“TRYING TO SAVE A MEMORY”: REDEEMING THE IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN MUSTANG IN THE 20th CENTURY

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of History
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2021

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Jillian Baldwin for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of History to be taken June 2021

Title: "TRYING TO SAVE A MEMORY": REDEEMING THE IMAGE OF THE AMERICAN MUSTANG ON THE 20th CENTURY

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Velma B. Johnston helped transform the perception of mustangs during the 1950s and 60s from pest to heritage species. The mustanger culture of the early 20th century, Velma Johnston's early conservation campaign, and Johnston's charge towards federal protection for wild mustangs encompass dynamic changes in rangeland management. The west went from primarily utilitarian to holding invaluable national symbols in the form of mustangs. Johnston streamlined the conservation movement by capitalizing on the symbolism of mustangs that were presented in the media. She used terms such as "symbol of freedom" and heritage species to gather nation support for mustang conservation and management. Using magazine publications, news articles, popular media, federal and state legislation, this thesis explores the mustang conservation movement during the early and mid-twentieth century. Understanding the current state of mustang management involved going back through the history of the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Steve Beda for being there since I came into his office hours pitching any idea I could think of about the American West. Not only does he share a passion for environmental history, but he also helped me streamline my thoughts and guided me in the right direction when I felt lost. I would also like to thank Professor Ocean Howell and Professor Monique Balbuena for being a part of my thesis committee. I took a history class from Professor Howell and learned about the invaluable connection between culture and the environment. I also began my thesis journey freshman year with Professor Balbuena when I took her Thesis Orientation class, and I am thankful I get to share the end of the process with her.

I would like to thank my parents for always supporting me and only occasionally judging me when I drank coffee at 6pm before a deadline. They are the ones who raised me to be the horse girl that I am. I don't think I could ever repay them for all the horseback riding lessons they got me, quite literally I don't have the money to repay them. I'd also like to thank my sister Allison for being my classmate while we both did school from home and always being a funny distraction when I needed it. I want to thank my boyfriend, Will, for always letting me rant about the thesis writing process and for reading over my drafts (I am sorry that your suggested title "HORSIES!" didn't make it into the final cut).

Lastly, I want to thank the horses that have been in my life for humbling me when I needed it, listening to me when they felt like it, and carrying me places I never thought I'd go.

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Introduction

Velma Johnston opened the front door of her 1970s Reno house with a warm smile and a loaded .38 rifle. It was the same rifle model she used in the 1950s to protect herself during midnight attempts to free trapped mustangs. A colt trampled half to death, a stallion with its eyes shot out, were common sights in the Nevada backcountry where mustangs were hunted down on public lands. A rancher herself, Johnston spoke out against this practice and eventually rallied a whole nation in support of the misfit mustangs. Johnston dedicated her life to being the mustangs' voice which got her both death threats and unwavering support.

Today mustangs are symbols of wildness and frontier heritage, but this was not always the case. While there were cultural influences such as books and television shows that romanticized wild mustangs, it was Velma Johnston's movement that created real change. By characterizing mustangs as a heritage species, Johnston convinced the federal government to both protect and manage wild horses under the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act 1971. Mustangs changed from invasive varmints to symbols of freedom within the span of forty years. This process began because Velma Johnston spearheaded a fervent national campaign. Besides the bald eagle, there is no other animal that has such an intertwined role in American history. Mustangs may have remained eradicable relics of the conquistadors without Johnston's steadfast commitment to the "wild ones."[1]

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[1] Deanne Stillman, *Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2008), 260.

The mustang's role in history has been largely underrepresented in range management discussions. While there is ample literature about the role of cattle and sheep in twentieth century rangeland management, mustangs are often relegated to side notes. The history focuses either on range ecology or livestock production but overlooks the vital part that mustangs played in rangeland management. Books such as *The Politics of Scale: A History of Rangeland Science* and *U.S. Forest Service Grazing and Rangelands: A History* look at the connections between the rangeland's utilitarian services and preservation through the lens of management. They do not, however, incorporate the role that mustangs played in influencing land management policies. Similarly, a chapter in *Rangeland Desertification* titled "Evolution of Rangeland Conservation Strategies" discusses past management techniques with conservation being the focus but, deal more with connections between domestic grazing animals and native abiotic and biotic entities. Other books include *Rangeland Management for Livestock Production* which furthers the popular narrative that rangelands were utilitarian. In both books, mustangs are not situated near the center of how rangelands were controlled by state and federal governments. Studies in other fields such as anthropology include *Inside Culture: Reimagining the Method of Cultural Studies.* The author, Nick Couldry, uses the case between the BLM and the public to demonstrate how the disconnect over the meaning of mustang has caused conflict over management techniques. Dr. Karen Dalke offers one the most comprehensive analyses on the cultural imagination on mustangs in her dissertation, "Mustang: The Paradox of Imagery." She argues that "anthropological inquiry offers the best approach for uncovering complex

meanings and contributing to their humane management."[2] since the idea of mustang is embedded in cultural context. However, the history of the term mustang has undergone significant changes since the interactions between wild horses, the Conquistadors that released them, and the expansion of U.S. territories into the West. A historiographical approach would help explain how the United States arrived at the current management techniques and provide a case studies as to how different interpretations have affected Mustang management. Mustangs were often cast aside in historical analysis because they did not fall into the category of cattle ranching or native ecology but rather existed in a limbo. The broader goal of this thesis is to incorporate mustangs and their conservation movement into the history of rangeland management and politics.

Fifty years before the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act (WFRH&B Act) became national legislation, mustangs were hunted nearly to extinction. In the early twentieth century, the west was at the mercy of land grabs by ranchers and cattlemen. Chaos ensued as the range could not support mass amounts of cattle grazing. This came to a head during the Dust Bowl when rangeland strained under pressure from environmental and man-made factors. Ranchers began to petition the General Land Office to create an organized grazing system so that the range could support copious amounts of grazing. The Taylor Grazing Act codified their requests, and the west became a utilitarian landscape. Anything that did not provide for livestock was obsolete and removable. This gave rise to a culture of Mustangers who hunted wild horses and drove the animals into trucks bound for pet food factories. Wild mustang populations were declining exponentially until Velma Johnston made strides in her home state of

[2] Karen Dalke, "Mustang: The Paradox of Imagery," Vol 1, no 2 (Spring 2010).

Nevada. The Wild Horse Annie Act was passed in 1959 which prohibited using aircrafts to round up mustangs. Johnston continued her campaign and successfully mobilized public sentiment towards mustangs which resulted in the WFRH&B Act. The Act was the first federal legislation that protected wild mustangs and integrated them into rangeland management. Thanks to the efforts of Velma Johnston, wild mustangs were given a second chance to be a part of the rangeland's future.

