



## Discovering the Horses

### The Story of the Rescue of the Wilbur-Cruce Mission Horse

By Janie Dobrott

Standing atop a mountain in southern Arizona, catching our breath from the steep hike, our attention is drawn to a small band of wild horses grazing far below us. This is what we hoped to see! These just might be the "horses of history" that we have read about in the book *A Beautiful Cruel Country* written by Eva Wilbur-Cruce, the elderly granddaughter of the homesteader of this ranch.

Marye Ann and Tom Thompson had driven from Willcox, Arizona to meet us at the Wilbur Ranch to look at what may be the descendants of horses brought out of Mexico in the late 1870s from Padre Kino's headquarters, Mission Dolores. Marye Ann is the registrar for the Spanish Mustang Registry, and if anyone could tell us if these horses physically fit the type, she could. After our first glimpse of the horses, we excitedly set off down the boulder strewn mountainside in a barely controlled slide to reach the bottom and to get a closer look. There, grazing before us among thorny Ocotillo cactus and prickly Mesquite trees, was a liver chestnut, medicine hat, overo, pinto stallion and his two mares; one chestnut and the other a black. Marye Ann's enthusiasm became apparent as she led us from one distantly glimpsed horse band to another until we were caught at dusk with a mountain between us and our trucks parked at the old Wilbur homestead. Fortunately it was the fall season, and we were not likely to run into any rattlesnakes in the dark, as they should have been curled up in their burrows keeping warm. We followed a deeply cut trail made by thousands of durable horse hooves, over the mountain. It led us to Arivaca creek, which was, in times of drought, the only available water. It bubbled softly by the old adobe walls of the abandoned Wilbur home.

Back at the vehicles, we recalled what we had seen that day. A band of "dog soldiers", (Old-timer's term for young bachelor stallions), including a wildly colored, flaxen maned and tailed, overo pinto with a bald face. Another medicine hat stallion, this one tobiano, and his two mares; one a bay and the other a pinto. Also, an old grey stallion with a missing eye, who apparently had lost his mares to a younger, stronger stallion, and then several larger bands with frame overo, chestnut and bay making up their numbers; some with blue eyes. Could it be that we had discovered a remnant strain of Colonial Spanish Horse? These horses that had been isolated for over 113 years, just might be the descendants of the horses that, "Padre Kino gathered from vast herds of Spanish Barbs which had proliferated since the time of Cortez among the mission farms and ranges in Mexico. Land which had become fertile breeding grounds of numberless short-coupled, sturdy, tough horses", (1. Frank Dobie, *Horses and Heroes*).

Dr. Phil Sponenberg DVM, PhD., representing The American Livestock Conservancy and members of the Spanish Mustang Registry, including Emmett Brislaw, "Doc" Stabler and Marye Ann Thompson, travelled to the Wilbur Ranch to see the horses in December of 1989. Fortunately, the drought had concentrated the horses along the creek and everyone was able to see a number of horses without having to hike the mountains. Upon returning, Dr. Sponenberg wrote his assessment of the herd from



which a few selected quotes have been taken:

The Wilbur-Cruce horses are one of a very small handful (five would be a very optimistic estimate) of strains of horses derived from Spanish colonial days that persist as purely (or as nearly as can be determined) Spanish to the present day ... they are the only known "rancher" strain of pure Spanish horses that persists in the Southwest. The Wilbur-Cruce horses are of great interest because they are a non-feral strain. When comparing the Wilbur-Cruce horses to other strains he mentions that, ... they cannot claim the historic isolation that [these horses] horses have had. .. The Wilbur-Cruce horses, as a non-feral strain, are therefore truly unique. Visual examination of the Wilbur-Cruce herd indicates that the herd history is very likely accurate. The horses are remarkably uniform, and of a very pronounced Spanish phenotype.

My husband, Steve, and I lived on the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge at the time of the discovery of the Wilbur horses in 1989. Steve was the refuge wildlife biologist and when the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchased the Wilbur ranch, he became interested in the wild horses that had to be removed. His reading of Eva Wilbur's book lead him to contact those who might be able to help identify the horses and eventually through Marye Ann and Phil Sponenberg, the American Livestock Conservancy was brought into the picture. Because of Steve's efforts, Eva Wilbur donated her beloved herd to the ALBC and the Conservancy in turn, through Dr. Sponenberg's efforts, arranged to pay for the cost of trapping, removing and distributing the horses into breeding groups.

We were in the habit of going over to the ranch to look at the horses and continue our written inventory in the early summer of 1990. Drought had plagued the area for two years, drying up the small springs on the south end of the ranch and concentrating the horses around the two areas of the creek which had not dried up. By then, the herd which had numbered over 100 head, had become reduced by mountain lions and rustlers. Once we discovered evidence left by those who sought to steal for themselves a bit of living history; a section of fence mowed down by the herd in their panic to evade their pursuers.

Another time we discovered a young foal tied to a tree with the lasso around its neck that was used to catch it. We diligently copied the license number of the truck from our hiding place as we observed those who came back to claim the foal, throwing it into the back of their camper! They were fined and the foal confiscated, but by then it was too late to reunite mother and her offspring.

The young foals also made easy prey for the lions. Over the years, flash-flooding had cut the banks of the creek 10 to 12 feet high, which created a vantage point for the lions to perch above the horses as they came down the tree-lined trails to water. One weekend we would see a mare with a new foal and the next weekend we would see the mare with nothing but a swollen udder to comfort her. The drought also took its toll; the ribs, backbone and hips jutting out on the mares with foals.

