

Horse heritage lost?

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Horses on a ridge huddle to shelter one another against a stiff wind blowing through the badlands in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where horses are kept as a “historical demonstration herd” to commemorate the park’s link to ranching in the open-range era.

Medora, N.D. - The horses that wander Theodore Roosevelt National Park add splashes of animated color to the craggy buttes and grassy draws they call home. Bands of horses have long been a fixture of the park’s South Unit. Officially, they serve as hoofed reminders of the open-range days when ranch horses helped cattle wranglers in the park’s Little Missouri River badlands.

But critics – including three prominent Western historians, all of them former career park professionals – complain that the National Park Service persists in ignoring “persuasive evidence” that some of the horses are descended from ponies surrendered by Sitting Bull’s followers in 1881.

A historical paper trail traces Sitting Bull’s ponies in a series of transactions, beginning with the surrender of about 350 horses at Fort Buford, to the purchase of 60 mares from that herd by a ranching baron in 1884 whose unfenced spread included the southern North Dakota badlands.

Despite that documented sequence, and other evidence amassed by a Harvard ethnographer who wrote a history of the park's horses, the National Park Service refuses to acknowledge evidence three historians have called "persuasive" or "overwhelming" unless confirmed by DNA samples linking horses in the park to those once held by Sitting Bull's people.

Ernest Quintana, the Park Service's regional manager, maintains that nothing short of scientific evidence is needed to confirm any link between horses in the park to those once owned by Sitting Bull's band or other tribes.

One of the most outspoken critics of the National Park Service's refusal to actively work to preserve mustangs with characteristics matching those used by Plains Indians is Robert Utley, once the agency's chief historian and Sitting Bull's most influential biographer.

"Clearly, NPS wants to be rid of the ponies, partly for environmental reasons, partly because they just don't want to be bothered," Utley wrote in an e-mail message to The Forum. "The DNA gambit is clearly ridiculous, as anyone who gives it a second thought knows."

As a practical alternative to DNA testing, which might be impossible because no genetic samples were taken of Sitting Bull's ponies, another former park historian proposed combing archival military records of horses confiscated from Lakota surrendering in 1880-81.

Jerome Greene, a career Park Service historian who has written extensively about the Sioux wars, said there were as many as 19 separate surrenders during that period, totaling 5,694 people.

Greene, who said existing research makes a "persuasive case" for the link between horses that came from the park and Sitting Bull's ponies, nonetheless said the Park Service "needs to tighten the knowledge" by obtaining records from the National Archives.

In a letter to the Park Service, he listed records groups that could shed more light. Nine months later, Greene has yet to receive a response, he said.

"It's dumbfounding to me that the park and the regional director just close their eyes to it," Greene said. The DNA requirement, he added, is an unreasonable standard. "It just boggles my mind."

The lineage of park horses to war ponies once ridden by Sitting Bull's people and other Plains Indian tribes is living history that would be a major attraction for Theodore Roosevelt National Park, Greene said.

"It just seems to me that the Park Service is missing an opportunity," he said. "Visitation up there would probably go up, because so many people are interested in horses. It's just a no-brainer" that the park should be open to exploring the evidence compiled by Castle McLaughlin, a Harvard ethnographer who wrote a detailed history of the park horses almost 20 years ago and has continued to research the horses.

"Castle McLaughlin has the evidence," Utley wrote. "She is right, and it is insulting that the TR (Theodore Roosevelt) staff will not give so distinguished a scholar the courtesy of at least having her come to the park and make her case. They don't want to hear it, even though its evidence is the only way to get at the question."

McLaughlin, while an interpretive ranger for the Park Service in North Dakota in the 1980s, spent three years researching the Badlands horses, combing historical accounts and photographs, as well as interviewing numerous ranchers and American Indians.

Another career Park Service professional and historian, Paul Hedren, also is convinced of the park horses' lineage, and dismayed by what he sees as wrongheaded bureaucratic intransigence.

"A smart manager, it seems to me, would invite Castle McLaughlin to hear her case. They don't seem to be interested."

An archival search might better document the disposition of confiscated Indian ponies, said Hedren, who has written about Sitting Bull's surrender and the Great Sioux War. His own research has unearthed documents of the transfer of Sitting Bull's horses to post traders near Fort Buford.

Many of those horses later were purchased by the Marquis de Mores, a French nobleman who failed as a cattle baron in the Badlands around Medora, which he founded.

"The chain of history has been proven," said Wally Owen, who for years ran the trail-riding concession at the park, another horse preservation proponent.

The public feud between former Park Service historians including Utley and the agency flared up last fall, after a roundup of the horses ended with the crash of a helicopter that was used to herd the animals into sorting corrals, where they were to be culled to reduce their numbers to prevent overgrazing.

Some horse advocates, including those involved with a foundation working to preserve the horses, complained that a proper roundup should have employed horse riders trained in moving horses, as did almost all previous roundups in the park, in tandem with a helicopter.

Last year, Utley wrote park officials asking that they work with a group that is working to preserve the mustang-type horses used by Plains Indians.

Members of the Nokota Horse Conservancy, supporters of a breed name for the hybrids once predominant in the park, maintain a breeding herd of horses in pastures near Linton, N.D., drawn from wild horses removed from the park in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1993, the North Dakota Legislature designated 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."

That official stature, supporters once hoped, would help protect the feral horses in the park, which once had been targeted for total eviction from the park, in the 1950s and 1960s.

Then, around 1970, the policy shifted to accommodate a "demonstration horse herd" "in the interest of historic accuracy." Theodore Roosevelt, when ranching in the Badlands in the open-range years of the 1880s, wrote of seeing wild horses, presumably strays from Indian tribes and ranches.

But in the 1980s, the park removed dominant wild stallions and replaced them with popular domestic breeds, including quarter horses and an Arabian horse. Park officials cited concerns about possible inbreeding as the reason for introducing horses, but a horse expert concluded that inbreeding wasn't a problem.

"We're managing the herd as a cultural demonstration herd," biologist Mike Oehler said. "We're not managing the herd to preserve some genetic line that's been purported. We're not a horse park, in other words."

Bill Whitworth, the park's chief of resources, said rangers strive for a good mix of horses, in color, appearance, age and gender. "We're managing populations instead of individuals," he said.

“They’re not managed as Sitting Bull’s horses,” he added. “There are other people who actually do that. We think the horse is best represented in private sources.”

In the 1970s, members of the North Dakota congressional delegation and state tourism office wrote park officials to ask them to preserve and protect the horses. But officials have been silent in more recent years.

“I thought we won the battle,” said Tracy Potter, executive director of the Fort Abraham Lincoln Foundation and a former state tourism director. He’d assumed that the Nokota’s status as the state horse would help assure its future.

Sara Otte Coleman, North Dakota’s tourism director, considers the park horses an asset. “I haven’t ever chimed in formally,” she said. “I think it’s something we need to follow and preserve.”

Today, following years of the systematic removal of the Nokota type, the bloodlines of the park herd have been diminished to the point that only a few horses in the park have the distinct traits and conformity of the wild ponies that once roamed the badlands, McLaughlin said.

“To me it’s a tragedy,” she added. “I felt I got a glimpse at a lost world just before it went under. Those first horses were wild. There were horses that would rather die than be captured.”

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