

# A Brief Overview of Draft Horse Numbers

by Merlin Ford

I've spent a bit of time over the past 2 years thinking about the number of draft horses that are being bred currently. I decided that it might help to put together a summary of draft horse numbers for the past number of years, as well as a few from the current time just to see where we really do stand.

I want to start by giving the first word to my old friend Eddie Arnold. It is now four years ago since Eddie passed away—just shy of his 107th birthday. A very interesting man, his experience and memory regarding Clydesdale horses was second to none.

I came across a letter of his the other day in which he said, "I went to the Brandon Winter Fair for the first time in 1923. There were 28 Clydesdale stallions in the aged class. The grand champion was Arnprior Emigrant, a good draft colt rising two years." I don't suppose that there has been (or ever will be) a draft horse show in our time (World Shows included) where we will ever see 28 aged stallions in one class.

Just below is a chart which shows when the different associations were formed.

Association	Year Formed
Clydesdale Horse Association of Canada	1886
Canadian Shire Horse Association	1888
Canadian Percheron Association	1907
Canadian Belgian Draft Horse Breeders Association	1907
Canadian Suffolk Horse Society	1910

A note about the Suffolk stud book: it is a soft cover and "contains pedigrees of registrations from the date of incorporation—April 27, 1910—up to and including June 1, 1939." That one stud book covers almost 30 years and, despite that, a total of only 307 stallions and 352 mares were registered. The Suffolk is one of the most interesting livestock breeds in existence, but unfortunately the breed has had more than its share of lean years.

Rather than include numbers from every decade, I'm going to include only some of the highlights. I think it will be easier to follow, and it will still allow for some helpful comparisons. In 1920, Saskatchewan had over one million horses, more than any province in Canada. The Stallion Licensing Board listed the pure-bred stallions as follows:

Clydesdales	Percherons	Belgians	Shires
1,378	872	176	38

In 1930, Saskatchewan still had over one million horses, but numbers started to drop the next year, and by 1951 the province's horse population had fallen to about 304,000.

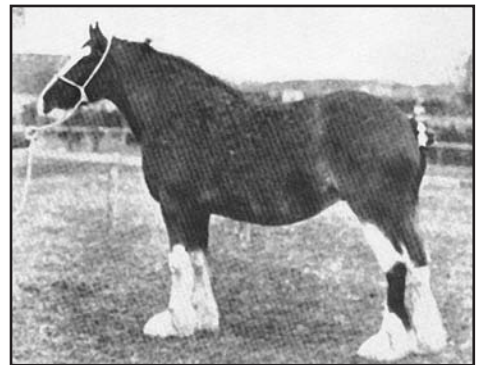
In the 1930 US Census, Percherons made up over 50% of the entire population of registered horses in the US (including light horses). The draft horse was in for some tough years however, and the chart below will show how Percheron registrations changed in the US from the 1930s through to the mid 50s.

Year/ # Reg'd	Year/ # Reg'd	Year/ # Reg'd	Year/ # Reg'd
1930 – 2312	1933 – 2651	1936 – 5000+	1954 – 85

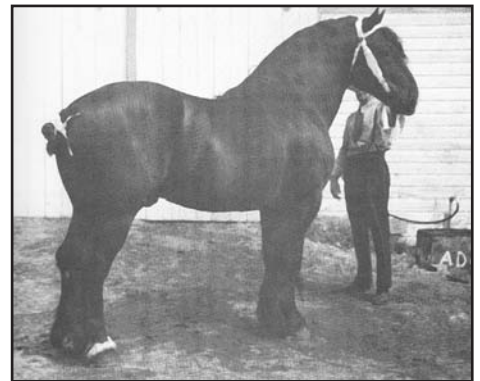
That isn't a typo! In 1954 there were only 85 Percherons registered in the US—an amazing drop, when you consider that only 18 years before they had registered over 5000.



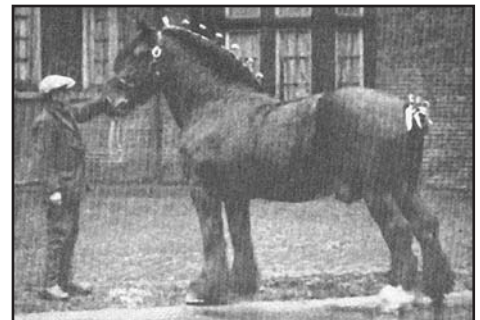
Three roan Belgian geldings owned by Harvey Osborn, Weyburn, Sask., in the 1960s



Rosalind, one of the great Clydesdales of her time, was purchased by U. of Saskatchewan in 1923.