The modern mustang was introduced to America in the early 1500s by Spanish Conquistadors. Thousands were placed on Spanish galleon ships and sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. The journey was perilous as half the horses died from malnourishment or disease and some were made to walk the plank to lighten the ship's load. Those that arrived on the New World's shores carried Spanish explorers across the American continent. Soon, enough horses had been brought over created a viable breeding population that could support the growing cattle business. Vaqueros rode skilled horses over the western plains and desert terrain but, turned loose the horses that were useless. Native Americans also began to rely on the horse. The Nez Perce people became master equestrians and even bred the first American breed of horse, the Appaloosa. Escaped and released horses gathered on the rangeland, fed off the natural flora, and created their own herd structures. Vaqueros and cowboys referred to these horses as "mestengos" meaning feral animals, without a master.[3]

[3] *Ibid*., 4-5.

Chapter 1

A Mare's Colt

The Bronn family was crossing the Nevada backcountry in a covered wagon, the mini van of the 1870s, with their eyes set on California. Benjamin R. Bronn and his wife were trying to care for their two young children and newly born infant, Joseph, when the Nevada terrain began to get the best of them. The thirty-five miles from Sand Springs to Ragtown taunted travelers with its shimmer of hope at the end of the desert, an alkali flat dancing in the heat only to disappear into the sand. The family began to run out of food and the mother's breast milk had dried out. Baby Joseph was on the verge of joining the collection of pioneers who could not escape the desert.[4]

Accompanying the Bronn's across the desert were four mustangs that Benjamin had caught and trained. One of the horses had recently foaled a colt who, like Joseph, was still nursing from its mother. Benjamin decided that the mare could provide enough milk for both his son and the colt and so Joseph was able to survive on mustang milk for a portion of the journey. Unfortunately, even the vast Nevada desert was not wide enough for Joseph and the colt. Eventually, the mare's supply began to run low, and Benjamin had to make a choice. He could either sacrifice the colt and give the mare's milk to his son or risk Joseph perishing before reaching the next town. The choice was clear but that did not make it any easier. Benjamin had personally trained each of the mustangs and the animals had proven themselves sufficient traveling companions. Benjamin needed to save his son, and the next morning he planned to kill the colt. As

[4] Alan J. Kania, *Wild Horse Annie: Velma Johnston and Her Fight to Save the Mustang* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2012), 42.

fate would have it, the mustangs were nowhere to be found when the sun rose the following day.[5]

The mare, the only lifeline for the baby, had disappeared into the desert's early morning chill. Later that day, a group of Paiute Indians approached the Bronn's camp with the mare and colt in tow. They offered a trade to Benjamin, dried goods for the mare but they wanted to keep the colt. Benjamin agreed and the colt faded into the Nevada horizon. Benjamin was able to save his son before the family made it to California. In the unforgiving Nevada desert, a mustang mare saved Joseph Bronn's life.

A couple years later, Joseph had grown up and married Gertrude Clay. The couple moved back to Nevada and bought a ranch in Reno out of which Joseph ran a desert freighting service. He used mustangs found on the Nevada range to haul goods across the Great Basin. On March 5, 1912, Joseph and Gertrude had their first child, Velma Bronn and only three years later the toddler was sitting astride a mustang caught by her father. The experience was short lived as Velma soon understood what happens when a horse kicks up its back heels, but it instilled in her a respect for the animals that would last a lifetime. Years later, Velma wrote in a letter to her friend Howard Caudle that "in those days [mustangs] were so plentiful that it was considered a fair challenge to try to get them. Nowadays they are so scarce that chances of catching any on horseback are much slimmer." [6] Her mustang's name, Hobo, was a fitting moniker for an animal whose home was rapidly disappearing.[7] When Velma was a child in the

[5] *Ibid*., 44.
[6] *Ibid*., 52.
[7] "Velma Johnston (Wild Horse Annie)," Wild Horse Education, June 27, 2014, http//wildhorseeducation.org/velma-johnston-wild-horse-annie/.

1910s, mustangs were a part of the rangeland culture but seen as unnecessary to the range's ecology. Mustangs were wild by circumstance, not by nature which ultimately granted them little protection from the political changes that were about to occur to their home.

The Beginning of the End

The mustangs inhabiting the Nevada range in the beginning of the 20th century were unknowingly part of a decisive war over land. With more homesteaders moving to the western regions of the United States during the 1800s, the divvying up of land and resources became a vital issue for federal and state governments. The General Land Office (GLO) was established in 1812 to distribute public lands to private holders, transform wilderness into productive agricultural lands, and generate income for the federal government.[8] Most of the privatized land became farmland but the remaining public areas with more arid climates and rocky terrain were better suited for cattle and sheep grazing. What westerners called the "cattle kingdom," began to dominate as ranchers grazed their cattle over vast expanses of rangeland.[9] The west became profitable, and the stage was set for conflict between ranchers, their cattle, and the mustangs.

Even with the GLO, rangelands were largely unregulated through the 19th century and into the 20th century. Ranchers had control over grazing on public lands because the GLO had no regulatory jurisdiction. According to the Public Lands

[8] Alexandra Heller, "History and Management of Public Rangelands in the United States: A Case Study from New Mexico," *Inquiries Journal* Vol 7, no. 4 (2015), inquiriesjournal.com.
[9] Karen Merrill, *Public Lands and Political Meaning: Ranchers, the Government, and the Property Between Them*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002),4.

Foundation, "forage on public domain lands belonged to the rancher whose cows got there first."[10] This first-come-first-serve mentality created a brutal culture of revenge killings and pitted sheep and cattle ranchers against each other as viable land became scarcer. The range began to noticeably deteriorate, and overgrazing became the main threat to rangeland resources and health. Back in 1889, Nevada was hit with one of the worst winters in decades that killed off about 75% of the cattle and sheep stock. This was a reminder of the fragility of the rangeland's resources. Something had to be done lest the American ranching business could fail.[11]

Sheep and cattle ranchers found a common enemy in the mustang. In a publication of *The Cattlemen* magazine, ranchers agreed that mustangs were "mostly expendable animals that shouldn't have been on the range in the first place."[12] Even though cattle had been freely grazing the land for 350 years, ranchers saw mustangs as pests that stole food from profitable livestock and had no real place on the working land. Herd management in the 1920s and early 30s was controlled largely by private ranchers with some intervention from the General Land Office and National Forest rangeland bureaus. Ranchers collectively petitioned Congress to establish a regulatory system that would bring order to livestock grazing.

