

Voices at the *Seashore*

MORGAN
HORSE
RANCH

BY ELLEN GREENBLATT



51 Years of Service

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How do you give a gift to a friend who gives *you* gifts every time you see them? That's the delightful dilemma facing Point Reyes National Seashore as the beloved Morgan Horse Ranch prepares for its 51st Birthday Celebration.

The National Park Service and partner, PRNSA (the Point Reyes National Seashore Association), have found the perfect answer: they are throwing

a party on June 27 for all of us and for the ranch. The hosts will be the National Park Rangers who make the ranch function and thrive, others who help care for and support the horses, and, of course, the horses themselves! The not-so-secret agenda of the party is to—well, party!—and to welcome all park visitors to meet the amazing Morgan horses of Point Reyes National Seashore.

People who happen, by chance, to walk up to the Morgan Horse Ranch, located between the Bear Valley Visitor Center and the start of the Bear Valley Trail, describe the visit as surprising, thrilling, magical, beautiful, and, often, unexpected.

“I didn’t know you could just walk up the path and that there were all kinds of exhibits explaining the history of the ranch and of Morgan horses,” observed one visitor—and that was before they even caught sight of the horses—or the rangers who care for them.

So how did a horse ranch end up in Bear Valley 51 years ago? And why Morgan horses? And why are they called Morgan horses?

The Morgan breed name is the easiest: the first “Morgan” documented was actually named “Figure” but was owned by a Vermont gentleman named Justin Morgan. “Figure,” born in around 1789, was, by all accounts, a fabulous horse and sired many offspring—hence the name and the breed, known, despite its relatively small size, for its versatility, its strength and endurance, and its good temperament. Just chat with any of the horses or, more easily, with the rangers who care for them, and they will confirm!

Now, how did the Morgan Horse Ranch begin in Bear Valley? That story is intertwined with the passion for the environment and for horses of one man and his resulting role in the founding of the park and the ranch.

Boyd Stewart, born into a dairy ranching family in Nicasio in 1903, seems to have been a major impetus for the Morgan Horse Ranch. Although the Stewart family did not begin breeding Morgans until the 1950s, it is reported that Stewart told old-time Vaquero Ray Ordway



Morgan Horse Ranch dedication

that Morgan horses had been in their family “..a hundred years.”

According to Brenda Tippin’s *Past and Present: Point Reyes Morgan Horse Ranch*, as a teenager, Boyd rode his horse five miles each day to the San Geronimo Valley where he caught the North Coast Pacific Train so he could attend Tamalpais high school in Mill Valley which was another 16 ½ miles.

Later, as an adult, Boyd Stewart, as a passionate visionary for preserving the glory of the Point Reyes peninsula, sought to partner with the National Park Service to protect and maintain ranchlands and the seashore even before Clem Miller spearheaded the effort to make Point Reyes a National Seashore during the Kennedy administration. In addition, and here is where horses reappear in his story, Boyd Stewart became a major force behind the establishment of the Morgan Horse Ranch at Point Reyes National Seashore.



Elvis with Ranger Bonnie Phillips

The history of the Morgan Horse Ranch mirrors the complexity of the history of California, starting with the rich fishing, hunting, and gathering culture of the Coast Miwok, who have lived on what is now Marin and Sonoma County land for at least 3,000 years. When Francis Drake landed in what is now California in 1579, he named and claimed, without any acknowledgement of the rich Miwok culture already there, all the area north of Mexico Nova Albion or New England. Subsequently, Spain and Mexico laid claim to the land as have private landowners.

But now, the Morgan Horse Ranch, at 51 in its prime of life, is part of the Point Reyes National Seashore. The Morgan Horse Ranch at its height included a herd of 30-40 horses and became a breeding and training source for other **National Parks seeking Morgans** for their own rangers. As other National Parks began their own breeding programs, the demand for horses from the Morgan Horse Ranch at Point Reyes dwindled. Consequently, the last filly—Los Reyes Liberty Rose, Rose for short—was born at the ranch in 1999.



