

HORSES IN HISTORY

HIDALGO & FRANK HOPKINS

By Anthony Amaral, *from Western Horseman Magazine, 1969*

FRANK HOPKINS...BEST OF ENDURANCE RIDERS? TWO FACTORS PRONOUNCE FRANK HOPKINS AN EXTRAORDINARY HORSEMAN: HIS ABILITY TO RATE HIS ENDURANCE HORSES FOR THEIR MAXIMUM EFFORT AND HIS SUCCESS WITH THE MUSTANG HORSE.

Two factors pronounce Frank Hopkins an extraordinary horseman: his ability to rate his endurance horses for their maximum effort and his success with the mustang horse. After having spent nearly 60 years in the saddle on the western frontier riding dispatch for frontier generals and having competed in more endurance rides than any other man, Frank believed that the mustang was the most significant animal on the American continent. In one of Frank's few published comments, he wrote: "I know what the mustang strain means, it means a horse that can keep going day in and day out, that doesn't need bandaging, fussing with, and that can win endurance rides whether the rules are made to order or not..."

Frank shared the same high opinion of the mustang as did the Sioux Indians who Frank knew well. He was born shortly after the Civil War in a log cabin in Fort

Laramie, Wyoming. His father was an army scout and his mother is reputed to have been the daughter of a Sioux chief. Frank often rode with the Indians to capture and break mustangs.

In his early teens he rode dispatch for Generals Miles and Crook. Later he was a buffalo hunter and worked with Buffalo





Jones, Bill Matheson, William Hinrer, and Bill Cody. He was riding mustangs and had developed definite opinions about them. When Frank was riding as a messenger for General Crook, the general mentioned to Frank "...if troops can't overtake a band of Indians in 2 hours, it's better to give up the chase." Frank pursued the comment and the General



replied that the wiry Indian ponies "...can go 90 miles without food or water. They can wear out all the cavalry horses we have on the frontier."

Frank probably was aware of the problem even before General Crook had realised the situation. Besides the phenomenal endurance of the mustang, Frank also rated the mustang as an intelligent and economical horse.

"You can't beat mustang intelligence in the entire equine race. These animals have had to shift for themselves for generations. They had to work out their own destiny or be destroyed. Those that survived were animals of superior intelligence. The mustang was grass-fed all his life. He picked his own food from the country, could live where even a cow would starve, and knew how to take such good care of himself that he was always ready to go."

ARTICLE BY ANTHONY AMARAL, SENT TO GILBERT JONES, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE SPANISH MUSTANG REGISTRY, WHO THEN SUBMITTED IT TO THE EDITOR OF THE SMR NEWSLETTER IN THE 1950'S:

Hidalgo will never have a bronze monument erected in his memory to grace a green turf, as have Man O'War and Citation. And for some reason or other, his name and pluckiness escape the pages in books that list the "Who's Who" of the equine world.

Yet, pound for pound, Hidalgo, a pinto mustang bred and raised with the Indians on a harsh South Dakota reservation, was more horse than a dozen of his blue-blooded cousins put together. But the remarkable story of Hidalgo is also the account of Frank Hopkins, a westerner who had no peer when endurance riding was the rage at the turn of the century. All in all, the slender, dauntless Hopkins who developed his endurance riding ability carrying dispatch for such frontier generals as Miles and Crook, competed in 400 long distance rides. If blue ribbons had been awarded to the winner at the finish line, Hopkins would have tallied 400. One of his lengthy rides started at Galveston, Texas and ended at Rutland, Vermont. A 1,800-mile ride in 31 days and finished 2 weeks ahead of the next rider. The greatest contest was still to come however; 3,000 miles across the Arabian desert against esteemed desert-bred Arabian horses.

Hopkins had raised Hidalgo from Sioux Indian stock on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Like many Mustangs of that time, Hidalgo was descended from horses brought to this continent by the Spanish Conquistadors. Hopkins preferred this type of horse for his rides. They were not much for looks but their indefatigable endurance outweighed their poor appearance. In ensuing years, Hopkins teamed up with the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show as a specialty rider. While in Paris during the

World's Fair in 1889, Rau Rasmussen, a lover of fine horses, approached him and a businessman who dominated most of the camel freighting around Aden on the southern tip of Arabia. Rasmussen spoke to Hopkins, telling him of an endurance ride that was held in Arabia each year, as it had been for 1,000 years. Only desert-bred Arabians had ever competed in the long trek. But Rasmussen had heard of the prairie mustangs, those scrubby, coarse-looking horses which had outrun the fastest horses the frontier cavalry had mustered against mounted Indians. He asked Hopkins if he would be willing to pit one of his mustangs against Arabian horses. With the financial support of the Congress of Rough Riders of the World, Hopkins' acceptance immediately stirred keen interest in cavalry and civilian horse circles throughout the world. Hopkins arrived in Arabia in 1890 for the endurance race, bringing with him 3 horses; Hidalgo, then 8 years old, was Hopkins' final choice for the ride. Slightly over 100 horses started on the ride from Aden. The great caravan of skilled Arabian riders rode their most prized mounts. They were spirited, accustomed to the difficulty of traversing the sands, and accustomed to the sun that sprayed exhausting heat upon them. Even among the mass of mounted horsemen, Hopkins stood out with parti-coloured, 950-pound Hidalgo from the American plains. Hopkins held Hidalgo at a steady pace as they made their way through the dry heat and over sandy soil. The march progressed to the Persian Gulf and up toward Syria and then along the border of Syria and Arabia. Each day the riders started with the sun, following it until they were marching into it. Horses

dropped by the way, some exhausted, some lame. At the end of the first week, the scarcity of water and the meager diet the horses were forced to exist upon in the barren country had culled the inadequate horses.

The strung line of riders dwindled daily. Entering the second week of the gruelling trek, Hopkins made his move and started to pass the other desert riders. In the

wake of the sand kicked up by Hidalgo, treasured Arabian horses of the Bedouins fell farther and farther behind, while Hidalgo kept to a steady pace.

On the 66th day of the ride Hopkins rode Hidalgo to the finish stone, leaving behind him 3,000 scorching miles. Hidalgo had lost considerable weight, drawing his pinto hide close to his bones. Hopkins had him well rested and fed when the second horse



▲ Hopkins & parti-coloured Hidalgo walking the deserts of Arabia



arrived 33 hours later. The Arabs praised Hidalgo for the distinction he had won. He had lived up to his name "exceptional," "exalted."

The story of Hidalgo is still mentioned among Arabian horse enthusiasts, but always with the conjecture, was Hidalgo an exceptional horse? Did he, as the typical representative of the mustangs of the American plains show superiority over the most acclaimed breed in the world, the Arabian horse? **HT**