

# Touch Stones

## I N T I M E

By Barbara Molland

Early each year the American Saddlebred Horse Association celebrates the start of every Saddlebred breeder's year with the publication of this reference and breeder's guide. It is a fitting time to think about our roles as stewards of the breed. What does it mean to be a steward? From the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* of the English language, we are given this definition of stewardship: "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; *especially*: the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."

In virtually every way, anyone who chooses to breed a horse, or to breed any animal, is taking on the responsibility of stewardship of that animal. Those of us who have been involved with horses and the American Saddlebred breed for several years concern ourselves with not just the breeding of one horse, but the welfare and future of many horses, sometimes even those that don't belong to us. This, in turn, forms the vision and future of the breed, a road map, so to speak, of where we have been and where we are going.

In today's world, we are all too aware that life changes quickly. Even among horse breeders, where the 11-month gestation period of a mare sometimes seems to slow life to a snail's pace, trends of horse ownership and use evolve ever more rapidly. New disciplines form, equestrian fashions emerge, and imports as well as creations of new horse breeds appear, some to last and gain an enthusiastic following, while others become that proverbial flash in the pan (or paddock).

We live in a rather unique time in the chronology of horses and their use. Nearly lost to equestrian memory, for example, is the fact that for most of the history of riding, for hundreds and hundreds of years, saddle horses or those used for riding exclusively, were amblers, not trotters. A trotting horse was a driving or harness horse, not one to be ridden. Using England as an example, in the work of the noted early English writer Geoffrey

Chaucer, he refers to the English Palfrey – the most common riding horse for royalty and people of means in England in the 1300s and the same ambling horse that is the ancestor of our American Saddlebreds today. The Palfrey was, during Chaucer's time, a common part of the English landscape and found from one part of the British Isles to the other. Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* before the invention of the printing press, so it is not hard to imagine that communication was slow in the 1300s; life hadn't changed appreciably in generations, but it was going to change rapidly in ways that people could scarcely imagine at that time.

In continental Europe and in the British Isles, the 1600s brought improved roads, which in turn led to more use of the harness and cart horse. At the same time, British colonialism brought increased maritime trade which encouraged imports of horses from other areas; this was accompanied by a growing interest in horse racing and English royalty's passion for fox hunting and sport. The saddle or riding horse as utilitarian transportation decreased in use.

Horse breeding at this time was often subject to the way that horses were kept, usually in extensive public common areas, unfenced, with stallions running freely with mares. Palfreys were generally small horses, rarely standing over 15 hands. When King Henry VIII declared a law demanding the castration of all small native British stallions – two years of age, standing under 14 hands and running freely in common areas – he was sounding the death knell for the English Palfrey. In 1660, when Charles II ascended the throne, he and his advisor, the Duke of Newcastle, began the serious

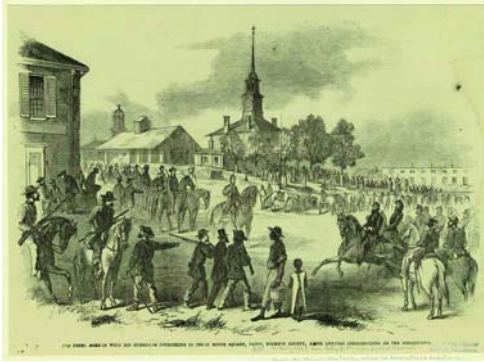


Paul Revere in Lexington in 1775 on what is widely speculated to be a Narragansett Pacer, which was used to create the Kentucky Saddle Horse.