Named after Colorado Representative Edward Taylor, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed in 1934 as the first federal legislation to control ranching. This was carried out by a new grazing division within the Department of the Interior which merged with the Bureau of Land Management. The six hundred million acres of remaining public

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[10] "America's Public Lands: Origin, History, Future," Public Lands Foundation (Arlington: Public Lands Foundation, 2014), 9.
[11] Stillman, *Mustangs*, 238.
[12] Russell Lord, "The Mustang Returns to Europe in a Tin Can," *The Cattleman,* October 1928.

land in the West would be grazed on a reservable permit basis. Ranchers paid a fee to graze their herd in specific land allotments, a few pennies for each head of cattle.[13] The Taylor Grazing Act divided the West with an invisible fence line and the unforeseen victims of this act were the mustangs.

It was only until the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 that the United States government released their official stance on wild mustangs: "a wild horse consumes forage needed by domestic livestock, brings in no return, and serves no useful purpose."[14] By explicitly calling cattle domestic livestock, the U.S. government solidified the idea that mustangs were not wild but rather livestock that had gone feral. A consequence of the Taylor Grazing Act was that wild horses became the enemy of rangeland health instead of cattle because of their feral status.

The Taylor Grazing Act reinforced the idea of what animals belonged to the rangeland and strengthened the decline of both the status and population of mustangs. The TGA treated cattle as being a necessary part of the western United States because of their value to industry. Management strategies such as mass roundups were used to eradicate the pest that was mustangs. The act set grazing standards and regulations for livestock and required ranchers to purchase grazing permits from the federal government. When ranchers' access to grazable land became dependent on their ability to pay for permits, horses were discarded as they had no return on investment. According to the Taylor Grazing Act, mustangs belonged to a west that did not exist

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[13] Stillman, *Mustang*, 238.
[14] *Ibid*., 240.

anymore. The Act managed rangeland for the benefit of cattle and sheep and as a result, mustangs had to be eradicated.

The pressure from cattlemen associations coupled with the need for cheap feed to provide for an increasingly urban population manifested in the mustanger culture. The practice of mustanging rose as the demand for the removal of mustangs became prevalent. The cowboys, called Mustangers, developed their own culture and identity around the capture of wild horses for sale to pet food and glue industries. Some practices are still used today such as Charles "Pete" Barnum's concept of driving herds into jute-lined chutes leading into portable traps easily placed on trains bound for California processing plants. Burnam's interpretation of mustangs served to summarize the consensus that mustangers and stockmen shared towards these animals. In a 1929 publication of *McClure's* Magazine, Burnum states that "I have beaten them across the nose with my quirt until their faces were drenched in blood."[15] There was a poetic cruelty with which mustangers approached their occupation. Some men were simply chasing their chance to be a cowboy before domestication swallowed the frontier. Others intertwined themselves with the mustangs, horse whisperers with a license to kill.

Around the same time that Benjamin Bronn was training mustangs in Nevada, Bob Lemmons was perfecting the art of mustang hunting in the Texas desert. Lemmons was born a slave in Lockport, Texas but gained his freedom at seventeen after the end of the Civil War. He worked as a ranch hand and attended multiple cattle drives where

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[15] Rufus Steele, "Trapping Wild Horses in Nevada," *McClure's Magazine* (December 1929).

he first learned to handle horses.[16] Eventually, Lemmons became well known for his unique and bold strategies towards capturing mustangs. Lemmons "made the mustangs think [he] was one of them" and isolated himself with a herd to a point where the horses started following him and his horse Warrior. "Show them you're the boss, that's the secret," recalled Lemmons. Lemmon's dedication to his craft demonstrated the magnetism of mustangs and the ephemerality of "useless" animals.[17]

"Spooky nature of the condemned"

Since the Taylor Grazing Act, the idea of the noble mustang was on an exponential decline. Mustangs were a far cry from the proud imagery in the made-up world of Hollywood and the subservient, trustworthy steed of the pioneer cowboy. Instead, mustangs were victims of the livestock feed and glue industries which incentivized mass roundups and slaughter. In *The Wild Horse of the West*, the first work that documented the decline of mustangs, Walker D. Wyman writes that these animals had gone from "cow pony to cauldron."[18] Walker's piece was published in 1945 after what was commonly referred to as the Great Removal. Thousands of mustangs were captured and shipped to chicken feed plants between 1920 and 1935.[19] "The wild horse returns to Europe in a tin can," boasted a headline in a 1920s publication of *The Cattleman* magazine.[20] The notion that these animals were returning to Europe alludes to the fact that many ranchers perceived wild horses as not native to the United States and treated them as a depletable commodity. The industries that these animals

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[16] Tricia Wagner, "Robert Lemmons (1848–1947)," BlackPast, August 26, 2012, blackpast.org.
[17] J. Frank Dobie, *The Mustangs,* (Ann Arbor: Little Brown, 1952), 17.
[18] Walker D. Wyman, *The Wild Horse of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1945), 78.
[19] Stillman, *Mustang,* 252.
[20] Lord, "The Mustang Returns to Europe in Tin Cans"

supported were too valuable to compromise and the idea of conservation was completely out of the question.

Mustang hunting relied on mustangs being characterized as feral. The term feral was a powerful tool that separated mustangs from other western beasts. It implied that all mustangs, no matter if they had been born wild or released from ranches, were previously domesticated. Stockmen considered mustangs as "expendable animals that shouldn't have been on the range in the first place" and did not possess the necessary requirements to be treated as native species.[21] However, even those that made a living off hunting mustangs could not escape the historical imagery that mustangs provoked in American culture. Charles Barnum, one of the most notorious and ruthless mustangers, noted the horses' phenomenal endurance, agility, and grit.[22] Resembling a tribute to the animals, Burnam revealed the cathartic tragedy that besieged mustangs in the early 20th century. The need for rangeland conducive to producing fat cattle meant that mustangs needed to be managed. How those mustangs were perceived had intangible effects on how mustangs were treated and the types of management strategies.

Although the most popular opinion on mustangs was shaped by cattlemen and the mustanger culture, there were still hidden voices that saw the decline in mustangs as detrimental to the American spirit. Adolph C. Krueter was a cowboy that worked with both mustangs and domesticated horses at his ranch in Montana in the 1930s. He wrote his observations about the demand for mustang products in an article titled "I Hearded the Wild Ones" for the *Frontier Times*:

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[21] Stillman, *Mustangs,* 238.
[22] *Ibid*., 239.

> “Frequently as many as five to seven hundred horses daily were being sashayed up the ramp to the killing floor. I heard that this was very often done with great difficulty, due to the spooky natures of the condemned.”[23]

Referring to mustangs as “condemned” alluded to buried sympathies in the ranching community. Later in his article, Krueter writes about another cowboy that pleaded guilty after being caught trying to blow up a mustang slaughterhouse. The young man testified that “I am a cowboy, I love horses. I can’t bear to think of people eating them.” Much like how the west became divided between public and private lands, the ranching culture began to split into two schools of thought on mustangs.

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[23] Adolph C. Kreuter, “I Hearded the Wild Ones,” *Frontier Times,* June/July, 1966.

