



# The Desert Arabian Horse

## FROM NOMAD TO PERFORMANCE HORSE

### History

If asked to name their most treasured possession, the nomadic Bedouin would have most likely chosen the Arabian horse. As a necessity for their very survival, the nomadic Bedouin tribes roamed the length and breadth of the hot, desolate, inhospitable lands of the Arabian Peninsula, breeding their horses for more than a thousand years. In the harsh evolutionary caldron of the desert sands, they created one of the finest specimens: the Desert Arabian horse. The Bedouin closely line-bred generation after generation by careful selection and merciless culling to create a breed of horse carrying only the most sought after genes. Occasionally, they raided other Bedouin tribes in a Ghazu intended not only to increase their tribe's wealth, but to obtain horses that would add new blood and strengthen desirable traits.

These horses possessed beauty, extraordinary endurance and willing dispositions. Intelligent and intuitive to their master's commands, the Desert Arabian was a veritable extension of the Bedouin who bred these marvelous purebred horses for hundreds of years.

Beyond their physical abilities, these horses were bred for their intelligence and their affectionate, dependable dispositions. It is said that many Bedouins housed their prized mares and foals with their families in their tents.

During the Crusades, Europeans learned that their big domestic breeds were no match for the Arabian horse in the desert, and they began a quest to obtain Arabian horses.

European breeders began using the Arabian horse to improve their domestic stock and to develop new breeds of horse with specific physical characteristics to achieve utilitarian ends. Such new breeds included draft horses that were quick but capable of carrying a knight and his armor, riding horses, carriage horses, racehorses and military remounts.

So prepotent is the genetic pool of the Bedouin-bred Arabian horse, that it has been used as foundation stock to create virtually every light breed of horse in the world. Of the 170 recognized breeds of horse, 138 have Arabian blood coursing through their veins. As an example, the Godolphin Arabian and the Darley Arabian are two of the foundation stallions for all British Thoroughbreds.



### The Desert Arabian Moves West

By the early 19th century, countries far from the Desert Arabian source, most notably Russia, Poland, Hungary, Spain, Germany and England, were importing Arabian horses from the desert to maintain breeding farms devoted to the Arabian horse. Some European studs maintained pure breeding lines, importing both stallions and mares from the desert, but, in the majority of cases, only Arabian stallions were imported. These stallions were bred to domestic mares in the studs of these countries to increase the percentage of Arabian blood. Further cross breeding occurred as horses were traded, sold or captured during warfare. Geographical descriptive terms were developed like Polish Arabian, Russian Arabian or Spanish Arabian, but those horses did not necessarily reflect an exclusive desert heritage.

The first significant importation of Arabian horses into the United States took place in 1893 when the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire allowed 40 desert-bred Arabians to go to the Chicago World's Fair. These became known as the Hamidie horses, named after Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Over the next few decades, other significant importations were made by individuals including Randolph Huntington, Spencer Borden, Homer Davenport, W. R. Brown, Henry Babson, W. K. Kellogg, Charles Crane, F. Lothrop Ames and Roger Selby ... some directly from the desert and some indirectly from the Arabian studs of Egypt, England,



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Argentina, Germany, Spain, Poland and Hungary. Today, you may hear about Babson, Davenport, Straight Egyptian, Heirloom, or Sheykh Obeyd Arabians, terms that reflect breeding programs or combinations thereof based on these importations or the country of origin.

It is not important whether Lady Ann Blunt or Homer Davenport or Henry Babson or any of the other luminaries we owe for the initial importations of these marvelous horses had a better eye for characteristics than any other. They purchased available animals that appealed to them from the available population of asil (pure) horses existing on the desert in Bedouin hands. What is important is that each of them managed to obtain and preserve a portion of the pure genetic pool before much of Bedouin culture was altered forever by Western influences and much of the asil stock became diluted with outside sources in the 20th century.

These Bedouin-bred Desert Arabian horses represent the intensely concentrated, undiluted genetic pool responsible for the creation of virtually all other light breeds of horse in the world, a priceless treasure of inestimable value. By foresight or luck, there remain small pockets of their descendents among the larger Arabian horse population in the world.

Today they demonstrate their talent in virtually every discipline from racing and endurance to dressage, Western pleasure, and team penning.

## Desert Arabians in Danger

In 1924, there were 545 registered Arabian horses in the United States, the vast majority of which could trace all lines in their pedigrees to the Bedouin-breeding tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Today, there are approximately 184,000 registered Arabian horses living in the United States, yet, according to reliable sources, fewer than 10 percent of them could meet the same criterion. The other 90 percent contain varying degrees of mostly European indigenous blood. Registrations of all Arabian horses in the United States have declined by 89 percent over the last 28 years, and more than 75 percent of presumed living Arabian horses are now over the age of 15 years. The reproductive herd is quickly reaching the limits of their ability to produce.

Of even greater concern, the Bedouin-bred desert horse is nearly extinct in the greater Arabian Peninsula and adjacent countries, preserved by only a handful of purist breeders and remnants of the great Bedouin tribes.

We are in danger of losing forever that which the Bedouin crafted from evolution's cauldron into one of the most perfect of nature's creations.

Without this precious genetic resource, future generations will not have access to the foundation blocks to create the next variation of Arabian for the show ring, endurance race or pleasure horse. This unique gene pool and the reliable transmission of desirable characteristics is what makes the Desert Arabian horse priceless. It has the ability to predict and then repeat the quality of the offspring within this unique genetic pool, conveying the best traits of the Arabian horse to whatever one envisions.

Founded in 2004 by long time advocates of the Desert Arabian Horse, the Institute for the Desert Arabian Horse seeks to protect and conserve the cultural legacy and genetic heritage of the Bedouin-bred Arabian horse through historical and scientific research, education, standard performance evaluations, international collaboration, and conservation projects. Contact us at [contact@desertarabian.org](mailto:contact@desertarabian.org).

## What has the Institute done to help preserve and promote the Desert Arabian horse?

- Promote education about the Desert Arabian at public activities such as The Egyptian Event in Kentucky.
- Publish historical information including *The Babson Influence*, a 504-page book, and the periodical *Al Khaima*.
- Encourage performance through the Drinkers of the Wind award.
- Introduce new people to the Desert Arabian horse through the Heritage Farm program.
- Provide information for breeders at regional symposia and through publications.
- Began an oral history project to preserve the history of Arabian horse breeding and conservation efforts in the late 20th century.



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