New York Public Library Picture Collection

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New York Public Library Picture Collection

Gaines' Denmark, foundation stallion of the breed, spent years with the Confederate raiders of General John Hunt Morgan after being requisitioned by his troops passing through Bourbon County, Kentucky. This photo of Morgan and his men was originally published in 1863.

work of eliminating the native British ambling stock and replacing it with imported Turks and Barbs. To quote the writer John Wallace, respected author of *Wallace's Monthly*, who wrote in 1895: "Of all the facts that are known and established in the history of the English horse, the wiping out of the pacer is the

most striking and significant ... The little English pacers, that had been the favorites of kings and princes and nobles for so many centuries were submerged in the streams of Saracenic blood that flowed in upon them, and their only legitimate descendants left upon the face of the earth found homes in the American colonies."

In England itself, herds of native British ambling horses contracted so dramatically that their only significant presence for a time was in southwest Scotland and in the Galway area of Ireland. They there became known as Scottish Galloways and Irish Hobbies, ancestors familiar to the historians of the American Saddlebred breed and to all gaited American horses. An example of how quickly these horses disappeared from common use in England can be found in the statement of an English traveler to colonial America in 1796, in which he wrote about the horses and horsemanship of Virginia: "The horses in common use in Virginia are all of a light description ... some of them are handsome but all for the most part spoiled by the false gaits which they are taught ... a pace and a 'wrack.' We should call this an unnatural gait,

as none of our horses would ever move in that manner without a rider; but the Americans insist upon it that it is otherwise because many of their colts pace as soon as born."

Clearly, this English traveler had no personal memory nor had he heard other of his countrymen speak of ambling horses. Within a generation or two these horses had fundamentally disappeared from the British landscape and British memory.

At approximately the same time, political and economic conditions in England encouraged the settlement of America. Religious dissent drove a small group of English Puritan settlers to the shore of Massachusetts where they found a wilderness of trails and rugged terrain, a perfect setting for their small ambling horses to regain an equine foothold of utility and a way to survive.

Americans being Americans, our early settlers soon rebelled against English conventional wisdom in both equestrian and political matters, and when Paul Revere rode in Boston to give the alarm that the British were coming he rode, it is said, a Narragansett Pacer – a small fleet horse from Rhode Island whose ambling forebears had been discarded by the British but which were already being used by Americans to create the Kentucky Saddle Horse and Tennessee Walker on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains. We find literary reference to the Narragansett Pacers in the writings of James Fenimore Cooper, when in the early 1800s he describes their gait in *The Last of The Mohicans*, "Tis the merit of the animal. They come from the shores of the Narraganset Bay, in the small province of Providence Plantation and are celebrated for their hardihood and ease of



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"Of all the facts that are known and established in the history of the English horse, the wiping out of the pacer is the most striking and significant ... The little English pacers, that had been the favorites of kings and princes and nobles for so many centuries were submerged in the streams of Saracenic blood that flowed in upon them, and their only legitimate descendants left upon the face of the earth found homes in the American colonies." – John Wallace, 1895, author of *Wallace's Monthly*.

The English Palfrey, ambling horse of the Middle Ages. In 1660, when Charles II ascended the throne, he and his advisor, the Duke of Newcastle, began the serious work of eliminating the native British ambling stock and replacing it with imported Turks and Barbs.

their movement.” The Americans took the qualities they most valued in the ambling horses, crossed those horses on the larger, finer Thoroughbreds being imported to America and developed a more stylish but still thoroughly comfortable riding horse, the Kentucky Saddler.

By the time the American Revolutionary War was old news and the Civil War was threatening to destroy the Union, the renown of Kentucky Saddle Horses had spread from one end of the new country to the other. With its limestone soils, the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky had become the cradle of the best horses in the nation. Even in the mid-1800s, Kentucky Saddle Horses were comparatively expensive. It is said that it was due to the superiority of its horses that the Southern Cavalry dominated in the early skirmishes of the War Between the States. Even Gaines’ Denmark, foundation stallion of the breed, spent years with the Confederate raiders of John Hunt Morgan after being requisitioned by his troops passing through Bourbon County.

