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Gen. Knox

Clark P. Thompson
Gen. Knox, like Old Drew (1842-1866), was a foundation sire of Maine trotting horses. However, unlike the Drew Horse, he was foaled out of state (New York), purchased in Vermont, and brought to Maine in 1859 when three years old. His owner, Thomas S. Lang, in a letter to The Maine Farmer published in 1870 recalled the following: “Gen. Knox, now 14 years old, was sired by Sherman Black Hawk, out of a bay mare by Young Hambletonian.” He described Knox as “black, with brownish stifles, flanks and nose, star in the forehead and strip of white on the upper lip and nose, is fifteen and a half hands high, and weighs 1050 pounds, in fair condition, ample mane and tail, small well formed ears, broad head between the eyes, tapering to a thin, well defined nose, rather thick neck, excellent foreleg well under the body, hind leg quite remarkable for development of hock muscle - which he transmits to many of his colts - hock and knee joints well defined. The feet are perfect ... the body round and compact, the back is short, and the loin as strong as can be found.” Another person who observed Knox wrote in 1878 that he was “a coarse looking horse.” See H. T. Helm’s American Roadsters and Trotting Horses. But, Helm continued, “his appearance does not speak out clearly of the excellences he contains.”

Some years later the noted pedigree authority, John W. Wallace, questioned the breeding of Gen. Knox. Wallace investigated the matter and concluded that the sire of Knox was Vermont Hero, a son of Sherman Black Hawk. When this was revealed to Lang, he did not dispute Wallace. As it turned out, Gen. Knox had more crosses to the thoroughbred stallion Imported Messenger than to Justin Morgan, and therefore, as Helm concluded, he should not be considered a Morgan horse. This matter illustrates a common problem for trotting horse breeders of that era. How to verify the breeding of a stallion or mare. There were many factors at work including outright deceit, poor record keeping, lack of a central registry and attempts to injure or enhance a particular stallion’s reputation. In his 1874 letter to The Maine Farmer, Lang stated: “It now seems that Sherman Black Hawk is the grand sire, instead of sire of Knox. ... the deception (which I was no party to, nor were Messrs. Denny & Bush) has done Maine no harm.” Messrs. Denny & Bush owned the breeding farm on Lake Champlain where Knox was purchased.

Thomas S. Lang was born in 1826 in North Berwick. At the age of 18 he moved to Vassalboro with his parents, John D. Lang and Anne Elmira Lang. Two years later he married and moved to North Vassalboro where he worked in his father’s various enterprises which included a saw mill, woolen mill and iron foundry. At an early age Lang became interested in stock breeding, principally cattle and horses. During the Civil War he was given a commission of the rank of Colonel and commanded to remain at home to
oversee the production of wool clothing for the Union Army, this according to Raymond Manson who researched Lang’s background for the Vassalboro Historical Society. Lang was active among the various agricultural societies and served for a short time as a trustee of the State College of Agriculture before failing health required him to resign. Lang also traveled to Europe where he visited various stock farms and horse training centers. Lucky for us, he was a frequent correspondent to The Maine Farmer where he shared his views on the breeding of horses.

In the spring of 1862, the editor of The Maine Farmer, Ezekiel Holmes, paid a visit to the breeding establishment of Thomas S. Lang. The stables and “yards” devoted to horses was a short distance from the village of North Vassalboro covering about four acres. The feeding program, consisting of “long feed” and oats unground with twice a week mash of potatoes and oats, was under the supervision of Albert Goodspeed. The foreman was Foster S. Palmer who trained and drove most of the horses owned by Lang. In some ways the breeding operation resembled a “stallion station” as Lang collected a number of stallions. Among them were: Gen. Knox, Son of Ethan by Ethan Allen, Gey Fox by Ethan Allen, Bucephalus by Blackhawk, Gen. Wayne, Telegraph by Blackhawk, Trenton by Geo. M. Patchen, Gideon by Rysdyk’s Hambletonian, Sharnon by Witherell, Ned Davis by Old Drew, and Palmer Horse by Old Drew. As Secretary Goodale of the Maine Board of Agriculture in his annual report (1862) stated in reference to Lang’s breeding operation: “where not a single stallion only is kept, but many, and where no pains nor expense are spared to secure the presence of superior specimens of the most approved breeds, and choice strains of blood in various combinations; so that the necessary requirements in a sire are no sooner fairly apprehended than they are fully met.” Editor Holmes concluded his remarks upon his visit as follows:

Even now, we believe the establishment of Mr. Lang is unsurpassed either in number of stock, or for its superior quality, by any similar establishment in the New England States. …

this enterprise, however, has not been started merely for the purpose of producing horses for speed - although this is a quality of great importance - but for the purpose of enabling Maine to become what she is so well fitted by natural adaptation to become the leading horse growing State, and to furnish the country with the best horses of pleasure purposes or for service, to be found upon the continent. This can be done. It only needs the hearty cooperation of the people at large, in efforts which are now being made by Mr. Lang to see this crowned with abundant success.

