

THE IMPORTANCE

One of the earliest advocates of riding for the disabled, an avid organizer international promoter: Mary Woolverton is an iconic figure both

Mary Woolverton is often acclaimed as one of the most important women in the history of the Morgan breed, but exactly who is she?

Those who know of Mary's recent accomplishments admire her for her promotion of Morgans as working carriage horses and for the unstinting devotion and countless hours she has given to the use of animals, particularly horses, in confidence building and both physical and mental rehabilitation of disabled people.

Going back in time a little further, she was renowned for her dedication to horsemanship for youth, particularly her leadership of the Victory Morgan Youth Club, a club whose members achieved proficiency in horsemanship while learning teamwork, sportsmanship, and the value of working hard to achieve goals.

By Karin Weight

Still further back in time, Mary was best known for her work with men who came back from Vietnam missing arms, legs, and (in some cases) the will to go on with life. Twice a week she hauled horses to Fitzsimmons Army Hospital where men left their wheelchairs and crutches to experience the freedom of movement as they first walked, then trotted and cantered. Mary promoted addiction, not to prescription drugs but to horses, and several of her "boys" went on to a lifelong partnership with horses.

But for those who knew Mary when she was a young woman just starting out with Morgans, her name and reputation is inextricably woven with that of a palomino Morgan stallion, Prince Of Pride.

A horse crazy kid who rode ponies, horses, and even a cow,



The many guises of Mary Woolverton including (background) a one horse open sleigh ride with Victory's Air Born.



OF BEING MARY

of youth programs, a professor of Morgan versatility, and a tireless in the history of our breed and in the equine sport at large.

Mary was raised in Massachusetts, where Morgans reigned supreme. Mary's mother was a close friend of Kate Morse, who, with husband Darwin, founded Green Meads Farm. She spent a great deal of time at Green Meads where she learned to love and appreciate the Morgan breed. It was only natural that she grew up wanting to have a Morgan of her own. Mary was both intelligent and athletic and loved to ski almost as much as she loved to ride, was interested in medicine and wanted a career that would involve helping people. So after getting her bachelor's degree in sociology from the University of Rochester she decided to move to Colorado. There she could work toward a master's degree in Medical Social Work, ski in the Rocky Mountains, and, she hoped, buy a small farm so she could raise horses. Morgans, of course.

After earning her master's degree and starting work as a social

worker for Denver Child Welfare, it was time to start seriously looking for a horse. Mary thought Condo and Upwey Ben Don bloodlines would be a great cross, and when she saw Redwood Mollie advertised for sale by the Mosher Brothers in Utah, the Condo daughter seemed to be a good start for her program. She was an attractive young chestnut mare, well-built and with a good disposition. Although she hadn't had much training, she was started under saddle and seemed reliable and sensible. Mary now had her first Morgan.

But wait! There was a flashy young stallion bred by Mosher Bros who caught Mary's eye. Prince Of Pride (Dickie's Pride x Utah Queen) was not a typical representative of the breed. He was tall for a Morgan (15.3 hands at maturity) and, instead of the typical dark bay, liver chestnut or black colors that dominated the breed at that





Mary driving Redwood Mollie in the Gay Nineties Class at the 1962 Circle J Show at Estes Park, Colorado. Photo © Alexander

time, he was palomino. He was not just an ordinary palomino, but had a snowy white mane and tail and an absolutely brilliant bright gold metallic coat that never faded even in the winter. Unfortunately, he had not been handled much, was not broke to ride or drive, and had an excess of energy. In fact, he was available simply because he was such a handful. Mary was a smart young woman, but when she saw the horse she fell in love and all her innate common sense simply vanished into thin air. She had to get a bank loan for Prince's "huge" price of \$1,500. Despite all odds, she considers that to be the best investment she ever made.

Mary had never trained a horse before, she had never ridden or worked with a stallion, and she certainly couldn't afford to pay a professional to help her. So every day she threw a saddle on Prince's back and took him to the dirt road that went along the local canal bank. He would take off running for a couple of miles, and then stop when they came to a barricaded road. By that time he would be under control and she would turn him around to train him on the way back to the barn. Perhaps he trained her. After a few months, however, the two of them had established a rapport and it became apparent that this was no ordinary horse,

but a real athlete with a fantastic aptitude for work.

