Today on Across the Fence we’ll catch a ride to the University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm. It’s a Vermont treasure – from its unique history – to its modern role in breeding, training and education. Good afternoon … and thanks for joining us … I'm Judy Simpson. The UVM Morgan Horse Farm is on the National Register of Historic Places. It is home to significant Morgan history, and a variety of educational programs. To begin, Across the Fence’s Keith Silva takes us to the farm in Weybridge with a report on history, horses – and some very dedicated humans.

From its idyllic setting to its historic architecture, and of course the horses … the University of Vermont Morgan Horse Farm makes quite an impression on the thousands of visitors who tour this facility each year … and for some one visit isn’t enough.

Nicole Grainger/UVM Morgan Horse Farm: “The UVM Morgan Horse Farm has always been an iconic place for me. I’ve always been a fan of the Morgan Horse farm and it’s been a place I’ve looked up to as long as I can remember.

Nicole Grainger has a job that many farm visitors would envy … she trains Morgan horses.

Grainger first visited the farm as a teenager. She attended UVM so that she could take classes here. She’s been an intern at the farm and an apprentice. In other words when it comes to the UVM Morgan Horse Farm … this isn’t Grainger’s first time at the rodeo.

Grainger: “It’s kind of the dream of a lifetime like never pictured that I’d be able to work in a place like this with a person I’ve idolized my whole life.

Grainger: “Steve Davis, in particular, has been an idol of mine that I’ve always looked up to … so it’s definitely been a career opportunity that I couldn’t pass up.

Stephen Davis is the director of the Morgan Horse Farm … he’s worked at the farm since graduating from UVM in 1972.

Stephen Davis//Director, UVM Morgan Horse Farm: “I live to train horses that’s why I’m here. My mentor and horse training teacher always said that the horses were easy … there’s no doubt that the interpersonal relationship between staff, student, etc. are very challenging, but the rewards are way on by the animals.
The Morgan Horse Farm occupies a distinctive place in the horse world. It's the symbolic home to the Morgan breed ... which was started by Randolph, Vermont businessman Justin Morgan in the 1700's. Morgan's horse 'Figure' became the foundation sire of the breed. The farm was run by the United States government as a breeding and training facility for the US Calvary from 1907 until 1951 when it was given to the University of Vermont for the perseveration and improvement of the Morgan breed.

Davis: “We’re representing the University of Vermont. This is not a show barn. This is a public facility. We do some very advanced work and training Morgan horses and we have some of the best Morgan horses in the world.”

Grainger: “We analyze all of our horses from the day that they’re born and kind of decide where a horse is going to fit best. Figure out as they mature one or two years of age what discipline they’re going to fit into best. At three is when we typically start their saddle work and then around there is when we’ll usually start deciding when they’ll start going to shows or not and then if they’re successful in the show ring we would either kind of sell them and move them along to a permanent home or their incorporated into our breeding program where we can keep those bloodlines and really promote the excellence of the breed that we really strive for here.

The practice ring is where the horses learn to walk, trot, and canter, but overall, the farm is one big classroom where UVM students get hands-on training with top professionals.

Grainger: “A big part of our mission is education especially with UVM and the public … we do have some classes from UVM that do come down and utilize the facility. One of the biggest ones is ASCI 115 which is the introduction to equine class and we make a big day of it and have a lot of different things going on for the students to partake in. [...] Halter-breaking foals is usually a popular one because they get to see all of the new babies, but I don’t think a lot of them know what it takes to actually train your horse to wear a halter and lead correctly and appropriately so they get to see how we at this particular farm manage and handle our foals and get a quick glimpse as to the time and work and effort that we put into it also working with the farrier a lot of people will have their farrier come in and they don’t realize how hard it is until you actually get down underneath your horse and start you know trimming their feet. I think the majority of the time the students walk away with a much greater appreciation for everything that goes on kind of behind the scenes and take away a lot more than what they would have just reading it from a book.”

No matter what the breed ... at the UVM Morgan Horse Farm its learning that counts and every day is an education.

Davis: “The fact that it’s a historic herd, the fact that it’s fifty animals minimum that there’s a huge sample of product to work with and the breed itself lends very well to teaching and being a subject of teaching. So, it’s a win-win situation all around.”

Grainger: “Working with the horses, they’re very intelligent animals and will stump you every day of the week, but it’s a challenge and one I love to be with every day.”

Nicole Grainger’s dream has come true ... and who knows maybe the next ‘Nicole’ is visiting the farm for the first time... if so, the chances are good that she’ll be back. In Weybridge, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Judy: Thank you Keith with me know is UVM extension equine specialist and professor of animal science Betsy Greene. Great to see you again.

Betsy: Great to be back.
Judy: And like lots of people you have special memories of Morgan Horse Farm.

Betsy: Interestingly enough I grew up in Massachusetts but I didn't know about the UVM Morgans until I went to school in Kentucky. We had UVM Raven and UVM Jackson as school horses at Morgan state university that was my first exposure. Then back in '97 I went to a meeting. Nation Ag agency meeting in Burlington and went on a tour. That was my first exposure and little did I know three years later I'd be working here at UVM and interacting with folks at the Morgan Farm.

