

Wild Horse Annie

Monday, Jul. 27, 1959

The wild horses and burros of the romantic old West are fast disappearing. Until 15 years ago they still galloped over the Western hills and grasslands in great herds, but since World War II an estimated 100,000 have been captured and cut up into dog food. Today, the Interior Department estimates, no more than 20,000 wild horses still graze on the lone prairies. Last week the wild horses had their day in Congress.

Their frail, unlikely-looking champion, Mrs. Velma B. Johnston, 47, is a Reno secretary. Ten years ago she was shocked to see a truckload of frightened, bleeding wild horses on their way to the slaughterhouse. She investigated the methods of roundup and was even more deeply disturbed, launched a campaign that has won her the nickname, "Wild Horse Annie."

For two hours last week, Wild Horse Annie told her story to 16 interested members of a House Judiciary subcommittee. The mustangs are flushed from their hilly retreats by low-flying airplanes, whose pilots pursue the animals across the prairies until they are near exhaustion. Then trucks take up the chase. Finally, the horses are lassoed with ropes weighted with truck tires or other heavy objects. The horses drag the weights around until they drop. Then they are hobbled, hauled into the truck. Wild Horse Annie documented all this with photographs that she took from the top of her car, while her husband sat below, a .38 revolver in his lap.

Since Wild Horse Annie's campaign got under way, most Western states have outlawed mustang hunting by plane on state lands. After hearing her testimony last week, many sympathetic Congressmen agreed that the practice should be outlawed on federal lands, too. Passage of Wild Horse Annie's bill seems likely—with one amendment. The Interior Department claims the horses are a potential threat to grazing lands, asked the right to hunt them humanely if the herds get too big. Wild Horse Annie has no objection to that.

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