Chapter 2

Desert Blood

Velma B. Johnston was an oddball within her 1950s Nevada ranching community. Most ranchers and cowboys marked their livestock with a unique symbol by branding them with a hot iron. Branding was not a requirement in ranching but, it does indicate ownership over free roaming livestock and helps combat cattle-poaching. Velma and her husband Charlie, decided not to brand their livestock on the Double Lazy Heart Ranch because she felt that it was a cruel practice and showing ownership over an animal did not justify subjecting is to a hot iron. Johnston was not trying to make a statement, she was simply following her gut and exercising her right to manage her own animals. That all changed in 1950 during her morning commute to work. Johnston happened to drive behind a truck shipping mustangs captured from round up. Blood was dripping off the floor of the trailer from a foal that had been trampled to death. A stallion's eyes had been shot out. After that encounter, Johnston and the life of the American mustang would never be the same.[24]

Johnston grew up helping her father run the family's freighting business, the Mustang Express. As a child she was exposed to the rough life of ranching and saw how her father's employees treated their animals. Johnston's relationship with horses was shaped by her parents. Her father Joe demonstrated that a relationship with a horse was based on mutual respect and cooperation when he caught and gentled mustangs. In an interview with journalist Alan Kania, Johnston's mother Gertrude "Trudy" said "we

[24] Kania, *Wild Horse Annie,* 15.

trained a horse, we didn't break it." Unfortunately, at five years old, Johnston showed signs of polio and was sent away to a hospital in San Francisco for treatment. There she remained trapped in a bed as her body struggled to develop in the half-body cast. As a young girl, the most devastating effect for Johnston was the cast's significantly effects on her face. She was left with an undeveloped chin and asymmetrical cheekbones, obstacles as the future face of the mustang movement but mere mole hills against Johnston's spirit. Her doctors recommended that she tried to move through the pain during her recovery and she naturally took to horseback riding as a form of therapy. Johnston returned to school two years behind her previous classmates but once again proved her grit when she secretly studied for and passed the senior year exams with top marks. When she graduated high school, Johnston got a job as an executive secretary at the Mutual Bank of Reno. There she was introduced to the typewriter which would eventually be her weapon against mustang cruelty.[25]

Velma Johnston entered the story of mustang management after decades of government round-ups encouraged by ranchers and executed by adrenaline chasing cowboys. She would later be known as Wild Horse Annie, a nickname jokingly given to her by a mustanger during a speech she gave about the treatment of mustangs. Johnston, a rancher herself, was going up against years of eradication-centered management strategies meant to benefit the very communities with which she identified. To change management strategies, Johnston needed to change an entire mindset. Although the Humane Society had been advocating for better management strategies since the 1930s, the treatment of these animals did not come into the public's eye until Johnston started

[25] *Ibid.,* 28.

one of the most successful letter writing and educational campaigns in United States environmental history. Johnston can be credited with leading the grassroots movement towards passing legislation to protect wild mustangs.

"I am fighting to save a memory"

When she asked the driver where the mustangs had come from, he told her that they had been rounded up in the Nevada desert by plane. Johnston knew she needed to expose the practice of herding, capturing, and killing wild horses for profit and sport. However, she would be rivaling a culture that had been defining the western frontier for decades. Johnston's enemy was not just the cruelty against these animals, but the fever that drove mustangers' to cause such afflictions.

From Johnston's perspective, wild mustangs were Nevada, and the plunder of mustangs meant the slow destruction of her Nevada heritage. Johnston was raised to see horses as living creatures before commodities. As a studious child, she grew up understanding the history of American industries and their dependence on wild horsepower to build a nation. For Johnston, wild equines paved the way for settlers, pioneers, and entrepreneurs like her father. It was the mustang's intangible symbolism that was not fully recognized until Velma Johnston brought it to light.

The first legal step in securing that heritage was figuring out what enabled the round ups. Mustangers kept their deeds quiet so it was difficult to find information via word of mouth. Johnston instead turned to the books and discovered how the Taylor Grazing Act enabled the eradication practices. With her typewriter in hand, she began

writing to her local papers to figure out if anyone else felt similarly about mustang hunting. Letters began to pour in, some with information about future round-ups.[26]

Acting on a tip she had received, Johnston and her husband Charlie went out into the Nevada night to find the herd of captured mustangs. The horses had been driven into a makeshift corral by way of aircraft. Velma stood up on the hood of Charlie's truck to snap a few pictures of the frightened animals. "The mustangs were milling around in the dry dust, hysterical with fear, their hooves and mouths were bleeding," Velma later told *Desert* magazine.[27] The one thing that Velma did not account for in her clandestine exposition was the camera's flash. Under the midnight Nevada sky, the light alerted the mustangers who ran towards the truck shouting. The only thing that deterred them was the sight of Charlie's .38. Velma and Charlie made it home and developed the photos which Johnston made sure were on the Storey County commissioner's desk the next morning. The commissioner, led by Johnston, went back to the corral and demanded that the men release the mustangs. Johnston's plan had worked but it gained her a huge target on her back. She had exposed the mustangers and placed herself at the center of the conflict.[28]

Receiving death threats became a daily occurrence for Johnston, and she began answering the front door with a rifle in her left hand. This did not force her into hiding. Velma, Charlie, and a few of their local supporters often met out in the open in taverns inhabited by the very ranchers hellbent on taking her down. It was in one of those taverns that Johnston received a another tip that the county commission had approved

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[26] Stillman, *Mustang,* 255.
[27] Marianne G. Shurtleff, "My Husband is a Mustanger." *Desert* (February 1962).
[28] Stillman, *Mustang,* 253.

two pilots to round up a herd of horses in Storey County. "You need to testify," Charlie told her. By 1952, with the aid of local papers, Johnston had amassed enough outrage to lead a group of supporters to the Storey County Courthouse. Her campaign consisted of fellow local horsemen and even the town postmaster, Tex Gladding. Right across from a posse ranchers and mustangers, Johnston stood up in front of the courthouse: "I am fighting to save a memory." With the help of other testimonials, Johnston was able to convince the Storey County commissioner to ban the use of aircrafts in round ups. It was a small victory, but a steppingstone no less.[29]

There were still ways for mustangers and cattlemen to get around the law. They could simply run the horses to neighboring counties where the law did not apply. Johnston now realized the angle from which she had to fight this battle. Perhaps others would see mustangs as inseparable from the heritage and memory of the West. Right around the time of Johnston's first courthouse victory, the *Territorial Enterprise* magazine had written an editorial on why wild mustangs should be left alone: "the wild horses are a pleasant reminder of a time when all the West was wilder and more free."[30] Johnston, who the media now referred to as Wild Horse Annie, realized that her best option was to use newspapers, magazines, and photographs to amass more support across Nevada and the Western United States.

