

Wild Horse Annie fights



By BEVERLY WALTER

VELMA JOHNSTON, a slim, vital, determined woman, stood on the hood of her station wagon with camera in hand. She was there to photograph a band of captive wild horses illegally corralled in a camouflaged pen—trapped for the rendering works of a pet food company.

In the front seat sat Velma's husband, Charles, a .38 revolver on his lap.

Velma gazed toward the crude corral a long time before she snapped her pictures. The mustangs were milling around in the dry dust, hysterical with fear. Their hoofs and mouths were bleeding from the abuse received from their capturers. The horses emitted strange tortured cries, but the two rough men in charge had but one thing on their minds: transporting the animals to the slaughter house. Their contract stated that the animals "should be breathing" on arrival.

Suddenly the wranglers spotted Velma and her camera. They rushed for their truck and came roaring down the dirt road toward the Johnstons. Charles leveled his .38 at the truck driver as Velma scrambled for safety. At the last second, the truck veered and took to the open road.

This is not a scene out of a Wild West pocket book, nor did it occur when the West was a youngster. This was "Wild Horse Annie" in action, and the incident, typical in her career, is less than a year old. She had tracked the horse thieves to a desert canyon seven miles from the Johnstons' Double Lazy Heart Ranch near Wadsworth, Nevada.

Velma notified law enforcement officers of the incident, and next day they released 400 wild horses, part of a huge roundup undertaken in western Nevada without permission of the Bureau of Land Management or county officials.

With endless courage and endurance, Velma "Wild Horse Annie" Johnston has fought the wild mustangs' battle for the past 10 years. But this crusade had its beginning in 1884 when a humble covered wagon was crossing a desolate stretch of Nevada. Mary Bronn lay ill and weak in the back of the wagon, but her concern was for the wan child at her side.

"Our baby will die unless he gets some milk," she said to her husband.

Hobbled nearby was a wild mare, her colt cavorting in the background. The man recalled that the young horse was the "fiercest, fightingest, bravest little critter" he had ever seen. Grabbing a pail from the wagon, he milked the mare. The woman fed the milk to their son. Thus was the life of Joe A. Bronn, Velma's father, saved.

"You see," says Velma, "it's in my blood!"

She got into the fight a decade ago following a ride from her ranch to Reno. At one point on the highway she was slowed by a truck jammed with bleeding and exhausted mustangs. The animals, frothing for water, were able to stand only because their bodies were packed so tightly.

It was a nightmarish scene, one that Annie has never forgotten. "Where are those animals from?" she asked

WILD HORSE

By James Rhodes

Wild horse, racing across the plain,
Sand in your hoofs and wind in your mane.
Never look back,
Never stop going.
Racing to the meadow
Where the greener grass is growing.
The mighty kingdom's calling,
Night will soon be falling;
Beat the sun,
Wild horse, run.

to save the mustang . . .

herself. "Where are they going?" Where from? Once back at her office she made hasty inquiries and received the answer: "They are from the clean wide spaces of the wind; from shaded canyons, sunset rims and craggy bluffs; from herds that run free and unfettered."

Annie dug deeper. One disquieting fact led to another. At one time, an expert estimated, 70,000 wild horses ran the sparse ranges of Nevada. By 1949 there were less than 10,000. (Today it is closer to 6000.)

After the war the pet food suppliers began using a new and much more effective way of rounding up the mustangs. Airplanes hazed scattered bands out of the rocky canyons and ridges into open country. There the ruthless quest continued.

Trucks, boarded by men expert with lassos, chased the mustangs to the point of exhaustion. Some were run until only bloody stumps of hoofs were left. Then the short rope was thrown around the horses' necks. Tied to the other end of these lines were heavy truck tires which were kicked off of the truck bed when a horse was snagged.

Behind the capture truck came a stock truck into which the lassoed horses were prodded, dragged or beaten. Then came the long ride to the slaughter house.

