



By Alan Parker

## Norm Craven: a Pioneer of WA Standardbred breeding

**Some 12 months ago prominent breeder and Racing and Wagering Board Member Bob Fowler asked Alan Parker if he had any stats on breeders who had bred three winners at a meeting.**

Parker didn't but he did have a database of WA race results that included the trainer, driver and owner of the winners of some 140,000 races since trotting records began in Western Australia in 1910.

Using the WA Trotting Association's old hand-written Registration Books as a reference he spent several months adding the breeder information into his database.

There are some 11,104 individual breeding entities covering the 140,000 races with four breeders each having bred in excess of 1000 race winners in WA and the winners have been cross-referenced with another database to provide the sex, sire and dam of each of those winners.

Each of those breeders began in the industry after 1970 when there was an explosion in the numbers of meetings and races run at those meetings.

Only two breeders from the period covering 1920-1970 have bred more than the winners of 500 races in WA.

Former WATA President and harness racing icon J. P. Stratton bred 984 WA winners while the largely unknown N. S. Craven bred 778 WA winners.

This is the story of Norm Craven and his remarkable contribution to the Western Australian Standardbred Breeding Industry.

When the WA Trotting Association was formed in 1910 the trotting industry in this State was in a parlous state in terms of the numbers of horses and more than 95 percent of the racing stock were imported to the State.

There was no breeding industry as such in WA and a large number of the horses racing at Belmont Park, Claremont, Midland Junction and later the WACA Ground were of unknown pedigree.

The Victorian bred Wilkes G and the successful New Zealand bred stallion General Tracey were among the first Standardbreds to stand at stud in Western Australia and both sired locally-bred winners foaled in 1907.

Capel Tracey (General Tracey-Nancy) was bred by Noel Brazier and won at the very first meeting ever conducted by the WATA at Belmont Park on Christmas Eve 1910. Brazier was later head of the 10th Light Horse at Gallipoli and was in the front line trench at The Nek.

Lady Wilkes (Wilkes G-Lady Kerr) won at Belmont Park on August 30, 1911 and she gave her breeder, owner, trainer and driver George Sainsbury the honour of becoming the first person to train and drive a winner they had bred.

Norman Stanley Craven was born in 1888 at Sandhurst in Victoria and was one of nine children and he moved to Western Australia at around the same time as the WATA was being formed.

In 1911 he married Muriel Sutherland and shortly thereafter he opened a chemist's shop on the corner of Barrack Street and Hay Street under the Perth Town Hall even though he held no formal qualifications as a chemist.

This caused him some angst five years later when he was successfully prosecuted under the Pharmacy and Poisons Act as not being a pharmaceutical chemist but carrying on the business of a chemist or druggist. He was fined £5 and then employed a qualified person to carry out the work.

Also in 1911 Norman Craven began to race the New Zealand bred gelding Burnley in a Tradesman's Trot race at Belmont Park. Tradesman's Trot races were restricted to horses that were used in the owner/trainer's business during the week.

Just down Barrack Street from Craven's Pharmacy was the Pink Top fruit shop run by David Simcock whose shock of red hair had earned him the nickname Pink Top.



Craven's Pharmacy under the Perth Town Hall circa 1925



A dapper Norm Craven



Norm Craven (second from right) on family holiday in NSW

Always looking for an angle to market his business, Simcock named a gelding of unknown pedigree Pink Top and trained it to win a double at Claremont in March 1913 with Norm Craven at the reins.

A little over two years later David Simcock became the only successful trotting trainer to die in the first World War when he was shot and killed at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915.

Craven drove or rode some 79 winners in Perth between 1911 and 1921 and trained 56 during the same period. A big man, Craven's physique wouldn't have helped his endeavours as a driver.

He had remarried in 1920 after his first wife had died from self-administered strychnine poisoning in November 1913 and his daughter Norma was born in 1923.

After he trained and drove the filly Gaby Deslys to win the 1921 WA Derby Craven stepped away from trotting as the demands of a growing business and young family took priority and it was some 11 years before his name again began to appear as the owner of racing stock.

When Gaby Deslys had been retired however, Norm Craven began to breed from her and to sell her progeny to other owners.

The mare's first foal was the mare Golden Gaby which became the first of 140 individual winners of 768 races that Norm Craven was to breed when she won at Fremantle in July 1932. She went on to win heats of both the Easter Cup and Fremantle Cup before being placed in the finals of both races.

