



THE HISTORIC NOKOTA HORSES, DESCENDANTS OF SITTING BULL'S HERD, PART II

By Patricia N. Saffran

When Hunkpapa Lakota Chief Sitting Bull surrendered in 1881, his herd of horses, many of roan coloring, were confiscated and sold. 268 were sold to French horse connoisseur the Marquis de Mores, a rancher in ND. De Mores later sold some of his Sitting Bull horses to A.C. Huidekoper. Huidekoper crossbred these sturdy horses with incredible stamina with Thoroughbreds, for ranch work, or with Percherons, for light hitching. He sold the crossbreds back East, calling them American horses. The Sitting Bull horses and their descendants ran on the huge open range ranches of the 1880's like those of De Mores, Theodore Roosevelt and Huidekoper and eventually some of the horses escaped into the badlands of ND. With the creation of Theodore Roosevelt memorial park and subsequent national park in Medora, ND, a decision was made in the 1950's to fence the park completely. Some of these wild horses remained in the park. There were attempts at crossbreeding to rid the park of its horses with Sitting Bull horse characteristics or to make them and other horses in the park more salable as bucking horses or ranch or riding horses. Periodic roundups and sales were held for the TRNP horses over the years.

ND ranchers, brothers Leo and Frank Kuntz bought their first large group of sturdy park horses at a sale after the 1986 round-up. They were looking for horses with great stamina for the local sport of cross country racing called The Great American Horse Race. It was at

the 1986 sale that the brothers met Castle McLaughlin, who was a ranger at the park. She received a grant in 1987 from the park to conduct a study of their horses. In her research, Dr. McLaughlin found the Sitting Bull historic connection. The brothers were so impressed with the Sitting Bull horses that they decided to try to buy as many as they could to preserve them. They named the horses "Nokota," for the horses' homeland in North and South Dakota. Later, in 1999, the Kuntz brothers along with Dr. McLaughlin and Blair and Charlie Fleischmann founded the non-profit Nokota Horse Conservancy. The Conservancy protects the horses and keeps a breed registry to promote the continuation of the Nokota. Native American youth groups volunteer and partner with the Conservancy.

After much lobbying by supporters, the Nokota were officially designated the North Dakota Honorary State Equine in 1993. Because Nokota horses are still in the park and activists are not pleased with the park's cavalier treatment of them, they urged the state to pass protections. On January 31, 2013, the North Dakota State Senate passed Resolution 4011, "A concurrent resolution urging the National Park Service to recognize the historical value of the Nokota horse and to provide for its appropriate management in Theodore Roosevelt National Park." With a September 28, 2013 roundup and sale, many part Nokota youngsters left the park. Fortunately, TRNP biologist, Blake

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McCann approached Frank Kuntz during the sale to open a dialogue about the unique Nokota still in the park.

Frank Kuntz commented to me that whether the horses are in the park or in herds managed by his brother Leo and himself, they still remain true to the Nokota type. He also said that even when bred or crossbred, whether traditional (refined) or ranch (taller), they still stay true to type (sturdy) and are different from any other horses. This versatile breed can jump, hunt, do ranch work and dressage, and some are skilled at airs above the ground.

There is a debate about the ultimate origin of the Nokota horses. Dr. McLaughlin, presently the Museum Curator of North American Ethnography, Peabody Museum at Harvard, told me in a telephone conversation that she believes they are descended from Spanish horses like other wild horses that roamed

the West and ran with escaped ranch and calvary horses, while Mr. Kunz feels they are not at all Spanish in type. Dr. McLaughlin writes, "Dr. Philip Sponenberg, the leading expert on colonial Spanish horses evaluated both the park herd and the Kuntz ranch horses and advised that some were phenotypically Spanish and those ought to be kept separate - those are the traditionals. My opinion is that the horses the Lakotas had were part Spanish but crossed with other types possibly including Canadian horses." Her view is consistent with the widely held view that horses went extinct in North America after the Pleistocene in 11,700 BC and only reappeared with the Spanish horses coming to the New World in the 1500's. Dr. McLaughlin also writes that if horses survived beyond the Pleistocene, as new fossil measurements may indicate, they did so in small herds in isolated areas. Dr. Castle continues, "There are no statements by Indians about always having horses in the historical record. Indians who were interviewed during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries often talked about seeing their first horses, which tribe they acquired them from (usually in trade),



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'taking.'"

Frank Kunz told me over the telephone that Nokota horses today that are descendants of Sitting Bull's horses retain a conformation that is not Spanish and not Spanish mustang. He says, "The phenotype of these horses is completely different. They're small built with a long low tail set. They're mulish in the hocks, are round boned and have good muscle. Many are roan in color and have strong, sound hoofs with solid legs. They're hardy, sturdy, sure-footed, have a good brain and are really smart." Mr. Kuntz's position is more in keeping with traditional Lakota oral lore that says the horses never became extinct.

In agreement with Mr. Kuntz, that horses always existed in North America, including the Nokota phenotype, are Yvette Collin and her husband Sean Collin. The Collins have a horse sanctuary called Sacred Way Sanctuary in Florence, Alabama. They are trying to raise awareness to prevent Native American breeds including the Nokota from going extinct. Ms. Collin has written a paper entitled, "How The

how they had to learn how to care for them, etc. This claim [that the Lakotas always had horses] has only come up in the last 20 years, and it is still only a few Lakotas who have claimed that. In my opinion this reflects both their colonial experience and the significance of the horses to them."

