

The HORSE

By Harland Manchester

In the Green Mountain country only two breeds of horses are recognized: Morgans and "other horses." The Morgan, as all Vermonters know, can outpull, outwalk, outlast and outthink any hunk of horseflesh on earth. He is also gentle as a kitten, sure-footed as a mountain goat, hardy as a bronco. And as for looks, the most magnificent spectacle on this terrestrial ball is a proud young Morgan, head high, eyes flashing, sleek coat shining, trotting down a Vermont dirt road.

There is every reason why the Morgans should be great horses: they carry the powerful genes of that game little stallion Justin Morgan, the equine Paul Bunyan of Randolph, Vt. The tireless tribe which sprang from his loins pitched in to build America, clearing land, hauling covered wagons, fighting battles and corralling cattle. Now that gasoline has taken over, the Morgan has become one of the nation's best-loved recreation horses.

Justin Morgan was a bold, chunky little horse about 14 hands high, weight about 950 pounds, who plowed fields, hauled logs, took the ladies to meeting and raced the shoes off any horse in the countryside on Saturday nights. His story begins with a man named Justin Morgan, a frail, itinerant teacher of penmanship and singing who was town clerk of Randolph.

When, in 1791, teacher Morgan made a trip to West Springfield, Mass., to collect a debt from a farmer who owed him money, he found that the farmer could offer him nothing but a three-year-old gelding in payment. In the pasture with the gelding was an inseparable companion, a two-year-old bay colt, origin unknown, with black mane and tail, a deep chest and a strong, short back. The farmer threw him in for good measure. Making the best of what seemed a bad bargain, Morgan led the gelding back home while the colt tagged along toward his great destiny.

Morgan broke the colt to harness, and that winter rented him to a neighbor, Robert Evans, who had a contract to clear timbered land. With only the half-grown colt for a "team," Evans' outlook was dubious. But when he hooked the chain around the first log and spoke to "Justin," the colt threw his shoulders into the collar, dug in his feet and snaked the log to the skidway like a veteran. Soon Evans was boasting at the village tavern that the Justin Morgan colt could outdraw any horse he ever saw.

One night Evans rode Justin to the tavern after a day's work in the woods and found that a match had been held in which 1200-pound horses had been unable to pull a big pine log ten rods to the sawmill. Evans

bet a gallon of rum that his colt could do it in three pulls. Justin made it in two.

A few days later the beaten parties picked a fast horse and tried to retrieve the rum by challenging Evans to a quarter-mile race. Despite having done his usual hard day's work, Justin was off the mark before the starter's hat hit the dust, and crossed the finish line several lengths ahead. Three other entries came forward that evening and the eager little stallion beat them all. Soon Justin was hailed as the local champion.

"When brought up to the line," wrote one of Justin's early biographers, "his eyes flash and his ears quiver with excitement, he grinds the bit with his teeth, his hind legs are drawn under him, every muscle of his frame trembles and swells almost to bursting, and at the signal he goes off like the springing of a steel trap."

When Morgan, the man, died of consumption, the colt was sold to pay creditors, and went on clearing forests and racing all comers. Because of Justin's feats of brawn and speed, farmers brought their mares to him. The foals were the spit and image of the tough little bay, and outworked, outpulled, outran and outendured all lesser North Country horseflesh.

No one knows how many colts Justin sired, but by the middle of the century a person could hardly enter a barn in northern New England without recognizing the candid eye, delicate muzzle, short ears, deep chest, short back and barrel trunk of famous Justin.

The greatest of Justin's sons was Sherman, foaled in 1808. Like Justin, he was small but tough. Hitched to a freight wagon with another son, he made regular trips to Portland, Maine and the "little team" became famous at overnight inns on the route, where their owner matched them at pulling or running against horses of any size, and usually won.

Among Sherman's many colts was the immortal Black Hawk. Foaled in 1833 out of a pedler's mare in Durham, N. H., this black grandson of Justin became one of the most celebrated sires of American trotters. Broken to harness and used on the family carriage, he showed an irresistible desire to pass everything on the road. His fame spread to Boston, where he was matched against New England's best in a five-mile, \$1000-stake race, which he won easily in 16 minutes. Soon every up-and-coming horseman had to have a colt by the famous black Morgan.

