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Foreword:

My love for the special horses we have bred in eastern Kentucky for generations inspired me to write this article some time ago. I purposefully refer to them simply as “mountain horses” because I seek to be all-inclusive without a particular breed/registry preference. These include and are not limited to: Rocky Mountain, Kentucky Mountain Saddle, Kentucky Natural Gaited, Mountain Pleasure, United Mountain Horses, and others.

In light of the recent opening of the Dawkins Trail, the annual rides in Knott County, the beautiful places we have to ride in our area, and all Adventure Tourism efforts in relation to equine pursuits, I feel these wonderful horses can figure prominently in local entrepreneurial efforts related to tourism. An understanding of where they came from, and how and why they were developed, is essential in ones appreciation and understanding of how they might fit into Saving Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) initiatives. Their use, production, promotion, and discovery can significantly contribute to our regional economic development efforts.

David May

Kentucky’s “mountain saddle horses” have been part of the Eastern Kentucky landscape for generations. Smooth-gaited mountain saddle horses arrived in the Kentucky Mountains along with the first European settlers. Imagine the tremendous hardships faced by those who first arrived in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The mountain saddle horses played a fundamental role in the success of these early settlers and were an integral part of their everyday lives. The very survival of Eastern Kentucky’s Appalachian mountaineer was likely made possible by these horses.

Epic tales have been passed down for generations regarding the exploits of our forefathers and their horse. For example one recurring account has been that “a good mountain horse is able to cover the distance from Salyersville to Mount Sterling in a day”. This is a distance of approximately eighty miles. My Grandfather, who was born in 1893, related to me on numerous occasions that this was indeed true. Many others have also described the same.

What makes this even more astonishing was the oftentimes near impassable roads in this region around the turn of the century.

These versatile horses were used for riding, driving, and all types of farm work. Few east Kentucky residents could afford the luxury of owning a separate equine for the multitude of tasks at hand. They needed a “does it all” type horse. Hillside farming was a commonplace practice. This steep topography has, until quite recently, virtually isolated Appalachia.

Mountain saddle horses, and mules reared from their mares, allowed the Appalachian mountaineer to overcome geographic and topographic barriers, build communities, and subsequently tame the rugged mountainous Appalachian region of Eastern Kentucky.

Mountain saddle horses possess many sought-after traits which make them highly desirable.

Perhaps foremost, particularly today, is their extremely smooth gait that ranges from a slow run-walk to a fast rack. Whereas most horses either trot or pace (much rougher two-beat gaits), mountain horses exhibit silky smooth four-beat gaits. These smooth gaits greatly reduce rider fatigue. Consider the importance of this comfort in the 19th century when riding was more than likely one’s only available mode of transportation. In addition, rider comfort quite often was greatly enhanced by the use of the quilted seat “Kentucky” or sometimes called “Somerset” saddle. Minihan, Sloan, and other local saddlers manufactured these most comfortable saddles. The McClellan, Buena Vista, spring seat plantation, English, and even ladies’ side saddles also saw widespread use. “Cowboy” or western saddles eventually gained prominence becoming a 20th century phenomenon coinciding with the earliest western movies being shown in local silent movie theatres, and later into the television era.

When I was a boy in the 1960’s, I assumed the other gaited breeds (namely the Tennessee Walking Horse, American Saddlebred, and/or the Standardbred) had been crossed, possibly with others, to create our smooth gaited mountain horses. Recently we have learned that quite the opposite is true. In 1994, Mountain Pleasure Horses were recognized as being “the foundation of all of America’s gaited horse breeds” . This “chicken or the egg” revelation has been scientifically proven using modern genetic research conducted by the University of Kentucky.

Although the exact origin of these saddle horses in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky has been largely lost to history, many equine historians theorize that colonial English stock was crossed with gaited Spanish horses. Credibility to this theory exists when one considers the proximity of the Paso Fino and Peruvian Paso of South and Central America. Another interesting theory is that the now extinct Narrangansett pacer (Paul Revere’s horse?) of the early colonies may have played a significant role in the development of Eastern Kentucky’s mountain horse. Geographic isolation, migration patterns, and folklore coupled with the historic timeline of the settler’s migration into Appalachian Eastern Kentucky lend credence to this theory.

Historically, only the very best horses were kept as breeding stallions with a family’s or area’s bloodline often acquiring “heirloom” status. Savvy mountaineers paid a tremendous amount of attention to selective breeding and constantly strived to enhance the desirable characteristics of these horses. After the prized smooth gait, probably the next most valued attribute is a calm and amiable disposition, which particularly suits this horse for harness work. Although in most places the lighter gaited horses were never in favor for use in harness, gaited mountain horses and their mule offspring, saw widespread use throughout Appalachia. Today, their workload is undoubtedly lighter, but they still see significant harness use, particularly in carriages, carts, and buggies.

Kentucky’s mountain horses are suitable for all types of farm equipment, wagon, and horse drawn implement use. The appearance of horse drawn implements in the latter half of the 19th century revolutionized agriculture. In the mountains the hillside turning plow was indispensable in that it allowed one to plow in both directions while always turning the furrow downhill. Another implement, the sled, was the “pick-up truck” of the era and proved

indispensible, especially on the hillside farm. I have often marveled at how people managed to survive before the invention of horse drawn agricultural implements. Today, light logging, crop cultivation, and pleasure driving are the primary work roles of these horses.

Other desirable attributes of mountain saddle horses are excellent conformation, heartiness (that is being “easy keepers”), intelligence, attractiveness or “eye appeal”, size (usually between 14.2-16 hands), stamina, and color. They come in a vast array of colors including bay, black, chestnut, sorrel, roan, grey, cremello, buckskin, palomino, and chocolate, among others. It is the sum of these positive attributes that make for a horse that is truly exceptional.

The same geographic barriers that have historically been the source of hardship and isolation have protected this horse from dilution, keeping it true, until today. Harsh conditions and isolation coupled with careful selective breeding has cultivated a tough, smooth-gaited, multi-purpose horse of exceptional merit and appeal.

It is my sincerest desire that present-day owners and breeders of these fine horses will continue to take into account their entire inherent positive attributes. Rather than breeding exclusively for the show ring, their calm and amiable disposition, versatility, smooth gait, and other perhaps lesser emphasized desirable characteristics need be taken into account by mountain horse producers when selecting or standing a stallion. It is of utmost importance that dilutions not occur for the sake of a “flashier” gait, more speed, a particular color, or any other “modern day” concept, notion, or whim. The mountain saddle horse bloodlines that took the savvy mountaineers of Eastern Kentucky generations to develop need be kept true for future generations of equine enthusiasts to enjoy. The mountain horse of eastern Kentucky, in my opinion, is as good as it gets.

1 By Proclamation of Governor Breton Jones, Commonwealth of Kentucky, September 29, 1994. Formally presented by Lt. Governor Paul Patton at the 1994 MPHA World Championship Show.

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