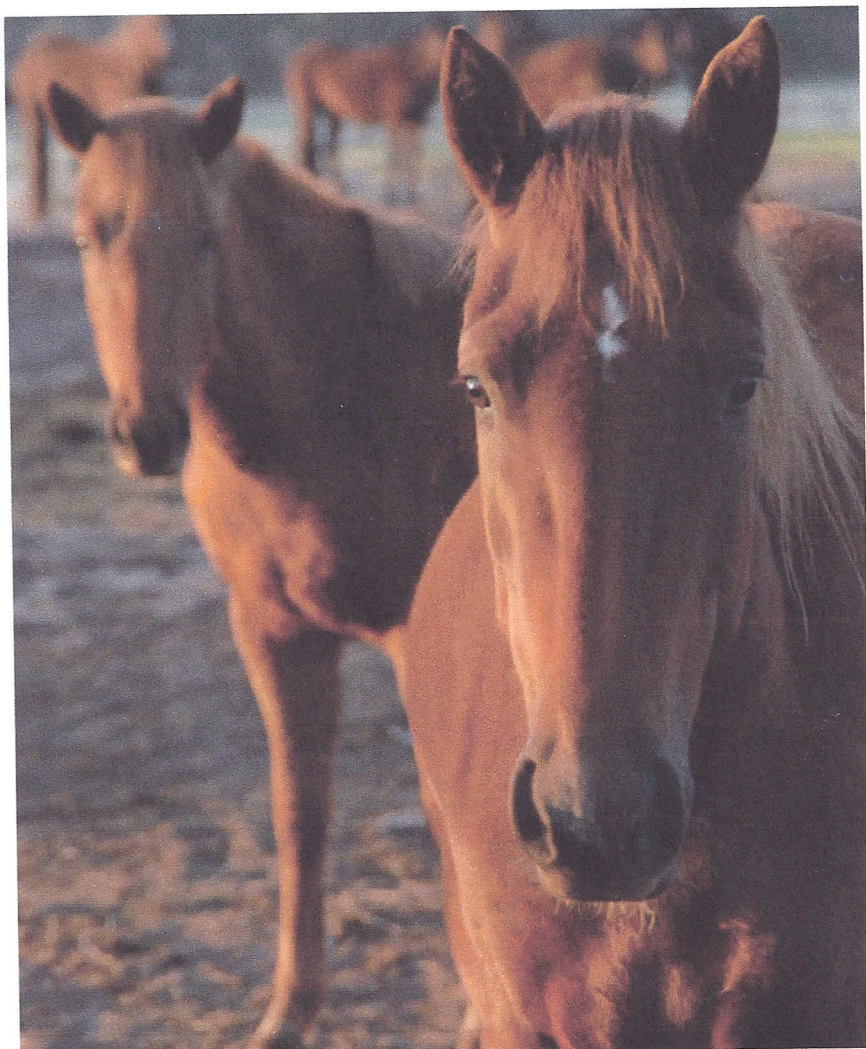


A Breed Apart

Once thought of as a bunch of strays, Marsh Tackies are making a comeback



Larry Kemmerlin, SC Farm Bureau

The cry of the Catahoulas bugled up from the river bottom, rolling through cathedrals of ancient cypress, through pickets of tupelo, gum, and pine. There is a cry and there is a bay, and a dog man can tell the difference a mile away. The hounds had a boar but could not hold him. The ground was soft but the horses sure-footed as we rushed through timber, buckbrush, and briar.

Way down in the Savannah River bottomlands, Marion Gohagan and I were on Marsh Tacky horses. Suddenly there was a bay, and the howling and barking seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Give your horse her head," Gohagan said. "She'll take you right to them."

I slacked the reins and held on. The mare dropped her head and stretched her neck, and the woods came by in a frightening green blur while branches slapped and clawed at my clothes and face. Two minutes, three, and we could hear the grunting and snorting of an enraged boar. We swung from our saddles, tethered the horses, and waded into the slashing, snarling mass of muscle and teeth.

