

The History of the American Saddle Horse

Introduction

In this paper I intend to cover the development of the breed of American Saddle Horse which includes the breeds of horses that went into its making, its development in America, and how the different types of Saddle Horses came about. However, I do not intend to include the ways in which these horses are trained.

1. Early History

A. Pacers

There is a certain breed of horses, the Pacers, that has contributed much to the development of the American Saddle Horse. This breed, which has existed since before 50 B.C., was and is bred to pace - a gait in which the legs on the same side of the horse move forward at the same time. From this horse the Saddle Horse has inherited the tendency to pace. This inheritance makes it easy for him to perform the rack - a four-beat gait which is very significant in Saddle Horses.

One specific type of pacer is the Narragansett Horse. Historians don't know exactly what the origin of these horses is and can only guess at it. There are many stories pertaining to the breed's origin, one of which is hinted at in the following quotation.

In the state of Rhode Island there is a bay called Narragansett, so named for a tribe of Indians that formerly dwelt on its banks. Accident, or one of those unaccountable freaks which nature sometimes plays in the animal world, gave rise to a breed of horses which were once well known in America by the name of Narragansetts.. They were small, commonly of the color called sorrel in America, and distinguished by their habit of pacing. Horses of this race were, and still are, in much request as saddle horses, on account of their hardiness, and ease of their movements. As they were also sure of

foot, the Narragansetts were much sought for by females who were obliged to travel over the roots and holes in the new countries.¹

Another story is that Governor Robinson imported a Spanish Jennet stallion which was of Oriental Thoroughbred blood, and which became the founder of the Narragansett horses. Some contend that this is not likely because the Jennets were Oriental and thus could not have produced pacing colts. However, it is not improbable that the mares could have given their colts the pacing tendency. But since there is also a mystery as to the origin of the extinct Jennet breed, this is probably just an attempt to connect two legends.²

One historian gives a more logical explanation of the Narragansett's origin. It is as follows: Rhode Island was settled by British liberals, many of whom were refugees or just plain fugitives. Since these people were not as religious as those in the other colonies, they were not opposed to establishing race tracks and offering prizes to winners. This led to selective breeding which produced the best and fastest horses of the time.

Around 1725 Dr. James McSparran, an Episcopalian clergyman, returned to England after a visit to Rhode Island. He then proceeded to write a book about his visit to the colonies, which he named America Dissected. In this book he made one statement about the small Narragansett pacers which states, "I saw some of them pace a mile in a little more than two minutes, a good deal less than three.." Some analysts interpret this to be around 2:15 to 2:20 minutes per mile. It is very probable that these astoundingly fast records were set over rough and badly constructed tracks with the weight of the rider on the horse's back. Even today when pacers are driven in front of light sulkies on fast tracks, those who pace 2:05 or even 2:10 are considered close to tops. I might also state that it was 176 years later that

¹ James Fenimore Cooper, The Last of the Mohicans, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap), p. 20.

² Pers Crowell, Cavalcade of American Horses, (New York: Bonanza Books), p. 58.

the first "two-minute horse" in history, Star Pointer, could pace his famous mile in 1:59 $\frac{1}{4}$. With racing between famous pacers during the pre-Revolutionary times, many of the best Narragansett Pacers were brought into Virginia, Tennessee and also to Kentucky, which in later times became the founding place of the American Saddle Horse.³

During this time another hardy little horse, the Canadian Pacer, was developing in the Canadian provinces. These horses, which were destined to play an important part in the founding of the American Saddle Horse, were said to be crosses of French importations and New English stallions containing British and Dutch blood.

One of the most famous Canadian Pacers was Tom Hal, a blue roan stallion that was foaled in 1806. He was imported from Canada to Philadelphia and later was sent to Kentucky.⁴

Tom Hal is probably famous because of his remarkable stamina and speed. Once he was said to have been ridden at the pace, which was his fastest gait, from Lexington to Louisville - a distance of over 80 miles. He accomplished this from sunrise to sunset one day and back the next day. Having done this, he won for his owner a \$100 bet. It is also said that he never lay down except to roll and was always found either standing or walking, day or night. He also walked as he digested his food. Tom Hal lived to the astonishing age of forty-one. It is also interesting to know that Tom Hal's blood influenced two other American breeds beside the Saddle Horses - the Standardbred and the Tennessee Walking Horse.⁵

³ Crowell, op. cit., p.2

⁴ Pers Crowell, Cavalcade of American Horses, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1951), p. 60.

