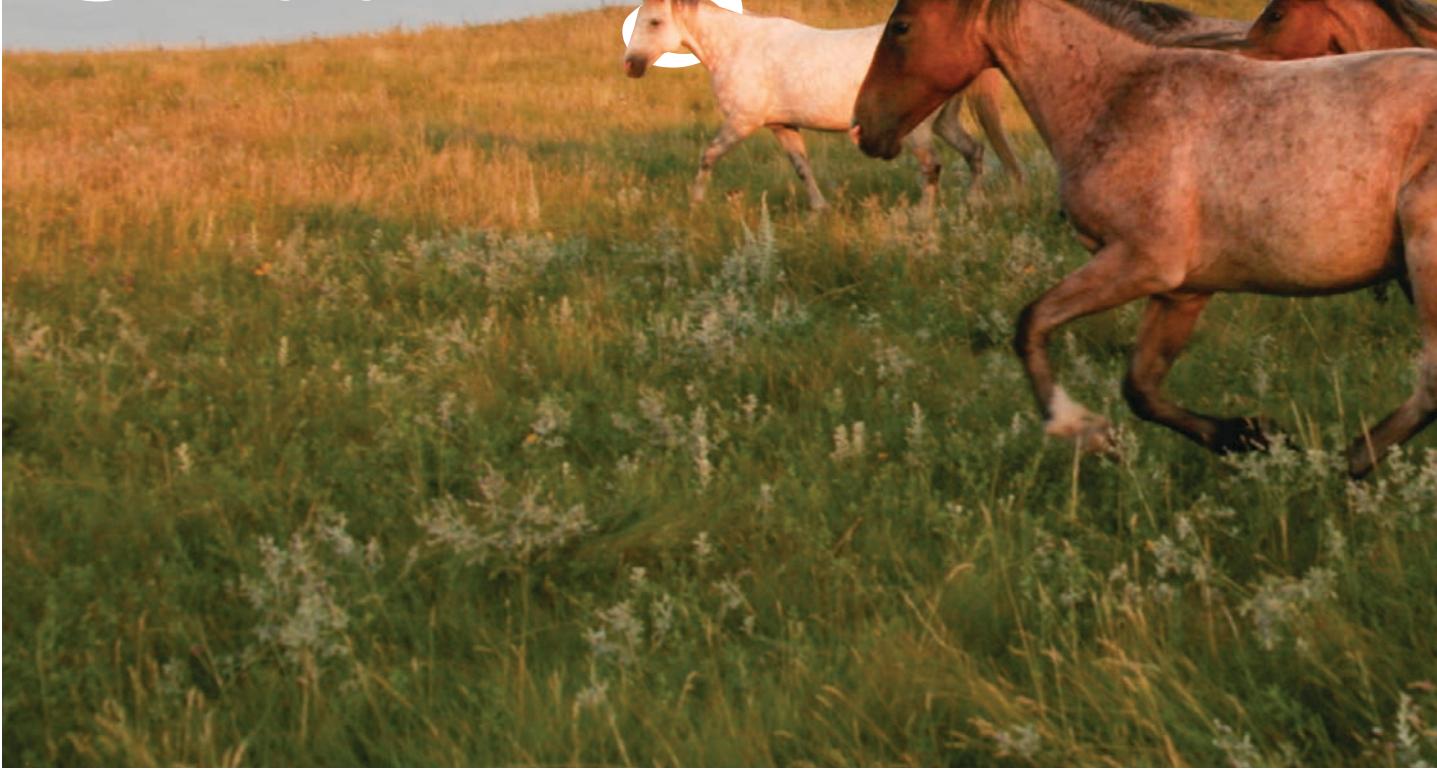


Sitting Bull's



The Nokota Horse Conservancy believes that the wild horses in North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park badlands descend from horses surrendered by Chief Sitting Bull in 1881. Park officials disagree, citing a lack of concrete evidence.

Story and photography by RYAN T. BELL

Lost Horses?

