

OLNEY GEPETO

ONE FAMILY'S PRIDE

by Laurel Scott Duncan

He may have been small in stature, but in the annals of Maryland pony breeding, Olney Gepeto has cast a long shadow.

One of a long line of classic Shetlands bred by Olney Farm, Gepeto (1967–1995) was by Larigo's Patton Prince out of Olney Swanee. A striking dark chestnut with a blazed face and flaxen mane and tail, this 10-hand charmer had brains and beauty to spare—not to mention character and disposition. In short (pardon the pun!), he was everything a Shetland should be. "He was absolutely the perfect pony, and he had personality all over the place," said Frances Flatau, who grew up on Olney Farm and knew Gepeto his entire life.

Although he only competed briefly as a youngster, "GeePee's" influence as a sire and grand-sire has been extensive. According to the American Shetland Pony Club, he sired a total of 50 mares, six geldings and 28 stallions. Shetland breeder Robert Krasniewski—who is well-versed in Olney pedigrees—put the estimate closer to 100, noting that ponies purchased for children's mounts often went unregistered.

Gepeto's bloodlines are regular winners at the Maryland and other state fairs, as well as top points-earners with the Maryland Pony Breeders. Many have achieved ASPC Hall of Fame status. And countless descendents have introduced children to the joy of riding in a manner befitting their unique heritage.

TINY BUT TOUGH

A native of Scotland's misty Shetland Isles, the Shetland pony is an ancient breed that is very much a product of its rugged environment. For centuries, this most diminutive of equines evolved in relative isolation, natural adaptation accounting for its economical size, its tough feet and its hardy constitution in the face of frigid temperatures and scarce grazing.

The pony's remarkable natural strength made him a prized pack animal among local crofters and farmers until the industrial revolution, when he was drafted to pull ore carts in English coal mines. A fa-



*Olney Gepeto,
born 1967
Robert Moseder Photo,
courtesy Frances Flatau*

vorite of Queen Victoria, the Shetland enjoyed new popularity as a children's mount during the late 1800s, a period during which he was also exported in great numbers to the United States.

This country's first Shetland registry, the American Shetland Pony Club (ASPC), was founded in 1888, in Illinois. A British counterpart soon followed in 1890. Though initial registrants came from mixed island stock, they were of a uniform type that formed the foundation for several modern varieties of Shetland.

According to the ASPC, over 150,000 Shetlands have been registered in America since the organization's founding, with unprecedented numbers of new members each year. American Shetlands are now bred and shown in two primary varieties, Classics and Moderns, both of which are limited to a height of 46 inches. In 1971, the ASPC began keeping a separate registry for a new breed, the American Miniature Horse, an even tinier horse that owes much to the Shetland. And in 1996, still another registry was opened for

American Show Ponies, a slightly larger, more animated and more refined Shetland derivative that is often trained to drive.

Today's classic Shetland remains an easy keeper, with a heavy winter coat and a luxuriously flowing mane and tail. He comes in virtually every color and pattern except Appaloosa. And he still makes a versatile childhood companion, being both an agile jumper and dedicated driving pony in one saucy package. Bombproof to the extreme, the classic Shetland was also the inspiration for cartoonist Norman Thelwell's legion of shaggy, child-wise "mighty mites," characters beloved to generations of Pony Clubbers.

THE BIRTH OF A DYNASTY

Olney Gepeto's history begins with the history of Olney Farm, a 200-acre spread near Joppa in horse-rich Harford County. Since 1860, four generations of the same family have tended this corner of paradise. But it wasn't until 1921 that Harriet Shriver (later Harriet Shriver Howard Rogers) joined forces with a friend to start



Severn Firecracker, Sire of Olney Swanee (dam of Gepeto), at the Maryland State Fair, courtesy Frances Flatau

breeding classic Shetlands at the ripe old age of 12. An astute young businesswoman, she procured a loan from a local bank with help from her father, and proceeded to breed and raise her beloved ponies for the next 72 years.

