

A Nation of Horse Hoarders

Another chapter in the wild horse “rescue racket.”

Words and photos by Rachel Dahl. Painting by Teresa Jordan.



Some people save magazines, boxes of old photographs, toys, or tools. That crazy neighbor next door may be collecting cats. People are strangely fascinated by this phenomenon, to the point that reality TV provides extensive coverage that we watch, aghast at the filth and clutter, homes filled with things hoarders cannot bear to let go. And yet we are guilty of hoarding, too. As a country we do not face the cost, clutter, or contention that comes with “saving” horses. Those who see the solution to the problem of excess horses and decimated resources are being held hostage by those who think we should save, preserve, and endlessly maintain every single horse.

Arlo Crutcher, vice chairman of the Fort McDermitt Indian tribe in northern Nevada, sat along a wall of the café at the Fallon Livestock Exchange one hot August day last summer. He wore a white cowboy hat and was surrounded by tribal members and bureaucrats all dressed up in their plaid, pearl-snapped cowboy shirts and jeans talking on their cell phones. He was there to sell horses for the tribal nation he represents. Instead of a gunfight in the street at noon, the crowd waited for a showdown in federal court in Reno. Would the judge allow the tribe to sell their own property or would wild-horse activists be

able to use the process to swindle more money out of an unsuspecting public to “rescue” even more horses?

Arlo’s sidekick, Monte Bruck, wore a battered, greasy ball cap and a handlebar moustache streaked with silver and Copenhagen. The manager of the sale yard, he had been fielding calls all morning from angry horse activists and reporters from as far away as Ohio. As he tried to eat a quick sandwich, his cell phone rang, and shoving back his chair he stormed outside, yelling at a reporter from Colorado to “count your pennies and come buy a horse.”

No one in the café that day wore a black hat, but it turned out the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) were there—flanking the line of Formica tables that had been pushed together in sort of a bunkhouse conference room. The Churchill County sheriff had deputies posted on the sale-yard property, and like all good western stories, clamoring ladies in distress wailed from the railroad tracks to “Save the horses!”

Because Monte had banned cameras from the property, horse activists set up their vigil in the adjoining railroad easement using that vantage point to take photos and shoot videos of the tribe’s horses, posting on social media pages, claiming “wild” horses were headed for slaughter. This brought out the reclusive railroad officials who attempted to explain private property and public safety to the activists, eventually threatening trespass. But the horse activists didn’t want to hear about private property; they had made their pledge and their allegiance was to the horses.

For nearly 100 years, members of the Fort McDermitt tribe have raised and sold horses. Many families on the reservation (Able, Sam, Crutcher, and Snapp) have reputations for producing high-quality ranch horses as well as rodeo stock. The tribe, through their stockman’s association, also runs a herd of horses on reservation lands. They own a permit for the Little Owyhee Allotment allowing tribal horses to graze on federal lands. Each year, members of the tribe travel to the East where they buy pedigreed studs to run with their mares to continue improving their breeding stock.

This story of these Indian horses began almost five years ago when members of the tribe say that two of the tribal elders—sisters who fear speaking publicly—were “trespassed” by the FS. Their horses had wandered onto public lands, were impounded,

and the sisters fined. Eventually there was a lien put on their social-security checks, and the sisters went to the tribal council for relief.

The tribe began working on a cleanup plan with the BLM and FS officials to keep Indian horses from trespassing outside the reservation and provide a manageable number of wild horses on public lands. A gather between the agencies and the tribe was finally planned for summer 2012, but was cancelled at the last minute when federal agencies caved in to the protests of wild-horse activists. They all agreed to try the gather again in August 2013, but FS officials cancelled again under pressure from the same groups. The plan would have removed roughly 500 tribal horses from the reservation and 200 wild horses from the public lands, allowing grass and water resources time to heal and regenerate.

Currently there are 40,600 feral “wild” horses roaming free in Herd Management Areas (HMAs) established under the Wild Free-Roaming Horses & Burros Act of 1971, managed by the BLM and FS. There are 50,000 horses standing in long-term BLM storage facilities where they will be cared for until they die. In addition to the federally managed horses, there are more than 90,000 horses running wild on Indian lands across the country.

The BLM annual budget for the wild-horses-and-burros program is nearly \$72 million. Although the act provides for the sale of excess horses with proceeds going back into the management of the program, politicians have bowed to the bullying of activists and established policy that prevents the BLM from making the sale. Last December, Nevada Association of Counties filed suit in federal court asking for relief from damage caused by feral horses and endured by the local counties.

There are more than 9.2 million horses in the United States but no processing facilities, forcing unwanted, unadoptable horses to suffer the grueling trips to Canadian or—even worse—unregulated slaughterhouses in Mexico. So last summer, when tribal members went ahead with their own gather, they decided to sell their horses at public auction in Nevada. The August 2013 gather brought



Fort McDermitt tribe vice chairman Arlo Crutcher (center) and brand inspector Arnold Sam wait for Monte Bruck, manager of the Fallon Livestock Exchange, who takes an angry call from horse activists. Bruck received several death threats as they waited for a federal judge to give the green light to a sale of the tribe's horses.

in 467 horses from reservation land and the allotments, which were then shipped to the Fallon Livestock Exchange for a special sale. But activists got in the way, insisting that there were wild horses in the bunch that would go to “kill buyers” and end up in foreign processing plants. Activists quickly filed for an injunction in Federal District Court in Reno to stop the sale.

