



# Little Sorrel & Rienzi

## MORGAN MOUNTS OF THE CIVIL WAR

BY KIM MARIETTE

**W**hen Little Sorrel was led off of the captured Baltimore & Ohio livestock train seized in Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1861, he stepped into service of the Confederacy. His was no ordinary war run—the little sorrel horse was destined to be the favorite war horse of the Confederate general, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson.

Little Sorrel caught Jackson's eye immediately, not as a war horse, but as a surprise gift to his wife. The horse was small in stature, about 14 hands, and had a quiet disposition with a kind eye. He was believed to be approximately 11 years old at his confiscation. He was solid gingerbread in coat color with no white markings. He was described as a bit gaunt at the time, but this was probably due to lack of feed and good care. Jackson named him “Fancy.” A larger sorrel horse was chosen by Jackson as his mount for battle.

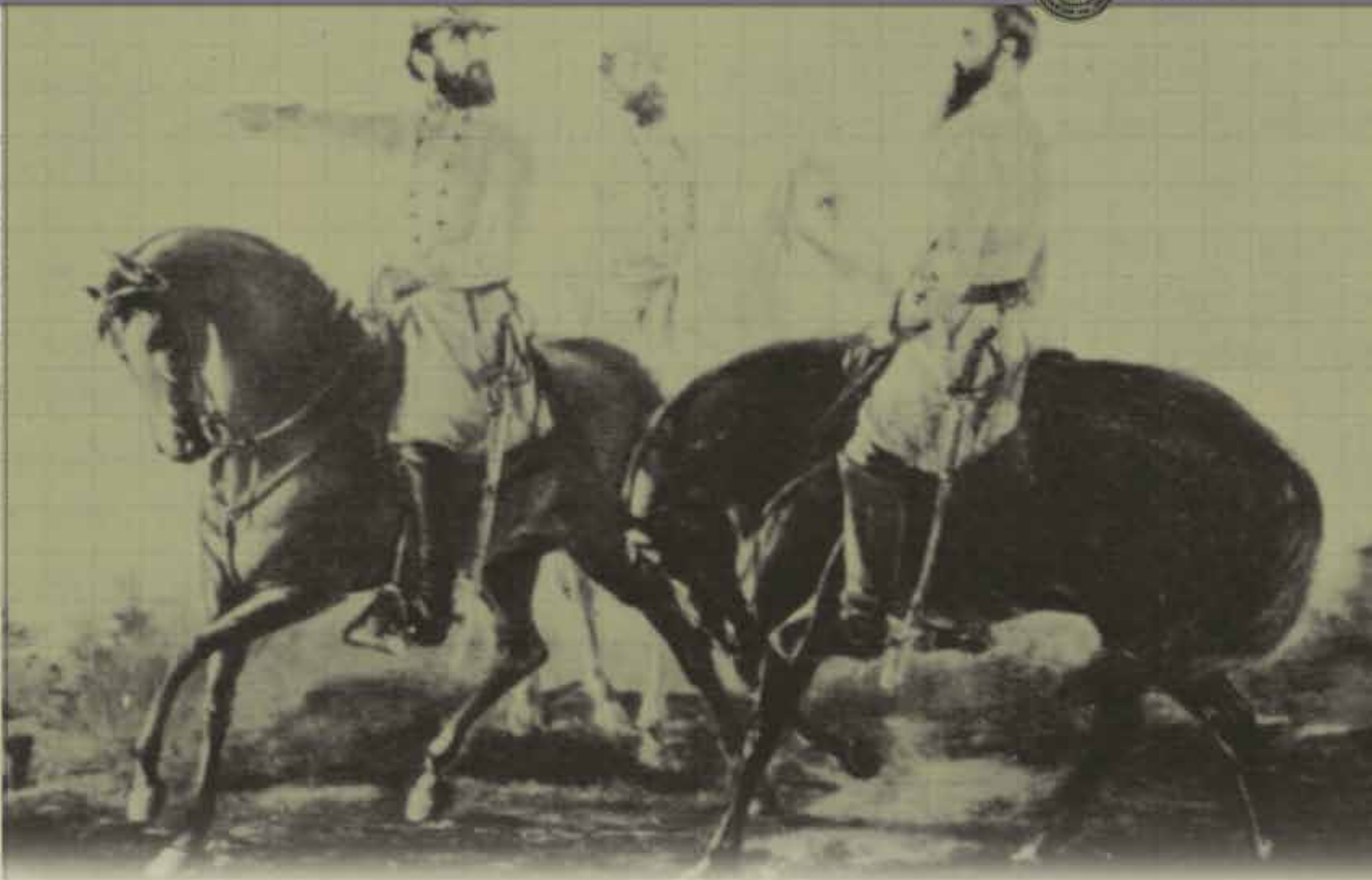
However, upon his first ride on Big Sorrel—as Jackson's staff called him to differentiate the larger horse from the “little sorrel”—it was discovered that the animal did not have the temperament for battle. He was difficult to handle, stubborn at times, and far too skittish to be used as a dependable war horse.

