

# small horse, big heart



the marsh tacky is a breed apart.

*Illustration by Robert Dinkler*

Miss Laura Towne was in a quandary. She had come south with the conquering Yankee Army in 1862 to teach literacy and citizenship to former slaves on Beaufort County's St. Helena Island. Working first out of her parlor at Oaks Plantation, later out of Frogmore's old Brick Church, which she had begun calling Penn Center, she made her rounds, visiting island families on a horse she called Little Charley. Now the Army was demanding she relinquish her horse. It was needed, a colonel informed her, to aid the faltering war effort.

Unbeknownst to the colonel, Miss Towne had two charley horses — and a sense of humor, as well. There was Little Charley and Big Charley, "a fine spirited Northern horse who has thrown riders and wrecked several carriages and buggies," she noted in her journal. The choice was easy. Miss Towne sent Big Charley off on an uncertain military career and kept her reliable smaller steed. She rode Little Charley and his successors on her island rounds for the next 40 years.

Little Charley was a marsh tacky, a diminutive, sure-footed, easy-keeping horse, equally useful in harness or under saddle, driven and ridden by slave and master, freedman, sportsman, doctor, school-teacher and mail carrier. Tackies go back to the very beginnings of Low Country Carolina. They come in a variety of colors and stand less than 14 hands (five feet) at the shoulder with narrow haunches, a sloping rump and a noble head. They have an uncanny, inherited knack for getting around in marsh, swamp and briar.

Folklore traces the tacky to hotblooded Arabians,

Andalusians and Barbs, horses of ill-fated conquistadors whose ships foundered and wrecked in the 16th and 17th centuries. The horses, the story goes, were able to swim ashore, while their masters perished in the pounding surf. Other less extreme scenarios have Spaniards herding horses overboard to lighten ships grounded on shifting and treacherous shoals, or putting them ashore to graze when they ran out of shipboard fodder.

Though the skeptic may insist the truth in legend is inversely proportional to its appeal, there indeed may be veracity in this tale. Biologists know the prehistoric horse evolved in North America and migrated across the great land bridge into central Asia, perhaps passing paleo-Indians headed in the other direction. By Columbus' day, the North American horse had become extinct. Indians led a miserable pedestrian existence, hauling scant belongings in packs strapped to the backs of small dogs, running, walking, crawling after buffalo and deer with predictable success. The plains tribes — Sioux, Cheyenne and Comanche — all got horses from early Spanish

settlements in the Southwest, by barter or theft, or by capturing and taming mustangs, feral escapees from Spanish corrals. Is it unreasonable to assume the earliest horses in the East likewise came from Spanish stock?

History is tantalizing but vague. The earliest Spanish incursion into what was to become South Carolina was the de Allyn expedition in 1526. After cruising north from Florida, de Allyn put colonists — and horses — ashore at Winyah Bay near present-day Georgetown. Alligators, mosquitoes, murder and mutiny ended that effort. De Allyn died of yellow fever and his men quit their new post — but may have left their horses behind.

The scenario was repeated 50 years later on Beaufort County's Parris Island, this time as a hasty evacuation before an attack by starving Cusabo Indians. Cusaboes reportedly butchered Spanish hogs and chickens, devouring the meat as soon as it could be hacked from the quivering carcasses. Perhaps the horses escaped that great, bloody feast.

Whatever the fate of those Parris Island horses, a century later the earliest English explorers into the Carolina Up Country found Cherokees and Chickasaws skillfully riding fine Spanish animals. Some mares eventually were brought back to Charleston and bred to thoroughbred stallions. The resulting foals were unbeatable on colonial racetracks.

Coolly analytical historians debunk the legends, claiming the tacky is a descendant of English horses — fine-blooded colonial escapees, their genetics unraveled by casual breeding, their growth stunted by plentiful but mediocre salt-marsh fodder. They may be right. Whichever story one chooses to believe, the marsh tacky is a unique and recognizable breed, the Carolina equivalent of the western mustang.

Forty-odd years ago, Herbert Ravenel Sass in the *Charleston News and Courier* reported marsh tackies on most Low Country islands, "some wild, some half wild, others wholly tame. Hard living and inbreeding have stunted their bodies but not their minds." He then sadly noted they "used to be so abundant . . . until the automobile displaced them."

The automobile proved the great nemesis of the marsh tacky. While more affluent horse lovers made riding a sport after it ceased being a necessity, hard-pressed island Gullah farmers could not afford such luxuries. Twenty years ago, a few tackies still could be seen on the

remote reaches of St. Helena and Edisto. Now there are none.

Or almost none. Forgotten, now nearly extinct, the marsh tacky at last is getting the appreciation it deserves, thanks to one D.P. Lowther of Ridgeland. Lowther, a farmer, contractor and long-time chair of Jasper County Council, is to Carolina horseflesh what an architect is to a National Register mansion. He has become a champion and preserver of the breed — unknowingly, at first. He grew up riding marsh tackies and appreciating their intelligence and tractability (their "level-headedness," as horse people say). "They're quick and smart," he says, "and tough as a board."

Lowther found himself buying tackies, perhaps without fully realizing why. "In the early '50s," he remembers, "I'd take the ferry to Hilton Head, hire a barge and come home with a couple of head. It was a good way to spend a Saturday."

Lowther bought the last native horse to come off Daufuskie Island; Hacksaw, he called him. He now keeps three dozen tackies — mares, fillies and one stallion — on his farm outside Ridgeland.

"I'm crazy, I guess," he says, looking lovingly out at the herd knotted up against the live oaks at the far end of the pasture. "Only one's broke to ride."

But preserving the marsh tacky is not about riding, no matter how sure the hoof or willing the heart. Preserving the tacky is about genetics. When the numbers thin out — in the zoo, in the wild or in the pasture — we face a tragic loss.

Right now, Lowther is on the lookout for new blood. His oldest fillies are daughters of his stallion. There are rumors of a few wild horses roaming an island in Beaufort County, and Lowther is dreaming of a roundup.

The marsh tacky is adaptable, agreeable, able to prosper on a diet of salt marsh and sweetgrass. It survived while more delicate animals succumbed to encephalitis, snakebite, drowning and gators. It is a unique and precious bit of Carolina in danger of passing with the wild places it once roamed.

Too bad time never allowed Laura Towne and D.P. Lowther a meeting. A Carolina farmer and a Yankee schoolteacher would have had a lot to talk about. ❖



Roger Finckney — horseman, rifleman, expatriate South Carolinian — rides an Arabian horse, the legendary grandparent of the tacky.