Yet with all this acclaim as the epitome of a true Saddle Horse, the Civil War was hard on the Kentucky Saddler. Many Saddle Horses were lost during the Civil War battles. The victory of Union forces was also a victory for Northern horses, Morgans and Thoroughbreds. Yet, the sterling qualities of the ambling descendants of the British Palfrey prevailed and contributed, sometimes anonymously, in significant ways to the settling of the Western United States. Important events such as the establishment of the Pony Express in 1860 called for small fleet horses, standing no more than 15 hands, a common size for the amblers who were also very fast. Many were purchased from Kentucky and Missouri, the owners of this endeavor sparing no expense to carry the mail swiftly from coast to coast, financing the establishment of a competing route to California and the dream of the West far more than they were the delivery of mail. These ambitious men were willing to purchase good horses for good money at a time when the Civil War and the development of the West were looming largely on the horizon. The Pony Express lasted for a year and a half before the telegraph made it obsolete, but the romance of this adventure played enormously to the American imagination, and this, as much as anything, led to the droves of pioneers who headed west for land and gold and adventure. The American Saddlebred breed, yet unnamed, helped to take them there.

Last year, I was reminded of the Saddler’s early presence in the West when I began an email conversation with Dr. Gus Cothran,

equine genetic researcher formerly at the University of Kentucky Gluck Research Center but now with Texas A&M University. Dr. Cothran has blood-typed most of the wild horse herds in the state of Nevada. I recalled that I had read that there was evidence of American gaited blood, or what Dr.

Cothran calls American Saddle or American Gaited Horses, in several herds in Nevada. Because most breeders and owners did not maintain breeding records or pedigrees on their horses during the years of the 1800s, we cannot technically designate horses from that time period as one breed distinct from another, but they were the horses that provided that same mix of blood which produced Saddlebreds and later, Walkers. DNA testing on herds of mustangs reveals that several herds there carry the genetic markers indicating they are descendants of that genetic pool.

In the fall of 2006, my husband and I took a road trip to Nevada to do some exploration of our own. We chose to explore the area along Highway 50, stretching from east to west, known as the loneliest highway in America. Highway 50 parallels the route of the old Pony Express Trail. After stopping at the Cold Springs Café and Gas Station, site of the former Cold Springs Pony Express Station, we spoke with a local hunting guide and outfitter about the wild horse herds in that area. He directed us to three, one of which was in the nearby Clan Alpine Mountains. We explored all day. After no luck sighting any horses, but seeing lots of “stud piles,” a reliable indicator of mustang presence, we had come to the end of our journey, tired and disappointed. We were 30 miles from the nearest paved road and had decided to turn back at the next possible widening of the sage-cov-



New York Public Library Picture Collection

This mare was one in a herd of five wild mustangs spotted by Barbara Molland in the Clan Alpine Mountains in Nevada. Molland says the horse displayed some very noticeable similarities to the modern Saddlebred.



Barbara Molland photo

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Women of the Kentucky Frontier Nursing Service rode American Saddlebreds to reach remote mountain cabins. These midwives often braved daunting circumstances such as stormy weather and flooding streams in the middle of a dark night.

ered track we were driving, when we came up over a rise, and there in the darkening light, silhouetted against the mountain, was a small herd of wild horses.

They stood, alert and surprised at our approaching vehicle. A band of five, typical of a mustang herd, included a young stud, three mares of various ages and a lead mare, the boss of the group. It was this lead mare that took my breath away. In her color, her neck length, her conformation and movement, she strongly resembled a Saddlebred. Using the zoom lens on my camera, I took as many shots as I could before they fled up the canyon. In subsequent trips and in visits to the large wild horse handling center known as Palomino Valley, we have seen and photographed others, but with some notable exceptions, few have impressed us as much as this mare in her similarity to the modern Saddlebred. Without the confirmation of blood typing, this story is anecdotal, and yet there were and are other documented examples of Saddlebreds being used in the West, escaping or being released when no longer needed; and certainly Dr. Cothran's work tells us that horses carrying Saddle Horse blood – tough, wiry, and intelligent enough to avoid capture – are now living wild and free in remote parts of the West.