A photograph of a herd of horses in a grassy field. In the foreground, several horses are running towards the left. One horse in the center is dark-colored, while others are lighter shades of brown and tan. The background shows a vast, open landscape with a fence line in the distance under a sky filled with dramatic, layered clouds.

Beginning with this year's roundup, Theodore Roosevelt National Park will cull its wild horse herd in favor of historic colors and phenotypes. Future park visitors will see more red and blue roans, pintos and blacks, such as in this herd of Nokotas.

THE BADLANDS OF NORTH DAKOTA are a dented-up country of pyramid buttes, finger ridgelines and zigzag ravines formed by the Little Missouri River. The bizarre landscape has a history of invoking mixed emotions. A cavalry soldier from the 1860s called it hell with the fires put out. Theodore Roosevelt, who staked \$82,500 in an ill-fated ranching venture in the badlands, called it a place of "savage desolation," reminiscent of the macabre poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. But since the badlands were incorporated into Theodore Roosevelt National Park, people have been more inclined to see them as a scenic attraction.

Nevertheless, contentious opinions still abound over the national park's herd of wild horses. In one camp, there's the Nokota Horse Conservancy, an organization that



Leo (left) and Frank Kuntz oversee nearly 500 horses on a network of owned and leased rangeland in North Dakota. For more than 30 years, the brothers have worked to establish the Nokota horse breed.

believes the park's herd descends from horses that once belonged to Chief Sitting Bull. In the opposing camp are the land managers of Theodore Roosevelt National Park. They refute the connection, arguing that the concept of a "Nokota" breed is a fabrication.

Are Nokotas legitimate heirs of Sitting Bull's legacy, or just illegitimate castoffs of Theodore Roosevelt National Park?

BROTHERS FRANK AND LEO KUNTZ are easy to tell apart. Frank sports a walrus mustache, and Leo always wears suspenders. They grew up in a family of nine children, on a ranch located on the rolling grasslands of North Dakota. Long before they helped found the Nokota Horse Conservancy, they were just thrill-seeking ranch boys who liked fast horses.

"We didn't get into it to save an old strain of horses," Leo says. "We got into it because we were cross-breeders."

The Kuntzes competed in Great American horse racing, an event where horsemen rode pell-mell over a mile-and-a-half of broken country. The risk of injury was so high that the sport earned the nickname "suicide racing." To be successful, a rider needed a horse as tough as the land it raced across. So the brothers set out to find horses with good bone and plenty of mettle.

In 1978, Leo bought some horses that had been gathered off the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. They took to cross-country racing like it was second nature. The horses were surefooted on broken ground, speedy on the open flats, and equipped with deep lungs and plenty of stamina. When the park announced a wild horse roundup and auction in 1986, Frank and Leo hatched a



COURTESY OF

After the Battle of Little Bighorn, Chief Sitting Bull and his rebel band fled to Canada. When they surrendered, the U.S. Army confiscated their 350 horses.

plan to buy as many horses as they could afford, and use them to breed a line of cross-country horses. They took out a bank loan and went home with 54 wild horses.

During the 1980s, the park service shifted how it managed wild horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Tom Tescher, the famed North Dakota rodeo bronc rider, worked with the park to introduce domestic stallions to "improve" the wild herd's genetics, including a Quarter Horse, an Arabian and a Shire-pinto cross stallion bought at the Miles City Bucking Horse Sale. During park roundups, undesirable native horses were culled so that the introduced bloodlines could flourish. Coincidentally, native horses were the ones the Kuntz brothers wanted to buy. Though it was not Frank and Leo's initial motive, they salvaged an heirloom bloodline at the moment the herd's genetics were about to dramatically shift.

"They don't write manuals for how to save a breed of horse," Frank says. "It's not something we were set up for. It just happened."

As the brothers delved into the history of the park's wild horses, they learned that the herd reportedly descended from horses surrendered by Chief Sitting Bull, the rebel Lakota leader.

