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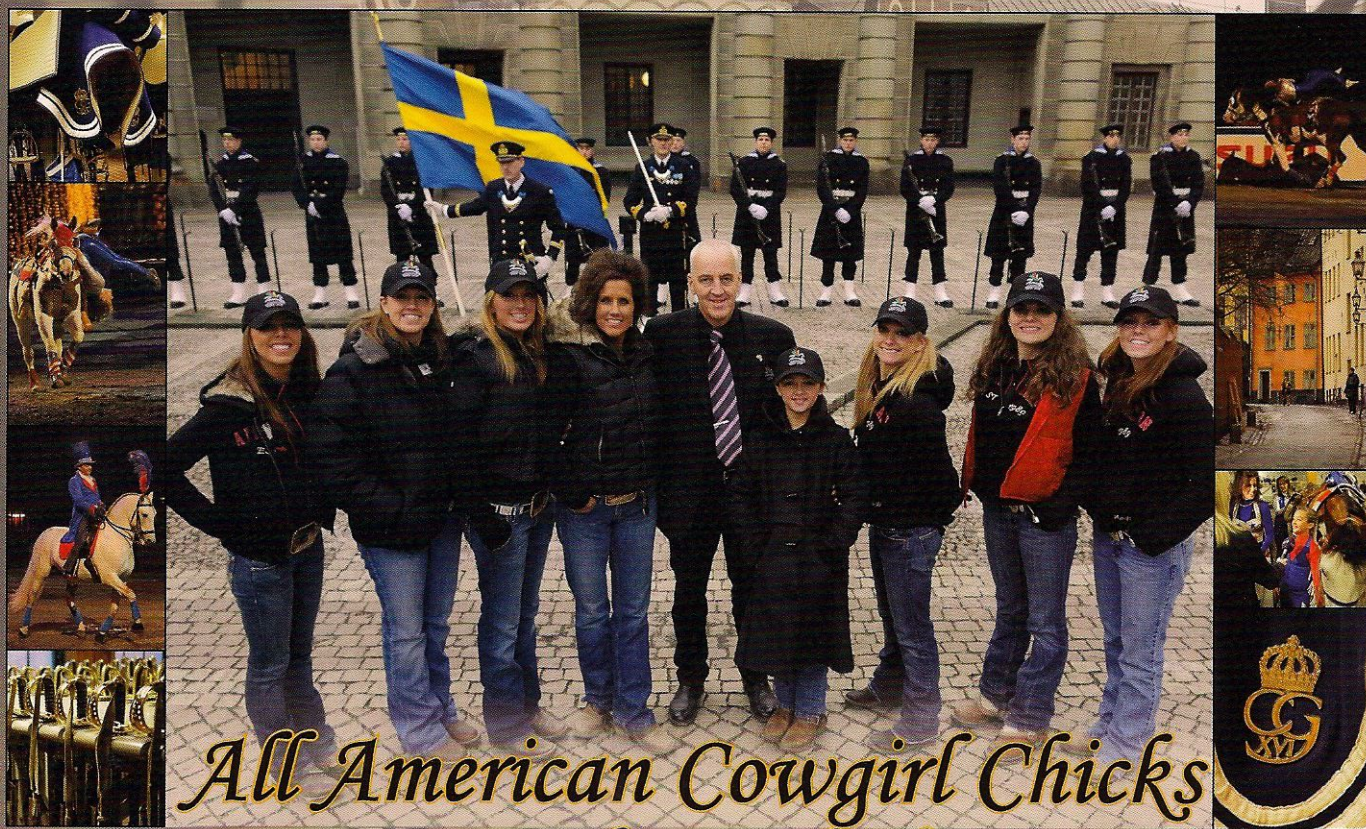
THE LIFE OF THE WESTERN WOMAN

## EXTRAORDINARY EXOTIC EGYPT

MARYANNE GABBANI

CHEF TIM LOVE

ANNIE OAKLEY



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# Extraordinary Exotic Egypt

Extraordinary and exotic seems Maryanne Gabbani's life. She is, however, quite matter-of-fact when telling of her progression from a horse crazy California child to the adult owner of a farm in Egypt complete with horse trekking business, ex-controller of interests in five Egyptian companies operating primarily in the grain trade, mother of two...and that's just a start.