Other notable uses of the Kentucky and Missouri Saddle Horses were found in the Remount Stallions stationed in widely dispersed

areas across the country for use as breeding stallions to produce horses for the United States Cavalry, and additionally to improve the horse herds of pioneer ranching families. There were more Thoroughbred stallions used than Saddle Horses, but Edna May's Choice, Lindbergh Peavine, Richmond's Choice, and Sandford's Dare, among others, were found on Remount lists dating from the early 1900s.

In Kentucky itself, the establishment in 1925 of the Kentucky Frontier Nursing Service formed in Hyden, Leslie County, Kentucky, by Mary Breckinridge, daughter of a prosperous Kentucky family, attracted women from America and Great Britain, who, armed with a nursing education in midwifery and a strong sense of adventure, traveled to Kentucky to serve the women and families of the Kentucky mountains who were in dire need of medical care. Often through stormy weather, flooding streams and in the middle of a dark night, these midwives – mounted on American Saddlebred horses – braved daunting circumstances to reach the people waiting anxiously for their arrival in remote mountain cabins. All this occurred as recently as the 1930s. In the book, *Babies In Her Saddlebags*, Joyce Hopp writes of Betty Lester, one of the first women to sign on as a nurse midwife. Betty describes the horses they were given for their duties: "Most of them come from down in the Bluegrass, especially chosen for our needs. They have to have a good gait, or they will break all the bottles." To this day, according to local mountain baby lore, Kentucky and Tennessee babies arrived by way of horseback, in saddlebags, not by stork.

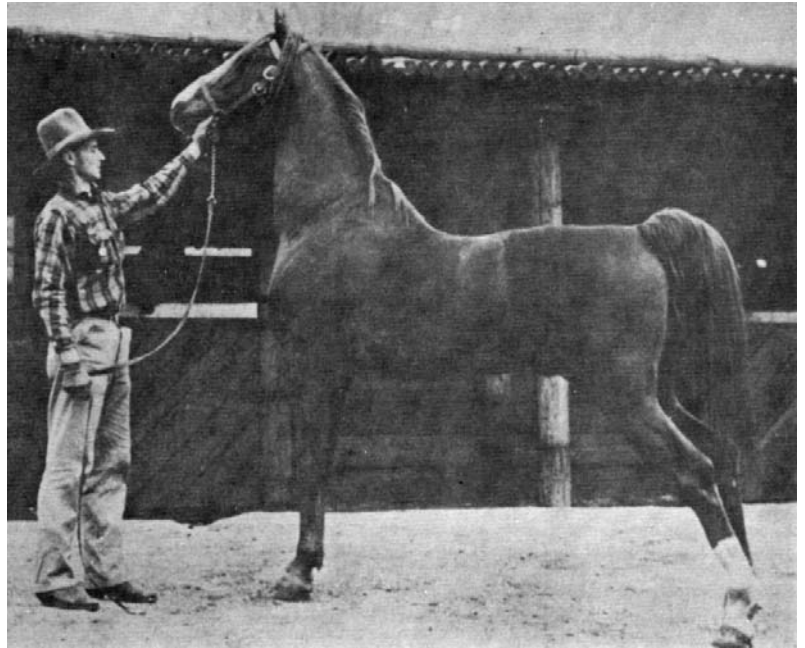
Another example of the utilitarian use of American Saddlebreds was the selection by the United States Forest Service in 1936 of a registered Saddlebred stallion named Grand Menard to stand at the head of a breeding program to produce horses for use in fighting wildfires in the mountains of western Montana. This was before the use of smoke jumpers and airplanes to control fire. To quote Lynn Weatherman in the 1986 *American Saddlebred* magazine, "A Saddlebred stallion, Grand Menard 11765, was bought by the Forest Service at a sale in Grand Island, Nebraska. This horse was bred by U.L. Bounds, Paris, Missouri. He was sired by Menard Lee, by Menard King, a grandson of Emerald Chief who was a winner at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904 and reserve champion to Montgomery Chief. His dam was a