So what did Mary do with her golden stallion? At the first show the cowboys sat on the rail expecting to see a rodeo. Indeed, the first class didn't go all that well and they were dismissed. But when they came in for the second class, both horse and rider now understood what they were doing and their very good work gave them a blue

ribbon, much to the astonishment of the cowboys. That first show was Western pleasure, but this was a horse who could do anything—and did everything. Mary and Prince showed hunt seat, dressage, side saddle, trail, costume, pleasure driving, buckboard driving, trotting races, and running races. She rode him on competitive trail rides in the summer, hunted with the Arapaho

Hunt in the fall, and went on sleigh rides in the winter. When there was work to be done, Mary harnessed Prince and he pulled logs and brush and even harrowed a show arena when the tractor broke down. And Prince was a jumper. We're not talking about little cross bars or even three-footers. Nope, he cleared four-six easily with his amateur rider hanging on for dear life. Mary had never had a jumping lesson, but she certainly had guts, and the golden stallion was completely honest, never stopping or running out.

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FOCUS ON WOMEN IN OUR INDUSTRY ~ The Importance of Being Mary



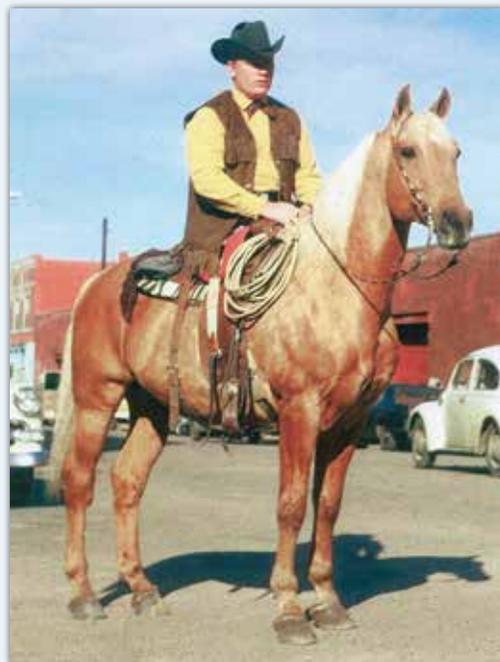
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Mary passes out ribbons at the Kent Denver School's "British Faire" in 1982 with Princess Anne (herself an advocate for riding for the disabled); Mary driving the pair Victory's Moonshadow & Victory's Jamboree, 1981; Mary riding sidesaddle in vintage costume aboard Prince Of Pride at the all-breed Rocky Mountain Horse Show in 1965; Mary and Prince Of Pride clearing a four foot three inch wall in the stadium jumping phase of the annual Colorado's three day equitation trials. Photos © Jack Schatzberg, Alexander

Prince Of Pride and Mary took the Morgan world by storm, winning championships at Morgan shows and in open competition, including Denver's prestigious Western National Stock Show. They went to Northampton to compete at the New England Morgan Show where they were named Versatility Champions. They took second place out of a field of 32 thoroughbreds in the preliminary division at Colorado's first three-day event, only one dressage point behind the winner. Mary says of that experience, "Prince took to the fences and tricky terrain with vigor; I was scared to death, but Prince took care of me." The next year they were part

of the winning intermediate team at the same event. Three-day events were still uncommon in the United States, so horses and riders came from all over the country. Mary was on the same team as the famous Olympic medalist Jimmy Wofford.

