
Badlands Broomtails

The Cultural History of Wild Horses in Western North Dakota

Castle McLaughlin



Horses raised on the open range, such as this breeding band owned by the HT Ranch, contributed to the development of feral herds in southwestern North Dakota.

Wild horses were once a common feature of the western landscape, from Texas to California and throughout the Rocky Mountains north into the Canadian plains. Following the reintroduction of the horse into the Americas by Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century, those animals that became feral adapted quickly and successfully to the plains environment, reverting to their natural form of social organization and aversion to man.¹ By 1850 there were an estimated one million wild horses on the Texas plains alone and an equal number

scattered across the western range.² Never as plentiful on the northern plains as they were in the Southwest, they nonetheless played a significant role in the cultural history of both the Plains Indians and the ranching communities which succeeded them on the northern range. The history of wild horses in North Dakota is richly documented in the literature and oral tradition of the cattlemen, and reaches into the present with the preservation of a wild horse herd in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in southwestern North Dakota.

The wild horse population was so dense in the Spanish Southwest by the eighteenth century that the capture and marketing of these animals has been compared to the Upper Missouri fur trade, and was regulated by licensing, taxes, and hunting seasons.³ Called "mustangs" from the Spanish *mesteno*, herds developed in the wake of the rapid diffusion of domestic horses throughout the inter-montane west during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chasing and subduing wild horses became an integral aspect of vaquero and cowboy life, and is widely celebrated in the music, art and poetry of western American culture. So closely are they associated with the American past that Congress, in 1971, declared them "Living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West."⁴

While few other plains animals have excited the imagination as has the wild horse, the animals customarily called "wild" that inhabited the American grasslands during the historic period are more accurately described as feral, originally domestic horses that escaped from early settlements. As such, American wild horses are distinguished from indigenous wild equines, such as the Tarpan of Mongolia.

Why, then, with such prosaic origins, does the wild horse evoke such fascination, debate, and imagery of the Old West? Anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence argues that the affective and symbolic potency of wild horses within American culture springs directly from their having made the transition from domestic to wild, thus eschewing cultural confines for a life of freedom and independence, values closely associated with the frontier experience. The dichotomy of the horse's nature, adapted to a utilitarian, servile existence but capable of readily reverting to an uncontrolled, primordial state, generated in man both a desire to conquer the animals and an admiration for their indomitability. These conflicting impulses are expressed in the widespread western legend of the uncatchable mustang stallion.⁵

Wild horses have also come to represent the contradictions inherent in transforming the West while preserving its frontier essence, as demonstrated by ongoing con-

troversy over their protection on public lands. Man's relationship to and perception of the wild horse in the New World has been as adversarial as it has been romantic, because it is contingent upon socioeconomic patterns of land use and cultural preference for utilitarian, domesticated animals. While the history of wild horses in North Dakota is not completely known, it appears to have followed the same pattern noted throughout the West: an initial relative abundance and use, followed by the diminution of herds with the intensified utilization of rangelands, and finally, a movement for their preservation. In North Dakota, debate over the value and protection of wild horses has centered on a remnant population in the South Unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park that was present prior to the park's establishment and has been managed by the National Park Service as a "historical demonstration" herd since 1970.⁶

The Historic Era

Documentation of early wild horses in North Dakota is scarce. As elsewhere on the continent, the appearance of feral herds probably developed as a consequence of the introduction of domestic horses into the area by explorers, traders, and Indians, most Plains tribes having acquired these animals by 1760.⁷ Trade was the primary agent for the distribution of the horse across North America; the Missouri and Knife River villages of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arickara played a significant role in their dispersal among both Indian and non-Indian groups in the Upper Missouri region. These communities were key distribution centers in an indigenous exchange network prior to and throughout the entire historic era; this system was utilized by Euroamerican traders who bartered horses, guns, and other exotic items for animal pelts and hides. Horses were reported in the Mandan villages by 1741; throughout the ensuing century they were continuously traded into and out of Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arickara villages, where they were also raised and kept for use as beasts of burden and as riding

¹ Horses evolved on the North American Continent, but were one of many mammalian species which became extinct during the Pleistocene, 8-10,000 years ago. There is an extensive literature on wild horses in North America; the standard historical overview is J. Frank Dobie, *The Mustangs* (Reprint Ed., Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984).

² Dobie, *The Mustangs*, pp. 108-109.

³ Daniel L. Flores, "Mustanging and Horse Trading: A Variant of the Early Western Fur Trade." Ms., Department of American History, Texas Tech University; G.C. Robinson, "Mustangs and Mustanging in Southwest Texas," in J. Frank Dobie, Mody C. Boatright, and Harry H. Ransom, eds., *Mustangs and Cowhorses* (Reprint Ed., Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1982), pp. 3-21.

⁴ PL 92-195, 85 Stat. 649, the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act of December 15, 1971.

⁵ Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, "The White Mustang of the Prairies," *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 81-94.

⁶ *Natural Resources Management Plan and Environmental Assessment*, Theodore Roosevelt National Park (Medora, ND: National Park Service, 1984), p. 46.

⁷ Here and the following paragraphs, see: John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1955); Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen, *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders Among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

⁸ Dobie, *The Mustangs*, p. 97.

animals. It is likely that feral herds developed in proximity to such centers of trade and settlement, where the maintenance of large numbers of horses required constant vigilance and was constrained by their commodity value and limited grazing resources. In his classic work, *The Mustangs*, historian J. Frank Dobie claimed that a particularly virulent smallpox epidemic, which decimated the village tribes in 1837, "released thousands of horses to run wild."⁸ Frequent trade and travel between the Hidatsa villages and their horse-rich Crow relatives along the Yellowstone may also have contributed to the development of early feral herds throughout the western Missouri Plateau.

The earliest known mention of wild horses in what is now North Dakota was made by frontier artist George Catlin, while visiting the Mandan villages along the Missouri River in 1832. Catlin noted:

The horses which the Indians ride in this country are invariably the wild horses, which are found in great numbers on the prairies; and have, unquestionably, strayed from the Mexican borders, into which they were introduced by the Spanish invaders of that country; and now range and subsist themselves, in winter and summer, over the vast stretches of prairie that stretch from the Mexican frontiers to Lake Winnipeg on the North, a distance of 3,000 miles. . .⁹

Washington Irving observed Arickara horses during the 1840s and distinguished between horses that had been captured wild and those that had been acquired by trade, stating: "The horses owned by the Arickaras are, for the most part, of the wild stock of the prairies; some, however, have been obtained from the Poncas, Pawnees, and other tribes to the southwest, who had stolen them from the Spaniards."¹⁰ While Plains tribes later adopted the southwestern technique of capturing horses by means of a lariat thrown during a mounted chase, a native informant told Lewis Crawford in 1930 that one band of Sioux caught their first wild horses around 1825 by placing bison hair snares along watering trails near Fire Heart Butte. Walking Elk, an Oglala, was said to have caught his first wild horse, a young colt discovered in a herd of buffalo, in the valley of the Platte River. While no date was provided for this incident, it is of interest because it was remembered that the Oglala at first attempted to feed the colt dried meat. Such a lack

of familiarity with horses would indicate that the incident occurred prior to the acquisition of horses through trade, in turn suggesting the early appearance of wild herds in the region.¹¹

The Open Range Ranching Era

Wild horses in North Dakota are best known for their role in the cultural history of the ranching communities along the Little Missouri River, where they have been reported in the rugged badlands and river breaks since the late nineteenth century. The late historic settlement of the region precludes written accounts of their origins, although reference to the earliest feral animals as "Indian horses" by local ranchers suggests their presence prior to the arrival of cattlemen.¹² The badlands ecosystem, combining grasslands, water, and the shelter afforded by the timbered riverbottoms and draws, made the country ideal habitat for feral horses, as it was for domestic livestock. The establishment of the ranching industry along the Little Missouri River during the 1880s seems to have augmented an extant population of wild horses in that relatively inaccessible region. Theodore Roosevelt, who ranched in the Medora area as a young man in 1884-1886, indicated that the wild horse population in the Little Missouri country was fairly substantial at that time:

