

Copperbottom

By Richard Chamberlain



*The stallion and his
home on the range grew
up together.*

THIS MONTH MARKS 172 YEARS SINCE INDEPENDENCE for the Republic of Texas. On March 2, 1836 – while a doomed band of revolutionaries still was besieged at the Alamo – a rabble-raising group of their brethren gathered at the tiny village Washington-On-The-Brazos to put their John Hancocks on the declaration that broke ties with Mexico. Eight weeks later, flush off his victories at Goliad and the Alamo, Santa Anna and his army were defeated at San Jacinto by ragtag rebels under Sam Houston.

Born in Virginia on March 2, 1793, Houston became the first president of the new republic, serving in 1836-38 and again in 1841-44. A colorful character, Houston lived with the Cherokees, fought with Andrew Jackson against the Creeks, was governor of two states, served two terms in Congress and was a U.S. senator. Ol' Sam also was an excellent horseman, both in the saddle and as a breeder.

It was in his role as horseman that Houston, the year after he finished his first term as president of Texas, bought a good-looking, well-conformed stallion named Copperbottom from breeder Edward Parker of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. (While the origin of his name, which also is recorded as Copper Bottom, is lost to history, the hulls of many of the wooden warships of the day were armored with copper plating and the ships sometimes were referred to as copperbottoms.) Foaled in 1828, Copperbottom was a chestnut son of Sir Archy, whose sire was the imported Diomed, who was either a son or grandson of Herod, depending on the pedigree one chooses to accept. Sir Archy was out of a daughter of the imported Buzzard, whose grandsire was Herod, thus making Copperbottom linebred to Herod. In addition, Copperbottom on his dam's side traced twice to Janus.

Houston had Copperbottom transported by river to New Orleans and then on to Galveston by steamship — either that, or he was ridden overland to Galveston. From there, Copperbottom was taken to Chambers County, Texas, and then to Huntsville,

Sulphur Springs and Hopkins County, where he died in 1860.

Though Copperbottom was known for his speed, and his progeny certainly could run, only a few were ever raced – though those that were did it well. More than a little money changed hands at the hooves of Copperbottoms sprinting on the beach at Galveston, and descendants such as Buckskin and Pilgrim were chronicled in Goodwin's Turf Guide in the 1880s and '90s. But those were the exceptions.

“At one time, the Copperbottom horses were known from Galveston to Sherman and were numerous throughout West Central Texas,” wrote Helen Michaelis, AQHA executive secretary in 1942-46, in the October 1941 *Western Livestock Journal*. “But unfortunately, there is very little data on them because the men who bred them did not believe in racing their horses. They believed to race a horse ruined him for top cow work.”

It takes speed to work cattle, and it was in doing top cow work in the world's top cattle center where the Copperbottoms found their true home. Valued for their cow sense and ability as working ranch horses, the descendants of Copperbottom and their blood were preserved primarily through the breeding program of R.L. Underwood, who ranched near Wichita Falls, Texas, and was AQHA president in 1944-45. At the time of AQHA's incorporation, Underwood was standing the Copperbottom-bred stallion Golden Chief, blood that he would use both top and bottom to breed such luminaries as Cutter Bill, the grandson of Dexter who became the National Cutting Horse Association's world champion in 1963. A son of Golden Chief, Dexter also was the maternal great-great grandsire of Jack Fiddler, who with points in heading, heeling and working cow horse was the AQHA all-around high-point horse in 1995.

“Copperbottom horses have gone down in unwritten history as ideal cow horses with lots of bottom and refinement,” Michaelis wrote. “They were intelligent and had a quick burst of speed; many of them were fast for a quarter of a mile. They were well muscled, especially over the kidney and loins; they had short backs, flat bone, short legs, beautiful heads, good withers, sloping shoulders and pasterns.”

Sounds like a pretty good kind of Quarter Horse. So thank you, Sam Houston, for Copperbottom. And for Texas, too. ■