Prince Of Pride was being shown in the 1960s and at that time there was not a lot of acceptance of colorful Morgans. One year Mary had entered an East Coast show which Morgan expert Dr. C. D. Parks was judging. As she was packing her truck and trailer to make the long journey, *The Morgan Horse* arrived in the mail. Mary was horrified when she read an article written by Dr. Parks

FOCUS ON WOMEN IN OUR INDUSTRY ~ The Importance of Being Mary



LEFT TO RIGHT: Mary teaching vaulting to members of her youth group using the aged stallion Great Hill Richmond; Gary Bartlett, a Vietnam vet and double amputee, prepares to show Prince Of Pride in a Western pleasure class at the 1970 Denver Fall Charity Show.

which lambasted those who were breeding palominos and other non-traditional colorful Morgans. Despite his prejudice against the golden colored horse, Dr. Parks couldn't overlook Prince's correct gaits and excellent performance, and Mary and her horse never left the arena without a good ribbon.

Prince Of Pride earned national fame and was pictured in magazine articles and various books, including Margaret Cabell Self's *The Morgan Horse in Pictures*.

While all this was going on, Mary was also taking advantage of Colorado's excellent ski slopes, and worked on the Ski Patrol at Loveland Basin. She also changed employment, starting a long-term career as a medical social worker at Fitzsimmons Army Hospital. As the Vietnam war geared up, more and more soldiers with badly broken bodies were being sent to Fitz, and Mary was doing everything she could think of to enrich their lives. Colonel Paul Brown, an orthopedic surgeon at the hospital, had read that amputees in Germany and Switzerland had been skiing, so he and Mary started taking Fitzsimmons patients to the slopes where they had the chance to learn a sport that was new to most of them, one in which they never expected to participate. They had organized what was possibly the first disabled skiing program in the United States.

Mary now had a group of soldiers, some paralyzed, and most missing limbs, who were starting to get active in the skiing program and loving it, but spring meant the end of the skiing season. Horse programs for the disabled are common now, but at that time they were simply non-existent. However, Mary now had a herd of sensible Morgans, a stock trailer, and young men who needed a new activity. Fitzsimmons was located well out of town with a field in front of the hospital. There were no ramps available, so the Morgans had to put up with wheelchairs bumping into them

and to helicopters frequently landing close by. They had to become used to legless riders and to the jerky hands of novice riders, but they adapted to all this amazingly well. Soon the hospital grounds were taken over by a group of wanna-be cowboys whooping it up on Morgans. Although Mary had experience with driving, for safety's sake she sent several of her interested patients to trainer Ted Willrich for more professional instruction in harnessing and driving horses.

In September 1969 four of the amputees formed "The Missing Links" team and entered Fort Carson's Cavalier Riding Club Competitive Team Trail Ride, a 35-mile horsemanship test. Mary and Morgan owners Sigrid and Karen Farwell formed a second team "Morgan Raiders" and the two teams rode together.

Larry Weight, captain of the Missing Links, was in the best physical condition of the team members, with one leg amputated just below the knee and the other (which was injured badly enough that it had to be amputated two years later) in a full leg cast. He rode the spirited 16-hand Aristotle.

Jim Brunotte had lost both legs above the knee, one arm below the elbow, and an eye, yet he handled Annie, a Quarter Horse, without difficulty even though during the entire ride she was determined that she had to always be in front.

Tom Ferrara, who was almost completely blind and had lost both legs above the knee, rode Mary's reliable Leontine Linsley ("Lemonade"), who seemed to understand Tom's problem and was particularly careful as she picked her way through the brush and trees.

The member with the most riding experience was Gary Bartlett, a Little Britches bull riding champion. Gary had lost both legs completely at the hip and he and Mary were still working on better ways to strap him into the saddle.

The morning went well, with all obstacles successfully

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negotiated. Then just before lunch Gary's horse swerved to avoid a large rock and Gary's safety strap broke. Gary ended up in the grass but was unhurt, and Mary, who was always well-prepared, got out a new strap and rigged a replacement. Soon Gary was back in the saddle and the riders brought the horses in cool to the lunch area. Shortly after lunch, Gary's horse, Preacher, started acting irritable and it turned out that he had a rubbed spot at the girth. Mary traded horses and saddle with Gary,

and in the process Gary landed on a rock, but promptly mounted Prince Of Pride sore but still joking. The golden stallion accepted Gary calmly and Preacher seemed happier with Mary's English saddle.