In the early years of her crusade, Velma watched the tactics of the wild horse robbers grow crueler and bolder. They polluted or roped off waterholes, forcing the wandering herds to seek water at places where the hunters lay in waiting. Weak colts were left to starve; horses with broken legs were abandoned.

As an outgrowth of this business there developed a "sport." Rifle-equipped hunters took to the air, and wild horses were shot from airplanes for nothing more than the sheer love of the killer to kill. If an animal fell near a road, the hunter sometimes returned to cut off the ears as a conquest trophy.

"It was terrible," Velma recalls. "I had to let people know what was going on."

She swore she would spend a lifetime, if necessary, to save the mustangs. But Velma knew she would need more than sentimentality on her side to win the fight. She needed facts to support her arguments, for her opposition came from quarters other than the outlaw horse hunters.

Sheepmen and cattlemen in the state, claiming that the uninhibited movement of wild horses was injurious to grazing land, long had demanded that the mustangs be rounded up and disposed of. Supporting this stand were the com-

mercial rendering works officials. They wanted legislation that would give them the right to capture and transport the animals.

But, Velma was gathering strength. The horsemen's associations were on her side. So were Edward "Tex" Gladding, postmaster of Virginia City, and Jack Murray, a Comstock businessman. Gladding and Murray had bred and raised saddle horses for many years. They and other old-time stockmen were of the opinion that wild horses only grazed land that would not support cattle. The mustangs, they said, helped reseed the open ranges.

Velma learned from others that mustangs saved cattle on the winter range by breaking ice with their hoofs at the waterholes. Wild horses also pawed through the snow to bare grazing ground that cattle eventually used.

Velma's first public appearance in behalf of the mustangs was in June, 1952. The Storey County Board of Commissioners met to consider the mounting mustang slaughter problem. Out of that fiery meeting came Velma's first victory. The commissioners banned the pursuit of wild horses by

plane or other motorized vehicles.

It was at this meeting that Velma was dubbed, "Wild Horse Annie." It was given in derision, but today she

Nevada Congressman Baring Would Outlaw Mechanized Capture of Horses

Congressman Walter S. Baring of Nevada is sponsoring legislation (H.R. 2725) which prohibits the capture of wild horses and burros on public lands through the use of airplanes, trucks and other mechanical devices, and further prohibits anyone from contaminating the animals' watering holes. This is what he had to say about the West's wild horses in a recent letter to *Desert Magazine*:

"The mustang has played an important part in the early development of the west and the tradition of their presence is comparable to the stagecoach and six-shooter.

"It may be that today's wild horses are a degenerate species. Because of the hardships they have endured in recent years, they have been forced higher in the hills where food and water are not available.

"The important thing, however, is that whatever they may be today, there is no justification for torturing them to furnish food for other animals which have been domesticated."

Baring pointed out that dog and cat food canneries can afford to pay but very little for mustang carcasses, and as a consequence hunters must herd the horses by airplane and trucks in order to net a profit.



PEOPLE FROM THE FAR CORNERS OF THE WORLD HAVE WRITTEN TO THELMA "WILD HORSE ANNIE" JOHNSTON SUPPORTING HER EFFORTS TO PROTECT WILD HORSES.

bears that nickname with honor.

Despite the Storey County breakthrough, the wild horse slaughter continued. To be effective, Velma knew the measure of protection afforded by the Storey law had to encompass the entire state.

With characteristic persistence, Velma carried the fight to the capitol at Carson City. In March, 1955, State Senator Slattery's bill for the creation of a state-wide ban on the killing of wild horses was signed into law by the governor. However the new statute did not apply to the eight acres in 10 that the federal government owns in Nevada, and the pace of the slaughter did not abate.

Range War

The wild horse controversy took on the aspects of an old-time range war. It reached a climax in February, 1957, when the *Sacramento Bee* published a series of widely-quoted front page features on the struggle to save the mustang. "It is time 'Wild Horse Annie' came to light," said the paper. Thousands of letters poured over the Sierra Nevadas into Nevada.

But after awhile the public outcry against the slaughter tapered off, and the roundups continued.

