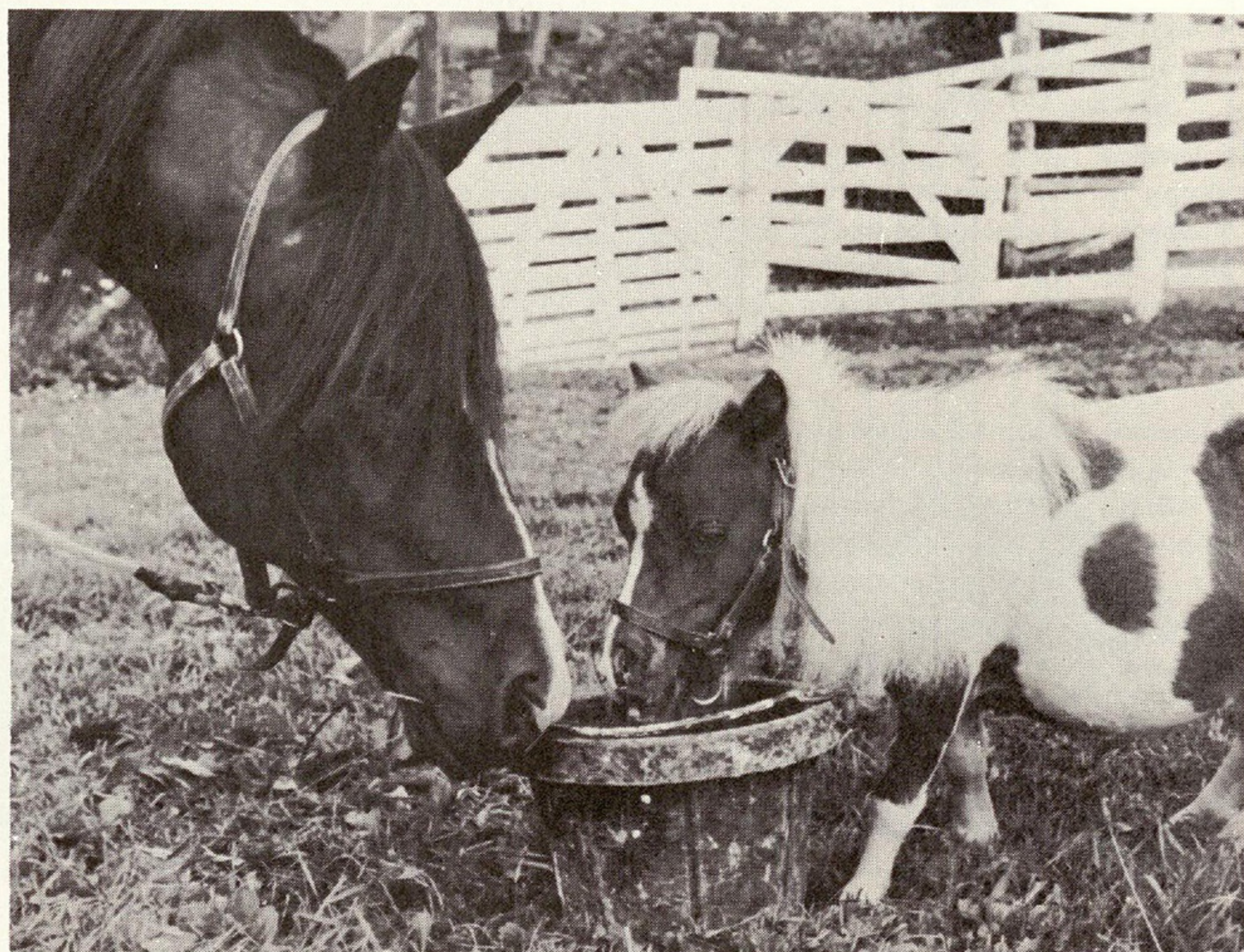


MINIATURE HORSES

...a 'different' kind of pet

by Dorothy Potter

Here is an unusual facet of the Pet Industry. Alton V. Freeman, well known for his former operation of Miami Rare Bird Farm, Inc., now is dealing mainly in the exotic for zoos and collectors. He reports that the sale of Miniature Horses has been fantastic but that supply is most difficult.



• Trinkett, a 20-inch, 18-month-old filly, shares a feed bucket with an Arabian stallion.