Rogers handled the ponies herself, and was a well-known exhibitor at the Maryland State Fair in an era when the trip to the fairgrounds took three or four days. A strict believer in showing the ponies in their natural state, Rogers never weighted their feet or set their tails, and made prospective buyers promise they wouldn't either. Nor did she "refine" her classic Shetlands by introducing Hackney or other blood.

Because she bred largely for the children's market, Rogers was particular about temperament. "It was nice if they were pretty, but Mother's whole point was disposition," stressed Flatau, who is Rogers' daughter. "If they didn't have good dispositions, then they weren't going to be good kids' ponies, and it wouldn't make any difference how pretty they were."

The Olney dynasty, bolstered with blood from the occasional British import, soon grew to legendary proportions. A pony from these lines won at Madison Square Garden, and some were exported as far away as Costa Rica. In 1966, Rogers—who was later inducted into the American Shetland Pony Club's Hall of Fame—even penned a "pony primer" called *If You Had a Pony*. It was the classic introduction to the care and feeding of ponies—and it featured a photo of Gepeto's great-great granddam.

Rogers' dream seemed to be unfolding all around her. "Mother told me once that when she was little, she looked out over the field and said, 'Someday, I'm going to have ponies of all colors standing out in

this field,'" Flatau recalled. "We were out in the field that day, and she said, 'Look, I've got it!'"

A PASSION PASSED ON

Although Olney Farm was also home to cattle, horses, and the occasional stray dog, Olney ponies—especially the Shetlands—clearly ruled the roost. Flatau recalls an idyllic childhood exploring the countryside on four stubby legs and hitching rides home from her Baltimore school in a pony cart. The pony that pulled that cart was none other than Gepeto's great-grand sire, Big Stuff. "It was wartime, and gas was rationed; so there were all sorts of ways of getting home," Flatau explained. "It was just everyday stuff to me, but the girls in my class were absolutely green!"

And every summer, there was show after show leading up to the state fair. Indeed, children and the fair are what Olney Shetlands were all about. "Practically every performance pony at the fair—from leadline to driving—is an Olney pony," Flatau maintained. "It's a neat thing to see, because that was Mother's whole point."

"And after she died, the Maryland Pony Breeders wanted to give a trophy in her memory. They asked me what I'd like it for, and I said I wanted it to be for the Shetland pony that accumulates the most points over the year in youth classes—because that was Mother's whole reason for doing it."

Nowadays, Olney bloodlines appear in almost every Shetland of every type—especially on the East Coast, where the classic Shetland is more predominant than the American Shetland (the Hackney type).

Although Rogers passed away eight years ago, her passion for ponies is a cherished family tradition that continues to this day. "The Shetlands we have now are descendants of her ponies," says Rogers' daughter-in-law Ami Howard, who runs a "boarding, breeding, training and teaching business with 35 stalls and lots of pony turnouts" on the family farm. "Each of my mother-in-law's grandchildren got a pony mare when they were born," Howard continued. "And some of [the ponies] are still alive and breeding!"

As Flatau explained, "That's how we kept the good ones [in the family]."

GENTLE GEPETO

Flatau—who can recite the lineage of virtually any Olney pony from memory—has vivid recollections of Gepeto. A foal

with good bone, he was by a little black stallion named Larigo's Patton Prince. This pony's name hints at descent from King Larigo, a black stallion foaled in 1907 and considered to be one of the all-time great show ponies (from the foundation line of the Wisconsin-based Trinket Jr., himself a medal winner at the 1904 World's Fair, King Larigo established the famous Larigo family of Shetlands. Gepeto was out of a mare named Swanee whose sire, Firecracker, had been Grand Champion of champions at the Maryland State Fair. Swanee herself served as the "official pony" for the Maryland State Fair's 100th anniversary celebration. "She got to drive through the fair with the farm queen in her cart," Flatau explained. "She had been at the fair every year since she was born, and had won ribbons there every year."

Gepeto made a few appearances in the show ring, too. However, he never competed in performance classes. "We never broke him or anything; at the time, we were running a day camp, with shows on weekends, and we just never got around to it," Flatau recalled.