In a great many—indeed, in most—localities there are wild horses to be found, which, although invariably of domestic descent, being either themselves runaways from some ranch or Indian outfit, or else claiming such as their sires and dams, are yet quite as wild as the antelope on whose domain they have intruded. Ranchmen run in these horses whenever possible, and they are but little more difficult to break than the so-called "tame animals." But the wild stallions are, whenever possible, shot; both because of their propensity for driving off the ranch mares, and because their incurable viciousness makes them always unsafe companions for other horses still more than for men. . .¹³

The development of open-range cattle ranching in southwestern North Dakota during the late nineteenth century was the result of a tremendous northward

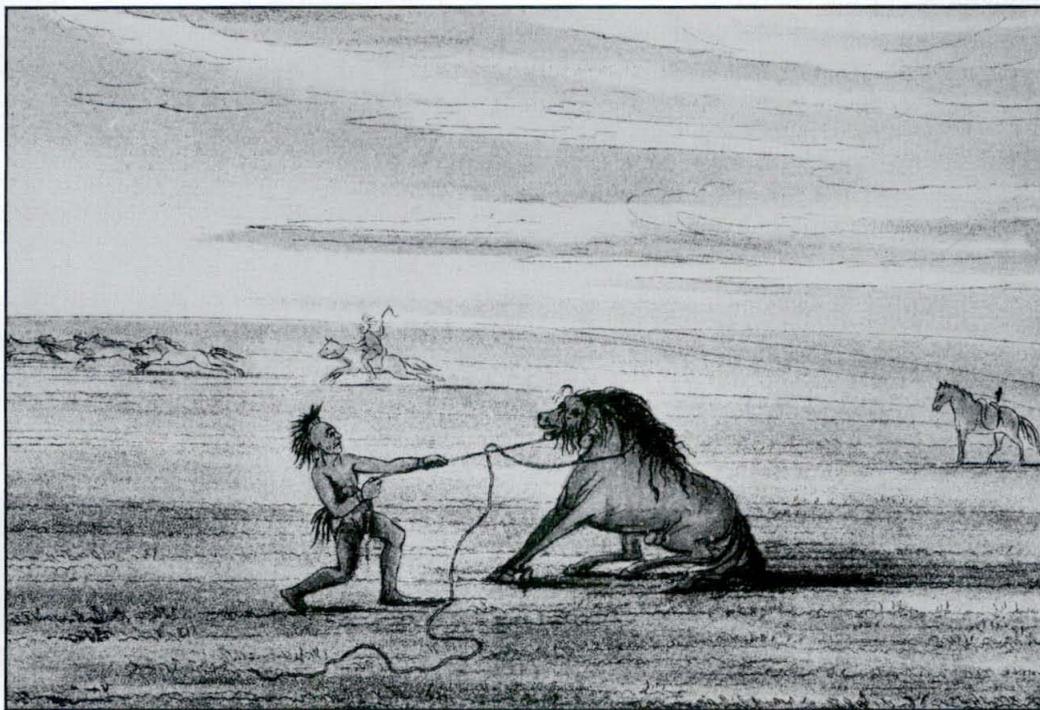
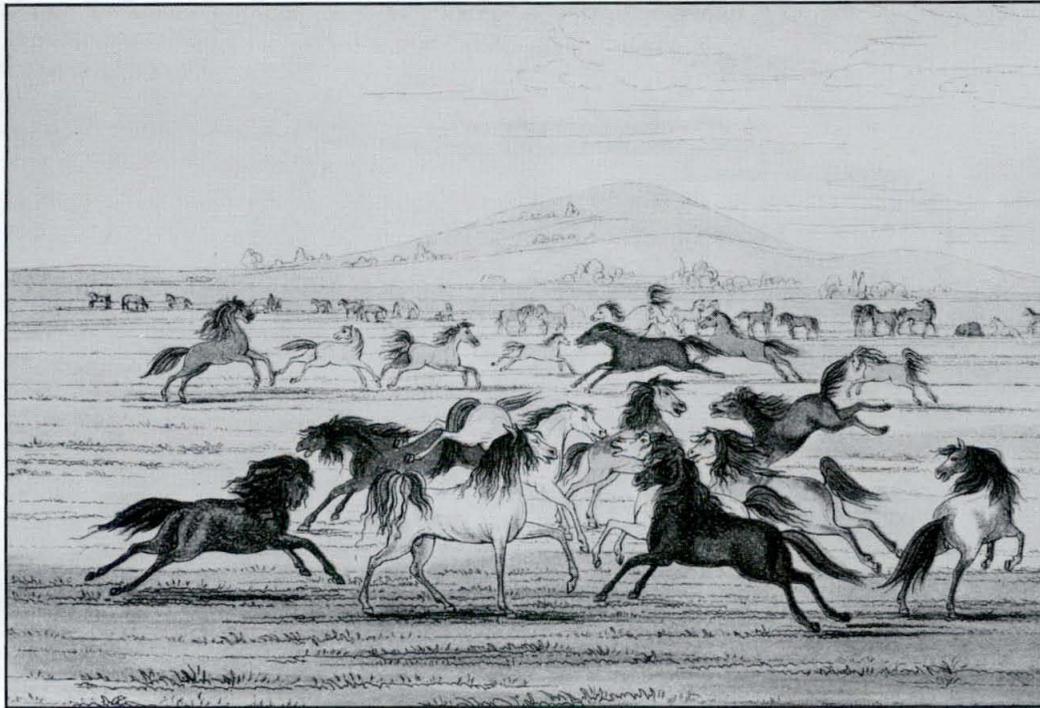
⁹ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians, Volume I* (Reprint Ed., New York: Dover Publications, 1973), p. 142.

¹⁰ Cited in Walker D. Wyman, *The Wild Horse of the West* (Reprint Ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 283.

¹¹ Lewis Crawford interview with Mrs. Waggoner, July 7, 1930,

Record Group A-58, Notebook #2, State Historical Society of North Dakota.

¹² See oral history interviews in Castle McLaughlin, "The History and Status of the Wild Horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park," 1989 (On file, National Park Service, Medora, ND). (Cited hereafter as McLaughlin, "Wild Horses.")



Artist George Catlin sketched and wrote about the spirited wild horses of the northern and southern plains during his western travels in the early 1830s. In describing the difficulty of getting close enough to sketch the wild horses, he wrote, "I made many attempts to approach them by stealth, when they were grazing and playing their gambols, without ever having been more than once able to succeed." In the sketch below, Catlin illustrates the Comanches' method of breaking or taming the wild horse, after capturing it with a lasso and then hobbling it.



The ranching tradition of the Spanish southwest was transported to North Dakota by Texas cattlemen during the open-range ranching era of the late nineteenth century. In 1883, North Dakota rancher Charles Eaton was photographed in Medora with a mustang horse and Spanish riding gear.

expansion of the Texas livestock industry following the Civil War, which was initiated by large, heavily financed operations seeking new grazing lands during a period of market expansion. By 1885 many of these were established in the Medora area, including such well-known outfits as the Berry Boice Cattle Company (Three Sevens); Hughes and Simpson (The Hash Knife); Towers and Gudgell (The OX); and the Reynolds Brothers (Long X). The scale of these operations was considerable, several companies running as many as 40,000 head of cattle and trailing thousands of Texas longhorns and cow ponies into North Dakota each summer.¹⁴

These agents of the Texas ranching tradition introduced into the Dakotas the methods, equipment, and livestock varieties of open-range ranching, as it had developed in the Southwest out of the Spanish hacienda system.¹⁵ A Medora rancher contemporary with Roosevelt acknowledged the influence of the southern cattlemen, saying, "All we knew of open-range ranching we learned from them."¹⁶ In this system, cattle were grazed on unfenced range, the herds rotated seasonally from the grassy uplands and valleys to home ranges in the sheltered badlands for the winter. Although they were herded by company cowboys, range cattle received little handling except during semiannual roundups conducted to brand, sort, and move them.