Among the Lakota people, the year 1876 is known as "The Year We Lost Our Horses." The name may seem surprising, considering that in June of that year the Lakota joined the Cherokee and Arapaho to defeat General George Armstrong Custer's troops at the Battle of Little Bighorn. But the victory proved bittersweet, as the U.S. Army retaliated with extensive military campaigns, the wholesale slaughter of buffalo to starve rebel tribes into submission, and a Draconian law requiring all natives to surrender their horses. From Oklahoma to Montana, native horses were rounded up, sold off, or in some cases slaughtered.

"Make them poor by destruction of their stock, and then settle them on the lands allotted to them," said General Philip Sheridan.

In the wake of the Battle of Little Bighorn, Chief Sitting Bull's rebel band fled into Canada. But after four hard years on the Saskatchewan prairie, they crossed into North Dakota and surrendered at Fort Buford. The U.S. Army treated the Lakotas as prisoners of war. They confiscated their herd of 350 horses and put the animals up for sale at the local trading post. Sitting Bull was imprisoned at Fort Yates, South Dakota, and then



Above left: To maintain the integrity of the Nokota breed, the Kuntzes run stallions and broodmare bands together in large pastures. Here, two stallions fight for dominance, a conflict whose outcome will stamp future generations.

Above right: With the Little Missouri River in the distance, outfitter Neil Tangen rides down a trail inside Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Tangen doubts the claims connecting Nokotas to Sitting Bull's horses; he believes that the park's wild horses are feral descendants of ranch stock.

forced to settle on the Standing Rock Reservation. But his lost horses were never far from his mind. During his quiet hours, Sitting Bull would draw sketches of his exploits as a warrior mounted on a blue horse, lance in hand and arrows flying through the air.

The Lakota had lost not only their horses, but their freedom, bringing to an end a nomadic way of life that had been their custom for at least a century.

The Nokota Horse Conservancy is based on an assumption that Sitting Bull's horses constituted a breed. But, whereas natives like the Nez Perce castrated geldings and used selective breeding to create the Appaloosa horse, the Lakota did not practice any form of active animal husbandry.

DESCENDANTS OF SPANISH HORSES arrived on the northern plains sometime in the 18th century. In 1742, the French fur trader Chevalier Verendrye, the earliest European to travel the area, wrote of encountering a tribe of "Horse People" somewhere in either South Dakota or Wyoming (his journal is vague). It is unknown whether they were the only natives to have obtained horses, but by the 1830s artist-ethnographer George Catlin documented a vibrant horse culture in his paintings of the Dakota people.

"The horse came along and transformed our culture," says Ron His Horse is Thunder, a fifth-generation descendant of Chief Sitting Bull. "We believed that this must be a gift from the creator."

Archaeological evidence shows that the horse revolutionized native culture during a period called the Plains Nomadic. Previously, natives



had lived in large villages that were characterized by numerous clusters of small-diameter tipi rings. But tipi rings during the Plains Nomadic period were considerably bigger, upwards of 18 feet in diameter. And settlements were located more sporadically across the northern plains, indicating a shift from a sedentary to nomadic lifestyle. Archaeologists surmise that horses enabled the natives to cut and carry longer tipi poles, and to roam freely in pursuit of buffalo. Life on the northern plains evolved to rely on the horse.

"Having horses was a symbol of wealth," says Ron His Horse is Thunder. "The more horses that you had, of course, the better horse thief you were. It took a lot of courage to go into an Indian camp in the nighttime, or even the daytime, and steal their horses. To steal a horse became a very brave thing. Not only did it make you wealthy, it made you a hero with your people."

The Nokota Horse Conservancy has gone to great lengths to research and document connections between the Nokota breed and native horse culture. Castle McLaughlin, PhD, a founding board member, is curator of North American Ethnography at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. For a recent exhibit, "Wiyohpiyata: Lakota Images of the Contested West," she studied the relationship between Lakota warriors and their horses. Blue roans were prized for riding into battle, McLaughlin says, because in Lakota cosmology the cardinal directions were associated with specific colors and supernatural powers. The direction west, "wiyohpiyata," was the domain of storms and warfare, and its colors were blue and black. Riding a blue roan horse linked a war-



rior metaphorically to those powers. McLaughlin points to the prevalence of blue roans among the Nokota breed as evidence that the breed's phenotype is linked to the Lakota people.

