

# Today's HORSE TRADER

A group of riders on horseback and mules with packs, traveling along a dirt path in a forested area. The lead rider is wearing a blue shirt and a white hat. The mules in the foreground are heavily loaded with gear, including a large white bag. The path is surrounded by green grass and tall evergreen trees under a clear sky.

**Book Reviews**

**Tennessee Walking Horse**

**Hindend Lameness Solutions**

**Conformation: No Foot, No Horse**

**How to be Your Vet's Star Client**

**United Kingdom (UK) Shetland Pony**

**Back Country Horsemen Of New Mexico**

# Today's HORSE TRADER

DECEMBER 2010

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Today's Horse Trader is published monthly  
by:

Frankadette, Inc.  
P.O. Box 220279, Newhall, CA 91322  
Toll Free: 1-888-705-3711 / Fax: 661-253-1725  
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*Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico Chapter head out to work on the trails. Photo courtesy Paul Noble.  
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# United Kingdom (UK) Shetland Pony

Excerpt from *The Official Horse Breeds Standards Guide* by Fran Lynghaug

Photos courtesy Vanessa Wright

The United Kingdom (UK) Shetland Pony is a very special breed. It is the true Shetland Pony, the one that worked the coal and tin mines in Scotland, England and Wales, and the peat fields in the Shetland Islands. These ponies are docile, kind, intelligent, sensitive, and capable of doing hard work. They have an amazing temperament, and are steady of mind and great of heart. However, they are definitely not world-class beauties! They are not sleek, slim-legged, high-spirited show ponies. Quite the contrary, they mostly look like sturdy little trolls – short and stocky with shaggy coats and thick manes and tails. This is because they have more important work to do than jumping fences and prancing in show rings.

It was discovered that the UK Shetlands are extra sensitive to small children, especially those with special needs. Their job in the United States is to be loved, hugged, petted, and kissed, as they stand quietly and patiently while a child in braces, or crutches, or in a wheelchair brushes and combs, feeds, or caresses them. It is very important work.

## BREED ORIGINS

No one knows for sure how the UK Shetland Pony became an integral part of the history of the Shetland Islands, but about two thousand years ago there were ponies like today's UK Shetland Pony living there. The Shetland Islands have severe weather due to their location, approximately one hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle and just north of Great Britain. Grass is scanty, the ground is hard, rocky, and wet, and there is a constant cold wind. Under these conditions, animals that can get by with little to eat are more likely to survive, thus the process of natural selection resulted in smaller ponies. It is important to note that the smallness of the UK Shetland Pony is not the result of stunting due to the lack of food while they are growing; it is solely due to the ruthless action of natural selection in weeding out the genetically larger ponies.

These ponies have a long history of domestication and were best suited to work as draft animals; they were often described as “wide, round, and low to the round.” They were originally bred to haul peat

and do farm work. Later they were used for draft work, when roads were built and carts could be pulled along the roadways. They were not the same type as today's American Shetland or the American Miniature Horse, for they were far more stocky and rugged.

In the late nineteenth century, Shetland Ponies were used extensively in the coalmines of Scotland and Wales. Many were exported to the United States to be used in the mines of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Their patient, quiet, kind ways were ideal for the demanding work of pulling coal carts in the mines. It was at this time that their history took a dramatic turn, regarding the work in the coalmines.

## TROUBLING HISTORY

Previous to the use of the UK Shetland Pony, from 1809 to 1842, hundreds of women and children were employed as “beasts of burden,” working in the many iron or coalmines across England, Scotland, and Wales. Boys as young as four and girls as young as several would draw coal out of the narrowest mine shafts by way of girdle and chain. From a belt around their waist, a chain was attached that went between their legs and was attached to a large tub without wheels. On hands and feet they would crawl, pulling the tub filled with ore or coal to the main shaft for fourteen hours a day.



In 1842, the Mines Act was passed, which prohibited women and children under the age of ten from working underground. When the labor law was enacted, UK Shetland Ponies were exported from their homeland by the thousands to replace the women and children who were no longer allowed to do the work. UK Shetland Ponies were small in stature, heavy boned, and surefooted. These qualities, along with their strength and temperament, made them ideal for the grueling labor in the narrow mine shafts.