⁵ J. H. Ransom, History of American Saddle Horses, (Lexington: Ransom Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), p.34.

8. The Thoroughbreds

The Thoroughbred breed started as a mixture of offsprings of the Arabian stallions Darley Arabian, Byerly Turk, and the Godolphin Barb, and the native mares of England. The desirable tall height of the English mares combined with the speed and stamina of the Arabian stallions gave the world the fastest horses it had ever known. Many years later, in 1832, an English stallion of this breeding named Hedgeford was imported to America.⁶

These, then, are the contents of the big melting pot that went into the making of one of America's greatest breeds of horses, the American Saddle Horse: The Narragansett Pacers, the Canadian Pacers, and the Thoroughbred. When these breeds were combined they produced horses with speed, stamina, the ability to do several different gaits, and also good looks.

II. Later Development

A. Early Saddle Horses

The first Saddle Horses were strictly utility animals. They were used for drawing wagons, pulling plows, and transporting their owners. As better roads were constructed the heavier and rougher gaited horses were separated from the others to do the heavy work, while the lighter, finer-boned horses were used for riding and pulling carriages. As time passed people who were proud of their horses began to compete with their horses to determine which was the best all around horse at the county fairs and horse shows. This made them strive to develop better quality horses. Thus the utility animal became the forerunner of the later show horse.

In 1850, Denmark by imported Hedgeford, the Thoroughbred stallion, was bred to a colonial saddler known as the Cockspur mare of pacing background.

⁶Nelson C. Nye, "Horse," World Book Encyclopedia, (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corp., 1950) Vol. 9, pp 308-324.

In 1851 the product of this union, Gaines Denmark, was foaled. As a three-year old he was sold for \$1,000 to E. P. Gaines of Scott County, Kentucky. This is believed to be the highest price paid for a Saddle Horse stallion at that time. (Today a top Saddle Horse will sell for \$75,000). From E. P. Gaines he was selected by General John Hunt Morgan for use during the Civil War and because of his great beauty, stamina and intelligence, he became Gen. Morgan's favorite charger.⁷ And the statue on the Fayette County Court House lawn is this famous general on his equally famous horse.

As the years went by following the Civil War, great horses were bred and better colts were foaled. Four of Gaines Denmark's most famous sons - Washington Denmark, Diamond Denmark, Star Denmark, and Sumpter Denmark - flashed like jewels into the horse world. Cabell's Lexington, who can be traced to Justin Morgan, founder of the Morgan Horse breed, on his sire's side, and to Tom Hal on his dam's side, was foaled in 1872. Other famous Saddle Horses, such as Montrose, the first Saddle Horse to sell for \$5,000, Harrison Chief, founder of the Chief family of Saddle Horses, and Annie C., dam of the immortal Bourbon King, were foaled.⁸

B. American Saddle Horse Breeder's Association

In 1891 such men as Gen. John P. Castleman, Will A. Gaines, and others gathered to form an association that would establish and further improve and promote one of the greatest breeds of horse the world has ever known. These men realized that a great horse breed existed in their midst and decided to take steps to protect the breed from pollution and to take care in breeding the horses. They set up a register of pedigrees into which only the very best Saddle horses would be listed. They named the association the American

⁷J. H. Ransom, History of American Saddle Horses, (Lexington:Ransom Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), pp. 16-17.

⁸Pers Crowell, Cavalcade of American Horses, (New York: Bonanza Books, 1951). p. 62.

