SHOEING FOR ELVIS

This farrier has spent nearly 30 years shoeing horses for the King of rock 'n roll.

By Frank Lessiter, Editor/Publisher

EVEN NOW, nearly 20 years after Elvis Presley's death, the talented singer who changed music and haircuts forever is known quite simply as the King of rock 'n roll.

Presley enjoyed a fabulous career before he died at the age of 42 on Aug. 16, 1977.

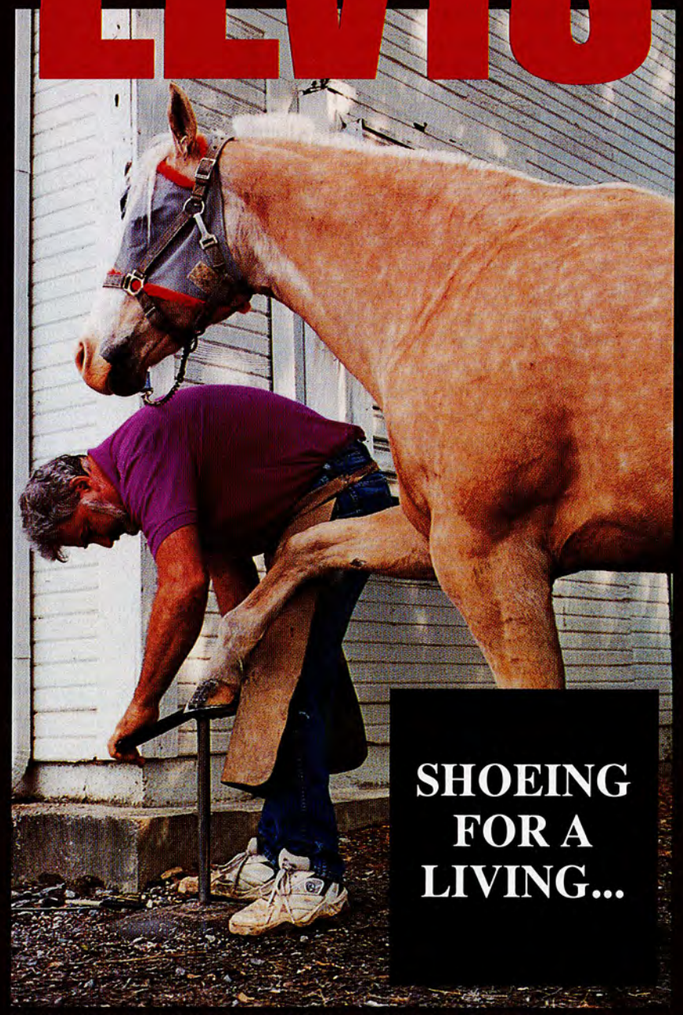
Legendary Singer

While Presley's music success is legendary, few people know of his interest in horses and the fact that a number of horses, including several older ones which Elvis purchased himself, still live at Graceland. This mansion and the Graceland grounds are a living legacy to Elvis Presley and attract hundreds of thousands of tourists and fans each year to his former home in Memphis, Tenn.

Presley started with the Graceland horses in 1966 when he bought Priscilla a black horse with a white spot on one leg. Less than a year later, they were married.