With his appetite whetted by the early success Craven began to purchase other mares, both locally and interstate, and to breed more foals, the majority of which he leased out to others to race. After 1921 only 62 winners appeared in Craven's name.

One of those winners was the 1932 WA Pacing Cup winner Miss Eileen which was trained and driven by Jack Simmons for Craven.

When she was retired to Craven's stud Miss Eileen was twice mated with the American stallion Peter Stretta which had been imported direct from the USA by the WATA in an endeavour to boost the quality of horses bred in WA.

The first of the two foals she produced by Peter Stretta was the 1938 gelding Stormy Weather who was to become Craven's first Group 1 winner as a breeder when he won the 1947 Fremantle Cup.

Stormy Weather won 13 races in Perth for trainer Cliff Clarke after being bought from Kalgoorlie where he had commenced racing in July 1943.

Those 13 wins included three heats of the 1947 Inter Dominion and he was sent out a warm 6/4 favourite for the £8,000 final which was second only to the Melbourne Cup as the richest horse race in Australia that season.

Stormy Weather looked to have the race in his keeping as he led with a half-mile to travel but a tyre on his sulky blew out and the wheel buckled and he dropped back through the field as the mare Bandbox went on to win in front of a crowd of some 30,000 stunned fans.

It was in 1947 that Norm Craven established his Kentucky Stud Farm in Serpentine and began to stand stallions.

Kentucky Stud Farm was in fact three properties with one farm being used for the stallions, one for the mares and foals and the third was an educational facility for the young horses that were brought along to the point where they were shown to potential lessees.

His policy of leasing out the horses he bred got Craven into hot water in 1943 when the Tax Department successfully prosecuted him for not declaring his income as lessor on his tax returns.

Craven employed a number of trainers over the years to educate his young horses including a young Norm Crossman who was later to become the track curator at Richmond Raceway in Fremantle.

Crossman had a couple of boxes on the course at Richmond Raceway and his stables played host to a number of visiting champions including the WA Pacing Cup winners Westburn Grant and Gammalite.

Norm Crossman enjoyed success with Yerilla Court which won 20 races and was second to Pure Steel in the 1975 WA Derby.

Norm bred Yerilla Court from the Intangible mare Petite Cherie which had been bred by Norm Craven. Norm's son Harvey is currently president of the WA Racehorse Owners Association.

Craven's list of stallions he stood at Kentucky Stud in the early years included General Mavista, Panther's Pal, Arab Chief, Walla Lawn and Royal Step.

Royal Step was an outstanding racehorse and had won a Fremantle Cup but as a sire he was to prove even better sire with some 74 individual winners of 420 races in Western Australia.

The Harness Racing Australia Sires Index only lists Royal Step as the sire of 66 winners but WA results prior to 1967 were notoriously difficult to access.

Royal Step's best horse was the stallion Royal Shadow which Craven bred from his favourite mare Walidious and then leased the colt to a client of Walidious's trainer Bill Johnson.

Under Johnson's care Royal Shadow won 20 races in Perth including the 1952 WA Pacing Cup a year after he had been runner-up to the New Zealand champion Single Direct in the 1951 edition of the race. In his WA Cup win Royal Shadow beat another Norm Craven bred runner in Earl's First into second place.

After his racing career had finished Royal Shadow returned to his birthplace to stand at stud. He was moderately successful siring 17 winners including the Bunbury Cup winner Beau Silhouette and Sires Produce Stakes winner Robert Rivaire.

Other good horses bred by Norm Craven included 1958 WA Pacing Cup runner-up Dillon Tower (16 wins), Earl Sandy (18 wins), Mintalla (18 wins), Padlock (15 wins), Peter Lene (14 wins) and Sir Raymond (19 wins).

In the mid-1940's Norm Craven joined with other interested breeders in forming the West Australian Trotting Breeders Association and in 1950 when the WATBA produced the Trotting Register of WA results Norm Craven was joint Vice-President with Tom Diver.

The WATBA had held annual shows of young trotting stock from 1946 as a means of promoting the WA bred horse.

Craven later sold his Serpentine properties and set up another stud in Guildford on the site of what is now the Rosehill golf course.

Norm Craven died on February 13, 1961 at his Guildford property and is buried at Karrakatta Cemetery.

Although his life wasn't without its ups and downs and controversies, Norm Craven made a remarkable contribution to the fledgling Standardbred breeding industry in Western Australia that should never be forgotten.

WA Pacing Cup winner Royal Shadow, bred by Norm Craven and who later stood at Craven's stud

