



**THE
WONDER
HORSE**

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**MARK GREENWOOD
HISTORY HUNTER**



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INTRODUCTION

Do heroes shape history? Or do tough times create them? In the search for an answer, we delve into the past to explore the stories that inspire us. Evidence found in books, photos and films takes us back to a time when hope and courage played a vital role in defining our national spirit.

In 1929, the US stock market crashed, sending countries worldwide into the Great Depression. The crippling financial catastrophe caused massive social disruption. Unemployment skyrocketed. Hungry people queued for food. In dark times, a hero was needed to lift the spirits of ordinary Australians. The call was answered by an underdog with unflinching

courage who refused to be defeated when the rules were stacked against him.

The story of the Wonder Horse involves a web of mysteries, from the intuition of a struggling horse trainer to the baffling puzzle of genetics that transformed an unwanted animal into a champion. At the story's heart is a bond of trust forged between a young man and a magnificent animal.

Ultimately, the greatest mystery revolves around what happened to the people's champion when he was at the peak of his powers. After defeating all rivals in Australia, the beloved horse sailed to the United States to compete in the richest horserace in the world. What occurred there would secure his legendary status and spark one of our nation's most enduring mysteries.

Join me as I delve into the story of the Wonder Horse — Phar Lap.



THE END

At the height of his fame, Phar Lap was enjoying a well-earned rest at a luxurious forty-four-acre ranch in San Francisco. After defeating America's champion thoroughbreds, decisions were being made about his future. Phar Lap's owner, David Davis, was in California sifting through lucrative offers to compete in an ambitious American racing schedule. Movie deals were being negotiated with Hollywood producers for the 'Wonder from Down Under' to star in a series of blockbuster films.

Each day, between 3 pm and 4.30 pm, thousands of admirers visited the Menlo Park ranch to meet 'Big Red' — one of many affectionate nicknames bestowed on the gentle giant. Under the watchful eye of Tommy Woodcock, Phar Lap's inseparable companion, fans lined up to take photos and get close enough to pat the



Phar Lap and Tommy, 1932.
Museums Victoria. Ref. MM 106658.

horse regarded by many as the greatest in the world.

After the crowds left, guards kept watch outside the stable. At all times, precautions were taken to keep Phar Lap safe. He only ate feed imported from New Zealand. He never drank water unless Tommy tasted it first, and he only ate sugar cubes from Tommy's pocket. Every night, Phar Lap's trusted companion slept in a bunk opposite the horse's stall, while the vet and other members of the Australian entourage partied until late, soaking up the celebrity of their association with the champion racehorse.

On 5 April 1932, Tommy woke before dawn to greet his best mate. That morning, Phar Lap refused his usual lump of sugar. Tommy touched the horse's nose. It was hot. He felt under the blanket. Phar Lap was sweaty and running a temperature. Tommy roused the vet, Bill Nielsen. 'Come quick,' he said. 'Something's wrong.'

A common stomach and intestinal disturbance was initially diagnosed. The vet concocted a medicinal tonic, forcing the large capsule down the horse's

throat. 'Keep him on his feet,' he told Tommy, 'until the medicine takes effect.'

But the horse showed no signs of improving. His temperature increased. He began retching and displaying signs of distress. He appeared to be in extreme pain and it was becoming progressively worse. Phar Lap pawed the ground with his forefeet. Within hours, he was staggering, barely able to stand.

Bill Nielsen left the ranch to fetch another vet for a second opinion, leaving Tommy alone with a desperately ill horse. Tommy felt helpless as Phar Lap squealed and groaned. His mate was in a dreadful state. Tommy walked the horse back into the stables to make him comfortable. Phar Lap nosed Tommy affectionately under his arm, then he collapsed at Tommy's feet, his head bumping the side of the stable door. It was as if something inside him had burst.

Tommy cradled his beloved horse, sobbing as he stroked Phar Lap's head and mane.