The one trail test that everyone dreaded was the "lame horse" where Larry's and Jim's horses had to stand together quietly while Larry climbed over behind Jim. Then Tom had to pony Larry's "lame" Aristotle and proceed to a checkpoint. This was actually performed perfectly; in

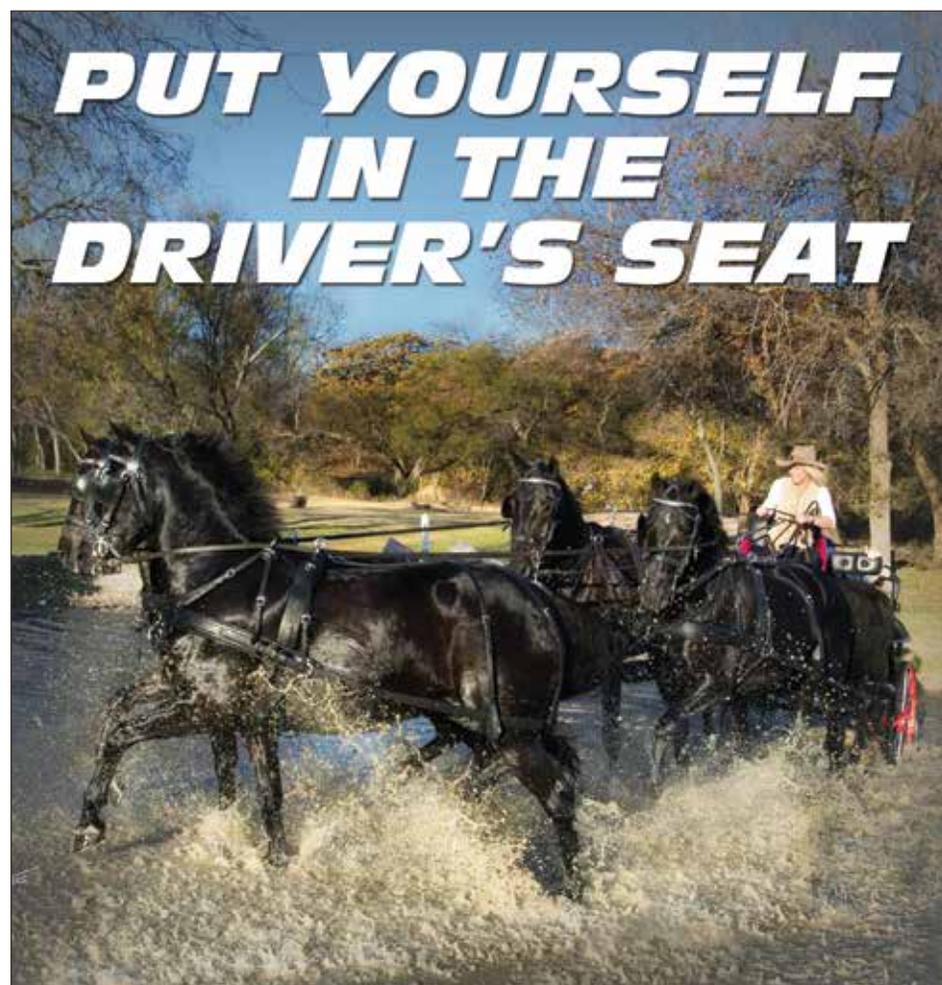
fact, the only test that gave the team any difficulty was opening the gate: the horses had trouble side-passing without leg aids, but eventually this too was accomplished.

Twenty-six teams competed in the ride, and at the end of the 35 miles the winning team scored 161 points, the "Morgan Raiders" came in fifth with 156 points and "The Missing Links" accumulated 152 points for ninth place. But the highlight of the award ceremonies was when Gary Bartlett received the infamous "Can O' Worms" trophy for the contestant "who shoulda gone fishing."

