

THE SPANISH MUSTANG AND THE LONG WAY HOME

by Callie Heacock and Ernesto Valdés

The evolutionary history and preservation of the Spanish Mustang is complex; its historical importance to the Spanish-Mexican settlements of Texas and, ultimately, to the colonization of the American West, cannot be overstated. J. Frank Dobie, who spent years researching *The Mustangs* and is credited with the best chronicles of the horses ever written, estimated that, at their height, over a million Mustangs ran free in Texas. In *The Mustangs*, he wrote: “To comprehend the stallions that bore conquistadores across the Americas, I had to go back to mares beside black tents in Arabian deserts. Before I could release myself with

the runner of aboriginal wildness, I had to trace the Age of Horse Culture that he brought not only to Western tribes but to white men who took their ranges. My chief pleasure has been in telling the tales, legendary as well as factual, of Mustangs and of rides on horses of the Mustang breed—but historical business had to come before pleasure.”²² The Mustang history in the Americas is believed to begin with the arrival of the first Europeans; however, an intriguing twist in its evolutionary path reveals that for the horses, it was a homecoming.

In 1493, on Christopher Columbus’ second voyage, twenty



Spanish horses stepped off the ships onto the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo and within a decade, this small band had multiplied to over sixty horses. By 1540 another 250 horses were added in an effort to meet the growing demand and to infuse fresh blood into the nascent American herds.³ By the mid-sixteenth century, the success of the breeding farms allowed Spain to cease any further importations of horses.⁴ No doubt to their surprise, as explorations of the new lands progressed, the Spanish discovered there were no horses native

to the Americas. As a result, historians cited the arrival of the horse with Columbus as the introduction of a new species into the American biosphere.

Later scientific analysis revealed that instead of being a new arrival, the Mustangs were the culmination of a long evolutionary journey. The general belief among scientists in the late nineteenth century held that the horse was native to Central Asia. Then, in 1870 American paleontologist, O. C. Marsh, studied some previously unclassified fossils from remote

*“For after God, we owed
the victory to the horses”¹*

– attributed to the Spanish Conquistadors



“The Run” by Jolie Alongi, Arrow Rock Spanish Mustangs, Tulsa, Oklahoma, www.arrowrockspanishmustangs.com.

regions of Nebraska and concluded that the fossils suggested they were part of the evolutionary lineage of the modern horse that appeared some thirty-four to fifty-four million years ago. He named the creature *Eohippus* (dawn horse) which appeared to be about the size of a collie, weighing no more than fifty pounds. Later during the Pliocene era, *Eohippus* evolved into *Hipparion*, sharing the biosphere with camels, giant mastodons, and other mega-fauna.⁵

Marsh's conclusion was supported in 1901 when the American Museum of Natural History displayed a lineage of similar fossils, including a nearly complete *Eohippus* skeleton found in Briscoe County, Texas (1899), and an incomplete one found in the Llano Estacado (1901).⁶ *The New York Times* covered the exhibition on September 15, 1901, and reported an astonishing conclusion: "The discovery forms another link in the chain of proof that the horse was originally an American animal . . . There is abundant geological evidence to prove that the ancestors of the horse to-day roamed over the western portion of this continent long before man came upon the earth or before the horse appeared upon the steppes of Asia or in the lowlands of Arabia."⁷ This latter phase suggests other chapters in the Mustangs' development that remained locked in their genetic code, until modern scientists were able to interpret the evidence.

Hipparion migrated from North America across the Bering Land Bridge into eastern Siberia where the species wandered onto the steppes and the vast plains of Eurasia. Nature's evolutionary forces molded *Hipparion* into *Equus*, while the species in America became extinct. How *Equus* emerged over the millennia remained a mystery until an international team of scientists from Berlin's Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research, the German Archeological Institute, Humboldt Institute Berlin, as well as American and Spanish scientists used DNA materials from the Pleistocene era and the Middle Ages to solve the mystery. The answer lay in Eurasia's Ponto-Caspian steppes (Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Romania) where by 3,600 BC, *Equus* emerged as one of the many animals that farmers of Eurasia were able to domesticate.⁸ The team's findings were published on April 24, 2009, explaining that by using DNA testing, they had discovered evidence of extensive and selective breeding by ancient farmers, including the array of colors so appreciated by owners, that was made possible by domestication. From this selective breeding within a domesticated environment over thousands of years, the horses of Spain that were brought to the new world finally emerged.⁹

