

10 Years in America

The Gypsy Vanner horse embodies the mystery surrounding Romany gypsies, who over centuries became known for their horse sense, music, fortune telling and nomadic lifestyles.

By Georgia Brown and Summer Best.

The English gypsy's dream is to create a perfect Gypsy Vanner horse. Such an animal is extremely stable in temperament and unlikely to be skittish. The body is powerful, compact, and can easily pull the distinctive bow-top caravans unique to gypsy lifestyles.

The Gypsy Vanner, developed from selectively crossing the Friesian, Clydesdale, Shire and Dales Pony, traces back to the original cold-blooded horse, equus caballus, the heavy prehistoric horse line of Northern Europe. Their history is interwoven with European gypsy traditions.

Pulling cross country carriages as easily as they pull caravans, Vanners are distinguished by their flashy feathers and flowing manes and tails. A look inside those large dark eyes and you sense their gentle disposition and special affinity to children. It's one of the reasons they are sometimes called "magic horses."

We're Comin' to America

This fall, the first Gypsy Vanners, imported to the United States in 1996, celebrate 10 years on American soil at the new 40-acre Gypsy Gold Farm near Ocala, Florida. Here, they enjoy occasional caravan work, but more and more, the Gypsy Vanner is becoming famous for its versatility, beauty and personality.

Their athletic abilities shine, too, with many "Vanners" proving suitable for competitive dressage, eventing and jumping. Those who ride Gypsy Vanners say it feels like "sitting on a pillow." Short-backed with powerful hindquarters, they pack the power of their larger draft ancestors.

Many Americans met Gypsy Vanners for the first time at Equitana in 1998 where they were a sensation in the show ring. By 2001, one of the first imports, The Gypsy King, was introduced as a Breyer Horse.

Photo by Mark Barrett
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Man with a Mission

The Gypsy Vanners' history in the US began in 1996 when Ocala's Dennis Thompson and his late wife, Cindy, imported the first Gypsy Vanners, Bat and Dolly. In 1994, while on a business trip visiting Shire breeders, Dennis and Cindy came across their first Gypsy Vanner. Returning from a Shire farm, the couple drove around a bend in the road and saw a field with a single horse in it.

Dennis, astonished by the image of the unique animal, turned to Cindy.

"Did you SEE that black and white horse?" he asked.

After a pause of a few seconds the couple made an immediate U-turn.

It was a chance turn in the road. A moment of decision that would change their careers, their personal lives. It was a moment in time that just felt right.

"This horse picked his head up and trotted straight to us," Dennis said. "With mane and feathers flying, there was magic in the air. We were basically in love with him, and we wanted to learn more."

At a farmhouse nearby, Dennis and Cindy, two enthusiastic Americans bubbling with curiosity, asked about the stallion. What was he? Was he for sale? Who owns him? Are there more? A local farmer explained that the horse belonged to a gypsy.

"He has a band of mares that look just like this stallion that he keeps hidden," the farmer said.

Hidden? Dennis and Cindy, on a new mission, couldn't wait to learn more.
Meeting the Gypsies

The Thompsons found it hard to believe there was an ongoing breeding program with this unusual horse, so they asked to meet the owner. The meeting was granted, and within a short time, he invited the couple to his camp. Having never been to a gypsy camp, Dennis and Cindy were in for a new adventure.

"Before we left, he took about six steps toward his vehicle turned and said to us, 'Don't worry, it's respectable.'"

When Dennis and Cindy entered the chain link fenced compound of the gypsy with the special horse, their eyes were opened to a new world. They spent the day with the gypsy as the man expounded on his stallion's qualities. The couple studied all the gypsy's mares and foals.

At day's end, the sage gypsy agreed to sell the stallion, but not for another year, due to his focused breeding program. He invited them to attend the gypsy horse fair at Appleby, but said they wouldn't find any horse better

than his stallion there.

Photo by Summer Best

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The Fair

In June at the Appleby Fair in Westmoreland, Cumbria, Dennis and Cindy studied hundreds of horses. Since the fair's inception in 1685, when King James II granted a market charter for a "fair or market for the purchase and sale of all manners of goods, cattle, horses, mares and geldings," the gypsy nation has gathered to buy and sell horses.

The fairgrounds are located in the sweeping horseshoe bend of the Eden River, in view of the square Normandy keep of Appleby Castle. At this annual event, Gypsies meet up with old friends, conduct business and race horses. All this is accompanied by pop and folk gypsy music played on Flamenco guitars, violins, harmonicas and tambourines.

Study, Understand, Import

For the next two years, the Thompson's mission was twofold: to understand the origins of this hidden breed and to identify the breeders.

Dennis and Cindy traveled to the United Kingdom extensively. They learned the Gypsy Vanners had been selectively bred by gypsies throughout the UK for 50 years. Gypsies have produced a variety of colored horses for generations by randomly pasture breeding herds of mares and selling the offspring as "trade horses." More recently, about 20-percent of their horses were selectively bred. It was these horses - with the distinctive look of the Gypsy Vanner - that they wanted to buy.

In 1996, Dennis and Cindy imported their first two Gypsy Vanners. For four more years, they studied horses in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, purchasing two additional stallions and 14 mares to establish their breeding program. That program would be the centerpiece of the breed in North America.