In addition, the large horse had a very choppy, uneven gait, which would have been very difficult to sit for long marches, some of which covered 40 miles in one day. The General always put on more miles than anyone, riding from front to back of his troops, rallying his men, shouting directions, and maintaining order. Jackson's forces had a unique way of travel—he insisted that the troops spread out and travel in a line, rather than side-by-side in large groups. This formation caused his command to be spread out over miles on the roads and in the fields, and the horse he was riding had to be strong enough to endure.

In need of a horse, Jackson turned to Fancy. He found that the horse had comfortable gaits, was willing and easy to handle. Jackson recruited him on the spot. The horse's name became Little Sorrel and the more Jackson rode him, the more he liked him. Little Sorrel maintained his calm composure during heavy shelling and would even lie down to doze when there were breaks in battle. His smooth, even pace allowed Jackson to fall asleep riding him on some of their long marches.

Little Sorrel and Jackson became an inseparable duo, the very sight of the pair instantly rallied the troops of the loyal men. Horse

*General Phil Sheridan on Rienzi cursing Grover's demoralized infantry and “raving in such a fearful manner that they feared him more than the enemy.”* (Drawing courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society taken from James Taylor's Sketchbook.)



and rider understood each other, and served each other well. One historian captures the relationship between Jackson and his horse very clearly: “By that stage of the war, Little Sorrel had learned his master’s embarrassment at the cheers from the soldiers. Whenever Confederates raised loud and friendly noise, the horse would break into a gallop and carry his rider speedily away.” (1)

One of Jackson’s staff, Henry Kyd Douglas, described Little Sorrel as “a remarkable little horse. Such endurance I have never seen in horseflesh. We had no horse at headquarters that could match him. I never saw him show a sign of fatigue.” According to Douglas, Jackson’s horse could “eat a ton of hay or live on cobs.” (2)

High-ranking Southern officers were allowed to bring grooms along with them as part of their staff to personally take care of their private war horses. Jackson’s aide was a man named Jim Lewis, who, as described by Congressman Alexander Boteler, was an exact match to Little Sorrel in terms of temperament and disposition: “For they were equally obedient, patient, easy-going and reliable; not given to devious courses nor designing tricks; more serviceable than showy and, altogether, as sober-sided a pair of subordinates as any Presbyterian elder with plain tastes and a practical turn,

need desire to have about him. Both man and horse seemed to understand their master thoroughly and rarely failed to come up fully to all his requirements.” (3)

Jackson and Little Sorrel faced dozens of battles together, both seemingly invincible. All of that changed on the evening of May 2, 1863 in Chancellorsville, Virginia. After two years and countless battles of being steady as a rock, Little Sorrel broke that pattern by wildly bolting after Jackson was unexpectedly shot while scouting along a turnpike with a small group of his men. He had men stationed on the other side of the turnpike as well and it was these soldiers that fired upon Jackson’s group. The scouting party was mistakenly thought to be Union troops.

