



≈ HISTORY LESSON ≈

MORGANS IN EARLY WESTERN FILMS AND SHOWS, PART I

Tom Mix and his Horse Tony

By Brenda L. Tippin

The first half of the 20th century was a time of transition for the Morgan breed, as well as for America as a whole. During the silent movie era spanning 1894–1927, Westerns became exceedingly popular with several cowboy actors/singers gaining enduring fame. The horses they rode were also popular, and sometimes received equal billing with their human co-stars. In fact, many of these movie star horses were Morgans.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Tom Mix in *The West of Yesterday*; Lobby card from *The Circus Ace*, with Tom Mix and Tony the Wonder Horse; Tom Mix and Tony (courtesy of Tom Mix Museum).



ABOVE: Lobby cards featuring Tom Mix and Tony the Wonder Horse in *No Man's Gold* and *The Yankee Señor*.

TOM MIX AND TONY—MIX FAMILY HISTORY

Tom Mix was a descendant of the immigrant Thomas Mix, born in Middlesex, London, in 1623, who came to America as a young man in his early 20s, settling in New Haven, Connecticut. The original spelling of the name had been Meekes, but was shortened to Mix by Thomas. The Mix family continued in New Haven through several generations, and traced through the Reverend Amos Mix, born in 1759, who served in the Revolutionary War, fighting in several battles. Amos moved to Muskingum County, Ohio, and died there. His son James was the first to settle in Pennsylvania, where the small logging community of Mix Run was named after him.

Tom Mix was born January 6, 1880 on the Mix family property in Mix Run, Pennsylvania, to Edwin and Elizabeth Heistand Mix. His father was an expert horseman, and ran the stables for a wealthy lumber merchant, teaching Tom to love horses and ride at an early age. In 1898 he served in the Spanish-American war, then signed up for another three years when his first tour was done. However, while on furlough in 1902, he got married and never went back to the Army. In 1905, he rode in Teddy Roosevelt's inaugural parade with a group of 50 horsemen, including several former Rough Riders. He went to Oklahoma, and worked various jobs including serving for a while as Town Marshall of Dewey, Oklahoma. Eventually he found work on the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch near Ponca City, and appeared in their Wild West Show, quickly gaining recognition for his expert riding and shooting. He was also made an honorary Texas Ranger by the Governor of Texas.

TOM'S EARLY FILM CAREER

In 1909, Tom won a national riding and roping championship, and began appearing in silent movies for Selig Pictures, continuing with them until 1917 when he signed with Fox Pictures. Tom became America's first cowboy star, setting an ideal that Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and many others would follow. This cowboy ideal established by Mix called for a noble hero, always standing up

for right and truth—one who wore flashy outfits, demonstrated expert riding and shooting, and rode a beautiful horse who made him stand out and enabled his daring, harrowing escapes from the many dramatic predicaments he encountered. Altogether Tom starred in over 300 films, all but nine were silent movies.

Originally Tom began his film career with a horse named Old Blue, a blue roan of unknown breeding, but who likely carried some Morgan blood. Old Blue appeared with Tom through most of his Selig films, but as the horse began to age, Tom began to look for the right horse who would take his place. He found just what he was looking for in a horse owned and trained by well-known actor and horseman Pat Chrisman, who often took parts in his films. The year was 1917, and the horse named "Tony" was a sorrel, about five to seven years old, with a distinctive large diamond shaped star connecting to a long narrow blaze, small snip on the nose, and two white hind stockings. Tony soon became known as Tony the Wonder Horse, becoming the first movie horse to bear this designation, though many others would follow. There are different accounts of his origin, but according to Helen Brunk Greenwalt, he was foaled on the Sellman ranch and was a son of Headlight Morgan. Helen, among the most knowledgeable experts on Morgans in the history of the breed, wrote a letter to *The Morgan Horse*, published in the Feb-March-April 1943 issue, recalling seeing Tony when Tom exhibited him at Springfield, and the knots on his knees that had been broken in a fall while filming. Some old newspaper articles confused Tony with another son of Headlight Morgan who was also a well-known movie horse (to be discussed in a later part of this series) but these were two separate horses. Tony did bear a strong resemblance to Sellman breeding and to Headlight Morgan. At any rate, while most of the movies Tom Mix made with Tony were destroyed by a fire in 1937, a few of the early ones still exist. Tony's Morgan heritage is clearly evident in these films. He had been well-trained by Pat Chrisman who taught him numerous tricks, and Tom paid \$600 for the horse.

