

**THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA**

Report by - KIRSTIN FEDDERSEN - 2001 Churchill Fellow

To study American developments in the training of animals for film work

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the ten weeks I spent in California, USA, I learnt more than what I thought would be possible. Every person I met was so pleasant and so helpful. It was a pleasure to be able to talk to fellow Film Animal Trainers about everything and not have them look upon me as a threat.

A million thanks to Steve Martin who was generous not only in letting me stay on his ranch and use his vehicles, but for the absolute wealth of information that he gave me.

Thanks also to Nancy Kobert and Rex Peterson who likewise were very generous with the information they gave me.

All three Trainers were not only totally invaluable for things they taught me but a pleasure to spend time with and get to know. The animals they own are a delight. Together, these people and animals gave me the best time of my life 😊

Last but certainly not least, a humungous thankyou to The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for making all this possible.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project Description: To further the knowledge of Australian Film Animal Trainers by learning from American Trainers.

Highlights: The three people most valuable, information wise, were:  
1) Steve Martin from Steve Martin's Working Wildlife  
2) Rex Peterson the Film Horse Trainer from Acton  
3) Nancy Kobert the Bird Trainer from Ramona  
All three people were based in California, USA.  
The two most interesting places I went to see animals perform were Sea World and the San Diego Wild Animal Park. Both these places were in San Diego, USA.

### Major Conclusions:

The Fellowship enabled me to learn many new training techniques on species I have trained in the past and it taught me how to train big cats for film work.

The information I have learnt will be disseminated when we start the Animal Actors Association of Australia and implemented immediately in my training methods and the trainers that work for me in my business 'Kirsko Film Animals'. This information will enable Australia to offer a more professional service to the Film Industry.

As soon as I get the permits, I will purchase 2 leopards so that the Australian Film Industry has access to a black and a spotted leopard that are specifically trained for film work. This is just the beginning. As the Animal Actors Association of Australia grows, hopefully together, we can accumulate a collection of many species of animals that are all film trained so we can provide most everything that production companies could want.

## **PROGRAMME**

The first two weeks of my fellowship were spent on Steve Martin's Ranch in Frazier Park which is about a two hour drive North of Los Angeles. There he has over 100 exotic animals trained specifically for film work. It was the big cats that I was most interested in because no one in Australia owns big cats trained purely for film work and there is a demand for them. Amongst other animals, Steve owns lions, black leopards, and cougars, and it was with these animals that I spent most of my time.

The next week was in San Diego with Nancy Kobert who is a bird trainer and spends most of her time doing free flight bird shows all over America. Nancy has a great collection of birds which we spent the week training. It was in this week that I went to Sea World and the San Diego Wild Animal Park.

The next three weeks were spent with the Horse Trainer, Rex Peterson on his Ranch in Acton (about one hour North of Los Angeles). Rex has 20 film horses on his ranch amongst the 50 that he cares for and it was these horses that we spent most of our time with. We covered most aspects of film training horses including liberty work and harness work.

The last four weeks were spent on Steve's Ranch with his Exotic Animals.

I was in California from the 20<sup>th</sup> of May till the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2001.

## **MAIN BODY**

The first two weeks on Steve Martin's place with the wild animals was a steep learning curve. One of our first exercises was training 4 lions to work together as a pride in various paddocks that we put them in. I was one of four trainers in the paddock and as I was the new person, it was me that got ambushed, pawed, and mouthed the most. This proved to be a great experience in learning their way of communication.

I spent every available minute with not only the lions, but the cougars and leopards as well. I had to get to know their body language and facial expressions so that I knew what they were thinking.

During this time I went out on a camel job –a setting for the release of The Mummy II and a leopard job –a stills shot for a record album. Both jobs took place in Hollywood. I was also involved with a deer job which was done on the back hills of Steve's ranch.

