

Do you believe in Magic?



Nate Chute /Daily Inter Lake

DIANE WARD gets her pony, Mid Somer Magic, ready to go outside for the day. Magic is a Kerry Bog pony, a breed of horse originally from Ireland that nearly went extinct. Magic is the only Kerry Bog west of the Mississippi River, Ward said.

Whitefish pair help to save rare Irish ponies

By CANDACE CHASE
The Daily Inter Lake

As Dick Ward tells it, his wife, Diane, first fell in love with the rare Irish Kerry Bog pony.

"I came into this kicking and screaming," he said.

But St. Patrick's Day finds both of the Wards smitten as

they await the birth of a foal from their Kerry Bog mare named Thornapple Farm's Mid Somer Magic. For a breed that teetered on extinction, each new baby proves anew the luck of the Irish.

The Wards' mare, born on summer solstice day in 2005, was the 10th entered in the American Kerry Bog Pony Society register. By coinci-

dence, Magic may give birth June 21 to the first Kerry Bog pony born west of Ohio.

"That would be double magic," Dick said.

It would provide a bewitching twist to their Irish pony tale that began with a trip to the Emerald Isle in 2004. The couple scheduled the journey to celebrate Diane's 60th birthday as well as their 45th

wedding anniversary.

ACCORDING TO Diane, she was poking around a little bookstore when she found a book called "Breaking the Silence."

"I'll pick up anything with a horse on the cover," she said.

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Kerry Bogs have large hearts and gentle temperaments

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The book introduced Diane to the Kerry Bog pony, a breed of small but strong horses that once flourished in Southwest Ireland in County Kerry. She learned that the pony lived semi-wild, grazing on sparse poor grasses.

Poor farmers once used the ponies to haul seaweed to fertilize fields and blocks of peat from bogs to heat their homes. On Sundays, families hitched up their ponies to carts to take them to Mass.

Blessed with a large heart and lungs and a sure-footed gait, the pony packs uncommon strength and a gentle temperament in a 10- to 12-hand high conformation similar to a Morgan horse.

Over the centuries, the Irish referred to the ponies as hobby horses.

"When poor people got kicked off the farm, they were told 'Take your old hobby and go,'" Diane said.

Now honored as the Irish heritage pony, the Kerry Bog pony breed dwindled to near extinction. Their demise came from war service pulling cannons, abandonment during the potato famine, competition from Spanish donkeys and then the final blow — mechanization.

When only 20 of the pure breed remained, a savior appeared in the form of Irishman John Mulvihill of County Kerry. Owner of the Red Fox Inn and creator of a Kerry Bog Village tourist attraction, Mulvihill made a mission of finding and breeding ponies with distinct Kerry Bog DNA markers.

Through an exhaustive search and testing, he found Dempsey Bog, a foundation stallion that produced two foals in the early 1990s.

"Now he [Mulvihill] has a nice herd," Diane said.

WHEN THE couple returned from Ireland to their former home in North Carolina, Diane got on the Internet. She located Linda Ashar, who had imported Kerry Bog ponies for breeding on her Thornhill Farms in Vermillion, Ohio.

"She had brought in six of the original 20," Diane said.

After much discussion, Diane convinced Dick that a hobby horse was perfect

for the hobby farm they had purchased in anticipation of their retirement in Whitefish. The couple brought Magic, a weanling chestnut with a flaxen mane and tail, home to North Carolina in November 2005.

In May 2006, the couple retired and moved with their Kerry Bog pony, three Paso Fino horses and three dogs to a new life on their 20-acre Livermore Flats farm located about five miles from downtown Whitefish.

Dick, 67, had been a professor of engineering as well as a representative of a materials management trade organization. Diane, 64, had a career in education. Both had grown up in Pennsylvania.

"I think we're what you would refer to as city slickers," Dick said with a laugh.

They discovered Whitefish through their daughter Jennifer Croskrey, who moved here 12 years ago. She now lives in a separate house on her parent's farm with her husband, Jerry, and two children.

Along with Magic and three Paso Fino horses, Diane and Dick care for 10 merino sheep, 23 chickens, three dogs and two cats. They both enjoy getting up and hitting the barn every morning to feed animals and shovel out stalls.

"It's been a wonderful life change for me," Diane said. "Ever since I was a child, I wanted to live on a farm."

The couple hired Lisa Follett to train Magic. Although

quite a handful at first, the pony soon came to trust Follett and now responds to voice commands on a lunge line with their 6-year-old grandson on board.

They have seven others waiting in line for rides.

"She's a pony for the grandchildren," Diane said.

A LITTLE more than a year ago, the couple set out to honor a commitment they made to breed their mare. Thornapple Farms included the stud fee in Magic's purchase price as an incentive to expand the Kerry Bog breed.

"You have an obligation to continue the line," Diane said. "It's fascinating to be in on the ground floor of this."

The couple selected Dempsey Bog, Mulvihill's first registered Irish Kerry Bog pony stallion, to sire Magic's foal. Thornhill Farms purchased and imported Dempsey Bog, as well as Old Peat, Magic's sire.

Without a stallion on the premises of the Wards' Round Prairie Farm, the process was a complex and expensive juggling act.

Montana law requires that the donor stallion pass a test for equine viral arteritis within a 10-day window of collection. The semen shipment had to arrive at the perfect moment in Magic's fertility cycle.

On the third collection from Dempsey Bog, all systems lined up perfectly for

artificial insemination performed July 23 by Dr. Bob Genovese at LaSalle Equine Clinic.

"It was a red-letter day when Bob came out and ultrasounded her and said, 'She's pregnant,'" Diane said.

WITH AN 11-month gestation period, Magic could receive her foal as her fourth birthday present on summer solstice. They plan to sell Montana's first native-born Kerry Bog pony as a weanling.

"That will be hard," Diane admitted.

According to Dick, a 5-month-old weanling commands a price of \$5,000 to \$6,000 on the East Coast. The couple expects Magic to deliver the foal at their farm without any problems.

They said the pending birth has made St. Patrick's Day more special as they look forward to adding one more to American's population of about 30 Kerry Bog ponies.

"It was hugely expensive but it's been a good ride for me," Diane said.

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