



“The National”—Then and Now

Today it's called New England. But years ago, before we had Grand National, the July fixture at the Three County Fairgrounds in Northampton, Massachusetts, was the biggest gathering of the Morgan horse world. If we could travel back in time, 65 or 70 years ago, what would be different and what would be familiar?

In 1953, my first visit at age 11, the show setup was more like that of a country fair. The big old grandstand was the place from which we watched. There was a competition ring with white fencing directly in front of the grandstand, and a half-mile racetrack circled the grounds. There were rows of open-fronted wooden stables on the opposite side from the grandstand, primitive by modern standards. Exhibitors pulled their vehicles up to the fence to watch. Today there are new barns, box seating, multiple rings for all the disciplines, and an upscale restaurant under a tent.

In those days, there were far fewer big professional trainer barns with multiple clients. The larger breeding farms were the mainstay of the Morgan industry in its infancy. In 2022, when we look at our horses's pedigrees we see the names of the horses that my generation watched back then. My most distinct memories: Ted Davis of Windcrest Farm winning the half-mile trotting race in harness with Upwey Ben Don, before winning the get of sire class with the same stallion; J. Cecil Ferguson's Broadwall Farm contingent, led by the massively crested stallion Parade; John Lydon winning every park class with Waseeka's Nocturne; Nancy Ela on so many Townshend Farm entries; The dominant Orcutt family—Dr. Bob, cousin Lyman, and his wife, Ruth (who was Anna Ela's sister); And all the prefixes on champions of the day: Townshend,

Orcland, Green Meads, Burkland, Wind-Crest, Saddleback, and Gladgay, to name a few.

One entire segment of Morgan breeding was generically called “Government.” Four of the six New England states had Morgan breeding programs at the state university level. The U-Mass Amherst-bred Morgans had Bay State as a prefix. There were university-bred Morgans with UVM, UNH, and U-Conn prefixes. The state programs were all present at the show, exhibiting their specific variation on the Government lines to Bennington, whether through Mansfield, Canfield, Panfield, or Ulysses. There were even two stallions, U S Panez and U S Menmar, who were the last survivors of the old U. S. Army Remount program.



By Denny Emerson
(with Lippitt Sandy, 1957)

I worked three summers for Robert Lippitt Knight (the last three years of his life), from 1959 through 1961. Many believed that Mr. Knight had been somewhat reluctantly dragged into the show scene, but he seemed the happiest I ever saw him when he was in Northampton, surrounded by such friends as Dean Davis (who later became Vermont's Governor), Gaius Blackmer, and Cecil Ferguson, all of them laughing and (mildly) carousing at cocktail hour in front of the bright yellow tack room with Green Mountain Stock Farm inscribed in black lettering across the doorway.

Those old school professionals were one tough bunch. They were hard boiled and unapologetically competitive. In one class, John Lydon's daughter, Ginny, took first, beating her father. As a young man, I made the mistake of assuming that since she was his own child John would be happy with Ginny's win. I said something like, “I thought she deserved first place.” John glared at me and

ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT): Seeing Upwey Ben Don (Upwey King Ben x Quietude) and Ted Davis on the racetrack is one of Denny Emerson's earliest memories from Northampton; UVM Cantor (Tutor x Sugar), pictured in 1961, with his high set, elegant neck, would not look out of place today; English Pleasure has changed a lot. The unbeatable Lady Roxanna (Vigilendon x Roxette) with Jane Rauscher Elliott up, 1967. (photos © Freudy, W. Patriquin)



LEFT TO RIGHT: Women like Pat Tataronis (on Command Performance), Nancy [Ela] Caisse (on Townshend My Debra), and Marsha Henry Shepard (on Bobbin Hollow Reata) blazed a path for female trainers in the Morgan breed. (photos © Tarrance, Bob Moseder, Freudy)

in his strong Boston accent replied, “Well, that makes you a good judge of bad whiskey.”

Women then were clearing a pathway for female trainers of the future. I would venture Pat Tataronis, Marsha Henry, and Nancy Ela could cut it today against beautiful riders like Sarah Gove, Amanda DuPont, Peggy Alderman, and Cindy Mugnier. It is, however, safe to say the typical rider then did indeed look average by modern styles and standards. Twice weekly lunge lessons, professional barns with both trainers and equitation coaches, and working out at the gym were not routine in those days.

What about the actual horses, then versus now? It’s tricky without having those 70 year ago horses to juxtapose against their contemporary counterparts. My memory suggests the modern Morgans are somewhat taller, certainly more refined, and probably more athletic. Back then in the division that we now call English pleasure, horses had a fairly flat way of moving. The modern park horse has far more extravagant hock and knee action than most from then on their best day. The sophisticated presentations I see on my annual visit to Northampton today are influenced so much

by advances in farrier, vet, and chiropractic care, feeding programs, and the conditions under which horses are worked.

Over the years, the predominance of breeders has been replaced by training stables and their rosters of junior exhibitors and amateur owners. This has created a change in the culture, a softer, friendlier model more in keeping with the service industry we have today.

So much has changed, but the evanescent magic that was present in Northampton 65 years ago remains the same today. The long, hot day is waning as the lights come on. You find your seat for the evening session. The first stars appear in the sky above, to be joined by the Morgan stars in the arena below. The organ music picks up the rhythm, the ingate opens, the class enters, knees rising, hocks propelling, jingle of harness, squeak of leather, thud of hooves.

And if only for this ephemeral moment, on this glowing Northampton summer evening, what poet Robert Browning described is precisely true, “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.” ■



LEFT TO RIGHT: Morgans have long showed their talent for high-stepping disciplines. Panorma (Parade x Red Shoes), driven by Bob Baker, 1962; Something you don’t see today: Photos from a 1959 magazine show the stallion Parade (Cornwallis x Mansphyllis) competing in both park harness and Calvacade Americana (with his son Broadwall Drum Major [x Debutansque], with owner J. Cecil Ferguson at the lines.