

The Morgan-Quarter Horse Connection: A Personal Quest

By Gail Perlee

Growing up horse crazy in Vermont, I couldn't help knowing about the Morgan horse and its history. I had always heard that the Morgan was the oldest American breed, and that it was a factor in the formation of other breeds, including the Standardbred, American Saddlebred, Tennessee Walker and Quarter Horse. As an adult, I began to explore the fascinating history of the Morgan and its connection to the other breeds in more detail. Its role was well documented and acknowledged by the other breed associations, with one exception- the American Quarter Horse. After moving to Arizona in 1968, I decided to look into the Morgan/QH connection and either prove it a myth or document its history. Little did I know that my search would continue for 40+ years, and would still be in progress today. The following is a summary of my findings so far. For starters, I read books about the QH breed, particularly those by breed historian Bob Denhardt. Imagine my disappointment when I found not one word about Morgans. The books seemed to say that not only did the Morgan have no part in the formation of QH, but that the QH was an earlier breed, dating from the importation of the English race horse, Janus, in 1752. This would mean that the QH, rather than the Morgan, was the first American breed. How could this be? I began to research American horse books published before the AQHA Stud Book was begun in 1941, looking for breed information. Many of the 30+ books I examined included descriptions of the various types and breeds including, after the 1840s, the Morgan. Nowhere did I find mention of Quarter Horses or any similar breed. In contrast, an entire book on Morgans was published in 1857, Morgan Horses: A Premium Essay by D. C. Linsley. And the first volume of the Morgan Horse Register was published in 1894.

Everything I read, except for books and articles published after 1940 led me to the conclusion that the Quarter Horse is a 20th century breed. Of course, there have been horse races ever since man first tamed the horse, and during early Colonial times in America, when there were no proper roads or race tracks, short races of 80 rods or so were popular wherever men, horses and a cleared path came together. Justin Morgan, himself, was famous for winning such races, but that doesn't make him a QH or a member of any other breed. Undoubtedly, a certain amount of sprint horse breeding took place by crossing Thoroughbred sires with local mares during Colonial times. When the first American Thoroughbred registry, Bruce's American Studbook, was published in 1868, a few entries were followed by the designation "quarter horse." This has been taken by some to prove that the QH has existed as a separate breed since Colonial times. However, nothing written before the late 1930s suggests that these horses were anything other than early Thoroughbred sprinters. In fact, today's Quarter Horses can trace their ancestry back to Colonial times only through 200 years of Thoroughbred breeding. In any case, the advent of good roads in the early 1800s soon shifted horse racing interest away from runners of all types and toward trotters, which were used everywhere in harness for transportation and commerce. People had a vested interest in how fast a horse could get down the road pulling a wagon or buggy, and speedy trotters were greatly admired and sought after. Harness racing became and remained the most popular American sport until

almost the turn of the 20th Century, when sporting interest began to shift back to flat races and Thoroughbreds. This probably was due to developments in transportation, such as train travel, which had begun to curtail the use of harness horses.

Having established to my own satisfaction that the Morgan breed predates the QH by over 100 years, I started to look for evidence of Morgan blood in the American cow pony and the modern Quarter Horse. One of the first pieces of the puzzle came from the book The California Stock Horse (1949) by Luis B. Ortega. He says, "many people throughout the country have conceived the idea that from the time during the 1870s to the early 1900s the horses used in the cow business were all California mustangs. This is a long way from the truth. As a matter of fact, the saddle stocks of many of the big ranchos were of good breeds with Morgan and Thoroughbred predominant. The remudas had fine, big, strong, well-reined horses that could really run. Cattle of that time were spooky and it required strong, tough horses that were well broke to handle them."