Spain acquired this "world-conquering breed" from the Moorish tribes of North Africa when the "highly adept warrior horsemen, riding hot-blooded, desert bred horses, invaded Spain." For the next eight centuries the Moorish horses were bred with the heftier Iberian warhorses that resulted in "the most successful horse types in history." "Within all domestic animals, no other species has had such a significant impact on the warfare, transportation, and communication capabilities of human societies as the horse. For many centuries, horses were linked to human history changing societies on a continent-wide scale, be it with Alexander the Great's or Genghis Khan's armies invading most of Asia and Eastern Europe, or Francis Pizarro destroying the Inca Empire with about thirty mounted warriors."¹⁰

By the Middle Ages, these desert bred horses became world



Edd Hayes' "Wild and Free" was created for the sixtieth anniversary of The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, in February 1992. This bronze and stone sculpture of wild Mustangs portrays the spirit of freedom through three mares, two colts and a stallion, and is located at Carruth Plaza in Reliant Park.

famous and were "sought after by the royal stud farms of Europe."¹¹ These crossbreeds are described as an "ideal blend of elegance, agility and durability that developed an extraordinary and heritable 'cow senses' [sic] making them useful in all herding and ranching situation. . . . When the Spanish set out to colonize the New World, they brought their Mustangs with them."¹² From a historical perspective, the horse left the Americas through the back door of the frozen Bering Sea and returned through the front door at Santo Domingo and the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea—they had come home.

The impact of the horses on the Spanish conquest and colonization of the Americas was so pervasive that the Conquistadors commonly stated that, "for after God, we owed our victory to the horses." The companionship between them "is wellnigh [sic] impossible to understand today . . . A companionship and pride at the same time, such as a man may feel for a younger brother who has accompanied him in some adventure."¹³ How this view translates into the chapters of the conquest is written in the accounts of Hernán Cortés' epic march to Mexico City in 1519.

After Mexico City, Spain penetrated the Mississippi River drainage during the 1539 expedition of Hernando De Soto who explored an area that would become ten of the southeastern United States. His expedition was bolstered by 300 Spanish horses that were "broken and fit for war," that represented the largest force of cavalry set out for any conquest up to that time.¹⁴ A year later, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado set out to explore the Southwest taking at least 1,000 horses on an expedition that went as far north as modern-day Kansas.¹⁵ Interspersed in the personal accounts and reports are comments that during some early incursions into the new lands, horses often escaped or were stolen by the Indians. In addition, the horses were brought into the western and southwestern lands granted to the missions and the ranches of Chihuahua and Coahuila. The Spanish horse was so popular that they provided most of the broodmares bred with the English stallions from the east coast that began to filter into the lands west of the Appalachians and Mississippi River. According to the Spanish Barb Breeder's Association, "Until the time of the American acquisition of the Spanish held western territories in 1803 [sic] (actually 1848) the blood of the Spanish Barb flowed in the veins of more early American horses than anyone would have dreamed at the time."¹⁶

As the centuries passed, escaped horses populated the American prairies and grasslands offering American Indians and eastern colonists access to the incomparable Spanish horses bred in the New World. Americans, Europeans, and American Indians began to add their own folktales about the horses to those of the Spaniards and Mexicans before them, and the horses' reputation diffused throughout villages, pueblos, and colonies. It became clear that the American progeny sustained its ancestral reputation. Sir Walter Raleigh reported that William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, described the Spanish horse as "strangely wise, beyond any man's imagination." Cavendish, in turn, reports that Sir Walter Raleigh having found "in the West Indies the finest shaped horses and barbs he ever saw." While

the Duke of Württemberg asserted, "There are better horses now in Mexico than in Spain." Finally, in 1778, Governor of Virginia, Patrick Henry, ordered two stallions and eight mares of "true Spanish blood" from herds in New Mexico.¹⁷

By 1800, the initial wonderment of the indigenous people of North America over the horse had evolved from stark terror at a new and bewildering enemy, to a welcome new food source, to recognizing its utility as a servant of man, to the almost mystic bond between the Comanche and his mount. "Nowhere . . . in North America were there the multitudes that gave their name to the Mustang Desert between the drainages of the Nueces and the Rio Grande."¹⁸ Feral descendants of Spanish horses became so numerous that travelers recorded innumerable mentions of herds that they encountered in the late 1700s until the 1860s. Each person—terrified or privileged to see them—was awestruck at their sheer numbers. Guesses of 10,000; 20,000; even 100,000 were estimated by the number of hours required for the mass of horses to cross a single stretch of prairie.