Horses were handled in similar fashion. To raise horses in an unfenced expanse with minimal care, ranchers exploited the natural propensity of equines to organize into bands of mares controlled and defended by a dominant stallion, which generally maintained them within a selected home range. The rancher

substituted his choice of breeding animals for natural selection and gathered the animals twice annually to remove young animals and replace breeding stock; the rest of the year they ran at large. A.C. Huidekoper, who ran 4,000 head of horses on his famous HT Ranch near Amidon between 1884-1905, described this practice in reference to his program of breeding Indian mares to Thoroughbred stallions:

The breeding up of this herd was a most interesting problem. With the exception of some full-blooded stallions, the rest of the herd ran at large . . . The ranch work commenced with the spring roundup. The country was ridden for 100 miles square, or more . . . The colts were branded and tallied. Then some 50 mares were selected and a stallion selected that we thought would improve the confirmation [sic] of the breeding. This stallion and his mares were put in charge of a cowboy, and for a week were herded by day and corralled at night. At the end of a week, the stallion would know his mares . . . He would take them to some location favored by him, and there you would find him with his herd during the breeding season; after the breeding season they might separate into smaller bunches.¹⁷

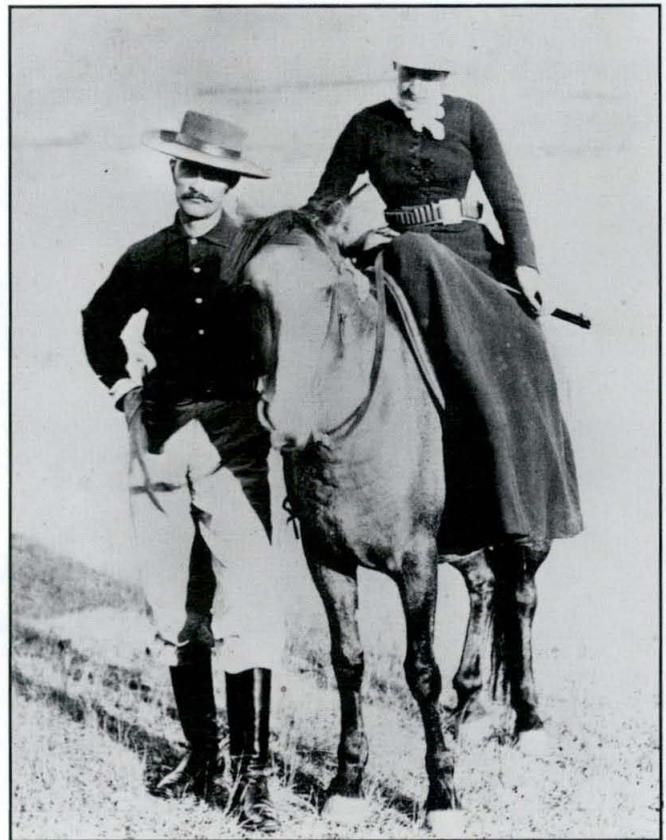
The practice of range-breeding horses resulted in the creation of feral herds throughout the American West. Essentially free roaming, such animals often found the opportunity to form or to join renegade bands that resisted capture; the physiography of the Badlands

proved especially conducive to this scenario. Ranchers called feral horses "broomtails," "cayuses," "mustangs," "ridgerunners," "broncos," and "slicks," a term applied to any unbranded livestock. Not infrequently, domestic stallions were deliberately released in order to "upgrade" the wild stock. In other areas, the local origin of particular horses or bands was inferred from circumstantial evidence or by the animal's appearance, resulting in ranchers sometimes feeling a proprietary interest in certain herds.¹⁸

Despite the domestic origin of feral horses, modern equine researchers have noted the remarkable rapidity with which such horses revert to forms of social organization and behavior characteristic of true wild equines. The long domestication of the horse, and genetic and historical differences among populations notwithstanding, comparative studies of free roaming horses have revealed consistent patterns in their behavior that seem to obviate the distinction between "wild" and "feral," thus animating debate over their protection.¹⁹

John Kolkema, who worked for the Beisigl Brothers' V Cross O Ranch west of Grassy Butte and on the George Dobson Ranch between the Cannonball and Cedar Rivers at the turn of the century, observed the process of reversion in domestic range horses, which included aggression between competing stallions and the avoidance of man:

horses ran at will both summer and winter . . . different bands of horses were taken to the ranch, the colts branded and then turned out of the corrals. It was not necessary to drive these back to their range. They would return of their own accord in the shortest possible space of time . . . For breeding purposes, a stallion was placed in a bunch of mares in a favorable location near a spring and he would do about as neat a job of close herding and guarding as I have ever seen. He would allow no other horses to come in close proximity to his harem. Nothing missed his keen eyesight or scent and if he saw a large band of horses approaching, he would drive his herd to some secluded spot in the hills and then bring them back to their old range after the strangers had passed by. I have seen stallions stand for hours on a high point watching their band and at the same time scanning the horizon



The riding horse of the Marquise de Mores may have formerly belonged to Sioux Indians who surrendered with Sitting Bull at Fort Buford in 1881. The Marquis de Mores purchased 250 of the Sioux horses from post traders; many were later resold to A.C. Huidekoper.

and at the first sign of danger rush for their band, head and tail held high and nostrils open. The mares seemed to immediately sense danger, would bunch together, and allow themselves to be driven off by their master. Instances have been recorded where the stallions of 2 separate bands would meet and then there would be a fight to the death. . .²⁰

Like many of the early ranchers and hired hands in the Little Missouri country, Billy Timmons was a former Texas cowboy who came to Medora in 1896 seeking unfenced grass and new opportunity. When he arrived in the area, he first worked as a horse wrangler for the

¹³ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life in the Far West* (Golden, CO: Outbooks, 1981), p. 23.

¹⁴ Sources on early ranching in the Little Missouri Badlands include Lewis Crawford, *History of North Dakota, Vol. I* (Chicago and New York: American Historical Society, 1931), pp. 484-516, and Ray H. Mattison, "Ranching in the Dakota Badlands: A Study of Roosevelt's Contemporaries," *North Dakota History*, XIX (April-July, 1952).

¹⁵ The development and expansion of the Texas range cattle industry is well documented; see for instance, Lewis Atherton, *The Cattle Kings* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972); Jimmy Skaggs, *The Cattle Trailing Industry: Between Supply and Demand, 1866-1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973).

¹⁶ Lincoln Lang, *Ranching with Roosevelt, By a Companion Rancher* (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1926), p. 176.



HT Ranch cowboys. Left to right: Jud Lebo, Peter Roth, John Tyler, Jack Snyder, George Woodman, Wallis Huidekoper (brother of A.C. Huidekoper, owner of the HT Ranch), Frank Philbrick.

Bellows Ranch, located on the Little Missouri River fifteen miles north of Medora. In his memoirs, Timmons commented on the wildness of the Bellows' range horses:

Some ranged a hundred miles from the ranch, as far as the Yellowstone breaks. They talked especially of Silver Tip, a wild Spanish mare that ran with a bunch of 25 or 30 horses that hadn't been corralled for several years. . .

When this proud queen saw a would-be rider, she'd bolt for the nearest breaks of the Little Missouri or Beaver Creek country and hide. I'd been told how 4 or 5 cowboys had taken stands and relayed runs on her to keep her out of rough country, but she'd always eluded them and escaped. They'd run their horses down, so they quit trying to get her into a corral or in a roundup.²¹

Timmons also mentioned a large black range stallion that had become incorrigible and would fight a saddle horse and its rider. In fact, many ranchers claimed that once free, domestic saddle horses became wilder and more difficult to recover than horses that had never known captivity. Will James stated, "The meanest bucking horse I ever saw was gentle to break, and never made a jump until one day he got away and run with the wild bunch for a couple of years."²² Likewise, C.F. Martell, who began ranching in the Little Missouri Badlands in 1910, described the difficulty of recapturing horses that had been wintered loose and noted that "We found some of the horses that had been broken were the worst (ridge) runners."²³

Due to the excellent market for horses that prevailed until after World War I, many of the early Little Missouri ranches were primarily horse breeding operations, and several others switched entirely to horses after the

¹⁷ A.C. Huidekoper, *My Experience and Investment in the Bad Lands of Dakota and Some of the Men I Met There*. Introduction by Usher L. Burdick (Baltimore: Wirth Brothers, 1947), p. 35.

¹⁸ Heather Smith Thomas, *The Wild Horse Controversy* (Cranberry, NJ: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1979), pp. 34-35, 50-54. One of the few

treatments of the subject from a ranching perspective.

¹⁹ James D. Feist and Dale R. McCullough, "Behavior Patterns and Communication in Feral Horses," *Z. Tierpsychol.* 41 (1976), p. 367.

