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Descendants of wild horses roam the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park near Medora, N.D. Many agree that the horses, which number about 125, are much tamer now than they were in the past. Patrick Springer / The Forum

Wild horses roaming what's now Theodore Roosevelt National Park have been linked for years to three of the area's most noteworthy historic figures: Sitting Bull, the Marquis de Mores and Old Four Eyes himself.

A trail of written accounts connects war ponies that were confiscated from Sitting Bull and his followers to horses used by ranchers during the open-range era around Medora, N.D. But the National Park Service has taken the position that airtight proof is lacking to officially acknowledge any ties.

If the link were recognized, wild horse advocates say, it would force the park service to work actively to preserve an important historic legacy, and stop what they say is the systematic removal of descendant horses.

The park's horse herd, culled every few years in roundups to avoid overgrazing, is exempt from federal laws to protect horses from mistreatment.

Years ago, horses were routinely sold for slaughter, including as food for zoo animals, and horse advocates say cavalier treatment continues, as evidenced by a helicopter crash during a roundup last month.

That incident, which injured the pilot and a park biologist, remains under investigation. The roundup was the first on record without using horseback riders, horse advocates said.

Now two noted historians — both former National Park Service officials — say compelling historic evidence shows that horses in the park are descended from Sitting Bull and his followers, and therefore should be carefully preserved as living history.

Robert Utley, a Sitting Bull biographer and former chief historian for the park service, said historic evidence amassed by Castle McLaughlin, a Harvard anthropologist hired years ago to study the horses at the park, is convincing.

"I think Castle McLaughlin has proved it beyond reasonable doubt that those horses out there are descendants of horses from the Marquis that were purchased from traders who got them after Sitting Bull surrendered," said Utley, author of "The Lance and the Shield," a 1993 biography of Sitting Bull.

In May, Utley wrote to the regional manager of the National Park Service to urge park officials to restore descendant horses to the park, now home to an estimated 125 horses.

From 1947, when the park was formed, until 1970, the park service's official policy was to completely eliminate wild horses at Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Current policy calls for maintaining a herd of about 50 horses.

"I judge the horses to have represented two important heritages of the park: the cowboy heritage of Theodore Roosevelt and the Marquis de Mores, the basis of the park's creation in the first place, and the heritage of the Northern Plains Indians, particularly Sitting Bull's Lakotas, who ranged over and fought other tribes in this area for generations," Utley wrote.

Paul Hedren, a historian and retired National Parks Service administrator, said McLaughlin and others have made a strong case tying horses alive today to Sitting Bull's ponies.

"I absolutely accept everything Castle is saying about these horses," Hedren said. "I think it's absolutely dead-on."

No genetic proof

McLaughlin, associate curator of North American ethnography at Harvard's Peabody Museum, teamed up with Leo

and Frank Kuntz, horse ranchers from Linton, N.D., to help save wild horses removed from the park.

"There's more to the story than we care to acknowledge," Hedren said.

But Ernie Quintanna, Midwest regional director for the National Park Service, said the government needs ironclad proof to link the park's horses to Sitting Bull's genetic testing.

"We've not found any scientific evidence that would suggest this view," he said. "We rely heavily on science."

Quintanna, based in Omaha, Neb., acknowledges that photographs of horses owned by the Marquis and those at the park bear a striking resemblance. But he said horses elsewhere also have the distinctive mustang look.

If proved by a "logical, undisputable connection," a link between horses today at the park and Sitting Bull would be a huge draw for the park, Quintanna said.

"Would that be wonderful? Boy, what a story to tell," he said.

But, he added, conclusive evidence is needed to withstand attacks from skeptics.

"This is a case made on circumstantial evidence," Hedren said. "But her circumstantial case is powerful."

The chain of ownership of horses passing from Sitting Bull and his followers, who surrendered at Fort Buford, near present-day Williston, N.D., in 1881, to post traders, then the Marquis, and later to A.C. Huidekoper, an early ranch baron, has long been documented in histories of the area.

Soldiers at Fort Buford seized 350 horses when Sitting Bull's band surrendered. Several post traders bought the horses, and sold 250 head to the Marquis, in 1883.

The next year the Marquis, who founded Medora, abandoned his ambitions of operating a large horse-breeding ranch, and he sold his horses, including 60 purchased by Huidekoper.

Park ignored report

Theodore Roosevelt, who ran a cattle ranch in the badlands during the 1880s, noted his frequent sightings of wild horses in the area in a remembrance he wrote in 1888.

"In a great many — indeed, 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 for their sires and dams, yet are quite as wild as the antelope on whose domain they have intruded," Roosevelt wrote.

As a park service employee in 1986 and 1987, McLaughlin was commissioned to study the history and origins of the wild horses at the Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

She had been an interpreter at the Knife River Indian Villages, near Stanley, N.D., and the park service dispatched her to take part in a 1986 horse roundup at Theodore Roosevelt National Park because she could ride horseback.

What McLaughlin saw appalled her: a callous disregard for the horses, witnessed by a stallion that was driven to death during the roundup and the deaths of three other horses confined at a Dickinson, N.D., livestock sales barn. The horses, she said, were trampled or otherwise wounded when crammed into inadequate space with stallions of mixed bands.

