

Spanish Mustangs

in the Great American West



Return of the Horse

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Prologue: Prehistory of the Horse



Julien Grandin

In an age without the measure of recorded time, long before humankind took a first breath, light began to filter through dense volcanic ash. Rich gases blended into oxygen as granite lava bubbled up from a molten core through torrid oceans covering the surface of this swirling planet. Eventually, the lava cooled into land masses and softened, becoming fertile for flora. In this timelessness while Earth was taking shape, drifting cosmic debris fell continually through the emerging atmosphere

into the oceans and onto the growing land mass, and this stardust fused into single cells, giving rise to the first fauna. While violent earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and hurricanes ravaged the sphere, tectonic plates shifted and the planet's supercontinent divided into seven separate continents. Life of many varieties emerged, including mammals.

Around the Northern Hemisphere, including the area destined to become North America, a browsing herbivore standing about nine inches tall at the shoulder and weighing ten to 20 pounds scampered through forest glades. With four toes on each front foot and three toes on each rear foot, this creature lived approximately 45- to 60-million years ago in the early to middle parts of the Eocene epoch. Scientists refer to this extinct genus as *Hyracotherium*, following the designation given by paleontologist Richard Owen, who likened fossil remains he found in England in 1841 to those of a hyrax. When Yale University paleontology professor Othniel Charles Marsh found more extensive fossils in the American West in the 1870s, he named the creature *Eohippus*, or "Dawn Horse." Over millions of years, tiny *Eohippus* grew and changed through many stages, becoming a large grazer with ultimately only one toe, or hoof, while evolving into variations of the *Equus* subspecies and eventually the horse that we know today.



Mares and foals in a privately owned Spanish Mustang herd trot across a Montana rise, 2007

Vargas, wrote:

“The Spaniards lamented the horses no less than they did their companions, for they realized the greatest strength of their army lay in these animals.”

De Soto’s exploration damaged the native culture in the region; what was not done by his swords was accomplished by European diseases that his men inadvertently spread. While he charted much of the American Southeast for the first time, De Soto reaped enmity among the natives with his cruelty and found little treasure and established no colonies. He died of fever while camped in Arkansas during the spring of 1542.

In 1539, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, a protégé of New Spain Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza, led one of the most fateful European explorations of the North American interior. A huge celebration ensued upon the gathering of his men in the city of Compostela for their heralded departure; banners fluttered in a lavish parade of conquistadors. As Pedro de Castaneda, a chronicler and member of the Coronado expedition, related:

“It was a splendid array as it passed in review. ... The well over 200 young cavaliers curbed the picked horses from the large stock farms of the viceroy, each resplendent in long blankets flowing to the ground. Each rider held



The primitive equine characteristic of zebra striping has been retained by some Spanish Mustangs, including this stallion on the Cayuse Ranch



Unlikely partners, a mare benefits from blackbirds feeding on annoying summer flies, Wyoming, 2007

his lance erect, while his sword and other weapons hung in their proper places at his side.”

Mendoza owned 11 large estancias, or Spanish-style ranches, with 1,500 horses. His investment and risk were high, as were the goals for Coronado, who joined with his wealthy wife in pouring personal funds into the expedition. They dreamed of finding the legendary Seven Cities of Gold that explorers such as Cabeza de Vaca had retold from native fables. The euphoria of the moment buoyed the weight of expectations on the shoulders of Coronado.

So began the Coronado Expedition, which rode on the backs of more than 1,000 mules and horses, many of which were Arabians, Andalusians, Barbs or crossbreds. Coronado brought more than 20 horses for himself, along with multiple sets of horse armor, and his captains equipped themselves in a similar manner. The expedition also included all the livestock and staples needed to sustain more than 300 of Coronado’s Spanish followers as well over 1,000 Tlaxcalan native porters and some African slaves. Despite the rumors about the cities of gold, which had been “confirmed” during a preliminary scouting expedition by the unscrupulous Friar Marcos de Niza,



Bay mare shepherds her own foal, rear, and an orphan she adopted at the Cayuse Ranch, 2007



A mare and her nearly identically marked daughter stand under Montana's big sky near Glacier National Park, 2007

no treasure was found and the Coronado Expedition was a failure. People and horses perished under the hardships as only small Zuni, Hopi and other Indian villages were discovered in the barren and rugged terrain. Coronado's troops stole resources from the Indians when they camped near present day Albuquerque, sparking a rebellion that they quelled with tactics including burning natives at the stake.