"If it is in fact the case, then they're one of the very few herds in the whole country that can be linked to a historic Indian community," McLaughlin says.

But did early Lakota horses constitute a breed? By favoring certain characteristics in the horses they stole, traded for and caught in the wild, the Lakota exerted a passive force on the development of wild horses in the badlands. In breed terminology, Nokotas are not a standard breed but a "landrace," defined in *The Genetics of the Horse* as "local types which have become uniform through a combination of founder effect, long isolation from other populations and selection within a local environment."

That definition is evident in the Nokota breed's entry in the 2009 edition of *The Official Horse Breeds Standards Book*:

"The social and physical conditions of life in the badlands seem to have encouraged the retention of Spanish and Indian pony characteristics in the animals that survived. Only the hardiest and most intelligent horses were able to withstand the long, frigid winters of western North Dakota and escape capture in the rugged, steep terrain. As a result, the Nokota horses of today retain many of the best features of their early ancestors."

NOT EVERYONE IS CONVINCED that Nokotas constitute a horse breed.

"They want them to recognize the bloodline so they can sell more horses," says Neil Tangen,



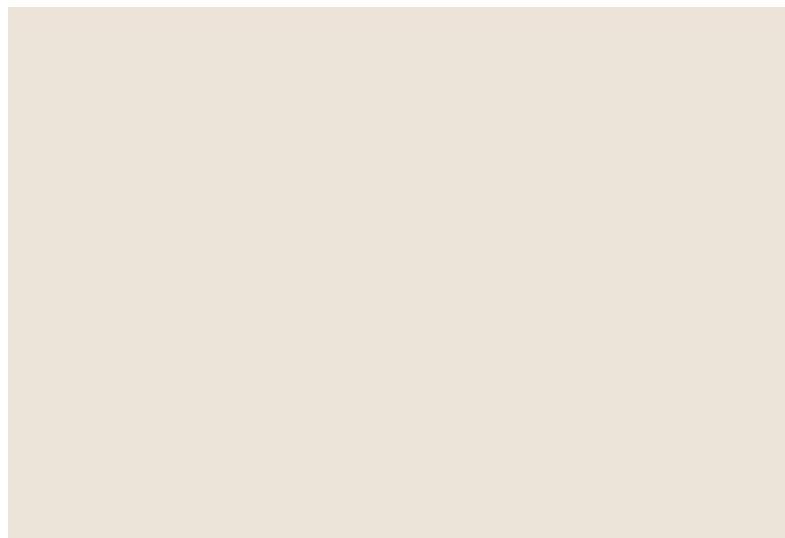
operator of Peaceful Valley Ranch, a trail-riding outfit located inside Theodore Roosevelt National Park. He sees wild bands of horses almost every day. To his eye, they look like feral ranch stock. Instead of buying horses rounded up off the park, Tangen sticks with his own proven line of Quarter Horses. He doubts that the park's horses descend from Sitting Bull's herd.

"It's the gift of gab," Tangen says, "a marketing strategy to sell horses."

Though a grassroots organization, the Nokota Horse Conservancy does savvy the art of publicity. In 1993, they successfully lobbied the North Dakota legislature to designate the Nokota as the state's official equine. In 1999, the conservancy earned 501(c)(3) status as a nonprofit organization, which, among other things, allows people to make tax-deductible donations to pay for summer pasture leases and winter hay. In April of 2013, the conservancy helped pass a state resolution that "... urges the National Park Service to recognize the historical value of the Nokota horse in this state's ranching and Indian culture and to manage the feral horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park in a manner that ensures the preservation of the Nokota bloodline..."

