

Horizons

By Roger Pinckney

The cry of the Catahoulas bugled up from the river bottom, rolling through cathedrals of ancient cypress, through pickets of tupelo, gum and southern yellow pine.

The hounds had a boar but could not hold him. The ground was soft but the horses surefooted as we rushed through timber, buck-brush and briar. We were way down in the Savannah River bottoms, Marion Gohagan and I on Marsh Tacky horses. Suddenly the howling and barking seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"Give your horse her head," Marion said. "She'll take you right to them."

I slacked the reins, held on. The mare dropped her head, 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, pulled our pistols and waded into the slashing, snarling melee.

Most hunters dream of owning one really good gundog. But how about a good gun horse?



AMY BAYLOR

The author and his Marsh Tacky mount pause to let the hounds coarce after a wild boar in the grass and pines of South Carolina.

Most places out west, it's illegal to approach game on horseback. In Minnesota, a horse is considered a motor vehicle, and firearms transported thereupon must be unloaded and completely

cased. No doubt, that's what landed Jesse James and the Younger boys in so much trouble in Northfield when they rode into town with their pistol butts peeking from their holsters. But throughout much of the South, the gun horse is as revered as the gundog.

In Georgia, Alabama and the Florida panhandle, quail hunts are often equestrian events – a matched pair of redbone mules pulling a wagon with dog boxes, extra shells, a field lunch and refreshments, the shooters following pointers or setters on horseback through sighing stands of longleaf pine. Typically, three riders taking turns shooting. All dismount, two approach the point while the third holds the reins. But on South Carolina deer drives, mounted men ride

with the hounds, pushing the quarry toward a line of standers, whooping and hollering encouragement, shooting

buckshot from the saddle whenever a deer jumps up within range. Launching a load of buckshot from between a horse's ears requires a level-headed, rock-solid mount. And this is where the Marsh Tacky excels.

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 coastal South Carolina and Georgia, Tackies carried colonial cavalry to victory in the Revolution. They carried hunters and mail. They pulled plows, wagons.

They fetched the midwife when your momma's time was due, hauled you to the burying ground when your time was due too. But then along came Henry Ford and John Deere and there seemed to be no future for a big-hearted little horse with a sixth sense for getting around in the woods. Too soon, there were less than one hundred left.

Folks who claimed to know said it was no big loss. Tackies were just strays from colonial plantations, stunted by poor forage and casual

breeding. But there were those who passionately believed otherwise. Marsh Tackies, they said, were direct descendants of the horses of the Spanish conquistadors.

Wall Street magnate and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch was an early conserver of the breed. Born in 1870 in Camden, South Carolina, Baruch was the son of a Jewish Confederate, a surgeon assigned to patch up Robert E. Lee should he ever catch a Yankee bullet. The elder Baruch took his family north after the war, where the younger amassed a fortune playing the Cuban sugar market.

Bernard Baruch returned south in 1905, buying land around Georgetown, trying to reestablish the colonial Hobcaw Barony, 22,000 acres granted by King Charles II to one of his cronies. Baruch had a large stable of horses and his staff kept them ready for deer drives and bird hunting. Generals Mark Clark, George Marshall, Omar Bradley and Black Jack Pershing were frequent guests; senators, congressmen, cabinet members, captains of industry, anyone who was anyone in the first half of the 20th century was invited to join Baruch and his family at the barony for their famous duck, deer, quail and hog hunts.

Baruch owned thoroughbreds that he raced at Saratoga, had the knowledge and means to purchase literally any horse in the world, but he chose Marsh Tackies for his favored gun horses.

"In interviews with former employees," notes author and historian Lee Brockington, "I learned that Mr. Baruch sent staff down to Hilton Head Island to buy Marsh Tackies. Local residents brought the Tackies over from the island by barge and sold them to Baruch's men, waiting with a truck and trailer. With Hobcaw's swamps and sandhills, the hardy little tackies were perfect for hunting."