The humble, "I did what anyone would have done in the circumstances" cowgirl attitude is matched in Maryanne's character by an inner core of true grit. How else does one endure the loss of a spouse while living in a country an ocean away from your native land, pick up the pieces colored by several cultures, and build back a mosaic of life that works?

It is a story Maryanne prefaced with the tale of her first horse experiences.

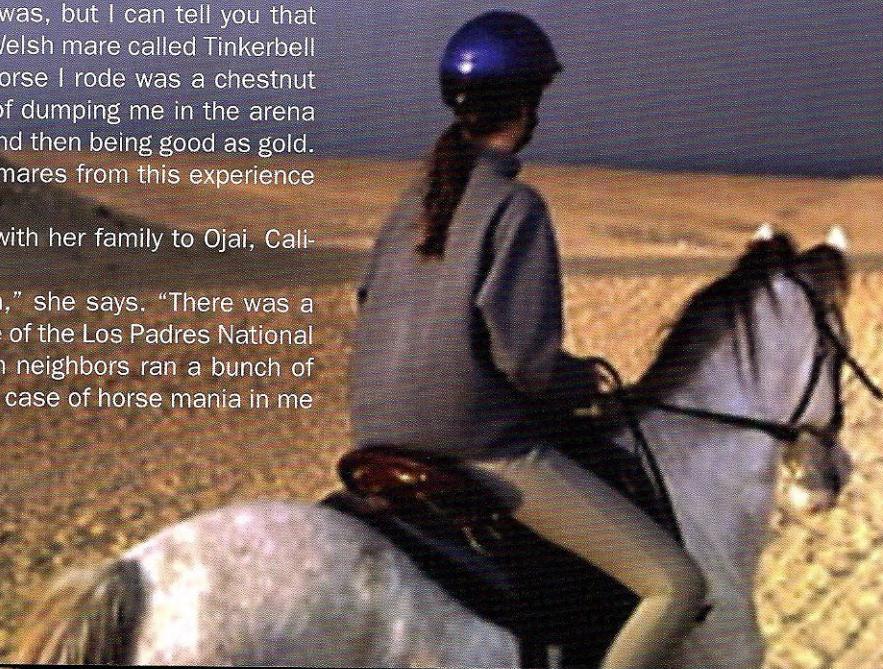
"I was born near San Diego where my father worked for the Navy as a computer specialist, one of the first," she explains. "I can't remember not being horse nuts, and I believe that I learned to read so that I could read horse books. It's a genetic anomaly...no one else in the family has the same abnormality. I first learned to ride at the now defunct Balboa Park Stables in San Diego around the age of eight or ten. I can't really remember how old I was, but I can tell you that the first horse they put me on was a grey Welsh mare called Tinkerbelle who was blind in one eye; and the next horse I rode was a chestnut mare called Jolena who made a practice of dumping me in the arena every lesson within the first ten minutes and then being good as gold. I retained a masochistic love of chestnut mares from this experience that still endures."

At twelve years old, Maryanne moved with her family to Ojai, California, a small town inland from Ventura.

"I thought I'd died and gone to heaven," she says. "There was a huge pasture behind our house at the edge of the Los Padres National Forest, maybe fifty or sixty acres on which neighbors ran a bunch of rescue horses. They recognized a terminal case of horse mania in me

## Maryanne Gabbani

PROFILE/INTERVIEW  
BY TOM MOATES





early on and gave me permission to ride them, particularly an old sawboned roan mare called Rosie. She was often ridden bareback (I must not have had any nerve endings in my butt at all) with a rope war bridle and was fond of scraping us off under olive trees in the orchard that was part of the pasture.