But certain aspects of the Nokota Horse Conservancy give it a hucksterish air. For instance, the breed name "Nokota" may sound Native American—"Lakota" and "Nocona" are real words—but it is a fabrication. Leo Kuntz came up with it by merging the state name, North Dakota, into one word. Something else odd is that the breed name appears as "Nokota®" in most of its literature. Trademarking is a smart business practice, and most breed associations have done so. But

Above: A weanling filly sheds her coat to become a blue roan, the preferred color of Lakota warriors.



This graphite colored pencil drawing was created by Sitting Bull in 1882. After his surrender to the U.S. Army, it was clear that he reflected fondly on the horses that had carried him and his Lakota warriors into battle.

the Nokota Horse Conservancy makes prevalent use of the trademark symbol, even inserting it into transcripts of verbal testimony given at legal proceedings. It gives the impression of trying too hard to prove the breed's legitimacy.

Another example of marketing spin is the "Z4" brand the Kuntz horses wear. The brand dates to a turn-of-the-century cow outfit, the HT Ranch, and the "Z4" brand appears on horses in the artwork of Charles M. Russell. The Kuntz brand is misleading, however. Leo tried to register "Z4" with the North Dakota Stockmen's Association, but the brand inspector said they no longer registered brands that incorporated numbers. So Leo registered "L+", and at branding time he inverts the "L" and positions the "+" in such a way as to look like "Z4."

Nevertheless, the conservancy has done an impressive job of promoting the Nokota breed. The registry includes some 1,000 horses, with Nokota breeders spanning the United States from Washington to New York. Nokotas are performing well in many disciplines, including dressage and hunter-jumper, as well as trail-riding and pack stock. The breed is young, and its potential in Western stock horse disciplines is as of yet untapped.

THE CRUX OF THE NOKOTA BREED'S legitimacy lies in how you interpret events that transpired after Sitting Bull's surrender.

At the Fort Buford trading post, 250 horses were sold to an interesting character in North Dakota history, the French aristocrat Antoine-Amédée-Marie-Vincent Manca Amat de Vallombrosa. Locals called him, simply, the Marquis de Morès. He had a "handsomeness of the Victorian stage-villain variety," wrote the American historian David McCullough, complete with a waxed mustache and long sideburns. The Marquis was a skilled horseman, trained at two of Europe's elite

cavalry schools, and the bodies of two men he had killed in duels attested to the Marquis's skills with a pistol.

The Marquis de Morès arrived in North Dakota with a business plan he believed would revolutionize the American beef industry. First, he would amass a cattle empire, then build slaughtering facilities on the range and ship beef east in refrigerated railroad cars (a new invention). By cutting out middlemen at the Chicago stockyards, the Marquis aimed to sell cheaper meat to Eastern consumers. He fenced 21,000 acres of badlands and stocked it with cattle. To make sure his cowboys were well-mounted, the Marquis bought 250 of Sitting Bull's confiscated horses at Fort Buford.

But the Marquis de Morès' trigger finger toppled his cattle empire. One day, he rode up on a group of cowboys cutting through his barbed wire fence, an act of protest against him for having fenced the open range. When the dust settled, one cowboy was dead, another testament to the Marquis's speed with a pistol. Years of legal trouble followed, forcing him to liquidate and leave the United States.

Of the Marquis de Morès' 250 horses, the historical record confirms the fate of only 60 mares, which were sold to a North Dakota cattle baron named A.C. Huidekoper. In a memoir, Huidekoper told the story of a favorite horse named Croppy:

"His dam belonged to a Sioux Indian warrior who fought at the Custer fight on the Little Big Horn. As proof she was there, she had a bullet through her neck. Notwithstanding her wound she trailed north with the tribes to the Canadian border, where the warriors were relieved of their arms, and the war ponies scattered. Some of these ponies came to the Marquis de Morès at Medora, North Dakota."

After Huidekoper sold out in 1906, however, the paper trail linking Nokotas to Sitting Bull becomes sparse.

During the Great Depression, it was common practice among area ranchers to treat the badlands as a grazing commons. However, President Roosevelt's connection to the region had sparked a movement to turn the badlands into a national park. Land managers fenced the property, inadvertently enclosing several bands of horses.