Riverbend Monkoncarlaet: this Percheron was purchased by George Fraser of Tate, later by Jonathan Fox.



Marden Jupiter: Gr. Ch. Shire Stallion at Chicago in 1924 for the Experimental Farm at Lacombe, Alta.

In 1946, the last Shire horse in Canada was registered. It would be another 37 years (in 1983) before a Shire horse was registered in this country again. The current Canadian Shire Horse Association was incorporated one year later (1984).

In 1947, the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture bought the Clydesdale stallion Windlaw Proprietor from Ray McLaughlin for \$2500. In 1953, the stallion was moved to the Prince Albert Jail Farm, and the University of Saskatchewan Clydesdales were reduced to about seven head.

The American Suffolk Horse Association ceased to exist. They reorganized and held their first meeting in 15 years in May 1961.

Any of us who enjoy draft horses owe a great big debt to those breeders who kept on through the lean years of the 50s and 60s. I wonder if any of them realized how critical they were to the future of the draft horse.

The chart below will show just where things were at in the 1960s. These numbers are from the US, but things were very similar in Canada.

Year	Percherons	Belgians	Clydesdales	Shires	Suffolks
1962	129	446	34	0	0
1963	116	530	15	6	4

In the spring of 1964, the first issue of the *Draft Horse Journal* was published. Maurice and Jeannine Telleen of Waverly, Iowa sent this magazine to 2800 potential subscribers. The response was excellent and today the magazine goes to over 20 000 subscribers around the world.

Maury has spent many years teaching people about draft horses and their history. He understands, as well as anyone, the importance of understanding our past in order to ensure a bright future.

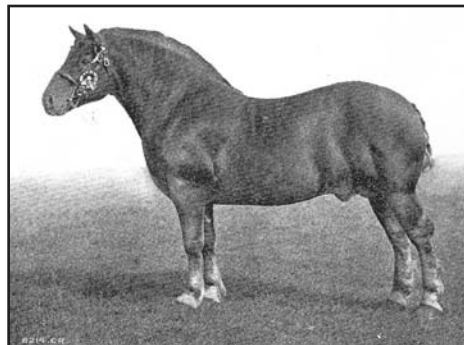
Here are some results from the Columbus, Ohio sale from the 60s to the 80s. If you take a minute and look at the number of horses being consigned, as well as the average prices, it will give you a good indication of the state of the draft horse business in those years.

Year	1964	1969	1974	1979	1984	1989
# of Horses	98	127	222	298	563	519
Average Price	\$340	\$446	\$1082	\$327	\$1680	\$1937

Things had really taken a positive upswing in the 1980s in the US, and the outlook was improving here in Canada as well. The chart below shows the number of horses being registered here.

Breed	Year	Number of horses registered
Belgian	1984	1023
Clydesdale	1985	236
Percheron	1984	582
Shire	1985	25 (note: CSHA had only reorganized 2 years earlier)
Suffolk	1984	3 (note: horses registered between 1980 and 1984)

I'll change pace slightly and include one story of interest for each of the five breeds.



A Suffolk stallion from the early 1900s.



Bridgeman's Paul, Gr. Ch. Belgian Stallion, 2006 CWA; owned by Gerald & Diane Hendry, Kronau, Sask.

Photo: Sandy Black



Prince: All American Percheron gelding 1990, bred by Walter Hughes, Preeceville, Sask.



Suffolk stallion competing in England in 1990.

Photo provided by Don and Catherine Baxter.

Both Hubert and Eddie Freitag of Alameda, Sask., worked at Meadow Brook Farm in Howell, Mich., as young men. Mrs. Wilson, the widow of John Dodge of automobile fame, owned Meadow Brook. Mrs. Wilson provided the enthusiasm and money, and Harold Clark provided the knowledge. Together they promoted the Belgian horse through the lean years (50s, 60s, etc), and shaped it into the breed it is today. (The horses bred at Meadow Brook are in Belgian pedigrees everywhere).

Many people have heard of the Budweiser Clydesdales. The Budweiser horses first started parading in 1933, as they do now. One of Budweiser's first purchases was the hitch of Clydesdales from the Shea Brewery in Winnipeg. Still parading over 75 years later, the brewery has hired a healthy number of both men and horses from western Canada.