Gus Bundy was a western photographer most active during the 1940s and 50s and focused some of his work on the mustanger culture. Velma purchased five photos from Bundy in 1954 and, although not explicitly proven, she most likely submitted

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[29] Stillman, *Mustang*, 255.
[30] *Ibid.,* 255.

these photos to the *Sacramento Bee* for an article about the demise of the mustangs. Convinced that releasing Bundy's photographs would rile up the American public, Johnston later wrote that "the *Sacramento Bee* gave us a lot of good publicity in February, and as a result that newspaper item has been picked up by paper around throughout the United States. I have been swamped with letters from people offering to help with national legislation."[31] However, Johnston needed to find the right approach to legislative action. Since she could not prove that mustangs were native, Johnston allocated a different term for the animals. Harking from her first speech at the Storey Courthouse, Johnston decided to call mustangs a heritage species. The perception of wild horses was changing from feral pest to an American symbol. [32]

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[31] Letter from Velma B. Johnston to Zelda R. Smith, August 2, 1957, Velma Johnston Papers, Conservation Collection, Denver Public Library.
[32] Leisl Carr Childers, "Leisl Carr Childers on The Gus Bundy Photographs and The Wild Horse Controversy." *Environmental History* 18, no. 3 (2013): 604-20.

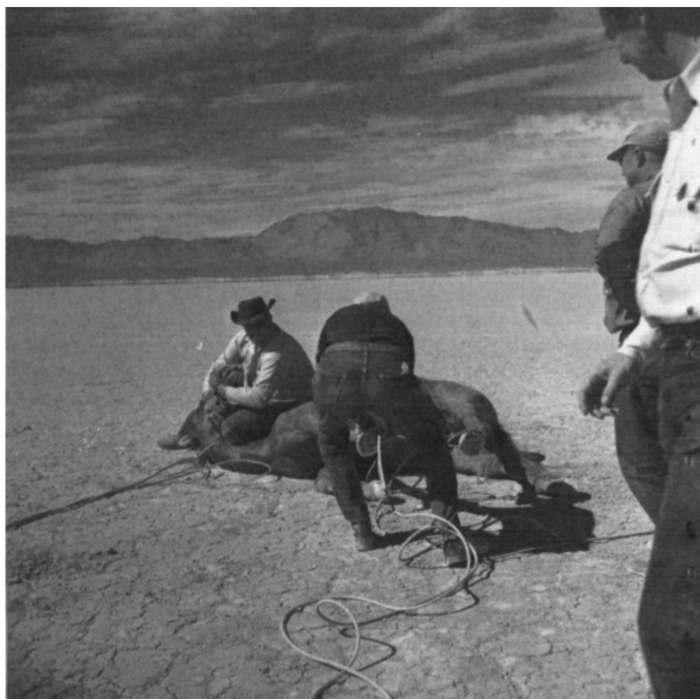

Figure 1: Two men roping a horse, 1951

Gus Bundy Photograph courtesy of Special Collections, University of Nevada, Reno

This change was evident when the State of Nevada copied Storey County's decision to outlaw the use of aircrafts and other mechanized vehicles to capture mustangs. However, in the same fashion that mustangers dodged the Storey County decree by running mustangs off county land, many ranchers throughout Nevada did not follow the law. They didn't legally need to adhere to the law because it did not apply to public lands. Fortunately, there was a wave of early environmentalism sweeping the country that aligned with Johnston's efforts.

1950s environmentalism focused primarily on pollution and energy consumption but there was a growing movement towards protecting American landscapes. In 1951, the Nature Conservancy was established to "protect ecologically important lands and

waters."[33] The Sierra Club "was becoming a voice for the wilderness" when its executive director David Brower used the media as a tool to spread environmental awareness.[34] The ads confronted readers with questions such as "Should We Also Flood the Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer The Ceiling?" in reference to Congress's plans to dam the Grand Canyon.[35] The Sierra Club also convinced the public to petition against building the Echo Park Dam as part of the Colorado River Project.[36] Rachel Carson had just published *The Sea Around Us* in 1951 which combined poetic narrative with environmentalism and brought awareness to ocean health and conservation.[37] The connection between humans and nature had the public's attention. It was up to Johnston to make the mustang a national issue instead of a bargaining chip for cattlemen.

A government sponsored program called Predator Control was one of Johnston's greatest tools to bring the environmentalist movement behind mustangs. Hunters funded by tax dollars disposed of coyotes and wolves that were seen as threats to grazing livestock. Unfortunately, mustangs became cheap and available bait for hunters to shoot, kill, and lace with poison that would then kill the canines feasting on the carcass.[38] The image of a government-sponsored poisoned horse being fed on by dogs set the media ablaze.

In 1957, *Reader's Digest* published an article about Johnston and her mustangs that went national. This was shortly followed by *True*, a men's adventure magazine, that

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[33] "The Modern Environmental Movement," American Experience, pbs.org.
[34] "David Brower," The Sierra Club, thesierraclub.org.
[35] David Brower, "Should We Also Flood The Sistine Chapel So Tourists Can Get Nearer The Ceiling?' vault.sierraclub.org.
[36] "The Modern Environmental Movement"
[37] Stillman, *Mustang,* 256.
[38] Rachel Bale, "This Government Program's Job Is to Kill Wildlife," *National Geographic* (February 2016) web.

published a piece about Johnston's efforts to keep mustangs in their rangeland habitats. Media coverage was necessary, but it would take boots, specifically cowgirl boots, in the courthouse to see real change. Riding on the back of growing national coverage from the media, Johnston met with Nevada Congressman Walter S. Baring. This meeting produced a 1959 bill that banned the use of aircrafts and motorized vehicles to round up mustangs on all *public* lands in Nevada. This was a huge milestone in her campaign, but Johnston knew that widespread protection for mustangs existed at the federal level.[39]

"A severe case of mustang fever"

Johnston was still disturbed at the pictures she had been looking at for almost ten years when she showed them to the House of Representatives. Collections of Bundy's and her own photos weighed heavy on the walls of the House while Johnston testified for the need to create federal protection of mustangs. "We have all been exposed to a severe case of mustang fever, it is highly communicable, not only by exposure to a person already having it, but also through the written word." Johnston, who had been working against the mustangers for years, used the mustangers' own terminology to summarize her campaign. There was always something indescribable about mustangs that could draw one in, whether to hunt them or admire them, and Johnston sensed this. She knew that western nostalgia had swept the nation through shows like *Gunsmoke*, *Maverick*, and *Rawhide*. Johnston had uncovered something in her campaign. Individuals who had never even seen a horse in real life, including some

[39] Stillman, *Mustang,* 252.

of the Representatives, were captivated by an intangible sense of independence and grit that mustangs possessed. Johnston began questioning America's reputation as a humanitarian nation when the government treated symbols of its past with cruelty and disregard. Wild horses "played their part in the development of this country," said Johnston, "except man, the horse has played the most prominent and beneficial role...he portrays the West as all people like to think of it; he is a symbol of wild freedom to us all."[40]