Once he was old enough to breed, Gepeto was turned out with his own herd of mares—a harem that grew to 15–20 in his heyday. He rewarded his proud owners with a near-perfect cover record.

"He had many, many wonderful children, and we never doubted that whoever we put in with him would get in foal," Flatau said. "He didn't make a big deal about it, but the next spring, they all had foals." Though some mares came to Gepeto from outside sources, his reputation was forged largely through homebred foals. "We sold a whole lot of his foals, and for the most part, they wound up with the



Olney Swanee with Farm Queen in period costume and Mrs. Harriet Shriver Howard Rogers, at the 100th Maryland State Fair, Cappy Jackson photo, courtesy Frances Flatau

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Olney prefix," she confirmed.

One anecdote in particular speaks to Gepeto's sweet nature. "He loved nothing in the world better than riding in [a vehicle]," Flatau began. "He rode in my Volkswagon bus, he rode in a truck, he rode in a trailer, he rode in a van—it didn't matter! You'd open anything, and he'd go right in, and he LOVED it.

"We kept him in this field full of mares at my stepfather's farm down the road. And in the summer we'd go over and see which mares and foals we thought were the best, and decide which groups we were going to take to the fair," she continued. "My youngest child was maybe five at the most... and her job, while we went and caught the mares and foals, was to keep Gepeto out of the trailer. I could walk away, and I knew that she'd be absolutely safe; that Gepeto would never hurt her.

"I'd look back, and he'd be standing there with a couple of feet on the ramp, wanting to get in, and this little bitty kid would go up and hit him on the shoulder and push him off!" she laughed. "There are not many other stallions in the world that you could leave a little tiny child with."

Gepeto spent his declining years in a retirement field with a lady friend of a similar vintage. One day, a young stallion boarding at the farm tore through the gate and broke Gepeto's leg, forcing Flatau to put him down. It was one of the hardest tasks she's ever had, and one that still hurts to ponder.

Fortunately, Gepeto's legacy lives on. And it didn't take long for his offspring to make their mark at the Maryland State Fair. "One year at the fair, before they had mare champion and gelding champions and stallion champions, three of the four champions -- junior and senior champions and reserve champions—were his children," Flatau recalled. "And the interesting thing was that they were full brothers and sisters!"

Gepeto's get were also consistent ribbon-winners at Maryland Pony Breeders events. "Maryland Pony Breeders used to give a trophy at their show for the stallion whose progeny won the most at that show," Flatau recalled. "This has got to have been 15 years ago or so, but they quit doing it, because he always won it!"

Mares related to Gepeto have certainly left their mark. A daughter named Olney Laughter was a State Fair veteran who taught many family members how to ride.



17 year old Olney Xerxes, son of Olney Gepeto, still standing at Olney Farm, courtesy Frances Flatau

Olney Zelda, also by Gepeto, is a Hall of Fame champion well-known in driving circles. And a mare named Olney Incense—who was by Gepeto's sire, out of a sister to his dam—was one of Olney's biggest and best producers. Bred to Gepeto, she became the dam of Olney Troubadour, Olney Zachary and Olney Quiz Kid (among many others).

But it is through a handful of his sons that Gepeto is perhaps best known. Olney Xerxes is Gepeto's current standard-bearer at Olney Farm, while Hall of Famer Olney Troubadour stands at Monkton's Charmsley Farm, and another Hall of Fame champion, Olney Zachary, resides near Hampstead.

According to Ami Howard, 17-year-old Olney Xerxes—who is a bright chestnut—has a "lovely head," with bone, substance and a nice way of moving. "He has a little better neck than the very old type Shetland, but you wouldn't mistake him for a Welsh or Hackney pony," she said. "He is sweet, quiet and easy to breed. We only have three foals this year—a colt and two fillies—but he did get two outside foals, too."

Olney Troubadour is a 1980 chestnut stallion with roaning. As owner Mary Gordon related, he was acquired as a driving pair-mate for another Olney pony. "Troubadour's been all kinds of places and done all kinds of things," she said. "And while he was never officially broken to saddle, he also taught several children to ride. We just put the kids up on him, and he doesn't know it's wrong until you tell him it's wrong!"