Horses carried Coronado and his explorers deep into the New World, traversing parts of New Mexico and Arizona, following the Colorado River into the Grand Canyon, then moving east to Kansas and south into Texas. Coronado made history as the leader of the first major Spanish exploration into what is now the western region of the United States and he provided some Native Americans there with their first glimpses of horses. However, only 100 of Coronado's men survived the campaign, and Coronado, who had been severely injured after falling while participating in what has been described as the first recorded horse race in the New World, was forced into bankruptcy.

It is not clear how many horses survived the Coronado Expedition. Historians have surmised that large numbers of Coronado's horses could have become or produced *mesteños*, but some records indicate that his mission included just a few mares, only one of which was reported lost.

As subsequent Spanish settlers moved farther north, up the supply line from Mexico City on the expanded "royal road" called El Camino Real, it was practical for them to let their horses graze on open lands. This is how the Gila Apaches and other southern Indian tribes first came in contact with horses. The necessity of grazing would continue to spread domestic Spanish horses across the southwestern ranges, and many of these horses would adapt to a wild state after escaping. In 1541, Viceroy Mendoza allowed allied Aztec chieftains to ride horses as they led their tribesmen. This is the first record of natives being given the right to ride on horseback. While there are few written facts to document the period, this general time frame could be considered the starting point of the Native American horse cultures.

Up until 1548, the Chichimeca Indians had blocked Spanish northern expansion along the El Camino Real. The Indian resistance was stifled after silver mines were discovered in Central Mexico, and natives were forced into slavery to extract the metal. During this era, wealthy Spaniards lobbied the government for rights

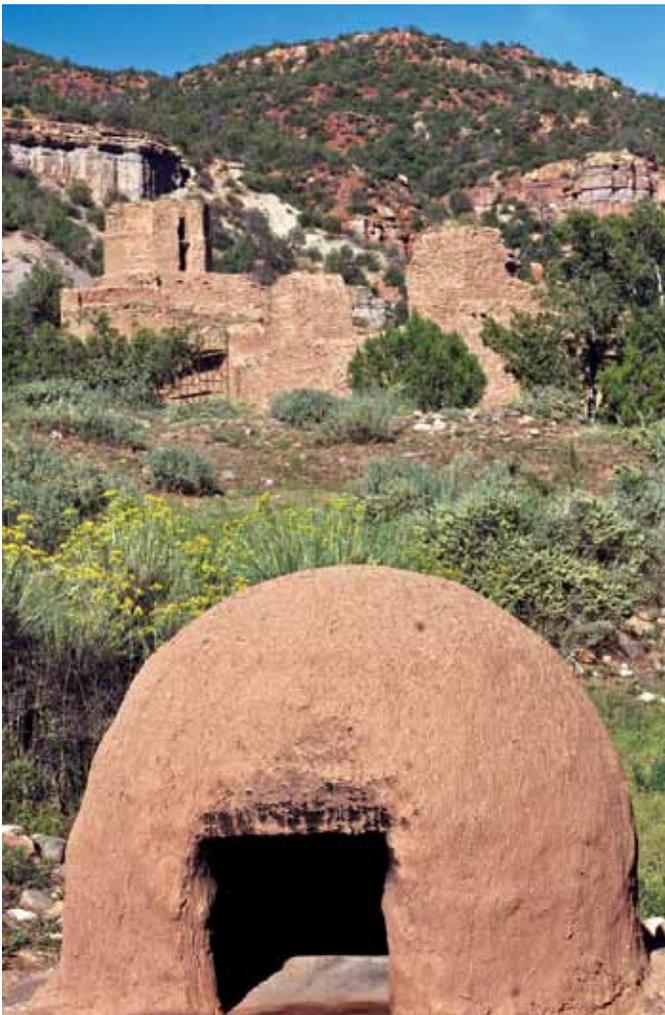
to the northern land, where they thought more slaves could be obtained and more silver mined. Following several failed excursions, young Don Juan de Oñate, the son of a conquistador, was given orders by Spanish King Philip II to lead an expedition northward. Oñate's cavalcade included settlers who planned to make the region of New Mexico their home. In 1596, these colonizers, their wives and children began to organize for the journey.