As I looked through books and articles by ranchers and old cowboys, I found more and more references to Morgans as cow horses. For instance, in the December 1976 issue of *Western Horseman* magazine, C. O. Peterson, who lived and worked in California's San Bernardino mountain ranching country for over 40 years, recalled the magnificent feral horses that roamed the area in the 1920s. He wrote that they were "mostly big, rangy animals of Morgan and Hambletonian ancestry and of solid colors- bay, sorrel and a few blacks. There were some real beauties among them". The article includes a 1927 photo of one of these bands showing horses of distinctly Morgan character. He went on to explain that they were either strays from local ranches or their descendants. He named the Charlie Weiss WWI remount operation and the Hitchcock, Shay, Heart Bar and Talmadge Bros. ranches as possible sources of the wild ones. They thrived in small bands until 1934 when the Taylor Grazing Act took effect and the wholesale removal of feral livestock from the public lands was begun. In his book, Back Trail of an Old Cowboy (1982), Paul Young, a 90 year old Montana cow puncher tells of going into the Ute Mountain area as a young man and capturing a band of feral Morgans that had been left there by a rancher who went bust. A son of that rancher told Young that a two year old Morgan stud and three Morgan mares had been turned loose with the other horses when his family cleared out five years before. Young didn't find the stud, but he did get a band of "pretty, well-bred Morgan mares" that he took back to Utah and sold to ranchers for breeding stock. Writing in the November 1961 issue of *Western Horseman*, T. W. Daniels states that "most of the miles I have ridden (as a cowboy and with the US Forest Service) in the past 45 years have been put behind me on Morgans or Morgan-bred horses. The old Circle Ranch (in Wyoming's Wind River country) back in the early 1900s still had a few of these standard-bred Morgans for handling stock on their ranch." Daniels goes on to tell some stories about the endurance and cow sense of these horses which he used when he rode for the Circle Ranch from 1918 until the early 1920s.

THE SELLMAN RANCH

Texas, the cradle of the Quarter Horse, was no stranger to Morgan blood. In 1881, the 40,000 acre Sellman Ranch in McCulloch and San Saba counties in west Texas was begun. By 1886, Richard Sellman was importing Morgan stallions to cross on his range mares. First was Major Gordon. His daughters were crossed with the 3/4 brothers Major Antoine and Gold Medal. Their daughters were mated with The Admiral, who arrived in

1908 and his daughters with Headlight Morgan, which the ranch purchased in 1914 at the age of 21. The old horse sired 112 foals for Sellman before his death. The last major Morgan stud acquired by Sellman was the US Remount horse, Red Oak, which he got from the US Government Farm in Vermont in 1918. From 1905, when he started registering his horses, through 1925 when he died and the ranch was broken up, Richard Sellman registered 689 Morgans from 273 mares. Peak production year was 1921, when 54 foals were born. For 45 years the Sellman ranch produced Angus cattle, ran thousands of sheep and bred Morgan cow horses for their own use and to sell as cow horses and breeding stock. Some were sold to other ranches which preserved their heritage, such as Roland Hill's Horseshoe Cattle Company in California, and a few went to the US Range Experiment Station in Miles City, Montana. Most simply vanished into the immense ranch lands of West Texas, or were sold to other Western ranches to improve their remudas. For instance, Jack C. Kinney of the La Osa Ranch in southern, Arizona, an honorary Vice-President of AQHA in 1941, purchased 130 Morgan mares, stallions and foals from the Sellman Estate in 1925. He used this stock to develop his own respected strain of cow horses. He never registered any of his Morgans, and eventually brought in Thoroughbred and a little Arab blood through the use of Remount stallions. But the La Osa herd remained largely Morgan until his death in 1949 and beyond. They were sold to cattle ranches, dude ranches and individuals throughout the Southwest, and even appeared in a Liberty act at Knott's Berry Farm in California and Hollywood movies, including Jumbo and the musical, Girl of the Golden West. Although the La Osa horses were lost to the Morgan breed, they spread the blood of old Justin Morgan far and wide in the west and undoubtedly contributed to the foundation of the American Quarter Horse.