By the 1850s, only male ponies (stallions) were used. They were lowered down into the mines at age four, where they remained underground the rest of their lives – sometimes as long as thirty years. Tens of thousands of stallions worked together underground, which was certainly a testament to their kind nature and willingness to please their human companions. The ponies traveled more than three thousand miles per year and hauled as many tons of ore and coal.

This was a sad and heart-wrenching time. The ponies received inhumane treatment, as attested by a grandson of a collier in the United States to the founder of the Shetland Register. Not only were the ponies sent into the mines for life, but their eyes were also sometimes hammered out and sewn shut to eliminate coal dust infections. This cruel treatment was done in the coalmines in the United States as well.

The best and stoutest ponies were exported to the colliery (coal mine) owners, as large profits could be made selling them for mine work. This was attractive to farmers on the Shetland Islands, who lived at poverty level and could not afford to keep their best ponies. Only the more slender animals were kept or sold elsewhere, because the strongest were in demand for the heavy work in the mines, thus they were much more valuable. The smallest and strongest ponies had no counterparts for this demanding work.

In 1870, a stud (breeding farm) was established by the Fifth Marquis of Londonderry, a colliery owner. The sole purpose of the stud, located on the islands of Bressay and Noss, was to breed pit ponies. No expense was spared in purchasing UK Shetland stallions and mares from the islands, and the best became the foundation breeding stock for the Londonderry Stud. The formula for success in the development of the Londonderry pony was to produce those with “as much weight as possible and as near to the ground as can be got” without defects of conformation. Temperament was not compromised, as a tractable pony was essential for the work required in the mines.

The Shetland Pony Stud Book Society began in 1890 in England to preserve the breed from the drain of the best stallions being exported to the coalmines. It accepted only ponies less than 42 inches high, which encouraged breeders not to produce bigger Welsh-like ponies.

As the mines became progressively more mechanized, fewer ponies were needed. Ponies bred at the Londonderry Stud were sold to breeders in the United Kingdom as well as to breeders and mine owners in the United States. The Londonderry Stud was finally dispersed in 1899, yet up until the latter part of the 1970s, ponies still worked in isolated underground mines throughout Britain. Today, UK Shetlands are still used on the islands to haul peat as well as do other tasks, and a few still work in tin mines in Wales, but for the most part, pit ponies are no longer used in the mines.

After World War I, the British started breeding UK Shetlands as riding ponies for children, and the demand for riding and driving them

became popular. Queen Elizabeth II and her siblings rode UK Shetlands, and the Queen Mother was the patroness of the breed until her death.

In 1956, the Shetland Islands Premium Stallion scheme was put into effect in Britain. The Department of Agriculture provided quality, registered stallions to seven of the Shetland Islands to live on the common grazing grounds (scattolds), where UK Shetlands were allowed to roam. It also prohibited the use of inferior studs, ensuring foals of greater value.

#### IN THE UNITED STATES

In 1984, Marianne Alexander of upstate New York bought two registered American Miniature Horses. She was captivated by their exceptionally kind and gentle dispositions, and amazed at the way they responded to her grandchildren and other children who visited her farm. They seemed to have a special sensitivity toward the children, who adored them.

Curious about their lineage, she began to trace their bloodlines and discovered that, although they were registered as American Miniature Horses, they were descendants of UK Shetlands imported to the United States in 1884 from the Londonderry Stud. This discovery piqued her curiosity, so she and her husband made a trip to England, Ireland, and Scotland to see the UK Shetland breed in its homeland hills, meet with Shetland breeders, and study the original studbooks in depth. It was their good fortune that they found some longtime UK Shetland breeders that had adhered to the Londonderry Shetland breed type. They offered the Alexanders firsthand knowledge about the UK Shetland that is barely known in the United States. This is when the Alexanders learned of the ponies' inhumane treatment in many of the mines. They also found that Shetlands in the United Kingdom are the true breed type – gentle, full-bodied, and good with children.

By the end of the trip, Marianne Alexander knew what she had to do; she wanted to give something back. “My personal intent was to make reparation for the inhumane treatment that thousands of Shetland Ponies received when sent into the mines for some thirty years – a life sentence.” The ponies' incredible sensitivity to children convinced her that they were ideal companions for children with special needs. She wanted to spend her retirement breeding the ponies and offering them to children who needed something to brighten their lives, to love, and to be a loyal friend.