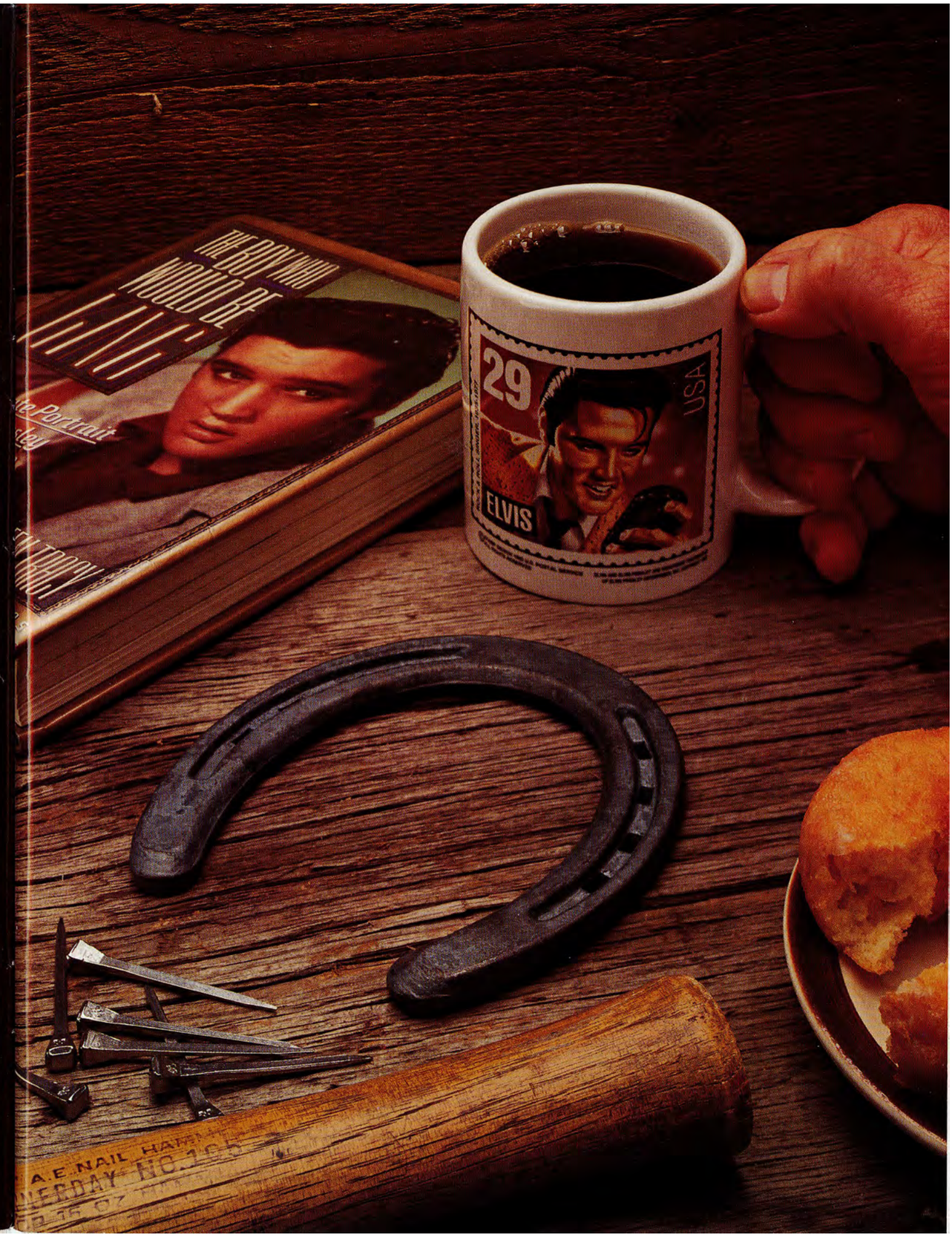
Legendary Farrier

Just as Elvis is a legend in rock 'n roll, Lim Couch, Jr., of Herando, Miss., is known around Graceland as a horseshoeing legend. Ever since Elvis bought that first horse nearly 30 years ago, Lim has shod the horses at Grace-



SHOEING FOR A LIVING...

THE GRACELAND HORSESHOEING LEGEND. Lim Couch has shod the horses and ponies housed in the barn at Graceland for nearly 30 years. While there are now only seven horses kept at the Elvis Presley memorial, there have been as many as 30 horses grazing here at a time.



BIG ON HOOF PROTECTION. Lim Couch uses a hoof sealer on all shoeing jobs and most trimming work. He finds an application of one of these products helps seal the hoof around the nails and helps hold the shoe tight to the hoof.

land. There are now seven horses at Graceland, but there were times when as many as 30 grazed the grounds.

He fondly recalls when Elvis used to come down to the barn and talk for hours while Lim was shoeing. There were card games in the tack room and visits to Lim's stables when Elvis reigned supreme over rock 'n roll.

During my "Shoeing For A Living" day spent with Lim, I not only got the Elvis Presley treatment, but watched as he trimmed and shod horses for other customers in Tennessee and Mississippi. Based on the afternoon spent shoeing the Elvis Presley horses at Graceland, I learned a great deal about shoeing older horses—such as those at Graceland which are over 30 years old.

Here is how my "Shoeing For A Living" day actually went.

8:35 a.m. Lim picks me up at the East Hilton Hotel in Memphis. He lives 20 miles south and has been shoeing horses for 31 years.

8:47 a.m. Driving south toward his first shoeing appointment, Lim tells me he ran a shoeing school for 15 years.

"We had 1,500 students from all over the country and a number of foreign countries," he explains. "I'm proud to say this includes a number of top-notch shoers around the country."

