

THE 350TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF THE CANADIAN HORSE

— A TIME TO CELEBRATE, OR ONE TO MOURN?

By YVONNE HILLSDEN

July 16, 2015 marks the 350th year anniversary of the Canadian Horse coming to Canada. Normally when a momentous occasion such as this is reached, it is a cause for great celebration. Unfortunately, this may not be the case with the Canadian Horse.

Recent media coverage has begun to sound the warning bell to the public that the Canadian Horse, our country's National horse, is on the verge of extinction with only an estimated 2000 to 2500 Canadian Horses left to reproduce and ensure horses for future generations. How can this be true, say some, when it seems that there are more Canadian Horses than that around, and the registry shows at least 1000 more horses in existence? The sad fact is that many of these horses are aged and past their reproductive years, likely deceased but their passing not reported to the registry, or in homes where their owners have no intention of producing another foal.

To expand upon this further, here are some recent, very troubling statistics on the breed. Since 2008, yearly registrations have been drastically declining, to the point where the breed is currently hovering at 200 or less registrations per year. This is the cut-off point which has prompted the Livestock Conservancy to downgrade the Canadian from its prior "threatened" status to "critical". With registration numbers this low, the breed is simply not sustainable as there are not enough new individuals being born to replace those being lost.

Case in point. At the end of each year, stallion declarations must be sent to the CLRC noting how many registered Canadian Horse stallions were bred to registered mares. In 2014, 100 owners provided only 195 declarations. This means that the absolute maximum number of foals expected for 2015 will be 195, and since not all breedings done will result in foals, the number of foal registrations in all likelihood will be considerably less than this. Once again the number of registered foals produced each year continues to drop catastrophically, to levels which have not

been seen since before the early '90's.

Added to this is the fact that since 2008, the shift in ownership profile has changed. Prior to 2008, there were a mix of individual owners, as well as breeders from whom people could reliably obtain horses. Since 2008, many of these breeding operations are now gone – victims of the economy and the rising costs of horse raising in a poor sales market. With the changing ownership profile, most Canadian horses are now owned singly as riding horses. This includes the vast majority of mares in the breed.

To put this in context, there are currently just over 3000 mares 20 years of age and younger left in the breed. Of this number, probably at least 1000 are too old or too young to be used by breeding. Recent surveys of horse ownership done in Quebec and BC indicate that nearly 50-60% of all mares owned, are in homes where they are used as the primary riding horse and that there are no plans to breed them. This means that the entire breeding population of mares left may be much less than the 2000 initially estimated. A more realistic number may be that only a 1000 or so potential breeding mares in total remain, which may contribute to the breed.

This coincides with declining stallion ownership. Prior to 2008, there were between 20 - 30 Canadian stallions standing at stud in BC. According to a recent survey, there are now only about 10 stallion owners left in the province who are currently breeding. Of these, the majority are located in remote areas of the province and do not offer shipped semen, so these stallions are not easily accessible to the majority of mare owners. This means that currently in BC, there are maybe only 3 or 4 stallions that are centrally located and that offer comprehensive breeding services making them readily available to mare owners.

This situation is echoed in each Canadian province. There is no question that the breed is in serious trouble. Registrations are at an all-time low, many breeders have gone out of business, and the vast majority of mares are in the hands of single own-

ers who have no plan to breed them, or to preserve their lines in the breed gene pool.

Victoria Tollman, Executive Director of the Equus Survival trust very eloquently summed up the situation. She says, "Every worthy mare should be in purebred production and contribute at least two foals (or more if you can support that) back to the gene pool. Every mare should also have a good daughter to replace her in the breeding program when the mare is retired." "Still each person's situation is their own, and they must act accordingly. Only you know what you can support. And if you can't support any [foals] during the breeding life of your horses, I suggest you lease them out, trade them for a gelding or senior Canadian in need of a retirement home, or sell or gift them to breeders who can. You owe that to your breed. So, no ... it's not easy being a rare breed steward. The sacrifices are many. The challenges tough. The rewards? Priceless ..."

