

≈ HISTORY LESSON ≈

MORGANS IN EARLY WESTERN FILMS AND SHOWS, PART V

Anndy Pershing—Wild Bill Elliott and Allan Rocky Lane

By Brenda L. Tippin

The story of Anndy Pershing is unique among Morgans who starred in Western movies. A registered stallion who still has many descendants surviving in the breed today, he played starring roles for two different cowboys: “Thunder” for Wild Bill Elliott, and “Black Jack” for Allan Rocky Lane.

“WILD BILL” ELLIOTT

“Wild Bill” Elliott was born Gordon Nance in 1904, to Leroy Whitfield Nance and Maude Aldridge, on a ranch near Pattonsburg, Missouri. The Nance family traced back to the early settlers of Virginia. Leroy Nance was a cattle rancher and broker who worked as a commissioner at the Kansas City stockyards. Gordon began riding at the young age of five and became highly skilled in roping, bulldogging, and bronc riding. He won a rodeo contest at the Kansas City annual American Royal Horse and Livestock Show at the age of 16. After attending

Rockhurst College for a while he traveled to California hoping to pursue a career in acting. He made his first Western movie, *The Arizona Wildcat*, in 1927, and renamed himself Gordon Elliott. He married his first wife, Helen Josephine Meyers, in February of that year and they had one daughter, Barbara Helen. Over the next eight years, he appeared in more than 100 films, but mostly in small parts. He worked with Gene Autry in *Boots and Saddles* in 1937 and in 1938 Columbia Pictures offered him the leading role in *The Great Adventures of Wild Bill Hickock*. This was so successful he was thereafter known as

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Anndy Pershing as “Thunder” with Wild Bill Elliott; Anndy Pershing as “Black Jack” with Allan Rocky Lane (AMHA Archives).

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“Wild Bill” Elliot, and he remained among Motion Picture Herald’s top 10 cowboy stars for the next 15 years. In 1945, he made a cameo appearance in the Roy Rogers movie *Bells of Rosarita*.

In 1944, Bill went to Republic Pictures and starred in a 16-movie series of Red Ryder, based on the popular comic strip created by Fred Harman. In this series he rode the striking, black Morgan stallion “Thunder,” played by the registered Morgan Anndy Pershing, whom Bill purchased for the role.

Wild Bill was claimed by some sources to be a breeder of Appaloosas and by others a breeder of Quarter Horses and Paints. However, he was always a great supporter of the Morgan horse, and was often mentioned in the pages of *The Morgan Horse* magazine. In 1944 he was interviewed for an article titled “The Big Little Horse That Couldn’t Be Forgotten,” by Orris C. Foster and J. Earle Dawley, which was first published in *Equestrian’s* November 1944 issue followed by the November 1944 issue of *The Morgan Horse*. The authors asked him, “Why did you choose Morgans for your motion picture work?” Wild Bill’s response was prompt and simple. “The answer to that question is ‘intelligence’—I mean for the horse. Morgans have intelligence, pride, poise, and gentleness. They know what is going on and no foolishness. I’ve done a great number of pictures with my Morgans—Thunder and Hedlite’s Sonny Boy. They have never failed me. You know, in making Western ‘horse operas’ there is fast action and quick getaways. If you come rattling down a shingled roof, and have to make an eight-foot leap from the roof to your horse and into the saddle, that horse must be at the exact spot you expect him to be, at the right second, and no matter how much gunfire is going on around him. A Morgan horse does not lose his head. Yes, I’d pick a Morgan horse every time for picture work.”

In summing up his thoughts, Wild Bill also had this to say, which certainly leaves no doubt about his opinion of Morgans: “If I could only afford one horse—I would buy a Morgan. He is the one great, one-purpose horse in America. He is gentle with children; you can drive him to church with pride. He will tackle a plow, round up your cattle, win races, and make a grand showing at a fair. Yes, Morgans for mine every time.”

Wild Bill went on to substitute for famous actor Randolph Scott in the popular movie *Old Sacramento*, later re-issued as *Flame of Sacramento*, and took honors alongside Roy Rogers as the favorite cowboy actor of 1946. Wild Bill continued acting into the 1950s, making his last Western movie, *The Forty-Niners*, in 1954. He retired from motion pictures at age 53 and moved to a ranch near Las Vegas in 1957, raising horses and cattle there as well as at his other ranch near Calabasas, California. He also developed his hobbies of collecting Western memorabilia and studying geology. During this time he was employed as the national spokesperson for Viceroy cigarettes. Sadly, this would be his undoing. He died of lung cancer in 1965.