9:00 a.m. We pull in at a barn near Collierville, Tenn., where two Federal Express workers keep their horses. There are two horses to trim.

As he is trimming the feet of the first horse, Lim shows me several hoof abscesses which have healed. "There are locust trees here and these horses tend to get thorns in the hooves which lead to abscess problems," he tells me.

9:25 a.m. Lim starts trimming the second horse. "Shoeing is a necessary evil," he says. "You tend to shoe for balance and bounce in the show ring or to correct a hoof problem.

"Both of these horses have been shod in the past, but now go barefoot. They are kept in a small lot with only occasional riding."

9:40 a.m. As we are preparing to wind up our work here, horse owner Dana Hanson drives up. She tells Lim one of the horses sometimes goes slightly lame, especially in wet weather.

Lim tells her when he trimmed the horse there was something similar to a calcium deposit on the hoof. It was solid and the horse wasn't limping.

"It seemed much like a ringbone problem," he says. "The horse may have kicked something, got hurt in the hairline area or got a cut on the hoof."

9:47 a.m. Driving to the next account, I ask Lim for details on his shoeing rig. It's a 1988 Chevrolet pickup with a 1974 modified Redding body. It's nothing fancy, but does the job, is fully depreciated and the body can be readily moved to another truck.

"My accountant says it's time to make a choice," says Lim. "Either I buy a new truck since this one is fully depreciated or pay more to Uncle Sam.

"It's not tools or a rig that makes a shoer successful. Instead, it's what you know about shoeing that counts with horses and customers."

"Shoeing has been good to me over the years and I love what I am doing..."

9:56 a.m. Lim has a trip charge of $1 per mile for clients that require considerable driving time.

"I am not the highest priced shoer in the area and am not the lowest priced shoer," he says. "The shoeing business has been good to me over the years and I love what I am doing."

10:03 a.m. Like many veteran farriers, Lim remembers when he would tackle any shoeing job. "I remember once doing 27 horses on a long day many years ago," he says. "I was so sore that I couldn't do any shoeing or trimming for 2 days."

10:20 a.m. The next stop in Olive Branch, Tenn., is a new account. Lim removes a plantation shoe on a competitive Tennessee Walking Horse owned by Bobby Andrews.

"This is about the largest legal shoe you can put on a non-padded Tennessee Walking Horse," he explains. "We do lots of padded walking horses, but not as many as we used to do."

Lim explains his shoeing philosophy in a few simple words: "The most important thing is not to shoe the foot, but to shoe the horse," he explains. "This is very important and takes in many ideas other than just the foot."

On this horse, Lim measures the front left hoof at a 48-degree angle and the front right hoof at a 53-degree angle before he starts trimming. There's a 4-in. long toe on both hooves. He tells me narrow heels are common with many Tennessee Walking Horses.

10:45 a.m. As Lim is finishing this horse, he applies Tuff Stuff to the

SHOE THE HORSE, NOT THE FOOT. Lim Couch sums up his shoeing philosophy in these few words. The Herando, Miss., shoer maintains this philosophy is very important, especially with the vast styles of horses that he shoes.

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hooves. "I use this on all of my shoeing jobs and trimming jobs for some customers," he says. "It seals the hoof around the nails, which is important, and holds the shoe tight to the foot.

"I don't carry many products in my rig to sell to clients, but Tuff Stuff and ThrushBuster are the type of products many owners should use regularly."

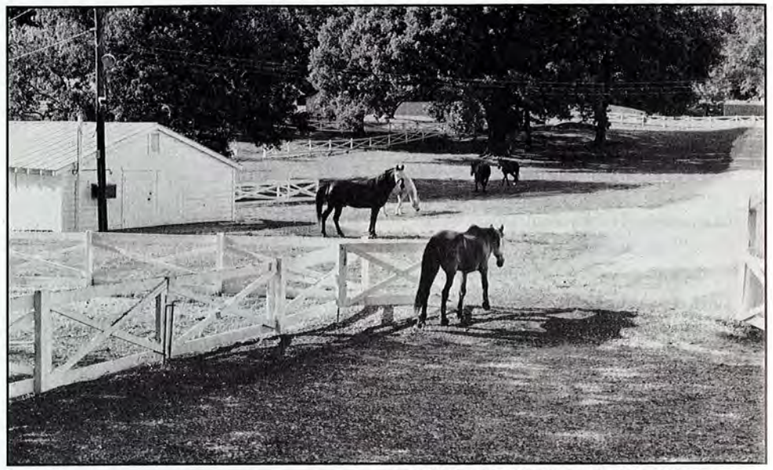
11:00 a.m. While driving to Lim's home operation, I tell him I noticed he tends to rely extensively on nippers rather than a hoof knife for trimming.