Oñate recruited 200 soldiers and their families. According to Oñate's muster roll, his march included 1,000 stallions, over 200 mares, more than 130 colts and about 90 mules. Of all these equines, Oñate personally owned 119 stallions and a third of the mares. In 1598, wayfaring families in their oxen carts began their crusade up the El Camino Real with the horses as well as herds of sheep and other livestock, grain, seeds and tools for building. Oñate observed that there already were many feral horses in New Mexico at this time, writing:

"The country is so immense and so full of wild mares."

Oñate also reported that that he lost 300 horses and mules in a 30-day period, partly due to the inability to contain his animals while wild horses were roaming nearby.

Crossing the Rio Grande not far from modern El Paso, Texas, Oñate claimed all the land north of the river for Spain and celebrated with his settlers what some describe as the first real Thanksgiving in America. They soon established the colony called San Juan de los Caballeros. Indians from a nearby Tewa pueblo shared their homes and food and helped with the outpost.



Adobe oven near the ruins of the Spanish mission church at Jemez, New Mexico, circa 1600s



Dun foal with striking black markings, Cayuse Ranch, 2007

Horses for the Explorers



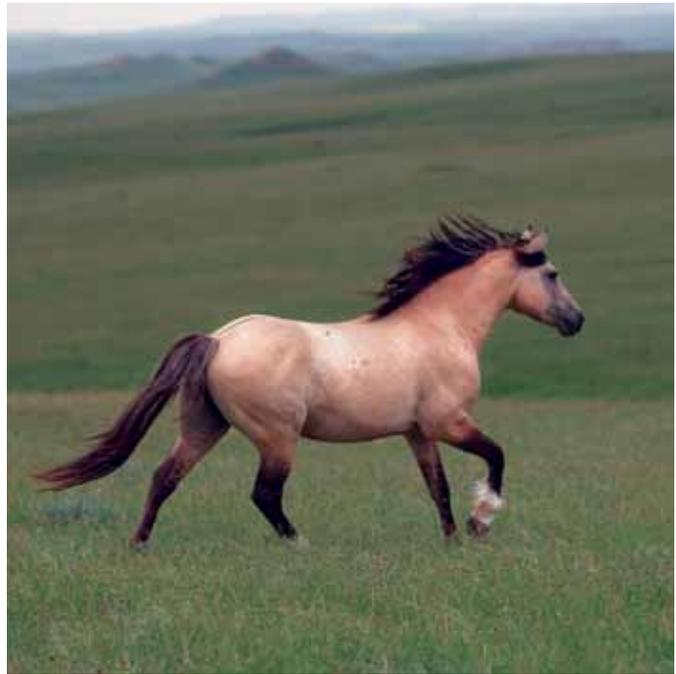
From the beginning, natural law had been the only force that shaped the American West; both wildlife and the continental natives yielded to nature's ways. The landscape in all its vastness lay unfenced and unspoiled before the mass arrival of colonial explorers and settlers in the 1800s. Until this time, prairie native grasses flourished and withered in an ecological cycle that matched the migrations

of grazing wildlife. Wild horses fit perfectly into this environment, and Spanish Mustangs continued to be molded by both the lushness of summer on the plains and the challenging conditions of winter winds and snowfall. But the impact of homesteading and agriculturally-minded settlers would forever alter this natural law and the wildlife that had adapted to it. As man invaded the pristine land, he wrought irrevocable changes, and those original native grasses that were sustenance to the buffalo, horses and other wildlife faded into extinction, never again to billow in the breeze.

