



CALIFORNIO: A FRIEND TO ALL

Riding in lightness, collection on a loose rein, skillful and humane cow work, reata or *vaquero*-style ranch roping, these are the elements of what is known as Californio horsemanship. This time-honored tradition originated with the Spanish *vaquero* horsemen of eighteenth and nineteenth century California. The secrets of the Californios were passed down to true seekers of this art, and form the basis of today's "natural horsemanship." A Californio's horse is ridden in collection; head up and on a completely loose rein. Training progresses from the *jaquima* (hackamore) through being "in the bridle," which traditionally was a spade bit.

Living in 1960s Paso Robles, California—the heart of *vaquero* country—Phyllis and Richard Nelsen both were inspired and educated by the local horsemen. Phyllis had ridden all her life and preferred to ride English, but Richard was drawn toward western riding. Phyllis remembered Morgans from her youth as horses that could be ridden in any seat, so they began raising Morgans.

The Nelsens traveled to area ranches, soaking up information

and looking for Morgans to purchase. Eventually the three Nelsen children: Keith, Chris, and Kirsten, would accompany their parents on their trips. These early experiences helped instill a life long love of Morgans in each of them. Phyllis had a deep interest in pedigree research and made charts for many of their horses tracing their lines back to Justin Morgan. She found it fascinating that some of their Morgans' ancestors were roan, gray, or spotted.

Through the connections they had made at the various ranches, the Nelsens acquired much of their original breeding stock, including the chestnut mare Sissey (Ro Mac x Berta Sonfield, by Sonfield). Sissey was bred by Dr. Clarence Reed of Compton, California, and foaled in 1959. Dr. Reed raised Morgans for use on his cattle ranch. Sissey had sustained a barbed wire injury to her hock and no longer could keep up with the herd, so her owner was looking for an easier life for her. "The ranch cowboys found her while riding the fences and figured by her poor condition she had been there for awhile," says Kirsten. "Because she was no longer sound, my parents were able to buy her."

By Laura Hornick Behning



(Opposite) 1. **Californio** pictured at age 18, in 1985. (Photo © Mary Jean Vasiloff); 2. **Californio**, with Dick Nelsen up, cutting at the first Grand National in Detroit; 3. **Californio**'s sire, **Tio Lalo**, with the Nelsen children; 4. **Californio** with Kirsten Nelsen, up. (Photo © Ken Inman); 5. **Californio** wearing a Ted Flowers parade saddle set. The picture was taken at a Morgan Versatility Event at the Kentucky Horse Park in 1985. (Photo © Mary Jean Vasiloff); 6. **Sissey** in May 1967, shortly before foaling **Californio**. (Above, top row, left to right) **Californio** offspring. **Tia Isabella** was purchased as a four-year-old by Roy Foote of Treasure Morgans. She became a valued broodmare whose descendants have spread across the country and across the Atlantic; **Worlds Edge Goldhawk** at the 1999 Grand National. (Photo © Howard Schatzberg); **Tia Marietta** was the dam of 14 offspring. (Above, bottom row, left to right) **Juan Bravo**, from **Californio**'s first foal crop (1970) cutting with Rick Bellwood, circa 1977; **Worlds Edge Goldoak** is one of **Californio**'s most successful breeding stallion sons; **Whippoorwill Salus** and **Shauna Vasiloff**; **Kennebec Opal** in 1989, Heather Davison, up. (Photo © Terri Miller)

Another horse who figured prominently in the pedigrees of many horses bred by the Nelsens was the beautiful palomino stallion Tio Lalo (Mahan Field x Palomesa), bred by Ed N. Vail of Los Angeles and owned at the time by Astrea and Jimmy Rogers (son of Will Rogers). Tio was an extremely kind stallion. Phyllis recalls the first time she saw Tio; he was lying down asleep in his stall at a show, totally unconcerned with all that was going on around him.

The family was offered Tio on lease and jumped at the chance. "When we were kids my brothers and I would all pile on Tio bareback, nothing on his head, and ride him around his corral," Kirsten reminisces. "If we kicked real hard, he might reward us with a slow jog." Tio lived with his harem and Sissey became his favorite mare. In the spring of 1967, the palomino colt Californio, named after the area's horsemen, was foaled.