Gen. Knox produced many trotters that could trot a mile at a clip of 2.30 or better. His two fastest performers were Lady Maud and Camors both of which made the 2.20 list. In his book, Noted Maine Horses (1874), John W. Thompson noted that Knox would have had more credits on the 2.30 list but for the slow half mile tracks of Maine. When Thompson made those comments there were only two mile tracks (the Bangor Totting Park and Ling’s track in Scarborough) in Maine according to George H. Bailey who summarized the trotting season of 1874 in a letter to The Maine Farmer at the beginning
of the new year. Bailey noted that Maine had 49 organized tracks in operation by the end of 1874. Like Old Drew, the sons of Knox were also sires of speed. At the end of 1874 Thompson noted ten sons of Knox that had sired 2.30 trotters. One such son was the flashy Gilbreth Knox, owned by J.H. Gilbreth of Kendall’s Mills, who sired several fast ones including Lothair. In his 1887 edition of Noted Maine Horses, Thompson mentions at least 56 sons of Knox doing stallion service. As one farmer wrote in 1867, “I am in favor of the Knox breed, and for these reasons: they are teachable, docile, speedy, symmetrical in form, and possess great powers of endurance. ... Knox stock is the best from plow to gig that I ever saw.” See The Maine Farmer, 6/27/67.

In the days of Gen. Knox, a stallion had to prove his worth on the turf before he could expect a large book of mares. In the case of Knox, the breeding season usually extended from May 1st to August 1st. At that point, Foster S. Palmer, the trainer/driver of Knox, would begin the process to get Knox ready for the many fall shows and fairs. His owner recalled the campaign of 1864 for the readers of The Maine Farmer as follows:

Knox had that season served since April, one hundred and twelve different mares, and left fifteen awaiting service when he left home for Springfield (site of the New England Fair). In five days after leaving service, I had him tried at Waterville... He trotted in 2.30 and repeated in 2.28. I started him for Springfield on Thursday morning, arrived there Sunday morning, trotting him Thursday (defeating Draco in straight heats, best time 2.31 ½), and came back to Boston same night, making in all twenty-one days from the time he was drawn from service until he had traveled upon cars (the train) and boat three days and nights without rest, won his race and was bound home.

One of the most exciting turf victories for Gen. Knox took place in the fall of 1863 at the Waterville Driving Park. The Maine Farmer reported that the contest between the stallions Gen. Knox, Hiram Drew and Gen. McClellan drew a large throng estimated at 5000. For some reason, the owner of Gen. McClellan declined to enter the “Sweepstakes” (Purse $500, $300 to the winner). The supporters of Hiram Drew were confident given the fact that their horse had never been beaten in Maine according to the Farmer. It was not that long ago (1860) that Hiram Drew won the “Champion Belt” defeating Knox at the State Horse Show sponsored by the Maine State Association for the Improvement of Horses. At 3 o’clock the stallions came to the Stand. Knox with Foster S. Palmer up won the pole and the first heat in the best three in five race. The second heat was a repeat of the first as the owner/driver of the Drew horse, Orrin Shaw, could not keep his stallion on gait. The third heat was also won by Knox despite a near spill for Palmer when a stray dog crossed the track in front of Knox. The Farmer concluded its report of the race saying “no such magnificent trotting was ever before witnessed in the State of Maine.”

In the early part of 1871 it was announced that Gen. Knox had been sold to parties out of State. After earlier attempts to sell Knox in State failed, Col. Lang decided to take the money and remove to Oregon. The sale price was reported to be $10,000. Knox would race in New York before retiring to Fashion Farm in New Jersey. Fashion Farm was
owned by Henry Smith, the owner of Goldsmith Maid and other good ones. It was reported that Lang took a couple of Knox stallions with him to Oregon. However, it seems that Lang had given up on breeding trotters. Instead, he engaged in the raising of sheep. In fact, a letter signed “Old Times” from “The Dalles, Oregon” appeared in the Farmer early in 1876. The letter read in part as follows:

I believe in the sound character of sheep raising as a business for much of the territory of Maine, especially if it be allowed to take the place of much of the horse and fancy stock raising, which the excitement and grand business license of the last ten years has led to. I would not detract from the creditable name that the fine horses of Maine have given her, but I cannot doubt that peculiar circumstances, aptitude for the business, accompanied by luck in the management of comparatively a few men, gives an unsound inducement for a large portion of farmers wholly unfitted therefore, to enter upon a very unsafe business.

Interesting advice indeed from a man that played a major role in giving Maine its stellar reputation as a horse breeding State. It remained to be seen if Lang was right or whether the earlier words of Ezekiel Holmes would prove correct that Maine was “well fitted ... to become the leading horse growing State.”