



The Write Stuff

A series featuring original works by Mid West authors.

This week we introduce: Peter Barden

Hermit's lovely story

RETIRED ABC Regional Journalist Peter Barden of Geraldton, who as a Mullewa schoolboy was privileged to run errands and do other jobs for that famous architect-priest, Monsignor John Hawes, has a delightful story to pass on to Mid West residents.

The story was written by the great man himself as a Franciscan Hermit at Cat Island in the Bahamas at the age of 78 and appeared in the Melbourne Catholic newspaper, "The Tribune," on January 12, 1956.

Known to the natives as Fra Jerome, here is the story that involved one of his racehorses when he was a Parish Priest at Mullewa.

Benito Boy was a lovely little foal. I assisted at his midnight birth. But when three months old he took sick. Soon he could not stand up. I telephoned for the vet. It was tetanus, probably from a germ in his mother's hoof, picked up in the blacksmith's shop. The vet injected anti-toxin serum. There is not much chance for any of the equine family that are stricken with this.

I had to milk the mare and feed Benito from a bottle. At midnight I rose to feed him. When from a crack under the stable door he saw the light coming from the priest-house he whinnied welcome to me. First I had to turn him over on his other side lest he should get bed sore. Then I made his pillow and proceeded to feed him from a spoon.

He made a recovery (a rare thing from tetanus!). Soon he was walking about again alongside his mother. The schoolchildren (mostly from farm

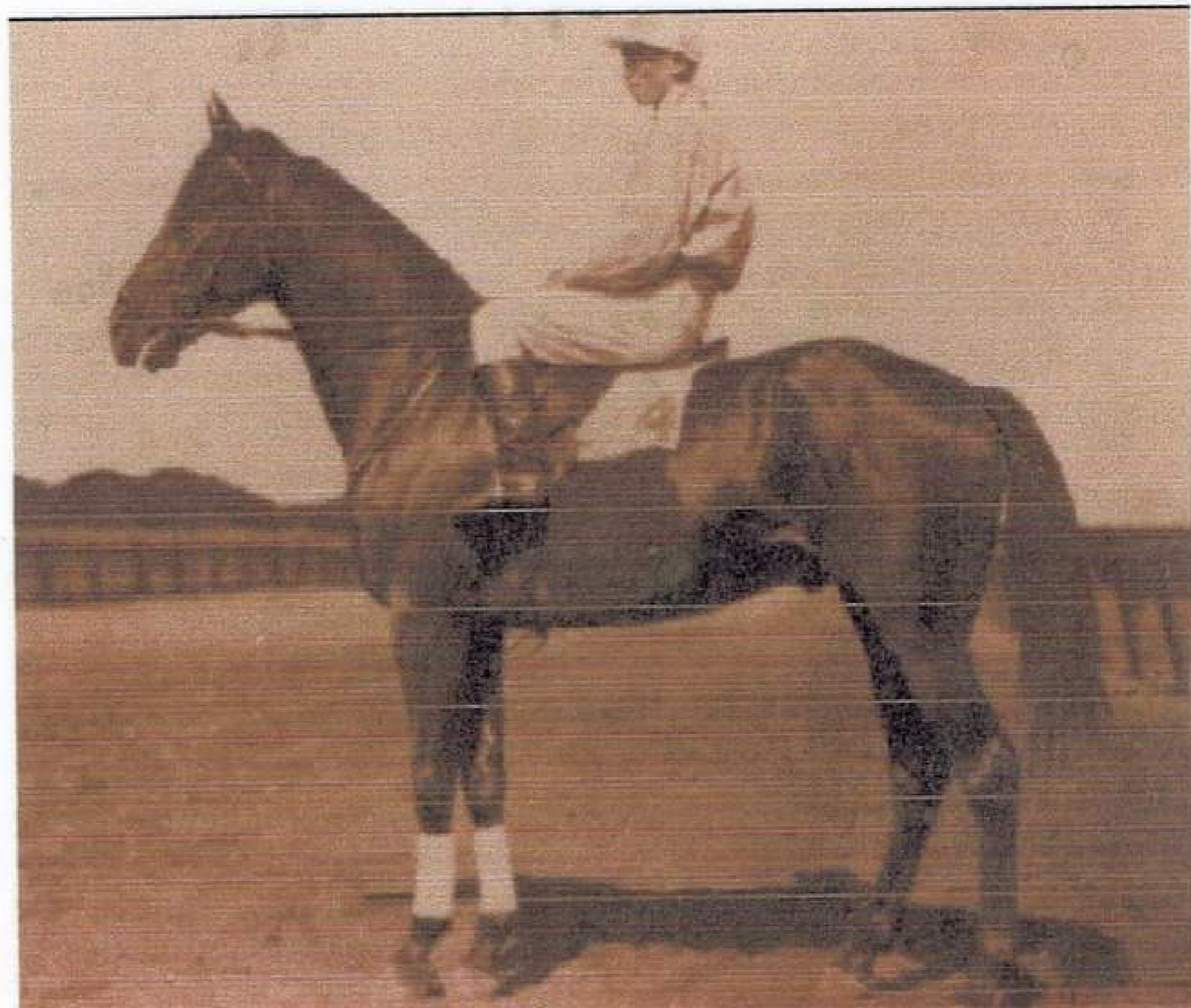
homes) had been praying for him.

BENITO'S TRIUMPH

The weather was getting hot; in the morning the mare liked to stand in the shade of the west front of the church. I had walked over — but where was Benito? I heard a sound and peered in through the wide open doors. Lo and behold! Right up the church, the young foal stood in front of Our Lady's Shrine (Our Lady of Mount Carmel). I called him, he turned round and began to clatter down the aisle-way, taking a bit at a bench end or two as he came along. Arriving near the north porch he put his nose into the large holy water stoup and then scattered it all about. The mare did not like being separated from her foal, but she was scared of the lintel of the door, standing as she did, 17 hands high. (Now many a long day's journey had she carried me that I might bring the Mass to outlying goldfield camps far away in the lonely bush). I led her inside and she stood in the cool dimness as contented as could be. Soon some little girls told the Sisters: "Benito went into the church to thank Our Lady for making him well."

SOCIAL COLT

Eventually Benito grew up a very lively and sociable colt. He made his debut, at three years old, at the Geraldton (Western



Australia) racecourse.

"Too much condition on him," the knowing critics said. "He won't do any good for the Cup, but he is a fine colt." I laughed to myself, for I knew my Benito.

It was an eight-furlong race. On the start, Benito galloped leisurely last of all. His jockey (who was formerly one of my altar boys) was just too weak to do anything but just

stick on. He had been fasting the whole week to reduce his weight. But Benito knew what to do; he took the conduct of the race into his own hands (or hooves, shall we say).

As he had been trained to do: when they reached the fifth furlong he stretched himself out with zest and overtook and passed each horse one after another and sailed up the straight to the roars of the people, "the priest's horse is first." The Irish parishioners (especially) from the Cathedral parish were delighted; horses were the great bond between us; but I was no gambler and hardly ever bet.

After his racing days were over I gave Benito to the Christian Brothers' agricultural college at Tardun (in my parish of Mullewa), to be their stud stallion, but he never forgot me.

When I visited Tardun, and Benito was browsing in some field, I had only to shout to him and he would raise his head, look around, and then come galloping across to me. (Fra Jerome, our beloved Monsignor John Hawes, passed to his eternal reward in hospital at Miami, Florida, on June 26, 1956 aged 80. His architectural gems in the Geraldton Diocese will be admired forever.)

Peter Barden