The origin of the word "mustang" is a corruption of the Spanish word for strayed, *mesteño* and *mostreño*. In Spain all horses were owned and accounted for by their owners, so describing horses as strayed only came into common usage for escaped horses after the Spanish brought the horses to the New World.



Yucaipa is the first foal of Jolie's personal riding mare, Luna Girl SSMA 2551, owned by Jolie Alongi.

Photo courtesy of Jolie Alongi.



"The Dance," by Jolie Alongi. The mare on the left is Windance and to her right is the stallion, Kemohah, both are Sorraia type Spanish Mustangs. The photo was taken during their first breeding season.

Photo courtesy of Jolie Alongi.

Ulysses S. Grant, as J. Frank Dobie writes in *The Mustangs*, was not known as a romanticist. He was, however, a famed horseman. In taming horses, he proceeded with kindness and patience, standing a long while and looking intently into a horse's nature. His riding skill was perhaps the finest that had ever come out of West Point.¹⁹ In 1846, serving with General Taylor's army camping at the mouth of the Nueces, Lt. Grant rode a freshly caught Mustang he purchased for \$3.00. He wrote long afterward that toward the border from Corpus Christi, "As far as the eye could reach to our right, the herd extended. To the left, it extended equally. There was no estimating the animals in it; I have no [sic] idea that they could all have been corralled in the State of Rhode Island, or Delaware, at one time. If they had been, they would have been so thick that the pasturage would have given out the first day. People who saw the Southern herd of buffalo, fifteen or twenty years ago, can appreciate the size of the Texas band of wild horses in 1846."²⁰

Though the Spaniards planted the seeds of the great southern horse herds, it was the Comanche who "fathered" or, in a vague way, managed the vast herds of wild horses. The prairies from the Rio Grande to the Brazos River seem to have been created for these small grass-loving horses. They thrived, grew healthy and strong, beautiful in their vast numbers, handsome and of matchless endurance from the wonderful grasslands of their new

home. They became incredibly prolific breeders. Since one mare can have only one foal per year and very rarely twins, only one of whom would survive in the wild, it is truly mind boggling that such vast numbers of the breed existed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Texas. J. Frank Dobie believed Texas was the one true cradle of the vast herds ranging the west—part of one gigantic population sweeping with the grass, not north and south as the buffalo did, answering a silent call to change locations according to their own dictum.

The Comanches in Texas regarded the region as their traditional homeland and defended it violently. This running war would have been impossible without their Spanish horses.²¹ During the Civil War, bands of Indians in the state pillaged freely against the settlements, growing stronger. By 1874, however, the Army and the Texas Rangers were determined to rid the state of the Comanche menace. Their solution was Captain Ranald MacKenzie and his Buffalo Soldiers. Thoroughly and personally loathed by the Indians, and not well-liked by his troops who called him the "Perpetual Punisher," MacKenzie was infuriated by the refusal of the last great Comanche chief, Quanah Parker of the Kwerharehmuh (Antelope) band to speak to whites, let alone talk "treaties" or come into the reservation. MacKenzie was further tormented because his troop movements were constantly shadowed by Quanah and his warriors.

The cavalymen sometimes saw the Comanches circling their camps in the moonlight, always just out of range, always silent, always there.

Quanah Parker was the son of Comanche chief, Peta Nocona, and a white woman captured in childhood, Cynthia Ann Parker. Cynthia Ann, who took the name Naduah, lived with the Comanches for over twenty-eight years, and refused traders' offers several times to leave her husband and children to return to the Parkers. In 1864, however, Cynthia Ann and her eighteen-month-old daughter, Topsannah, were captured in a raid on their camp while the warriors were hunting. She was returned to the Parkers and made several attempts to escape to her Comanche family, only to be returned to the Parkers, east of Waco. When Topsannah died at age four of a "white man's disease," Cynthia Ann mourned in the Comanche way, ripping her clothes, wailing, mutilating herself, and cutting off her hair. She then starved herself to death, never knowing that her husband and sons still lived.