UP IN the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, 60 miles from Asheville and 7 from the nearest town of Spruce Pine, there is a log cabin overlooking part of an animal farm. The log home is more than a cabin, the owner isn't much of a farmer, and the horses are by no means found on most farms.

Camels, zebras, ostriches, antelope, swans, kangaroos, etc. all associate more or less in harmony with a few registered Arabian horses and many tiny miniature horses. All of these are the property of Alton V. Freeman who, for over a quarter of a century, has been one of this country's major zoo animal importers. He is the former owner of the Miami Rare Bird Farm in Florida—a tourist attraction and holding

area for zoo stock.

Around five years ago, when the real estate value became too tempting, Freeman, his wife, and three children sold out and moved to the peacefulness and beauty of a 365-acre farm in the North Carolina mountains. Here they built a log-framed home on a hill overlooking the barn and pastures.

From the windows they can keep close watch on any questionably friendly new animals in the fields below. Most of the zoo stock are for breeding purposes, but there is also a constant turnover of temporary animal visitors awaiting shipment to customers.

While zoo animals are Freeman's business, horses have been his hobby—first Arabians and now miniatures. These little horses entered the picture almost

by accident. Some years ago a zoo customer asked Freeman for assistance in importing miniatures from Argentina—animals that cost \$1,000 each, plus air freight, duty, inland freight, brokerage, quarantine, etc. Upon arrival, however, the Argentina ponies aroused so much public interest that other inquiries started coming.

At the Smith McCoy sale in West Virginia a few years back, Freeman bought four pairs of small horses standing 28 to 32 inches. A year or so later, when McCoy (who had the largest known collection in this country) became ill he sold the entire herd of more than 30 animals to Freeman. Since that time, by diligent searching, purchasing, and breeding, more than 100 such animals

have passed through the Spruce Pine farm and the present herd consists of about 25 head of breeding stock from a 19-inch mare to a 32-inch stallion.

Foreign demand for these miniature horses has been as great as American. For example, Japan has purchased 15 in several repeat shipments; Germany 12 in four repeats; Switzerland 6; France 1; and Canada, Hawaii, Venezuela, and Mexico all have come to Freeman for these unusual horses. The St. Louis Zoo bought a group for their famous stage show; Sea World in California bought a pair to have in a show with a porpoise; Universal Studios purchased some for their tourist visitors.

Many kiddie zoos find the miniatures much safer and more show-worthy than other ponies. A circus act has one riding on the back of a larger horse; and finally, innumerable horse lovers have found these tiny animals the answer to their desire for a pet.

Prices range from \$250 to several thousand dollars for good animals. True miniatures, Freeman says, should stand no higher than 32 to 33 inches at the withers. In many cases the difference of 1 inch in height is a difference of several hundred dollars in price. Figures are not infrequently quoted in half-inches using a carpenter's level for exactness.

There are many small horses called miniatures, but when checked they are usually dwarfs with malformation of the head, legs, belly, etc., and usually with undershot jaw. Also, most purchasers fail to take into consideration that a so-called miniature, offered at say \$100 when 28 inches tall, may be a young animal that will grow 6 or 7 inches more, taking it out of the miniature class—thus the only safe purchase is an adult.

Freeman claims that of all the animals he has had (and that includes most of the animal world) these little horses are the easiest to care for. In fact, during green-grass season, not a thing need be