"I like to use nippers on dead sole because it is easy to clean and rake out this hoof material," he says. "I also use nippers when there is extensive frog trimming to do. With the nippers, I can easily take top growth off the frog, then switch to a hoof knife."

11:22 a.m. Lim tours me around his home, farm and previous school operation. On the way down his road, we pass a crew putting in gas lines, a sign this area is undergoing a change as the Memphis suburbs come closer.

11:37 a.m. When he started shoeing horses. Lim says it wasn't unusual to drive 75 miles to shoe a horse. When he got there, he found why local farriers wouldn't touch the unruly animal.

"As I developed my business, I didn't go as far from home," he says. "Now, I have customers who bring horses to my farrier shop for work."



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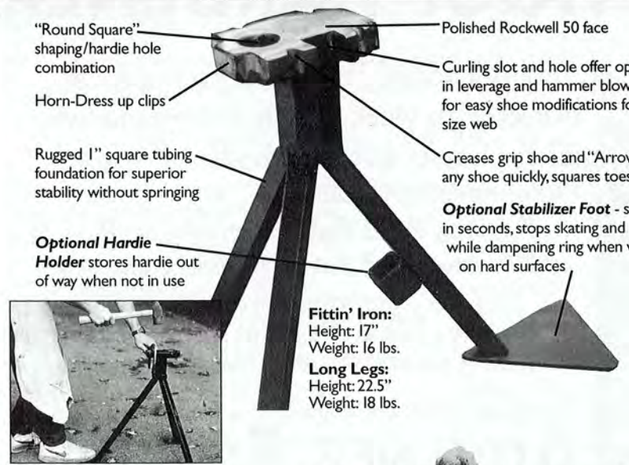

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12:05 p.m. As we pull into the yard of Dana and John Chisolm at Horn Lake, Miss., Lim tells me moisture is the biggest problem facing horses in this area.

"With our humid, ever-changing weather, we see hooves that go from being very wet to very dry," he says. "It is important to avoid serious hoof cracks. This is why I like to seal the hooves to keep as much moisture in them as possible."

A homemade hoof moisturizing remedy Lim uses contains motor oil, pine tar and iodine for medication. He likes horse owners to apply this or a similar mixture once or twice a week to all hooves.

"Something like this is required for good hoof care," Lim adds. "In fact, some of the big Tennessee Walking Horse stables have grooms who treat these hooves twice a day."

12:17 p.m. While trimming several horses and ponies, Lim talks over nutritional concerns with the Chisolms. Dr. Chisolm, a leading area obstetrician and gynecologist, has taken the day off to do yard work.

Lim tells the couple they should feed biotin to their horses. They also ask questions about white vs. dark hooves as it seems they have had more problems with light-colored feet. They are convinced white hooves are more brittle and have more cracks and breaks.

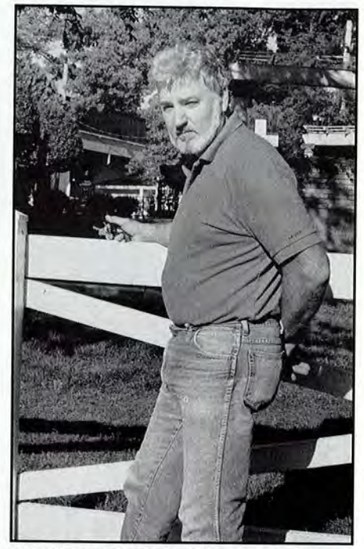
Lim doesn't have all the answers, but says they should be feeding supplements with essential vitamins, minerals and biotin to the horses and ponies. He urges them to see their feed dealer.

Speaking of supplements, Dr. Chisolm tells me he recommends his patients take zinc supplements during pregnancy. "Zinc serves as 'brain food' for the unborn baby and I'm convinced babies whose mothers take zinc end up being smarter," he maintains.

12:55 p.m. After we say goodbye to the Chisolms, Lim tells me these road trips consist mainly of basic trimming and shoeing work.

"When there is heavy forging or therapeutic shoeing work to do, I get clients to bring the horses to my farrier shop," he says. "I do heavy shoeing work at the shop on Saturdays or early in the morning during the week.