²⁰ Reminiscences of John Kolkema, in Manfred Signalness, ed., *Fifty Years in the Saddle: Looking Back Down the Trail*, Vol. III (Dickinson,

disastrous winter of 1886-87 decimated the cattle herds, particularly "dogie" cattle from Minnesota and the East. In contrast, horses survived because of their organization in small, dispersed bands and their instinct to paw away snow to graze. Rancher Lincoln Lang, who lost heavily that winter, commented that the ability of horses to "rustle" during harsh winters provided an advantage both to the horse breeder and to the feral herds:

As we would learn in due time, they were the only class of livestock that could ever really adapt themselves to the natural conditions governing the country . . . Thus, in passing, we get a side-light on why it was that from a few horses, turned loose by the Spaniards during their day in the southwest, there developed naturally and rapidly the great wild herds of the plains.²⁴

There would have been little difference in type between wild and domestic horses of southwestern North Dakota during the late nineteenth century. The standard ranch mount of the era was the Spanish mustang, a breed favored by ranchmen in the Southwest and California; these cow ponies were customarily purchased by northern ranches along with delivered Texas cattle.²⁵ The Hash Knife, one of the largest Texas ranching enterprises operating in North Dakota, imported Spanish mustangs for use as company cow ponies and also sold them to other ranching operations in the Little Missouri Badlands.²⁶ Indian horses were also originally descended from Spanish stock, and although few tribes practiced selective breeding, the Indian pony was regarded as a true type. Mustangs were small, hardy horses noted for their endurance, a quality horsemen term "bottom," and which was valued for arduous rangework. It was a common practice for early ranchers to use mustang and Indian mares as their foundation stock; on the northern plains these animals were often "bred up" by crossing them with Thoroughbred stallions or other eastern breeds to increase their size while retaining their hardiness.

For example, in 1883 the Marquis de Mores, French entrepreneur and the founder of Medora, North Dakota, purchased 250 horses (including all of the mares) that had been confiscated from Sitting Bull at Fort Buford, some of which still bore bullet wounds from the Battle of the Little Bighorn.²⁷ His wife, the Marquise, was photographed several times with a saddle horse that may have been one of these Sioux horses, most of which would have been broken to ride. Evidently the Marquis intended to begin breeding horses on a large scale, with these mares as foundation stock, but changed his mind after horse thieves thinned his herd.²⁸ In 1884, de Mores sold sixty of the Sioux mares to A.C. Huidekoper for his Little Missouri Horse Company (HT Ranch). Huidekoper range-bred the mares to a Kentucky Thoroughbred stallion, and the offspring commanded high prices as polo ponies and local ranch horses.²⁹ Lincoln Lang, who owned one of these cross-bred mounts, noted "the western range horse of the early days usually comprised an intermixture of breeds . . . As a rule, the aboriginal strain was present to a greater or lesser extent. Sooner or later, it was likely to crop out, usually to your disadvantage."³⁰

Lang captured several wild horses in the badlands; he also lost some of his own ranch stock to the wild bands, and complained that "Outlaw horses were an unqualified nuisance on the range at all times, due to their habit of inducing others to join them."³¹ It is likely that considerable exchange occurred between domestic and feral range herds, with ranch horses escaping into the badlands and ranchers in turn "harvesting" feral horses for use or sale as saddle, harness, or breeding stock. John Goodall, foreman for the Marquis de Mores at age twenty-four and a noted rancher and lawman later in life, told Usher Burdick of an occasion on which he and Theodore Roosevelt watched a young cowhand attempt to break a wild horse. He also partially attributed the failure of the Marquis de Mores's ill-fated stagecoach line to the fact that "there were no horses except wild horses," noting that the animals had broken up enough equipment to have paid passenger fares for all of de

ND: private printing, 1990), p. 230.

²¹ William Timmons, *Twilight on the Range: Recollections of a Latter-day Cowboy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), p. 90.

²² Will James, *Cowboys North and South* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 47.

²³ Reminiscences of C.F. Martell, in *Fifty Years in the Saddle, Vol. III*, p. 261.

²⁴ Lang, *Ranching with Roosevelt*, pp. 252-253.

²⁵ Lewis Crawford interview with H.H. Peays, December 26, 1923, Record Group A-58, State Historical Society of North Dakota. For the history and diffusion of the mustang horse, consult Dobie, *The Mustangs*, and Robert M. Denhardt, *The Horse of the Americas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947).

²⁶ Wallis Huidekoper, "From Cow Horse to Polo Pony," *Bar North*,

1955 (June), p. 65.

²⁷ Crawford, *History of North Dakota, Vol. I*, p. 492; Dobie, *The Mustangs*, p. 90; Arnold D. Goplan, *The Career of the Marquis de Mores in the Badlands of North Dakota* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 1979), p. 21.

²⁸ See Donald Dresden, *The Marquis de Mores: Emperor of the Badlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1946), p. 173, and Herman Hagedorn, *Roosevelt in the Badlands* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1921), p. 67.

²⁹ A.C. Huidekoper, *My Experience and Investment in the Bad Lands*, pp. 23-35; Wallis Huidekoper, "From Cow Horse to Polo Pony," p. 64.

³⁰ Lang, *Ranching with Roosevelt*, p. 286.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

Mores's customers.³² Roosevelt wrote of his ranch horses:

Our outfit may be taken as a sample of everyone else's . . . All our four horse teams are strong, willing animals, though of no great size, being originally just "broncos," or *unbroken native horses*, like the others [emphasis added].³³

Capturing wild horses was difficult and dangerous. After attempting it in the company of Comanche Indians on the southern plains, Catlin expressed the widely held view that "There is no animal on the prairies so wild and sagacious as the horse, and none so difficult to come up with."³⁴ Methods varied according to the purpose of the hunt and hence the number of horses desired. In early Texas, where wild horses were both abundant and valuable, Spanish and American profiteers staged large-scale, highly organized roundups designed to net hundreds of horses. On the northern plains, these events were typically informal forays undertaken for sport or to augment ranch remudas. Generally, small groups of men attempted to capture a single band of horses by positioning relay riders at intervals to tire the running animals, which were then either roped or guided into a strategically located and camouflaged trap.

Wild horse herds typically consist of a dominant stallion, one to fifteen mature mares, and their immature offspring.³⁵ When chased, the horses are often led by an older mare, while the stallion assumes a position in the rear, driving the others and, if necessary, fighting pursuers. The running animals will perform feats of desperation to avoid capture, such as jumping off precipices or climbing sheer cliffs, measures that sometimes prove fatal. They also have a well-developed instinct for avoiding entrapment. This behavior makes chasing wild horses a risky enterprise, which elicits all of the riding and roping skills in the repertoire of a working cowboy, particularly in deeply dissected terrain such as the Little Missouri Badlands. Injuries and even deaths have been reported for both horses and riders, usually resulting from violent falls during the chase. In the Southwest, Spanish mustangers dedicated their corrals to saints and used part of their returns to engage a priest

to say mass for the souls of their departed comrades.³⁶

Frequently, roundups were motivated by an ambition to capture a particular horse, generally a young stallion that displayed intelligence, speed and pride. Selected horses could occasionally be roped if encountered alone or by chance while running down an entire band. The individual pursuit of a dominant stallion was called by a nineteenth-century Texan "The chase of all chases," but generally succeeded only in ruining the rider's saddle horse.³⁷ Horses that eluded capture were repeatedly challenged; among both Plains Indians and ranchmen, uncatchable animals such as the "Pacing White Stallion" passed into legend, with songs and stories composed in their honor.³⁸ Recognition also was accorded to the men who succeeded in putting an end to their liberty: "When Berry Robuck boasted in his retirement, 'I am the man who caught the blue mustang mare,' he did not have to retell the story to his fellow cowboys at the Trail Driver's convention."³⁹

Joe Strong, ex-sheriff of McHenry County and early-day cowboy in North Dakota, recounted the story of an 1899 wild horse roundup between Shell Creek and Little Knife River, close to the former town of Sanish. Mr. Strong was one of nine riders, including the owners and hired hands of the 101 and Double V ranches, who relayed a herd for three days in order to catch the lead stallion, which had attracted a good deal of local attention. Strong's detailed narrative describes the lure of a wild stallion that had the desired appearance of a domestic horse but the spirit and speed of a wild one, and expresses his eagerness to possess and master the qualities of the animal:

There were not many horses in the band we were after, probably not more than ten or twelve, but one of them was a prize; one of the best horses I have ever laid my eyes on. He was a big chestnut stallion, and the leader of the band . . . Where he originated, none of us ever found out, but he was a beautiful animal, with real breeding in him . . . He was so fast that he made our ordinary cow ponies ashamed. His speed, stamina, and endurance was what we

³² "Life and Exploits of John Goodall," in *Fifty Years in the Saddle*, Vol. III, p. 143; reprinted from Usher L. Burdick, "Life and Exploits of John Goodall" (Watford City, ND: McKenzie County Farmer, 1931). Goodall may have been using the term "wild" to refer to unbroken rather than feral animals, although contemporaries describe the capture and use of wild horses near Medora. His comments counter sources which indicate that De Mores purchased broken, well-bred horses for the stage line; see Goplan, *The Career of the Marquis de Mores*, p. 24.

