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"NOW JUST A DARN MINUTE!"

Readers will recall that in the last issue of THUNDERBEAR, we left Cindy Orlando, Superintendent of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, with the distinct possibility that an obscure NPS guideline would require that she phase out the 2,000 Hereford cattle now operating as "organic lawn mowers" in the new Kahuku Ranch unit of the park and replace them with historically accurate, but vicious, Hawaiian Longhorns, which would make visiting the park a more thrilling experience.

Sadly, this does not appear to be the case. Cindy is off the hook. She is not required to replace the effeminate Herefords with lusty longhorns.

Here is a note from Jerry Rogers, former Associate Director, Cultural Affairs of the NPS

Hi PJ,

Like the preceding #278, this issue is as good and as fun as always. Thanks for what you do for all of us.

As seems to have become usual, I don't really know the answer to the question you asked me in the Hawaii story in the #279 issue. I am copying Bob Utley on this message because I know he will recall the incidents I mention below.

I cannot think of any overall requirement of law to preserve "breeds" as opposed to species. I am thinking of some situations in which a park believes it should do so--specifically, Lyndon B. Johnson NHS, where Johnson's "effete English" Herefords (your phrase) are deemed to be park cultural resources. Having been at the LBJ ranch in about 1965 in the company of Bob Utley and a mad genius Texas Tech Park Administration Professor named Elo Urbanovsky, and having observed the President's ranch foreman Dale Malacek polishing the hooves of the ancestors of said Herefords with a power buffer, I would have to say those animals are very much cultural resources of the park. If there are other examples, my guess is that they would result from case by case consideration of the mission of the individual park unit.

Some people have engaged in careful breeding programs aimed at selecting out certain breed characteristics in order to recover breeds such as Spanish Churro sheep that Navajos began to herd a couple of centuries ago.

Essentially they are trying to breed out the "improvements" that have been bred into certain animals over time. I recently saw an ox that resulted from such breeding at Shaker Village at
Pleasant Hill, Kentucky. Again, I am not aware of much of this sort of thing happening in NPS units, nor of any requirements to do so.

Some parks that have bison herds are dealing with the fact that not all bison were the same 150 years ago, and that some bison that survived the great slaughter managed to acquire cattle genes. I think Yellowstone may still be dealing with some of this from bison brought to the park decades ago from Texas--probably from the herd of Charles Goodnight who actively bred cattalos.

There is a current issue related to this question at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where a herd of horses that are almost certainly direct descendants of 'Sitting Bull' ponies is not acknowledged as such by the park or the region. They were removed from the park rather than being managed as cultural resources, as Bob and others believe would be correct.

Your Hawaii story reminds me that J.Frank Dobie said the feral longhorn was the second most dangerous animal in North America, right after the Grizzly bear. Long ago at Fort Davis National Historic Site, I was sifting through the Post Surgeon's daily reports. The Post Surgeon was exasperated by a requirement that had come down from Headquarters to monitor the health of beef animals delivered to the post as food for the troops, reporting that he was unable to perform the required check of the temperature of this bunch of longhorns "owing to the wildness of the animals." That conjured images of a guy wearing an officer's hat and a white smock running around a corral behind giant steers with a rectal thermometer in his hand while dodging the horns of other steers.

By the way, I never actually held the coveted title "Chief Historian." Verne Chatelaine, Herb Kahler, Bob Utley, Harry Pfanz, Ed Bearss, Dwight Pitcaithley, Martin Pechir, and others maybe including Russ Mortensen and Ross Holland did, but not I. (Jerry is being a bit modest, the Chief Historian of the NPS reports to the Associate Director, Cultural Affairs, in this case. Jerry--Ed.)

Keep up the good work.

Jerry Rogers

Thank you, Jerry!

Hawaii Volcanoes Superintendent Cindy Orlando tells me that HAVO is ending the cattle operation in the new Kahunuu Ranch addition in April this year, and, JUST A DARN MINUTE! she has no intention of replacing them with historic "Vancouver" Longhorns from the Parker Ranch. (Nor is she required to by NPS regulation, as Jerry Rogers pointed out.)

Incidentally, if you would like to hunt the "Vancouver Longhorns," Hawaii's historic wild cattle, the Parker Ranch can arrange a hunt of Hawaii's most dangerous game for a little over $2,000 (there is no season). The Parker Ranch supplies everything including guns; ammunition and a paniolo (cowboy) guide who will make sure you don't end up on the horns of the beast. The Parker people will also cut up the critter for you; not a bad deal, considering.
Still, the issue of historic breeds of livestock in a national park setting is an interesting one.

Jerry brought up several interesting points in his letter.