On September 8, 1959 President Eisenhower signed Johnston and Congressman Barring's bill into Public Law. The law became known as the Wild Horse Annie Act and declared that no aircrafts or motorized vehicles could be used to capture mustangs on all public lands. The law was instrumental in moving the mustang issue from state to the federal. However, the two pitfalls would consume Johnston until the passage of the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. Congress and the House did not include anything in the Act about managing mustangs with the goal of ensuring the horses' long-term survival on the range. It also did not grant the mustang any inherent protections or special status in the law for which Johnston had argued. Despite her speeches, letters, and media coverage about their symbolism, mustangs were not yet officially indoctrinated as a heritage species. That process would take Wild Horse Annie to the next level of campaigning and fighting against federal ranching politics.[41]

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[40] *Ibid.,* 257.
[41] "The Wild Horse Annie Act," The American Wild Horse Campaign, https://americanwildhorsecampaign.org/.

Chapter 3

Winning a Battle, not the War

Velma Johnston had accomplished the first step in what would be yet another decade long fight to achieve more federal protection for wild mustangs. Public Law 86-234, the Wild Horse Annie Act, had been approved and passed on September 8, 1959 but according to Johnston, it was mostly smoke and mirrors. In Johnston's opinion, the Act failed in two ways. It did not address the root cause of mustang killings and did little to deter round ups. The Act was passed without any respectful acknowledgement of mustangs' role in America as Johnston had been advocating. The Gus Bundy pictures that Johnston showed Congress were effective only in so far as evoking fleeting feelings of disgust. Little was changed in how mustangs were viewed by the federal government which was still benefiting from appeasing ranchers and sanctioning mustang killings.

The second failure was that even though it set fines and prison sentences for anyone found using motor vehicles or airplanes to hunt and capture wild mustangs, there were significant barriers to the Act's implementation. Enforcing such measures in rural backwoods rangeland was nearly impossible. If anything, the Act bolstered the rebellious nature that mustangers were known for in the early 20th century. While federal jurisdiction of rangeland had all but saved ranching communities in the 1930s, ranchers were not accustomed to federal infringement in the name of protecting pests. About a year after the Wild Horse Annie Act was passed, Johnston received a tip about a plane chasing a herd of mustangs into Lagomarsino Canyon. The source noted that the co-pilot was firing gunshots into the herd. Johnston called the Washoe County police who arrived on the scene only to find week-old tracks and no horses. Not even the next

day did Johnston get another tip. This time a truck was sighted driving into the same canyon where later, twenty horses were found shot to death. The two failures of this act would be the starting point for the next ten years of Johnston's petition to get the American public to perceive mustangs as "a symbol of wild freedom".[42] [43]

Johnston and her supporters also had to navigate the increasing divides between federalism and rangeland politics. Lawmakers needed to be convinced that the government should promptly address mustang management. Establishing "a program to protect, manage and control wild horses" within the re-workings of the Taylor Grazing Act (TGA) during the 1960s would prove another challenge.[44] At the time, the cattle kingdom of the west was still run by the permit system set by the TGA which "maintained preference for ranchers who needed a permit to make use of owned or leased land and water rights."[45] Cattle ranchers were still able to graze livestock on federal land without regulations for rangeland ecology and there was little understanding of how mustangs fit into the rangeland ecosystem. A program for managing specific rangeland resources such as "riparian areas, threatened and endangered species, sensitive plant species, and cultural or historical objects" would not be implemented until 1976 with the passing of the Public Rangelands Improvement Act.

Even with the Wild Horse Annie Act, the perception of mustangs did not shift completely away from pests, nuisances, and commodities. Mustangs were still being used as an ingredient in pet food in the 1950s into the early 1960s. Since there is little to no overhead cost in raising wild mustangs, it would be difficult to shake the economic

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[42] Stillman, *Mustang,* 260.
[43] Kania, *Wild Horse Annie,* 29.
[44] "Wild Horse Annie Act," Wild Horse Campaign, https://americanwildhorsecampaign.org/
[45] Heller, "History and Management of Public Rangelands".

benefits between mustang meat and dog food. Another facet to this issue was that rangelands were viewed primarily from a utilitarian perspective devoid of conservation for aesthetic or ecological purposes. Even though the coming decade was pivotal in the United States' environmental movement, Johnston and the mustangs would be building on a foundation that was not yet constructed. Establishing how mustangs fit into the 1960s environmental movement was contingent on changing the image of mustangs. If Johnston could tip the scales so that humane treatment outweighed the benefits of eradication, then mustangs would have a chance. The missing link, the *why* of mustang management, would be altering how mustangs were perceived. Luckily, a similar feat had been accomplished twenty years earlier.[46]

On June eighth, 1940, the Bald Eagle Protection Act was approved to stop the decimation of bald eagle populations in the American wilderness. The bald eagle was adopted as a national symbol during the Second Continental Congress for its strength, independence, and uniqueness to the North American environment.[47] When eagle populations were noticeably declining, the Act set criminal penalties for those who "take, possess, sell, purchase... any bald eagle, alive or dead, or any part, nest, or egg thereof."[48] Amendments were passed to include the ban on the pesticide DTD after Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* exposed the issue in 1962. President John F. Kennedy wrote to National Audubon Society's Charles Callison on July 18th, 1961 saying that "the fierce beauty and proud independence of this great bird aptly symbolizes the

[46] Martin Padgett, "Wild Horses part One: The Misfits," Motor Authority, November 16, 2019, https://www.motorauthority.com/news/1119927_wild-horses-part-one-the-misfits
[47] United States of America Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates of the 110th Congress Second Session Volume 154-Part 9.
[48] 76th United States Congress. PL 86-70 Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, (1940).

strength and freedom of America."[49] Since the bald eagle held symbolic status in American culture, it was granted federal protection. There are parallels between the language used to describe the bald eagle and the American mustang however, etymological ambiguity further complicated the mustang issue.

Johnston defined mustangs as "a living symbol" in her address to the 1959 Congressional subcommittee but there was still uncertainty around what that meant for management strategies. There were multiple schools of thought surrounding the proper terminology for mustangs, each with its own implications on how these animals should be managed. Most of the debate existed around whether mustangs should be considered native species. Some argued that only horses with Spanish blood, those that descended from the original herds brought by the conquistadors, should be treated as wild. Under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966 introduced by Senator Frank Moss, mustangs with Spanish blood were granted federal protection.[50] However, this did not satisfy groups such as the National Mustang Association who believed that all unbranded free-roaming horses should be considered wild and granted protection. Some argued that since the mustang should be considered a reintroduced species because of hereditary links the Equus family that inhabited North America in prehistoric times. In the eyes of the law, this confusion was a major obstacle to figuring out how to approach mustang management. Despite this debate, Johnston was only focused on one goal: "to prevent another mass extermination" as she told the *Denver Post*. "Those that are left

[49] Douglas Brinkley, "Rachel Carson and JFK, an Environmental Tag Team." Audubon. January 26, 2017. https://www.audubon.org/magazine/may-june-2012/rachel-carson-and-jfk-environmental-tag-team.
[50] Hope Ryden, *America's Last Wild Horses,* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973) p. 236.

must be protected before it is too late."[51] By the time the debate could be settled, the mustang would be a thing of the past.