During my week with Nancy Kobert, we worked her birds daily. She would show me what she had already trained them to do and how. With some of them, we would train new behaviours. As we were working, Nancy would come up with all these 'hot tips' on how to train birds so I learnt a lot from her –not only new things but different ways of training certain behaviours. I was taught the importance of weighing your birds every day if you are working them because a bird that has eaten too much is not food motivated so it takes longer to learn. Nancy's birds work because they love the food rewards and they love her. Their favourite reward is safflower seeds.

We also discussed other methods of training eg. Sanctuary Training and the Skinner box method. I read many of Nancy's training books while I was staying with her. Nancy has many other animals that she uses for her shows. I went to one small show she did with some birds, a chinchilla, a porcupine, and a monkey. She showed off her kookaburra that laughs on cue ! It is much easier for people to have exotic animals in America. The Australian Government makes it very difficult for Australian Trainers to have not only Exotic animals but Natives as well.

Sea World was an amazing place to visit –seemed to have something to cater for everyone. When I arrived, they were showing off one of the Budweiser horses –it was beautifully presented –likewise were their stables, yards, harness etc. I watched the bird show, the Sea Lion and Otter show, the Dolphin show, and the Killer Whale show. They were really terrific –just goes to show that animals really can do anything if you take the time to train them properly. Not only were the tricks they performed excellent but the choreography was great too and the pools were partially above ground for better viewing. Brought tears to my eyes to see how hard those magnificent animals try to please us humans who in some cases have been so cruel to them in the past.

The day after I went to The Wild Animal Park where I watched the bird show twice, and the elephant show. The bird show was brilliant especially the Macaw which circled in free flight for at least 5 minutes before doing the last lap only a metre above the audience. Like Sea World, they had a helium balloon with a bird cage under it at a height of 500 feet. A Hawk dived from the cage at great speed and landed right in front of the audience.

The animals at this park were all in great condition and their enclosures were so big that it was sometimes impossible to see them. On two occasions I went to find the lions and tigers in their enclosure and could not see any. I had never heard of or seen an Okapi (relative of the giraffe that looks almost like a cross between a giraffe and a zebra). It was great to see some of the animals that we cannot even quote on for jobs in Australia because we do not have them here yet. I thought the zoo could have been better laid out. It is very big and with a little more planning they could have made it easier to walk around.

I could have easily spent two days at each of Sea World and The San Diego Wild Animal Park not to mention the San Diego Zoo which I could not fit in to my busy schedule.

3 weeks with Rex Peterson included going to Death Valley on a three day Nissan Commercial with 8 black horses . Five of us left with two ten horse trailers made of Aluminium which were towed by new, big, pick up trucks (utes). This meant that for the one horse that appears in the Television Commercial, Rex hired the film company 8 horses and 4 wranglers –I'm hoping that Australian Productions get bigger so that we too have this kind of budget. For that same job in Australia, I would be lucky to have 2 horse doubles and one assistant.

The rest of my time at Rex's ranch was spent learning from him training specific behaviours on his film horses, breaking in horses to harness, and caring for his horses. He always said I did not have to help with his chores but by helping him I learnt more so I was usually with him from 8am till 8pm. Rex would show me how to train a certain behaviour and then give me a horse to implement the practical side which is what I needed to do so that I could learn how to teach the behaviour. Just watching him is not enough to pick it up. He had a good range of horses for teaching. They ranged from a yearling horse that had very minimal handling, to Justin, his 14yr old Quarter Horse Stallion who was extremely talented. We covered most the film behaviours that a movie horse needs but mainly whip training which is using the whips as an extension of your arm to guide horses to full fill their tasks. Then you work on getting distance so you can get behind the camera to cue them. The horse is working totally at liberty, he has no equipment of any sort on his body.

Rex's way of breaking horses into harness is different to what I have seen. He has a vehicle where you can hook up 3 horses abreast. He puts one sturdy, well schooled horse on each side of the new horse which is in the middle. We broke in at least 10 horses in a very short period of time and they all did very well with minimal stress.