Havilah Babcock, USC professor and author of *My Health is Better in November*, no stranger to horseflesh and notoriously free with his opinions,

said, "Take a horse to have your picture made on, but a mule to get you home . . . a horse has more education, but a mule has more sense. The finest hunting mounts I've ever ridden were the Tacky ponies owned by Mr. Bernard Baruch of Hobcaw Barony."

Bernard Baruch was not the only man to go looking for Marsh Tackies on Hilton Head. D. P. Lowther of Ridgeland, South Carolina, rode Tackies as a child and was always impressed by their level-headedness and stamina.

"An 800-pound Tacky will ride a 1200-pound quarter horse into the ground," he says. As an adult Lowther set about assembling a herd. "Back in the early '60s 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 50, 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 the senior keeper of the breed. There were

others, Ed Ravenel of Charleston, David Grant of Darlington and Marion Gohagan of Scotia, where we rode after wild hogs not so long ago.

So what makes a Tacky? Any color a horse can be, a confirmation like an Arabian, like a Barb, or an Andalusian. Fourteen hands to fifteen-two, less than a thousand pounds, strong narrow chest, sloping rump, dished face, flared nostrils, flinty hooves, long tail and double mane to beat back the bugs, sometimes a dorsal stripe and a faint brindling about the legs. But mostly it's about attitude.

Hungry, they will be happy with salt grass. Heavy, they will grunt, roll their eyes but haul you anyway. Light, they will treat you kindly. Lonesome, they will follow you around like a dog. Mired, they will roll right out of it. Creek or river, they will plunge right in. Totally wild, you can be riding in weeks. 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. And should you get thrown, or more likely fall off, it is not quite so far to the ground.

But are Tackies really Spanish horses? Folklore abounds. Strays from the 1536 Desoto expedition? Survivors of shipwrecks? Runaways from Spanish missions? Drop-offs on barrier islands? Science had the final word.

Jeannette Beranger, Research and Technical Programs manager for the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy, was studying the Florida Cracker Horse, a proven Spanish derivative, when she heard about some crazy man up in Ridgeland whose herd had then grown to 100 head. That would be Mister D. P.

Beranger drove up to see him, clipped some horse hair, drew some blood. She was surprised by the analysis, though most Tacky fanciers were not. "The Tacky's genetics date from the golden age of Spain," she flatly proclaimed. "The conquistadors needed a mount that would carry great weight over long distances on scant forage. Breeders in the

Lowcountry needed the same things the Spanish explorers did, and they kept those traits alive."

Beranger is not sure about the high romance of Desoto or shipwrecks. Her reading of DNA traces the tackies directly to a large herd the Spanish kept outside St. Augustine in the early 1700's.

"Florida Indians would load their horses with deer skins, come up to Charleston to trade," she notes. "They would sell the skins, then sell the horses, walk back to Florida and start all over again."

Then there was an expedition against the Spanish and their Indian allies by the South Carolina militia in 1723. The English brought several hundred head back to Charleston as spoils of war where they were dubbed "tacky," or common, as opposed to fine English mounts.

In 2007 Beranger 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.

Down in the swamp, Marion and I holstered our pistols, got our wind back, wrestled our pulse back close to normal. It had been quite a scramble. The boar put Marion up a tree and hooked one of the dogs. Feelings were hurt, but not much else, and both man and dog will be more careful next time. Marion ran a lariat around the boar's snout, secured it behind tusks sharp as broken glass. Marion swung into the saddle, dallied the rope to the horn, and his horse leaned into the load. An 800-pound horse, a 200-pound rider and a 300-pound boar, no problem. The happy dogs trotted along behind as the Tackies carried us out of the swamp, back up to higher ground. 🐾

For more information on Marsh Tackies, visit www.carolinamarshhtacky.com; www.marshhtacky.org or www.albc-usa.org.