Whenever I used to hear the name of Jonathan Fox, I associated it with Hereford cattle. What I didn't realize was that Jonathan played a very important role in keeping the Percheron breed alive. Justamere Par Excellence and Justamere Stylish Stella will always have a place in the history books, and the influence of Justamere Showtime lives on still today.

In the late 1980s, Thomas Smrt, a wealthy man from Illinois, started importing a number of Shire horses from England; maybe over 300 head. He spent a lot of money on promotion, and even developed a theme park called Shireland. I drove past that park (it was closed for the day) on an evening in the summer of 1991. There were Shires lined up eating out of a cement trough in numbers that I'm sure I'll never see again. It was quite a sight. Shireland is no longer in existence, but if you look in Shire pedigrees today you will still see the Fox Valley prefix.

Georgina Robbins of Saskatoon (she and her family have raised excellent Clydesdales) is a distant relative to Andy Haxton, who in 1939 was driving a hitch of Suffolks, which had been imported from England. At the time Clydesdales almost completely dominated the hitch classes at the show. Andy took this hitch to the shows on behalf of Hawthorn Melody Farm of Illinois and had an excellent year with their Suffolks.

I'll finish this article with the number of draft horses registered here in Canada for the last few years.

Breed	2001	2006	2007	2008
Belgian	795	667	589	671
Clydesdale	407	401	443	501
Percheron	1005	974	865	918
Shire	12	22	22	17

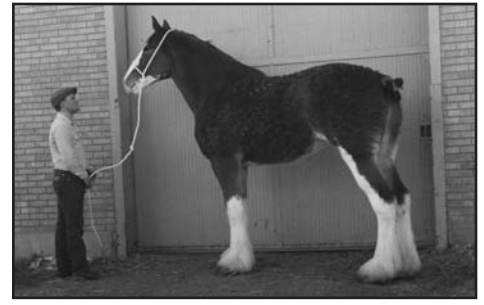
NOTE: To date in 2009, there have been 24 Shires registered in Canada.

For the ten years prior to December 31, 2008 there were 331 Suffolks registered here in Canada – for an average of about 30 registrations per year.

I've tried to include a decent number of Saskatchewan connections in the photos and content that I've included. Not only has the number of draft horses changed over the years, so has the style of horse being raised, and I think these photos will help to illustrate that.

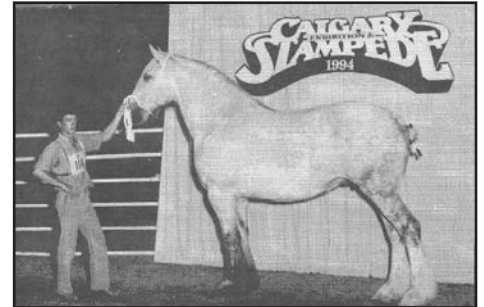
I hope that you'll take the time to go through this article a couple of times, consider the numbers, and let's all do our part to ensure a bright future for the draft horse.

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*Donegal Lady Iona, Gr. Ch. Clydesdale Mare, 1993 CWA for Hatfield Clydesdales, Gladstone, Man.*

Photo: Monty Thomson



*Gentle Giant Lucky Choice: Shire Champion of the 1990s, owned by Keith Gibson, Westlock, Alta.*

Photo: Browarny Photographics

## About the author

Merlin Ford is a web designer, writer and historian living near Preeceville, Sask. He has had a strong interest in draft horses for the past 20+ years and is currently working on a book on the history of draft horses in Saskatchewan.

Merlin sent *Genesis* a six-page information booklet that he has prepared that is packed with information about draft horses. It includes brief breed descriptions, contact information for the breed societies, a list of draft horse books and magazines and a run down on draft horse related events. Until *Genesis* gets it in print, Merlin can provide electronic or print copies on request.

Merlin closes his information booklet as follows:

"Please feel free to call at any time if I can assist you in any way with your draft horse questions (or just for a good draft horse visit). For those of you who are online, I have a number of draft horse links on my website that you may find interesting." [www.clippityclop.ca](http://www.clippityclop.ca)

Contact Merlin Ford at Preeceville, Sask.: phone 306-547-2799 or email [clippity.clop1@gmail.com](mailto:clippity.clop1@gmail.com)