Photo by Mark Barrett

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Creating a Breed Society

To organize the breed and promote its qualities, the Thompson's founded the Gypsy Vanner Horse Society, (gypsyvannerhorse.org), which registers horses bred by gypsies. Located in Wales, it is committed to respecting

the spoken words of those gypsies who dedicate lifetimes to breeding the perfect caravan horse. They also wanted to clarify the confusion about terms that identify other colored draft horses: Gypsy Cob, Irish Cob and Tinker Horse (tinker is an old-fashioned word for child).

The society's mission statement is "to bring honor, recognition and a better understanding to one of the world's most colorful and least understood societies and the horses they love so dearly." The society maintains the records and collects DNA samples of horses and their offspring to further protect the bloodlines. It can also certify a horse using seven standards of excellence.

Breed Characteristics

The breed is described as strong, intelligent, docile, athletic and colorful with excellent endurance. Overall, it has the look of a draft horse of small to average height.

#1 Colors include Piebald, black and white; Skewbald, any color and white; tri color; solid; and Blagdon, a solid color with white splashed up from underneath.

#2 There are three height classifications: Mini Vanner under 14 hands, Classic Vanner 14 to 15.2 hands and Grand Vanner 15.2 and over.

#3 Body: The back is short coupled, withers well rounded, chest deep and broad with well-sprung ribs. A powerful neck, sloping shoulder, heavy powerful hips, well muscled rounded croup and a tail not set too low are required.

#4 Legs should be clean, medium to heavy bone, set on a large round hoof. Hocks should be broad and clean with the modified closer hock set of a pulling horse, but not as close as the modern draft horse. Leg movements should be clean, strait and true with a distinctive, energetic and effortless trot.

#5 The ideal hair is straight and silky with some wave. Abundant feathering, beginning at the knees on the front legs and near the hocks on the rear legs, should extend over the front of the hooves. The mane, forelock and tail should be ample to profuse; double manes are common, but not required.

#6 The head should be more refined than a typical Shire, set on a strong neck in harmony with the horse's overall look. A slightly Roman nose is acceptable if it goes with the overall look, but a heavy Roman nose is not acceptable. The ears should be in proportion to the head and not too

large. The eyes can be any color, wide set, bright, alert and kind.

#7 Nature: A Vanner should be alert and willing with traits of intelligence, kindness and docility, a Golden Retriever With Hooves®.

Photo Courtesy of Lynn Wade

The Romany caravan or vardo developed about the middle of the nineteenth century in England. Some Gypsies continued to live in bender tents, but owning a vardo was a great status symbol, and a couple often started their married life by purchasing a wagon. The familiar bow-top roof, brightly painted designs and carved wood details made each wagon unique. The interior was often richly carpeted with a small stove, chests for storing belongings and racks to protect the gypsy woman's cooking utensils and china. It's said that Gypsies bred the colorful Vanners to complement the intricately carved designs on their traveling homes.

Tragedy & Change

In July 2002, Dennis Thompson was away on a business trip when tragedy struck. Cindy, who was up late at night on foal watch, suffered a tragic and fatal fall in the barn.

Seven days later, on the day Cindy was buried, the foal was born. On his head, with little white hairs, was the number "7."
It's a horse Dennis will never sell.

Dennis admits suffering extreme depression, and not a day goes by that he doesn't do something to preserve her memory. The work they began with the Gypsy Vanner continues, and Cindy Thompson is memorialized with the C.T. Pony Bear, a plush, stuffed pony that, when sold, will benefit the Gypsy Gold Gelding Association, a nonprofit program for supplying therapeutic riding programs with gentle Gypsy Vanners.

New Horizons

Last winter, Dennis was searching for an artist to work on a marketing display when he met Lynn Wade, an artist well known for her fine art paintings and sculptures of horses. The two equestrian singles, both experts in their respective fields, both enthusiastic and full of great dreams, soon fell in love. They were married that spring, selling their respective farms to move to the new farm in Ocala.

Lynn's enthusiasm for the Vanners is heartfelt. "We've only begun to tap the things these horses can do," said Lynn. "The ones I've ridden were very smooth. If I were a little younger, I would start training one for

eventing!"

Photo by Summer Best

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The Gypsy Vanner's magic quickly endears them to those that know them. Lynn, who had a successful professional career with horses before she began painting seriously, thought she would scale back her horse work as she painted more and more. Not so. She's up at dawn with her husband, cleaning stalls, planning, working with the Gypsy Vanners.

Must be that Gypsy magic.

For additional information on Gypsy Vanners:

Gypsy Vanner Horse Society website: www.gypsyvannerhorse.org

Gypsy Gold Farm website: www.gypsyvannerhorse.com

Call 1-866-gypsy vanner (1-866-497-7982) or 352-591-2969 or email gvh2@aol.com

Golden Nutrition

Gypsy Gold's nutrition program focuses on quality forage and feed products.

"These horses are naturally cool and easy-going, and we want to keep them that way," Dennis Thompson says. "We like to keep them healthy and in good condition."

Gypsy Gold Gypsy Vanner mares typically eat alfalfa, supplemented by free-choice, Seminole Alfa-Balancer block minerals. Stabled horses enjoy Seminole Perfect 10, a 10-percent fat, 10-percent protein textured feed, with timothy/alfalfa and coastal hay mixes.

"The low-protein, high-fat diet works great to keep them in great shape, mentally and physically," Dennis said. With this complete diet, the farm has found no need to give added supplements.

Summer Best

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