

Tom Hannon – The Friesian Horse and a Dream

Adapted from *The Early Years of Friesians in North America*, by Laurie Menzel Williams©
Adapted by Laurie Menzel Williams and Timothy Hannon, 2023
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In 1974, Tom Hannon of Louisville, Ohio, imported the first Friesians to touch the soil of North America since the 1700's. A much-awaited freighter arrived in the Port of Orange, New Jersey, carrying some 1200 Mercedes Benz automobiles - and the first Friesian horses to North America, housed in center box stalls. The Dream began!

Thomas and Theresa Hannon began their journey in the horse world with a Morgan horse to drive around the farm and became founding members of the Western Reserve Carriage Association in Ohio. In 1973, Tom considered putting together a 4-in-hand of Arabians. A collector and advocate of historic carriages and carriage furnishings, Tom thought it would be interesting to put Arabians to their large coaches. His goal became reality – but in a very different manner than he expected.

The Hannons traveled to England in May of 1973 and attended the Windsor Horse Show on the grounds of Windsor Castle. “During the opening day ceremonies, all the carriages were driven from the Castle down the long lane onto Smith’s Lawn. It was spectacular. One of the 4-in-hands was drawn by four gleaming, black Friesians. My eyes were riveted on those four horses. They were black, with not a spot of white. Their necks were bowed and their manes and long tails were flying. The feathers on their feet emphasized the grace of their elegant gait. They parted and silenced the crowd as they glided off the winding road from Windsor Castle out onto the green meadow. I looked at Theresa. She was as stunned as I was. For us, the Friesians were magic.” (Hannon, *Walk On*).

The plans changed that day. Tom and Theresa discovered that several of the horses in that eye-catching 4-in-hand were owned by Elizabeth Korthagen Van-Til of Brueklen, Netherlands (a tiny town after which Brooklyn, New York was named). Elizabeth Korthagen-van Til - Tante Bets, Taint Bets, Auntie Bets - was a most remarkable woman. Her name was synonymous with the promotion and revival of the Friesian horse in sports in the Netherlands and beyond. Tante Bets actively drove and competed with her Friesian horses. During one of their first competitions in Germany, the crowd went wild trying to see the Friesians. In England, at Windsor in 1973, the exact same thing happened again. This time Tom and Theresa Hannon witnessed the display! A meeting with Tante Bets and the Hannons was soon arranged.

“She spoke of her great dream - to drive her horses in the United States. Alas, she was too old and such a trip was too costly... I suggested that we buy her horses and have her accompany them to the United States. This caught her fancy and the revolutions of the cognac bottle around her tiny room increased perceptibly. Soon we were in negotiations and before that day was over, Theresa and I were the owners of three Friesians. Before the trip was over, we bought two more.” (Hannon, *Walk On*).

The first five horses were transported to the U.S. by a French container ship out of Rotterdam. Tante Bets and a young groom, Donald, traveled with the horses to the port of New York City. The five horses spent their 30-hour quarantine in Clifton, New Jersey. Dr. Leslie M. Kozsely, a prominent carriage driver and trainer, remembers the day the Friesian horses arrived in New York as a time of much excitement. “On the evening of their arrival,” stated Dr. Kozsely, “Tom Hannon, his son Tim, future son-in-law Steve Harper, Bill (a company manager from Zanesville, Ohio), and I greeted the new arrivals. The famous Friesians had come to the new world. The horses looked remarkably well after their week of travel on a ship that had encountered rough seas.”

The family and friends waited out the quarantine at a nearby Holiday Inn, where they met for dinner and congratulatory drinks. The hotel manager inquired as to the occasion, and when he learned the details he asked to see the horses. Tom promised to stop by the next day to show him the reason for the celebration. A

man of his word, Tom stopped at the hotel on the way back to Ohio and unloaded two of the horses to the delight of the hotel manager. “The manager had arranged for all the local media to be on hand, and we took the Friesians into the dining room of the Holiday Inn. The owner was most grateful for the publicity and we were greatly impressed with the remarkably good manners of our new horses.” (Hannon, *Walk On*)

The first horses bought by the Hannons with the help of Tante Bets were the mares Karoliena star (Ritske), Richtje star (Hotse), Tsjaltsje star (Hindrik), Tini, and Wodaline. Tante Bets visited “her” Friesians at the Hannon’s. “They recognized me right away. Horses never forget you. I used to quarrel a lot with Wodaline when I owned her, and the minute she heard my voice she pinned her ears back. She used to do that at home too. We were always at odds with each other,” she laughs.’ (*Phryso*, April 1991, Jelly Veltman)

Tom took it upon himself to showcase the Friesian breed wherever the opportunity presented itself, from east coast to west, in parades, horse shows and driving competitions. The 1974 annual Carriage Association Convention was held at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The Hannons packed the trailer and headed to Greenbrier with Tante Bets, where she lived her dream of driving her horses in the United States. Dr. Leslie Kozsely created a gig from a Friesian-type chaise by replacing the shaft with a pole and he rode with Tante Bets. In November 1975, Tom showed his Friesians at the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto, Canada.

Tom desired to create a breeding program for Friesians in the United States. To this goal the Hannons met Mr. Hofstra of Friesland in 1976 and he proceeded to buy a Friesian stallion for their desired program. The FPS Approved stallion, Bouwe 242, arrived in style in the belly of a KLM Dutch Airlines Boeing 747 in January of 1977. In the following years, numerous foals were born, with the majority sold to others, expanding the breed throughout North America.

On June 19, 1982, Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands came to Holland, Michigan. Tom Hannon and his son Tim drove Queen Beatrix and her husband, Prince Claus, as well as the mayor of Holland, Michigan, from the square in Holland to Hope College. Tom served for several years on the Netherlands American Bi-Centennial commission, recognizing 200 years of unbroken diplomatic relations between the two countries. “When the time came to prepare a program for her visit, the committee was very supportive of using our horses and carriages for the event, and Queen Beatrix was aware of our importing the Friesian horses to America,” states Tom.

Over the next 30 years, Tom became affectionately known as the grandfather of the breed in North America. It’s been said that Tom loved his wife, his children, and his Friesians, possibly not in that order! Tom is no longer with us, but his mantra survives.

“The Outside of a Horse is Good For the Inside of a Man.”

Dreams do come true!