OLDER SHOEING IDEAS. Several of the horses still at Graceland have been there since Elvis purchased them back in the 1960s. So knowing how to deal with older horses is definitely part of the shoeing routine done at Graceland.



VETERAN SHOER. Lim Couch has shod horses for 31 years, ran his own shoeing school for a number of years and is currently President-Elect of the American Farrier's Assn. He fondly remembers when Elvis used to come down to the Graceland barn and talk for several hours while Lim was shoeing a number of horses and ponies.

"I particularly like to work on padded Tennessee Walking Horses at the shop. Horses having a serious hoof separation often require a half day or more of therapeutic shoeing work. It's easier to do this work in the farrier shop where the equipment is handy."

1:07 p.m. Speaking of the farrier shop, Lim drives me past his office, stable operation and farrier shop to check his mail and telephone calls on the answering machine. He's run this stabling operation for 35 years.

1:35 p.m. For lunch, Lim takes me to Marlowe's BBQ which specializes in great Memphis food. While we are looking over the menu, Lim tells me why he is fully convinced there is a distinct reason why hooves grow faster in hot weather than in cold weather.

"In the winter, the horse uses all its available energy to grow hair and provide body heat to stay warm. In the summer, this energy ends up in faster hoof growth," he says.

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He also has distinct opinions on founder and says there are plenty of unanswered questions. "For instance, nobody can tell me why it seems like one foot is always warmer and rotated in founder cases," he says.

1:46 p.m. While eating, Lim tells me he was on a first-name basis with Elvis and often played cards with him in the Graceland tack room. Elvis visited Lim's stables three times during his singing career.

"Elvis was a night person," recalls Lim. "I'd sometimes get a call at 6 a.m. from an owner who had sold a dozen horses to Elvis during the night and wanted me to shoe them right away."

2:14 p.m. As we wrap up lunch, Lim recalls the time he was called out of bed around midnight by the folks at Graceland a number of years ago. They had a foundered horse and they wanted Lim and the vet to come right away.

"We went out to Graceland and worked on the horse from 1 to 7 a.m.," says Lim. "We got the horse fixed up and she is still in the barn at Graceland.

"They told me they wanted the horse saved and it didn't matter what it cost. I told them we'd work on the horse anyway even if they were someone who couldn't pay. The horse's health was much more important to us than the money."

2:30 p.m. Cleared by the security guards at Elvis Presley's Graceland mansion, Lim pulls his shoeing rig up next to the door of the barn located at the back of the property.

2:35 p.m. Lim takes me on a quick tour of the barn. In the tack room, he points out the painted names on the wall of the original Elvis horses. "Note how they've always gone around those old names when they paint," he says.

2:40 p.m. As we take Ebony's Double out for a trim, Lim tells me to take a close look at the stalls. They are covered with rubber mats with limestone mixed with the wood shavings.

"Even with these precautions, we still have thrush problems," he says. "We trim the hooves often, the ground here is clean, we medicate the hooves, the vet works with us and we still can't get rid of the thrush."

3:10 p.m. The next horse out, New Ebony, has similar thrush concerns. "He used to wear pads and was shod for Tennessee Walking Horse classes," says Lim. "I've recently cut back the frogs and opened them up."

He tells me Elvis used to keep as many as 30 horses here in the Graceland property. "People stand up there by the fence behind the mansion and snap photos of me working out here," says Lim. "Sometimes I think I'm the world's most photographed shoer."

Visitors to Graceland can only see the barn and the horses in the distance. I ask why they still keep the horses.

"It's because Elvis always kept horses at Graceland," he says. "They are keeping everything the same way it was when the King was living here."

3:25 p.m. Lim tells me how he started shoeing at Graceland around 1966 before Presley married Priscilla.

"My sister lived next to the Graceland property and their next-door

"They've kept everything the same as when Elvis was still living here..."

neighbor was Vernon Presley, the father of Elvis. I told Vernon one day I would like to shoe the Graceland horses for Elvis. He didn't say anything and I figured my chances weren't very good.

"About a month later, I got a call to shoe the horses at Graceland. Then a week later, they had 30 more horses to shoe. I've been shoeing at Graceland ever since."

3:35 p.m. The next horse out of the stalls is Beauty, a horse Lim shod long before it came to Graceland. He pulls the shoes and gives the horse a trim.

"His hooves and frogs have collapsed in just a month's time," Lim says. "They look worse then ever.