The refuge then hired a man known for his expertise in catching wild livestock to begin the removal of the horses. The trappers set up a large pen made up of metal panels adjacent to the old homestead corral with a water tank in the middle. They then fenced off the smaller of the two remaining watering holes and staked out their cowdogs on the one remaining stretch of creek where the horses could water.



The old corral had been built close to the bank of the creek and in turn this located the adjacent metal-paneled trap out over the dry wash of the creek. Towering old cottonwoods, which undoubtedly witnessed the original herd drinking under their canopies, lined the bank here. As the hot days strung out, cicada insects hummed loudly and the air seemed to suck the moisture out of every living thing.

The first horse band to enter the corral included an old, alpha mare, the only true roan left in the herd, who is now a member of our breeding group. Eva Wilbur called her "Rosalita", and remembered her as a foal the last year they worked and lived on the ranch.

As the trap filled up with horses, the cowboys herded them into the old corral, leaving the trap empty and waiting for more. They then separated the stallions from the mares and foals, whipping up the dry soil of the corral and creating dust clouds that obscured the scene from view. Next they were loaded into bob-tailed trucks and driven to a defunct feed-lot where they were held until the last horse was caught. Only one horse was lost during this time, an overo, pinto mare that had an eye with pink skin around it. It was evident that she had an advanced case of skin cancer and had become weakened and emaciated from it.

The next move was appropriately to the rodeo grounds of "Old Tucson", a Western movie set and theme park located just west of the city. It was from here, that those who were fortunate enough to receive a breeding group, gathered to claim their prize.

Eva Wilbur-Cruce came, despite the heat, to see her equine legacy dispersed. She arrived wheel- chair bound from a recent stroke, but attired in her straw hat, sheltered under an umbrella and pleased to see so many others displaying esteem for the "little rock horses" that she had lived and worked with for over 40 years.

The temperature that day broiled up to 114 degrees, a record setting scorcher! It seemed that a continual intravenous drip would be the only way to keep our bodies hydrated. It was in this oven of heat that the vet was scheduled to inspect horses and draw blood for typing; first the stallions, then the dry mares, and then the seven mares and foals that had survived the lions. They were pushed into chutes, blindfolded, their markings recorded, and a sticky patch with a number slapped on their rumps.

Quoting from an article in The American Livestock Conservancy News, Dr. Sponenberg commented on the bloodtyping:

We held our breath until the results were back, and were relieved that they were consistent with the history related to us by Mrs. Wilbur-Cruce. These were indeed purely Spanish ranch horses, and our efforts were all for the good and worthwhile end of saving this remnant.

The processing of the horses was finished and now it was up to the new owners to figure out how to load their wild horses into the trailers and beat it out of the heat towards Oklahoma, Texas, and California.

Our group of five went with the herd assigned to the Arizona Pioneer Living History Museum in Phoenix. Because we lived on the refuge and there had been so much controversy over the removal of the horses, (some would have liked to see the horses stay in a group on their historical site) we had to wait to receive permission to bring our horses home.



We drove the three hours to Phoenix every weekend for the next seven months to work with the horses. During this time, we used "The Jeffery Method" of handling wild stock, as suggested by Phil Sponenberg. The method consists of catching the horse in a confined area with a long pole with a noose attached. The handler then makes "invitational pulls", of the rope, alternating sides to teach the horse to give to pressure and step toward the handler. It is a slow process, no matter the method, to gentle a wild horse! It is an experience that taught me much about body language, both horse and human, and above all to slow down.

Rosalita, (now named Dolores, after Kino's mission), the mare that Eva had petted as a foal, was gentle enough that we were able to start her under saddle in August, two months after removal from the ranch. I rode the mare at the museum's dedication of its new corral, built in the mission style, for the public display of their breeding group. Eva Wilbur attended and was able to see some of what was being accomplished with the horses.

We finally received permission to bring our horses home in January of 1991. Now we had more consistency in our gentling process. One memory that stands out distinctly in my mind, occurred that spring after the horses had started to shed. Magdalena, a particularly sensitive mare, was tied to the fence and I was slowly and carefully currying loose hair from her back. There was a light breeze blowing and as I lifted the curry, a round, curry-shaped patch of hair became airborne and then gently fell to rest on Magdalena's rump. She startle-jumped a foot upwards and I startle-jumped three feet backwards, both our springs were wound tight that day!

In all the time it took us to gentle our little group, and as frightened as the horses were in the beginning, not one ever showed any aggression toward us, never offering to bite or kick. As anyone knows who has worked closely with this breed, these horses are as exceptional in their intelligence as they are in their temperaments.

Since then, Steve and I have moved to New Mexico to manage a large ranch. The terrain is very similar to that of the home-range of the Wilbur horses; steep and rocky. We are continuing the tradition of raising the youngsters in rough country, and as they have been started under saddle, they have proven to be balanced and savvy, and run with confidence over the rocky hills.

Standing atop a mountain in New Mexico, mounted on a pinto Wilbur-Cruce Mission Horse, I look out over the grassy valley at our mares, foals and youngsters. These are what we had hoped they'd be, "the horses of history", the descendants of the horses that Padre Kino brought to his Mission Dolores. We are the keepers of Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce's legacy, her beloved "little rock horses", and it is a privilege.