

Two Paths Diverged

A pair of Morgan breeders, living in close geographic proximity but with divergent visions, exemplified a 20th century paradigm shift in Morgan breeding.

By Denny Emerson

When I first met Morgan horses about 70 years ago at “The National” in Northampton, Massachusetts, it wasn’t long before I understood that there was a clear difference of opinion about what a Morgan horse should look like, move like, and act like.

The advent of motorized vehicles had already become the source of the divide. Before 1900, there were no cars, trucks, or tractors and horses were the way many people hauled goods, farmed, and traveled. Many of those pre- and early-20th century Morgans resembled and moved like smaller draft horses—short, stocky, and powerful, well-suited to driving and pulling, as well as riding. By the 1920s and 1930s, cars, trucks, and tractors had largely replaced horses, creating challenges for the future of the Morgan breed.

In practicality, most people simply got out of horses and into vehicles with engines. The edges of many pastures became graveyards of abandoned horse-drawn equipment, even into the 1950s and 1960s. Devoted Morgan breeders were faced with a choice: preserve tradition or adapt to the marketplace?

In Vermont in the 1940s, two big breeding programs came to define this paradigm shift. Ted Davis’s Wind-Crest Farm, in Windsor, and Robert Lippitt Knight’s Green Mountain Stock Farm, in Randolph. The locations were 45 miles apart geographically but poles apart philosophically. One man was a market-driven entrepreneur with a new age business model, the other a preservationist breeder who was free, through inheritance, from the necessity of profit.

Interestingly, a few years ago when I was in Ireland judging some classes at the Royal Dublin Horse Show, Chris Ryan told me that there was similar controversy about what was and was not an “Irish-bred horse.” Formerly, Chris said, Irish-bred meant Registered Irish Draught, Thoroughbred, Connemara, or a mixture of those, with no European warmblood in the mix. But market forces brought in various warmbloods from the continent, such as Holsteiners or

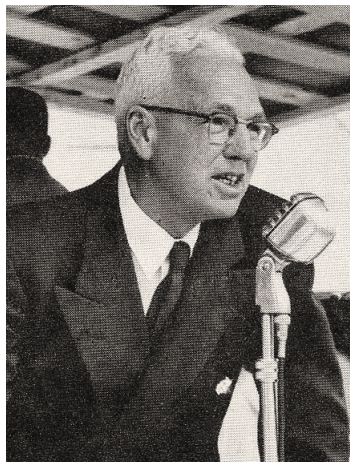
Dutch Warmbloods, so that a modern Irish horse might be any or all those influences.

Chris’s comments made the parallel inescapable for me; adding outside blood to the Morgan breed was market driven, as was the incorporation of warmbloods to the Irish sport horse gene pool. So, today in Ireland there are traditionalist breeders, in-between breeders, and those who base their selections on creating specialists for equestrian disciplines.

Ted Davis co-owned the Davis Brothers Chevrolet dealership in Windsor, and the story goes that Owen Moon of Upwey Farm bought a car from Ted, which was how the two became acquainted. Moon had purchased the registered American Saddlebred stallion Upwey King Peavine through the agency of Johnny Woods and Grace Brunk Woods, and the stallion entered the Morgan Horse Registry under old Rule II which gave the Morgan Horse Club latitude in accepting applicants. The cross on the Government-bred Audrey, a Morgan mare by Bennington, begat the stallion Upwey King Benn. King Benn was bred to Quietude (Troubadour Of Willowmoor x Ruth), giving the breed two full siblings. One was the game-changing stallion Ted Davis would acquire, Upwey Ben Don. The other, the mare Upwey Benn Quietude, became the dam of the dominant sire Waseeka’s Nocturne, bred by Davis, but named by his buyer. Nocturne’s son, Waseeka’s In Command, is the majority progenitor behind most modern show Morgans, typically appearing multiple times in pedigrees.

I remember Ted as a hands-on horseman. He raced Upwey Ben Don in harness and showed him in in-hand and under saddle. My guess is that Ted’s breeding program was market driven far more than tradition driven. Ted

was a small-town businessman, and he understood the fundamentals of the market economy. I believe what Ted Davis (and Owen Moon before him) intended was to adapt the breed to a more free-reaching, more refined riding horse, and some of that was done by adding American Saddlebred influence. In my mind this model



TOP TO BOTTOM:

Ted Davis (photo © Warren Patriquin) and Robert Lippitt Knight.

