

# *Celebrating 350 years of the Canadian Horse*

*by Valerie Kirkwood*

**I**n 1654, King Louis XIV of France, wishing to further secure and develop the colony of New France in the Americas, sent a shipment of two stallions and 20 mares from the Royal Stables in Normandy and Brittany across the Atlantic to what we now call Quebec. Up until that time, farming operations had been carried out with the assistance of oxen and donkeys. These new arrivals would be used both for farming and transportation.

Of the 20 mares which were sent, only 12 survived the trip on a boat which also included a number of “filles du roi” (King’s Daughters) – women, many of them orphans, whose passage to the colony was paid

for by the king and who were destined to become wives and mothers in the new land. There were no docking facilities at the western end of this arduous voyage. While the human passengers and goods made their way to shore on smaller boats, the horses had to jump and swim for it in the cold, swift waters of the St. Lawrence River. Two more shipments of horses arrived: 14 in 1667, and 12 in 1670. By 1671, a total of 82 horses had arrived in the colony. By then, the horses were multiplying with such rapidity that Intendant (translates as Colony Manager or Chief Steward) Jean Talon wrote to the king stating no further shipments of horses would be necessary.

Possession of these horses was not restricted to the aristocracy or the religious orders; they were also allotted to the better farmers. In order to ensure



Lineup of Canadian mares, 5 years and older, at the Merrickville Fair, 2015.

*Photos by Valerie Kirkwood.*



Cornelius Krieghoff (1815-1872) often painted the people of Quebec and their speedy little horses.

that the horse population would grow, the following conditions were imposed on ownership: each mare could be bred once a year to any of the stallions; one foal (or a fine of one hundred francs) was to be returned to the Intendant for redistribution under the same conditions. After three years, the horses would become the property of those who met these conditions. Fines were also imposed for maltreatment or neglect of the horses.

Life was not easy for these horses on the frontier of European settlement. Winter conditions on the shores of the St. Lawrence River were harsh, and the horses grew luxuriant coats to withstand the cold and windy conditions. Those on the far outreaches were often turned loose in the forest to survive on whatever they could find on their own. Because iron was a scarce commodity at the time, the horses were rarely shod. Thus, the horses which survived these conditions were small of stature, with thick coats, long, wavy manes and tails, moderately feathered legs and strong, hard hooves. The Canadian breed is very aptly named “The Little Iron Horse.”

These horses formed the basis of the Canadian breed, with no other outside influence until a century later when England won the battle of the Plains of Abraham at Quebec City, and the French colony was ceded to England under the Treaty of Paris in 1763. By then, there were 14,000 horses in Quebec, and the defenders had even been able to raise a small cavalry of 200 in defense of their land.

Word of the courage and stamina of these horses spread, and a number were exported for use in the Revolutionary War. The period between 1830 and 1860



Upper Canada Village's Ellie is still going strong at 20 years of age, and is doing duty this day as the tow scow horse, with teamster Doug Monroe.

saw a huge increase in both the export and import of horses into Lower Canada (Quebec). One of the more famous exports was the trotter Saint Lawrence, foaled in 1841 near Montreal, and whose name, and those of his racing progeny, appears in the American Trotting Register, volume XII, 1893. Canadian horses undoubtedly contributed to the founding stock of the Morgan and Standardbred breeds.

English settlers entering the area brought with them their own ideals of horses preferred for agricultural use, and perhaps the most drastic admixture of external bloodlines began with the introduction of heavy draft horses. These horses – primarily Belgians, Percherons and Clydesdales – were introduced to add size to the small Canadian horses, in order to be better able to handle the bigger agricultural equipment which was being developed in the early to mid 1800s. Indeed, by the 1880s, it was feared that the character of the Canadian horse, as a breed, was in danger of being lost. Quebec Government Veterinarian, Dr. A. J. Couture, was greatly in favor of improving existing breeds rather than cross-breeding, a task he accomplished very well



Bob Fisher disking with mares Echo and Jabara at a Leeds County Draft Horse Club Field Day.

with the Canadian Cow. In 1885, a commission was established to try to stop the decline of the Canadian Horse. Through his efforts, in 1886 an initial stud book was established. Horses meeting that standard were found, often in outlying areas, where cross-breeding had had minimal effect. In 1895, the Canadian Horse Breeders' Association (CHBA) was founded.

The federal government got into the act shortly thereafter, and under commissioner Dr. J. G Rutherford, a new stud book including breed standards was initiated.