Fearing federal legislation would come too late to save the horses from extinction, Velma tried a new approach. On her own initiative, she

posted spotters in strategic locations in the desert canyons to notify the sheriff's deputies at the first sign of illegal maneuvering. Many big brawny Nevadans volunteered for service in "Annie's Patrol."

The Word Spreads

Meanwhile, Velma's crusade was receiving its first taste of national publicity. Newspapers and magazines carried feature articles on her work. She received letters from the far corners of the world in praise of her efforts. A missionary in the Belgian Congo sent a poem on the wild horse — a memory of his childhood . . . from Georgia a judge asked how he could help . . . a nun in a Wisconsin convent sent her prayers . . . a Detroit cat fancier wanted petitions to circulate at cat shows—no wild mustang meat for his cats! . . . a 7th grade class in New Mexico organized a class project known as, "Save the Mustangs" . . . from Cyprus came encouragement from a sergeant in the Black Watch regiment . . . the Massachusetts SPCA made mustang preservation their legislative project . . . a Sioux chief wanted to lead a band of warriors in defense of the wild horses so cherished by his race. Characteristically, Velma answered each letter personally.

In April of last year a major victory in Velma's long fight was almost achieved. Nevada Congressman Wal-

ter S. Baring (see insert) introduced a bill to prohibit the hunting of mustangs by airplane or motorized vehicles on any public land in the United States. However Congress adjourned before action could be taken.

In January of this year Baring re-introduced his bill (H.R. 2725). It is popularly known as the "Save the Mustangs" bill. At this writing (late April) there has been no action, but Velma is encouraged. If it doesn't come this year, perhaps next.

Meanwhile she goes on with her fact gathering, correspondence and publicity work. Virginia Gillas, who operates a secretarial service in Miami Beach, Florida, is one of Velma's most loyal and active helpers. Together they have prepared, mimeographed and mailed hundreds of pieces of literature to further the campaign.

Secretary

"Wild Horse Annie," in her daily routine, is the soft-spoken and charming secretary to a pioneer Reno business firm. She was born in that city in 1912. The Johnstons have been married 22 years. They have no children, but each summer Velma takes a dozen of her friends' children for a stay at Double Lazy Heart. She and her husband teach them how to ride and how to get along in the desert outdoors.—END

DESERT PRIMER SUMMER SURVIVAL

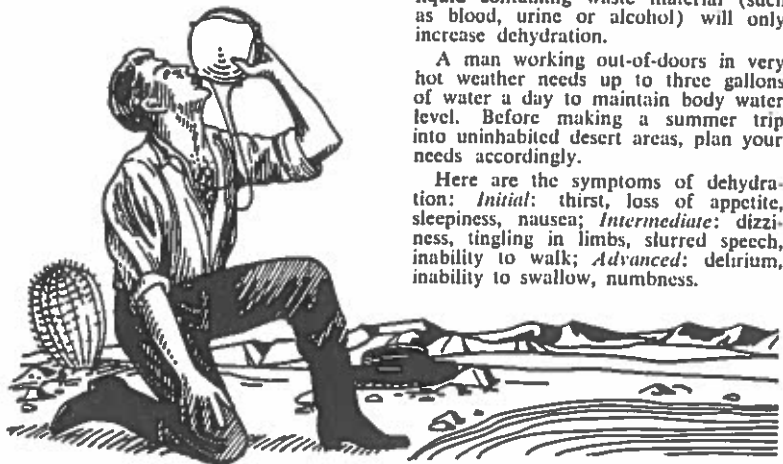
. . . the need for water . . .

Respect the desert—do not fear it. If you are prepared, the desert, even in summer, is far safer than dodging traffic on a freeway. Bring plenty of water, know the area you are visiting, have adequate maps and a compass, and tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return.

But, let's look at the worst: your car has broken down in rough unfamiliar country; you failed to leave word, and no one knows where you are (and therefore your chances of being rescued by a search party are nil); maximum temperatures hover near 120 degrees in the shade!

