



Forty-One Years of Hell

A firsthand account of mustang mania. By George Parman

As I walked up and gave my best “Hi” to the strangers who had just driven up to my parents’ home at the Weeks Ranch around 1950, little did I know how much Charlie and Velma Johnson would impact my future. A rather small pickup with a wooden rack had two mares in the bed. They wanted to get them bred to a stud my dad had recently shipped in from Tennessee. Years later, Velma Johnson would become the infamous “Wild Horse Annie.”

It would probably surprise most, and possibly Velma herself, to know that she was actually a Johnny-come-lately on the horse issue, both pro and con. In the early 1900s, horses were still being used almost everywhere in various capacities, with many of the world’s armies being mounted on Nevada horses. Horses were big business in Nevada. As society became increasingly industrialized and the demand for horses began to rapidly diminish, a serious problem also started to manifest itself, and the negative impact of too many horses was making the papers as early as 1927. The November issue of the *Eureka Sentinel* that year reported that forest ranger James E. Gurr had shot 1,046 wild horses in an attempt to limit their detrimental impact on the environment.

Later, in winter 1946, Jim Brown and Ed Allyn were hired by a couple of ranchers to thin the horse herds at the north end of Edwards Creek Valley. Heavy overgrazing had left both land and horses in poor condition. During their stay at Shoshone Meadows, Jim said they culled 851 head on a fee basis. Actions such as these may seem hard to many folks who haven’t seen the agony that cold, starvation and lack of water can bring.

Bear in mind that this depletion of the range by horses doesn’t just impact them. All livestock and almost all wildlife—except buzzards which flourish under these circumstances—are also jeopardized by this one uncontrolled species.

By the ’60s and ’70s, the battle lines were being drawn with laws passed at the behest of Velma that no motor-driven vehicle could be used to capture or harass wild horses. For example, in 1967, Nevada ranchers Julian Goicoechea, Art Cook, and Ted Barber were indicted in federal court on charges of illegally using an airplane to round up wild horses. Charges were brought by Mr. Shirley Robison, Nevada brand inspector. Fortunately, the ranchers were found not guilty, but the waters were being tested.

About this time Hollywood started getting in on the act with movies such as “The Misfits,” filmed near Stagecoach, Nev., in 1961. Its portrayal of mustangers as a “blood and guts” crowd was aimed squarely at influencing the opinions and attitudes of children and uninformed city folk. The propaganda campaign against mustangers was in full motion.

A bill introduced in Congress in 1970 by Wyoming Sen. Clifford Hansen, and later signed into law by President Nixon, authorized the secretary of the Interior to protect, manage and control free-roaming horses and burros on public lands. With passage of the Wild Free-Roaming Horses & Burros Act (WHBA) in 1971, another level of bureaucracy crammed tightly up the east end of a westbound mustang was about to come galloping onto the West’s open range.

Under this law some feral horses were

under permit and some weren’t, but all could be claimed. At that time all horses were claimed, and many were temporarily released onto Bureau of Land Management land when not being used. The BLM issued a mandate that all horses be gathered and claimed by their owners and, upon completion of this chore, owners would be required to pay a trespass fee for every horse.

Fair enough, except that the fee was higher than the value of the horses. As one might expect, many ranchers found themselves unable to “buy back” their own property—which with the stroke of a pen had just been confiscated—and simply left some or all of their horses on the federally managed land. And that, my friends, was the real beginning of the glamorous wild mustangs. Most were just feral horses that had been stolen from their rightful owners.

It wasn’t long until the consequences of these actions became apparent. By 1975, the BLM determined that 50 percent of the range in Stone Cabin Valley east of Tonopah was in poor condition. The horse population had exploded with a subsequent destruction of habitat. A contract was issued for \$26.50 per head, with trap locations at Italian Pipeline, Highway Well, and Haws Canyon. The holding corral was at Stone Cabin Ranch. About 80 horses were caught and held there. Brand Inspector Arshal Lee, along with the director of the Nevada Department of Agriculture, impounded the horses claiming that they were the property of the state and questioned the constitutionality of the WHBA. The horses were released.