Californio's pedigree consisted of the very best of old Western Working (including horses bred by Richard Sellman, Merle Little, and Roland Hill), Brunk, and Government lines that were present in California at the time. His golden color came down through the generations from his paternal great great grand-dam, the palomino mare Dawnglo, foaled in 1939 at the L.U. Sheep Ranch in Montana. In the November/December 2000 issue of the Rainbow Morgan Horse Association newsletter, author and breed historian Laura Algranti wrote of Californio: "Both his parents and all of his grandparents were bred in California. Five of his great-grandparents were also California-breds and the other two [one appears twice in this generation] were bred on the U.S. Government Farm in Vermont and were then sold to ranchers in California. Californio was truly named."

The Nelsen family moved from California to Arkansas and finally to Loudonville, Ohio, throughout the next few years. Californio grew up, as quiet tempered and generous as his sire and dam, and Richard started him under saddle in the *vaquero* tradition. Known to his friends and family as "Cali," the golden stallion

was trained and shown in many different divisions. At the first Grand National in 1973, Cali was Reserve Champion Novice Cutting Horse and Reserve Champion Futurity Cutting Horse. He also did well at other Midwestern Morgan shows including the Julep Cup, where he won the trail class and was reserve in Western Pleasure Stallion in 1974. Often he was the only palomino at Morgan shows and Kirsten knew they'd have to be twice as good as the others to get a good ribbon. "During the time I showed Cali, there was still a lot of prejudice against palominos in the Morgan show world. There was also much confusion on what a western pleasure horse was supposed to be. Because Cali was unmistakably palomino and performed with quiet elegance, he placed very well under West Coast judges, but basically ignored by most Midwest and East Coast judges."

Open shows, however, were another story. "Cali did very well in open competition," Kirsten recalls. "He would go into just about every class—driving, English pleasure, western pleasure, hunter, trail, reining, cutting, equitation. He was always the crowd favorite. Children would run up to him and hug his legs, kiss his nose, even grab his tail. Cali loved all the attention." Whatever he was asked to do, Californio promoted the Morgan horse's sweet nature. Kirsten even used him to give lessons to children. "I didn't realize until I got older that not all stallions were as gentle and kind as Tio and Cali," she says.

While not always finding acceptance at Morgan shows, Kirsten thought perhaps the palomino shows would be a place for Cali to shine. If they registered Californio with one of the Palomino registries, she could exhibit him in that association's shows. But because Cali had a lot of sooty dappling and dark Bend Or spots, he was refused registration. The registry's representative told the family to turn out Cali so he would sun bleach to a lighter gold and not to feed him any alfalfa (which is thought to darken some colors), and then maybe they could register him. That was an unacceptable



(Top row, left to right) **Treasure Golddust**, who resides in Sweden, has produced four foals and is due with her fifth in 2008—at age 21!; **Kennebec Topaz** is a reliable riding horse as well as an excellent broodmare; **LBF Gay Isabella** competing in Second Level Dressage in 1995; **Treasure Merrigold** (forefront) and Ray Breyer in an Illinois parade. (Bottom row, left to right) **R-Two Rayning Success** with Mike Hoffman, up, at the 2006 Ranch Horse Versatility Show, where he finished reserve. (Photo © Willow Brown); **LBF Gay Enchantress** driving with her owner, Polly Smith; **Whippoorwill Felicity** and her owner Tonya Farina, competing in First Level Dressage at Lexington 2006. (Photo © Bob Tarr.com)

answer to the Nelsens. Instead, Kirsten showed him in palomino classes at open shows, where entrants need not be registered.

In 1984, Californio was purchased by the DuPont family of Nemours Morgans in Delaware, specifically to be the mount of their two young sons, Henri and Irene. “Like all Morgans for children, he was a great teacher and gentle and loving friend,” says Martha DuPont. Cali “was really Henri’s horse,” she says, and he would hop on Cali bareback and take him for rides around their farm.