All this activity did not go unnoticed. First there were a few articles in the local newspaper, which certainly included good press for the Morgan breed. Congressmen and senators who visited the soldiers at the hospital took note of what was going on, and Mary's work earned national recognition when she was named Female Federal Employee of the Year and received a commendation signed by President Nixon. By this time some of the soldiers were getting serious. They had special adaptive saddles built, and the Circle J show included a popular class specifically for disabled veterans. Mike Wallace, of the popular national news program *60 Minutes*, brought a crew to Denver to interview Mary and her "boys" and the reliable Morgans were seen by millions of viewers.

Several of Mary's soldier students ended up purchasing and showing Morgans. David Trexler had two of the top Morgan cutting horses in the nation before he became manager for Bazy Tankersley's Al Marah Arabian ranch. Gary Bartlett and Jim Brunotte both became serious "heeler" ropers. Pruett Helm met his wife, Sherrill, at Circle J, and the two of them started Iron Forge Morgans, an extremely successful farm in Montana where they have raised many national champions. Mary introduced Larry Weight to Karin, and together they started West Mountain Morgans.

Mary was always modest about her program and said that all the accolades should go to her patients, but it was her enthusiasm and unlimited energy that started and sustained the project. More than 150 wounded men discovered that they could ride horseback and this made a profound difference in many lives.



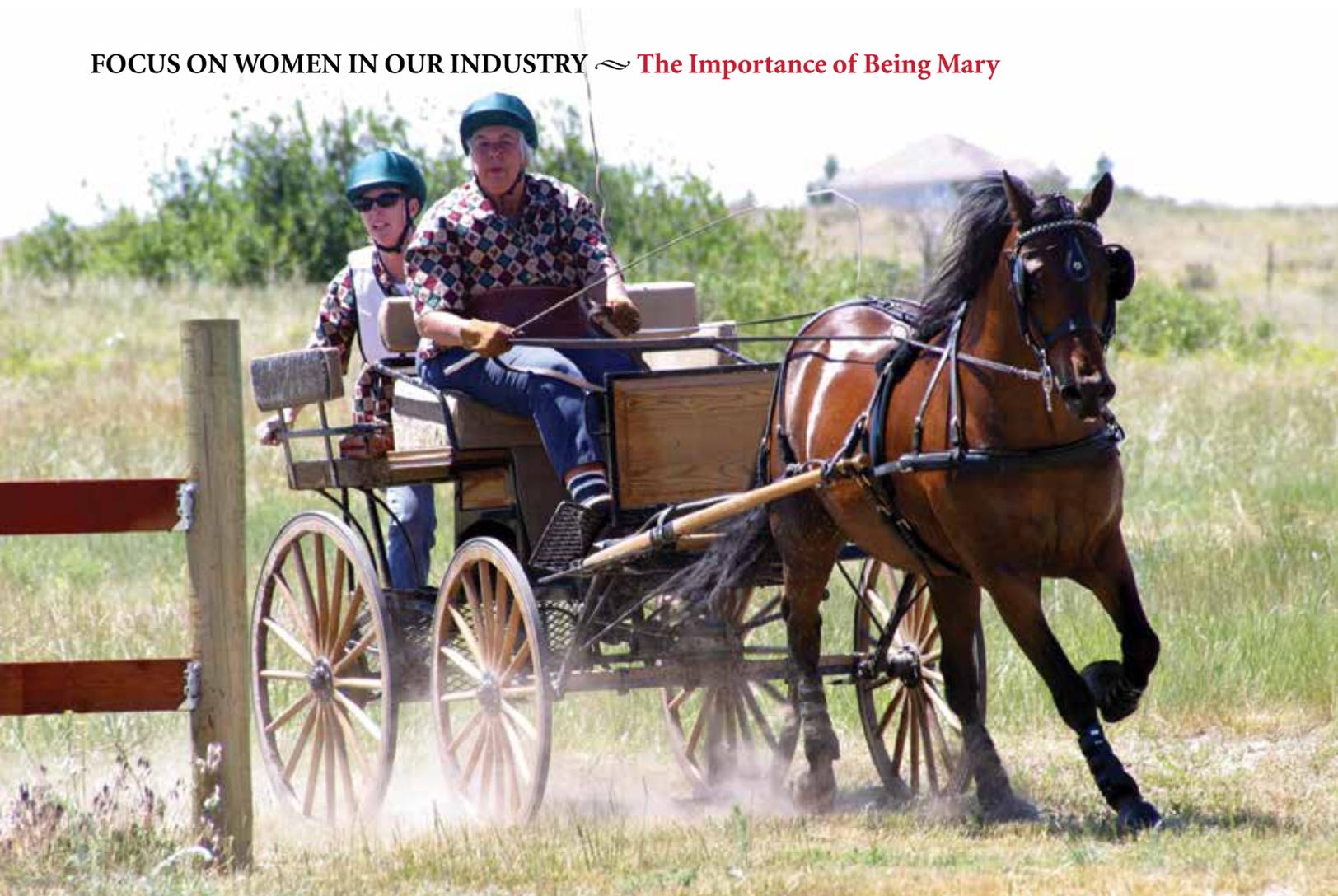
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Mary Woolverton and Victory's Air Born at a 2005 Combined Driving Event. Photo © Tom Massie