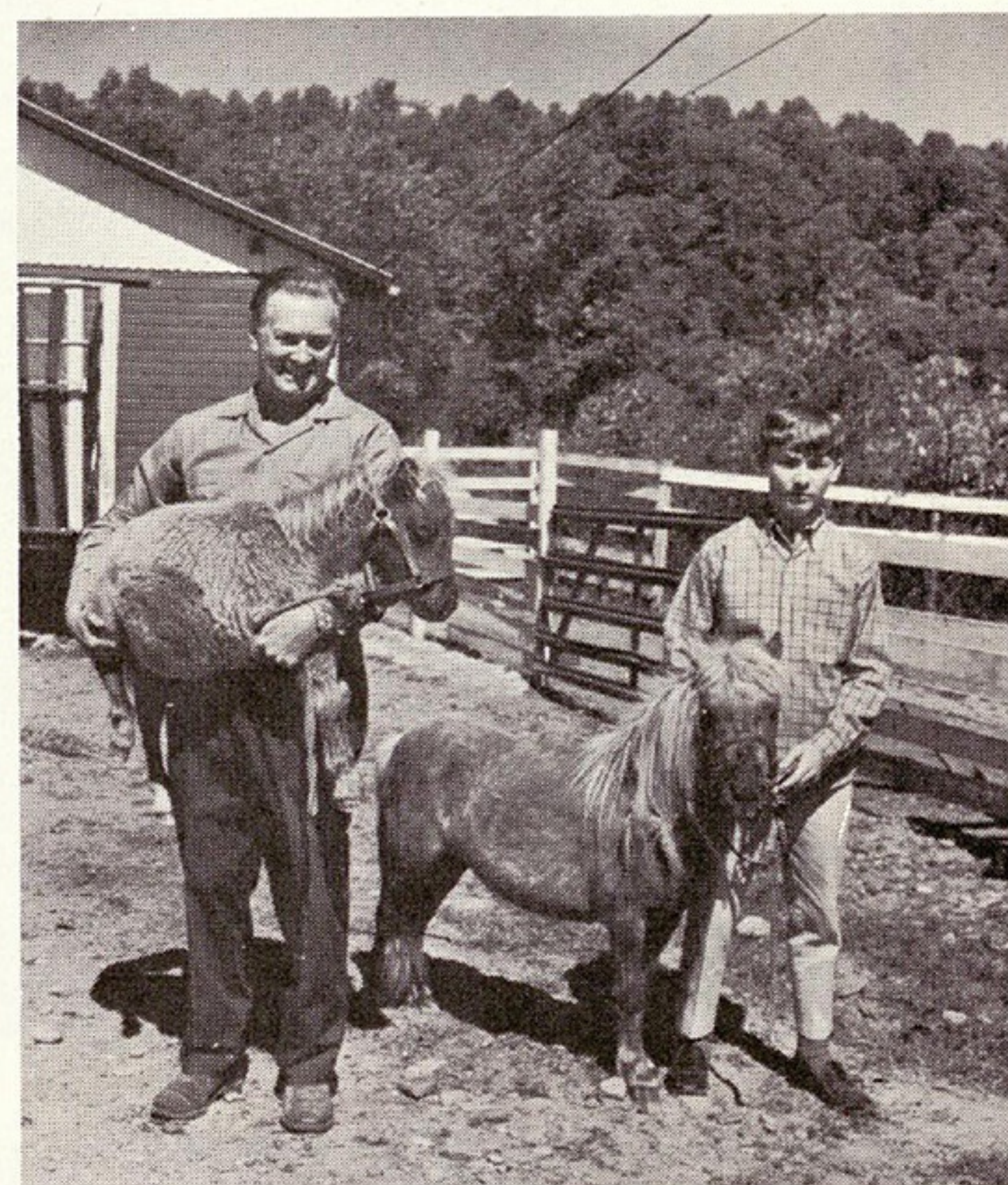
done for them other than provide water and salt. During the winter some hay and a handful of grain daily takes care of them. A shelter should be provided, of course.

Unlike some ponies, nearly all miniature horses are gentle and make good pets from the time they are foaled. Colors are usually chestnut, bay, and palomino, but other standard colors are found.

While line breeding would appear to be the natural method of producing a small foal, this doesn't always work. Freeman's mare was 19 inches at 18 months of age and is the offspring of a 32-inch mare and a 31-inch stallion. A good many 33-inch or so mares may produce offspring that will mature at 30 inches, but unfortunately the opposite is also true. Some breeders believe the stud should be smaller than the mare to eliminate problems at foaling time.

For some reason most of these small horses are found one or two at a time on individual pony farms in Ohio, Indiana, and the Virginias, although several Californians are building breeding herds—and there is still a herd of several hundred in Argentina. Having just visited this group, Freeman claims that while there are more of them, the average size is not as small as good miniatures in this country. And, of course, the freight, duty, etc., make the home-grown animals cheaper. Also, it is reported the Argentinians will not sell stallions.

When asked what good they are if you can't ride them, drive them, or work them, Freeman replies, "I can't do that with my zebras either, or any of the other animals here—not even my dog. These are simply lovable, desirable pets for persons interested in the lilliputians of the equine world, which are much easier to care for than the average full-size horse or pony. Furthermore, while the demand exceeds the supply (and it will for a long time to come), the hobby of breeding miniature horses is not unprofitable by any means." □



• Alton Freeman holds a Miniature horse in his arms, while his son Clifford stands next to another Miniature.