

Unbridled enthusiasm

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Harlan Grunden raises American Morgan horses on his ranch near Curtis. He hitches a gelding to a marathon undercut carriage, a small lightweight carriage designed by a woman in Wisconsin, to make very tight turns and be easy to maneuver.

CURTIS — The Grunden Ranch near rural Curtis has about 325 cows. That's their main business, but they have made a name for themselves with Morgan horses.

Harlan Grunden called it a "hobby that's gotten out of hand," and apparently the American Morgan Horse Association is impressed. The AMHA inducted the ranch into the 2017 AMHA Breeder's Hall of Fame earlier this year.

According to a release from the organization, in 1969 Harvey and Myrna Grunden wanted a hobby they could share with their children. They researched different breeds, and were drawn to Morgans because of the breeds' easy riding and a gentle disposition. The Grundens made their first purchase and never looked back.

Two generations later, Grunden Ranch is making its mark in the show ring and their progeny is found in at least 29 states, including Vermont, where the breed was developed in the 1800s. The ranch has had seven generations of the same Morgan bloodline, said Harlan, a son of Harvey and Myrna, who carries on the tradition at the ranch near Curtis.

The Grunden Ranch also helped spread the breed abroad with Harvey and Myrna introducing the first Morgan horse to Germany in 1979: a stallion named Funquest Meddler.

Harvey is now in a retirement home and Myrna has passed away, but the passion for the Morgan horse continues through their three children, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Upon their retirement, they divided the herd between their two sons. Harlan and his wife, Tammy, acquired the Grunden Ranch identity, while Harris and his wife, Joanie, acquired the RG identity. Their daughter, Gina Essink, and her husband, Dennis, raise Morgan horses under the RC prefix.

Harlan and Tammy operate their Grunden Ranch with their son Hance. Their daughter, Megan Welch, of Moorefield (married to Dawson Welch), is involved in the operation, too. Harlan is vice president of the AMHA and does quite a bit of traveling across the country in that role, he said.

They currently have 77 registered Morgans, including six stallions for breeding and six geldings. Their mares gave birth to 16 foals this year. Some of the mares and geldings are used to work cattle.

“We have been known to use our horses moving cattle the day before going to a show,” says their web site. They have exhibited in Western, English, pleasure driving and carriage classes and participated in shows in Salina, Kansas; Des Moines, Iowa; and Loveland, Colorado. Horses from the Grunden Ranch have placed in the top in the Morgan Grand National in Oklahoma City, shown both by the Grundens and their customers.

Prize stallions, such as GRM Monarchs Go Figure are sought after. Harlan said they recently have had customers bring mares from Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania to breed with Grunden’s stallions at Medicine Valley veterinary clinic in Curtis. They also sell semen and send it out by next day air. Unfrozen semen must be used within 36 hours, said Harlan. Breeding requires careful timing by veterinarians using ultrasound equipment to identify ovulation in the receptive mares.

The Grundens host a buggy drive/trail ride annually on the last Sunday in September.

“This is a good opportunity to enjoy the scenery and have a good visit with friends. We love to show our horses to visitors who are always welcome to stop in for a visit,” he said.

The weather was mild on Monday at the Grunden Ranch, where stallions and mares and foals, are well accustomed to natural conditions on the hills. Harlan hitched a gelding to a marathon undercut carriage, a small, lightweight carriage designed to make very tight turns and be easy to maneuver, as it rode down the long, gravel driveway.

Yes, Morgans are gentle, beautiful animals.

Founded in 1909, the American Morgan Horse Association is a nonprofit organization serving more than 50,000 Morgan horse owners, breeders, exhibitors and enthusiasts throughout the United States. AMHA serves as a parent organization to more than 50 recognized Morgan horse clubs and national organizations.