We were after more than bacon, Gohagan and I. Call it historic reenactment, homage to tradition, maybe even act of worship. Ripping through the thickets, we didn't have time to call it anything. The pigs were descendants of hogs run off from the Hernando de Soto expedition 450-odd years before. The Catahoulas were descendants of de Soto's dogs when they slipped off to breed with Indian feists. And we were riding noble horses with a Spanish bloodline.

Horse Sense

If any horse could qualify as an endangered species, the Marsh Tacky would head the list. Once common in swamps and on the islands of South Carolina, Tackies carried colonial cavalry to victory in the Revolution and Confederate partisans to defeat during the Civil War. They carried hunters and mail, and pulled plows and wagons. They fetched the midwife when your momma's time was due and hauled you to the burying ground when your time was due, too.

But then along came Henry Ford, telephones, and real estate development, and there was no future for a big-hearted little horse with a sixth sense for getting around in the woods. Wealthy plantation owners diluted the genes by breeding to long-legged Walkers and Thoroughbreds; poor farmers quit breeding them at all. By the 1980s there were fewer than one hundred purebred Tackies left. Experts claimed it was no big loss. Tackies, they said, were just strays from colonial plantations, stunted by poor forage and casual breeding.

DNA had the final word, thanks to Jeannette Beranger of the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. Beranger was studying Southern cattle and sheep breeds when she heard about Marsh Tackies. She drove up and pulled some hair. What Beranger found was that most Tacky genetics can be traced directly to a large Spanish herd from colonial St. Augustine. "The Chickasaw Indians were superb horsemen and hunters. They would load horses with deer skins and take them to Charleston to trade. They would sell the horses, too, walk home, and start all over again."

Saving the Bloodline

Farmer, contractor, and former county council chair D. P. Lowther of Ridgeland, South Carolina, rode Tackies as a child and was always impressed by their level-headedness and stamina. "An eight-hundred-pound Tacky will ride a twelve-hundred-pound quarter horse into the ground," he says. "I could jump on a Tacky and ride him clean to Charleston." As an adult, Lowther set about assembling a herd. Tackies were cheap and farmers eager to sell. "Back in the early sixties I'd go over to Hilton Head and come home with a couple of Tackies. It

was a good way to spend a Saturday." Pretty soon, he had fifty, not one of them broke to ride. "Folks thought I was crazy."

But D. P. Lowther, Mister D.P., as they call him now, became a senior keeper of the breed. There were others: Ed Ravenel of Charleston, David Grant of Darlington, and Marion Gohagan of Scotia, where I rode after wild hogs not so long ago.

So what makes a Tacky? They come in any color and conformation a horse can be. They're midsize between pony and horse, weigh less than a thousand pounds, and have a strong narrow chest, a sloping rump, a dished face, flared nostrils, flinty hooves, and a long tail and a double mane to beat back the bugs.

But mostly it's about attitude. Hungry, they will be happy with salt grass. Lonesome, they will follow you around like a dog. Mired in mud, they won't rear and thrash like other breeds. They will ease onto one side, find new footing, and walk right out of it. You can shoot from the saddle, too, and they will not flinch. If a Tacky tells you no, you're either asking the wrong question or asking the right question the wrong way. You train them; they train you. Push-button horses. And should you get thrown, or more likely fall off, it is not too far to the ground.

Marion Gohagan's pride is his four-year-old stallion, Sabata, which he rides exclusively. Yes, there are frequent discussions, and often negotiations, but riding a stallion at all speaks volumes of the breed's tractability. No, he will never cut him. Sabata is far too precious for that.

In 2007 Beranger's group helped owners and breeders establish the Carolina Marsh Tacky Association, which seeks recognition for the breed and registration for individual horses. The association has set a goal of a thousand horses, the number it thinks will assure the breed's survival.

Sabata and his brothers have a lot of work to do.

For more information, go to carolinamarshhtacky.com