



Dana Wingate Kelley: He Had the Time of His Life!

By Denny Emerson

Though physically small, even frail in stature, Dana Wingate Kelley had a huge personality that made him a legendary figure in the world of Morgan horses. Dana bred more than 100 Morgans who carried his Royalton prefix, and there are still Morgans out and about today with traceable lineage to Dana's Justine Morgan Horse Farm.

I first met Dana in 1957, when I was 15, but 13 years later, in 1970, when May and I moved to a farm on Brook Road in Strafford, Vermont, Jaye and Dana lived directly across the street. Only about a 60-second walk away, he became a constant presence and close friend.

One trait that Dana shared with many children of the Depression era was an intense frugality, and there are legions of stories about his thrifty inclinations. One morning he arrived at our house with six empty tube wormers and a small pail. "Can I borrow a pail of hot water?" he asked. "I just wormed six horses and if I soak these empty wormers, I can get enough to do a seventh for free!"

Another time he was wearing a T-shirt that he'd just bought at the South Royalton Thrift Shop. "Look at this—five cents—what a deal!"

"Dana," I said, "it has a big hole under the armpit."

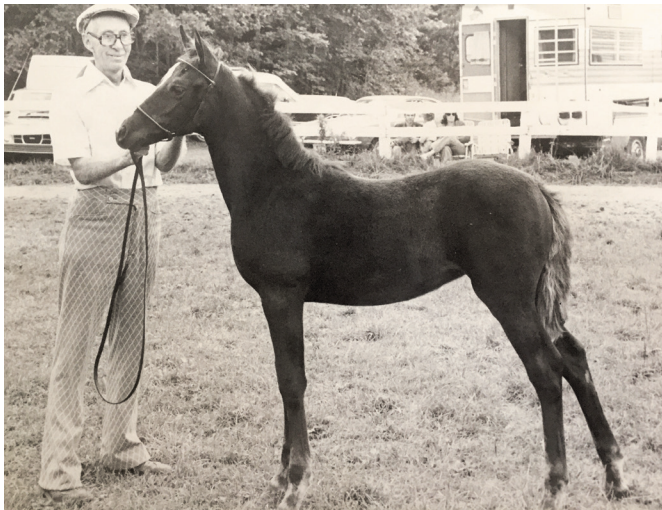
"Never mind about that," he replied.

Speaking of dress, Dana had a subzero sense of fashion. He wore checks with stripes, loud, clashing colors, a virtual caricature of questionable taste in clothing, but he was blissfully unaware and he didn't care anyway. Dana was his own person, happy in himself. If there was one phrase that I heard him repeat after any sort of trip or horse show or other adventure, it was the seven words, "I had the time of my life!"

For years, Dana and Jaye lived just south of the village of Woodstock, Vermont, on a farm split by Route 106, the houses and barns on one side of the road, the pastures on the other side. Lawrence Rockefeller was in the process of creating a golf course to go with the Woodstock Inn, and he needed Dana's meadows. According to local legend, Rockefeller sent an agent to see about buying Dana's land. Dana knew full well what the deal was, but he could play the naïve and doddering old farmer to a T.

When the agent named a sum, Dana said, "Oh no, I just couldn't sell. I sit in the mornings and drink my coffee and watch my Morgans play there. No, I just couldn't." As the offers kept

ABOVE: Dana Wingate Kelley with Ethan Eldon, the foundation stallion of the Royalton prefix.



LEFT TO RIGHT: The dapper Dana Wingate Kelley winning the weanling class with Royalton Lynn Allen at the Lippitt show in 1977; and winning the Cavalcade Americana in Northampton, dressed as the “Music Man,” in 1981. He was driving Royalton Minora and Morrill Mt Mandy Ash.

increasing, so did the pathos of Dana’s protestations until he figured he’d upped the ante about as high as the market would bear. At this point, all misgivings vanished. Dana sold and moved to Strafford.

Dana’s horsemanship was “casual,” to put it kindly. For many summers he rented a pasture for his mares and foals about half a mile down Brook Road, and he kept his stallions at the barn behind his house. When he needed to tease or breed a mare, he would drive in his car, get out and catch the mare, get in the car again, with his arm out the window holding the lead rope, and I’d hear clop-clop-clop as the mare trotted beside the car between the two places.

There is a well-worn tale of Dana hooking an unbroke youngster, by mistake of course, and showing it in a pairs class with another horse. Luman Wadhams shared his own firsthand memory of that event in an interview in this magazine in 2020. He recalled, “I went to the Lippitt show when it was in its inception. Marilyn [Childs] was running it... There was a harness pairs class and Dana Wingate Kelly, who was a little old guy, was there with three horses, an experienced pair and a two-year-old that was really green. I was stabled right across from him. He pulled these horses out and put harnesses on them and hooked them to this rattle-y old buggy. He showed them and came back and said, “they didn’t do too well.” And Barbara Ackley said, ‘Dana, you hooked the two-year-old.’” He didn’t hook the right horse in the pair! But he lived to tell the tale. He always got away with it. Always.

Joe McLaughlin lived in Royalton, when Dana and Jaye first moved to Vermont from Massachusetts and bought a farm on Gee Hill above Royalton Village. As Joe drove past the small country store one summer evening, he saw Dana’s stallion, Ethan Eldon, tied by his bridle reins to the railing in front of the store. Joe stopped, and saw Dana emerge from the store, a burlap bag of

groceries in one hand, an ice cream cone in the other.

“Joe, can you hold these while I get on?” Dana asked. Once Dana had his reins gathered and his feet in the stirrups, Joe handed him back his purchases and Dana headed back up the mountain, happily eating his ice cream cone, sack tied to the saddle.

Dana loved a party, and he would show up in a grass skirt with a blond wig, playing a ukulele and singing Al Jolson songs. One time he wore that same wig in a Cavalcade Americana type of class in Northampton, wearing a dress with a big pillow stuffed in the front. The sign on the carriage was borrowed from the musical *My Fair Lady*, “Get me to the church on time.”

During the winter months, Jaye and Dana went to Fort Meyers Beach, Florida, and they wouldn’t come back to Vermont until it was safe. And the word “safe” implied that all the snow had melted from the north-facing sides of buildings. Back in the 1970s, there was some deal with toll calls, that you got so many seconds for free, after which you had to pay so many extra cents per minute, something that Dana wanted to avoid like the plague. So, sometime in the first few days of May, the phone would ring, and it would be Dana calling to check on the status of Vermont’s early spring weather. I would pick up the phone and hear, “Is it safe yet?” No “hello,” no idle chit chat that might plunge the conversation into money-costing overtime, just straight to business.

If I said, “not yet,” in a few days the phone would ring again, but if the answer was “yes,” it meant that in a few days we’d see Jaye and Dana’s car pull into their yard across Brook Road.

On Dana’s 75th birthday, I asked him what he wanted for a present. “Let’s go for a long trail ride,” he responded. Off we went up into the hills. And that is how I want to remember Dana Kelley, always game to have an adventure with one of his beloved Morgans. Which, incidentally, he would sell to you if the price was right! ■