Now let's assume that you wisely took along an adequate water supply (without water you could expect to survive two days, perhaps three in hot weather; having a supply of three quarts or less per day may not appreciably increase your expected survival time). Your most important need is to prevent dehydration, and you can do this two ways: by conserving your body water (resting in the shade by day and walking by night, keeping fully clothed), and by drinking enough water to replace

that which is lost through perspiration. Drink sensibly. Science has not yet discovered a person who can adapt to a sub-standard supply of water. Drink when you are thirsty. If you are low on water, try to find more.



Stick to the trails when hiking—preferably your own car tracks. Trails usually lead to water and safety. By striking out cross-country you run the risk of wandering in circles or coming across impassable terrain. Any country a vehicle can travel, you can walk.

Most likely water sources on the desert are at the base of cliffs or at the head of washes in foothills. Damp sand in such washes is a good place to scoop out a deep "hand well." Many times water will settle in these holes. Also look for standing water in rock cavities.

There is no substitute for water. A liquid containing waste material (such as blood, urine or alcohol) will only increase dehydration.

A man working out-of-doors in very hot weather needs up to three gallons of water a day to maintain body water level. Before making a summer trip into uninhabited desert areas, plan your needs accordingly.

Here are the symptoms of dehydration: *Initial:* thirst, loss of appetite, sleepiness, nausea; *Intermediate:* dizziness, tingling in limbs, slurred speech, inability to walk; *Advanced:* delirium, inability to swallow, numbness.

THE WILD HORSE TODAY

By TOM McKNIGHT*

IN SPITE of barbed wire, grazing permits, motorized ranch operations, airplanes, expanded military reservations, and the increasing pressure of civilization in general, there still are 15,000 to 30,000 wild horses inhabiting the West today, plus another 2000 to 4000 in western Canada. More properly "feral" than "wild," because they are descendants of domesticated stock that reverted to the wild, these animals are scattered over parts of 13 states, but mostly in the desert and semi-desert regions of the Southwest.

Nevada contains the largest number, with several thousand inhabiting the rocky ranges and basins of the northern and central parts of the state and a few hundred in the southern part. California's wild horses are mostly in the eastern portions of Modoc, Lassen, Mono and Inyo counties, which abut Nevada. Arizona has only a few remnant herds dispersed widely, though the principal concentration is in the Fort Apache Indian Reservation and adjacent parts of the Mogollon Rim country. New Mexico is second only to Nevada as a stronghold for wild horses, with several thousand in the various Pueblo reservations of the upper Rio Grande Valley, the Mescalero

Apache Reservation northeast of Alamogordo, and the Tularosa Basin west of Alamogordo.

Colorado's wild horses mostly are found in the southwestern corner of the state (in and around the Southern Ute Indian Reservation) and the northwestern corner (largely between the Yampa and Little Snake rivers). In Utah the horses are widely dispersed, but are most numerous in the semi-arid basins and ranges of western Utah, particularly in Tooele and Juab counties.

These animals characteristically run in small herds of from five to 15 individuals, roaming as widely as the press of civilization and the availability of water and forage will permit. Generally they occupy remote back country, which varies from rugged mountain ranges and pinyon-juniper rimrock to sagebrush-covered hills and bajadas.