³³ Roosevelt, *Ranch Life in the Far West*, p. 33.

³⁴ Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, Volume II, p. 57.

³⁵ Herd size varies with the social and ecological conditions. The most accessible biological and behavioral discussion of wild horses is Joel Berger, *Wild Horses of the Great Basin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

³⁶ J.W. Moses, "A Mustanger of 1850," *Mustangs and Cow Horses*, p. 42.

³⁷ Robinson, "Mustangs and Mustanging in Southwest Texas," *Mustangs and Cow Horses*, p. 10.

³⁸ For examples, see Dobie, *The Mustangs; Mustangs and Cow Horses*, *passim*; for an analysis of the legends, see Lawrence, "The White Mustang of the Prairies."

³⁹ Jimmy Skaggs, *The Cattle Trailing Industry*, pp. 33-34.



The Medora stagecoach line, owned by the Marquis de Mores, reportedly utilized unbroken range horses, with predictable and expensive results.

envied and wanted. He was ours, if we could catch him, because he carried no brand, as did none of the mares in his band. In those early ranching days, any horse that was without a brand was yours, if you could rope him and put your brand into his hide.⁴⁰

On one level, a wild horse roundup may be viewed as an event that reenacts the conquest of the western frontier and the hegemony of culture over the natural world through the agency of the cowboy. For the participants, a roundup served to develop or to demonstrate skills that expressed competency within ranching culture, and validated their place within the local social order. The element of personal challenge is conspicuous in virtually all first-hand accounts of mustanging. Roundups allowed for the display of individual expertise and bravado; the ability to dominate a wild horse was an aspect of identity and achievement within ranching

culture which is perpetuated today in the more structured format of rodeo.⁴¹

The Closed Range

By 1910 open-range ranching in western North Dakota had been eclipsed by the emergence of private property, defined by the fence and encouraged through a series of Homestead Acts and other federal legislation aimed at establishing family farmers in unoccupied regions of the Great Plains. As one rancher on the Missouri Plateau lamented, "We now had to buy our land and fence our range . . . the roundup wagon was a thing of the past."⁴² Wheat farms and enterprises producing both livestock and feed crops replaced the expansive cattle operations in the Little Missouri Badlands, most of which were already out of business by 1906, when A.C. Huidekoper sold the 40,000 acre HT Ranch. The new pattern of land tenure and intensified production required more con-

⁴⁰ Narrative of Joe Strong, North Dakota Writers Project Records, History of Grazing Files Series No. 560, 26E4, Box 109 (McHenry County), State Historical Society of North Dakota.

⁴¹ The interpretation of rodeo as a performance expressing opposi-

tion between natural and cultural domains in ranching culture was developed in Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982).



Cowboy photographer Leo D. Harris recorded a defiant wild horse captured during a roundup in the 1930s. Although the location of the photograph is noted only as "western North Dakota," it may have been taken at the old Killdeer Rodeo Grounds near the Killdeer Mountains.

trol over the now divided range, and ushered in an increasing concern with range and livestock management techniques. These included the replacement of domestic livestock with new varieties, and the eradication of undesirable wildlife such as prairie dogs, predators, and wild horses. Larger historical processes also affected wild horse populations throughout the twentieth century, including mechanization, wars, the development of the pet food industry, the drought and depression of the 1920s and 1930s, and expanded federal management of public lands.

When homesteaders arrived in Billings County at the turn of the century, they found wild horses in the Little Missouri Badlands. One resident stated that when her parents homesteaded just north of the present boundary of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in 1909, "every hill and plateau and higher elevation had a number of horses standing on them" and local men with hired crews made their living capturing and selling the animals, shipping

them on the railroad from Belfield.⁴³ A wild horse roundup was reported near Medora in 1915, and ranchers such as William "Badlands Bill" McCarty are reported to have captured wild horses for resale throughout the early part of the century. Some of this activity may have been related to the enormous demand for horses created by the Boer War (1898-1901) and World War I, which was met largely by the removal of wild horses from the western range.

The influx of homesteaders into western North Dakota generated a demand for the heavy work horses necessary for farming, and many North Dakota ranchers began breeding horses for the farm market by importing draft stallions such as Percherons. The selective breeding of animals for the changing demands of agricultural production and the modern saddle horse market rendered the nineteenth-century mustang and cow pony obsolete. Another impetus for this process was the Cavalry Remount Program, established in the wake

of the tremendous demand for horses during World War I. In this system, the U.S. Army placed Thoroughbred and Morgan stallions with selected horse breeders to cross with their own mares, the government retaining first right to the offspring provided they met government specifications. Several Little Missouri ranchers participated in this program as a means to improve their stock, although the widespread use of purebred, registered horses as ranch mounts did not occur in southwestern North Dakota until the 1950s.

Following World War I, the displacement of horses by mechanized farm equipment and automobiles, farm failure, and general economic decline punctured the horse market, and many animals were virtually abandoned throughout the western half of the state. Rancher John Leakey noted that as early as 1917, feral horses had "all but ruined the country" for cattle along the Little Missouri through over-grazing, and claimed that this situation contributed to the failure of his livestock operation.⁴⁴ In reference to two well-known Dunn County ranchers, a writer remarked that "Probably that same bunch of horses that they had prior to the war, and which sold at fantastic prices during the war, were running wild in the breaks along the west side of the Little Missouri during the 1920s, until they almost become a nuisance even in that sparsely settled region."⁴⁵ In 1927, a group of about thirty ranchers in eastern Montana and southwestern North Dakota organized a four day roundup which covered an area forty miles long and twenty miles wide. They succeeded in capturing 2,700 head of horses; many were branded and owned, the rest "slicks." The riders divided the animals they claimed or wanted and sold the remainder to a North Dakota buyer for \$6 a head.⁴⁶

Drought and the Depression generated a rural exodus from the western half of North Dakota during the 1920s and 1930s; many of these emigrants also left behind livestock that became feral. By 1934, 42 percent of the people in Billings County were on relief, and drought had struck a severe blow to the ranching industry.⁴⁷ Lewis Crawford observed:

The taxes and interest on the investment in lands have been too high to make ranching profitable. The range counties are bare of cattle and county commissions are acquiring much land by tax title. In the meantime, grass is going to waste

or is eaten by straggling bands of horses that no one is anxious to claim.⁴⁸

By 1935 feral horse numbers in North Dakota had probably regained or surpassed population levels of the open-range era, although they were far fewer than in states such as Wyoming and Nevada, where thousands of horses were removed from the range during the 1930s. Feral horses were reported throughout the Little Missouri corridor from south of Medora to Williston. In reference to the area between Killdeer and Medora, one rancher told the writer that "The whole damn country was full of wild horses, especially after the drought and depression;" another that "A group made a living catching and selling wild horses, but sometimes they weren't worth stealing."⁴⁹ Herds were concentrated in the badlands and breaks along major creeks on the west side of the Little Missouri River. The rugged terrain made capture difficult because horses "got educated in knowing that saddle horses could not follow them if they jumped down this steep place," with the result that, "if you are riding a fast horse and are good with a rope, you sometimes get one or two, but not very often."⁵⁰ Frequently, wild stallions were shot by ranchers anxious to protect the grasslands for their livestock. Rancher Andrew Johnson described the range of wild horses in western North Dakota during the first half of the twentieth century in the following way:

There were some in Beisigel Creek and Magpie Creek that were troublesome for a few years. Then there were some on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation that ran in the river breaks from Bear Den Creek to the breaks east of Boggy Creek and it took quite a few years in getting those cleaned up. The largest band of them was on the bank of the west side of the Little Missouri River in the Beaver Creek and Dry Creek country. I think those were strung up and down the river breaks for twenty miles or more. They were great sport for the person interested that liked to run wild horses for a large number of years.⁵¹

The expanding pet food industry provided an incentive for capturing such animals for slaughter sale, and during the 1930s and 1940s, thousands of feral horses were rounded up annually throughout the West for the

⁴² Reminiscences of Charles Bahm, in Fred E. Shafer, ed., *Fifty Years in the Saddle, Vol. I* (Watford City, ND: Private printing, 1963), p. 116.

