

A rare breed

Fell ponies bring a bit of England to Tennessee

By Hollie Deese

Photography by Mark Zaleski



List, with less than 2,500 annual U.S. registrations, and less than 10,000 worldwide. The conservancy uses this list to bring attention to livestock, such as the Fell pony, to connect them with people interested in saving a rare breed.

In the fall of 2005 she imported her first Fell.

“She was a great pony to start off with because as soon as I got her I knew it was a match,” she says.

The next year, Melissa imported her first stallion, and so began her part in strengthening the endangered breed.

A SENSE OF ENGLAND

After her mother died, Melissa and her father John Peter Norum moved their breeding and training business, Dream Hayven, from Wisconsin to Tennessee in 2012, choosing an old 40-acre cattle farm in Lafayette, Tenn., as the perfect location.

“It took us a couple of years to find what we thought was the perfect match for us,” she says. “This farm hit the market and we loved it.”

Not only was the weather ideal and the cost of living more affordable, but its rolling hills and fields of vibrant yellow meadow buttercups weren’t too far off from the Fell’s native gentle hills of Cumbria, England.

“The four seasons for me is critical because you can’t raise a pony and expect to maintain that heritage — that look — without it, because so much of what they are about is environmental,” she says. “They need the toughness of a winter, but not a super tough winter.” Her northern Tennessee farm provides a similar environment as Cumbria, England, she says.

“You are only going to get so much England in America, but I have gone on many trips over there and have had a vision in my mind of what I recalled, and this was wonderful.”

said it was a Fell pony that she had picked up in Colorado. That was 2002 and I was smitten. I was enamored and couldn’t get this little pony out of my brain.”

She started learning all she could about the horse, which is listed as “Watch,” on The Livestock Conservancy’s Conservation Priority

The first time Melissa Kreuzer saw a Fell pony, she had to have one.

“I was at a friend’s house and she bred Friesians,” says Melissa, whose kinship with horses includes a degree in equine management. “I stopped and looked at this pony and asked, ‘What is that?’ She

Fell ponies get their name from the Fells, a mountainous region in the North of England.



‘A BIG JOB’

Melissa’s work is imperative to getting the Fell’s numbers up, but she knows it isn’t easy, says Jeannette Beranger with The Livestock Conservancy.

“Horse conservation has recently become very, very hard,” she says. “Since biofuels have taken off with a good bit of the corn crop, feed is very, very expensive. Committing to a breed is a big job and if it was easy a lot of people would do it.”

Market prices for weanling Fell ponies start at about \$3,500. More mature ponies with training or breeding potential are typically not less than \$6,000.

“It is not just a matter of putting the animals on the ground, but it is about promoting that breed,” Beranger says. “It is the marketing, and that farm in particular seems

Fell ponies are easy to recognize because of abundant and beautiful leg feathering and a long, luxurious mane and tail — characteristics which drew Melissa Kreuzer to the breed.

to promote their horses pretty well. And it is really important that the breed association promotes the breed too.”

It probably helps that Melissa, besides her daily chores on the farm, is also the vice chairman of the Fell Pony Society of North America.

“They are really catching on, especially in the last five years as people are using them for dressage and doing really well,” Melissa says. “They are amazing trail ponies, which is my passion. And part of my business, I do retraining for people and consignment sales.”

Besides breeding, raising, and promoting Fell ponies, Melissa also trains horses at her Dream Hayven farm in Lafayette, Tenn., in a region similar, in both climate and geography, to the Fell’s native gentle hills of Cumbria, England.



She also promotes her ponies on the Renaissance Fair circuit because they are historically accurate for the time period. A real crowd pleaser is a white Fell that she dresses as a unicorn.

A decade in, Melissa can’t imagine doing anything different, or raising another kind of horse.

“We are increasing the genetic capability of the breed to survive here on a different continent,” she says. “I felt because of their limited numbers there was definitely an opportunity and a reason for stewardship that didn’t exist in some of the other breeds.”

Beranger agrees.

“The horses she is working with represent a piece of diversity that could be important at some point,” she says. “We don’t fully understand what is in the makeup of each of these breeds, but it could be they have some characteristic that can be really important for horses down the road. But if they are not around, you have lost a resource. That is why these animals are so important.” ★

Hollie Deese is a Tennessee writer.



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