

# The Using Horse

## *McCurdy Plantation Horses Emerge as a Pleasure Breed Apart.*

*By Terry Temple*

In doing the research for this article, many of the stories to be found about McCurdy Plantation Horses begin with a description of the Deep South. They speak of Tara-like mansions under moss-draped oaks and gaited horses gliding along emerald lanes. I too can wax nostalgic, because the reason behind these fancies is practical: Plantation life required a lot out of its horses. And Alabama plantation life is how McCurdy Horses emerged as a well-protected distinct breed of saddle horses, heralded by their owners as the perfect combination of strength, temperament and above all, a comfortable ride.



The McCurdy horse is strong, yet refined, with a broad chest, short back and rounded hip.

“To ride a McCurdy is to fall instantly and irrevocably in love,” says Cindy Johnson, president of the South Carolina chapter of the McCurdy Plantation Horse Association (McPHA). “I’ve owned so many other breeds, but when it’s time to hook up the trailer, it’s always a McCurdy that I load.”

Tommy Bishop, also of South Carolina, describes himself as an “end-user.” His McCurdy Rusty is a 14’2” seven-year-old gelding, who carries this 6’3”, 230 pound, 60-year-old horseman all day long with safety and ease. “He’s my ‘using horse’ – short-coupled, strong and a pleasure to ride.”

Tommy’s idea of “pleasure” doesn’t necessarily concur with what a show judge might be looking for. In fact, Tommy (and others throughout the horse world) doesn’t always agree with the direction some breeders take to achieve the currently fashionable color, look or way-of-going. That’s not to say that McCurdys aren’t beautiful or McCurdy owners don’t show their horses – on the contrary. But it does mean that the McCurdy philosophy is to keep the bloodline true and clean of tampering to achieve a certain look, color or form. And to keep it that way as you’ll see later on, to register a purebred McCurdy is not as simple as filling out a form and paying a fee.



While most McCurdy horses are grey or roan, any color except piebald is acceptable.

### **Made by God, Not Gimmicks**

So goes the slogan on the official website for the McPHA. “McCurdys were bred for one thing: Transportation,” says Rick McDuffie, who is carrying on his family’s tradition of breeding and promoting McCurdys. “There was a time when if you lived outside of town, horses were a necessity, whether you owned the plantation or worked the land. The McCurdy was bred to be the family vehicle, to drive or be ridden to church on Sunday then to work on the farm all week. An even temperament and intelligence weighed far more than what the horses looked like, what color they were or how big or small.”

That said, McCurdys range from

14.2 – 16 hands, with 15 hands the norm. While many are grey, any color except piebald is acceptable and roans are prevalent. Mane and tails are lush and white markings are common on face and below knees. Confirmation-wise, McCurdys are strong but refined with a broad chest, short back and rounded hip. Well-established since the early 20th century, the breed reproduces true from generation to next.



McCurdys are naturally gaited from birth, with no special training required. According to the McPHA brochure, "They require little training except to 'get on and ride off'. Their natural saddle gait is commonly referred to as the 'the McCurdy lick,' a very smooth, comfortable gait that literally can be ridden all day without rider fatigue."

The brochure goes on to say McCurdys "have a very calm, easy-going temperament that makes them unequalled as family horses. They excel at many tasks such as trail riding, field trailing, driving, and working livestock. Many have natural 'cow-savvy' or cow-herding instincts." Today, McCurdys are used for every discipline in the field, and show to great success at gaited shows in English and Western Pleasure.

In 1999, Cindy Johnson found out about McCurdys while doing an internet search on gaited horses. Now she describes a typical day of riding as "five-to-six hours on the trail is a normal outing, and that's traveling about seven miles per hour, non-stop, in hilly terrain. We ride at least two or three days a week and sometimes more. In organized rides and endurance trials, we can ride six or seven hours a day, two to three days in a row and these horses just keep going, passing their P&R with no problem. Cindy's mare, Aria Isa Dream, utilizes her body so well that she can maintain her gait all day long without tiring, her seven mph gait having been described as a 'resting gait.'



The natural saddle gait of the McCurdy horse is a straight forward, lateral, four-beat, single-footing gait that is very smooth and is commonly referred to as the "McCurdy lick." McCurdy horses also can perform the flat walk, running walk, the natural rack and an ambling stepping pace.

"They are sure-footed and agile – we can ride up cliffs, traverse two-foot wide paths, take any footing. I always know I'm safe," she beams. "I will never have another breed." She is shopping for her 50 acres now so she can start her breeding operation in earnest and is now one of the leaders in propagating and promoting "this marvelous breed."