The first is the fascinating story of the Ponies of Sitting Bull.

If this story is true, then these horses are living historical artifacts connecting us with the way of life of one of greatest Native American leaders, Sitting Bull.

In 1876, after defeating General George Crook at the Battle of the Rosebud, and virtually annihilating, Colonel Custer's 7th cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Sitting Bull deemed it prudent to take his people across "The Medicine Line", that invisible border that the superstitious Americans dared not cross, and into "Grandmother's Country" (Queen Victoria's Canada) where they were allowed to settle in the Cypress Hills under the benign supervision of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

By the 1880's, American cries for vengeance had diminished to the point where it would be possible for the Lakota to return to the United States. The buffalo were gone and therefore the Lakota would not need all those horses if they were going to be peaceable farmers, now would they? So as part of the homecoming deal, Sitting Bull had to give up the pony herd. A willing buyer was the visionary Marquis De Mores, a French count who built a chateau in the Badlands and named a town after his wife, Medora. He envisioned a vast cattle empire, complete with slaughterhouse and rail spur for processing and shipping the meat and so on. The idea of Indian ponies fascinated him. Here was a working animal that had been bred by the Indians to suit the rugged Northern Plains environment. It was (relatively) small and not as pretty as European horses, but it was incredibly hardy and enduring. It did not freeze to death in the winter or die of thirst in the summer. It happily lived on grass and did not require supplementary grain or hay.

The Marquis bought many of Sitting Bull's ponies. Possibly, so did his near sighted neighbor and fellow rancher, Theodore Roosevelt.

Things went reasonably well until the Great Blizzard of 1886, which put the cattle out of existence and the open range cattle industry out of business.

The Marquis and Roosevelt went on to other things. Sitting Bull's ponies? Some undoubtedly died in the blizzards, some lived out their lives on other ranches, and some, it is said (and here it
gets tricky) drifted into the Badlands and became the "Wild Ponies" of Theodore Roosevelt National Park in North Dakota.

Now neighbors, generally speaking, most "wild" horse legends are just that; rural legends and federal land managers accept them at their peril.

Nothing brings the crazies out of the woodwork faster than a "wild" horse story.

If the horses are on an Eastern or Gulf Coast barrier island, then OF COURSE they are the descendents of horses shipwrecked on a 16th century Spanish treasure galleon!

If the "wild" horses are in or even near Shenandoah National Park, then OF COURSE they must be the descendents of Col. John Singleton Moby's ghostly cavalry horses.

There is a lesson for Land Managers here: Never EVER refer to a loose horse that has strayed onto federal property as a "wild" horse! If you do, hundreds of "wild" horse crazies and dozens of equally crazy "wild" horse organizations will immediately descend upon you and your operation and make life miserable for you!

Geography will not save you! If your park is in the Midwest, then OF COURSE your "wild" horses will be descendents of those used by Jesse James! If your park is back East, say Saratoga Battlefield NHS then OF COURSE your "wild" horses will be the descendents of the horses of the Connecticut Light Horse.

The correct terminology, particularly when dealing with a reporter, television or otherwise, is that you have some "strayed livestock" in the park and that you are assiduously searching with due diligence for the rightful owners, who are undoubtedly weeping their pillows with grief over the loss of their beloved ponies. In the interim, you have placed these "strayed livestock" in a fenced enclosure where teenaged girl volunteers from the local 4-H are caring them. (Horses have a terrifying constituency in the Perpetual Teen Age Girl, ranging in age from 16 to 60, who regard all horses as "Sacred" and God help any federal land manager who inconveniences the object of their affection in any way!)

If, after due diligence, you are unable to find the owners, then and only then will you place the strayed animals with devoted foster families who will sign a blood oath that they will not sell the horses for dog food or steaks for perverted Europeans.

Now neighbors, by now you should have concluded that your kindly editor is not a sucker for a "wild horse" tall story.

Just to reinforce my prejudices, I sent off an inquiry on the legend of Sitting Bull's Ponies being the ancestors of the feral horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park to the
superintendent of that park, Ms Valerie Naylor.

("If in doubt, ask a ranger" and all that) Anyway Superintendent Naylor wrote me back very promptly and said:

"...There is NO evidence that the feral horses in Theodore Roosevelt are descended from Sitting Bull's ponies and there is no way to determine that. There are some people who perpetuate that story."

Your editor was soon to discover who those "some people" are.

They are Robert Utley and Dr. Castle McLaughlin, two of the premier experts on Western Americana in the United States, as well as retired NPS historian Jerry Rogers, no slouch himself in the worship of Clio. They vehemently dispute the position of Superintendent Naylor and the NPS on the subject of Sitting Bull's ponies.