Cali was supposed to be retired, but longtime breeder Mary Jean Vasiloff of Whippoorwill Morgans had bigger plans for him. In the spring of 1985 she leased the stallion with the heart as golden as his coat. Californio bred several of Mary Jean’s mares and his excellent, trustworthy temperament made him a perfect ambassador for the breed at promotional events such as the versatility event she helped to organize at the Kentucky Horse Park. Mary Jean says, “He was a total gentleman in every way. He had been very well trained by the Nelsens, but *beyond manners* he was also a kind and affectionate horse, responsive to people and attention, and he had a sense of humor.

“He was very versatile, an athlete, and a beauty. He was also a solid horse with a deep heartgirth and rib cage, good bone, strong back, and good deep hindquarters with plenty of depth in the stifle. His neck was set on properly above the withers and well down on the chest, with a nice straight underline, and a properly placed crest. He had very kind eyes, lovely small, well set apart ears, and good bite of even teeth with large nostrils and firm mouth. Even all this at the age of 18, when he came to me. He was still a classically made Morgan.”

In September 1985, Californio was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Merrill of World’s Edge Farm in Hendersonville, North Carolina. The Merrills’ farm was situated in a scenic valley just below a lookout point called “World’s Edge.” Here Californio

would live with his band of mares on 100 acres. Well-known equine photographer, Dodo Knight, took many stunning photographs of Californio surrounded by the beauty of nature at World’s Edge, which Mr. Merrill used in his advertisements.

The World’s Edge program was short lived; the farm dispersed most of its Morgans in 1988. Mr. Merrill retained Californio and a few mares, and Cali’s last foals were born in 1991. The following year, then 25-year-old Californio along with his favorite mare Starlite Lady and three of Cali’s last offspring were sold to trainer Paul Hellebrand. Cali’s final years were spent at the Hellebrands’ farm in Missouri living with Starlite Lady. They had a pasture on one side of the driveway, and their son World’s Edge Gold Royal had one on the other. One of Californio’s favorite things to do was to race his son up the pasture along the driveway. One day in 2000, the father-son team was observed playing their favorite game in the morning; in the afternoon, Cali was found to have peacefully passed away in his pasture. He was 34. He is buried next to Starlite Lady, who preceded him in death.

Californio Offspring and Beyond

Of Californio’s 55 offspring, 33 of them were bred while he was at Mohican Farms. The palomino stallion’s first foals arrived in 1970, and in that crop was the chestnut stallion Juan Bravo (x Re-Wind Of Sundown). Juan went on to sire seven, including Roy Foote’s excellent sire Primavera Regalo; Mr Good Juan, sire for Sharlene Anderson’s R-Two Morgans in Montana; and Primavera Ramona, a mare who produced for Polly Smith’s Little Brook Farm as well as for Triple S Morgans. Polly has built much of her breeding program around the results of her original stallion Gay Vaquero crossed with Primavera Ramona. Two of her broodmares, LBF Gay Isabella and LBF Gay Enchantress, are from this breeding, and in 2005 she purchased another Ramona offspring, the stallion

Triple S Wings Of Wind (by Triple S Red Wind). Isabella has shown through Third Level Dressage and has won the AMHA Open Competition Bronze Medallion. Her sister Enchantress also won her AMHA bronze medallion in Dressage and has earned numerous carriage driving awards. Ramona's 1989 son, Painters Pine Ridge, owned by Travis Filipek, has had a long and successful reining career. His latest win was as the 2007 World Champion Non-Pro Reining at age 18! Pine Ridge also is an excellent sire of Morgan reiners, including Morganquest Native Sun, winner of the 2007 Grand National Reining Freestyle Open Finals and many other national titles.