It was on Friday, August 16, that Arlo sat in the café with the tribe's brand inspector Arnold Sam, FS and BLM officials, and the state of Nevada brand inspector Chris Miller, awaiting the judge's decision. While they loitered, Monte and his office staff continued to field calls from curious reporters and angry activists from across the country, including two fairly personal and descriptive death threats.

“We should have just shipped the horses to Canada ourselves,” Arlo said in exasperation. “We thought we were doing the right thing giving people a chance to buy these horses, but these activists have just made it impossible.”

Late that day Judge Miranda Du granted Laura Leigh of Wild Horse Education a temporary injunction, preventing the sale of any unbranded horses, even though each horse had been certified as belonging to members of the tribe by two separate brand inspectors. On Saturday morning, Suzanne Roy and

Denize Bolbol from the American Wild Horse Preservation Campaign (AWHPC), with more threats from their lawyers, convinced Monte to let them participate in the sorting process, meticulously examining each horse to determine which had a brand and could be sold in the auction. If the horse had no brand it was called a wild horse by the activists and not eligible for sale.

A total of 149 unbranded animals were moved to a separate holding pen and held until August 21, when Du would decide if they were wild or not. A wise woman from the Fort McDermitt tribe, one of the elders whose social-security check was lienied by the government, asked, “They used to hang horse thieves, didn't they?” The 327 branded horses were finally auctioned late that afternoon, with activists and rescue groups buying 150, and 177 purchased by private parties.

During the court hearing, activists continued to maintain that the 149 unbranded horses were federally protected. AWHPC attorney Katherine Meyer, who had never seen the horses but attended the hearing by phone from California, insisted the horses were wild because they had no brands. Bolbol testified for the activists that the horses she examined acted like wild horses because they put their heads down and ran from humans.

Nevada brand inspector Chris Miller was asked by attorneys how he determined that the horses were domestic and belonged to the tribe. He explained that in addition to declarations by the tribe's brand inspector



who recognized several horses, he examined body type and condition. Additionally, he said there were 25 geldings in the group and two Shetland ponies. Bolbol conceded that the unbranded geldings in the bunch were probably not wild horses, and that generally Shetland ponies are not found in the wild.

Judge Du then lifted her injunction say-

ing the horses. Thinking it was another dead end, Arlo reluctantly began explaining his frustration with what appeared to be just a lot of talk, but, after a brief negotiation, the donor agreed to pay for the horses. Both the AWHPC and the Cloud Foundation offered to put the money through their organizations and then pay the tribe, but it went



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Most of the Fort McDermitt horses for sale in Fallon were branded by members of the tribe, proving they weren't "wild" horses. Laura Leigh, left, maintains Wild Horse Education and filed the suit that prevented the Fort McDermitt tribe from selling its horses last August. ABOVE RIGHT: Production of horse meat, by country.

ing the plaintiffs did not prove the 149 unbranded horses were wild and the tribe could sell them. Unfortunately, she had unwittingly set off another firestorm in the world of horse activism. Due to the delay, the 149 had become famous and activists swung into high gear, determined to "re-home" the horses they had worked so hard to save. But resources were scarce and it was prime time for the wailing ladies to shift into full fundraising mode. Websites were updated, rescue workers called in, trucks and trailers borrowed. Then the infighting began.

A public auction wouldn't be necessary. Suzanne Roy told Arlo her group would be at the sale yard Thursday morning with a check to purchase all the horses. She never showed up. Another group wanted the account number for the tribe's bank, saying it would deposit the money for the horses, but that money never showed up either.

Late the following day, Arlo received a call from Democrat Joseph Abruzzo, state senator from Florida, claiming to represent an anonymous buyer interested in purchas-

straight from the donor into the tribe's bank.

After the deposit was confirmed, activist organizations began claiming credit far and wide for saving the horses. The Cloud Foundation issued three press releases alone, to make sure the right people were mentioned and given credit. Originally asking not to be named, the angel donor turned out to be Virginia McCullough, heir to Chesapeake Petroleum and an active crusader against horse processing facilities in the United States. She claims to have rescued more than 1,800 horses, many of which are kept on her farms in Wellington, Fla.

The tribe's horses though were not heading to Florida. After claiming glory in every media outlet possible, the big-time AWHPC ladies disappeared, leaving the small, underfunded rescue organizations stuck finding homes for horses. McCullough had paid for them, but Arlo was not sure where they would end up. By the end of the week he was exhausted and jaded by the activists who had caused all the trouble but were now nowhere to be found. "Their agenda is to raise hell.

