



The Heritage of the American Saddlebred

A Forgotten Glory

by Barbara Molland

Outside the Kentucky Bluegrass region of Kentucky, where thoroughbred race horse farms abound and stone walls enclose the verdant pastures of places like Claiborne Farms and Three Chimneys, little is known of another breed common to this area, the American Saddlebred. But the Saddlebred has, perhaps, more historical claim to this country than does the thoroughbred. In the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, the Saddlebred has its own museum, and the memorabilia inside attests to an intimate relationship that exists between the Bluegrass and its show horse breed reaching far beyond the more recent confines of the show arena. It is a relationship tied to the historical use of the horse as both a saddle and harness horse, and to understand it requires a look at the history of the people, the horse, and the region.

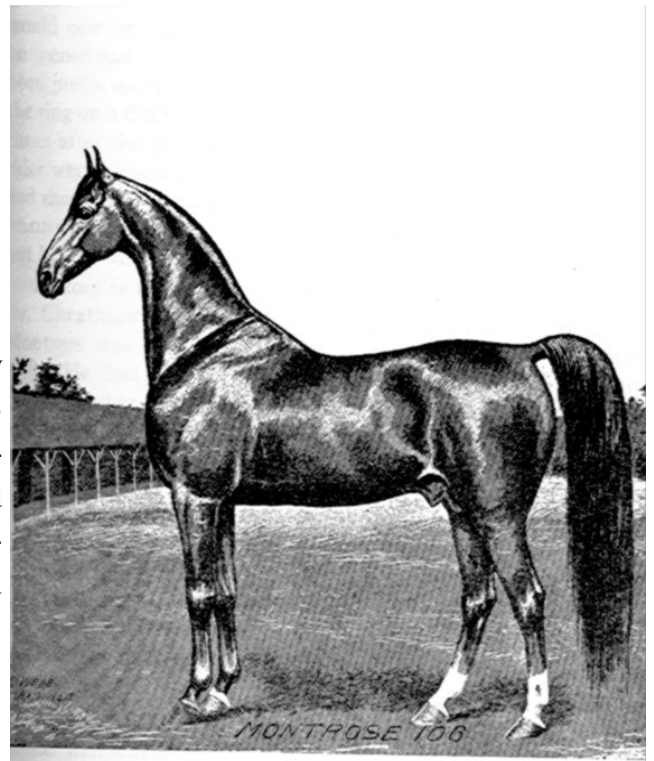
In 18th century America, the territory west of the Cumberland Gap was a raw land, heavily treed, with rolling hills and beautiful meadows underlain with limestone rock. As European immigrants moved westward into this roadless terrain, they did so on foot and horseback, traveling narrow winding trails with hazards on all sides. As depicted in this painting of Daniel Boone guiding settlers into the west, the vast land beyond the Cumberland gap was a wilderness, a roadless territory of unimagined expanse. People were lost in this immensity without a horse. Those with means brought with them agile, ambling horses from the British Isles, small horses, often referred to in the old English literature of Chaucer's time as palfreys.



In the Narragansett Bay area of Rhode Island, these horses were being bred in large numbers and were known as Narragansett Pacers. , Pacers were sure-footed amblers, could live on spare rations, and had an almost eerie ability to cover a lot of ground at speed without fatigue.

Paul Revere's Ride on Narragansett Pacer

They carried the settlers to what would become widely known as the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky where successful farmers began to breed them to stallions of the thoroughbred breed, such as Montrose, that were then being imported from England. The resulting offspring were larger, more refined, and many retained the ambling ability of the gaited horses.