Jackson was hit three times before Little Sorrel made it to the woods but the forest did not stop his mad dash. He continued to gallop towards enemy lines while his injured rider barely stayed on him. By the time Little Sorrel broke through, two of Jackson’s men had caught up with the horse and rode up along each side of him, taking hold of the horse’s reins. This stopped Little Sorrel but it did not stop his panic. The men barely got Jackson off of Little Sorrel’s back before the horse took off again, galloping

*General Jackson’s Little Sorrel was a Morgan, captured at Harper’s Ferry (from a painting by Elder, “Heroes of the Valley Jackson, Ewell, and Ashby.”) (Courtesy Chicago Historical Society).*



≡ LITTLE SORREL ≡

**Top to bottom, left to right:** *Little Sorrel as he stands at the Museum of the Virginia Military Institute. When Little Sorrel died, his hide was mounted and placed on display. His remains are interred on the parade grounds of VMI, where he enjoyed celebrity status until his passing; Little Sorrel, tacked up with Civil War gear; Little Sorrel, also known as “Old Sorrel”; Little Sorrel in his later years; Little Sorrel displaying his Morgan characteristics: well conformed, 14 hands, stout, and strong.*

(First image courtesy of the Virginia Military Institute. Remaining images courtesy of Christian Heidorf and The National Museum of the Morgan Horse.)

towards enemy lines with the surviving horses. Little Sorrel was eventually captured and returned to the Confederacy a few days later. Private Thomas R. Yeatman of Stuart’s horse artillery is credited with that deed. Jackson learned of his horse’s recovery on the day that he died.

Although Jackson was to die of pneumonia contracted after his wounds were treated and his left arm amputated, bolting into the woods probably saved Little Sorrel’s life. He was one of only seven horses to survive the incident; the remaining twelve horses were shot and killed.

Little Sorrel died on March 16, 1886. Upon his death, Little Sorrel’s hide was removed and placed over a plaster mold of his body. The measurements for the mold were taken by noted taxidermist, Frederic S. Webster.

Little Sorrel was determined to be a Morgan by his physical appearance and characteristics. Unlike his Confederate counterpart, Rienzi came to the Union cavalry with a known pedigree—the blood of Black Hawk, to be exact.

**R**ienzi was foaled in 1858 on the Sexton farm near Lakeport, Michigan and was known locally as the “Leonard colt.” After a time, he was sold for \$90.00 to the Leonard farm and was trained for harness to pull logs out of the forest. Now called “John,” he was purchased as a three-year-old for \$175.00 by a group of citizens from Port Huron, Michigan. “John” was intended to be a

gift to a local member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Cavalry before departing for the war. The gelding was presented to Captain Archibald Campbell of Company K, 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Cavalry, completely tacked up and turned out, to be used as his war horse.

Unfortunately for Captain Campbell, who was a novice rider at best, “John” was not for the faint-hearted. He was not completely trained to ride and was a very strong horse, a bold mover with quick actions. By now he stood between 16-17 hands high, was very intelligent, and not for a “city” rider—not for Campbell, at least. The horse was described as having an “eruptive nature,” and Campbell was reluctant to ride him. By this time, “John” had developed the unsettling habit of wringing his tail to show his displeasure, which was often.

Campbell’s Commander, Colonel Philip Sheridan, was an excellent horseman and always admired the big black horse, having ridden him several times. In June of 1862, when both men were stationed in Rienzi, Mississippi, Campbell gave his horse to Sheridan, who did not turn down the animal. Sheridan said he couldn’t “refuse a good horse.” Rienzi’s military career began in earnest.

Prized by Sheridan for his smooth, ground-eating gaits, Rienzi was soon the favorite war horse of the Colonel: “... and from that time till the close of the war I rode him almost continuously, in every campaign and battle in which I took part, without once finding him overcome by fatigue, though on many occasions his strength



~ RIENZI ~

**Top to bottom, left to right:** A wounded soldier recognizes Sheridan on his famous ride from Winchester and waves encouragement. ; Rienzi survived the war and was Sheridan's personal mount as he traveled to various army assignments; Rienzi in 1865. Sheridan astride Rienzi at the Washington, DC monument; The famous Thomas Buchanan Reed painting "Sheridan's Ride" of General Sheridan and Rienzi.