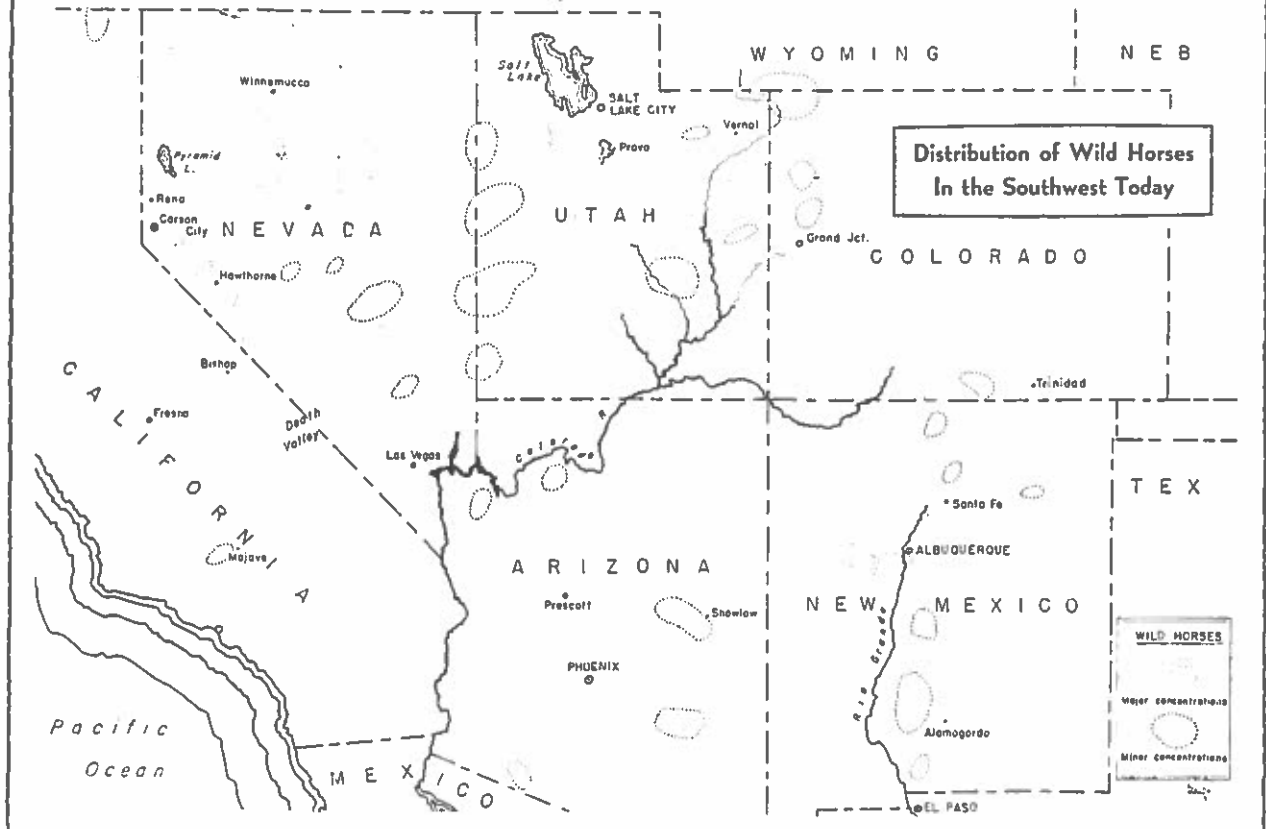
In physical appearance today's wild horses bear only limited resemblance to the famed mustang of yore. Presumably as a result of scanty grazing and inbreeding, they tend to be runty, big-headed and coarse, though they have agility and stamina. Occasional individuals are handsome and well-built, but these are the ex-

ceptions. Indeed, their most common appellation in the West is "broomtail."

Unlike the wild burro, the wild horse does not significantly interfere with the activities of other fauna. There is some competition for forage with deer and antelope, and occasional examples of bothersome waterhole pollution, but in general these instances are limited in scope and occurrence.

If left alone by man, the wild horse would probably multiply with great rapidity. It is virtually exempt from predation and is rarely molested by parasites and diseases. However, man, chiefly in the person of ranchers who disapprove of sharing their forage and water with unowned and economically unprofitable horses, has exerted a strong measure of control, reducing the wild herds from several hundred thousand a decade and a half ago to only a fraction of that number today. Indications are that this total will continue to decrease, albeit slowly, until only a few thousand are left in widely scattered localities. I expect that this remnant will be extant indefinitely.—End

*McKnight is assistant professor of geography at the University of California at Los Angeles. He recently completed a year-and-a-half study of feral horses in the United States and Canada.



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