In her 250-page report, submitted to the park in 1989, McLaughlin catalogued the systematic removal of horses from the park — often sold for slaughter, including to a zoo in the 1960s as food for large cats.

The wild horses in the park were largely intact from their roots as hybrids of Indian ponies and early ranch horses from the 1880s when the park was first established in 1947, she determined.

In the 1980s, McLaughlin wrote, the park began to introduce other domestic horse breeds, including Thoroughbreds and American Quarter Horses, because offspring of those horses would be sold at auction for higher prices when culled from the herd.

Local ranchers, whose hired help was needed in roundups to remove surplus horses, held great influence with park

administrators, McLaughlin wrote, who allowed them to target for removal horses bearing Indian pony or mustang characteristics.

In researching the origin of the park's once-free-roaming horses, McLaughlin's report compiled references to the horses in letters, journals, memoirs and other sources. Many writers made references to badlands horses once belonging to Sitting Bull, and their offspring.

Wallis Huidekoper, A.C.'s brother, wrote in his memoirs about the connection between their ranch stock and the great Lakota Sioux warrior.

"Many were war ponies and had been in the battle of the Little Big Horn," Huidekoper wrote, "for they carried scars from the rifles of Custer's troopers."

McLaughlin's report, though commissioned by the park service, was filed away and forgotten, McLaughlin said. "They didn't like my conclusions and they just ignored it."

Plight of the horses

Utley and Hedren said park officials should give McLaughlin an audience, and work with the Kuntz brothers and their supporters with the nonprofit Nokota Horse Conservancy, which advocates for the horses and owns foundation breeding stock.

"People, their jaws just drop when they hear the story," she said. "It's just so disillusioning."

Beginning in the late 1970s and escalating in the 1980s, Leo Kuntz bought many of the horses removed from the park to keep as breeding stock to preserve the lines descended from Indian ponies and early ranch stock, including horses introduced by Huidekoper.

Frank Kuntz said he and his brother, who lobbied to have the Nokota horse named the state equine in 1993, found themselves accidentally thrust in the advocacy role. Leo bought his first park horse for long-distance endurance horse racing.

"We've become spokesmen for the horses," Frank Kuntz said. "They can't speak for themselves."

Theodore Roosevelt, remembered as the father of the modern conservation movement, wouldn't approve of how the park that bears his name has looked after the horses he once watched roam the range, Frank Kuntz said.

"I don't think he'd be saying bully about what's happened," he said. "I think he'd be turning over in his grave."

Meanwhile, Quintanna said park officials remain open to new information or evidence about the horse herd.

What about Roosevelt's own writings about the wild horses, with references to runaway Indian and ranch stock?

"It's compelling," Quintanna said. "It helps build the case. But it's not enough. Unfortunately, it's still the standard that science sets."

Saga of the historic Badlands wild horses

- July 19, 1881: Sitting Bull returns from exile in Canada and surrenders with followers at Fort Buford, near present-day Williston, N.D. Soldiers confiscate their rifles and an estimated 350 horses. Post traders buy the horses and later resell many.

- 1883: The Marquis de Mores buys 250 of the horses seized from Sitting Bull and his followers, including all the mares, with intentions of breeding horses on a large scale at his ranch near Medora, N.D.

- 1884: A.C. Huidekoper, the earliest big cattle baron in the Little Missouri Badlands, buys 60 of De Mores' Sioux mares for his sprawling open-range ranch. Huidekoper breeds the Indian ponies with larger breeds to use as ranch saddle horses.

- 1888: Theodore Roosevelt writes of seeing wild horses during his ranching days.

- 1947: Theodore Roosevelt National Memorial Park is established, with north and south units. For years, local

ranchers allow some horses to trespass and graze.

- 1955: Wallis Huidekoper, A.C.'s brother, publishes his memoirs, recalling the hot-blooded mustangs once ridden by Sitting Bull's band.

- 1970: Park policy shifts to accommodate a demonstration horse herd in the interest of historic accuracy to depict the open range era.

- 1977: A horse expert from the Bureau of Land Management disagrees with park officials that the herd has a problem with inbreeding.

- 1978: Still citing inbreeding problems, the park hires cowboys for a roundup. Extreme heat contributes to the deaths of seven horses driven miles in 105-degree temperatures. Rancher Leo Kuntz buys one of the horses to use for endurance races.

- 1986: Two helicopters and 25 riders round up 60 horses. The herd's dominant stallion collapses and dies while being chased. A mare later breaks out of a sale barn pen and dies from her wounds, but other horses escape. Two other horses die from injuries. Kuntz buys 51 of 54 horses sold at auction.

- 1993: The North Dakota Legislature designates the Nokota horse as the official state equine, declaring: "The Nokota breed may well be those distinct horses descended from Sioux Chief Sitting Bull's war ponies."

- Oct. 18, 2007: A helicopter crashes while rounding up horses in the park, injuring the pilot and a biologist; 54 horses already captured were released. The accident remains under investigation.

Sources: The History and Status of the Wild Horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park by Castle McLaughlin, Forum files

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