"I harassed my parents for a horse from the time I was twelve until I was about eighteen and left home, but all they'd ever say was, 'Marry a man who'll buy you a horse,' which I thought was pretty useless advice. I'd beg, borrow and steal any horse I could to ride and we would wander all over the valley and hillsides on horseback whenever possible. Luckily, I found quite a few friends whose parents were rather more easy-going on the topic of horse owning.

"At some point, when I was about fourteen or so I took a fall from one of these horses that resulted in three lumbar vertebrae with broken processes and one hell of a concussion because I can't remember the accident to this day. I'd forgotten it completely until I was about forty, when a chance request for a spinal x-ray by an orthopedic surgeon prompted him to ask when I'd broken my back. The vertebrae are now nicely fused and other than some vague recollections of being home long enough to read the entire Norwegian trilogy of Kristin Lavransdatter (about two thousand pages), I don't recall a thing."

Maryanne left home and attended university in San Francisco for a couple of years, which temporarily hampered her equestrian activities. Then, after a short stay back home, she made the move to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1971 to complete a university degree at Simon Fraser. Then it was off to graduate school.

"I met my late husband [Diaa] while we were both in grad school at the University of Waterloo [Ontario,

Canada]," Maryanne recalls, "and we were married in 1980. Our son was born in 1981 and we began traveling back and forth to Egypt to visit [Diaa's] parents and for him to tend to business that was beginning to really grow in Egypt. Our daughter was born in 1983, and by 1988 I'd had enough of being a single parent and threatened vile deeds if a home in Egypt wasn't found for us. I'd had enough of shoveling snow and driving kids to school through freezing rain. We thought about having four children, but happily only had the two... quite enough, thank you.

"When we moved to Egypt, it was at my instigation. My husband had emigrated to Canada and felt that life there was better than in Egypt. As essentially a single mom, since he was in Egypt tending to business, I disagreed. We decided to do two years in Alexandria as an experiment, but in a family vote at eighteen months, it was unanimously decided to stay."

At forty, Maryanne finally got that first horse of her own. The Arab filly, named Dorika (meaning "little Dorothy" in Hungarian), was a gift from a friend of her husband's. The horse originally came from an oasis in the Western Desert, and had lived in the family's garden located outside of Alexandria, until his wife died suddenly.

"My husband volunteered me as a new owner and there I was, after a twenty year absence from riding, with a hot, untrained four year old Arab mare...recipe for disaster if there ever was one...but we are still together about eighteen years on, and I have her two sons as well. Over the next ten years, my horse collection grew to five with the purchase of a lovely Anglo Arab mare, Nimbus; the arrival of her son and Dory's; and the purchase of a baladi Arab gelding called Bunduq just before my husband's death.

*STORM OVER ABU SIR. Pauline Trouveroy is riding Nayzak on an afternoon in the winter. The weather had been stormy all day but not really raining in the desert area. There is a faint rainbow ending over the pyramids.*



*RIDERS AT THE SUN TEMPLE. Merri Melde on Bunduq (on the left) Maryanne Gabbani on Dorika (center) and Tracy Karbus on Nazeer. "The Sun Temple is in our local desert and visible from my roof."*



"Diaa had started a company to import grain to Egypt," Maryanne explains, "beginning with soybeans and soy meal, moving into corn as the markets (which had been under government control) opened, and then he expanded into grain discharge terminals, trucking, an airline and a soybean crushing plant...his last project. He was as busy building this empire as I was with the kids and the horses and our Rat Terrier breeding, a project for the control of rats in the grain silos, as well as working as a substitute teacher at the American School in Cairo where we moved in 1993, and as a writer/editor for an English language monthly magazine, The Egyptian Reporter. Workaholics R Us!