The birth of the first of Californio's additions to a series of excellent producing mares collectively known as "the Tia mares" (the other Tia mares were by his sire, Tio Lalo), were born in 1971. The incredible producer Tia Marietta (x Tia Monita by Tio Lalo) is responsible for one of the largest family of Californio descendants today. This buckskin mare produced 14 offspring and nearly every one went on to be a successful breeding horse as well. Included in this group was Seven C Copper Penny (producer of World Champion Trail Horse, Radiance Cavalier, and others for Barbara Hewitt's Radiance Morgans); Windlord Ethan Allen, buckskin, whose only two offspring before being gelded were the buckskin stallions Shagwood Shininghero (sire for Dahlonga Morgans) and Shagwood Doubleagle, both with many offspring today; the palomino mares Gold Cross Sun Flower and Gold Cross Sun Princess (producing for Kristi Roy's Krila Morgans); Gold Cross Miss Flicka (who has produced both Universal Morgans and Mossrose Morgans); and the late Gold Cross Sun Catcher, buck-

skin stallion (sire for Universal Morgans).

Also in Californio's 1971 foal crop was the palomino mare Tia Isabella (x Oh-Cee's Gift). She was purchased as a young mare by Roy Foote of Treasure Morgans. Roy remembers, "I saw Californio only one time and that was at Mohican Farms about 1974. I was there to see if I could find the kind of Morgan I had decided to purchase. I wanted "Western" Morgans . . . the kind that had cow sense and a bloodline history of working cows or had shown their offspring could cut cows or do reining. I bought two Morgan mares at that time. One of the two, Tia Isabella, was by Californio, and was being halter broke by Dick when I arrived at Mohican Farms. She was probably one of the best Morgans I ever bought! Very athletic, super disposition, a 'boss' mare who only had to lay back her ears to establish this fact, a wonderful Mom, and her foals were just as good!"

Isabella gave Treasure Morgans ten foals in her lifetime, including the good palomino broodmares Treasure Incantation, and Treasure Merrigold, owned by Kris and Al Breyer of Briar Patch Morgans. Merrigold is the dam of the Breyers' 2005 Reserve World Champion Four-Year-Old Western Pleasure BPM Estralita De Oro, a palomino mare. Another Tia Isabella daughter, Treasure Golddust, was trained in reining and sold to Germany in 1992. She now resides in Sweden with Helen Van Den Born at Tulllesbo Morgans. "She has a rocking chair lope, and she can carry herself like a top class Dressage horse," Helen says of her golden mare. "She really can canter so slow that you can walk next to her. She spins and stops like a pro, the best reiner I've ever ridden, Quarter Horses included. I wish I had found this great mare years earlier!"



KENNEBEC MORGAN HORSE FARM

236 PHIPPS POINT ROAD • WOOLWICH, MAINE 04579
PHONE: 207.443.2703 • FAX: 207.386.0528 • E-MAIL: PEGGYG@GWI.NET



IN MEMORIAM

Kennebec Opal (Californio x Kennebec Lucille) 1981-2007

Shown here at Groton House, 1989. Heather Webster, up.



*She has her
grandpa's eyes.*



A beautiful head and eye are just one of the many fine qualities our Brookridge Morgans have inherited from Californio. We are dedicated to preserving the classic type Morgan- lovely to look at, sound, kind, versatile, long lived- and colorful. Visit our website to discover more!

Pictured are Coral Forest (World's Edge Goldoak X Kennebec Topaz), 2004 palomino mare, and Positively Charmed (Gone Gold X Foxton Frosty Dawn), 2007 smoky black silver filly, with Lisa Holec.

Brookridge Morgans

www.brookridgemorgans.com

Jim and Laura Behning, Covington, GA
770-385-1240



Little Brook Farm pays tribute to CALIFORNIO
with his three great great grand daughters.



LBF Diamond Lil
(MEMC Tequila Cuervo x LBF Gay Enchantress)

LBF Cajun Queen
(MEMC Tequila Cuervo x LBF Gay Enchantress)

Little Brook Farm

Polly W. Smith

P.O. Box 589 Brownsville, Vermont 05037-0589

(802) 674-2944 - lbfvaquero@valley.net

www.littlebrookfarmmorgans.com

LBF Memphis Belle
(Star-Ru RK Ladd x LBF Gay Isabella)

Breeding quality foundation sport Morgans for the amateur owner.

None sweeter than her and she's an excellent mother. She didn't have a foal last year, so she tried to steal the other mares' foals, so I rebred her last year. This might be her last foal, then she'll be retired and she'll help me raise the youngsters. She will never leave my farm." Golddust has had five foals in all, four by Helen's stallion Sc Island Centavo and is well on her way to spreading the Californio bloodline within the European Morgan population!