Dr. McLaughlin continues, "Lakotas didn't breed horses selectively; like most Plains people they liked horses for their attributes and actually liked what they called 'American horses' - i.e., stock they took or got in trade from whites which were generally larger. It's highly unlikely that the horses they surrendered represented anything even close to what we would consider a "breed" in terms of consistency and uniform background. There was a very active intertribal trade in horses as well as competitive

Continued on page 41.



NOKOTA HORSES

Continued from page 39.

Dominant Culture's View of Oral History Denied Truth About The Indigenous Horse" and is in the process of writing her PhD on the relationship between Native Americans and the horse. At present, they have more than 100 horses including a Nokota mare and stallion that were hand selected by Leo Kuntz. The Collins also have Choctaw, Cherokee, Apache, Ute, Lakota, Cheyenne, Ojibwe and other Native American breeds. Ms. Collin told me in a telephone conversation, "My ancestors, and the ancestors of many native people throughout the Americas, were very clear. The horse was here before the arrival of the European explorers and conquistadors, and this creature played a very significant role within their cultures. Along with oral history accounts, there are also numerous written accounts by early explorers who spotted large herds of horses in North America upon their arrival."

In agreement that Native Americans always had horses, Nokota and all around horse trainer and Conservancy board member, Jack Lieser explained to me on the telephone about his experience of Lakota horse mythology. Mr. Lieser explains, "Lakotas have a strong oral tradition. When they want to educate the young in tribal history, they make them repeat that history over and over until it's accurate. That's how they keep their traditions alive and one of their traditions is that the Lakota always had horses." The Lakota believe their horses did not disappear or become extinct. They observed Spanish horsemen or the US calvary but somehow their riding skills were superior. Mr. Kuntz says, "The Indians were much better riders than the calvary and they knew how to ride with a lot more skill." Mr. Kuntz continues, "There are few remaining horse fossils because the Indians didn't eat horses unless they had to and they didn't bury their own dead with any horses – they left them on the land. What ever remaining fossils existed were pulverized. When I was a boy I saw photographs from the late 1800's and early 1900's of huge piles of bones next to railroad cars to be loaded up to go back East to be processed into fertilizer."

The Lakota lore about horses not becoming extinct in North America is in line with the latest findings by Dr. Steven Jones, Professor Emeritus of Physics, and others who are remeasuring known horse fossils with a more accurate AMS Accelerator Mass Spectrometer (in HD Wild Horses, May 2013 – New Evidence for Pre-Conquest Horses in North America, lecture by Dr. Jones, April 4, 2013 with best Equus findings 6020 BC to 1350 AD).

The aforementioned Nokota Horse Conservancy helps to raise funds for the care of horses and has a goal of creating a sanctuary especially for the horses where visitors can experience the historic herd.

Mr. Lieser who is on the Conservancy board and who trains the Nokota horses has nothing but praise for them. He says, "They're so different. I do clinics with them. They look right into your soul. It makes it good and bad. You always know where you are with them. They know where your holes are so it can be hard. On the whole, they're some of the most intelligent and athletic horses I've ever worked with. They're different from mustangs or other breeds that haven't yet been handled. The Nokotas don't panic and they always find a way out. They're always thinking. They can be scared but they don't totally check out. At Leo's place [Kuntz] I placed a young Nokota horse in a round pen and the rails were all about 7 feet high except for one area that was about 6 feet. The horse was loose by himself when I walked in. He jumped the shorter rail and landed on his chest and knew he couldn't get out. It didn't work so he came back in. Three days later, I put him in another pen. At the end of the gate there was a space 2.7 feet off the ground. I walked in under that space and he saw me do it so he scooted under that gate to get out to go with the herd. It was fascinating to watch.... The Lakota natives used to use the Nokota horses in their Sun Dances. They believed you could talk to god through these horses. When these horses look you in the eye, you do understand that. They look at you and know you. It's amazing with these horses. A whole herd that are more intelligent than most horses. Right now the horses are at Leo Kuntz's or leased nearby and Frank Kuntz manages them. I come up from Texas to do clinics for them. I encourage everyone to come – it's a once in a lifetime experience, a spiritual journey."

The Nokota® Horse Conservancy is producing a calendar as a fund raiser. The funds are especially needed due to increased costs of land and for feed. A few select Nokotas are for sale. Information is available on the horses and Jack Lieser's clinics at nokotahorse.org or call Shelly Hauge and Frank Kuntz at (701) 254-4205. Yvette Collin can be reached at sacredwayspiritshorses.com

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Photos: Page 39: Nokota horses in Linton, ND, photo courtesy of Jack Lieser; Page 40, clockwise from top left: Nokota on the farm in Sweden, courtesy Sotardalen Nokotas; Blue roan Nokota stallion, Hunkpapa Sundance, with masked Nokota mare Yankton Vision Quest, photo courtesy of Yvette Collin; Indian Scout Fort Reno, 1888 by Remington, horse with mask from the period, public domain; page 41, left: War Chief, Nokota horse, photo courtesy Castle McLaughlin; right: Nokota Horse, courtesy ND State Historical Society.