"When he died, it never, ever occurred to me to leave. What was I going to do in Canada at the age of fifty-one, having been out of the work force for the past nineteen years? I had no money and a kid attending Columbia University in New York. There was enough money in a trust fund for the kids to pay for their four years at Columbia, where they both ended up, but I had to work out survival on my own...AND I had control of five of Egypt's important companies because of the children's inheritance of the shares on their father's death. I simply, very strongly, felt that I had to finish what he and I had started. Leaving was, as I said, out of the question...and if I had, my kids would never have been able to come back to Egypt."

Maryanne admits that it was the support of a strong group of women in Egypt that helped her when things were the darkest. She gained encouragement from women she knew who are Egyptians, married to Egyptians, or have strong ties there. They meet in person, call one another, and chat online—but when one of the group is in need, they are all there to lend helping hands. Maryanne's farm even developed into somewhat of a safe haven for them.

"The farm has evolved into a place of refuge for women who need to come and unwind, think, or just play with horses and dogs and donkeys and mules," she says. "This was never really thought out, but has simply happened."

A farm along the Nile with a view of the desert is coveted land, and Maryanne's spread is a lucky situation—one that she clearly carved out for herself.

"Farmland in the Nile Valley is expensive," she explains. "Think downtown Tokyo. It's almost as crowded too. I have almost twenty horses and only 2.5 acres, roughly. The horses live in paddocks and we are at maximum occupation at this point. Some of the land is the house garden and some is a kitchen garden and a bit is planted in forage, but not much since I built the nursery paddock."

"From about May to October the season is HOT and dry, and from October to May it varies between moder-

ate and dry to cold and dry. Our rainy season was about five years ago," Maryanne laughs heartily at her own joke (the irony clearly in the near truth of the matter). "We irrigate the land and the paddocks are sand. But, trees and plants grow like mad wherever you irrigate. I can see the Sahara from my front door, and the change from green to desert is as abrupt as a pencil line on paper."

"The farm and the trekking are exclusively my work. My husband was a totally urban soul. I bought the farm with the proceeds of the sale of our house in Canada, and have built the activities of the farm entirely on my own. In fact, in a weird way, I have to thank my husband's death for being able to have the farm. If he were alive, I'd still be living in the city."

In the west, many people assume the difficulties for a woman taking the reins of business and family matters at the death of a husband might be particularly difficult in the culture of North Africa. When asked this question, Maryanne has several insights to share.

"A lot of people make that interesting assumption about a woman in Egypt," she says. "In ways it is true, but in many others it isn't."

"First, it is true in that men often assume that they have the right to do what they want...they may not actually have the right, but they like to make that assumption. Men here act as though they want an easygoing woman who does whatever they want but, in reality, they have a great deal of respect for a very strong woman. So women who are willing to go along with the stereotype tend to have a hard time, while the ones who buck it have a hard time too but in a different way, and they get respect."

"Now the other part of the puzzle lies with a hadith of the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH...meaning Peace Be Upon Him) that tells a story about a man who came to the Prophet to ask whether he owed greater allegiance to his father or to his mother. The Prophet said that first he owed his allegiance to his mother, second he owed his allegiance to his mother, third he owed his allegiance to his mother, and then to his father. A lot of people say that the Middle East is a patriarchy because the men are the ones in public, but in fact, when they get home, it's "yes, mom." Mom runs the show and it's best to remember that when Mom says jump all the boys ask how high."

"One of the most dangerous things in the world is an Egyptian mother-in-law, because they all heard that hadith and they all believe it. They believe that it is their inalienable right to run their sons' lives (and the poor hapless daughter in law's) forever. Some of them are nice, but this is the stereotype and it has a lot of truth to it."