Those of us concerned about the breed's preservation urge Canadian mare owners to seriously consider Victoria's suggestions. To ensure that the breed continues, and that every mare's genes contribute to the gene pool, we hope that all mare owners will consider breeding their mares at least once or twice. In order to best contribute to the breed, choose the highest quality stallion possible, and which best compliments the mare. In order to make the breeding count, it's not enough to choose a stallion based on convenience or the most affordable stud fee. Be open to using shipped cooled or frozen semen to achieve this. Register your foals after they are born, and especially before they are sold. Help to maintain Canada's beloved National breed before it is too late!

For anyone looking to buy a Canadian, they should be aware that the availability of well-trained mature horses is extremely limited. For example, the chances of someone finding their "ideal" black, 16 hand, 7 to 10 year old, well-schooled Canadian gelding are very slim, especially considering that there have been fewer than 50 geldings per year registered since 2008.

Those looking to buy now will most likely have to purchase a youngster, and by doing so, will not only help to sustain the breed, they will also help to support those mare owners trying to do their part to perpetuate the breed.

And for those who say Canadians are too expensive, remember the old adage "you get what you pay for". Yes, well-bred animals are going to cost more to purchase, just as they cost correspondingly

more to produce, but not only will buyers be investing in an invaluable part of our Canadian history, they are also going to end up with a sound, sturdy horse who will be a faithful companion for many years to come.

If you want more information on the Canadian Horse breed and our efforts to promote and try to preserve it, please see the Canadian Horse Heritage and Preservation Society webpage at

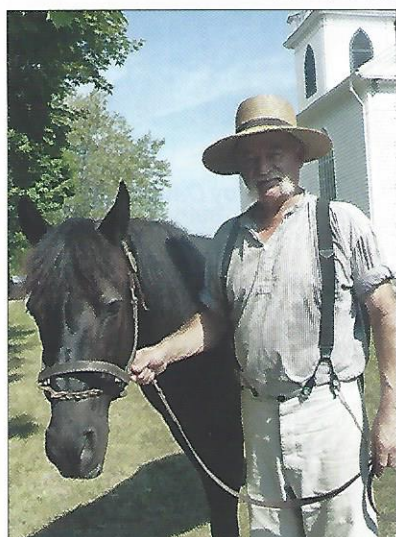
<http://www.chhps.org/> or Facebook page at: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Canadian-Horse-Heritage-Preservation-Society/483475991706071>

If you are a Canadian Horse owner or lover, please consider becoming a member and helping us to support and preserve our beautiful and uniquely Canadian Heritage breed!

R: Six horse hitch of Canadians at UCV. Photo: Ruth Freeman



*Below:
Left: Arnold Lafave. Centre photo, L-R: Stephanie Filliol, Robert Filliol, Bruce Henbest - Co-ordinator of Interpretation, UCV; Victoria Andrews, TROTT Director Right: Richard & Brenda Primeau*



RBC Chair Dr. John Mills original oil painting of a Canadian mare and foal was auctioned at the Horse Lovers Weekend held at Upper Canada Village on September 5th, during the 350th anniversary of the Canadian horse arriving in Canada from France. All the proceeds went to TROTT, Equine Therapy for adults & children with disabilities, in Ottawa.

Robert Filliol of Lunenburg, ON. was the successful bidder. He bought the painting for his daughter Stephanie, who was born with Spina Bifida. Stephanie, who loves horses, was also generous enough to make a personal donation to TROTT. Thank you very much Stephanie. We hope this is the beginning of a long & happy relationship with TROTT. Robert also bought the lovely Ash Walking Stick.

Thanks to Don Cook, UCV Teamster & RBC Member who organizes this successful annual event at UCV, and fellow UCV Teamster Arnold Lafave who donated both hand-carved pieces to join the charity auction. Thank you Arnold for this lovely unexpected surprise. Richard & Brenda Primeau of Long Sault, ON. were the successful bidders who took home the sculpture.