ALLAN “ROCKY” LANE

Allan “Rocky” Lane was born Harry Leonard Albershardt in Mishawaka, Indiana, in 1909, to parents William H. Albershardt and Linnie Anne Dayhuff. His grandfather, Herman Albershardt, immigrated from Prussia to Ohio around the time of the Civil War and his father was born in Cincinnati in 1876. His parents were married in St. Joseph, Indiana, in 1903. Lane grew up in Grand

Rapids, Michigan, and attended the University of Notre Dame where he played varsity baseball, football, and basketball. His true interest, however, was acting and he had worked as a model, photographer, and stage actor by the age of 20. He was spotted by talent scouts for Fox Film Corporation and offered a contract. He dropped out of the university to pursue his acting interests, and played supporting roles into the early 1930s, including one in the Shirley Temple film, *The Stowaway*. He starred in *The Law West of Tombstone* in 1938 and went on to star in several Royal Mounted Police films during the early 1940s before taking over for Wild Bill Elliot in the role of Red Ryder in 1946. He also purchased Wild Bill’s horse, thus Anndy Pershing, who played Thunder for Wild Bill, became “Black Jack” for Rocky Lane, as he was thereafter known in Western movies.

Over the next 16 years, Rocky Lane made 82 movie and television appearances, mostly in Westerns. Thirty of these were B-Western movies made between 1947 and 1953 with his horse Black Jack. From 1961 to 1966, Lane became the voice for the popular talking TV horse, Mr. Ed. Mr. Ed was a Saddlebred cross named Bamboo Harvester who carried many Morgan lines back to Tom Hal, Copperbottom, Davy Crockett, Black Hawk, Indian Chief, Gifford, and more. Interestingly, Rocky Lane felt that this voice-over work was a comedown from his previous acting roles and refused billing on the show, but it ended up being one of his most popular roles. Altogether he appeared in more than 125 movies and television shows during his career which lasted from 1929 to 1966. He was diagnosed with cancer in 1974 and died six weeks later at the age of 64.

ANNDY PERSHING

(General Pershing x Ann Bartlett by Barney Hudson)

Anndy Pershing bears a unique role among the Morgans who found work as early Western movie horses. Not only was he a registered Morgan but he maintained his connection with the Morgan world and stood for stud all during his acting career. He sired 11 registered offspring, and still has active descendants living today. A coal black stallion bred by C. G. Stevenson and foaled in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1940, Anndy Pershing was a son of General Pershing (Successful x Black Dolly by Morgan King). This rather rare line was also unusual in that the direct sireline carried straight back to the Hawkins Horse, son of Justin Morgan—meaning at least four direct sirelines to Justin Morgan were carried forward with the unbroken male line to Hawkins Horse surviving into the 1970s. Most Morgan histories credit only the three best known sons of Justin Morgan—Sherman, Bulrush, and Woodbury—giving only minor mention of two or three of the others. The Bulrush sireline became extinct in the 1990s, but the line to Hawkins Horse through Anndy Pershing survived almost as long, although practically no one was aware of it.

General Pershing was a large black stallion standing 15¾ hands tall and foaled in Iowa in 1930. His grandsire was the J. C. Brunk bred St L (Rancho x Ben’s Daisy by Ben Franklin), and the sireline continued back through the famous old Canadian trotter St. Lawrence. Ben’s Daisy was J. C. Brunk’s famous old mare that he took to the 1910 Vermont State Fair when she was 19 years old. There she won the 15-mile trotting race, her time well under the allotted hour and more than a mile and a quarter in the lead. General Pershing’s pedigree also concentrated several uncommon lines, tracing back

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LEFT TO RIGHT: Anndy Pershing as Black Jack with Allan Rocky Lane (AMHA Archives); Anndy's Sky Boy (Anndy Pershing x Dollygirl by Hedlite) (*TMH* February 1949); Red Ryder comic strip artist Fred Harman.

to the handsome black son of Gifford, Gifford Morgan Jr, and numerous crosses to Illinois Black Hawk, son of Black Hawk.