"He's good at teaching the young colts manners, too," she continued. "We throw them all in there with him, and he teaches them to be respectful of their elders."

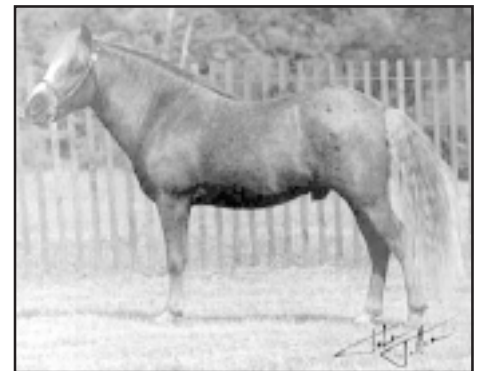
True to their breeding, Troubadour's get have made outstanding children's mounts. His Charmsley Hi Speed—another pony who required no breaking—even competed in the hunt teams at Equitana '96 and became a Hall of Fame champion in his own right.

Apparently, Troubadour inherited a lot more than Gepeto's disposition. "[His pair-mate] was from the Legend line, who were non-jumpers. But Gepetos jump ANYTHING," Gordon attested. "And here's something that we haven't quite figured out, but which we think goes back to one of Gepeto's grandsires," she added. "Every single foal Troubadour's ever had has either a black or white spot somewhere on its body. The boys usually have black spots, and the girls have white ones!"

Troubadour has even proven a worthwhile cross on mares with warmblood and draft breeding. "They were pretty darned nice," Gordon admitted. "Lots of bone, and a good size."

Needless to say, "Troubie" is one of the family. "As I tell people, I've known this pony longer than I've known my husband!" his devoted owner said, laughing.

Robert Krasniewski feels the same way about his Olney Zachary, a bay brother of both Troubadour and another standout, Quiz Kid. Although he originally planned to geld Zachary, Krasniewski said, "He got so cute, and had a nice temperament; so we figured as long as I drove him and did all these things with him, he would be okay." Zachary went on to become a Hall of Fame halter champion who sired his share of Hall of Fame ponies.



Olney Troubadour, an ASPC Hall of Fame son of Gepeto, currently standing at Charmsley Farm, John Totten photo, courtesy of Charmsley Farm

He was an especially good influence when crossed with his nieces. "I bought a mare from Mrs. Rogers who was out of Zach's sister, and by breeding him to his niece, we had two more Hall of Famers," his proud owner said. "And the thing they are all consistent in is temperament. Every now and then you'll get a zinger—just a plain Jane—but at least it's sweet."

Zachary's offspring have had banner days at both Maryland Pony Breeders events and the State Fair. And Zachary himself is currently enjoying a career between the traces. "I had never driven anything else before," Krasniewski said. "I just got in the cart, and off we went!"

PERFORMANCE PLUS

Gepeto's descendants continue to excel in the show ring, particularly in performance classes. Of course, as ASPC steward Susan Hill will tell you, that's an Olney tradition. "Those ponies are absolutely as popular as ever," she said. Nevermind that the current trend in halter classes is towards a more refined pony, one that often bears Hackney and/or Welsh Pony blood.

When it comes to riding or driving, "...the Olneys really are [what] everybody wants," the Whiteford horsewoman continued. "You can do everything with them; they're not likely to run away with you or anything."

Case in point: the Maryland Pony Breeders' High Point list for 2000. The Champion Shetland Foal—Ensor Acres No Way—was sired by Gepeto's son Olney Xerxes, from an Olney mare named Gee Whiz. Reserve Champion in that division—Celynnen Nutmeg—is by Gepeto's son Olney Troubadour. The Reserve Champion Shetland Yearling was Olney Merlin, a son of Olney Xerxes from Olney Yippee, while Echodale Emblem—by Gepeto's son Olney Zachary—took the Reserve Championship for Shetland Driving.

Even the coveted Harriet Shriver Rogers Award went to the aforementioned Charmsley Hi Speed, a son of Olney Troubadour.

