



## Just horsing around

Welsh cob and her son teach a thing or two **by steven moore**

After chickens, sheep, pigs, and cattle, we thought we would get to know horses a bit here on the farm. But rather than go “whole-horse” and buy our own, we decided to borrow.

Friends down the road have two horses but not quite enough grass to keep them all season, so we volunteered our pastures. Last year, they were rebuilding the road next to our place and with all the heavy equipment lumbering around, it didn't seem like a very placid atmosphere for horses. This year we could promise a quiet, country holiday so Clover and Storm arrived about a month ago.

Clover is a Welsh Cob. The Oxford English Dictionary says that “cob” is used in a number of senses with diverse origins but cites the first usage in 1420 as meaning “stout”. According to Oklahoma State University, the original home of the

Welsh Mountain Pony was in the hills and valleys of Wales before the Romans. Winters were severe. Vegetation was sparse. Shelter was only a valley or a clump of bare trees. Yet the Welsh Pony managed to flourish.

Other sources add that the original Welsh Mountain Pony may have evolved from the prehistoric Celtic pony. They developed intelligence, speed and soundness, and are known for “heart” and endurance. They are tough and thrifty, with a steady, tractable, and calm nature.

In the 1500s, King Henry VIII, thinking to improve the breeds of horses, particularly war horses, ordered the destruction of all stallions under 15 hands (one hand equals four inches (10.16 cm), and the horse is measured from the ground to the top of the withers) and all mares under 13 hands. Fortunately the ponies in the wild,

remote, and inaccessible mountains of Wales escaped this order.

On the upland farms of Wales, Welsh Ponies and Cobs would often have to do everything from plowing a field to carrying a farmer to market to driving a family to Sunday church. When coal mining became important, many Welsh ponies were used in mines to pull carts.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more Arabian blood was added by stallions that were turned out in the Welsh hills. Other breeds have also been added, including the Hackney, Thoroughbred, Norfolk Roadster, and the Yorkshire Coach Horse.

In 1901, the Welsh Pony and Cob Society was formed, with the first Stud Book published the following year. In 1949, the sections of the Stud Book (A, B, C, and D) were introduced and Clover is a Section D, no shorter than 13.2 hands and the largest of the Welsh breeds.

Clover's son, Storm, is a Quarter-horse cross. Well-named, he is larger and, at three years old, more like a rambunctious, clumsy teenager always testing the limits.

Both are palomino and, to show how much I didn't know about horses, I thought palomino was a breed designation rather than strictly a colour designation. Clover and Storm are light cream in the body with the palomino white manes and tails. Quite striking, really, and the colouring often favoured for parade horses.

I was quite casual around both of them until Storm took a nip at me and then quickly turned his back. A sudden close-range look at the south end of a horse going north was disconcerting. People have since told me it is a sign of disrespect.

Well, why would he respect me when I'm shoveling his manure twice a day? I decided on an "all you need is love" approach and he has since settled down. He comes over to see me more quickly than Clover, and I can groom him and lift his hooves to clean them with a hoof pick without too much trouble.

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Clover is quite placid, although a chicken sent them both racing away in panic by flying a foot off the ground to the bottom rail of our split rail fence. Since horses are prey animals, their defence is flight and one experienced rider told me, "You might as well be sitting on top of a thousand-pound rabbit."

We are finding these horses to be lighter and more selective eaters than our Herefords and practically teetotalers when it comes to water. I guess they get much of their moisture from the dew on the grass in the morning. They don't tear grass off like cattle, they crop grass with their fore teeth and grind it with the back teeth.

Unlike cattle, who are ruminants with several stomachs, horses have only one small stomach that functions best if it is never quite full. Once the food has traveled through the stomach and the small intestine it enters the large intestine.

Put an ear, or stethoscope to the side of the horse's belly and you should hear the rumble and gurgle of a healthy functioning gut. The whole process of digestion can take

up to 48 hours from pasture grass to my manure fork.

When I tell someone we have horses, their first question is always "Can you ride them?" Well, yes, but the unknown variable is for how long. Both are saddle-broken but not really gentled or trained, and a helmet and Velcro pants seem to be required equipment for riders.

When ridden by her owner, Clover is reluctant to travel away from the barn and way too enthusiastic to return to it. Storm has been saddled several times but not ridden while he has been here.

On one of our family trips to the U.S. Southwest, I realized a childhood dream by riding a horse in Monument Valley and pretending to be John Wayne. The only thing missing was the bad guys chasing us while I held the reins in my teeth at full gallop, shooting back at them over my shoulder with one hand while rolling a cigarette with the other. After imaginary horse riding like that, I'm happy, but not dying, to ride these two palominos.

They are beautiful to watch and often that's enough. It's a pleasure to go to the fence and have both of them lope over for a pat. We are learning all their sounds. The Snort is a strong exhale that creates a vibration or flutter sound in the nostrils. It means "Is this danger?" followed by an intense stare at the object he or she is unsure about. The Blow is much like the snort but the blow does not create the vibrating or fluttering noise that the snort does. It is usually used when a horse is curious, or when the horse meets another. The Nicker is a vibrating sound with the mouth closed, from the vocal cords. Usually a sound of greeting or friendship.

We are also learning the meaning of colt, foal, filly, stallion, mare,

sire, and dam just like we learned sow, boar, ewe, ram, pullet, hen, rooster, jack, jennet, bull, heifer, steer, and ox. Then there are all the parts of a horse's complicated leg such as canon, ergot, coronet, fetlock, and pastern (and that's just from the knee down).

Horses. Mostly smarter than cattle, definitely better smelling than pigs, usually easier to ride than sheep. And just watching them run conjures up a faint image of John Wayne.