HISTORY LESSON ≈ *Tom Mix and his horse Tony*



**SCENES OF A
MOVIE STAR COWBOY
AND HIS MORGAN**

1 and 2. Tom Mix and Tony at the White House (Library of Congress); **3.** Tom and Tony in *Three Jumps Ahead* by Fox Film Corporation (public domain). **4.** Promotional photo featuring Tom and Tony crashing through a window, signed "from your friend Tom Mix" (Compliments of Ralston Wheat Cereal); **5.** Tom Mix and Tony (Library of Congress); **6.** Tom Mix and Tony from *The West of Yesterday*.

TONY THE WONDER HORSE

Tony first appeared in the 1917 movie, *The Heart of Texas Ryan*. This was originally based on the Zane Grey novel, *The Light of the Western Stars*. However, it was made without Grey's authorization, so the story was modified and the title changed. Later that same year, Tom and Tony signed a new contract with Fox Pictures, and Tom rose from a starting pay of \$350 per week to \$17,500 per week, a remarkable sum in that era. Both he and William Fox became millionaires due to his films. Tony quickly became nearly as popular and famous as Tom himself, partnering with him in dozens of films in which he was often listed as a co-star. Tom insisted on performing most of his stunts himself, and very often Tony did too. Other horses were used at times, but the original Tony truly was remarkable. He was about 15 hands tall, very deep-bodied and muscular, with the classic short back and very up-headed appearance. His neck was of good-length, well-crested, rising up from a powerful, sloping shoulder to a finely chiseled head of great beauty, large intelligent eyes, and short, sharp ears.

Dramatic scenes featured Tom and Tony jumping through glass windows, sliding and sometimes even rolling down precarious embankments, chasing trains, leaping across chasms, plunging into raging rivers, and much more. In acts of rescue Tom often pulled an additional rider up behind him while Tony tore on at a full gallop, seeming not in the least disturbed by the extra weight. During such getaway scenes he often made difficult jumps that would have been challenging carrying a single rider, let alone two. The movie *The Great K & A Train Robbery* is one of a handful featuring Tom and the original Tony which has been preserved and can still be seen on YouTube as the copyright is expired. It was filmed on location in the vicinity of Glenwood Spring, Colorado, and the scenic 12.5-mile-long Glenwood Canyon, which plunges 1,300 feet in places to the Colorado River. Early in the movie Tom, who is portraying an undercover detective hired to round up some train robbers by pretending to be one of them, is shown dangerously poised above the

canyon clinging to a rope which he has somehow attached to the high side of the canyon on one side, and Tony who is waiting patiently for him on the other side. He slides down the rope, landing conveniently in Tony's saddle in probably the first zip-line escape ever recorded, all the while shooting at the bandits. Tony manages to overtake the train while carrying both his master and the rescued heroine. He then has no problem keeping up with the train and following it for some distance while Tom takes care of business on the train, then is ready to carry him off again as soon as he is done. Later that night Tom sneaks into the home of the railroad president, instructing a friend to watch Tony, as the horse thinks he has to go wherever Tom does. Sure enough, after a time, Tony decides Tom has been in there long enough and must need help, and boldly trots up the steps and into the mansion to find him. He rescues Tom as well as the friend who was supposed to be watching him and couldn't stop him from going in after his master, and with both riders aboard makes a startling leap from an upper balcony into the swimming pool below.