THE SMS RANCH

One of the big outfits that acquired Sellman stock was the legendary SMS Ranch, which was founded by the sons of Swedish immigrant Swen Magnus Swenson in the late 1870s. Eventually their holdings encompassed four 100,000-acre operations in west Texas, the Throckmorton, Flat Top, Tongue River and Spur ranches. They ran Hereford and Angus cattle and raised their own cow horses, starting with 50 Spanish mares from California and a white stallion, said to be an Arab. According to long time SMS manager Frank S. Hastings in his book, A Ranchman's Recollections (1921), "mainly, cow horse breeding has been a pure case of scrambled eggs". The SMS was a good example of that, says Hastings, having over the years-added Missouri saddle horse, Thoroughbred, grade Percheron, Clydesdale, Standardbred, German Coach horse and Morgan blood. Of the Morgans, he says: "During the past five years, nine registered horses from the Richard Sellman Farm, Rochelle, Texas, have been added. They weight 1,000 to 1150 pounds naked". More information on the SMS Morgans came to light in an article by A. M. Hartung in the March, 1950 Western Horseman. The SMS had purchased the stallions Gotch and Red Bird and seven mares from Sellman in 1914. According to Hartung, the Ranch used this Morgan blood in their program for the next several years and then added Arab blood using three Remount stallions, which "crossed well with the Morgans, proving to be intelligent and easy to break". Probably the SMS remuda, which numbered 1,100 head, including 500 cow horse geldings, 100 draft horses and 275 brood mares, was fairly typical of the other big Western ranches. Over time, given rigorous culling and

selection for cow horse characteristics, a fairly uniform cow horse type emerged which became the foundation for the modern Quarter Horse.

THE TRIANGLE & 6666 RANCHES

The Sellman and SMS ranches were not the only big Texas spreads to use Morgans. Born in 1887, the son of a Texas pioneer, Tom Burnett owned both the famous Triangle and 6666 ranches, which comprised half a million acres of prime west Texas ranch land. Burnett purchased the five-year old Morgan stud, Redolent, from the Sellman Estate in 1925, and kept him as a cow horse sire until his death in the mid 1940s. In 1934, Burnett traveled to the well-known Brunk Morgan Farm in Illinois and bought another Morgan stallion, Jubilee King, and two mares Deura and Heroda, to use in his breeding program along with Redolent, and QH foundation sires, Beeches Yellow Jacket and Joe Hancock. Jubilee King must have impressed other Texas ranchers too, because the Sawyer Cattle Company in San Angelo and the Quitaque Cattle Company in Quitaque each purchased a Jubilee King son from the Brunks. Although Burnett did not live to see the establishment of the QH, many of the fine cow horses he bred became foundation stock for the new breed. Burnett lines are still prominent in AQHA cutting horses. Jubilee King stood at the Triangle for seven years, and was willed back to the Brunk family by Burnett. He went on to found a major family of Morgans and his blood is much sought after in the breed today. The two mares entered the Triangle broodmare band, where they surely enriched the Burnett bloodlines with yet more Morgan blood.

THE MATADOR

Another legendary cattle ranch, the Matador at Channing, Texas, also ran Morgan stallions. In Jeanne Thomas' widely published article, "Morgan Bloodlines in Texas Quarter Horses," she interviewed Beale Queen, one of the original members of AQHA and for many years a breeder of QH race horses. He said that the Matador had either six or seven stallions, three of them registered Morgans. They were Rondeau by Headlight Morgan, and a bay stallion whose name has been forgotten, were both purchased from the Sellman Estate, and Pluto, who was foaled the US Government Farm in Vermont in 1922 and sold to the Sellman Ranch as a yearling. The Matador bought him in 1927 from Sellman's son-in-law, and kept him until 1932 when he was sold to the JA Ranch. The Matador was the second largest American ranch, eclipsed only by the King Ranch, and was running 47,000 head of cattle on 800,000 acres. According to George Wallis in his book, Cattle Kings of the Staked Plains (1957), the Matador was founded in 1878 by Henry H Campbell, a pioneering Texas cattleman, on land that had once been home to millions of buffalo. It was prime country for beef production, and by 1881 Campbell controlled 100,000 acres and ran upwards of 40,000 head of cattle. The ranch raised its own cow horses using Morgan and Steeldust stallions. By the turn of the century, the Matador ran cattle on huge leased tracts in South Dakota (500,000 acres and 700 head of horses), Montana, Canada and Brazil. They acquired yet more land in Texas including a 400,000-acre division of the XIT ranch. In 1951 the Matador sold for \$19,000,000.