Californio's 1973 palomino daughter, Tia Katrina (x Re-Wind Of Sundown), produced five in her short life. Her buckskin daughter, Sipeo Sonata, is owned by Judy Hinman of Amberfields Morgans. The mare's kind nature makes her a reliable demonstration horse at various Morgan promotional events that Judy and her family regularly take part in, including Saratoga Days and Equine Affaire. Another Tia Katrina offspring is the buckskin stallion, Bye Bye Bucky. He has bred on through his 1994 buckskin son Tioga's Spitfire, owned by Cynthia Nelson. Silhouette Acres Skyefire, a buckskin Spitfire son, is standing at Bill and Carol Williams' Wm-Car-WMS Morgans in Pennsylvania.

Margaret Gardiner of Kennebec Morgans, long known for her dedication to the original using Morgan, sent her mare Kennebec Lucille to Californio in 1980. Phyllis Nelsen recalls that "Lucy" was in heat when she came off the truck from Maine; she was immediately put in with Cali, who "always had to roll before he bred a mare." Mission accomplished, and Lucy was out of heat the next day. Phyllis jokes that the truck driver could have just hung out and taken the mare back home the same day! The result was the buckskin mare Kennebec Opal, who had a successful career in eventing and Dressage as well as being an excellent lesson horse. She also was the dam of six including Kennebec Topaz, broodmare for the author's Brookridge Morgans. Topaz has foaled two offspring and is in foal for 2008. Her son, the 2002 palomino Gone Gold, is the sire of two silver dapple offspring: the 2006 bay silver stallion Unconventional, and the 2007 smoky black silver filly Positively Charmed, opening up a whole new realm of color possibilities in Californio's descendants.

The palomino mare Whippoorwill Salus (x Whippoorwill Pazazz) was one of

the foals Californio sired for Mary Jean Vasiloff. Foaled in 1986, Salus has been an outstanding producer with 11 foals to her credit. Her five-year-old palomino daughter Whippoorwill Goldusty is in the current broodmare band at Whippoorwill Morgans. Salus's most recent foal was born last year when she was 21 and she is in foal for 2008! Salus has been on lease the last few years to Jane Pietenpol of Mossrose Morgans. Jane says, "My husband, John, and I have always tended toward a working western horse. We were beyond words when Mary Jean asked if we wanted to lease Salus, bring her to our farm, and use her for a broodmare. Salus has balanced, correct conformation. She is sound and hardy, bold and sensible. Not much bothers her. She is laid back and likes to hang around people. If we are in the pasture, she is right behind us looking for attention or treats. We have four offspring here out of Whippoorwill Salus. They are a very unique family unlike anything we have experienced. The family always seems to know one another and always takes care of each other. They can be separated in different pastures during the warm weather months and always seem to know they belong together when they meet up again. All of the Salus offspring are the same as her in temperament and disposition: sure and steady, bold and sensible, and enjoy being with people."

Several of Salus' offspring are producing for Tonya Farina's Matton Morgans, including the smoky black mare Whippoorwill Felicity, chestnut Whippoorwill Echo, and buckskin (registered dun) Whippoorwill Calisto (on lease from Whippoorwill Morgans). Tonya's entire lineup of broodmares consists of her Salus daughters! Felicity and her full sister, Whippoorwill Electra (now owned by Margaret Johnson), have been successful in the Dressage arena, with Felicity showing at such prestigious shows as Dressage at Devon, where she promoted the Morgan among the best warmbloods in the country.

Californio's two most prolific sons came from the World's Edge breeding program. Worlds Edge Goldoak (x Ponderosa's Miss Quiz) and Worlds Edge Goldhawk (x Funquest Ruby) are both palominos from the 1988 foal crop. Goldhawk was purchased at age six by Sharlene Anderson of R-2 Morgans, where he still stands at stud. "The reason I purchased him was not for his color, but for his sire," Sharlene says. "I had owned in the past his half brother, Juan Bravo, who proved to be a superior athlete in cutting and reining. Therefore when I started to support the national show in reining, I looked for the horse I knew could do it, and when I found Juan's half brother I was very excited. I put Hawk immediately with a reining trainer and even at six he turned out to be very good." Hawk has done well in reining at the Grand National and also has won in western pleasure classes at Morgan shows.