Instead of trying to convince lawmakers and environmentalists that mustangs were integral to rangeland ecology, she convinced the public that mustangs were integral to American culture. This strategy proved effective when, due to public sentiment, the Nevada Wild Horse Range was established on a military base. Unfortunately, the federally protected area was too small for the horses' migratory tendencies and there were reported cases of mustangs dying of dehydration from the lack of water on base. While the Nevada Wild Horse Range demonstrated that public demand could affect necessary federal change, it also highlighted that mustangs were perceived as neither wild nor domestic. The mustangs had been given freedom to roam within the territory without any managerial intervention as if they were truly wild. The flipside to this approach was that mustangs have no natural predators and cannot regulate their own populations. Lawmakers needed to find a different strategy to manage this type of animal since the public was becoming increasingly aware of how mustangs were treated.[52]

Misfits, Managed

Johnston's continued fight for federal protection shared similarities with her campaign in the 1950s but with several key differences. Johnston had been made a widow when her husband Charlie passed away from emphysema.[53] She was now

[51] Kania, *Wild Horse Annie*, 31.
[52] Stillman, *Mustang*, 264.
[53] Craig C. Downer, "Velma Bronn Johnston A.K.A. 'Wild Horse Annie,'" Nevada Women's History Project, https://www.nevadawomen.org/research-center/biographies-alphabetical/velma-bronn-johnston/

running the Double Lazy Heart Ranch on her own since she and Charlie had no kids; however, children were still a huge part of Johnston's life and her campaign. At her ranch, Johnston continued to teach young kids how to ride and care for horses. As a child herself, surviving polio "gave her great empathy for confined and suffering

Figure 2: Velma Johnston with a foal and children (Denver Public Library, Western History/Genealogy Collection)

animals" but the growing popularity of Johnston's movement during the 60s made her more aware of her physical condition.[54] Johnston declined magazines' requests for portraits and personally sent in descriptions of herself to newsletters. She "wanted to be seen as beautiful" like how her camp kids and Charlie saw her. Even though publicity was good for her movement, being in the spotlight exposed Johnston to the opinions of the media and pop culture. She was invited to be a guest on the game show *To Tell The Truth* but when she sent a picture to the casting director, Johnston never heard back. Talking to a friend about the experience, Johnston said "the rejection hurt, but it also toughened [her] for other criticism." Johnston was growing accustomed to the scrutiny

[54] Downer, "Velma Bronn Johnston."

as her grassroots movement gained popularity. Her campaign also expanded alongside an increase in mustangs in Hollywood.[55]

While Johnston often shied away from showing her face in public settings, the mustangs she was fighting so fervently to protect seemed to populate more screens than rangelands in the 1960s. Westerns such as *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* used mustang imagery, some clips being of actual wild mustang herds, to bring the spirit of wild horses to the screen. In the series *Fury*, airing from 1955 to 1960, a young boy has an unexplainable relationship with a mustang stallion. The premise for the show centered around a wild and untamed stallion that only allowed the young boy to ride him.[56] One of the most profound pieces of cinema that was made during Johnston's campaign was the western drama *The Misfits* released in 1961. It tells the story of how a Rosalyn Tabor, played by Marilyn Monroe, becomes intertwined with the cowboy culture of Reno, Nevada. In the final scenes Clark Gable's character, rough-around-the-edges cowboy Gaylord Langland, takes Rosalyn to a mustang drive. Rosalyn is appalled at the practice after learning that the mustangs are slaughtered and sold for pet food. She tells Gaylord that she did not know she was falling in love with a killer and begs the cowboy to release the captured stallion and mares. The climax involves a wrangling scene wherein the two characters, accompanied by Gaylord's friend Guido, rope a mustang stallion amidst the barren Nevada desert.[57] In New York Times review, journalist Bosley Crowther commented that "the wrangling is vivid and thrilling and everyone is having a good time, until the woman discovers what the horses are being captured

[55] Kania, *Wild Horse Annie*, 35.
[56] *Fury*, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047734/
[57] John Houston, dir. *The Misfits,* 1961. (Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2012) DVD.

for…[the director] lets his cameras show so much of the pitiful plight of the creatures." The audience "is left in breathless horror" at the sight of the stallion being subdued. According to the article, *The Misfits* was considered a box office blunder but the audience's reaction to the final scenes is irrefutable.[58]

Figure 3: *The Misfits* film set photo, Ernest Hass, 1960

Cultural populism in the 1960s transformed the image of the mustang and helped launch Johnston's letter writing campaign for more widespread federal protection. On one hand, Hollywood glamorized the relationship between the cowboy-rancher and the mustang. Most of the mustang imagery shown in cinema portrayed horses as complementary to gritty, heroic cowboys and capturing mustangs was a necessary consequence of western American freedom. A mustang's worth existed in giving up its wild nature to be a loyal companion. On the other hand, a mustang that remained untamed reflected the continual resilience and fierce independence of cowboys and

[58] Bosley Crowther, "Gable and Monroe Star in Script by Miller," *New York Times,* February 2, 1961.

ranchers. The tension between wild versus subservient mirrored the issue that federal and state governments were facing in determining whether mustangs were native or non-native. Wild horses existed in an etymological purgatory. Mustangs' popularity in 1950s and 60s Hollywood helped promulgate this issue for the public.