Around 1900 a wiry youth named Claude Jeffers went to work breaking horses for the Matador. He stayed for 36 years, starting horses for the 60-70 cowboys who branded about 10,000 calves a year. Jeffers would break anywhere from 50 to 500 head per year,

and in his peak year he broke 580 horses, putting them through nine saddles each, with the help of only one assistant. Jeffers believed in using gentle methods, and was one of the few old time "bronc peelers" who did not use spurs. According to Wallis, Jeffers thought that "the Morgans make the best cow horses. They are just about the right weight for the average man, and have lots of ginger and endurance too. The Steeldusts are also fine. They are active and learn quickly. They can't stand as much riding as the Morgans though. They are a little too nervous and work themselves down too soon." Asked about Mustangs, he said, "most of them are too small and they never get gentle. It takes a gentle horse to work cattle efficiently". In 1935, a year before he died, Claude Jeffers rode his horse, High Power, to first place in a big cutting contest at the Texas Cowboys Reunion in Stamford, Texas. High Power, half Morgan and half Steeldust, was named the top cutting horse in the state of Texas.

THE GOODNIGHT/ADAIR (JA) RANCH

Another historic west Texas ranch used Morgan studs. This was the Goodnight Ranch at Palo Duro, later known as the JA Ranch. In 1876, Charles Goodnight founded the first ranch in the Texas Panhandle. Trying to find markets for his cattle in the 1860s, he and Oliver Loving had pioneered the Goodnight-Loving Trail, which ran from Texas to New Mexico and supplied beef to the US Army. Later on Goodnight and John Chisum opened the Chisum Trail to supply the Colorado gold miners. In 1879, Goodnight sold a partnership in his ranch to an Englishman, John A. Adair. By the late 1880s, 100,000 cattle were ranging over 1,335,000 acres, and Goodnight had sold out to Adair. The brand was changed to JA to reflect the initials of the new owner. In the early 20th Century, the ranch passed into hands of Mrs. Cornelia Adair, and it was she who brought in the first recorded Morgans. In 1920 she purchased the Morgan stallions Dan and Dixie Dan from the Sellman Ranch. Both were sons of Headlight Morgan and foaled in 1916. They ran with the mares until sold in 1927, probably because they had too many daughters in the brood mare band. The JA must have satisfied with the Morgans, because in 1932 they bought Pluto from the Matador. This trading around of breeding stallions was common practice among ranchers as it prevented inbreeding. Pluto, however, remained on the JA until his death from old age.

THE BELL RANCH

The 750,000-acre Bell Ranch in northwestern New Mexico, which was destined to become another prime source of Quarter Horse foundation stock, began as Mexican land grant in 1824. After the war with Mexico in 1848, it became part of the United States. The original owners, the Montoya family, were able to hold on to the huge ranch until 1870 when it was sold to a wealthy American land speculator, who eventually went broke. In 1898 the rich grasslands of the Bell Ranch passed into the hands of the Red River Valley Company under the leadership of E.G. Stoddard. He promptly hired a new manager, Charles M. O'Donel, a former British army officer who came to the U.S. and went west to become a cowboy and stockman. O'Donel ran the Bell Ranch from 1898 until his death in 1933. Under his leadership, modern ranching methods were introduced and improvements to both the cattle and horse herds were begun. In 1903, O'Donel purchased two registered Morgan mares, Lucy and Mary, and a two year old Morgan stallion, Bonnie J, from the Morgan Horse Company of Carpentersville, Illinois. In 1923,

