



Morgans in the Mountains

By Denny Emerson

Since its inception in 1936, the 100-mile competitive trail ride at the Green Mountain Horse Association (GMHA) in South Woodstock, Vermont, has been a testing ground for Morgan horses.

In 2023, the lightweight division was won by the registered Morgan High Brook Tiger Lily, ridden by Debbie Keenan. The middleweight division was won by another registered Morgan, Baymount's Lorenzo, ridden by Jenny Kimberly, and the heavy-weight division was won by a part Morgan.

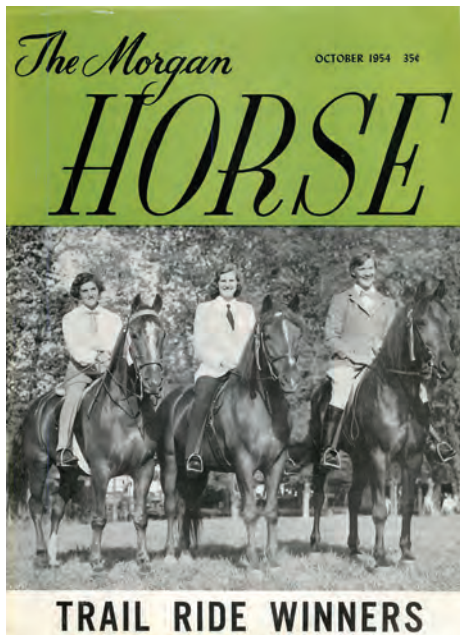
If ever there was a case of the veteran and the rookie, Jenny and Debbie exemplify that in dramatic terms. Jenny Kimberly has done 40, 100-mile trail rides, has more than 11,000 miles of

competitive and endurance distance riding, 4,000 miles of distance driving, and has won any number of rides in her long and hugely successful career.

By comparison, this event was Debbie Keenan's first 100-mile ride, and her total number of miles in distance riding competition is fewer than 1,000. Debbie's lack of experience, however, was largely compensated for by the fact that she'd placed herself under the tutelage of Sue and Dan Boyer, local long distance riding legends.

What Jenny and Debbie had in common, though, were two rugged Morgan trail horses. A tough horse is a necessity when you are tackling the steep terrain in and around South Woodstock, Vermont.

ABOVE: Contemporary Morgan winners of the Green Mountain Horse Association 100-Mile Rides include (top left) 2023 Lightweight Division Champion High Brook Tiger Lily and Debbie Keenan; (top right) 2023 Middleweight Division Champion Baymount's Lorenzo and Jenny Kimberly (photo © Nick Goldsmith); (bottom right) Lisanne Dorion and the 2010 Trail Horse of the Year, Nation's Glory; and (bottom middle) the 2018 sweepstakes trophy winner Aikane's Sunflower and Robin McGrath (photo © Nick Goldsmith).



LEFT TO RIGHT: The author, Denny Emerson, competing in the 1957 GMHA Ride with Lippitt Sandy; The October 1954 cover of *The Morgan Horse* that inspired him; This 1946 photo of Lippitt Morman and Wilfred LeBoeuf is engraved on the Grand Championship tray awarded to this day (photo © Ira Haas).

The GMHA 100 is a hard test. Many veteran endurance riders consider it the most difficult three-day, 100-mile trail ride in the United States. The 40-mile loops performed during the first and second days must each be done within seven hours and the third day's loop of 20 miles must be completed in three hours.

At the initial veterinary inspection each horse is carefully evaluated and any deterioration in condition over the next three days will result in penalty points; the top horses are those with the fewest points deducted.

Back in the day, before the internal combustion engine, Morgan horses had little need of specific tests designed to see if they were sound, tough, willing, and generous. Daily life on the farm, in the army, on the trotting tracks, and on the ranch provided all that and more. It was Darwinism in action and only the strong prevailed. Gasoline-powered vehicles took over from horses right around the beginning of the 20th century. By the late 1920s and into the mid 1930s, horses that had been used by humans as part of the economic fabric had either disappeared or they became horses used for showing and for sport.