Ann Bartlett, the dam of Anndy Pershing, was a daughter of Barney Hudson, who traced his sireline back through King Herod, son of Sherman Black Hawk, and also had additional lines to the Hawkins Horse, Billy Root, Hale's Green Mountain, and Morrill. His second dam was Miga, a daughter of Winterset, closely related to the lines used by Clark Ringling (*see feature in this issue, page 56*), being a full sister in blood to his stallion Royce (Winterset x Potena) and to Midnight Beauty, the dam of his last stallion, Black Winter. His third dam, Cola (Morgan Star x Hebrona Morgan) was a full sister of Potena.

Anndy Pershing was first sold by his breeder as a yearling in 1941 to Roland Hill's Horsehoe Cattle Company in Gustine, California. A year later, he was purchased by Mrs. Anna K. Zeitler of Santa Cruz, California. She bred three foals from him, the mare Anndy's Rose (x Rosella), Anndy's General (x Kitty Q), and Anndy's Sky Boy (x Dollygirl). (Note: The online database lists these horses as Anndy Rose, Anndy General, and Anndy Sky Boy, but the spelling "Anndy's" is shown in the hard copy of *Morgan Horse Register* Volume VI). None of these bred on.

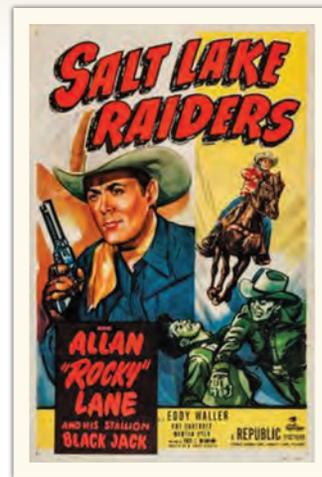
Anna Zeitler wrote to *The Morgan Horse* in February 1945, saying in reference to the November 1944 issue, "As a Morgan breeder and lover of Morgans, I was interested when I came to page 14, 'The Big Little Horse That Couldn't Be Forgotten' by Orris C. Foster and J. Earle Dawley. The horse mentioned, Anndy Pershing, was the stallion I owned at one time and his get is worth telling about as they show his breeding and beauty. The other one mentioned, Hedlite's Sonny Boy, is a half-brother to my mare, Dolly Girl, who had a fine stud colt by Anndy. I am just like Mr. Elliott. If I can afford one horse, it would be a Morgan!"

The next year, in 1943, Mrs. Zeitler sold Anndy Pershing to the Berman Stock Company in Pacoima, California. Wild Bill bought him from the Berman Stock Company in December of that year. During his time with Wild Bill, Anndy Pershing became immensely popular in his role as Thunder for the Red Ryder series. He sired no foals during this period and Wild Bill sold him to Rocky Lane in February 1946.

Anndy Pershing's next foal was the mare Rita Pershing (x Senorita Morgan) bred by Merle Little and foaled in 1949. Rita won the yearling fillies' class at the Riverside California Show, as well as Champion Yearling Mare at the Imperial County Fair in 1950. Merle sold her to R. E. Adelmeyer of Honolulu, Hawaii, to be shipped there after the San Fernando Fair that year, for his young daughter Judy. In the August 1951 issue of *The Morgan Horse*, Judy wrote, "Last year my father and mother took me on a vacation trip up in Wyoming on a ranch where we did a lot of horseback riding. I like horses and riding very much so my father said he would get me a horse to take back to our home in Honolulu. While in southern California, we visited El Rancho Poco and Merle Little had a filly that I fell in love with. Rita Pershing was born at El Rancho Poco and her sire is of motion picture fame known as Black Jack, whose owner is Rocky Allen and with Republic Pictures. The dam is a beautiful mare and is owned by Mr. Little... Rita has just been broken to ride and she is a lovely saddle horse... There are no other registered Morgans on the island that I know of although we have several large cattle ranches here where they do use cattle horses and they may have Morgan strains in them...I am now 11 years old and have ridden off and on ever since I was seven and a horse is my favorite animal, especially Rita." Rita produced one foal, Sun Down's Sun, by Sun Down Morgan, but he did not breed on.

Anndy Pershing's next foal was the mare Poco Sebrena (x Betty Joaquin), also bred by Merle Little, foaled in 1956. She had no offspring. A gelding, Chief Storme, out of the mare Ojo De Fantina, was also bred that year by Paul Koch of Duarte, California.