"The left front foot is broken back so far that it would be difficult to shoe. The hoof is peeling off the side and these big frogs look like they have been soaked in water.

"These horses run outside most of the time and just graze here in the yards at Graceland. They are hardly ever ridden, so shoes aren't important for most of them."

SHOEING OLDER HORSES. Couch says a shoer needs to keep these horses in as natural a condition as you can. Changing the way they are shod often leads to problems.

4:10 p.m. Lim fondly recalls a pony Elvis bought in the late 1960s for his only child, Lisa Marie. "That pony finally died of natural causes a few years back at 33 years of age," he says. "We'd kept her trimmed all the time she was here at Graceland."

4:15 p.m. Lim brings out a palamino named Sun Reflector who is wearing shoes. There's little new hoof growth on the back feet, so Lim trims the frog without removing the shoes.

But the front feet are so weak that he takes the shoes off to trim the feet properly. After nailing the shoes back on, he applies ThrushBuster and Tuff Stuff to all four feet.

"Because of his white hooves, this horse simply won't stay sound when left barefoot," says Lim.

4:40 p.m. As Lim brings out the next mare, Ingram, he explains how he learned to keep all halter snaps fastened when shoeing. "One day I was shoeing alone and was trimming an Arabian mare in the stall and somehow left a halter snap loose," he says. "Somehow that loose snap got hooked on my belt loop.

"Everytime I raised my hand to take off the halter, the horse would snap her head up and leave me dangling. Finally, I reached back and ripped the belt loop buckle off my pants. Now I always fasten all the halter snaps on every horse."

4:42 p.m. This 30-plus-year-old mare knows all of the ropes of trimming and shoeing. As Lim approaches, she raises her foot for him to look at.

"Look at how thin this horse is," says Lim. "It's not because she is neglected because she gets the best care in the world. But she has arthritis and you really have to go slow when you pick up her leg.

"Because of her condition, I'm going to cut the heels back slightly to keep them from drawing up under her and contracting even if they are left a little long."

4:49 p.m. While Lim is working on the last foot of this horse, I ask what his plans are as the American Farrier's Assn. president-elect.

"I'd like to see the organization concentrate on getting the word out to horse owners in regard to the activities of AFA and the value of using certified farriers," he says. "I think the group can still do more in these two areas."

4:57 p.m. With Ingram back in her stall, Lim brings out the sixth horse, a big horse called Sir Patrick.

"He tends to have a slight foot problem," says Lim. "But his feet stay in better shape and he doesn't limp if we keep him shod. He has been foundered in the past, but he still gets around well without medication or limping."

5:19 p.m. After examining Sir Patrick, Lim leads him back to his stall without doing any trimming. "He has a pad on the front feet, still has a good hoof angle and is looking much better," Lim says.

"But his back feet are a different story. See how the hooves are spread out and separate. The hooves don't grow down, but tend to grow straight out. But I'm not going to do anything to him this time."

5:46 p.m. The last horse out of the stall is a Warmblood. Once again, Lim decides his feet are fine and walks him back to his stall without having to get

out the nippers.

6:02 p.m. Since these Graceland horses are getting up in age, I ask Lim for some tips to share with readers shoeing older horses.

"Leave them in a condition that is as natural to them as you can," he says. "Their joints get set in a certain way and ligaments tend to lose elasticity. So leave them alone as much as you can and shoe them the same way as you have done in the past.

"In over 30 years of shoeing, I have found that if you try to change the way you shoe older horses, you usually create additional problems."

6:20 p.m. With the tools packed up, we stop for gas before heading back to my hotel. Lim tells me the Presley people are ideal clients.

"They treat me great," he says. "I am always happy to do shoeing and trimming work for them.

"I write my own schedule for checking the horses on a regular basis, make the decisions on what needs to be done and decide which horses should be shod and which should be left barefoot.

"These Graceland people are always super people to work with..."

"They call only when there is an unexpected problem or they need a question answered about the horses. These Graceland people are exceptional folks to work with."

6:35 p.m. Back at the hotel, I thank Lim for an exceptional shoeing day and he heads home to Mississippi to meet his daughter coming in from Houston.

For me, it's been another super "Shoeing For A Living" day spent with a shoeing legend in his own right, the past and present shoer for Elvis Presley and the Graceland horses. Plus, I've learned a great deal about the important techniques in shoeing older horses.

And before you ask—no, I didn't see Elvis during my day spent shoeing in the Memphis area. Ω

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