After learning of these circumstances when his father lay dying in 1872, Quanah took the name Parker. He never attended a parley or made a treaty; his Antelope band fought every encroachment on their hunting grounds with a whirlwind ferocity, and then vanished completely, as if by magic, one officer said. At about this time the Indian agent, Labadi, estimated that the Comanche had 15,000 horses and 300 mules on the upper Texas plains.²²

In the late summer of 1874, the cavalry caught a Comanchero, Jose Tafoya, on his way to a meeting with the Comanches. MacKenzie had Tafoya stretched against a wagon wheel until he talked, revealing that Quanah and the other Comanche bands had a secret encampment in the Palo Duro Canyon, an almost-invisible, but enormous crack in the earth on the Texas plains.²³

MacKenzie sent scouts to the "vast crevasse opening in the apparently level high plateau. They crawled to the edge on hands and knees, amazed at what they saw. Far below, along a stream that had cut through the earth over countless aeons [sic], they saw hundreds of grazing ponies and a three-mile-long stand of scattered tipis."²⁴ The scouts reported their findings to MacKenzie who immediately drove his regiment through the night to Palo Duro. The cavalry arrived at dawn, and scouts found only one trail down into the canyon, so narrow that the troop of fifty cavalymen had to pass through in single file to the canyon floor. MacKenzie's men ran to the horse herd, stampeding more than a thousand horses down the canyon. The surprised warriors sprang to resistance, allowing the women and children to retreat farther down the canyon, scramble up the walls, and escape across the prairie. The warriors then set a great fire and vanished behind it, after insuring noncombatants had made their escape.

MacKenzie, having managed to kill only four warriors, dealt the harshest blow he could by ordering the soldiers to burn everything left behind: tons of flour, sugar, blankets, cured buffalo meat, tents, new carbines, and ammunition—winter provender stored up over the year. Not yet done, MacKenzie ordered the killing of 1,200 trapped Comanche ponies. "MacKenzie had destroyed... the Comanches as surely as if he had shot them with the horses."²⁵ This manner of warfare, the systematic killing of Indian horses, was repeated all over the west in succeeding years. Killing the horses destroyed the Indians' power to resist

Quanah, unsure of moving his People to the reservation, walked to a private place and asked for a sign to guide him for his People. As he stood, gazing off into the clear, bright air of the high plains, an eagle circled over him several times, and then flapped off to the southeast. A wolf appeared and ran southeast, where the dreaded confinement of the reservation lay. He had received an answer, and agreed to take his People to the reservation. Because the Antelope band had never signed and therefore never broken any treaties, they were not subjected to the harsh treatment received by some of the other tribes on the reservation.

Quanah went on to become a friend of Teddy Roosevelt, going to Washington, D.C. several times. He reconciled with his Parker relatives and had the government pay to move the bones of Cynthia Ann and Topsannah to his home in Cache Creek, Oklahoma, a twenty-three room house (the Star House) built for him by Texas rancher and businessman, Burk Burnett. Quanah Parker personally took the bones of his mother and sister, tenderly washed them and held a Comanche ceremonial burial. He had also acquired the only extant image of his mother, the captive photo after she was returned to the Parkers. Quanah's descendants and the descendants of Cynthia Ann's family hold family reunions each year, either at Cache Creek, Oklahoma, or Fort Parker near Groesbeck, Texas.

General Ranald MacKenzie was retired from the U.S. Army on March 24, 1884, with a diagnosis of "general paresis." In December of 1883, he had begun exhibiting odd behavior and showing signs of mental instability. Upon his forced retirement, he was taken under military escort to the Bloomingdale Asylum in New York City. The descendants of Quanah's Comanche herd still thrive and are registered by the Southwest Mustang Association.

*Quanah Parker, born in 1845 to Comanche Chief Peta Nacona and Cynthia Ann Parker, was a protector of the Comanche interests in both war and peace. "As a result of Quanah's shrewd business negotiations the Comanches and affiliated tribes, by 1900, generated an aggregate annual income of \$232,000 per year through grazing leases."*¹

Photo courtesy of Old Fort Parker, Groesbeck, Texas.





Iron Horse has the largest LP blanket of the 2009 foals born at Arrow Rock. His dam, Iron Maiden is on lease from Jerry and Peggy Brietzke of La Vernia, Texas.

