

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides monthly, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

Iowa's Endangered Breed



Photo courtesy of the American Cream Draft Horse Association.

The American Cream Draft Horse is an Iowa story and an Iowa legacy developed by farmers and their families in Central Iowa 100 years ago. The only draft horse breed in the world originating in the United States, founded and developed in Iowa, the American Cream is a part of Iowa's agricultural history.

Draft horses, in general, hold a unique place in Iowa agricultural history. A draft horse is a large-breed horse specifically bred and used for pulling heavy loads and used to farm before the age of mechanization. Between 1870 and 1945, the

State of Iowa became a leading producer of heavy draft horses. Iowa shipped draft horses around the country to build and power cities, as well as supplied draft horses for national agricultural production. The peak years of draft horse breeding from 1900 to 1915 saw Iowa with 1.5 million draft horses on Iowa farms.



Photo courtesy of Iowa Barns.

The American Cream descends from a foundation mare named Old Granny and was first noticed at an auction in Story County, Iowa, in 1911 and purchased by Harry Lakin. She was a cream-colored draft horse, now known as champagne-colored, estimated to be about 6 years old.



Photo courtesy of the American Cream Draft Horse Association.

Old Granny's breeding is not known, but her cream-colored coat, pink skin and amber eyes are defining standards for the breed. Many of her foals were cream-colored as well, and they sold for above-average prices because of their color. Old Granny's great-great-grandson, the stallion Silver Lace, was an impressive figure, standing 16 hands and weighing 2,200 pounds in 1932. Silver Lace was said to be the most famous cream stallion and would come to have a significant influence on the American Cream breed.

During the 1930s, cream draft horses became popular in the counties surrounding Melbourne, Iowa. One owner, Clarence T. Rierson, became interested in the strain and bought all the mares sired by Silver Lace that he could find. He researched the ancestry of each cream horse and recorded its pedigree.



A plaque on the barn built by Clarence T. Rierson in 1920 north of Radcliffe, Iowa, commemorates the work of Rierson in developing the American Cream Draft Horse. Des Moines Register Photo.

In the spring of 1944, a group of interested breeders met in Iowa Falls, Iowa, and laid plans for forming the American Cream Horse Association of America. Rierson was one of the founders. It was also Rierson who named the breed "American Cream."

A breed registry was formed in 1944. In 1948, the National Stallion Enrollment Board recommended recognition of the breed, and in 1950, the Iowa Department of Agriculture recognized the American Cream Draft as a separate draft breed. Ninety-eight percent of the horses registered could be traced back to Old Granny, and by the time of Rierson's death in 1957, the association had registered almost 200 American Creams in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

The American Cream's size makes the breed desirable for harnessing, hitching, and driving. The horses have been traditionally used as part of a working team. Good dispositions and a willingness to work make them easily managed horses on small farms. Their calm, gentle nature makes them a good choice for novice owners. They are hardy horses and are not bothered by temperatures if they have appropriate housing so that they can get out of the heat or cold as needed.

Just as the American Cream breed was becoming established, the market for draft horses collapsed. Due to the mechanization of agriculture, most workhorses went to slaughter. The breeding of draft animals nearly ceased, and the American Cream was in danger of going extinct.

For 14 years, the American Cream Horse Association of America was inactive, except for the transfer of a single horse. Fortunately, a few people kept their Creams and thus maintained a small genetic base that became the foundation for the breed's survival.

The American Cream Draft registry became active again in 1982 with three families beginning to rebuild the number of these horses, changing the organization's name in 1994 to the American Cream Draft Horse Association.

Today, Iowa has more registered American Creams and more Cream breeders than any other state in the country. The breed's strength and uniform cream color make it a popular choice for people who drive horses in teams pulling parade wagons, plows, and carriages.



A billboard welcoming travelers to Radcliffe, Iowa, proclaims it as the birthplace of the American Cream Draft Horse breed. Des Moines Register Photo.

But the American Cream is considered “critically endangered” by the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. In 2016, the Equus Survival Trust also listed the breed as “near extinction” with less than 500 registered horses worldwide.

The most famous American Creams live in Colonial Williamsburg. A breeding program there is working to increase breed numbers and is home to several such horses.