

Taking the "little" out of Canada's Little Iron Horse

Historians agree that what we know today as the French Canadian horse is the result of nearly 350 tumultuous years of development in Canada.

At times the animal worked unnoticed in the remote farming communities in Quebec and at others it was highly sought after. But whatever it's past, historians also agree that by 1979 fewer than 400 of the little heritage horses remained.

Today numbers are stable but many enthusiasts say they fear for the future of Canada's "Little Iron Horse" and Alex Hayward of North Gower is one.

In 1990, as a recognized authority on the subject, he was interviewed for a story in *Canadian Geographic*. He told the interviewer: "I think Canada has finally discovered something uniquely ours, and people are finally starting to pay attention." Unfortunately today, those words haunt him. It has long been recognized that the Canadian bloodline throws desirable qualities in crossbreeding. And now Mr. Hayward is worried about a move to change the registration standard of the breed.

"This is the only breed in Canada for which the standards were set by the federal government" said Mr. Hayward, "and no one has the right to change them. You see these paintings?" He points to a reproduction of a Cornelius Krieghoff's painting on his wall. It shows a winter scene of a family in their horse-drawn sleigh. "All the horses depicted in Krieghoff's work are of the French Canadian horse of his day, (around 1850). Look at today's version and you will see it hasn't changed much at all."

"But more recently people have had bad experiences with Canadian horses they have bought from disreputable breeders and this is giving the heritage breed a bad name," he said. "It's all about profit."

Because there's currently a demand for tall slender horses with the desirable Canadian qualities, the unscrupulous breeder is turning out Canadian horses that don't match the original standard" he explained. "We're not against anyone making a profit," he added, "but for them it's about money. For us it's about saving part of our Canadian heritage".

Mr. Hayward is upset that some breeders want to create a new registration to cover what he considers to be unsuitable breeding stock. He says this is unacceptable.

Dave Edwards of Pembroke agrees. He got involved with Canadian Horses in 1990 through his father and grandfather. "There is something different about them," he said, "a unique look and personality. They love people and especially kids." He is concerned about the loss of these qualities.

"The once-rigorous inspection of breeding stock is gone," he added. "They're breeding culls or crossbreeding with the Thoroughbred to get taller horses, only for saleability. If what they really want is a thoroughbred, then why don't they buy one? Why do they feel they have to change our little Canadian horse?"

Ontario breeders are not alone in their bid to preserve current registration standards.

Yves Bernatchez is president of a Quebec rare breeds association and a member of l'Association Quebecoise du Cheval Canadien. In a telephone interview with the *Era* he said the practice of breeding to produce a horse over 16 hands high (which is against the present breed standards) is undermining its best qualities, such as strength, soundness, stamina and easy-going temperament.

In a letter he also stated "l'Association Quebecoise du Cheval Canadien is completely opposed to any initiative to modify the standard of this proud old race. "If someone wants to change the horse, he has only to create a new breed, without the destruction of the collegial work of generations of breeders who can be well satisfied with their results. Using Cheval Canadien as the founding stock, American breeders created the Morgan, and the Standardbred horses. In so doing they never attacked the integrity of Cheval Canadien. Our official stand is: Do the breeding you like, but do not seek to alter or change the qualities of the Canadian horse."