FAMILY PRIDE

Whatever their role in life, Olney Shetlands—Gepeto's get included—continue to enchant. And you don't have to be a child to appreciate that. Just ask Joyce Eikenberry, whose Badger Brook Farm, near Logan, Ohio, is populated largely by descendants of Gepeto through her herd stallion, Olney Xpress ("Buddy"). Eikenberry—who remembers Gepeto's



Olney Swanee, dam of Gepeto, at age 33, courtesy Frances Flatau

amazing gentleness—used to show and drive her ponies, but now just "...keeps 'em, feeds 'em—and enjoys 'em."

Eikenberry says that Gepeto passed on not only his coloration, but "... a good, calm, level-headed 'people' disposition, with good pony conformation, good heads—and teeth! The same is true of his grand-get and great-grand-get, on down through the fourth generation."

She tells a story that illustrates the "good sense" for which the Gepeto line is known. "Badger Brook Button Quail (Olney Xpress x Olney Quail) had her foot caught in some wire down in the creek some years back," she recalled. "Did she struggle or fight? Not a bit of it; she just stood there patiently until I showed up that morning.

"When I did, she and Quail looked up at me and whinnied—the others left them to come up for their grain, but Quail and Button did not move. When I realized what was going on, I went and grabbed the pliers, and waded down into the creek to cut the wire away—it was wrapped solidly around Button's hind leg and there was no way she could have gotten loose.

"She stood very patiently and calmly until I had the wire off, picked up her hind leg and waved it back and forth a couple of times, then climbed out of the stream and she and Quail trotted away up the cliff. But she stopped for a moment half-way up, turned around, and came back—I swear to this day it was to thank me!" she said.

It warms Flatau's heart to hear stories like that. After all, Olney Shetlands are a matter of family pride, generation after generation. "Every now and then I hear from somebody, and they say, 'I've just gotten a pony, and its name is Olney such-and-such,'" she said. "And it's like finding a long-lost relative!" 🐾

Update on Native Dancer

The Equiry's 1999 Maryland Stallion of Distinction

Each year in the Stallion Issue, The Equiry honors a Maryland stallion who has had a significant impact on his breed. Usually, it takes several generations after the stallion is deceased before the impact may become recognized. This year, the honor goes to the Shetland Pony stallion Olney Gepeto, but in 1999, that stallion was the Thoroughbred Native Dancer. From time to time, we report on the descendants of our honored stallions, and we thought you might find this information about Native Dancer's descendants interesting.

[At the Fair Hill CCI***] the top three horses—all U.S. Thoroughbreds, have some remarkable similarities in their pedigrees. All three descend from Polynesian (born in 1942) through the great Native Dancer, who won 21 of 22 starts, including the Preakness and Belmont. The Native [1st place], who was bred in New Jersey by Southview Farm and Marjorie R. Francis, has Polynesian twice on his dam's side: Native Speaker is by Restless Native, a son of Native Dancer. Polynesian is also Native Speaker's maternal great-great-grand sire.

Polynesian appears at the very top of the pedigrees of Cayman Went [2nd place] and Tigger Too [3rd place]. For Cayman Went, Native Dancer is the sire of paternal great-grand sire Raise A Native, who also sire the great Alydar, who sired Kentucky Derby winner Easy Goer, Cayman Went's sire. Polynesian also appears in the dam's side of this pedigree, in the fifth generation.

For Tigger Too, Raise A Native sired the influential sire Exclusive Native, who sired Teddy's Courage, Tigger Too's sire.

The influential Nasrullah appears three times in the fifth generation of The Native's pedigree, descending through the great Secretariat (maternal grandsire of sire Uno Roberto), Nashua and Never Bend. The distance-loving Princequillo also appears twice in the fifth generation.

Nasrullah appears only once in Cayman Went's fifth generation as Alydar's maternal great-grand sire, but he's not present in Tigger Too's pedigree.

Cayman Went was bred in Kentucky by Christiana Stables; Tigger too was bred in California by Gene Cunningham.

—John Strassburger,
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