(First image courtesy of the Western Reserve Historical Society taken from James Taylor's Sketchbook. Remaining images courtesy of Christian Heidorf and The National Museum of the Morgan Horse.)

was severely tested by long marches and short rations. I never observed in him any vicious habit; a nervousness and restlessness and switching of the tail, when everything about him was in repose, being the only indication that he might be untrustworthy. No one but a novice could be deceived by this, however, for the intelligence evinced in every feature, and his thoroughbred appearance, were so striking that any person accustomed to horses could not misunderstand such a noble animal." (4)

Being a one-man-horse suited Rienzi. With Sheridan riding him, he remained calm under fire and was obedient to his rider. So obedient in fact, that Sheridan was able to jump the horse over a two-foot-high earthen entrenchment that was protecting Confederate soldiers at the Battle of Five Forks. Sheridan grabbed his battle flag, spurred Rienzi forward, and together they leaped the wall and landed amid the retreating soldiers. Neither Sheridan nor Rienzi was injured in this event.

One cool autumn evening, a couple of soldiers new to camp sought to keep themselves warm by finding an extra blanket to "borrow." Slowly circling the camp, they eventually came upon the officer's tents and the horses picketed nearby. All of the horses were blanketed, but only one horse had a blanket that was thick with no tears. When they approached the big black horse, he immediately pinned his ears and bared his teeth at them. Stunned, the two thieves decided to wait until full dark and approach the horse one on each side. Hoping to confuse the horse with this tactic, one

man would hold the horse's halter tight while the other undid the blanket's straps and buckles.

Rienzi was not fooled. He repeatedly bit and struck at the two men, but they were able to hold the horse off long enough to strip the blanket from him and take off at a dead run. Rienzi took off too but stopped when he reached the end of his picket rope, fortunately for the two men, who looked back to see a furious black horse with gnashing white teeth.

History only notes one time in which Rienzi's battle bravery was lost. Through 1863, General Sheridan rode Rienzi in the Battles of Perryville, Stone's River, Chickamauga, Chattanooga and Missionary Ridge. It was at Chickamauga that Rienzi froze when a bullet passed between his legs. Sheridan was not able to encourage the horse to move and eventually had to dismount and retrieve another horse.

Rienzi stayed collected on long marches and was indefatigable on them. He would settle into a five-mile-per-hour walk, which was hated by Sheridan's men. The rest of the horses had to jog trot to keep up with Rienzi.

It was Rienzi's remarkable endurance that brought him and Sheridan fame in their poetic ride from Winchester, Virginia, where Sheridan was attending a conference nearby, to Cedar Creek, where Sheridan's troops were under heavy Confederate attack. The now-famous 20-mile gallop occurred on October 19, 1864. Rienzi had enough energy left to help Sheridan roust his retreating men back into battle, which the Union eventually won.