“Stallions must not exceed 15.3 hh, and weighing 1,100-1,350 pounds. Mares must not exceed 15.2 hh, and weighing 1,050-1,250 pounds. The head is courageous looking, perhaps somewhat angular, with the ears far apart, the neck thick, the frame stout, the breast full, the shoulders strong, even rather upright, the back longer than short and sides inclined to flatness, the croup rather round or fleshy with quarters short and somewhat drooping, the muscles well let down and the tendons large, the feet tough and almost immune from disease.”

Between 1907 and 1940, the Canadian government ran a conservation program to preserve the Canadian horse at Cap Rouge near Quebec City. World War I had a drastic effect on horses outside the program, with many being shipped to the battles in Europe. The Second World War brought a stop to this federal government program, and the Quebec government stepped in and purchased a number of the Cap Rouge horses, continuing to breed them at the Deschambault experimental farm. The mechanization of farming in the mid 20th century very nearly spelled the death of the breed. There was a brief attempt in the 1964 - 1975 period to cater to the burgeoning riding horse market by adding Thoroughbred blood. In 1981, the program at Deschambault was closed down, and the remaining 44 horses were auctioned off to members of the CHBA under the following conditions: that each mare was to be used as a brood mare; that each stallion was to be available for breeding; and that all of these horses would live in Quebec until Jan. 1, 1986.

By that time there were only 400 Canadian Horses left, and it was up to private breeders to ensure the survival of the race. Several farms, mainly in Quebec but a few in Ontario, took up the challenge of "Preserving for Our Children, the Horse of Our Forefathers." Most of these breeders have focused on the old bloodlines and traits, and, while cross-breeding occurs with light horses for the riding horse market, and with heavy horses (often Percherons) for mid-sized draft horses, these efforts are frowned upon by purists.

In April 2002, the Canadian parliament designated it the National Horse of Canada. Prospects of the Canadian Horse have been improving, although it still remains on Rare Breeds Canada's "Vulnerable" list. All registered Canadian Horses are DNA typed to ascertain parentage. All are micro-chipped, and the pedigree

shows the racial purity of each individual. Modern breed standards show a bit more variation in height and weight than those originally established: "Their height averages 14 to 16 hands (56 to 64 inches, 142 to 163 cm) and stallions average 1,050 to 1,350 pounds (480 to 610 kg) in weight, while mares weigh 1,000 to 1,250 pounds (450 to 570 kg)." Most Canadians are black, bay, brown or chestnut in color, some of the latter with flaxen manes and tails. The grey gene seems to have died out. The horses are always solid in color, with a minimal amount of white on the face or lower legs.

The modern-day naming convention for Canadian Horses seems complex at first glance, but can provide a lot about the age of the horse and its breeding, once you are in the know. First comes the prefix (herd or farm name), then the stallion's name, then the foal's name,



Tango, an 8-year-old gelding driven by Patrick Brunet, is a fine example of a Canadian Horse.

starting with the letter assigned to that year. The letters run alphabetically, but I, O, Q, and V are not used. For instance, a foal born at Upper Canada Village in 2015 was named Upper Canada Rhett Champ. "Upper Canada" is the prefix, "Rhett" is the stallion's name, and "Champ" is the foal's name, 2015 being a C year.

At the Canadian Horse Show at the Merrickville Fair in 2015, the full range of sizes and colors were on display. The yearling class had a 13-month-old filly destined for dressage which was considerably draftier and taller than a 15-month-old filly purpose-bred for driving. The mare class showed all the colors of the breed. The Fair had opportunities for horses to be shown in-hand, in harness and under saddle.

Similarly, at Canadian Horse Day in Upper Canada Village, the wide variation within the breed was quite evident. Upper Canada Village has its own breeding program, with more than 20 Canadian horses on site. Most are 15.2 hh or less. For Canadian Horse Day, a number of outside horses were invited to participate



Norchesnes Fellow Paygaze, a 14.2 hh stallion owned by Brigitte Boisvert, at the Merrickville Fair 2015.

in a grand parade and to give demonstrations in diverse areas of expertise. Most were shown in harness, but Western Pleasure, English, Dressage and even Roman Riding also put in appearances.

Dressage mare Litjens Robi Unique stands 16.2 hh at 7 years of age. Owned by Eleanor Graydon, she was ridden in a Musical Freestyle demonstration by Garnet Clapp. This mare is competing at Second Level. Clapp says that when she first saw the filly out in a field of youngsters at a Quebec breeding farm, she was immediately drawn to her by the way she carried herself. Unique, she says,

displays great trainability and wants to work. Saguenay Eve Yukon Jospatriote, aged 16, of CanaDream Farm, also performed a Musical Freestyle with Kimberly Belledame aboard. He is competing at Prix St. Georges level in Canada and the United States. He is a much more compact 15.2 hh. and shows great power and character at this international level of dressage.