Was great to see a different set of equipment. Rex uses some things I have never even seen before, other bits of equipment are the same as what we use but made differently. Most of the equipment he has is a lot newer. There is the most incredible choice of training tools available from the American market. A horse truck is a rare thing, most trainers have one ute and various trailers. Rex has a range of trailers to suit any size job. Most the horse enclosures I saw on the ranches were made of steel –very little use of timber which dominates our yards. Horses tend to eat or ruin timber.

Rex's training method is by niggling –he taps the horse till it grows so tired of him niggling that the horse does what he wants eg lifting a leg up or nodding it's head. Their reward is ceasing the niggling. He is always very patient and calm with them and the niggling always stays as niggling –he does not hurt them because this would cause them to panic and or fight therefore they would be unable to think about what he was asking of them. By using this method, you know you can achieve it on set whether they are hungry or not –it is a very reliable method. We also discussed the importance of keeping a journal for each animal so that you can remember which behaviours you have trained on each horse.

Back to Steve Martin's Working Wildlife for the last 4 weeks and didn't this go quickly. The first two week block served as a very good introduction to Steve's wild animals. Taking big cats for long walks on chains, or shopping in the back of the car, or just playing with them in one of the large arenas began to feel 'normal'. Even the bears that walked by with their trainers were more of a normal event as I learned a bit about their body language and which ones were comfortable with me getting close to them.

So working the big cats was what the last four weeks was going to teach me. Steve had 4 lions that were just over a year old. This meant they were at the right age to teach all the basics ie 'Stay', 'Mark', 'Come', 'Go', and 'No'. The 'Mark' is where you ask them to put their two front feet on a block of wood or stone. As they get better, you reduce the size of the mark and increase the amount of distractions. You also increase the distance between yourself and the mark. The 'No' is taught to them so they know what not to do ie 'No' or 'A A' when they try to bite even if it is a playful bite which it normally is.

The cougars were two years old so they had more training on them. We worked on getting them fit as they were very lazy, as well as having different people cueing them and again reducing the size of their marks. We got Dylan working to a mark only 5mm thick –this is good for film work because the camera does not see a mark this size. Using the mark you can send the cat to wherever the camera person wants.

The black leopards were 9 years old and very well trained. They have done a lot of work for the camera. We spent most of the time walking and playing with them. The work we did, where possible would involve new challenges. We had Ivory doing a 'beg up' on command.

It is amazing how different each species of cat is. The lions are more dog like to train than the other cats. The cougars are very reliable and half dog, half cat like to work. The leopards are very similar to a domestic cat to train. If the leopards did not want to do something, it was much better to baby them and ask again rather than trying to make them do it. This is also due to the fact that they are older. I found it incredible that these nine year old cats let me step right in and train them and how well they worked for me. They are probably the best kept leopards in the world –almost every afternoon they leave the compound, go for their walk, then get tethered outside Steve and his wife, Donna’s house on soft green grass with their toys and people to play with them. Then they go inside the house where they have dinner (a feast !) and stay the night till early in the morning when they wake up and Donna takes them back to the compound.

Something that really amazed me with the lions (and to a lesser degree with the other big cats) is how possessive they are. The four year old lion became so possessive over his ball that it had to be removed or he was likely to kill someone over it. He then became possessive about the logs in his cage and then over his own foot ! I learnt to be careful with the food rewards –once you reward a big cat, that chicken neck has to go into his mouth as soon as possible –they get most irritated if you drop the reward or pull it away from them. All our training with these cats was purely positive motivation –they worked for food rewards or just verbal praise from their trainer. It is a give and take thing with these big cats. When a 200kg lion plonks himself down and says ‘I am not walking any more’ he will get up much quicker if you respect his wish and let him stay there for a little while and then ask him to get up.

Each animal on Steve’s ranch has the best possible diet suited to him as an individual. I learned a lot about putting together a suitable diet for big cats. It is possible to train wild animals without starving them so that they are in the best possible condition –the animals here all glow with health.

It is important to raise the big cats from cubs –they are very aware of who their human parents are. They are much happier to please their human parents than any other person. That bond is very special.