Many such feats endeared Tony to the hearts of his fans. He was known for frequently stealing Tom's signature 10-gallon white hat in his teeth and running off with it, untying the knots if his master had been captured and tied up, or giving him a well-timed nudge to make him fall into the arms of the heroine.

THE GOLDEN AGE

The 1920s were the golden age for Tom and Tony. Tony was so popular he received his own fan mail and received co-star billing in nearly three dozen films. One letter arrived at the Mix ranch addressed to "Just Tony, Somewhere, USA". This inspired Fox to make a 1922 film called *Just Tony* in which the horse was the primary star. This was followed by *Oh, You Tony!* in 1924, and *Tony Runs Wild*, in 1926, both starring Tony. One of the most famous stunts said to be performed by Tom and Tony was from the movie *Three Jumps Ahead*, in which they are portrayed making a 20-foot leap across the 90-foot-deep chasm of Beale's Cut. Tom

TOM MIX'S HORSE A MORGAN

I'd like to run a half page ad in the MORGAN MAGAZINE and an enclosing check for twelve dollars (\$12.00). Also my 1943 subscription and a subscription to be mailed to—A C Roger Haney, Squadron H, Group 2, Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Ala.

Under separate cover you will find enclosed photographs of Flyhawk 7526—our senior stallion—and Betty Barr 05103 which I would like both printed in the ad as representative types of our breeding stock. Any suggestions you may have will be appreciated and I will be glad to take care of any other expense regarding the ad.

Also, enclosing pictures of pair of Morgan mares, hitched to sleigh—Ann Royal 05322 and Annabella 05444—winners of saddle and harness—as well as breeding classes in the Mid-West. Recently sold to Martin W Littleton, New York City.

Including some notes for publication if you care to use them. Did you read the article in December issue of *The Cattleman*—regarding the death of the late film actor, Tom Mix's famous horse Tony? It failed to mention that Tony was originally foaled at Richard Sellman's Ranch in Texas and was a son of Headlight Morgan. This would make good reading for THE

MORGAN HORSE MAGAZINE. If you don't have the article which is quite interesting, I'd be glad to clip it and mail it to you.

Some few years ago, Tom Mix, in connection with a circus, exhibited the original Tony here at Springfield, and I recall seeing him and noticed especially the knots on his knees that had been broken in a film scene.

We have had a very active Morgan year, sales have been numerous and profitable.

My brother, J. R. Brunk and I recently sold a group of seven head to Hector A. Pivotal, Guatemala, Central America—five stallions and two mares—included in the group are (from J. R. Brunk) Juzan, 8-year-old stallion; Tarron, 7-year stallion; Congo, 2-year stallion; McJoy, 4-year mare and a yearling mare. (From Helen Brunk Greenwalt) Flying Colors, yearling stallion by Flyhawk and Plains King 7684; 6-year stallion from L. U. Sheep Company, Worland, Wyo. The group has not been shipped yet on account of war conditions.

HELEN BRUNK GREENWALT

High View Farm, Pawnee, Ill.

HISTORY LESSON *≈ Tom Mix and his horse Tony*

insisted that he and Tony performed the jump themselves, not once, but five or six times to get it right for the camera. Tom was inclined to exaggerate his accomplishments, but when it came to his stunts, he really did perform most of them himself, and was injured more than 80 times. He suffered many broken bones, bullet and knife wounds, and once he and Tony both were badly injured by a dynamite explosion. Undoubtedly camera effects were also used to further dramatize such scenes. In the photo for the stunt of jumping Beale's Cut, the horse and rider appear much smaller in proportion to the chasm than they should be, to make the chasm look bigger and more daunting. However, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that Tom and Tony really did perform the stunt as Tom claimed, and even expert horse trainers admitted it was possible. The approach to the chasm is slightly downhill and a platform was built extending slightly over the edge ensuring that crumbling or slippery footing was not a concern. The record for a broad jump for a horse is 28 feet, a full eight feet further than this one, so Tony may well have been able to do it. Many experts believed Tom and Tony did the jump. Given Tom's personality, it seems likely that trials were done with stunt men and when they succeeded, he was impatient to do it himself. At any rate, viewers were always impressed with the Tom and Tony movies and they were hugely popular.