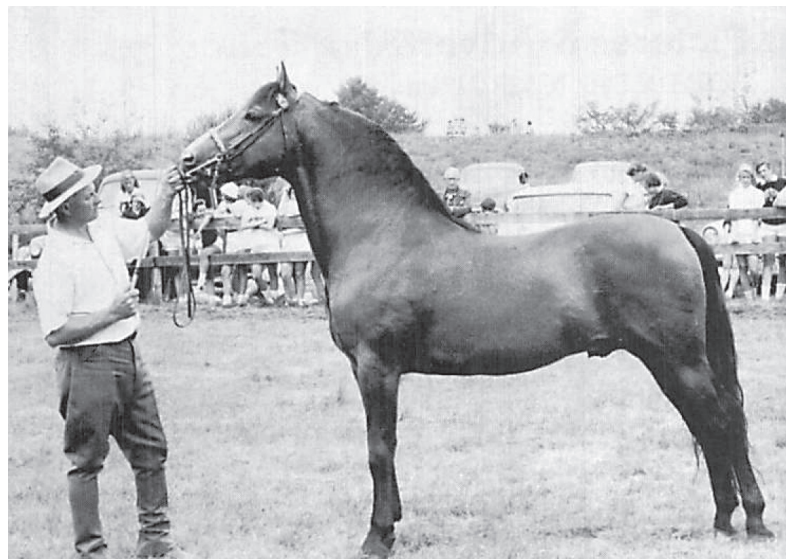


LEFT TO RIGHT: The Upwey King Peavine son Upwey King Benn (x Audrey) and his son, Ted Davis's influential Upwey Ben Don (x Quietude) (photo © Savage).

has always seemed consistent with the U. S. Government's use of General Gates, a horse with a Thoroughbred grandparent, to increase size of horses for remount and cavalry use.

As a side note, I am probably of the few—if not the only—person still around who has held a mare being bred to Upwey Ben Don. I arrived at Wind-Crest maybe in 1958 or 1959 to visit, and Ted said, "Denny, glad to see you. Here, hold this mare while I get Ben Don. She's ready right now." As I have said many times publicly, seeing Ted Davis and Ben Don in the trotting race on my first trip to Northampton was an indelible Morgan memory.

Meanwhile, actually even earlier than Ted's involvement with Owen Moon, the nucleus for the foundation of the Lippitt Morgan line was being assembled right down the road from what would become Wind-Crest Farm on Route 5 in Windsor, by A. Fullerton Phillips. Phillips had collected a herd of Morgans of high percentage old blood as an attempt in preservation. Sadly, tragedy struck one summer day when a fierce thunderstorm rolled in and a bolt of lightning struck Phillips's herd of mares and foals, killing them all. The few survivors were in a barn across the road, and after Phillips died a year later "from grief" those survivors were bought by



LEFT TO RIGHT: Representatives of Mr. Knight's preservationist program, both out of the mare Lippitt Kate Moro, Lippitt Dusky Kate (by Lippitt Ethan Ash) and Lippitt Red Moro (by Lippitt Selassie).



Robert Lippitt Knight, the wealthy heir to the Fruit of the Loom textile mills in Rhode Island.

Mr. Knight owned the sprawling thousand-acre Green Mountain Stock Farm in Randolph, Vermont, and through a large staff of employees he maintained a herd of prize Ayrshire cattle, a flock of Cheviot sheep, and a constantly growing herd of “old type” Morgans. When I first met Mr. Knight in 1957, he was already in his mid-seventies, and rather heavy. Unlike Ted Davis, I never saw him handle a horse. Whether he’d driven or ridden when he was younger, I never learned.

He used to sit in a lawn chair and watch his horses being ridden and driven, a straw Panama hat perched on his head, sometimes puffing on a cigar, hands clasped across his chest, usually awake, but sometimes nodding off into a siesta.

Although Knight was a traditionalist breeder, he was not averse to breeding to outcross experiments. Two famous full brothers, Lippitt Mandate and Lippitt Morman, were by the U. S. Government stallion Mansfield. (I rode another Mansfield descendant, Lippitt Tweedle Dee, a colt he’d sold to Deane Davis who would later become Governor of Vermont.)

But both these breeding programs came abruptly to a close after the deaths of their progenitors; Ted Davis died in 1960, at the young age of 61 and Robert Lippitt Knight died two years later, at the age of 79, in 1962.

Perhaps the simplest way to think of this is to understand that Ted Davis carried on Owen Moon’s breeding goals, while Robert Knight carried on the goals of A. Fullerton Phillips. Both visions are valid, and both exist today, but there are plenty of modern “in-between” Morgans whose pedigrees contain Upwey Ben Don, Waseekas Nocturne, and at least a trace of Lippitt.

It depends on what someone wants in a Morgan. Shorter/chunkier and taller/rangier types are still available to own, train, ride, and breed. In my exploration of the breed, from the Lippitt Country Show in Tunbridge, Vermont, to the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show in Oklahoma, my own observation is that most modern Morgans look like Morgans. They are built uphill, have strong limbs, crested necks, and beautiful heads. And most of all, in 2024, they still possess that friendly, generous nature that was famous in the breed when George Washington was president. ■



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