Morgan owners who valued the virtues that had created the Morgan breed over its first 125 years of existence needed to find new ways to replicate what had been simply the rigors of normal utility. The timing of the first GMHA ride was ideal because by 1936 the old ways were mostly gone. Traits that are less necessary become traits that breeders no longer emphasize, and some of the fundamentals of the breed might have become irrelevant.

But right from the start of the GMHA 100-mile trail ride Morgans proved they still had the right stuff. I have some old

GMHA magazines from the 1930s and 1940s that are full of references to Morgans and photos of Morgans on the trail.

There are so many iconic names, both of horses and the breeders who rode them. Dr. Clarence Parks won the GMHA ride on Lippitt Miss Nekomia and then, in a feat almost surreal, won the ride 44 years later with a great granddaughter of that original mare.

Other major Morgan notables, such as Dr. Robert Orcutt, Nancy Ela, Ruth Orcutt, and Pat Tataronis, used the GMHA 100 as a testing ground. The standing joke was that one weekend they'd beat you in the show ring and the next weekend they'd beat you out on the trails.

There's a big silver plate awarded each year to the sweepstakes winner, the highest placed horse of all divisions, and engraved upon it is a photo of the Morgan stallion Lippitt Morman and Wilfred A. LeBoeuf, champions of the 1946 ride.

In 1954, I was inspired by a cover of *The Morgan Horse* magazine featuring three winning Morgans, Quorum, Arkomia, and Soneldon. In 1957 and 1958 I rode Lippitt Sandy at the GMHA 100, and in 1959 I rode Lippitt Rebecca there for Robert Lippitt Knight. Then, in 1962, I completed the ride on my father's driving Morgan, Miller Commander.

As you go along the trail, every ten miles you see a "Miles to Go" marker and a number. Also known as confidence markers, they inform you how close you are to the finish. I was kneeling on the stall floor rubbing Lippitt Sandy's legs at the conclusion of the 1957 ride when Robert Frost looked over the stall door at me in one of those never-to-be-forgotten moments. It only occurred to me years later that "And miles to go before I sleep," Frost's most



Scenes from past Green Mountain Horse Association 100-mile rides.



Morgan horses and Morgan people have long participated in the “crown jewel” of competitive distance riding. Some include (clockwise from top left) Pat Tataronis & Burkland Sharalyn; (left to right) Ruth Orcutt on Townshend Lady Sensation, Roy Hall on Windcrest’s Delight, and Jane Clark on an Ulendon son; Lippitt Miss Nekomia (shown here with Dr. C. D. Parks & his wife), competed many times (photo © Warren Patriquin).

iconic line from his famous poem, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” must be the source for the ten-mile markers.

For a few years it looked as though purebred Arabians would take over and dominate all types of distance riding. Their lighter frames expel excess heat more readily and their easy way of moving is efficient with no wasted motion.

But Morgans have clawed their way back. In 2010, Lisanne Dorion’s Nation’s Glory was the GMHA Trail Horse of the Year. In 2018, Robin McGrath and her Aikane’s Sunflower won the Wilfred LeBoeuf Memorial Sweepstakes Trophy as overall grand champion of the event. And of course, just now in 2023, two of the three divisions were won by Morgans.

Here is something worthy of reflection as we look at the long history of Morgan horses and Vermont mountains. The very first Morgan horse to travel over 100 miles of rugged Vermont

terrain—even before Vermont became the 14th state—was also the very first Morgan horse.

In 1790, Justin Morgan and little Figure traveled from West Springfield, Massachusetts, to Randolph Center, Vermont. We think they followed the west side of the Connecticut River about where Route 5 and Interstate 91 run today. From the point where they crossed the line from Bernardston, Massachusetts, into Guilford, Vermont, is a trip of almost exactly 100 miles to Randolph Center.

There are many ways in current times to demonstrate that the modern Morgan retains the classic breed traits of earlier days, but if you have ever ridden for 100 miles over the peaks and valleys where Figure and his sons and daughters once lived and worked, you will swiftly appreciate how tough and game the modern Morgan horse you sit on has to be, just the same today as when Figure first showed the way. ■



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