Judy: What is it about that particular breed the Morgan that is so special? We heard about it in the piece but there is something these horses really capture people's hearts.

Betsy: Well they have that look to them. They catch your eye first of all but then they have versatility. You have all different types of horses used in all kinds of discipline. For example UVM Raven was just a small black Morgan mare but she jumped better than our bigger thoroughbreds in the inner collegiate horse shows. They are versatile usually very easy to keep. Sometimes you have to be careful they don't get too fat. And then they are just striking.

Judy: What are some of the professional uses that you have at the farm?

Betsy: I use it mostly in teaching a little bit of extension. The intro to enquire science that is the one I teach and in fact coming on October 8th the students will go down for a full day lab that actually makes up 4 of their semester labs because they get from shoeing horses to judging to working with the fowls which is always very interesting for them and often a brand new experience. Also the get to see that at work and castration so they see the actual industry work with the horses and get some hands on.

Judy: There is a neat annual program called Vermont days.

Betsy: Yeah they have been doing that for years and it is a wonderful thing because it is a day that they plan to show off the horses from the fowls parading with mares and fowls to all the different type of training. They do some educational studies as far as talking through what they are doing with the horses and how they get to be that way as far as showing high stepping all the way to the pleasure and then they usually have someone in the Calvary outfit to show historical aspect of the Morgans as well.

Judy: Let’s talk about the training because we did see some of that on the tape. In one segment there was a horse in the ring and it had on some chains?

Betsy: Yeah it actually had on a stretchy piece of tubing which if you have ever been to the gym or to a trainer you do things to work alternating muscles with resistance exercises and that is actually one way they use to strengthen the horses to have some resistance while they are working. It helps them gain more muscle gain more fitness as they are going and it is something that you don’t think about on horses but see in the gym all the time.

Judy: Right. This is fair and field day season too and there are some important connections to the farm as well.

Betsy: Yeah the Morgan Horse Farm has been awesome as far as bringing horses to the field days. For example they were at Addison County Field days and did some demonstrations. They had some sort of Morgan extravaganza. It was a demonstration that some folks had planned and then they also brought the apprentices from the farm so that they could actually get some experience showing because those apprentices are there to learn whole aspects. You have to get out and do it to be able to go out on your own later and be competent in their area. Also I think there is some horses at Champlain Valley expo right now on display showing the breed.
Judy: Tell me a little bit about are some of the jobs these apprentices will go into from their experiences.

Betsy: The apprentices come from all over the country and I guess the world as well. Some of them have the love of horses. Some of them just want to have their own horse aside from their other career. A lot of them want to break into the industry whether its pleasure or the high stepping park style Morgans you have to get that experience. They get that experience all in one at the Morgan Horse Farm. Then they might go to managing a barn training breeding because they get all those types of experiences in that one place.

Judy: The farm also play a significant role in tourism as well?

Betsy: Absolutely! Because of course the facilities are beautiful. A wonderful example of Vermont history and then the horses also are an example of Vermont history as well because that government line of that breeding is where the farm originated then it was donated to the university in the 50's with the hope to continue that government line of breeding. We think of the Calvary when we think of that and so it’s a beautiful place an interesting barn it’s the historic register. It’s wonderful to go around. Every time I go down there I think gosh this is neat neat neat barn and you don't see many of those around and it's now preserved as well.

Judy: Tell me a little bit about how many horses there are at any given time?

Betsy: There are approximately 50 horses on site and that includes the geriatrics stallions mares fowls and those in-between that with the training. Some of those are being turned out working on keeping their fitness others are being shown worked purchased whatever but they do have several breeding stallions they do have bird mares but of course they aren't putting out as many fowl as the industry has changed and the needs adjust accordingly.

Judy: Coming back to the story we just saw and Nicole’s experience at UVM really have come full circle.

Betsy: Yeah it is interesting because I think that Josie Davis actually met her the first time down at the Morgan show in Massachusetts and then she was coming to UVM and brought her horse Morgan mare Tippy to the university farm. She was in the horse barn co-op. She was a leader in that. She was on the drill team and became a leader in that while she was here. She was active in the program and became an apprentice at the farm and then here she is working. The final full circle is one of other Morgan horses is now a school horse at the UVM campus farm.

Judy: Tell me a little bit about the future you think of the Morgan horse and also the program itself because I imagine it may be not as popular as agriculture issues have been in the past are going to be in the future?

Betsy: It is one of those things where we have to be sure to put out the best Morgans for the uses and needs of the public. I think they really look to breed accordingly. I think there is a strong future as long as there is support and as long as we keep doing the community service the education on the facilities the animals and the programs. I think there is still a strong future but it is like I said it’s not like they need to put out 100 horses but it's still a part of history that we represent a huge part of it.

Judy: Which is really impressive too because the horses that do come out are even that much more special.
Betsy: Oh yeah absolutely and of course I have helped with promoting Morgans overseas so of course there is a UVM Morgan mare in Germany that has won her classes in their German Morgan show. UVM Numiness is her name.

Judy: Nice. Betsy thanks so much for joining us today.

Betsy: Absolutely.

Judy: That is our program for today. I am Judy Simpson we will see you next time on Across the Fence.

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