Were they wild horses or simply ranch stock turned loose on the grazing commons? Today's park managers believe the latter, citing a 1954 roundup that was aimed at removing all horses from the property.

"Something like 125 horses were brought in, and 99 percent of them had ranch brands," says Bill Whitworth, the park's current chief of resource management.

Tom Tescher was on that roundup. He passed away in 2008, but appears in a documentary film about the park's horses that plays at the North Dakota Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"They go back to horses that got away from ranchers, and horses that belonged to bankers that had a loan on them," Tescher said, referencing the hardships of the Great Depression.

McLaughlin has seen the records from the 1954 roundup, and believes they prove just the opposite. Horses obviously evaded roundup or else there wouldn't have been any remnants to reproduce. Those, she argues, were certainly wild horses.



"You'd be surprised how many young natives don't know anything about their horse culture," Frank Kuntz says. In the past, the Nokota Horse Conservancy has partnered with the United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck to host a youth program called Horses on the Prairie Camp.

"The roundup was held expressly for the local ranchers to reclaim the horses that grazed in the park. They didn't even try to round up the wild horses, and I have multiple quotes from ranchers who participated in that roundup."

Tescher was one of them.

"In private, Tom told Leo and me the opposite," McLaughlin says. "He knew those horses were descended, in part, from 19th century wild horses. I guess that wasn't the politically correct position for him to take with the park."

The reason for Tom's duplicity, she speculates, was that he felt ambivalent about the wild horses.

"On one hand, he was definitely a rodeo cowboy rancher who loved Quarter Horses. He didn't like Indian horses," she says. "The fact they were wild intrigued him, and the fact he spent most of his life chasing and rounding them up gave him a kind of appreciation for them, as opponents."

Park superintendent Valerie Naylor considers the conservancy's claims as circumstantial, at best.

"It's a romantic idea that some of Sitting Bull's horses run wild in the park," Naylor says. "People like the notion and it would be nice if it were true. But it's not. The evidence shows that they are fe-

ral ranch horses that were fenced into the park in the 1940s."

Naylor says that DNA evidence is needed for Theodore Roosevelt National Park to acknowledge a connection between the wild horses and Sitting Bull's people. But obtaining DNA from a band of horses that died a century ago is difficult. The Nokota Horse Conservancy attempted to extract DNA from horsehair taken from an object in the Peabody Museum. The results were inconclusive. Museum artifacts are treated with pesticides and preservatives, which damages genetic material. Also, the root on a piece of hair is needed in order to extract DNA. The Lakota cut the mane and tail hair they used for decoration, meaning that even if the conservancy found a hair strand untainted by chemicals, the odds aren't good that it would have the root.

Regardless of the Nokota's provenance, what's at stake is the genetic integrity of the horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park. In 2013, the park's herd topped 200 horses, the largest it has been since the 1954 roundup. As chief of resource management, Whitworth is charged with balancing the populations of the many animals that inhabit the park. The target horse population, he says, is 100 head. At press time, the park service was planning to round up and cull nearly half the population in late September, selling the surplus horses at public auction. In a subtle yet significant shift in park policy, their plan would cull horses in favor of historic phenotypes, such as roans and pintos, selling off stock tainted with domestic bloodlines. They say it is not a gesture of concession, but rather one meant to enhance the authenticity of the park's wild herd to match the horses that ran loose in the badlands during Theodore Roosevelt's time.

A simple way to accomplish that goal would be to introduce Nokota breeding stallions. Their bloodlines are a time capsule of the park's wild horse herd, circa the 1986 roundup. But superintendent Naylor says that option is out of the question. The unspoken reason, it seems, is that doing so would mean the park service acknowledges the claims of the Nokota Horse Conservancy.

"When you look at the history of these horses, they've earned the right to be recognized," Frank Kuntz says.

The Nokota Horse Conservancy returns to make this point, time and again. By doing so, however, they've created their own existential crisis. Until the park service recognizes that a Nokota breed exists, it doesn't. 

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