Through the end of the 1700s and far into the 1800s, Native American horse cultures thrived. At the same time, the West was becoming increasingly populated with feral horses that Indians both captured and lost in the immense expanse of the landscape. The native horseman's attitude toward maintaining his wealth of horses embraced the belief that it was more honorable to steal from Spanish settlers than to attempt to capture mustangs. As the Indian herds of horses swelled and native camps became overgrazed, stallions would wander away with their harem of mares and foals to seek better foraging grounds. The Indians' casual method of ownership led to a continuous loss of horses and an ongoing need to replenish their herds by increasing raids on the horse-rich Spanish.

The native philosophy that there would be plenty more horses waiting where they had obtained others eventually extended to anyone's horses, from those of neighboring tribes to those of settlers and explorers. This often led to hostile skirmishes and tribal wars. During these Native American battles and horse-stealing raids, often conducted under the cover of night, many more steeds would inadvertently be released into the wild. This way of life created a cycle that constantly released fresh stock into the ever growing herds of wild horses. The Spanish Mustangs in the western United States remained for decades geographically separated from horses that had arrived into colonies on the East Coast from other European lands.

As trappers and explorers began moving west, they brought the first of the Eastern-based horses with them, including Narragansett Pacers known for their smooth gaits; the relatively new Thoroughbreds from England, famed for their speed and stamina on racecourses; the typically gray Percheron postiers from France that were used to pull large sleds in Canada; the black Friesians from the Dutch province of Friesland that originally had been sent to New York City for use as both harness and riding horses; the Irish Hobbies that excelled as riding mounts, and various warmbloods,



A buckskin Spanish Mustang canters across the Cayuse Ranch, 2007



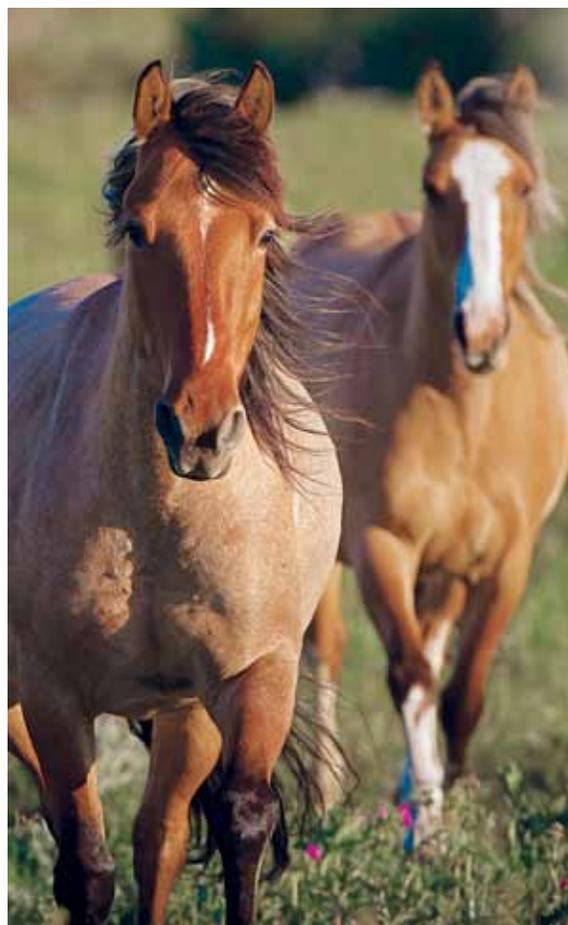
Spanish Mustang bachelors at play



Raffaella, a mare known for her extraordinary mane and bright eye

crossbreeds and draft horses. The explorers' arrival in the West with this varied array of horses marked the beginning of the dilution of true Spanish bloodlines. Ultimately, the mixing of breeds would be one of several contributing factors that threatened the existence of pure Spanish Mustangs.