At the same time that Mary was riding Prince Of Pride, working full time at Fitzsimmons, giving her all to her soldiers, and expanding her Morgan farm, she was a charter member of the new Circle J Morgan Club, was instrumental in forming the Morgan Cutting Horse Association, served as a director and wrote the club newsletter, as well as occasional articles for *The Morgan Horse*. And somehow she found time to give free lessons to young girls in her neighborhood. Soon she found herself organizing the Victory Morgan Youth Club.

Formally organized in 1974, the club met each week at Mary's small farm in Littleton, Colorado, but many members, infected with enthusiasm for horses, came to the farm far more frequently. Starting out by learning safety, general horsemanship skills and appreciation for the Morgan breed, their education expanded rapidly. They worked on horsemanship badges, played Horse Bowl, practiced judging, and everyone learned to harness a horse and drive. Mary's patient black stallion, Great Hill Richmond (Green Meads Marauder x Orcland Victoria) and his son, Victory's Jamboree (out of Condo's Midnight Belle), spent hours on the lunge as club members learned vaulting. Members cleaned stalls and tack, participated in shows and parades, collected food and Christmas presents for needy families, worked with handicapped children and, for many years, the club was one of the most active

youth horse clubs in the nation. The club earned recognition from the AMHA for their newsletter and was awarded Youth Club of the Year nine times between 1981 and 1993. Several members showed successfully at Morgan Grand National and took part in the Youth of the Year competitions.

When Susan Lane was named AMHA Youth of the Year in 1980, she accorded much of her success with Morgans to Mary's mentoring. Susan served as AMHAY president in 1980-82. Lisa Bryant, who is still actively showing Morgans, also got her start with the Victory Morgan Youth Club, as did Amy Johnson, who won the AMHA Hunter Seat Over Fences Gold Medal the first year that it was offered. Susan Dumler, Suzanne Wolfe, Betsy (Viets) Wallen, and Victoria Book are just a few of the many successful young people who got their start with Mary's help and encouragement. And Mary didn't limit her work with youth to her local club, but also served as AMHA Chairman of the Youth Steering Committee and was instrumental in the management of the youth events at the Grand National & World Championship Morgan Horse Show® for decades. The AMHAY recognized her work in 1982 by naming her Youth Person of the Year.

After years of being actively involved with the Morgan breed, Mary was intensely aware of the great qualities of these horses. She was convinced without a doubt that this was the ideal breed

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Mary kept many pets, some of them rare. While she loved her zebra Ziggy, she recommends sticking with Morgans when it comes to driving.

for someone who appreciated horses with stamina, soundness, longevity, beauty, and wonderful dispositions. Morgans had given her so much, and she wanted to give back to the breed even more. She had a great deal of experience volunteering with the Circle J, and she expanded her volunteer efforts to become a director of the American Morgan Horse Association. She also earned her judge's card and started giving clinics and lectures on the Morgan breed throughout the world. She judged Morgan and open shows in Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia as well as throughout the United States.