Photo courtesy of Jolie Alongi.

Anglo westward expansion, or “manifest destiny.”²⁶

In the spring of 1875, an emissary was sent to persuade the last wild Comanches—Quanah Parker’s Antelope band—to come into the reservation. Quanah’s People had just endured a terrible winter and were close to starvation, their primary food source was gone. Buffalo hunters had annihilated the great southern buffalo herd in violation of the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1848. With little game to be found, Quanah agreed to bring his People to Fort Sill. On June 1, 1875, now General MacKenzie stood at attention as Quanah Parker, clad in chief’s attire, with 700 Comanches and 1,500 horses came to their new homeland.

When the American Indians in the Southwest had mostly been subdued and sent to reservations in Oklahoma, and cattle markets opened in the East, Texas became cattle ranching country. Without the threat of Indian depredations cattle ranchers had no worries other than the price of beef and drought.²⁷ Mustangs became a nuisance, eating the grass on government land that otherwise would be leased to cattle ranchers for raising a commercially viable product in great demand “back East.” By the early 1900s, the very word “Mustang” was a synonym for an ugly, useless animal. The beautiful, indomitable horse that carried the Spanish in their pursuit of gold and converts, who

became a complete culture and part of the religion of the Indians and allowed the Comanches to repel the tide of Spanish colonization and Anglo expansion into Texas, was now considered worthless. Taking wild horses became a sport in some areas, and for a time, there was a bounty for dead horses. They were killed for leather, shot for “fun,” rounded up and sold for chicken feed, and later, shamefully, for pet food. All their beauty, stamina, and courage came to dust.

In the twentieth century, after the dust clouds of gold and silver had settled, and the struggles for possession of the North American continent were decided, a small western horseman fell in love with the American horse—the Spanish Mustang—and began to seek them all over the West, fearing their eminent extinction. This was an important moment for the present-day horses of Texas. Bob Brislawn was employed by the U.S. Geographical Survey Department, part of a crew that was using horses in mapping the western states. His deep roots in the West allowed him to become a friend, confidant, and interpreter between the western Indian tribes and his employers. Robert Emmett Brislawn and his brother, Ferdie, sought any horses they could verify either by oral tradition or physiology as being “Spanish.” Being children born at the end of the great western

expansion era, living among Indians, ranchers and cowboys all their lives, they knew what such a horse was, and their eye was accurate.

Bob was especially methodical and unyielding about what he wanted. He slowly traded, bought, or, helped by his Ute Mustanger friends, Monty and Sadie Holbrook, of Ft. Duchesne, Utah, gathered in the wild the ones that fit his standards. Bob Brislawm looked at hundreds of horses while he ran the government survey. During his time off, he haunted the wild places, camped for days by water holes, and examined horse skeletons. The horses he sought had structural anomalies not found in modern breeds. Educating himself with skeletal evidence, Bob became knowledgeable enough that he could feel the backbone and examine the round cannon bones and singular hooves of the live animals to recognize a purebred Mustang. There were very few left, and they were difficult to find, often in inaccessible box canyons or formidable mountain valleys that white men did not know existed. Old ranchos had bred the same strain of horse for 200 years, and Bob was able to acquire a mare or two. He bred generations of these horses to be sure that what he had were pure old blood from the Spanish arrival in America. Years before DNA was anything but a scientist's wistful dream, Bob Brislawm was studying everything he could about equine history and genetics.

After more than forty years, much travel, travail, and disappointment, there was a growing flicker of hope, on June 14, 1957, at Sundance, Wyoming, when the Spanish Mustang Registry was incorporated. Bob registered only seventeen horses he felt certain were the "razo puro." The breeding program was founded on the great Monty, a young buckskin Spanish stallion caught in the Book Cliffs of Utah by Monty Holbrook. This stallion sired two exceptional sons who became the first two registered SMR horses, Buckshot, a dark line-backed grulla stallion with the zebra-striped legs indicative of the "old blood" and Ute, an orange dun stallion in 1945, with a dorsal stripe, a cross over his withers, and white face and feet with silver in his mane and tail. The dam of these two was Bally, a sorrel Ute mare born about 1935. In the early 1940s, Monty escaped back into the mountains, taking some of his mares with him.