"So what all this adds up to is the fact that if you are of a certain age and have mastered what I call 'The Mother Voice', that voice that we all heard in our adolescence asking if we had REALLY finished our homework or if we'd





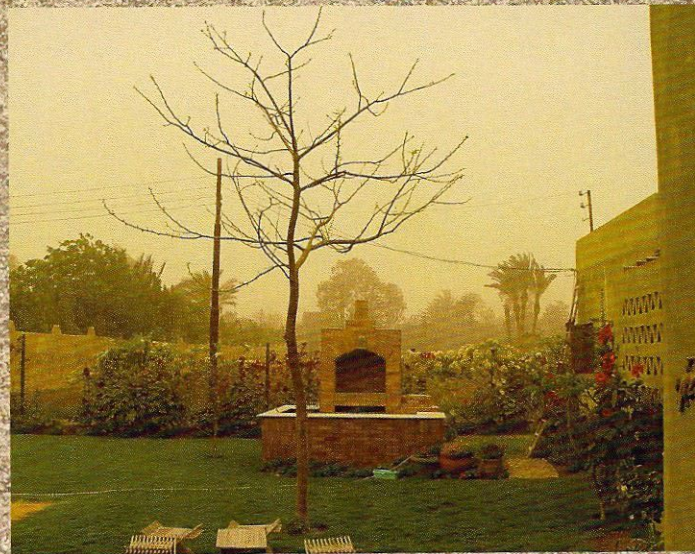
*BRINGING HOME THE BERSEEM (above) shows a wagonload of this feed coming in the front gate at the farm. George, the donkey, is the hauler and the young men on the wagon are grooms who work for me (along with a couple of neighbors). Part of their job is to go and cut the forage for the horses daily. I rent a couple of acres of land just to grow feed for the horses.*

*BERSEEM FIELDS (above) shows Tracy Karbus on Bundug riding along a narrow trail that runs through fields of berseem clover which is the winter forage for the animals in Egypt. Summer forage is a tall South African grass called African Love Grass in North America. We don't have hay here and the horses are dependent on fresh forage cut daily.*

*SANDSTORM (right) was taken out my front door during a sandstorm. Usually the mango groves across the road and the desert hills are clearly visible.*

*(Below) The three riders are from the rear one of my grooms on Wadi, Cris Sha'rawi on her gelding Nayzak, and Cally Stephenson who currently lives in Bahrain on Dooby. They are riding along a canal with berseem clover and possibly corn in the background. The building in the background is one of the village homes. They are multilevel and multifamily dwellings that are usually built by the parents who occupy the ground floor and then finish off successive floors for their sons and their families. This is at the edge of the village of Abu Sir.*

*HANGING OUT IN THE Paddock (below right) is a shot taken from the roof of my house of the horses hanging out in the paddock.*







*GIZA FROM THE SOUTH. The grey gelding, Dooby (Dubious), is on his way to Giza in December, 2007.*

REALLY cleaned up under the bed, you can get away with murder. There isn't a man in the area who won't immediately straighten, check the buttons on his shirt and then flinch because he will realize that he's just lost the fight the minute that you use this voice. I like this voice.

"I will be the first to admit that not all women who move here figure out the cute little social angles in Egypt, not all women who move here learn to speak Arabic, and not all of them are shameless in their willingness to exploit all the angles. I was doing a PhD in Social Psychology at the University of Waterloo when I met Diaa. I quit just before running my dissertation research because essentially, I wasn't that interested in the field anymore and I didn't want to be a professor, but I never stopped studying. I like languages, and speak and read four of them, and cultural issues fascinate me.

"When my husband died, I sat through a couple of months of meetings with a bunch of bankers who thought I only spoke English. Then one day I lost my temper listening to one particularly obtuse banker miss a point that

was being explained over and over to him in both Arabic and English, so I explained it carefully, sarcastically and administering a serious verbal beating in Arabic...in The Mother Voice.

"The room went silent and then the only one of the bankers that I'm still friends with almost fell off his chair laughing. The rest of them were horrified. If you can do that, you'll be ok."

Contact Maryanne Gabbani and learn more about her adventures, animals, and horse trekking business through her website: [www.alsorat.com](http://www.alsorat.com), or through her blog, Living in Egypt: [miloflamingo.blogspot.com](http://miloflamingo.blogspot.com).