⁴³ Loyla Lindbo, *Origin of the Park Horses* (Beach, ND: Private printing, 1988), p. 5; Loyla Lindbo interview, April 11, 1987; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."

⁴⁴ John Leakey, as told to Nellie Snyder Yost, *The West That Was: from Texas to Montana* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1958), pp. 200-205.

⁴⁵ Biographical sketch of Gus Elfstrom, *Fifty Years in the Saddle, Vol. III*, p. 106.

⁴⁶ Reminiscences of Frank Clem, *Fifty Years in the Saddle, Vol. III*, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁷ *Echoing Trails: Billings County History* (Medora: Billings County Historical Society, 1979), p. 37.

⁴⁸ Crawford, *History of North Dakota, Vol. I*, p. 513.

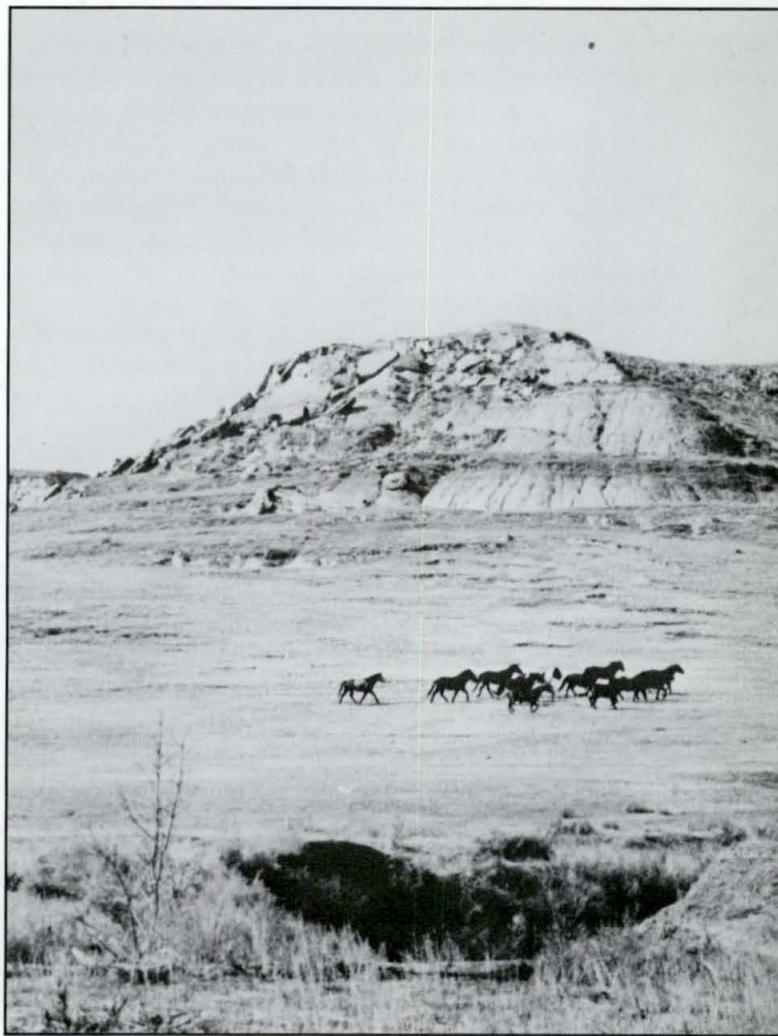
⁴⁹ Jim Connolly (Dunn Center) and Jack Murphy (Killdeer) interviews, 1987; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."

⁵⁰ Andrew Johnson, ed., *Fifty Years in the Saddle: Another Look at the Trail, Vol. II* (Dickinson, ND: Private printing, 1965), pp. 483-484.

"canner" market.⁵² Rodeo stock contractors provided a local market for feral horses, particularly the heavy draft types, which were slow and relatively easy to capture. Many of the horses taken off the Fort Berthold Reservation and out of the badlands between Killdeer and Medora became saddle broncs on the regional rodeo circuit; a few, such as "Figure Four" and "Whizz Bang," developed national reputations in the rodeo arena.⁵³ During large horse roundups on the Fort Berthold Reservation during the 1940s and 1950s, captured animals were tested for their bucking ability: "We used a bareback rigging with weights. If they bucked hard enough that the straps made an "X" over their back they were kept; if not, they were canned."⁵⁴

Vernon and Harris Goldsberry, well-known horse breeders often credited with introducing the American Quarter Horse to North Dakota during the 1950s, got their start in the business by capturing wild horses in the Little Missouri Badlands west of Grassy Butte between 1935-1945. At age fifteen, Vernon Goldsberry went to work for a rancher who hired crews to catch and break wild horses for sale as riding animals. He attributed this enterprise to the fact that draft horses so outnumbered saddle horses in western North Dakota that "About the only chance of getting something to ride would be to dip into the wild bunches."⁵⁵ After four years of employment, Vernon went into partnership with his brother; by roping two or three horses a week and capturing animals for other ranchers unable to gather their stock, they earned more income than Depression-era employment could offer. While some mustangers utilized ten to twenty relay riders, the Goldsberrys preferred to work as a team; one would run a band of horses until they were winded and could be roped by the second rider. They chased the animals in early spring or fall, partially to avoid running newborn foals, which were often killed by falling into washouts. When catching horses for the saddle horse market, the Goldsberrys targeted young stallions, which were individually roped or were snared along trails. Some animals were kept for their own breeding stock; in 1954 the Goldsberrys sold fifty-four mares in order to buy their first registered Quarter Horse stallion.

The challenge of chasing wild horses across the broken landscape of the badlands compelled many cowboys to pursue them regardless of the current market conditions, one former rancher noting that "People bragged about the badlands horses . . . you knew they were



A 1954 roundup of horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park spurred on

mustangs.⁵⁶ Most roundups were staged in early spring, when wild horses were weak from winter grazing and icy conditions favored shod saddle horses. The most widely reported technique was the relay chase, in which riders pursued one or more bands of horses, often exchanging their saddle horses for fresh mounts until the wild horses were tired enough to be roped. Concealed traps or corrals were sometimes built along trails or in natural canyons; decoy domestic horses and flags were used to direct the horses towards the opening. However, pens were seldom left standing, for fear that others would use them to capture owned range stock. Snaring

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 484. Note that wild horses had frequented the breaks along Beaver Creek since the open range era; see Timmons, cited above.

⁵² Wyman, *The Wild Horse of the West*, pp. 201-215. A first-hand account of producing and capturing horses for the slaughter market is provided in Robert W. Eigell, *Cows, Cowboys, Cannners, and Corned Beef and Cabbage: The Last Large Scale Epic About the Northern Ranges of the West* (New York: Vantage Press, 1987).

⁵³ Both Whizz Bang and Figure Four were out of branded mares but were raised on the range and were difficult to capture and handle.

⁵⁴ Bruce Northrup interview, August 11, 1987; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."