The Spanish Mustang Registry continued under Bob's careful, meticulous guidance until the mid-1950s, when his son, Emmett Brislawm, took the reins. Bob gained national recognition as a preservationist, and in so doing, gave respectability to a wonderful breed that had suffered every brutal consequence of its many gifts to mankind. In 1972, the United States Department of Agriculture recognized Bob Brislawm and his extraordinary life and research. Brislawm, "Mr. Mustang," died in 1979, and is buried near Oshoto, Wyoming. He was a giant among horsemen, breaking trail for all who continue to conserve his beloved breed which was made possible one horse at a time, by a man with no fortune, but great heart, and great wisdom garnered from years of devotion. The newly elected president of the Spanish Mustang Registry is a Texan, Jim Dildine of C-8 Ranch, Chilton, Texas, the first time a Texan has been president of this northern Spanish Mustang group.

While Bob Brislawm was patiently gathering his seed herd in Wyoming, the horse who had numbered in the millions on the wide prairies of Texas still existed, on lonely ranches whose owners would have no other, and who realized the worth of their hardy cow ponies, stubbornly and happily ignoring the often-erroneous American "bigger is better" mantra. Although the quarter horse is now thought of as the Texas horse, it was not initially a breed, but began as any sprinter who could run a fast quarter mile, often to its owner's monetary benefit.

When the U.S. Army was scratching its collective head about how the Indians kept outrunning their pursuers, it was said that a study conducted by the government concluded that for every inch over fourteen hands, a horse lost endurance and soundness. In other words, less was more—faster, smarter, stronger. Ilo Belsky thought so. His Phantom Valley Ranch used little Spanish cow horses exclusively, and the blood of those outstanding horses still resonates in the horses of his descendants. Tom East, an in-law of the Klebergs of the fabled King Ranch, raised a famous strain of ponies straight from the Spanish blood.

Men still seek the "Tom East" descendants within a second registry, the Southwest Spanish Mustang Association, established by Gilbert Jones, the hero of the Texas Mustang preservation movement. Born in 1906 in Hastings, Indian Territory, Gilbert helped his father, Monroe Ivory Jones, a poet and a farmer, author of *Jingles and Heart Throbs*, train horses. When he was seventeen, Gilbert was given a little mare named Susie by his uncle, and so began his nearly eighty year commitment to the Spanish Mustang. Gilbert gathered horses from the western tribes, from Mexico, and from the descendants of the Five Civilized Tribes who came to Indian Territory on the Trail of Tears in the 1830s, bringing their horses with pedigrees longer than their great flowing manes and tails. One such bloodline was kept by Jewell Whitmire, a lineal descendant of Old Hop and Corn Tassle, Cherokee chiefs who lived in the 1700s. The Texas Cherokee, having been promised land in perpetuity by their friend Sam Houston, lived in Texas from the 1820s until Mirabeau Lamar had them removed to Indian Territory.

Horses were collected from Mexico by Cap Yates, of Longhorn fame, and bred by Tally and Bessie Johnson, Oklahoma Cherokees.

Preservation from the original Texas herds probably owes more to Gilbert Jones and his supporters than to the Brislawms. The Southwest Spanish Mustang Association, begun in 1978 in Oklahoma as a closed registry with only horses descended from the breed stock of nine families, had better access to old Texas bloodlines. Along the way, the Spanish Mustang picked up many advocates. Dr. Gus Cothran, an equine geneticist at Texas A&M University, has been of inestimable help in the ongoing genetic research on bloodlines. Dr. Phil Sponenberg, Professor of pathology and genetics at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, and technical programs advisor of the American Livestock Breed Conservancy has been a friend of both registries and their color expert. Horseman and geneticist, Robert Painter, who owns what is believed to be the only herd of pure Barbs alive in the world today, understands the difficulties inherent in saving a breed from extinction, especially when no



Gilbert Jones (1906-2000) and his Southwest Spanish Mustang Association, begun in 1978, seeks only Mustangs with the purest of bloodlines. He is considered the hero of the Texas Mustang Preservation Movement.

Photo courtesy of Peggy Brietske, Sacred Ground Spanish Mustangs, LaVernia, Texas.

one involved is moneyed, and most are “horse-poor,” refusing to sell them except to a buyer committed to carry on the conservation begun 100 years ago. He says, however, “the horses call who they need,” which is evidently true.

