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Louise Firouz, Horse Breeder, Dies at 74



Roksana Fazeli via Bloomberg News

Louise Firouz, in an undated photo. She is credited with having inspired an international revival of the Caspian breed of horses.

By DENNIS HEVESI
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Louise Firouz, an American-born horse breeder who while roaming a mountain range in Iran in 1965 discovered a pony-size Caspian horse, from a breed that had long been thought extinct, died on May 25. Caspian horses were found to be a precursor of modern racehorses.

Mrs. Firouz was 74 and lived in a small town in northern Iran. The cause of death was lung and liver failure, her brother, David Laylin, said.

"The discovery of the Caspian, a breed of great antiquity, was a matter of the greatest scientific and historical importance in equine studies," the author Elwyn Hartley Edwards wrote in the 1994 edition of The Encyclopedia of the Horse, which is considered the primary text on horse breeds.

The Caspian was believed to have died out 1,300 years ago.

At 10 to 12 hands (a hand is four inches) and therefore generally no more than four feet high at the shoulder, the Caspian is small, but it is not shaped like a pony.

It has three distinguishing features: an enlarged parietal bone, giving it a raised forehead; a wide scapula, or shoulder blade; and two extra teeth of the upper jaw.

DNA testing performed in the 1990s by Gus Cothran at the University of Kentucky's Horse Genome Project (Dr. Cothran, a geneticist, now teaches at Texas A&M University) directly linked Caspians to horses of ancient Egypt and Persia, demonstrating that they

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were precursors of the Arabian and other horses classified as hot-blooded, reflecting their temperament.

“Cold-blooded are your draft-type horses; hot-blooded are typically riding horses, like thoroughbreds,” said Francie Stull, a geneticist and a co-owner of the Kristull Caspian Horse Ranch in Bowling Green, Ky., which maintains a genetic base for Caspians.

“Arabians have a dished face,” Ms. Stull added. “When you look at them from the side, their faces curve inward, like Caspians’.”

In 1965, after her initial discovery, Mrs. Firouz went on to find about 30 Caspians during a three-month trek through the Elburz Mountains, south of the Caspian Sea.

Those found in the wild were ragged and covered with ticks and other parasites.

Others were beasts of burden for villagers.

Mrs. Firouz had gone to the mountains after hearing of small horses there, hoping to return with a few to use at the Norouzabad Equestrian Center, a riding academy in Tehran that she owned.

“Arabians are notoriously high strung,” Ms. Stull said. “She was looking for more appropriate children’s mounts.”

On that first trip, Mrs. Firouz took back three Caspians. Within a year, she went back and returned with seven mares and six stallions, the start of a breeding herd.

Word of her discovery filtered through Iran’s high society. The country was then ruled by Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

In 1971, [Prince Philip](#) of Britain visited the shah, who gave him two Caspians. Fascinated, the prince went to Mrs. Firouz’s academy and persuaded her to export some of her rare horses.

Over the next eight years, she exported 29 Caspians, initiating foundation lines for a rebirth of the ancient breed. About 2,000 Caspians are now registered throughout the world, according to the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy in Pittsboro, N.C.

“Louise Firouz was the first to do the research and recognize that these were descendants of ancient horses,” Ms. Stull said. “Although they are still a critically endangered species, due to her efforts they are becoming treasures throughout the world.”

Louise Laylin was born in Washington on Dec. 24, 1933, a daughter of John and Dorothy Laylin. Growing up in the horse country around Great Falls, Va., she rode in fox hunts and on show jumpers. Her father, a lawyer, did work for the Iranian government.

In 1956, during her junior year at [Cornell University](#), Miss Laylin went to study at the American University in Beirut. An Iranian diplomat invited her to visit Tehran, where she met Nancy Firouz, an Iranian aristocrat. They married a year later, after she graduated from Cornell with a degree in animal husbandry.

Mr. Firouz, who owned a construction company in Iran, died in 1994. Besides her brother, David, of Great Falls, Mrs. Firouz is survived by a sister, Laura Nichols, also of Great Falls; two daughters, Roshan Reddaway of Dublin and Atesheh Larsson of

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Belgium; a son, Caren, of Tehran; and seven grandchildren.

Hard times came to the Firouz family after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Because of his aristocratic roots, Mr. Firouz was imprisoned for six months; Mrs. Firouz was jailed for six weeks. Much of their fortune was seized.

In her 70s, living in northern Iran, Mrs. Firouz continued to ride.

Some years ago, she was mounted on a tall Turkmen horse when it tripped on a mountain trail, dislocating her shoulder.

“People said she should stop riding,” Mr. Laylin, Mrs. Firouz’s brother, recalled. “She said, ‘I beg your pardon. The horse fell. I didn’t.’ ”

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