

The
Newfoundland Pony
Cultural Tradition and
Practice

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THE NEWFOUNDLAND PONY

The Newfoundland pony is the sole member of the Moorland family of horses in North America. Moorland ponies and small horses are found in the mountainous and upland districts of the British Isles. The breeds include the Dartmoor and Exmoor ponies from the West of England, which most closely resemble the Newfoundland pony. Moorland ponies are stocky in build with flowing mane and tail and are strong despite their small stature. They are hardy and require little feeding, being able to subsist on rough moorland grazing and withstand the cold Winters out of doors. Many spend the whole year grazing on common land, while others are domesticated animals.¹

In appearance the Newfoundland pony is of stocky and muscular build with a deep, narrow chest, short back, sloping rump and low-set tail. The most usual colours are black, bay or brown, though others occur. To be registered with the Newfoundland Pony Society (NPS), ponies must meet the following specification:

Demonstrated or documented ancestry to the Newfoundland pony, acceptable to the society; of good temperament, docile and easy to work with; good Winter animals, being all-round hardy; sure-footed; structure varying from fine-boned types to larger, stocky types; height from 11.0 to 14.2 hands; coat colour black, brown, bay, chestnut, dun, grey, roan and white (pink skin); piebalds and skewbalds are not acceptable; has a heavy coat which sometimes changes colour and character seasonally; thick mane and tail; low-set tail; feathered fetlocks with hair extending below fetlock points; flint-hard hooves; typically have dark limb points, white or light colour on limbs being acceptable; is free of defects which might endanger the ability to live a normal, healthy life².

The history of the breed is unrecorded. The early proprietary colonies of the seventeenth century are said to have owned horses and there are scattered references to horses during that century, though they were perhaps not numerous until the nineteenth. For instance, a chronicler of eighteenth-century settlement has written that:

“Only at St. John’s did anyone use horses; almost everyone there, and everyone elsewhere, dragged it [firewood] out by hand or with the help of dogs.³”

The first colonial census, that of 1836, recorded 1,551 horses (undifferentiated by type), of which the great majority were in St. John’s and Conception Bay.⁴ No doubt this reflects the greater development of agriculture (and of roads) in these districts. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, horses were widespread about the island. One writer has credited the keeping of horses as a factor in creating the traditional settled, year-round outport in the mid-nineteenth century. Horses rendered the settlers’ former practice of removing to the woods for the Winter

¹ Andrew Fraser, The Newfoundland Pony, Creative Publishers, St. John’s, 1992, pp.18, 75-80.

² Newfoundland Pony Society website.

³ C. Grant Head, Eighteenth Century Newfoundland, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1976, p.18.

⁴ J.R. Smallwood (ed.), Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, volume 2, Newfoundland Book Publishers (1967) Ltd., St. John’s, 1984, pp.1034-1036.

unnecessary, as firewood and other timber could now more conveniently be brought to their year-round dwellings⁵. The number of horses owned increased steadily during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to more than 16,000 in total at the 1921 census. The first census to differentiate horses and ponies was that of 1935, at which there were 9,035 ponies – they in fact outnumbered horses. By this time, therefore, ponies were owned widely in the island part of the province, though not, it seems, in Labrador⁶.

Ponies did have some industrial uses. The Bell Island mines, for instance, used ponies⁷ as did some lumber mills⁸, though the forest industries used larger horses. Mainly, however, ponies were used in the rural domestic economy. Ponies fulfilled numerous functions in the rural economy, being used for transport, haulage, fetching wood from the forests in Winter and much general work. One writer has said that an older rural generation valued the pony not only for its utility but also for its temperament, capacity for work and charm. Another writer has noted that ponies formed close bonds with human families, which larger horses did not and that they enhanced family life. Most of their duties, however, were in agriculture. These included ploughing in Spring, carrying seaweed and caplin from the shore to fields, fertilizing gardens, mowing and haymaking and carrying crops from fields to barns. Ponies roamed the outports freely in large herds in Summer before being brought from pastures in Autumn; they were “easy keepers” who bred and found their own subsistence.⁹