Saddle Horse Breeder's Association." Soon after the establishment of the association the following list of top Saddle Horse stallions was set before the association for approval. It is as follows:

Denmark	Texas
Brinker's Drennon	Prince Albert
Sam Booker	Peters' Halcorn
John Dillard	Varnon's Roebuck
Tom Hal	Davy Crockett (added in 1893)
Van Meter's Waxy	Harrison Chief (added in 1898)
Cabell's Lexington	Pat Cleburne (added in 1899)
Copperbottom	Coleman's Eureka
Stump the Dealer	

Through the years the list was reduced down to one horse. The association recognized the Thoroughbred horse Denmark by imported Hedgerford alone as foundation sire. The living sires on the original list were given numbers and placed in the registry. The deceased sires were put on the Noted Deceased Sire's List.⁹

III.. Types and Gaits

As I have mentioned earlier, the finer-boned and better quality Saddle Horses were separated from the rougher horses and were used for showing and for producing even better horses. But because of the different uses of these horses, they were divided into three even smaller groups: the five-gaited horse, the three-gaited horse, and the fine harness horse.

A. The Five Gaited Horse

Because of his natural flexibility and good balance, the Saddle Horse, of all breeds, is most adapted to learning the five gaits - the walk, trot, and the canter (which is actually a slow, animated gallop) are the natural gaits of the Saddle Horse. The other two, the slow gait and rack, are man-made and must be taught to the horse in his early training. This is made possible because of his inherited tendency to pace, which is similar to these two gaits. We might not have known of the slow gait and rack if there hadn't

⁹Ibid, p. ?

been a need for these two extra gaits sometime during the history of the American Saddle Horse.

In olden times the Saddle Horse was the principal means of travel and sometime he was required to make long journeys and because of the long distances a frequent change of gait was restful to both horse and rider. It was at that particular time that horsemen gradually began to bring forth the tendency to pace. Since this horse was also strong on the trot, this feat was difficult. And when the pace finally was brought forth, it came as a four-beat gait which was the rack. Then when it wasn't necessary for the horse to travel at the speed of the rack and he was tired of trotting, he was slowed to a slow gait which is similar to a slow rack. Horsemen then began to call this type the five gaited horse.

As I have said before, Saddle Horsemen were proud of their fine horses and showed them whenever they could at county fairs. Gradually the horse's gaits became a large part in the judging of the horse when only conformation was judged before.

Today, the five gaited horse class is the major class in all American Saddle Horse Shows. In the more important shows in America, the five gaited championship class is referred to as the "Big One."

B. The Three Gaited Horse

About the time the five gaited horse was developed, another type, the three gaited horse, also came into being. This horse, sometimes referred to casually as the "walk-trot" horse, was used by the leisure class of people who didn't need the versatility of a five gaited horse. They wanted, instead, a proud, showy mount that would perform only the walk, trot, and canter with high stepping motion of the knee and hock and carry his head high at the same time. These horses were also shown in horse shows against their own kind.

Today the three gaited horse class is a major class in all Saddle Horse shows and is second only in popularity to the five gaited horse class. Today, though, these horses must have extremely fine conformation to be classed as a good three gaited horse.

C. The Fine Harness Horse

Another horse that became popular during this era was the fine harness horse. This type was very similar to the three gaited horse except that he was the Sunday-go-to-meetin' horse or the high-steppin' strutter of his day. He pulled the fine carriages to important gatherings such as church and festivals, and county fairs and was the pride of the well-to-do class of people.

The fine harness horses of today also show in most American Saddle Horse Shows. They are shown in expensive fine leather harness and a shiny four-wheeled buggy. They are judged chiefly on fine conformation, a high rolling trot and proud posture.

IV. Conclusion

The development of the American Saddle Horse has by no means been completed. Even today, finer and more perfect horses are being developed. But since the Great Depression and the advent of better transportation, the Saddle Horse has become purely a sport and in some cases a business. He is still admired, though, by many thousands of people all over the world and good horsemen sometimes become emotional just by watching an excellent performance. The American Saddle Horse has attained a pinnacle of fiery elegance among the most popular breeds of horses. There is no doubt in my mind that the Saddle Horse deserves its title, "The Peacock of the Horse World."