François Bergeron of Ormstown, Quebec, is a great proponent of Canadian Horses for combined Driving competitions. He has many driving Championships to his credit, and travels throughout eastern Canada



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and the U.S. giving clinics and judging. He likes Canadian horses for their elegance and athleticism, and considers driving them to be a return to his heritage.

Bob Fisher, a member of the Leeds County Draft Horse Club, started out driving a Standardbred for pleasure. When he was invited to a sleigh ride sponsored by a Canadian Horse club, he knew these horses represented the next step in his driving career. They have superior strength to the Standardbred, and he likes their size, stamina and versatility. He currently has three Canadian horses – Jabara, Rocky and Star – and they are broke to ride and drive single and double. He uses them for sleigh rides, diskings, pleasure driving and wagon rides.

As to the future of the Canadian Horse? It lies in its continued versatility. Kelly Ferguson, DVM, Canadian Horse breeder and one of the moving forces behind getting Canadians recognized at the National Horse Show, prefers horses in the 15 hh range, with a draftier frame built for work, and with short ears, a short head and a thick neck. Above all, her horses must have excellent temperaments and workability. Her preference would be to see the breed undergo more standardization.

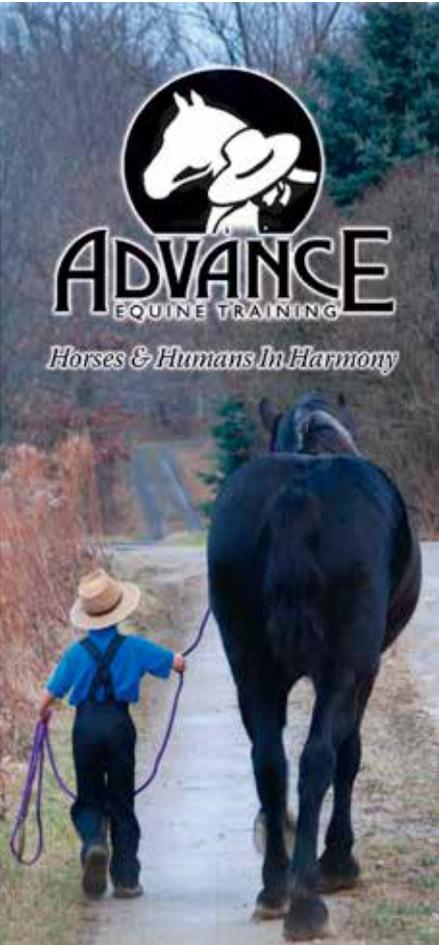
Breed recognition is something which needs to be enhanced. Often, when people see one of these remarkable horses performing at a show or other event, the comment is “What kind of horse is that?” They can tell that it’s not a Thoroughbred or a Quarter horse, or even a smallish Friesian. Some might guess Morgan, but most often, “Canadian” is not a breed they have heard of. Proud owners, riders and drivers are eager to inform these people of the virtues of this heritage breed.

Dana Boychuck of Glamorgan Farm near Belleville, Ontario, strongly suggests that her riding students who are ready to purchase their own horse consider a Canadian rather than a recently retired Thoroughbred racehorse. Although these ex-racehorses can often be acquired for a modest sum (purebred Canadians continue to command a somewhat higher price), their investment will be redeemed in the long run by having a horse that doesn’t require blanketing in the winter, and, in most cases, don’t need to be shod. Canadians require very little concentrated feed, and do well on hay and pasture. They also tend to be a longer-lived breed.

At the other end of the spectrum are those just entering their retirement years and who now have time for pleasure driving, or would like to add a team of horses to their farm. Canadians do well in both of these activities. Their smaller stature than today’s 18 to 19 hh Belgians and Percherons makes harnessing a much easier task, and a team has sufficient horsepower for all but the very heaviest of farm work. They are handy in tight situations in the bush, and have flash, speed and stamina for driving on the roads or on sleigh rides.

Canadian Horses are gaining in popularity, and no longer seem to be on the brink of disappearance. Recent DNA studies show there is a wide range of genetic diversity within the breed, so with careful attention to reproductive choices, the breed should remain on solid footing. Truly, after 350 years, Canada’s Little Iron Horse has many reasons to celebrate. 

*Valerie Kirkwood lives in Kemptville, Ontario.*



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