In the meantime, Mary used her knowledge and experience to become active in riding for the disabled. She volunteered long hours working with children and adults in the National American Riding for Handicapped Association, now reorganized as the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) and is a past president of that organization. One of her horses, Leontine Linsley, was named Therapeutic Horse of the Year. "Lemonade" was another of Mary's versatile horses. Originally used as a pack horse in the high country, she became a champion cutting horse and competed in reining, competitive trail riding, Western pleasure, stock horse,

team penning, reining, dressage, English pleasure, gymkhana events and jumping; she was still giving youngsters lessons well into her 30s.

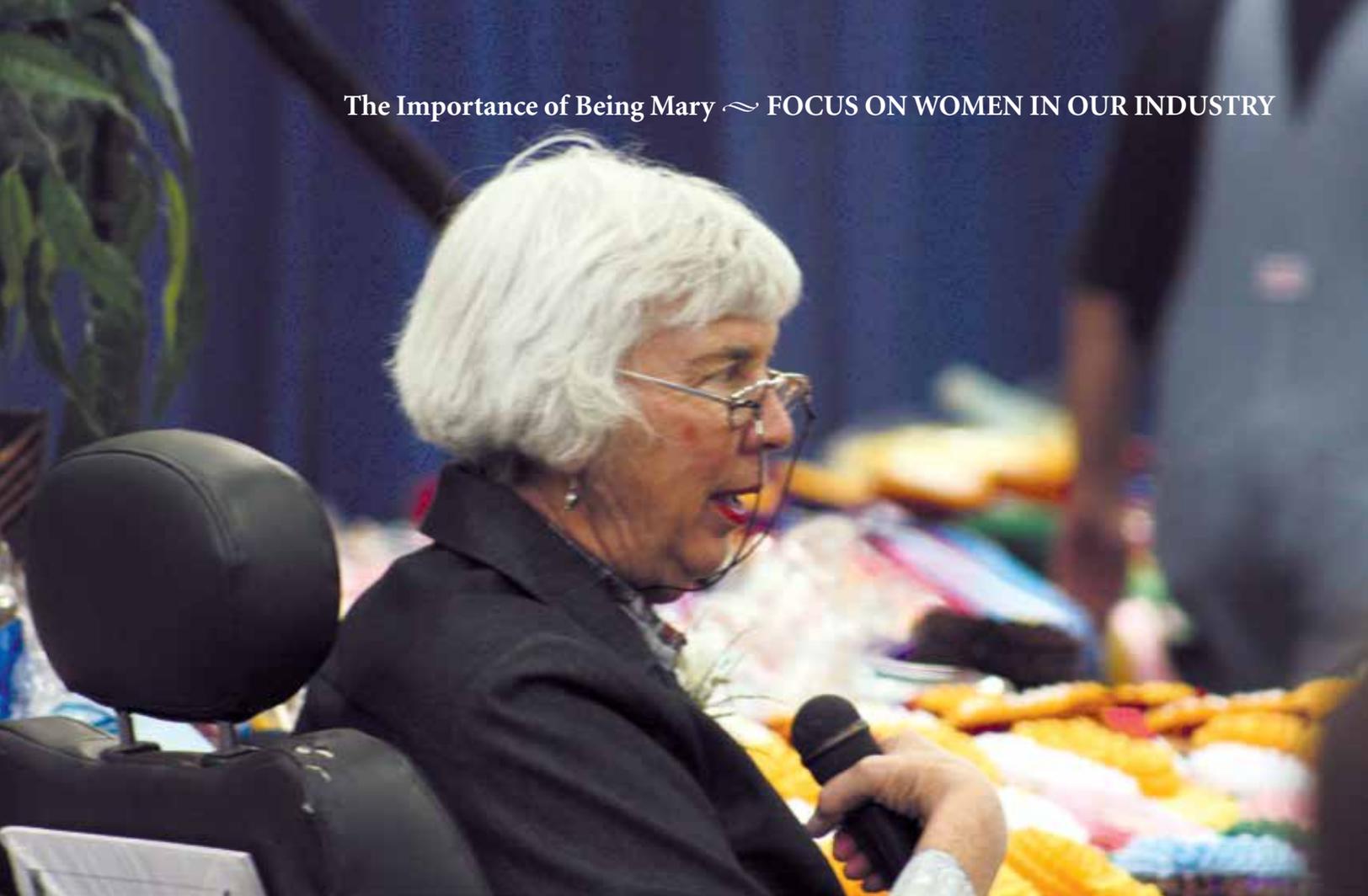
Mary's work with riding for the handicapped merged with her love of carriage driving. After moving to a larger facility in Elizabeth, Colorado, she hosted numerous driving events and clinics at her new farm. Jeff Morse of Green Meads came to clinic