Meanwhile Tom built a 12-acre movie set, which he called Mixville, in Los Angeles. Many of the interior scenes of his shows were filmed here. During that same year, Tom met President Calvin Coolidge and his wife at a horse show while touring the East Coast. President Coolidge invited them all, including Tony, to visit the White House. In 1927, Tom Mix placed his handprints in the concrete outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and Tony's hoofprints were placed alongside them, making him the first horse to be honored with the Hollywood tradition. The highest paid actor in Hollywood during this period, reportedly earning more than \$6 million during his career, Tom nevertheless parted ways with Fox in 1928, and then made five more films for FBO. He was also a friend of the legendary Arizona lawman and gunfighter Wyatt Earp and served as pallbearer at his funeral when Earp died in January 1929.

END OF AN ERA

By this time, the silent movie era was coming to an end, with the first sound movies appearing in late 1927, and the transition being completed by the end of 1929. However, with the October 1929 stock market crash, Tom lost most of his fortune, as well as his Hollywood mansion and his Arizona ranch. Tom abandoned his film career and went back to work in Wild West shows for a time. In 1932, he returned to film work producing nine sound films for Universal and, finally, in 1935, a 15-episode serial called *The Miracle Rider*, which were his last films. In 1933, Ralston Purina obtained Tom's permission to produce a radio show, *The Tom Mix Ralston Straight Shooters*. Tom himself never appeared in these broadcasts as his voice had been damaged by a bullet to the throat, but the show continued to be popular into the 1950s, well after his death. Tom and Tony were also featured in numerous comic book series from about 1937 into the 1950s, well after both their deaths. Comics featuring Tom and Tony were also published in Sweden, Germany, Australia, Great Britain, and Canada.

TONY'S RETIREMENT, TONY JR

In 1932, when he was about 22 years old, Tony sustained a slight

injury to his hip during filming of *The Fourth Horseman* and had to be retired. Tom sent him to pasture at his 17-acre Arleta ranch in the San Fernando Valley of California where he was well-cared for. Tom found another horse in New York who resembled Tony, but with a wider blaze and four white stockings. He was officially called Tony Jr. but on film continued to represent Tony. At least two similarly marked horses were used during this final period, both likely having some Morgan blood, and continuing to perform similar stunts to the original Tony. A white horse was also used for public appearances, called Tony II. None of these reached the fame and popularity of the original Tony, however, who continued to receive fan mail.

DEATHS OF TOM MIX, AND OF TONY

Tom died on October 12, 1940, at the age of 60, when he lost control of his Cord Phaeton convertible in Arizona while driving at high speed and coming upon some unexpected construction. He hit an embankment and the car rolled into a wash, while a heavy aluminum suitcase came loose from the back of the car and struck him in the head, breaking his neck and killing him instantly. In obituaries across the country, Tony (the original) was considered so close to Tom he was listed as a survivor. He was also a beneficiary in Tom's will. Two years later, on the same date, Tony was euthanized due to the infirmities of old age, at 32 years old. Although Tony left no descendants in the Morgan breed, his contribution left a lasting influence, and helped to define the era of the American Cowboy hero in Western films which endured for decades. ■

RESOURCES

- Allbreed Pedigree, www.allbreedpedigree.com.
- American Morgan Horse Association, "Online Morgan Registry," <http://services.morganhorse.com/PortalTools/HorseRegistry/Index.cfm>
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This is the first in a series of history articles by Brenda Tippin about Morgans in early Western movies.