Goldhawk's son R-Two Rayning Success was the 2002 Grand National Reserve Champion 2nd-Year Green Reining. Trained for Ranch Horse Versatility, in 2005 at Guthrie, Oklahoma, "Rayner" won the Morgan Ranch Riding, Morgan Cutting, and Open Morgan Working Cow Horse, and was Reserve Champion Open and Open Working Cow Horse. In 2007 at the Montana Winter Festival's Challenge of the Breeds he was reserve champion, placing in six events: Cutting, Trail, Driving, Jumping, Barrels, and Trotting Race. Rayner is going back this year and will compete against a total of 16 different breeds. It's not surprising that he is so successful at such a variety of events—it's in his blood!

Another versatile Hawk offspring is the palomino gelding R-Two Sirius, owned by Michelle Gorman. Michelle drives Sirius with his only daughter, Sirius Love, and the pair makes a striking team as both are similar in build and color.

Goldhawk offspring also have become valued breeding stock for other programs. One of the most notable is the 2000 palomino, T-Two Little Zipper, who sired some excellent foals for Homestead Morgans in Canada, including their cremello mare Hmstd Moonlite Serenade, and buckskin mares Hmstd Lil Bit Of Heaven, owned by Eitan and Debbie Beth-Halachmy; and Hmstd Tiptoe Sunrise, owned by Barbara Fink. Another Goldhawk son, NVS Tesoro, a 1999 palomino bred by Lisa Horning of NVS Morgans, sired 19 before being gelded. Most of his offspring are just getting started in their breeding and showing careers.

Californio's other major breeding son, Worlds Edge Goldoak, never saw the show ring due to a pasture accident as a young horse which cost him an eye. Despite his handicap, Goldoak always is a gentleman to handle and was the first stallion for his current owner, Judy Burns. Many of Goldoak's older offspring carry the CJ prefix of his first owner, Jonathan Tallman of Crown Jewel Morgans in Virginia, who purchased him in the World's Edge dispersal in 1988. Goldoak daughters have been successful show and breeding horses for a number of colorful breeding programs. The palomino mare CJ Golden Treasure, owned by Jackie Moehling of Justawee Morgans, has many wins in both open and Morgan Dressage and hunter classes, and has produced two foals for the farm as well. The buckskin CJ California Gold is producing for Barbara Byrd, and palomino CJ Buttercup (x Chuckey Reflection Of Joy) is part of the broodmare lineup at Judy Hinman's Amberfields Morgans.

Californio has a few other sons that are still entire and have done limited breeding, including the 1987 palomino Worlds Edge Sun Bear, owned by Lisa Holec; 1990 palomino World's Edge Gold Royal, owned by Paul and Linda Hellebrand; and the 1989 palomino Dogwood's Golden Chief, owned by Deborah Natola.

Out of the Past and Into the Future

Californio came from a legacy of real ranch horses, made through a hard day's work under an endless sky. Today, his descendants retain the beauty, athleticism, superb feet and legs, good bone, and best of all, good minds, that characterized their hard-working ancestors. These qualities make the descendants of Californio especially well suited as Dressage and sport horses as well as for the demanding western disciplines of cattle work, cutting, and reining. But perhaps their best "use" is that of family friends. "Californio was a wonderful ambassador for the Morgan breed," Kirsten Nelsen says. "Initially, it was Cali's beautiful color that drew people to him. But it was his sweet disposition, people-loving personality, and good old fashioned Morgan versatility that kept them fans for life." ■

The author wishes to thank the following people for their assistance in the preparation of this article: Phyllis Nelsen, Chris Nelsen, Kirsten Nelsen, Sharlene Anderson, Martha DuPont, Roy Foote, Linda Hellebrand, Judy Hinman, Charles Merrill, Jane Pietenpol, Polly Smith, Helen Van den Born, and Mary Jean Vasiloff.