⁵⁵ Here and following, Harris Goldsberry interview, July 6, 1989; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses;" Vernon Goldsberry in *Fifty Years in the Saddle*, Vol. III, p. 146.



rea cowboys in pursuit of their own range stock as well as of wild horses.

was also a popular and successful strategy; two techniques have been recorded. Noose ropes camouflaged with green paint were hung between trees or brush along a trail that the horses were then encouraged along in hopes of snaring the leaders; to prevent strangulation, this was only employed in flat areas. Conversely, foot snares were set on sloping trails along which the desired horses were run down; the rope was secured to a cut green tree to slow the animal's flight while preventing a violent impact. The southwestern technique of "creasing" the base of a horse's neck with a rifle shot to temporarily render it immobile required specialized skill;

few North Dakota ranchers reported accomplishing this without killing the horse.⁵⁷

Preservation

By the early 1950s, wild horse populations along the Little Missouri had been considerably diminished. Economic recovery and the rebuilding of cattle herds during the 1940s encouraged the removal of horses from the range, a process accelerated by federal land management agencies such as the U.S. Grazing Service (later Bureau of Land Management), U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service (NPS) and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. During the period 1945-1960, a common focus of these agencies was rehabilitation of the rangeland and other natural resources, and the development of recreation potential. The eradication of unclaimed livestock was a shared priority.⁵⁸ Various agencies, including the Forest Service, removed feral horses from the Little Missouri National Grasslands area during the 1940s and 1950s; in 1950, 500 range horses were rounded up on the Fort Berthold Reservation and sold. When Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park was created in 1947, several hundred head of owned livestock, primarily horses, and a number of unclaimed horses were grazing in the area appropriated for the South Unit. Disputes between the NPS and local ranchers over trespass horses marked the first few years of federal jurisdiction; in May of 1954, the parties agreed to hold a large-scale round-up to settle the issue.⁵⁹

The event received national publicity, including a front page story in the *New York Times*. More than forty local ranchers and cowboys dispersed into small groups and rode through the park area for three days, gathering bands of horses and driving them into corrals at the Peaceful Valley Ranch and then through the streets of Medora. At the rodeo grounds, some were roped and ridden in front of hundreds of onlookers who also enjoyed chuckwagon barbecues, a dance, and a horse auction to benefit the March of Dimes.

Nearly all of the captured horses (and mules) were branded and owned by surrounding ranchers who had persisted in their practice of grazing livestock in the Medora badlands, in part as an expression of defiance against the NPS land annexation. Several small bands of unclaimed horses that were locally considered wild eluded capture and remained in the northern segment

⁵⁶ Ed Newcomb interview, October 22, 1987; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."

⁵⁷ The techniques used by ranchers in the Little Missouri Badlands to capture wild horses were used throughout the west; the most complete surveys of these methods are found in Thomas, *The Wild Horse Controversy* and in Dobie, *The Mustangs*. For a first-hand account of twentieth century mustanging, see Will James, "Pinion and the Wild

Ones," *Cowboys North and South*, p. 189-217.

⁵⁸ Samuel Trask Dana and Sally K. Fairfax, *Forest and Range Policy: Its Development in the United States* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), pp. 179-207, *passim*.

⁵⁹ Discussion of management in Theodore Roosevelt National Park is taken from McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."



Several generations of Medora-area cowboys subdue a young horse captured in the 1954 roundup in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Left to right: Rex Cook, Tom Tescher, Millard Lund (state brand inspector in 1954), Louis Pelliser, and Johnny Stuss.

of the park along Government Creek, an area local cowboys referred to as "wild horse country." These horses were inadvertently enclosed within the park when the northern boundary was fenced in 1956-57, thus entrapping the last known population of wild horses in North Dakota. According to a newspaper account, then Superintendent John Jay felt that the remaining horses would "lend color for tourists" over the course of the next thirty-five years, the horses would generate debate between the National Park Service, local ranchers, and the public.

Throughout the first twenty years of NPS jurisdiction, the remaining horses were considered trespass livestock. Elimination of the animals was considered necessary to facilitate the NPS goal of restoring the park's nineteenth century natural environment, which included the reintroduction of bison and other herbivorous species. Efforts to remove the horses reached a zenith during the 1960s, and by 1966 the herd had been reduced to

approximately twenty head.

Nationally, a movement to protect wild horses on public lands was beginning to gain momentum in response to declining numbers and the inhumane methods of capture and handling practiced by commercial mustangers operating for the slaughter market. The first federal legislation to halt this activity was PL 86-234, the so-called, "Wild Horse Annie Act" of 1959, which forbade the use of aircraft in horse roundups on federal lands.⁶⁰

Considerable local resistance to the park's plans emerged and found expression in appeals to North Dakota legislators and in several editorials in the *Dickinson Press*. In response to efforts by the National Park Service to remove all of the remaining horses in 1965, an editorial penned by a Medora resident stated:

Ranchers and other residents living near the proximity of the park are not happy about the ultimatum delivered to the park headquarters

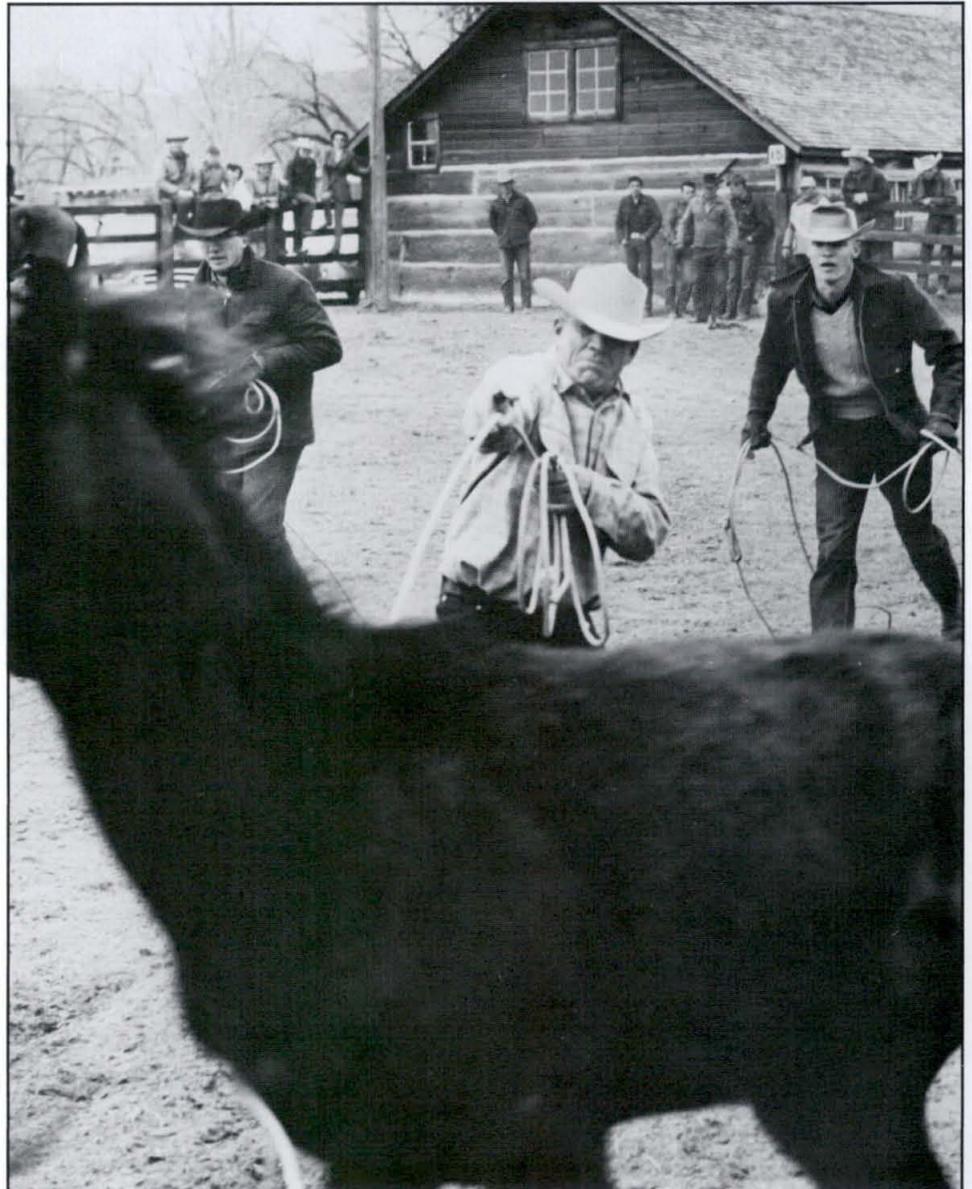
. . . When speaking of the wild herd, local citizenry were quick to tell anyone who might ask a bit of the history and folklore surrounding this freedom loving band of horses. For as long as anyone can remember, horses have been an integral part of the North Dakota Badlands.⁶¹