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almost every year, and Cliff Swanson willingly gave his time and knowledge to Mary's driving projects. Mary became a PATH certified driving instructor and was chairman of the 1997 World Congress for Riders with Disabilities. She also served on the International Paralympic Committee that wrote the rules for paralympic equestrian competition. She traveled

throughout the world to give clinics and speak to groups about riding and driving for the disabled.

In later years Mary has suffered many physical trials and has herself become disabled. Although riding no longer was an option, her love for horses and the outdoors was still enabled by carriage driving, and she became particularly competitive with Victory's Air Born (HVK Port Au Prince by UVM Promise x Victory's Reverie by Gallant King). Then 27 years old, the typey



Mary's vast knowledge of all things equine have made her a valued presenter over the years.

bay spent his younger years as a reining horse, eventually adding hunter pleasure and classic English pleasure to his repertoire. But considering his bloodlines, it was no wonder that carriage driving was his forte; with Air Born in the traces, Mary qualified to represent the United States in Scotland in 2006 at the World Para-Equestrian Championships. Lacking funds and not wanting to stress her senior Morgan with the trip to Scotland, she competed with a borrowed horse and still was an exemplary representative for her country.

Decades of intense involvement with all aspects of breeding and showing, working closely with many trainers and spending 19 years on the AMHA Board of Directors has given Mary an intimate insider's view of the horses and people who have shaped the breed. After spending some time with her, even those who have been active in the breed for years are struck with her amazing first-hand knowledge of the Morgan breed.

Mary's original idea of breeding Condo and Upwey Ben Don bloodlines started with the Condo daughters Redwood Mollie and Condo's Midnight Belle, whom she bred to Great Hill's Richmond, an Upwey Ben Don grandson. She was always willing to breed to outside stallions when she felt that they would cross well with her mares. In 1993 she leased another Upwey Ben Don grandson, Saddleback Sealect, who had culminated his stellar show career with the Open Pleasure Driving World Championship. In order to promote him locally, she took him to the Continental Divide

Morgan Show, where he was named Grand Champion Stallion at the advanced age of 22. Morgans from Mary's breeding program have been especially successful in the sport horse disciplines. For instance many of the Morgans used by the Rockefeller family for their carriage pleasure driving were bred by and selected from Mary. In addition, Victory Morgans and their offspring are used in the show ring as well as in the sport horse arenas and as beloved backyard companions.

On a personal note, this writer's husband was one of Mary's "boys" at Fitzsimmons Hospital, and Mary introduced me to him. One of the most enjoyable aspects of writing this article was that it gave Larry and myself an excuse to make the trip to Mary's lovely Colorado ranch. The three of us spent two pleasant days catching up with Morgan news, sorting through old photos, reminiscing about Morgans and people, and just having the pleasure of being together with long-time friends.

The AMHA has honored Mary by naming her Woman of the Year in 1971, placing her in the AMHA Hall of Fame in 1994, and awarding her the Golden Reins in 2007. Much can be said about her awards and honors, but Jeff Morse summed up Mary's value to the breed very well when he wrote: "Most of all, I honor her for her unshakable belief in the value of preserving and improving the essential qualities of the Morgan breed: its soundness, versatility, beauty, and sanity as reflected in her breeding, judging, teaching and promotion of the breed." ■