"We Need a Law"

In 1970, the federal government's predator control strategies were exposed after an incident in Wyoming where a Boy Scout troop found dead bald eagles that had been poisoned from feeding off toxic sheep carcasses meant for coyotes. Public outcry ensued because bald eagles were culturally significant to the United States. In 1971, *Sports Illustrated* published a three-part article series titled "The Poisoning of the West" about the incident. The article highlighted a shift in the cultural understanding towards nature: "the more a person learns about the balance of nature, the less he is likely to ask questions like the ones that a sheepman recently bellowed across a room: 'Which is worth more, livestock or predators?'" Sheepmen were the main lobbyists to getting the BLM and Forest Service to condone the poisonings. The article's author goes on to comment that as "ecological knowledge grows, we no longer consider which is 'worth more,' which is 'good' and which is 'bad,' which is 'destructive' and which is 'useful.'" Animals were beginning to be understood in terms of how they relate to people beyond their utility. Or rather, the idea of utility changed. The public's response to the dead bald eagles helped terminate the predator control program. Like the bald eagle, the mustang held cultural significance to the public as demonstrated by its presence in popular media. The mustang's historical and ecological role in the rangeland was still

ambiguous. However, Johnston's campaign capitalized on the mustangs' role as misfits.[59]

During the late 1960s into the 70s, the public sent more letters to the federal government about mustang conservation than any other issue besides the Vietnam War.[60] Sympathy for the misunderstood and misrepresented mustangs was on the rise and schoolchildren were Johnston's biggest supporters. On Christmas Day 1969, eleven-year-old Gregory Gude was gifted a copy of Marguerite Henry's *Mustang: Wild Spirit of the West* by his father, Maryland Congressman Gilbert Gude.[61] Gregory wrote to his father's colleagues that "we need a law to protect wild mustangs before they are all killed."[62] The word began to spread and other children started sending in letters requesting that something be done to save the mustangs. Joan Bolsinger, a fourth-grade teacher from Rosebud, Oregon told her class about the mustangs and helped them write letters to Oregon senator Mark Hatfield and Washington senator Henry Jackson. Soon, thousands of letters were sent to state and federal officials.

On a policy level, there was still a dichotomizing debate over how public lands should be used. House representative Wayne Aspinall fervently fought against any form of legislation that did not "attain maximum economic efficiency" or "support regional economic growth" as stated in *One Third of the Nation's Land: A Report to the President and the Congress*.[63] The report argued for stripping public lands of anything that did not yield income, including wild mustangs. Cattle lobbyists made the

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[59] Jack Olson, "The Poisoning of the West," *Sports Illustrated,* March 8, 1971.
[60] "Return to Freedom Remembers Wild Horse Annie," Return to Freedom, returntofreedom.org.
[61]"House Votes Protection For Mustangs in West," *New York Times,* October 5 1971.
[62] Stillman, *Mustang,* 261.
[63] Public Land Law Review Commission (1970), *One Third of the Nation's Land: A Report to the President and the Congress*, Washington D.C.

convincing argument that mustangs were non-native species and a threat to the pristine rangeland that existed before the conquistadores introduced the animals. If mustangs were seen as merely invasive foreigners, then protecting them would be like protecting weeds or stray dogs. The argument was sound, but Senators Hatfield and Jackson kept moving their bill through Congress with the continued support of Johnston's letter-writing brigade.

Leaving her hometown of Reno, Johnston traveled to Capitol Hill on April 20th, 1971 to testify for the protection of mustangs once again. She was accompanied by two biologists, James Fiest from Montana, and Steve Pellegrini from the University of Nevada. The scientists were there to provide ecological and behavioral information regarding mustangs' role in the rangeland ecosystem. However, it was Johnston's words that convinced a room full of lawmakers to unanimously pass Public Law 92-195, the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act. Johnston echoed the line she said back in 1952 during her testimony at the Storey County Courthouse: "I am here to save a memory." Her words overshadowed lobbyists from the Nevada Cattlemen's Association, and convinced lawmakers that mustangs deserved to be protected and respected as integral to the heritage of the United States. [64]

The WFRH&B Act codified three new federal approaches to mustangs. First, it granted mustangs federal protection "in areas where they are presently found, as an integral part of the system of public lands." This meant that wild horses would be protected on whatever public lands they resided in at the time of the Act's passing. Secondly, the Act required horses be "managed in a manner that is designed to achieve

[64] Stillman, Mustang, 264.

and maintain a thriving natural ecological balance." This was the first time that mustangs were explicitly acknowledged as being a part of the rangeland' ecosystem. The third and possibly most substantial change to the federal government's stance on mustangs since the Taylor Grazing Act was that the term wild was finally applied to mustangs. Wild now meant "all unbranded and unclaimed horses on public lands." Recognizing mustangs as wild connecting them to the natural and cultural history of the American West. The federal government finally saw mustangs as Wild Horse Annie saw them, "a symbol of wild freedom to us all." [65]

[65] Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. Pub. L. 92-195. Stat. 1971.

Conclusion

Johnston's leadership resulted in an organized movement and an effective campaign. She united people from all different walks of life across the United States under the mission to preserve wild mustangs. Johnston's message was simple: "respecting the heritage the wild horse and burro brought to the expansion and development of the West." This garnered widespread support from people who had both grown up with horses and those who had never ridden a horse in their life. [66]

Today, wild horses are managed by a joint effort between the Bureau of Land Management and the United States Forest Service. The Bureau was given jurisdiction over mustang management when the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act was passed in 1971 under the Nixon Administration. According to the WFRH&B Act, the BLM was authorized to "remove excess wild horses and burros from the range to sustain the health and productivity of the public lands" in conjunction with the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act. As of March 1st, 2020, the BLM's Wild Horse and Burros Program estimates that there are about 95,000 mustangs roaming on 177 Herd Management Areas (HMAs) across ten western states. Wild mustang management has been a part of a multi-use approach to rangeland resource management since the 1970s however, concerns have been raised about the effectiveness of the BLM's efforts.[67]

Statistics from the BLM's Wild Horses and Burros program show an increase in mustang populations and a decrease in successful removal and adoption rates. The

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[66] Stillman, *Mustang*, 260.
[67]"Programs: Wild Horse and Burro: Bureau of Land Management." Wild Horse and Burro Bureau of Land Management. https://www.blm.gov/whb.

current management strategy is a three-pronged approach consisting of Appropriate Management Level (AML) assessments, fertility control, and targeted herd roundups. Appropriate Management Levels are determined by the BLM to the upper and lower limits of a population size in specific Herd Management Area. These management techniques are also costing the federal government about $85.5 million each fiscal year and based on previous data, this number is set to increase annually. With no natural predators and the ability to live for up to 40 years, exponentially increasing mustang populations are putting a strain not just on the federal reserve, but also on the future of rangeland health in general.

Mustang conservation and animal rights groups such as Return to Freedom and Protect Mustangs have advocated for alternative management techniques. These groups and others like them claim that round ups and land-dart administered birth control are inhumane. Johnston's fight to ban the use of aircrafts in round ups unraveled with the passing of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act in 1976 which reinstated using mechanized vehicles and helicopters. Using helicopters and loud vehicles to drive herds into small corrals can cause the animals undue stress and can result in some mustangs perishing in the stampede. There is also the issue of where to keep the increasing number of mustangs that are rounded up. Rob Sharp, the BLM manager of Oregon's wild horse program, said that with adoption rates dropping, HMAs are becoming "completely maxed out," and that "this is not a sustainable way of managing these horses." Mustang conservation groups claim that wild horses are not the problem but rather the encroachment of land development efforts into the west and the millions of privately owned livestock grazing on BLM rangeland.

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