**SHERIDAN'S RIDE BY THOMAS BUCHANAN READ**

Up from the south, at the break of day,  
 Bringing to Winchester fresh dismay,  
 The affrighted air with a shudder bore,  
 Like a herald in hast to the chieftain's door,  
 The terrible grumble, and rumble, and roar,  
 Telling the battle was on once more,  
 And Sheridan twenty miles away.  
 And wider still those billows of war  
 Thundered along the horizon's bar;  
 And louder yet into Winchester rolled  
 The roar of that red sea uncontrolled.  
 Making the blood of the listener cold,  
 As he thought of the stake in that fiery fray,  
 With Sheridan twenty miles away.  
 But there is a road from Winchester town,  
 A good, broad highway leading down;  
 And there, through the flush of the morning light,  
 A steed as black as the steeds of night  
 Was seen to pass, as with eagle flight;  
 As if he knew the terrible need,  
 He stretched away with his utmost speed.  
 Hills rose and fell, but his heart was gay,  
 With Sheridan fifteen miles away.  
 Still sprang from those swift hoofs, thundering south,  
 The dust like smoke from the cannon's mouth,  
 Or the trail of a comet, sweeping faster and faster,  
 Foreboding to traitors the doom of disaster.  
 The heart of the steed and the heart of the master  
 Were beating like prisoners assaulting their walls,  
 Impatient to be where the battle-field calls;  
 Every nerve of the charger was strained to full play,  
 With Sheridan only ten miles away.  
 Under his spurning feet, the road  
 Like an arrowy Alpine river flowed,  
 And the landscape sped away behind  
 Like an ocean flying before the wind;  
 And the steed, like a bark fed with furnace ire,  
 Swept on, with his wild eye full of fire;  
 But, lo! He is nearing his heart's desire;  
 He is sniffing the smoke of the roaring fray,  
 With Sheridan only five miles away.

The first that the general saw were the groups  
 Of stragglers, and then the retreating troops;  
 What was done? What to do? A glance told him both.  
 Then striking his spurs with a terrible oath,  
 He dashed down the line, 'mid a storm of huzzas,  
 And the wave of retreat checked its course there, because  
 The sign of the master compelled it to pause.  
 With foam and with dust the black charger was gray;  
 By the flash of his eye, and the red nostril's play;  
 He seemed to the whole great army to say;  
 "I have brought you Sheridan all the way  
 From Winchester down to save the day!"  
 Hurrah! Hurrah for Sheridan!  
 Hurrah! Hurrah for horse and man!  
 And when their statues are placed on high  
 Under the dome of the Union sky,  
 The American soldier's Temple of Fame,  
 There, with the glorious general's name  
 Be it said, in letters both bold and bright;  
 "Here is the steed that saved the day  
 By carrying Sheridan into the fight,  
 From Winchester—twenty miles away! (5)

Sheridan was so impressed with Rienzi's performance that he changed the horse's name to "Winchester," in honor of the rout they achieved. Although the public recognized the horse with his new name, the big black always remained "Rienzi" to Sheridan and his men privately.

Rienzi died on August 17, 1878. His body was preserved and stands at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C..

Although both Little Sorrel and Rienzi saw much warfare and were ridden in many, many battles by their respective generals, they did not participate in the same battles simultaneously. Sheridan and Jackson were most active in 1862. After Jackson's death in early 1863, Sheridan continued in 1864 and 1865, and eventually rode Rienzi to Appomattox Court House, where he witnessed the end of the Civil War.

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The lives of Little Sorrel and Rienzi did not cross until after their deaths, when the same taxidermist, Frederic S. Webster, mounted the remains of both horses. Little Sorrel and Rienzi were the only two horses from the Civil War to be preserved and honored in this manner. ■

**Endnotes:**

1. James I. Robertson, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, the Soldier, the Legend* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1997), 629.
2. Richard G. Williams, Jr., "Jackson's Most Trusted Sidekick," *The Washington Times*, April 8, 2006.
3. Richard G. Williams, Jr., *Stonewall Jackson, The Black Man's Friend* (Nashville: Cumberland House, 2006), 139.
4. Captain H.C. Greiner, *General Phil Sheridan As I Knew Him, Playmate-Comrade-Friend* (Chicago: J. S. Hyland & Company, 1908), 404.
5. Sue Cottrell, *Hoof Beats North and South, Horses and Horsemen of the Civil War* (Hicksville, New York: Exposition Press, 1975), 46-48.

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 Christian J. Heidorf, "The Morgan Horse—Profiles in History: Rienzi, Sheridan's War Horse," *The National Museum of the Morgan Horse*, Middlebury, Vermont.  
 Sandra Moats, "The Cavalry Morgan Horses of the Civil War," *The Morgan Horse*, July 2004.  
 Peggy Pittenger, "Philip H. Sheridan and His War Horse," *The Morgan Horse*, November 1966.