Once numerous, the Newfoundland ponies declined in numbers during the second half of the twentieth century until fewer than 100 remained in the 1980s. Mechanization of transport and agriculture ended the pony’s role in these activities, while municipal laws restricted animals’ freedom to wander. Some ponies were sold to horse dealers to avoid the cost of keeping what were no longer working animals. The near-disappearance of the pony led to the formation of the Newfoundland Pony Society, which was incorporated in 1981. The first aim of the society was to gain status and recognition for the Newfoundland pony, so that its value would rise above that offered by the horsemeat trade¹⁰.

The objectives of the NPS include preserving and protecting the breed, regulating breeding, maintaining a register of qualified animals and assisting breeders, owners and sanctuaries. Under the provincial Heritage Animals Act of 1997 the NPS was made responsible for registering, promoting and protecting the breed. The act gave legal protection to the breed (which is the only heritage animal registered under the legislation) and required permits for ponies to be exported from the province. The breed is therefore recognized under provincial legislation, but gaining recognition under federal legislation has proved more problematical. The

⁵ Phillip E.L. Smith, “In Winter Quarters”, Newfoundland Studies 3,1, 1987, p.23.

⁶ Smallwood (ed.), 1984, pp.1034-6.

⁷ Gail Weir, The Miners of Wabana. Breakwater Books, St. John’s, 1989.

⁸ Dorothy Pedersen, “Pony Tales”. The Beaver, Aug-Sept, 2000.

⁹ Fraser, 1992, pp.10, 115-9, 123; Dennis Flynn, The Long Haul. James Lane Publishing, St. John’s, 2012, pp.5, 18-19.

¹⁰ Fraser, 1992, p.175; Flynn, 2012, p.5.

heritage breed shows some variability, as a DNA study¹¹ has confirmed, more than would be allowed under the federal Animal Pedigree Act. Achieving the necessary degree of uniformity would require a breeding programme lasting for several decades. The NPS fears that the heritage qualities of the breed would not be preserved during this process and it has now abandoned the objective of seeking incorporation under the federal act.

Efforts made by the NPS, together with owners and breeders, have stabilized the numbers of the breed but they remain low. Estimates vary, but it is said that the total population is 350 to 400 animals, with perhaps 200 to 250 of those being of breeding age. Most ponies are found in Newfoundland and Ontario with smaller populations in other provinces and in the USA. The Newfoundland pony is considered critically endangered by the Livestock Conservancy and by Rare Breeds Canada¹².

SUMMARY

Certainly it can be said that the Newfoundland pony, the only member of the Moorland family of horses in North America, is a distinctive breed native to at least the island part of the province. The origins of the breed are unrecorded, but it seems that they became more numerous during the nineteenth century as agriculture was encouraged. Ponies were extensively used in outport agriculture as well as transport and other household activities in addition to a few industrial uses. As well as playing an essential role in the rural domestic economy, the pony is credited with some part in bringing about the settled outport community of the Victorian era.

In the second half of the twentieth century mechanization of transport and agriculture, ended the ponies' role in those activities and other factors also discouraged the keeping of ponies. By the 1980s the once-numerous ponies were close to extinction. The Newfoundland Pony Society was set up in 1981 to reverse this decline and their efforts, together with those of others, have been partially successful. Even so, numbers of ponies remain low and they are considered an endangered breed by several organizations. Provincial legislation in 1997 recognized the breed's heritage status and gave legal protection to the pony. Achieving recognition under the equivalent federal legislation has, however, proved problematical and the NPS has ended efforts at incorporation under the Animal Pedigree Act.

¹¹ Referenced in Flynn, 2012, p.20, The full reference to the study is J.M. Prystupa et al., "Maternal Lineages in Native Canadian Equine Populations and Their Relationship to the Nordic and Mountain and Moorland Pony Breeds." *Journal of Heredity*, May-June, 2012, 103(3), pp.380-90.

¹² Newfoundland Pony Society website.

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