Montrose

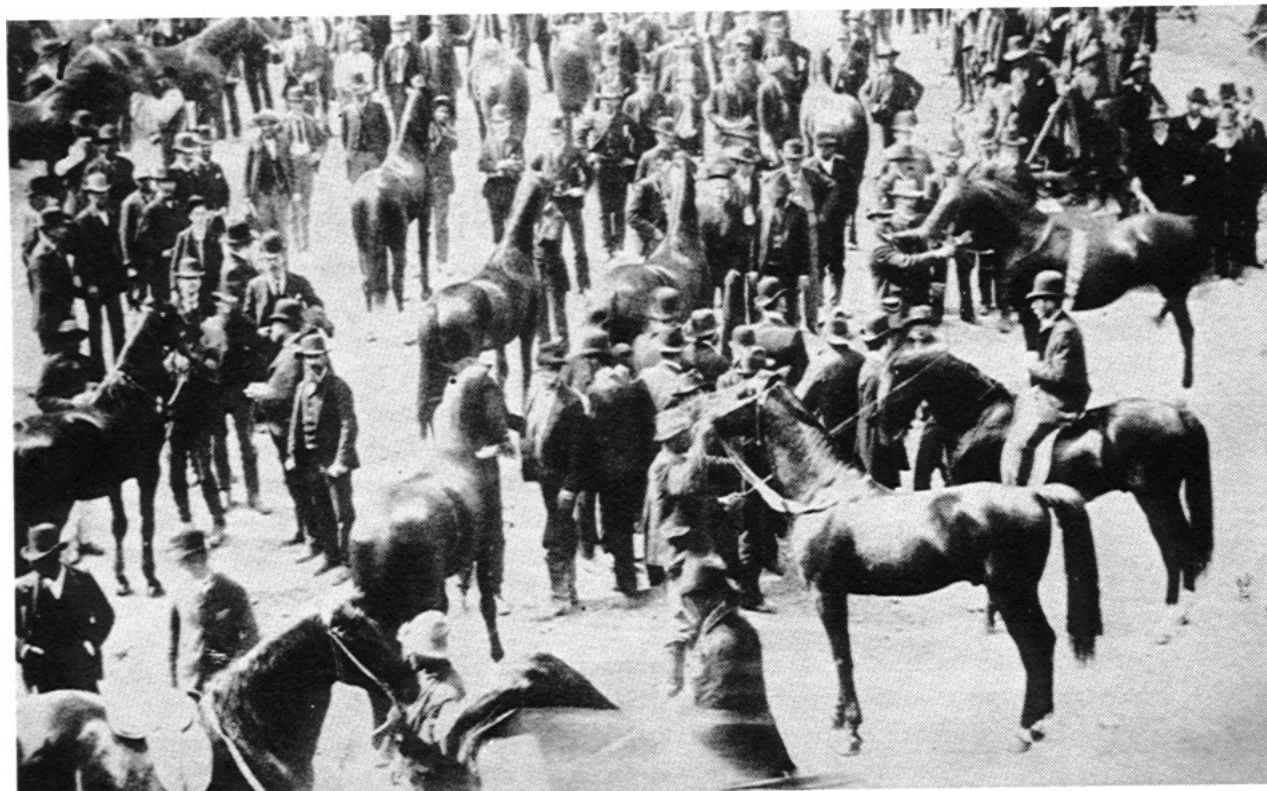


Civil War General John Hunt Morgan on his Saddlebred

It was in this way that the early years of the American Saddlebred breed began, and this region, the eventual state of Kentucky, became widely known for the production of the best horses in the country. The limestone soils of the Bluegrass seemed to grow the best horses anywhere. Unlike today's horse breeding priorities, however, early American horses had to prove themselves. The whims of their owners played little part in the success or failure of a breeding stallion. The successful stallion attracted mares through the reputation of his offspring, and if they were good, the word would spread for many miles, a reputation carried by his colts and fillies as they worked their way to the far reaches of Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma and other regions. The characteristics of stamina, energy, intelligence, tractability, speed, and beauty sold the horses that possessed them, and owners brought their mares from great distances to the stallions whose offspring they admired.

It was a time in which people knew horses the way they now know computers, and most were as comfortable on the seat of a buggy or in the saddle as they now are sitting in front of a keyboard. Practicality dictated that their horses be tough. Just like the hardy people who settled this uncharted territory, a horse had to have the energy, sturdy conformation, and disposition to do a job and to also be a willing and trusted part of the family's day to day activity. With his keen intelligence and affection for his "family", the Saddlebred endeared himself

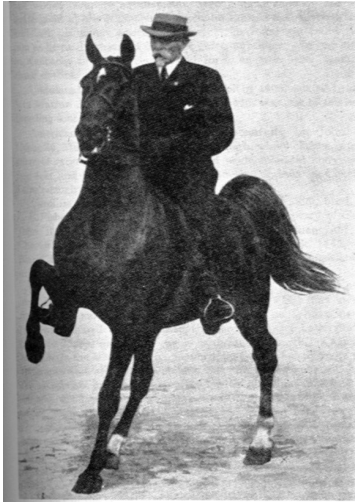
to the people who depended upon him, and in return as their communities grew and there was time for socializing, they honored him with county fairs and special court days dedicated to the racing, trading, and dealing of horses. This was not a horse that came out once weekly for the fox hunt in Virginia or for a ride around New York City's Central Park; this was not a specialist horse but a vital cog in the machinery of frontier life, as dependable in front of a plow as he was for the doctor racing to an emergency on a distant farm. He had to have stamina, strength, speed when needed, and dependability. If he could amble and give his rider a comfortable ride, he was even more valuable.