Sadly the ruling in this matter was against Arshal Lee. By fall of that same year the



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roundup was under way again, with the bid being raised to \$36.50 per head. Even this amount wasn't enough so the contractor pulled out, leaving BLM employees alone to complete the roundup. Noteworthy in this case is that Arshal Lee's ranch lost its cattle permit, which even the current owner, Hicks Station, hasn't been able to get restored.

By 1976, the "under the cover" crowd was arriving in the persons of George High, Len Simms and Joe Leaf, who were employed by the BLM to work in plain clothes as wild horse and livestock investigators. High arrested Max Allred in Antelope Valley for hauling horses. At trial Allred was acquitted, but we were starting to smell what was really in store for ranchers. Many years later, Blaine Johnson, co-owner of Clan Alpine Ranch, became the first person convicted under the WHBA. He received a three-year suspended sentence and \$1,000 fine.

I met George High in 1980. He was driving an old International pickup with Colorado plates, and with his old hat, worn Levis and shoes, he appeared to be just another ranch worker. I sensed that something wasn't quite right, but it wasn't until spring 1988 that my personal clash began.

Jimmy Williams of White Stud Springs in Reese River Valley called and asked me to bring my portable corral to his ranch. He had claimed and paid the fee for 84 head during the initial claim process. Now he had rounded up his stock and needed some help to hold the horses. Soon the BLM arrived via helicopter, counted the horses, took the corral down, released the horses, and the case went to court, which subsequently ruled in Williams' favor. He could gather his original number plus offspring. The resulting gather took quite a while and George High spent lots of time trailing and stopping us as we hauled horses. It must have gotten to be too much for him, and soon Len Sims and Joe

Leaf showed up. During the next couple of years we hauled out several hundred horses without making any significant impact on the population.

Sometime during this period, I was approached by Richard "Bugs" Hicks to find out how much I knew about the range around Duckwater. He said that the Indians in that area were in bad need of help. When I arrived at Portugee Springs, I found the

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bloated carcasses of four horses that had been trampled into the mud. At any given time there were over 100 horses fighting, trying to get to the mud in hopes of a drink. Everywhere there was any water, the story was the same. Bugs contracted to move 2,000 head. The BLM was notified and, with its admonition to keep a low profile, we began water trapping.

On Aug. 11, 1990, we started to move horses, and the next day George High, Len Sims, and the fed crowd arrived en masse. They charged us all with using a helicopter to hunt with intent to kill or capture wild horses. Of those charged, two pled guilty, the remaining five, including myself, refused, and charges were either dropped or they were found not guilty at trial.

It was about this time that horse numbers also exploded on the Nellis Bombing Range, with over 2,000 horses dying in 1990 alone. The impact of this scourge was severely felt on Ben Colvin's outfit and the Fallini Ranch, where the population grew to the point that there were more horses than cat-

tle. When the Fallini Ranch constructed corrals to protect its water from the depredation of this plague, the BLM filed suit. After a lengthy litigation, and over \$1 million in expenses, the court ruled in favor of the ranchers.

Also in 1990, Ben Colvin was forced to gather his cattle. He had been overrun with more than 1,300 horses on a range that could only sustain 200. By 1996, his permit was covered by dead and dying horses and he was out of business.

Since this time, countless ranchers have fallen to the machinations of the WHBA. Any number of well-intentioned, albeit uninformed, people have weighed in on this issue. Such notables as Madeleine Pickens, whose shenanigans include buying a ranch and attempting to change its permits from cows to horses as well as showing up with three helicopters and disrupting a lawful gather, are rarely deterred by the facts or the law in their efforts to have their own way.

Where does all this leave us now? Horse numbers now exceed 100,000 under government care, thousands of which are being corralled and fed at an estimated feed cost of about \$28,000 per horse over its lifetime. This doesn't reflect care, medical, or disposal fees, with no end in sight.

In 1961, the number of grazing permits issued for the Toiyabe National Forest was 148. In 2013, only 18 were issued. I have now lived 41 years of pure hell dealing with the insanity of wild-horse policy. I've witnessed the decline and imminent demise of a flourishing livestock industry. All because of the WHBA, hoards of do-gooders, and Velma Johnson. ■

George Parman is 82 and still ranches near Eureka, Nev. He comes from an old Nevada family that has been in the horse business for four generations.