he obtained the Morgan Remount stallion, Langley (Hugo x Eudora), from the Army Remount Depot at Fort Reno, Oklahoma as herd sire. Langley sired five crops, a total of 77 foals, for the Bell Ranch before he was shipped to Arizona as required by the Remount Service's rotation system. O'Donel wrote to the Remount Service shortly before his death, saying "Langley's colts which are now in use have proved so very satisfactory as cow horses that our roundup foreman has implored me to inquire whether we cannot again obtain the service of that horse." Langley never returned to the Bell Ranch. According to David Remley in his book, The Bell Ranch: Cattle Ranching in the Southwest, 1824 – 1947 (University of New Mexico Press, 1993), "of all the many stallions O'Donel used in his breeding experiments at the Bell, he liked Langley best."

Albert K. Mitchell, who became the next manager of the Bell Ranch in 1933 and held that position until 1947 when the ranch was sold and broken up into several smaller ranches, was one of the founders of AQHA and its president in 1947, 1948 and 1949. During the 1930s, Mitchell used Remount stallions, mostly Thoroughbreds, on the Bell Ranch broodmares, which were undoubtedly rich in Morgan blood. In 1941, he purchased the Quarter Horse colt Lucky Strike from the CS Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico, and later QH studs from the King and Burnett ranches in Texas, and soon began registering the foals as QHs. For many years the Bell Ranch Quarter Horses were well respected as quality working ranch horses, and like so many of the old time ranch horses, they traced back to Morgan blood.

OTHER RANCHES

The use of Morgan stallions as herd sires on Western ranches was by no means limited to the Southwest. Several big outfits besides the Sellman Ranch used purebred Morgan stock. Some of these were Roland Hill's Horseshoe Cattle Co and Tehachapi ranches in California and newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst's Sunical and Piedmont Land & Cattle Company ranches also in California. Others were the Hunewill's Circle H ranch in Nevada, the Theis Ranch in Kansas, the Jackson Ranch in Montana and the LU ranch in Wyoming, as well as many smaller ranches throughout the West. All of them raised cow horses for their own use and sold both using horses and breeding stock to other ranches. For instance, registered Morgan studs from the LU were used at stud on the nearby Padlock and Pitchfork ranches. Not only that, but transfer records in the Morgan Horse Register show a steady stream of young Morgan stallions going to ranches all over the West from the turn of the Century until the late 1950s. In the period from 1920 to 1938 alone, there were transfers of 164 Morgan stallions to the Western states. Most of them went to California (35), Kansas (36), Montana (28), and Texas (28). Another big influx of Morgan blood came in with the Indian Horse Improvement Program. This was a federal project, which was part of the New Deal. Although other breeds were tried, the Indian programs concentrated on Morgans. Between 1938 and 1981, with most of the activity in the 1940s and 1950s, the Indian Horse Improvement Program produced over 800 registered Morgans and countless partbreds at 22 Indian agencies and schools in eleven western states. The above figures do not include the use of Morgan Remount stallions and the many Morgans horses that were bred by or sold to western ranchers, but not registered or officially transferred. There is ample evidence, that, beginning in the 1880s, Morgan cow horses were an important part of the mix that eventually resulted in the American Quarter Horse.

THE AQHA

It is possible to estimate the influence of the Morgan on foundation Quarter Horses by looking at the early registrations of stock from some of the big ranches that were known to use Morgans. For instance, in first bound Volume of the AQHA Stud Book (covers 1941 – 1961), 270 JA Ranch horses, mostly mares, were registered. An additional 24 were out of JA mares and at least 3 by JA stallions. Thirty-nine Matador horses were registered, and another 34 were out of Matador mares. Tom Burnett (Triangle Ranch and 666) stock accounts for another 118 registrations, with 34 more out of Burnett mares. The Bell Ranch registered 26 mares foaled between 1939 and 1947. If you add up all the Volume I foundation QHs of proven Morgan blood (188) and all those bred by the Matador, JA, Bell and Triangle ranches (453), plus those by or out of stock bred by these ranches (95), you come up with a total of 736 foundation QHs with proven or very probable Morgan blood. When you factor in the thousands of Morgan and part Morgan cow horses bred on Western ranches from the 1880s on, you begin to get some idea of the contribution of the Morgan to the development of the American cow pony and, ultimately, to the foundation of the American Quarter Horse.