In addition to having been the Chief Historian of the National Park Service and the author of 16 books on the Western frontier, Utley has the reputation among fellow historians as the finest historian of the American frontier in the 19th century. Indeed, the Western History Association provides the annual "Robert M. Utley Award" for the best book on the military history of the frontier and Western North America.

Even more to the point, Utley is the author of THE LANCE AND THE SHIELD: THE LIFE OF SITTING BULL. This means that the author has more than a passing knowledge of Sitting Bull and his ponies.

Naturally, I decided to check with Bob. Here is what he had to say:

Dear PJ,

As Chief Historian of the National Park Service, 1964-72, I was instrumental in formulated the policies and standards for the care of park historic resources that basically remain in place. As one of the architects of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, and as Deputy Director of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 1976-80, I am familiar with federal preservation law. I judge the horses to have represented two important heritages of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. The cowboy heritage of Theodore Roosevelt and the Marquis De Mores, the basis for 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. In fact, two important battles between Sitting Bull's warriors and US Army troops were fought very near the existing park.

The wild mustang horses that the park disposed of some years back were a mixed bloodline that remained basically intact during the century they had run wild in the Little Missouri Valley. The strains were two: cow horses that entered this area when the Marquis de Mores set up his cattle operation, and the Indian horses confiscated when Sitting Bull surrendered with his following at
Fort Buford in 1881, and which the Marquis purchased. Thus these horses represented a highly significant resource of the park.

I therefore believe that the decision to dispose of these horses violated the policies and standards of the National Park Service and constituted a federal undertaking within the meaning of Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. This was not recognized or acknowledged by park management at the time, so of course, no compliance was initiated under Section 106.

Thanks to the Nokota Horse Conservancy, a philanthropically supported enterprise based in Linten, North Dakota, the bloodlines of these two heritages have been preserved. In other words, significant historic resources of the park still exist outside of the park.

I believe it is advisable for the National Park Service, at the least, to open a dialog with the Nokota Horse Conservancy described in the enclosed brochure. These horses have been preserved largely through the interest and effort of Frank and Leo Kurtz and Shelly Hague, with vital support of Castle McLaughlin, the last an anthropologist, is now with the Peabody Museum at Harvard and did much of the research groundwork during two tours as park seasonal in 1986 and 1987.

I don’t know whether it is feasible to restore some of these horses to the park. That is the outcome I would like to see flow from the talks I am advocating. In any event, since the horses at the conservancy are still park historic resources of major significance, some kind of partnership or relationship between the park and the conservancy seems to be in order. At the very least, Dr. Castle McLaughlin should be invited to present her evidence.

Sincerely,

Robert Utley

OK, next enter Dr. Castle McLaughlin. Dr. McLaughlin is Associate Curator of North American Ethnography at the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. In the interest of full disclosure, Dr. McLaughlin is also vice-president of the Nokota Horse Conservancy, so she does have a dog in this fight.

Dear PJ,

When Theodore Roosevelt National Park was created in the 1950’s, a concerted effort was made to get rid of the wild horses, which are strongly disliked by the NPS and most rangers whose mission then was to "recreate" the biological landscape of the 19th century. A superintendent who was also a historian, reversed that policy, circ 1970, and advocated treating the horses as an historical resource rather than a nuisance.

At that time, the park decided to maintain an "historical demonstration " herd. Then in the 1980’s, another superintendent went into a partnership with local ranchers who proposed getting rid of the wild horses in the park and breeding bucking horses instead, so that the park could
make money by selling them as rodeo stock. That decision was protested by the public, as well as a number of wild horse biologists, but they forged ahead.

I entered the story in 1986, when I was hired to ride a round up as a seasonal ranger, and was subsequently hired to conduct research on the history, administrative history, and social organization of the horses; a project I worked on for three years.

Regardless of the Sitting Bull connection, the NPS has been criticized from many quarters for getting rid of the original horses, which are well documented to have been in the Badlands since the 1880’s, when Theodore Roosevelt wrote about them.

Most American wild horse herds started in the 1930’s with cast off ranch horses augmenting the Badlands’ herds during the Great Depression. However, most of the tamer and slower horses seemed to have been culled out over the years as local ranchers often chased and captured a few for sale.

When I arrived, the horses were extremely wild and very difficult to approach. Many also had Spanish colonial characteristics, as has been documented by several independent horse experts. However, the NPS got rid of those and replaced them with domestic stock.

I was young and deeply discouraged to discover that local politics trumped doing the right thing; especially when the park turned a deaf ear on the protests of respected biologists etc, as I thought the public deserved to see "real" wild horses, rather than quarter horses and also felt that the original breed stock, not others, deserved to be there after all that time.