Thanks indeed to that internet search, Cindy met Rick's Dad, the Reverend Richard McDuffie, Sr., who mentored her in all things McCurdy, found her horses and became her riding and training partner. The good pastor McDuffie, who died suddenly in 2006 (and rode hard until his last days), was one force of the vital team behind recognizing the century-old saddle horse line as a distinct breed.

#### **A Brief History**

Back in the day before engines and four-wheel-drive, farmers and plantation owners covered a lot of ground to manage their acreage, sometimes riding 30-40 miles a day at speed. Their horses needed power and stamina, and comfort for the rider was absolutely key. Long before there were registries of any kind, plantation breeders were crossing all types of Saddlebred and Walker-type horses to achieve the stated goal – the world's best transportation horse.

McCurdy Plantation Horses began to emerge in antebellum Alabama at the turn of the 20th century. The life-long horseman Mr. Ed S. McCurdy Sr. of Lowndesboro, Alabama, owned a plantation that indeed looks a lot like Tara and still exists today. He spent his life seeking the right balance of a horse that was a serious farm cruiser and a pleasure to ride or drive – hard and far and all day long.

McCurdy's Doctor, who was born in 1905, was destined to become the McCurdy Plantation Horse foundation sire. When the Tennessee Walker registry was established in the '30s, the McCurdy family horses were among the first registered foundation members of that breed. The Doctor and his sons John McCurdy and McCurdy's Fox were outstanding stallions in every way and Alabama breeders clamored to bring their finest gaited mares to tap into the line.



McCurdy plantation horses are naturally gaited from birth.

Over and over, their enduring qualities of strength, natural gait and intelligence emerged. Today, you can find the McCurdy family influence on saddle horses all over Alabama and the Southeast, and most purebred McCurdys can trace their lineage back to the Doctor.

"The regional aspect is really the phenomenon that created the true McCurdy," says Rick McDuffie. "For decades, Alabama farm owners and workers carefully protected the line, breeding only for temperament and performance." The fact that the Doctor and sons so consistently threw type is what finally turned an unregistered line into a breed.

#### **Beyond Alabama**

For the first part of the 20th century, McCurdys were an Alabama secret, but in the sixties, a horse trader named Henry James White established a contact and started bringing them to sell in North Carolina. That's when the senior Mr. McDuffie was introduced to the line.

"Sometimes we had more McCurdys and sometimes less, but from then on, Dad was never without a McCurdy," says son Rick. "One thing I wanted to say about Dad was that he didn't tolerate mediocrity in himself, in his children, or in his dogs and horses. It was his love of excellence that drew him to the McCurdy horses. When I was a boy, we had several breeds but once he owned the first McCurdy horse, there was no going back. There was never anything to compare, in Dad's (and my) estimation, with the McCurdys."

"Mr. McDuffie often referred to the McCurdy as the perfect back yard horse," Cindy continues. "By that he meant that McCurdys can stand in a pasture for months without being ridden and you can go out, saddle them up and ride just as easily as though they had been ridden every day for those months."

Mr. McDuffie became a tireless advocate of the line, making many buying and "talking" trips to Alabama every year. He and fellow horsemen Roy Rogers (no, not that one) of Greenville, Alabama and Ron Mann of Cullen, Alabama banded together with the vision of protecting the McCurdys as a breed. They developed own contacts with the McCurdy family and in the early '90s, the McCurdy Registry and Association was born. The requirements for registry are stringent.



In order to achieve a foundation registration of a McCurdy Plantation Horse, you must provide

proof of accepted lineage, a video tape showing all gaits and way of going, and one of the sitting Board of Directors must see and approve your horse in person. Again, temperament and “fortitude of mind” are the key traits and regardless of lineage, a horse will not be recognized unless he or she possesses it all. Of course a purebred McCurdy bred to another purebred McCurdy produces a purebred McCurdy, eligible for registration like any other breed.

Since the registry began, several hundred horses have achieved it and the popularity of the breed has grown. Most McCurdys still reside in the Southeast, but member farms and stallions can be found as far as Oregon and Minnesota.

Cindy Johnson sums it up: “There’s simply none better for versatility and pleasure. As my equine vet, Lisa Handy, tells everyone: ‘When you buy a McCurdy, you buy a brain.’”

In her spare time Terry Temple enjoys riding her two arabians Ayla and Khody. Terry owns Temple Media, a full service marketing agency.