daughter of Grand McDonald, one of the most sensational showing sons of Rex McDonald. Grand McDonald beat both Edna May and Golden Glow in the show ring and was the winner of numerous titles.” Lynn goes on to quote *Western Horseman* magazine, in the September/October 1944 issue: “This horse, out of Menard Lee and Gypsy Rose, enjoyed some reputation among horse breeders, and the purchase focused considerable attention on the work being done in improving saddle horse stock in western Montana ... slowly but surely the grade of saddle horses produced in the locality is improving as a result of the infusion of new and better blood ... The American Saddler has proved a good traveler on mountain trails, tractable and easily handled and the studs seem able to transmit the desirable characteristics of the breed to even cold-blooded mares.”

Grand Menard made quite a name for himself in western Montana. There is now a campground and picnic area named for the old horse at the Nine Mile Station, near Lolo, Montana. Two months ago, when I interviewed Bob Hoverson, head of the packing and outfitting portion of the Nine Mile Station and a forest ranger for more than 35 years, he told me that he still has Grand Menard’s stall name plate displayed in a corner of his office, something just as important to him as the trophies and ribbons are to me in mine.

Although it can be said with great pride that the American Saddlebred has been used as a show horse since the mid-1800s, it and its ambling ancestors have been used for many more years as horses of utility. Circumstance drove its development and its continued use to give us today a sterling example of a well conformed horse, a strong horse, a horse with stamina, great legs and feet, straight backs, and an intelligent, kind, and trainable mind. The show ring use has given us beauty, elegance and refinement, not to mention a way for breeders and trainers to make a decent living in creating them.

With all these attributes, we have a treasure worth keeping. The trail of history, these touch stones over time that remind us from whence the breed came and the value of its contribution to the American past, show us that it would be a mistake to forget the honest utility of our horses, the way that hard use over and through the generations of the partnership of Saddlebred horses and the American people has provided us this finely chiseled gift of the equine world for safe keeping. The American Saddlebred horse is to this country the equine counterpart of a national treasure, its winding



Courtesy Ninemile Ranger Station, U.S. Forest Service

trail across this country braiding itself intimately into our most anguishing political moments as it also paralleled the development and western expansion of the American people. We must be ever vigilant to protect its reputation, its soundness, its correct and strong conformation, genetic health, intelligent and kind disposition ... and I will add, lest we forget, its inherent ambling ability. We members of the American Saddlebred Horse Association, who every year fill out our stallion reports and foal registrations, are in fact the stewards of this breed. It is up to us to honor the best qualities of the American Saddlebred and to have the wisdom to look into the future and provide a place for this horse in the generations to come, no matter what the discipline. If we don’t, we may find ourselves like the English traveler of the 1700s, no longer recognizing or valuing what was once so much a part of our landscape. The American Saddlebred is a horse to celebrate. Let’s not lose sight of that at a time when, unlike the Englishman, we have both the communication technology and the awareness of history to allow us to make intelligent choices. Let us, as we often say, rack on! **as**

*Sources used in the writing of this article include: Famous Saddle Horses by Susanne (Emily Ellen Scharf), 1936; The Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper, 1826; The Pony Express by William Lightfoot Visscher, 1946; The Horse of America by John H. Wallace, 1897; War Horse, Mounting the Cavalry with American’s Finest Horses by Livingston and Roberts, 2003; Babies In Her Saddlebags by Joyce W. Hopp, 1986; Saddlebreds In Big Sky Country by Lynn Weatherman, The American Saddlebred magazine,*

In 1936, the U.S. Forest Service chose registered Saddlebred stallion Grand Menard to head its breeding program to produce horses for use in fighting wildfires in the mountains of western Montana, another utilitarian use of the American Saddlebred.