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Article published Dec 12, 2011

They ride Morgans, don't they?

When Col. Lemuel Platt raised the 1st Vermont Cavalry, he did not have to look far for the proper mounts for his cavalrymen. Vermont featured the best breed available: the Morgan horse. The horse had proven itself and Platt, a prosperous Colchester farmer, understood the breed. Morgans possessed levels of strength and endurance above and beyond other horses.

When Platt issued a call for horses, he set certain requirements. The prospective mounts needed to be "four to nine years of age, fifteen hands high at least, and . . . strictly sound." Other attributes were "short backed, well knit, strong limbed . . . good size and spirit." Both geldings and mares would be acceptable.

Platt and a small group of inspectors selected each horse for the regiment.

One man who observed the selection of horses in Burlington described the mounts in an article that appeared in the Burlington Free Press. He wrote that "a finer looking set of animals of that number for the purpose, we do not believe can be seen in any cavalry regiment in the nation." Another reporter echoed those sentiments when he stated "no Vermonter will blush to see go out of State, as a fair type and representative of the Green Mountain steeds.

Platt proved an excellent judge of horseflesh. He surveyed each potential mount, rejecting those he deemed unacceptable. The colonel also proved a shrewd buyer. Though permitted upwards to \$125 for each horse, the 1,200 horses purchased for the 1st Vermont Cavalry averaged out to \$110. All portions of the state provided horses. One Brandon resident, William Field, supplied "about one hundred" mounts. If such a large purchase generated any feeling of favoritism, Platt rejected 24 of Field's horses. Those rejects and all the others "took up his line of march for the outer gate, to return to his former less ostentatious employment in civil life."

Upon selection, branding irons were immediately available. The letters "U.S." were branded onto the right foreleg and the right shoulder. The horse then became official government property.

Mounting a regiment

Horace K. Ide, a member of the 1st Vermont Cavalry and regimental historian, described the process of a soldier acquiring his mount. "The men and horses were drawn up in a line and each man took his horse according to the position he held in line. After this they were allowed to swap some, but the practice was generally

discouraged.”

Two days after the regiment departed Burlington, men and horses paraded down Broadway on Dec. 16. The entire regiment received accolades from the local city press, but many praised the superior horses, which the men rode.

The New York Evening Post: “The horses have been selected by competent judges from the best stock in Vermont.

The New York Herald: “These animals are all of the Morgan breed, and embrace hundreds of splendid specimens of the equine race.”

In passing through Newark, N.J., the local Advertiser printed: “The horses are small, compact and sinewy and evidently capable of great endurance. It was the general remark that so splendid a body of animals had never been seen together in this city.”

The regiment certainly made an impression on its way to the south.

In mounting a regiment, the Army strived for uniformity, not only in the clothing worn by its soldiers, but also in its horses. When possible, regimental quartermasters placed horses of similar colors in the same company. This proved a much easier task early in the war, when time permitted selection over need.

Ide provided a breakdown of the companies and the color of the horses in his regimental history. He recalled: “Company A, brown; Companies B, D, and F, bay; Company G, gray; Company H, sorrel; Company E, chestnut; and Companies I and K, black.”

Charles Tompkins, who served as colonel of the unit, commented on the Morgan horses in his regiment. “The mounts of the First Vermont Cavalry were decidedly the best I had ever seen,” he declared, “Everybody was attracted to them.” However, he disputed the claim that the horses stood at least 15 hands high. “This is utterly erroneous and very wide of the mark,” he declared, “The great majority of the horses in that regiment would, in ordinary times, have been rejected for being of insufficient height; few were up to 15 hands, and the height of the average was about 14-2.” A hand is equivalent to 4 inches.

Vermont did not hold a monopoly on the breed for military use.

One Illinois cavalry officer expressed immense pride when he acquired a Morgan for his mount. He informed his mother, “The other day, a very fine horse being offered at the Inspection Ground, I bought him. He is a chestnut horse about 15½ hands high, five years old, weighs between 1,000 and 1,100 and is pretty as a picture. He is of the Morgan breed, proud and high spirited, yet fearless. He will stand within four feet of a puffing locomotive and never thinks of being frightened. He is deep-chested and has a very fine head and ears and a neck that might serve as a model in painting. In fact, he is a prince among horses, and I doubt not that I shall be envied (for) my treasure when I rejoin my regiment. . . . On the street his proud bearing attracts much attention and the rascal gets more admiring glances than his rider.”

War was not easy on horses. It is estimated only 200 of the original 1,200 horses used to mount the 1st Vermont Cavalry in 1861 survived the war.
