

Chapter 6 - Monstrous Horses

A few examples of the truly monstrous horses that were developed in Europe in the middle ages still exist. These giants were bred, of course, to carry the knights and their armor. The weights they were asked to bear were tremendous, sometimes as much as four hundred pounds. Among those large war horses were the Jutland Horse that was bred in Denmark. This breed can be traced back to the 12th century, and ninth century images of Danish warriors show them on horses with similar characteristics.

The Percheron is another breed of huge horses. The first known records of this breed show that from the 6th century the Percheron came from an area called La Perche in Normandy, France. I have heard it suggested that the large graceful animal with an arched neck and well-shaped head and body were actually bred up from the ancestors of the beautiful Arabian horses

However, when we speak of big horses, we must mention the English breed, the Shire, the largest horses in the

world. Standing at as much as seven feet at the withers, about six inches taller than members of the other big breeds, the Shire frequently weighs over a ton. The largest one on record weighed 3,300 pounds.

Prior to his death a few years ago, Bernie Chapman, a world famous farrier, shod horses in Lubbock. As so often happens to great artists, the word was never widely spread while he was alive. Local people who owned horses with severely troubled hooves sought his expertise, as did beleaguered horse people around the world. On one occasion he was flown in a private jet to treat an expensive race horse in England. Another time a rhinoceros in an American zoo developed severe foot problems, and Bernie was called on to care for this unusual patient..

One spring afternoon, Jan Norton and I were riding our horses near Bernie's establishment. Jan's horse picked up a rock and she stopped to clean its hoof. As I waited, I heard a sound I could not identify. It was a loud clicking noise like a machine operating, but I couldn't hear a motor. When Jan had removed the rock and mounted, she started to ride on. I asked her to wait and listen to the unusual sound. "What is that?" I asked.

She listened and shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“It’s coming from the other side of Bernie’s place. Let’s ride around and check it out.”

We rode on until we cleared Bernie’s barn and then saw the cause of that strange sound. Grazing side by side in a small plot of grass behind Bernie’s barn were two of the largest horses I had ever seen. That clicking sound was being made by the teeth of those giants as they nipped grass. When Jan rode up and stopped beside me, she was laughing. “Now I remember,” she said. “That’s a pair of Shire horses the owner shipped down from Ohio to get Bernie’s expert help with their diseased hooves.”

When I realized we’d heard horses eating grass from forty yards away, on the other side of a barn, I sat in amazement.. I was riding Atticus that day. He was seventeen hands or five feet eight inches tall, a truly good size for a horse. Sitting on my magnificent gelding, not far from those towering Shires, I felt like we were standing in a hole.