Food & Agriculture commodities
Production - 2011

meat Indigenous - HORSE

Area	metric ton	Production \$1000
China	161,208	251,105
Kazakhstan	75,477	117,566
USA	70,215	109,371
Mexico	64,695	100,772
Russia	52,897	82,395
Argentina	46,337	41,024
Australia	26,074	40,615
Mongolia	24,935	38,845
Brazil	21,593	34,101

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

Their hearts aren't for the horses," he said. Sadly, Arlo and his Fort McDermitt tribe had become just another episode in the wild-horse activist "rescue racket" publicity machine.

In the end, Liberty for Horses took roughly 30 dry mares and spent days hauling them to California in a tiny trailer. Ellie Price, a descendant of Carnegie Steel and owner of Durrell Vineyard in Sonoma, took 25 young stud colts to her ranch in Northern California. Sally Summers, who runs the Nevada special-license-plate-funded group, Horse Power, took 69 mares and young colts, and Madeleine Pickens took 25 old stud horses to her Mustang Monument in northern Nevada.

Laura Bell, the wailing damsel from the railroad tracks, didn't take a single horse. While she camped at the sale yard in Fallon for days, providing footage and social media coverage for the rescue efforts, Lyon County was investigating reports of animal neglect at her Starlight Sanctuary in Silver Springs. She has 70 horses at her place, kept in rocky dirt pens in the Nevada desert. For several years, she has rescued the horses no one else will take—the sick, hungry, and crippled. Operating on a shoestring budget, Bell is critical of euthanizing horses out of "convenience." She says all horses should be saved, and her outfit is the epitome of what happens when they are. Horses suffer and neighbors complain.

The contrast is remarkable between the Starlight Sanctuary and the Mustang Monument, where the national icon is being used to create a romanticized, absurd Hollywood version of the Old West. Ex-wife of oil magnate T. Boone Pickens and coined Miss



Maddy by an old cowboy and *RANGE* fan, the foreign-born divorcee loves her western heroes and is building a movie-set shrine to her fantasy where Chinese tourists and European visitors can experience something resembling a Technicolor B-movie.

Originally scheduled to open her eco-sanctuary in February 2013, Miss Maddy has experienced some delays and her staff now says they'll be open in summer 2014. She recently returned from a trip to London where the petite "Mustang Messiah" wooed 100,000 travel agents with her \$1,200-per-night tepee packages complete with 24-hour butler service. Bathrooms are detached and require hiking. Miss Maddy insists they will sell out the first year to tourists who are excited to come to the United States to learn to make moc-casins.

Where Laura Bell has aluminum-pipe panels lashed together with bailing twine on her rocky, 20-acre plot, Miss Maddy has built a brand new barn and buildings for all the equipment it takes to run a 522,000-acre former cattle ranch. She is spending bucket-loads of money to water three fields of beautiful alfalfa hay, and her 650 Pyramid Lake Paiute horses along with the rescued Fort McDermitt horses are grazing peacefully in the meadow just below the house. Neither of these gals is saving mustangs, but collecting a rag-tag batch of horses that are privately sold through the Fallon sale that no one else will take.

Currently making the rounds on as much media as she can get her hands on, Miss

Maddy recently appeared on a San Diego morning show to promote her fight against processing horse meat in the United States. Waxing on in her lyrical, lofty delivery about the civilized nature of Americans, she declares that we consider cats and dogs and horses to be pets. "This is America," she says. "We are considered a civilized country.... You can go to China and eat dogs and cats."

But as we all know, there are starving children in Africa, North Korea, China, and almost everywhere else. In Mexico they eat

horses; and in France, Belgium, Germany and Argentina they raise horses specifically to eat. Plenty of civilized people eat horses. Hungry people eat whatever they can. Despite Miss Maddy's horror, horse meat often fulfills the protein requirements for healthy human bodies.

It is the height of ignorance and arrogance to tell anyone, let alone people in countries that experience high levels of malnutrition and hunger, what they can and cannot eat. According to the World Food Programme's hunger statistics, there are 842 million people in the world who are starving. One out of six children in developing countries is underweight—roughly 100 million—while people in the United States are hoarding 50,000 horses at taxpayer expense because we are too civilized to eat them.

Apparently we are too civilized to let other people eat them, either. We are too civilized to let Arlo sell his tribe's horses without a fight. And we are too civilized to put suffering horses out of their misery. In our passion to save the horse, we blindly let other countries starve their children while we continue to go into debt to hoard horses. Because, as Miss Maddy says, "We don't eat our pets." ■

Rachel Dahl lives in Fallon, Nev., and regularly rides her favorite horse, Dr. Summer, which was bought from a horse broker before he went to slaughter. He was a failed hunter/jumper, but now plays polo.

THE ADVOCATE'S PLEDGE
"I pledge allegiance to the wild equines of the United States of America and to the icon for which they stand, one symbol, understood, undeniable, with liberty and freedom for all."

R.T. FITCH, "STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S HEART" BLOG, DEC. 12, 2013



Mrs. Pickens built new hay barns last summer. INSET: The tepees (bathrooms located through the trees) where Miss Maddy's guests will stay for \$1,200 per night. AT TOP: Starlight Sanctuary in Silver Springs, Nev., where 70 horses no one else will take live in pens held together with bailing twine and duct tape.