#### REGISTRY

Alexander began to assemble a breeding herd of UK type Shetlands in the United States and established The Shetland Register (TSR) in 1986. The philosophy of the register was based on the knowledge and interest of individuals who later participated in the development of Alexander's organization, Personal Ponies LTD. (PPL), incorporated in New York in 1993. The primary purpose of this organization was to provide Shetland Pony companionship to children who are differently abled, to make a difference in their lives, and to bring love and joy to them.

To assure that the true UK Shetland type and temperament would be acquired, the register began securing and importing ponies from the Shetland Islands, Scotland, and England. The majority of American Shetlands could not be used; although some could possibly trace their

*continued Page 31*

Greetings Snow Lovers,  
my name is Potty and I am seen here with one of the volunteers at WNCR. We are supposed to be having a training session but I just love to roll and play in the snow so we have been doing more playing than training. I am a two year old Appaloosa cross filly that came to WNCR last summer. I guess you could say I was a little on the thin side at the time of arrival and not too sure I wanted anything to do with humans. However I have changed my mind about people, you are okay after all. I am now ready to find a forever home and complete my training so I can be a wonderful trail horse!

**Ya'll come visit!!**

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lineage to the UK Shetland, they did not resemble the breed. Only a few UK type Shetlands in the United States were used for breeding if their pedigrees traced back to the UK Shetlands imported in 1881, but these were infrequently found. TSR's goal was to develop and preserve this type of pony from the United Kingdom.

PPL's purpose was to bring a pony to a child with special needs –their pony – to love and care for, completely without charge. In a distinctly unique program, the ponies were placed with sponsors who brought them to the children, which made PPL the only organization of its kind in the world. There are riding centers and organizations dedicated to assisting children to learn to ride or drive a horse or pony in harness. Nothing, however, has been done for the very small child with special needs that requires a smaller mount or an equine companion of small stature.

The ponies were placed strategically with their sponsors to help promote PPL and serve the wider community, such as visits to convalescent homes, daycare centers, therapeutic riding centers, and treatment centers. Ponies were brought anywhere children could benefit from seeing and interacting with them. Volunteers sponsored ponies by maintaining them so that they were available for visiting families unable to keep a pony at their home. These children could visit several times a week to see "their" pony and to care for it in any way they could, whether it be brushing, feeding, walking, or just being with their pony.

#### DYNAMICS

Since its humble beginning with only two individuals, PPL has expanded into an international organization. It has placed ponies with hundreds of children with special needs. There are programs in almost every state involving hundreds of volunteers throughout the country. The organization now has fifty-five breeding farms, sixty-five stallions standing at stud, about two hundred breeding mares, and more than one thousand registered ponies. Yet even with all this growth, there are still many children waiting for ponies.

Although small Shetland Ponies are far less expensive to maintain than big horses, building a quality herd of UK Shetlands is hard work and

very expensive. The Personal Ponies organization is ever on the lookout for true-to-type Shetlands in the United States, but they are rarely found anymore. Thus, importing quality UK Shetland stallions and mares for the breeding program is a priority. Without quality breeding stock, it is impossible to keep up with the request of families with children who are differently able.

Finding and importing a mature (two-year-old) stallion or broodmare is both an expensive and complex undertaking. Today's market in the United Kingdom is focused on a riding type Shetland, making it difficult to find the draft Londonderry type pony of yesteryear. Once an individual that is suitable for the organization is located, there is the cost of the pony, the added cost of airfare, trucking, and veterinary approvals, as well as extensive quarantines and testing carried out by both the U.K. and U.S. governments. This means that the cost to import a mature individual of breeding quality is about \$18,000 to \$20,000.

TSR is open to utilizing modern biotechnology, such as artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and the possibility of cloning, as these technologies become available. The organization consists of volunteers who raise, train, sponsor, and promote the ponies, and they assume the cost of maintaining the ponies they are assigned. Families who receive ponies from the program are also responsible for the cost of maintaining and the care of the ponies they receive.

For more information about Personal Ponies Ltd, visit [www.personalponies.org](http://www.personalponies.org). *The Shetland Register*, 23 Sergio Way, Hot Springs Village, AR 71909. "The Official Horse Breeds Standards Guide, Voyageur Press; First edition (October 2, 2009) by Fran Lynghaug." Available at bookstores and online booksellers and from [www.voyageurpress.com](http://www.voyageurpress.com).

