

## The Missouri Fox Trotter



Westward Ho! The settlers were on the move. The West was calling and the name of the West was Missouri. *The Little House On The Prairie* was being lived for real. Crops were being raised and the cattle industry was to find its second largest producing state in Missouri.

When Missouri became a state in 1821, more pioneers came flooding in across the Mississippi from Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky. They brought the soft-gaited horses that had served them so well in their home states. But the rugged Ozark mountains held new challenges for these hardy trailblazers.

Horses that could perform the broken gait called the Fox Trot proved to be the most useful for the purposes at hand. It didn't take long for a selective breeding program to begin. As early as 1820, there was a conscious effort to develop a true fox trotting horse. So, what is so special about the fox trot gait? C.H. Hibbard, historian and charter member of the Fox Trotter Association describes the gait as, "a broken gait, with the animal walking with the front feet and trotting with the back feet. The back foot disfigures the track made by the front foot." Hibbard goes on to say, "the Fox Trotting horse was not a high stepping horse, but an extremely surefooted one because of its shuffling gait. Further, because of the sliding action of the rear feet, rather than the hard step of other breeds, the rider experienced little jarring action and was quite comfortable in the saddle for long periods of time."

The Fox Trotters are indeed cousins to the other soft-gaited horses of the Eastern areas, but they retain their own distinctive gait in the fox trot. Like their namesake the fox, their hind track matches or "caps" the track made by the front foot (on the same side.) In the snow, they leave only two tracks per stride.

Looking at the classic fox trot being performed, the head and tail are slightly elevated, giving the animal a graceful carriage. The rhythmic beat of the hooves along with the nodding action of the head give the horse a look of relaxation and poise.

The head should nod, the ears should indicate the step and the tail should be a part of the rhythm. The step should be springy and consistently smooth with a little up and down motion. The natural rhythm of the Fox Trotter starts at the tip of the nose and goes back to the tip of the tail in one continuous motion.

Most soft-gaited horses can demonstrate the fox trot in addition to their breed specific gait. While the rack and the running walk can be flashy in appearance and efficient road gaits, the fox trot can be used as a working gait in rough country as well. From its early development to present day, the Fox Trotting horse was a useful horse not only on the farm but in running cattle. From the earliest days well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Fox Trotter maintained a solid reputation with cowboys who both pioneered and later ranched cattle from New Mexico to Colorado as well as in Missouri.

Present day Fox Trotters are increasingly found on Western ranches. In the Big Horn Basin country of Wyoming the Stock Growers Association uses them almost exclusively. The US Forestry Service has more than one thousand Fox Trotters registered to its name. A Fox Trotter horse has claimed top honors with the North American Trail Ride Conference (NATRC) on numerous occasions over the years.

The Missouri Fox Trotter may be chestnut , black, bay, grey, piebald, skewbald, palomino, white, buckskin or any other equine color. Its head should be well proportioned with a straight profile. Its ears are pointed and its eyes are large and expressive. Its neck is well formed and of medium length. Its withers are pronounced with a back that is short and straight. Its croup is muscular and rounded with a rather high tail set. Its chest is broad and deep while the shoulder is sloped and muscular. Its legs are sturdy, well muscled and they have good joints with clearly defined tendons. Its hooves must be well formed and proportionate to the size of the horse.