In Texas today, the Spanish Mustang Council, owned by John “Mustang Mac” and Diane McSwain of Winona, Texas, is devoted to the one cornerstone principle of Bob Brislaw and Gilbert Jones: purity of bloodline. These horses must conform to standards to keep them as they have always been, not to be “improved” by making them larger, or bigger-boned, or heavy-hipped. They remain as they were 500 years ago. With that constancy come all the other admirable qualities that have smitten the Indians, the cowboys, and now, discerning modern horsemen who want a horse with great heart, extreme intelligence, enormous range of motion and flexibility, independence and spirit, large soft eyes full of life and curiosity, alert as a guard dog, and with a willing heart, always ready for adventure. They learn so quickly that repetitive lessons bore them into mischief. All these qualities, along with their special physical traits, are the result of centuries of living free on the American prairies. They are hardy, abhor stables, and avoid barns unless for some tasty hay. They require no high protein feed, regarding grass and fresh hay as “good grub.” They are not shod—their hooves are so thick-walled and hard, farriers often complain at the difficulty of trimming their feet. It is possible to believe that a breed so gifted has reached this apex because the perfect environment was waiting for their return, to the great grasslands of Texas, their *querencia*. *Querencia* is an old Spanish word for one’s spiritual home, the



Choctaw War Lance, a colt owned by Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s director Lance Heacock and Blue Hill Farm in Bellville, Texas.
Photo courtesy of author.

one place were body and spirit thrive best in all the world—and so it was with Texas and the Spanish horses.²⁸

Little more than 2,000 of these registered horses are alive today, and they are still seen as a “threatened” breed, subject to extinction. The horses still retain all the colors of their breed, and all the character. They are usually gaited, as were their Spanish ancestors; and because of centuries of being trained to remain with their rider, will stay close to camp. It is difficult to exaggerate the charm of these horses. They exhibit playfulness and a *joie de vivre* not seen

in other breeds. Many of the hard-bitten old horsemen believe them to have something magic.

There are many breed conservators in Texas, some within 100 miles of Houston. There are Shelby and Alice King, with their Choctaw herd at Santa Guadalupe Ranch near Gonzales; Mona Pomraning near Hockley; Mary Ann McLeod of Brenham; Tony Riojas of Houston; Callie and Fred Heacock of Blue Hill Farm in New Ulm; and Nanci Falley with her American Indian Horse Registry in Lockhart. There are more Spanish Mustangs now in Texas than in any other state, finally and again.

Many who read this will have seen the powerful life-sized bronze of a plunging herd of horses in front of the Texas Memorial Museum at the University of Texas at Austin. That sculpture, *Mustangs*, was created by A. Phimister Proctor who spent nearly a year on Tom East’s San Antonio Viejo ranch, modeling each horse on a live Spanish Mustang, descended from the once-fabled Rancho Randado herd, raised in the brush country of South Texas, and caught forever in their wild beauty.

The future for the first American horse looks brighter each year, as more people discover they still exist. Many had assumed they were gone forever. Our American treasure, the Spanish Mustang, which, with the exception of the pure Barb, may have left Spain with Andalusian, Arabian, Portuguese Sorraia, and native Spanish blood in their veins, became a breed themselves when they first swam ashore and touched their dainty, hard hooves on the sand near present-day Vera Cruz, the first equine since prehistory to feel the American continent beneath them. From 1519 to the late 1800s, they were one of America’s most valued resources, eclipsed only by the grandeur of the new land itself. Whatever one believes about the effects of the Spanish conquest, one thing remains beyond question; a magnificent and everlasting gift was left behind—the Spanish Mustang.

Callie and Fred Heacock live at Blue Hill Farm near Bellville, Texas, on a Stephen F. Austin land grant, where they are breed conservators for Spanish Mustangs and own a small herd. Fred is also a criminal lawyer, and Callie owns Bexar Moon, an Indian trading company. Her family has lived in Texas since the 1830s.

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Peyote Dream, born at Blue Hill this spring, is a very rare foal color, pink, with bright red mane, red dorsal stripe, and red and white tail. This birth color has not been seen in the registries in twenty years and is indicative of the ancient Spanish blood, as are her heavy leg stripes, and withers’ cross. She should mature as an equally rare color, apricot dun, retaining all her Spanish markings. Photo courtesy of author.