You may ask, if the QH has so much Morgan blood, why are the two breeds so different in appearance and way of going? One reason is that the QH breed was quickly closed to all outside blood except Thoroughbred, and it is still open to Thoroughbred blood today. The other reason is the different directions taken by the two associations after WWII. While the Morgan folks mostly concentrated on producing family horses and English style horses suitable to be shown in the Saddlebred manner, the Quarter Horse people strove to produce a Western type horse intended for the trail, arena and quarter mile racing. This trend toward specialization went on until the sport horse movement of the 1980s caused the leadership of both breeds to consider returning to their horses' more versatile roots. Forty years of specialization had changed both breeds, and not all the changes were positive.

As the American horse buying public gradually changed from pleasure/show uses to sport horse competitions, both breed associations have encouraged their members to produce more good all around athletes. Today, we are seeing more Quarter Horses as hunters and in three-day eventing. Morgans are beginning to excel in combined driving, dressage, reining, cutting and ranch horse competitions. Perhaps in the future, the shared past of the Morgan and the Quarter Horse will again be more obvious in the descendants of both breeds.

The End

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FURTHERMORE....

November, 1993 The Western Horseman reprinted an article that was originally printed in a February 1949 issue about W. T. Waggoner entitled "The Horses of the Three D's". It sheds additional light on the "historical lineage" of the original QH. "Tom Waggoner knew all about his horses, how they were bred, and what became of them. Unfortunately, he did not keep records for

unregistered horses. As a result, since his death nothing exists on paper to present a reliable history of his Quarter Horse breeding program." The article mentions that one of the stallions that he owned was named Texas. Richard Sellman registered a Morgan stallion named Texas in 1909. He was a black with a star and snip. (The Admiral x Sallie Antoine). W. T. Waggoner favored a dun horse and purchased buckskin from Bud Parker in Weatherford, TX in 1910. Waggoner also had a stallion named Texas Chief. It was noted that "Texas Chief was the outstanding representative of the great Traveler strain of Quarter Horses". (181) Sellman also foaled a Morgan named Texas Chief in 1917 [Morgan Chief x Emma B]. The AMHA CD ROM lists no progeny for Texas Chief. Sellman thought highly enough of the colt to register him, and then there is no record of him. Apparently, he was one of the many Morgans who disappeared.

An article, "Dick Sellman and His Morgans" by A. M. Hartung, was presented in the Nov. 1950, Western Horseman. Mr. Hartung evidently knew Richard Sellman as noted in the following statement: "Dick Sellman was alive to the fact that Morgan breeders were rapidly losing the original type of Morgan horse. He informed the writer that the Morgan horse breeders had for years been infusing too much of the larger, coarser blood of the Standardbred. They were thereby losing the original type of Morgan horse, according to Mr. Sellman, who was always looking for stallions of the original true type and blood". Mr. Hartung also states that in Richard Sellman's 1912 catalog he stated that "he could show more genuine equine beauty and quality in his herd of registered Morgan horses than any breeder in the United States". Mr. Hartung notes that Dick Sellman raised many excellent Morgans from The Admiral including TEXAS 5889, THE CORPORAL 5991, DEXTER 6004 and RED BIRD, who was the top stallion at the Swenson SMS ranch near Stamford, Texas. [Emphasis mine] Other noted sons of The Admiral were SUNNY SOUTH, ADMIRAL GORDON, THE RAVEN, MAZEPPA, BLACK PRINCE, RED BOY, MOUNTAIN VALE, etc. The stallions noted from Gold Medal were GOLDEN 5691, MEDAL 6675, GOLDEN RULE and others. GOLDEN RULE is listed in The Morgan Registry as being a "golden" chestnut.

Note: This last section was not written by Gail Perlee, but was added when the article was published in the book, Writing For the Brand, Vol. I. (2003)