In his long life about 2000 mares were bred to Black Hawk. Many of his colts went to Kentucky, Tennessee, Illinois, Michigan and the Far West, there to pass on

. . . That Became A Legend

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the fabulous genes of the original Justin. The pampered darling of the dynasty was Black Hawk's son, Ethan Allen, champion trotter of the world at the age of four (one mile in 2:25½) and winner of 33 out of 55 races. No log-pulling for Ethan; he was owned by several wealthy Bostonians, had personal lackeys, and became the great American pin-up horse. "The handsomest, finest-styled and most perfectly gaited trotter ever produced," *The American Cultivator* called him.

While Morgan stars captured the limelight, their kin by the thousands, recognized as the finest general-utility horses in the country, spent their boundless energy doing the world's work. Doctors swore by them; come snowdrift or high water, the little Morgan always got through. By the 1850's nearly four out of five of the horses on New York's Sixth Avenue streetcar line were Morgans.

When the Civil War began, Secretary of War Cameron sent buyers to comb the North Country for 1100 Morgans to mount the crack First Vermont Cavalry. This regiment subsequently fought in 75 battles and skirmishes. At Gettysburg, already half shot to pieces it was ordered to make an almost hopeless charge over rough ground against a strongly entrenched enemy force. "The behavior of the horses was admirable," wrote a chronicler, "running low and swift, as in a race, guiding at the slightest touch on the neck; never refusing a fence or breaking from the column." Eyewitnesses called it one of the most gallant cavalry charges of the war.

Morgans fell on evil days toward the end of the century. The faster "Hambletonians" — with the aid of good Morgan dams — took over the harness tracks. Farmers bought strapping Percherons for work, and the shadow of Henry Ford fell across the highwav. The Morgans retreated to stony back farms, grew shaggy coats against the cold, and lived on grass.

But they still had powerful friends. One of them, Colonel Joseph Battel, gentleman farmer and conservationist of Middlebury, Vt., spent a small fortune and most of his life collecting fine Morgans, tracing pedigrees, and establishing the Morgan as a registered breed.

In 1905 Colonel Battel presented his farm and stock to the U. S. Government. Breeding continued under the direction of the Department of Agriculture, and in 1951 the 940 rolling acres and 40-odd Morgans were

acquired by the University of Vermont. In front of the stallion barn a heroic bronze figure of Justin overlooks the pasture meadows where a dozen of his saucy descendants frisk around their dams.

With the great national surge toward the outdoors, the smart, willing, unfussy Morgan has found a new career as a pleasure horse. Women and children love him for his gentle personality and close rapport with his owner. His surefootedness and good temper have made him popular on dude ranches. As President Benjamin Harrison once pointed out, in an emergency the Morgan always consults his rider. He is famous, too for his "bottom," which in horsey talk means guts. Every year this is demonstrated in the 100-mile trail-ride of the Green Mountain Horse Association held at Woodstock, Vt., open to all breeds. Last September, Morgans swept the field of 66 horses from ten states and Canada, taking first place in all three divisions.

There are approximately 7500 registered Morgans in the United States today, and at least as many high-grade unregistered Morgans. California leads in breeding them, with Vermont second and Illinois third. Two schools of breeders war politely: the "old Morgan" minority prides itself on high percentages of the original Justin's blood; the "new Morgan" group believes that the breed is improved by discreet admissions of less exalted ancestry. The whole argument would bring a horse laugh from Justin. He never had a pedigree. Most Morgan men are content so say that he was a fortunate mutation, a "biological sport:" that, like Topsy he "just growed."

It would be pleasant to report that Justin Morgan spent his final years in green pastures, suitably honored. Such was not the case. The world did not know him for what he was, and he was batted from pillar to post like most old horses of the day. Again and again he was sold, each time for a lower price and to a lower station. At the age of 22 he was working on a six-horse freight team.

In 1821, when he was 32, he was on a farm in Chelsea, Vt., still hale. He spent that winter in an open yard with other horses. One of them kicked him in the flank. The wound went untended. Inflammation set in. He died. But his indomitable genes persist. Wherever a Morgan canters through the morning mist, Justin lives again.