



Our Gaited-Horse Heritage
By Dan Aadland

In the early 1890s, a stocky cowboy, saddle slung on one shoulder, stepped off the train at a station bordering the Crow Indian Reservation in south-central Montana. A Danish immigrant, Magnus Johnson, already had under his belt a decade of hard cowboying in central Montana, where he supplemented his income by training horses for miners. His mission this day was one he'd accomplished several times earlier, that of buying unbroken horses from the Crow Indian tribe.

Magnus had repeated this horse-buying mission several times. He'd choose approximately 20 head, make his deal, then pick a special one for himself. His selection was always a smallish, solidly built horse, with a little "attitude," the kind that would make succumbing to the fatigue of a 60-mile ride extremely unlikely. The other essential was a "single-foot gait," probably what we'd call an amble or a running walk today.

Using the corrals at the Crow Agency headquarters, he'd spend a couple of days training his chosen mount, then round up his 20 head, and aim them toward home, 200 miles away - a feat of horsemanship on a green animal almost unimaginable today.

To Magnus, my wife's grandfather, the choice of a gaited horse for a long ride was automatic and unquestioned, just as it was to his son, Elmer, my father-in-law. To the tough cowboys of the northern plains in those days before highways and horse trailers, smooth-gaited horses weren't something new or novel, they were standard fare - a fact all but lost in the sea of hype put forth by various breed associations laying claim to the term "Western horse."

A contemporary of Magnus' came west to assuage the sorrow caused by the deaths, on the same day, of his mother and of his wife. Accustomed to the Thoroughbreds of his foxhunting companions in New York, Theodore Roosevelt marveled at the toughness and ground-covering ability of the Western cow ponies he found near his ranch on the Dakota/Montana border. On his far-reaching hunting trips to Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and southern Canada, he found one trait in common (in addition to their toughness) among many of the indigenous cow ponies: They were smooth-gaited.

In his book, *The Wilderness Hunter*, Roosevelt writes, "Sometimes we racked, or shackled along at the fox trot which is the cow-pony's ordinary gait [*italics mine*]." Later, he tells of riding with his ranch foreman at a "rack, pace, single-foot, or slow lope" and goes on to assert that the trot is disliked by "all peoples who have to do much of their life-work in the saddle."

Fueled by family stories and by the writings of many who observed horses in the early West, such as Francis Parkman, Washington Irving, Andy Adams, and Andrew Garcia, writers who mentioned the prominence of gaited horses, my wife Emily and I continued the tradition. My father-in-law's aging geldings had fueled our appetites, reining back into a fast rack when you both spurred and collected them.

In 1980, from an outfitter who'd used her to breed gaited mules, we bought a big Tennessee Walking Horse mare named Mona. Ever since then, we've picked and chosen from within that breed to duplicate as closely possible the horses of an earlier time when there were no roads or horse trailers, and the cowboy had "miles to go before he slept."

TRIGGER Jr Birth: January 1, 1941 - Death: 1969

Trigger Jr. was a full-blooded Tennessee Walking Horse named Allen's Gold Zephyr!

"Paul K. Fisher, Souderton, Pennsylvania, advertised in the 1946 Blue Ribbon magazine as being the world's largest breeder and dealer in yellow horses.

He sold Trigger Jr. to Roy Rogers in 1948. Trigger Jr was the most famous of all Tennessee Walking yellow horses.