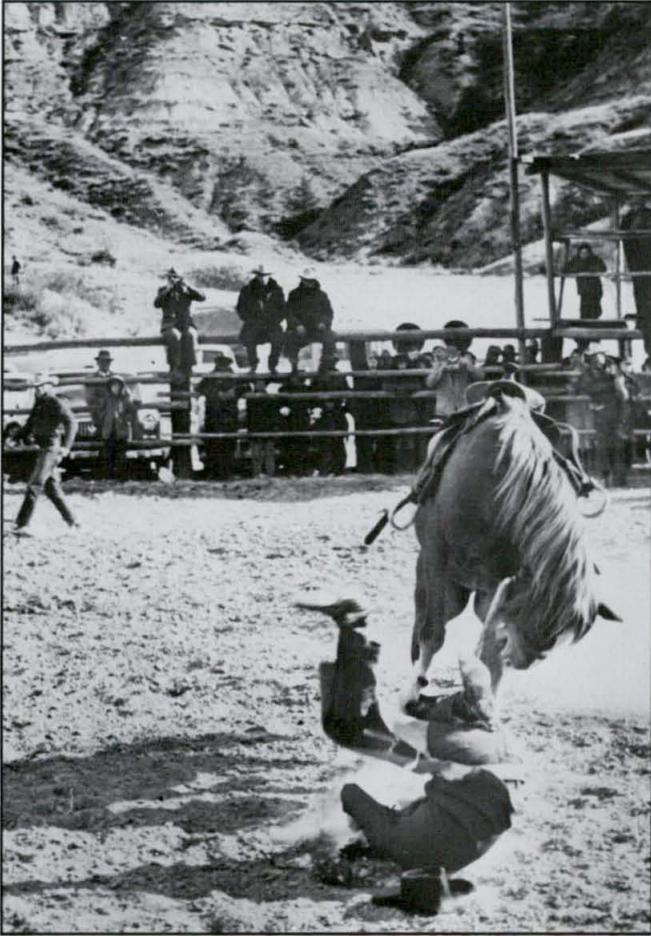
The reaction to the proposed eradication of the horses revealed a more complex attitude toward the animals than the utilitarianism often said to characterize the relationship between ranchers and animals.⁶² Rather, opposition stemmed in part from a widely shared conviction that wild horses had been in the Medora area since the nineteenth century and were part of the community's cultural heritage. In addition, the planned removal of the horses was viewed as further expression of the unwelcome federal hegemony exercised in the appropriation of rangeland by the NPS and other agen-

cies. Area residents held various opinions regarding the origin of the remaining horses, some arguing they were direct descendants of the wild nineteenth-century bands, others that they came from stock that had escaped from their own families; proponents of each view held that the horses should remain. Essentially, these claims served the same purpose of incorporating the horses within the rubric of a local cultural identity threatened by externally imposed change.

In support of the horses, Medora community members represented their value in terms of the historicity and pleasure associated with wild horse roundups. Chasing wild horses reaffirmed traditional skills, values, and knowledge rapidly being rendered obsolete by transformations in ranching and the reduction of the range. A McKenzie County rancher interviewed in 1940 lamented the reduction of the herds, noting, "When they are gone,

During a roping exhibition held during the 1954 NPS roundup, highly regarded cowboy Louis Pelliser uncharacteristically misses a loop tossed at a running yearling, while younger hopefuls wait their chance. Horses are generally roped from the ground by means of an overhand pitch known as a "houlihan" throw.





It was a common practice for cowboys to match their skills against the bucking ability of captured wild horses, and several "buck outs" were held during the 1954 roundup in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. During one such event, Jim Jefferies judged the seemingly brief ride of Bob Abernathy. Whizz Bang, a horse captured during the roundup, later became a well-known saddle bronc. Whizz Bang was sold to World Champion cowboy Casey Tibbs, who took the horse to Japan to stage bucking demonstrations.

some more of what had been the 'Old West' will have disappeared."⁶³ The satisfaction gained from challenging the freedom of the horses derived from their enduring indomitability, regardless of origin; this quality elicited admiration and an identification with the plight of the

horses. In commenting on the local opposition to NPS efforts to eliminate them, a former Medora rancher portrayed community sentiment in this light:

The park roundups took out the owned horses . . . But the park never got them all—no one, I mean the cowboys, wanted to. The park wanted them out, but the locals didn't. They were fantastic to watch, as smart as they were . . . There was a heavy blue roan stud in the late 1940s and early 1950s that was a hell of a horse—no one could catch him. One time near Peaceful Valley he jumped an eight foot corral and went straight up the side of a cliff.⁶⁴

Interestingly, a simultaneous dispute between local ranchers and the Bureau of Land Management over the proposed removal of wild horses near Lovell, Wyoming, resulted in the creation of the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range, the first federally designated wild horse refuge, by the Secretary of the Interior in 1968.⁶⁵ The Pryor Mountain controversy placed the issue of wild horses on the national political agenda and led to the passage of PL 92-195, the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act, in 1971. The Act, which declared all extant feral horses "wild" and mandated their protection on most federal lands, does not apply to NPS areas; management decisions at Theodore Roosevelt National Park have remained the prerogative of successive park superintendents.

The discovery of Theodore Roosevelt's mention of wild horses in the Medora area, coupled with the public outcry, prompted a new superintendent to reverse the park's policy from elimination to the protection of a designated number of horses. In 1970, a Wild Horse Management Plan was approved which justified the maintenance of the herd on the basis of their historical significance to the open-range ranching era.

Establishing the preservation and management of wild horses as policy during the early 1970s opened a new era in their history. Both nationally and in southwestern North Dakota, a variety of interest groups have contested subsequent management decisions regarding the animals. The vigor of this debate illustrates the power of the wild horse to evoke conflicting ideals and values

⁶⁰ Analysis of the development of federal wild horse policy from a protectionist perspective may be found in Hope Ryden, *America's Last Wild Horses* (New York: Ballantine, 1970); a rancher's interpretation is advanced in Thomas, *The Wild Horse Controversy*. A more balanced treatment is presented in Richard Symanski, *Wild Horses and Sacred Cows* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1985).

⁶¹ Jackie Anderson, "Wild Horse Roundup Commences in Theodore Roosevelt Park," *Dickinson Press*, May 29, 1965, p. 1.

⁶² See Symanski, *Wild Horses and Sacred Cows*; Lawrence, *Rodeo*. Ranchers' varying attitudes toward wild horses appear to hinge on the perceived degree of competition between horses and cattle for grazing lands; where such resources are scarce and horse populations high,

support for horse is minimal.

⁶³ Interview with T.B. Knight, February 1940. North Dakota Writers' Project Record, History of Grazing Files Series No. 560 26E4 (McKenzie County), State Historical Society of North Dakota.

⁶⁴ Gerald Barnhart interview, October, 30, 1987; see McLaughlin, "Wild Horses."

⁶⁵ Dick Thomas, "Range Feud Swirling Over Wild Horse Herd," *The Denver Post*, April 3, 1966, p. 1; Ryden, *America's Last Wild Horses*, pp. 201-203, 243-257.

⁶⁶ Floyd Oyhus, *Riding the Range with Floyd* (Dickinson, ND: Private printing, 1989), pp. 52-53. Stanzas excerpted from "Chasin' Broomtails."



Nearly all of the horses (and mules) captured during the 1954 roundup in Theodore Roosevelt National Park were branded and owned by area ranchers, who grazed horses in the badlands during the winter. A number of unclaimed horses, which were considered "wild" and which avoided capture during the roundup, remained in the park and provided the genesis for the modern park herd.

in American culture. Their historic value springs largely from their role within the early ranching culture of the West, and their final enclosure punctuates its passing. A contemporary Medora poet addressed this theme in a poem called "Chasin' Broomtails":

.....

*For there's something about chasin' broomies,
That always gets in your blood;
That keeps you ridin' and sweatin',
Through the rain, the snow, and the mud!*

.....

*For it's really a part of our history,
A part that we lived in the past;
A part that is gone forever,
But in our memory will always last!⁶⁶*

Acknowledgements

Initial research on the history of wild horses in the Little Missouri Badlands was supported by the Theodore Roosevelt Nature and History Association. I would especially like to thank Medora rancher Tom Tescher, who guided my investigations in "wild horse country," and the other western North Dakota ranchers who granted me oral history interviews.

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