In 1957, Poco's Red Head (x Charrita) was foaled, bred by Merle Little, and left no offspring. (Note: The mare is recorded as Poco Red Head in the online database and Poco's in hard copy *Morgan Horse Register*, Volume VIII). Anita Joaquin, also bred by Merle Little and again out of Senorita Morgan, was foaled the same year. She was the dam of four foals, three mares, and one gelding. One of these, the mare Esther Joaquin (x Rex's Major Monte) did breed on, and was the dam of nine foals. There are several descendants surviving today through this line, in both the United States and Canada, including some from the Sun-West prefix, and a couple of mares bred by Jo



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Rita Pershing (*TMH* August 1951); George Knapp and Orron (Anndy Pershing x Almond Joy), Big Bear Lake, California Hesperia Trail Ride (*TMH* April 1962); Salt Lake Raiders movie poster, starring Allan Rocky Lane and Anndy Pershing as Black Jack, 1950.

Johnson of JAF Morgans—JAF Diamante Del Mar and JAF Mariposa Del Mar, full sisters (JAF Sunrise Surfer Dude x Sun-West Diamond Tiara) are examples. The stallion Poco's Ace Of Spades (x Betty Joaquin), also bred by Merle Little, was foaled in 1957 and was the sire of seven foals and has numerous descendants, especially through his daughter Poco's Queen (x Julie Bell Gift), who was the dam of six foals, including the stallion Gays Cinco De Mayo (x Moro Hill Gay Ethan), sire of 58 foals. A very few descendants survive through his daughter Velvet Lady (x Julie Bell Gift), also foaled in 1957 and bred by Merle Little. His last foal was the stallion Orron (x Almond Joy) bred by Ronald Cronk and Orval G. Smith, foaled in 1957. Orron was the sire of 31 foals and a number of descendants also survive from these lines. In 1962, Orron, ridden by George Knapp, participated in the Hesperia Trail Ride which was under the sponsorship of Region 11 of the California State Horsemen's Association. It was the first competitive trail ride in southern California under the North American Trail Ride Conference and the first Class C (one-day) NATRC ride to be held anywhere. The ride was held in mid-January of that year in Hesperia, a high-desert resort community on the northern slopes of the San Bernardino Mountains. Thirty-seven horses were registered for the competition, of which seven were registered Morgans and six were half Morgans. Sixty-three additional horses also participated in the non-competitive group, with at least five additional Morgans in this category. The 25-mile ride involved 10 miles of deep sand in the Mojave River bottom and several steep climbs to elevations ranging from 4,000–6,500 feet, as well as lots of up and down work in the juniper covered foothills.

Several of the Red Ryder movies with Wild Bill Elliott and Anndy Pershing starring as Thunder are available on YouTube. Among these are *Red Ryder—The San Antonio Kid*, 1944; *Red Ryder—Great Stagecoach Robbery*, 1945; and *Red Ryder—Phantom of the Plains*, 1945. Many of Rocky Lane's movies starring Black Jack can be seen on YouTube, including *The Denver Kid*, 1948; *The Wyoming Bandit*, 1949; *Salt Lake Raiders*, 1950; *Night Riders of Montana*, 1951; *Marshall of Cedar Rock*, 1953, and several others. Rocky Lane's last B-Western movie starring Anndy Pershing as Black Jack was the movie *El Paso Stampede* in 1953, in which they

must overcome a plot of cattle rustlers.

Anndy Pershing was also featured as Thunder in the Red Ryder comic strip created by Stephen Slesinger and artist Fred Harman. Harman was widely recognized as one of the truly great Western pen-and-ink artists. Wild Bill played the character Red, a tough cowboy mounted on his mighty black stallion Thunder, always racing to win out against gangsters, cattle rustlers, and other bad characters. Red and Thunder lived during the 1890s in the Blanco Basin of the San Juan Mountain Range on the Painted Valley Ranch. The comic strip was published in hundreds of newspapers.

A remarkable ambassador for the breed, Anndy Pershing left a great legacy for the Morgan breed in working with both his cowboy actors that would be enjoyed and remembered by fans for many years, and his rare bloodlines also continue to live on in many descendants. ■

RESOURCES

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