



Horses are not just a hobby for Doug and Elaine Kneis of Katy. They are a passion. The couple's 15-acre Magnolia Ranch, situated on a former rice farm in the equestrian neighborhood of Lexington Estates, is home to a rare breed called the Gypsy Vanner. In the United States, there are only 1,500 of these animals, which are also sometimes known by several other names: The Irish Tinker, Gypsy Cob, Irish Cob, and Romany Cob are all used to describe Gypsy horses.

Known for the profuse feathering on their legs and flowing manes and tails, the Gypsy Vanner possesses an exquisite beauty that is only part of what makes them so appealing. Their docile and friendly nature, intelligence, great strength, and strong work ethic have endeared them to horse lovers around the country. And their popularity is growing, considering it took some time to find them.

For many years, gypsies kept Vanners a secret. The unique life of travel and pulling wagons inspired their special breeding, and the Gypsy Vanner has an interesting history.



Brains and Beauty

BY CLAUDIA RICHTER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERALD WHEELER

Katy is home to a beautiful and rare breed of horse that is gaining attention the world over.



Bred for nearly a hundred years by European gypsies to pull their caravans (hence the name Vanner), they are believed to be a mix of Shire, Clydesdale, Friesians, and Dales Ponies. They have a short but powerful build that enables them to travel great distances without tiring easily. Their beautiful colors distinguish them

from other horses and help prevent theft from the often-discriminated-against European gypsies.

Doug Kneis first laid eyes on a Gypsy Vanner while on a business trip to Europe. He fell head over heels in love with them and ended up striking a deal with a gypsy and his son for Gypsy Warlock, an amazing representation of the breed. "The reason I got hooked was the personality of these horses," says Doug. In addition to the Magnolia Ranch in Katy, Doug and Elaine have Gypsy Vanners on their property in Belleville and have other animals to round out the mix. "My wife and I just love animals," says Doug, "and we always have."

In fact, Doug says this love goes back to his childhood when he was one of the only boys he knew who was interested in horses. Although he didn't have real horses, he was content to dream about them with plastic toy horses mixed in with toy cars and green Army men. When he was able to realize his dream, his first horse was an Arabian.

While Arabians can fetch a pretty penny, Gypsy Vanners also don't come cheap. They can range in price between \$25,000 and \$100,000 for a good stallion. They can be purchased from breeders like Doug Kneis in the United States. He travels to Europe to select horses on an individual basis and brings them to the United States by air, noting that they are good travelers. There are only three ports of entry for the horses into the United States: New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. A groomer flies with them to take care of them during the flight and the horses undergo rigorous testing before they are released from a three-day quarantine.

Doug and Elaine Kneis employ seven full-time workers at the Magnolia Ranch, 160 employees in Houston, and 200 in Mexico with an oil field service company they have co-owned since 1986.

For more information on Gypsy Vanners at the Magnolia Ranch, visit www.gypsylvp.com.