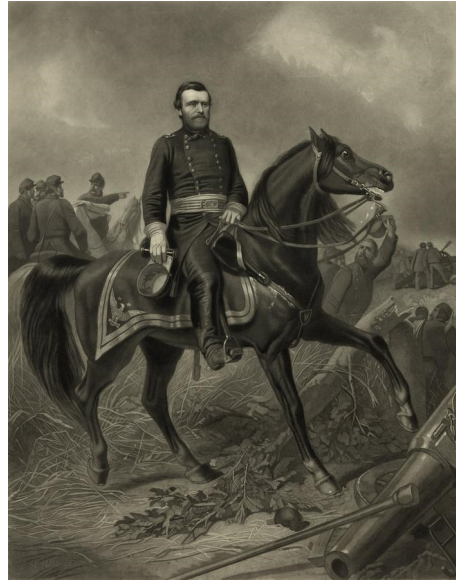
Gathering of American Saddlebred Horses and Men in the 1870s in Missouri

The horses that failed in this duty disappeared over the years, either because they were unable to perform or because of extreme hardship such as during the 1860s when thousands died during the grueling military marches of the Confederate cavalry during the Civil War. The few who survived and returned with General Lee and his troops bred on to become the foundation horses for the American Saddlebred breed, established in 1891, the oldest breed registry in the country. The American Saddle bred grew and became a part of this frontier landscape in the same way that the cottonwoods grew along the riverbanks of the Ohio River. The horse suited the place and the place suited the horse. Because he was so uniquely a product of his environment and the needs of the people who used him, there was nowhere else in the world a horse like him.

The names of the early horses reflected their ownership as well as this landscape: Gaines Denmark, Tom Hal, Copperbottom, Rex McDonald, Washington Denmark, Black Squirrel, Davy Crockett, Lexington, Forest King, Genius Bourbon King, and Harrison Chief.



General John Castleman and Carolina



Union General Ulysses S. Grant and Cincinnati



Confederate General Robert E. Lee and Traveller

Many of these horses that served in the American Civil War and their ancestors before them were gaited horses, and the four beat cadence of their ambling gait on the dusty backroads of this countryside announced the arrivals and departures of strangers and friends alike, reflecting the rhythm and slower pace of everyday lives. It was a world in which animals played a necessary and harmonious part in daily life, and the measure of a good horse was its ability to do its job as a true partner with its people.

Soon enough, with the establishment of roads, and the invention of the automobile in the early 1900s, horses everywhere lost their utility, the American Saddlebred among them.



American Saddlebreds Tied to Amish Wagons in Pennsylvania Today

The breed's admirers found a way to continue using the horse by turning him into a show horse, finding new life, and for decades this re-living of the breed's glorious past found expression in the show arena. In the process, as the memory of those Colonial and Civil War days faded, as the natural strength and solid appearance were replaced with the artificiality of braced tails and exaggerated vertical movement, the once smooth riding, large hearted breed began to lose not only some of its utilitarian history but a well deserved place of honor among the heroes of the American past. Forgotten were the many thousands of Saddle Horses that died at Gettysburg and Antietam, at Bull Run and Fredricksburg. Forgotten was the horse that stumbled home from defeat to plow the field or to carry the sick child the many miles to medical care, the one who contributed in essential ways to the repair and healing of the American South. Ignored were the very qualities in this horse that made it such a valued family horse and natural outgrowth of the place and people who needed him so badly at a critical time in the country's survival and growth.

The American Saddlebred's intelligence, smooth gaits, jumping ability, speed, and willingness to go on even to the point of exhaustion were all qualities ideally suited to a new country finding its way. The American Saddlebred became through a trial by fire the horse of America, the horse bred for the nation's great distances and its many obstacles, the family horse, its war horse, its proud bearer of generals on both sides of the Civil War. Yes, the Saddlebred is an impressive show horse, but this horse needs to find expression participating in disciplines that duplicate what he once did and still can do so well. Let's give him a chance to show us what he can do in eventing, cross country, jumping, and on the trail as an endurance horse. This is his due. Let us honor the breed that truly belongs to America.