The Sitting Bull connection came up during my research, it was mentioned by several local ranchers and had in fact, been published as early as the 1930’s. The paper trail is really quite clear. The Lakota horses surrendered at Fort Buford in the 1880’s, were purchased by the Marquis de Mores, who founded the town of Medora, now park headquarters, and raised the horses on the open range there. After a few years, he sold them to another local who continued to breed them and to lose them in the Badland. It’s pretty clear that the Lakota horses were not the only wild horses in the area, and that they were not the only ancestors of the modern herd.

But the real evidence is the horses themselves. We have photographs of the original wild horses, and the correspondence between them and the horses called "Nokotas", the ones removed from the park and purchased by the two ranching brothers is really astounding. In fact, the "Indian pony" appearance of the park horses and the dominant colors of black, roan, and grey were what the ranchers and the NPS objected to in the 1980’s, and they justified "modernizing" the herd by saying that there was no market value for old time horses like that, whereas the public would buy the offspring of currently popular domestic breeds. This is documented in NPS records.

The numbers of horses has been contentious, but since Theodore Roosevelt is an enclosed park, everyone has recognized that the population would have to be managed. The issue at THRO has been the change in the herd. The public can literally walk up and pet some of the horses. These are "wild" horses? I am not alone in feeling that something has been lost in the process.
Apparently, the problem is that the park cannot admit a mistake or re-think a superintendent's decision. Also there is still anti-horse sentiment, and the park has been very reluctant to invest in horse management expertise of any kind. I am sure a contributing factor is the increased cost of more careful and informed horse management in these straitened economic times.

But it seems to me that they have simply dug in their heels on principle. Recently the park has stated that the Sitting Bull connection would require genetic proof; but since no one thought to take a blood sample from the horses in the 1880's, that is clearly impossible. Also, it is unlikely that these Lakota horses were "pure" anything in relation to known breeds. So I am not sure they would have genetic markers/signatures that would distinguish them anyway. I don't believe that Lakota horses or other plains herds were "pure" Spanish mustangs; that is one of those romantic notions, but they evidently did have some Spanish colonial characteristics.

One has to wonder why the NPS would be so hostile toward several of their most distinguished former staffers such as Bob Utley and Paul Hedrin, and so adverse to the possibility, which, if true, could only enhance the appeal of Theodore Roosevelt National Park as a destination and demonstrate good will toward scholarship and the Native Peoples whose land they now manage. These horses could well be the only bona fide descendants of an important Native American Herd. Objectively, it makes no sense. I believe that is why this situation is so galling to Utley, Hedren, and others.

Sincerely,

Dr. Castle McLaughlin
Associate Curator of North American Ethnography
Peabody Museum. Harvard University

Well now, neighbors! As old timers used to say "It's a difference of opinion that makes a horse race!" and we seem to have a difference of opinion between the present administration at Theodore Roosevelt and the NPS on one side and Jerry Rogers, Robert Utley, Dr. Castle McLaughlin, et al on the other side.

In the next issue of THUNDERBEAR, we will present the views of superintendent Valerie Naylor and her staff as well as the Regional staff, who are backing the position of Superintendent Naylor, i.e. that there is no provable connection between Sitting Bull's ponies and modern day horses in and around Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

Clearly, this issue requires more publicity. Your kindly editor has been told that NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC magazine has a larger circulation than THUNDERBEAR.

I don't believe that for a moment, but it is worth considering that we take the issue to THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC for more publicity and possible resolution.

You see "wild" horses, American Indians, The West, and Theodore Roosevelt are iconic symbols of America! Put them all together and you have the kind of story that only NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, with its incomparable color photography can tell!
One can visualize a two-page color spread of blue roan ponies running through the badlands! That and other photos of the horses, ranchers, the Badlands, Utley, Naylor, McLaughlin et al, would complement the text, which would be an interesting debate between the two factions on the subject of Sitting Bull's horses.

Your friendly editor will return to the Washington, DC area, on or about April 15 and will straightaway broach the idea of an article on the "Mystery Horses of Theodore Roosevelt National Park: Fact or Fiction?" to the editors of NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC magazine. The NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC should be able to get a well known Western writer such as Tim Egan, George Wuerthner, or Terry Tempest Williams to do the text, asking questions of Utley, McLaughlin, and Naylor.

Such a debate should lead in the direction of a solution if not the solution itself!

So where does your kindly editor stand on the subject of Sitting Bull's Ponies? Well, I'm agnostic on the subject, but I'm looking forward to a good argument from all concerned!