Rose and Ranger Emily Henderson

In addition to Rose, the other four horses at the Morgan Horse Ranch today are: Honcho (at 26, still the leader), Elvis (22 and Rose’s half-sibling), Mira (age 18 and the “Princess” of the herd) and the newest acquisition, Knight (age 7), whose official name, Sizzlin’ Hot Knight Hawk, gives him, according to Interpretive Ranger Fiona O’Kelly, “the best name of any NPS employee at Point Reyes National Seashore, and perhaps the whole National Park Service.” Although Knight has already been out on the trail, he is still training.

The three law enforcement rangers in charge of the Morgan Horse Ranch—Chief Julie Byerly, Ranger Emily Henderson and Ranger Bonnie Phillips—speak with passionate voices about their work, their love of the important role the Morgan horses play in the park—and their



Chief Julie Byerly and Ranger Emily Henderson

love of the horses themselves. They came to the Morgan Horse Ranch through different paths—volunteering in parks, a love of horses, a career in journalism, an attraction to wildlife management and/or law enforcement—but they share a sense that they have the best jobs in the world and have together become a mighty team of advocates, administrators, caregivers—in other words, professional rangers.

With the horses, “we do it all,” said Ranger Henderson and Chief Byerly in a recent joint interview.

“We can reach an injured or lost hiker in a difficult-to-access location in the 70,000 acre park, and we can assist with search and rescue missions,” but the rangers and horses also foster a love of the park by appearing at happenings like the sand castle contest, the Marin County Fair, and other scheduled events. Smiling, Ranger Henderson reported the joy of kids visiting from the East Bay who had never been to a national park nor

seen a horse. “This was significant because it was a diverse group of kiddos that were able to have a positive interaction with a police officer and build a connection with our outdoor spaces. Both really cool things that show how the horses can be a bridge for inclusion.”

Equally as important as the mission of the Morgan Horse Ranch are the casual, unscheduled encounters the mounted rangers have with park visitors, some of whom “squeal with pleasure” when the horses approach, some of whom have rarely or never seen a horse before. Ranger Phillips noted in a separate interview, “We want the Morgan Horse Ranch to be a vibrant place” that people are eager to visit. “Horses help with inclusivity with everyone. [They evoke] a positive interaction and build up trust. Plus, you have a presence on a horse.” Of course, should there be any issue needing enforcement, appearing on horseback projects a greater command presence, but more often, the role of the horses and rangers involves helping to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

Visitors, literally and metaphorically look up to rangers on the Point Reyes Morgan horses, and such admiration will certainly be the case on June 27, the Morgan Horse Ranch Birthday Party. Festivities might include a horseshoe painting station, farrier demonstration, horse trading cards, and the opportunity to view interpretive exhibits, including the forge used to make horseshoes, and vintage leather saddle bags and equipment.

There will also be opportunities to become a volunteer—and who has not always wanted to muck out horse stalls, care for the horses, and maybe even get to take them on the trails?

Visitors to the park will recall last summer’s devastating fires. The most dramatic recent event for the horses and the rangers occurred on August



21, 2020 when in the midst of those fires in Point Reyes with, as Ranger Phillips described, the smell of burning bay leaves everywhere and the sky dark with smoke, the park and rangers concluded that the four horses (this was before Knight's arrival) had to be evacuated. Ranger Phillips described loading the horses into a trailer with Chief Byerly as the ranch itself was threatened by fire and driving, white-knuckled, across the Golden Gate Bridge to the U.S. Park Police (USPP) Mounted Patrol Headquarters at the Presidio of San Francisco. When the horses returned on September 12, the rangers reported that "they ran through the fields in apparent excitement." The horses' "voices" here are clear: their actions speak louder than any words.

Chief Julie Byerly, who came from Yosemite to work at Point Reyes, eloquently summed up the mission of the Morgan Horse Ranch and its rangers: to protect and, when necessary, restore the historical and culturally quintessential image of a National Park Ranger, prepared for any kind of visitor interaction, adding "If we don't actively maintain horse ranches, we will lose them."

A National Park Ranger on a horse, in full uniform with a flat hat, is an iconic image that evokes the image of a "friendly ranger" here to serve and protect the public and public resources. At Point Reyes National Seashore, we owe that image to the horses of the Morgan Horse Ranch.

Come celebrate the Morgan Horse Ranch's 51st Birthday with us on June 27!