During this second period on Steve’s ranch, we did two film jobs. The first a Chimpanzee job in a studio in Hollywood. The Chimp we used was a 10 year old called Zac who is probably the oldest working Chimp in the world. This is another indication of how successful Steve’s method of training is. The second was stills shots of lion cubs, teenagers, and an adult. This took place in Steve’s barn where he has a white wall which can be used as a studio backdrop for camera crews which saves the animals travelling.

I was also lucky enough to have worked with some of the other exotic animals on Steve's ranch. Animals such as the wolves, the chimps, capuchin monkeys, bears, the binturong, alligators, and some elephants that a friend of Steve's owned. I went to the aquarium in Monterey where I was fascinated by the otters and the show they did for the public. Another day I visited the Feline Reproduction Facility in Rosamont where I saw many medium sized cats I had never even heard of before eg. Jagundi and Fishing Cats. They also had black and spotted Jaguars and Amur (Russian) leopards both black and spotted. An absolute feast for the eyes !!

Sled Reynold's ranch was another place I went to visit. Sled is a Film Animal Trainer who specialises in horses and camels. I went camel riding with his brother Reggie Reynolds who I knew because I worked with him on Babe II. Again, it was a pleasure to see different equipment and different training methods.

## CONCLUSIONS

More than ever I know that any thing is possible as far as training animals –they are such positive creatures and love to communicate and please.

I'm hoping that the film industry in Australia continues to grow as it has for the last few years so that we as Australian Animal Trainers can get more work and therefore afford better equipment similar to what the American Animal Trainers have. This will make us more professional. Another result from the increase of work would be specializing. The American Animal Trainers normally only do a couple of species so production companies deal with different Trainers all the time depending on which animals they need for a film shoot.

Nancy Kobert showed me how much you really can do with birds –the more time you spend with them the more they learn and then the faster it is to teach them new behaviours. I learned that you must have confidence in your birds regarding free flight. Once a bird is well trained, it does not want to leave you so you can free fly him and he will come back.

Rex Peterson also finds this with his horses, the more you teach them, the easier it is for them to learn new tricks. I would like to combine his 'nigging' method with my positive motivation and clicker training so that the horse is working for a reward but if he decides the reward is not worth it (which can happen in a pressure situation on set), you still have the 'nigging' method to fall back on.

To watch Steve Martin with his animals is like magic. What a privilege to learn from a man that is so talented and loves his animals so much. He taught me to read these wild animals so that you know if they understand you or not. He is so aware of that fine line between the respect these animals must have for you and to be at one with them –to play and to cuddle so that when it is time to work, the animals work well to please the person they so respect and love.

In order to best disseminate the information that I learnt on my Fellowship, I will start up the previously mentioned Animal Actors Association of Australia. The first meeting will be largely on what I learnt in America and will be open to who ever would like to come. I have video footage of the animal training that we did in America so that others can learn from it. Also, the animal trainers that I work with will get trained by a mixture of the methods I have learnt in overseas and those existing before hand.

I gained an incredible amount of knowledge from this fellowship and look forward to using this knowledge to improve the service that Australian Film Animal Trainers provide to the Film Industry.

Just one more thing...this fellowship has fulfilled a life long dream for me. From a very young age I was telling my family all about the black leopard I would one day have. Now I have the knowledge to be able to follow that dream. This together with the fact that I am now so much closer to being able to talk to the animals is such a wonderful feeling. What a lucky person I am to have a career that I love so much.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In America there is a special school called Moore Park College where people can study the management and training of all animals. Hopefully the Animal Actors Association of Australia will be the first step towards a school such as Moore Park College so that more Australians will be able to learn how to care for and train not only domestic animals but exotics and natives as well.

My aim is to keep more films in Australia. In the short term this can be achieved by using my established American contacts to bring animals that we do not have here in for specific films rather than the film going overseas. Long term, Australian Film Animal Trainers need to get a collection of exotic and native animals that are film trained so that we can provide the animals that the Film Industry needs. Once again, I hope that the Animal Actors Association will be an instigator for this to happen.