

Trail Riding

By Denny Emerson

I read about a prisoner of war who kept his sanity through years of captivity by constructing a hidden time and place in memory to which he could escape. His captors could control his body but not his mind. Most of us have such a refuge. William Butler Yeats wrote about this phenomenon in the poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.”

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there,
for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer,
and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always
night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low
sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or
on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

I didn’t go to an island. I had a Morgan horse. One summer afternoon in 1959, when I was conditioning Mr. Robert Lippitt Knight’s Morgan mare, Lippitt Rebecca, for the Green Mountain Horse Association’s 100-mile trail ride, I had ridden from my parents’ farm in South Reading, Vermont, eight miles over toward Cavendish. As dusk began to fall we were a mile from home, climbing the long hill by Mrs. Derby’s farm.

Rebecca was eager for supper, marching resolutely up the narrow dirt road. We passed a spot where I could see range after range of mountains, like blunted shark’s teeth stretching far to the horizon. From one hillside pasture I could hear the bleating of sheep and from another, more faintly, the tonk-tonk of distant cowbells. Birds were flying to nest, and huge cumulus clouds, tipped golden by the setting sun, were massed overhead.

If I had to choose just one “Lake Isle” moment, it would be that place, that moment. Part of the intensity, I am sure, was because I was 17, and it felt as though I had the entire world stretched out before me.

But there have been many other times in the years since that day that Morgans have taken me to places that are rarely seen unless we have some means of getting off the traveled roads. I remember them as a kaleidoscope of shapes, sizes, and colors, deep red (Lippitt) chestnut, light chestnut, dark brown, bright bay, 14.2 hands to 15.3, Lippitt Sandy, Lippitt Rebecca, Lippitt Raymond, Miller Commander, Taproot Flag Ship, Canequin ReachForTheStars, High Brook Rockstar, Catch A Cloud, DRF All Eyes On Me, Winding Up.

There are all sorts of ways to ride off the grid. Some people like endurance riding, and have brought Morgans to pinnacles of the sport, like the Tevis Cup. Others prefer competitive trail rides, a test of conditioning where Morgans are tops. My very first interest in trail riding was triggered by seeing a cover of *The Morgan Horse* from October 1954 showing the three division winners, all Morgans, at the GMHA 100-mile trail ride. Three years later I rode Lippitt Sandy on that ride. Before the final veterinary inspection, I was on my knees rubbing Sandy’s legs and I realized that someone was standing above me in the door opening, watching what I was doing. I looked up and saw a face silhouetted by a mane of white hair and instantly recognized



A man, a Morgan, and nature. Denny Emerson on one of his frequent trail rides on the mare who has become a favorite, Catch A Cloud.

Robert Frost. I was too shy to say anything, and after a moment, he walked away.

For every rider or driver who competes in distance rides, many more do it for fun, and when someone has a game, tough, sound little Morgan it is as if they have stepped out of The Beatles’ song, “Ticket To Ride.” A ticket to ride into the back of beyond, on green meadows, hard bedrock, through mud and snow, over mountains, down canyons, all the places the trail may lead. Morgans are born for that; they are the original American all-terrain vehicles, with pricked ears and a sense of adventure.

Those golden adventures might be in your own backyard, as they were for me. If you live in a city, town, or suburb you may have to trailer out but once you are road tripping the sky’s the limit. Want to ride on a New Zealand beach? In the Rockies, herding cattle? In the English Dales? Go do it. And all you have to do is saddle up, climb aboard, and head out to discover your own personal Isle of Innisfree, in whatever form it may take. Just follow those bright little ears. ■