Among those that witnessed the turn of the 19th century, independent trappers such as John Colter, Jim Bridger, Joe Walker, Benjamin Bonneville, Jedediah Smith and other bold souls lived west of the Mississippi River. These rough-cut colonial entrepreneurs laid the groundwork for western expansion by charting previously unmapped territories as they moved across the land, encountering tribe after tribe of Native Americans. During the first 40 years of the 1800s, before the major onslaught of settlers from the East moved west to fulfill their American dreams, these independent, burly men traveled the Missouri River hunting and trapping beavers and other animals for the lucrative fur trade. They co-existed with friendly tribal cultures and adopted much of the Native American knowledge of the natural world. Living off the land and trading with Indians for horses, they had few other possessions. A breed unto themselves, this wily bunch of individualists became known collectively as "mountain men."



Trotting through wildflowers, Spanish Mustangs traverse the Seven Eagles Ranch, Montana



A pinto mare and her Medicine Hat foal stroll with blackbird companions that feed on summer flies, Montana



Spanish burro living with mustangs in Oklahoma, 2008

Comanche was nursed back to health in Kansas and given a leisurely retirement, asked to work only during formal functions when he would be draped in black and led at the front of his regiment. After he died of colic at age 29, Comanche's skin and bones were preserved and have been on display at the University of Kansas Museum of Natural History.

Three decades prior to the disaster at Little Bighorn, excitement about the American frontier had begun to spread like wildfire in the wake of the United States's annexation of Texas and Mexico's move to cede claim to regions stretching from Texas to California following the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. This landmark event, followed by the Gold Rush in the Northwest Territories, fanned a hot national desire for growth.

Beginning in 1841 and continuing through 1894, homestead legislation sparked fierce political debate. Before the Civil War, representatives of Southern states had regularly voted against this legislation because they foresaw that passage would hasten the development of the West, thus shifting the balance of political influence to areas without slavery. After a narrow defeat in 1858, major land grant legislation described as designed to



Roan filly stretches her stride to keep up with her dam, Wyoming, 2007



Vaquero spurs with sharp rowels, circa 1900

help the poor and provide relief to overcrowded Eastern cities was ratified. Called the Homestead Act of 1862, it was signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War. This new law—which provided 160 acres of unoccupied public lands to each homesteader with payment of a nominal fee after five years of residence—would eventually spur thousands of Eastern urban Americans as well as small farmers in the East and Midwest to seek new opportunities in the West. Leaving the bitter ashes of the Civil War behind after it ended in 1865, these new pilgrims bought Conestoga wagons and rolled to what they hoped would be a bright new future.

Unforeseen hardships lay ahead. As much as the legislation was supposed to help the poor, many became mired in conditions far worse than they had experienced previously. Arriving with few financial assets and with their horses' strength expended, turning back was not an option for most. Yet this was a new era, and the long



Band of Spanish Mustangs near Glacier National Park, 2007

wagon trains continued to flood into the Southwest over the Santa Fé Trail, eventually flowing into the Northwest across the Oregon Trail. Many American citizens and immigrating Europeans who were soon to be citizens believed that this wide open country's resources were inexhaustible. Additionally, it was generally believed—partly due to the terms of land grant legislation—that anyone who was willing to stake a claim on property and defend it deserved to call it his own. Many native nations found this concept of ownership of their ancestral lands objectionable; they maintained that they belonged to the land that had fostered them and many generations before them.

En masse, settlers arrived in the West with a mindset wholly different than the mountain men and explorers had taken with them on their pioneering journeys. Many of



Cayuse Ranch mares graze near a mound that the Brislawns know only as made by 'the people who were here before us'

Cowboy wearing decorated chaps, right, prepares to lasso a calf, Browning, Montana





Roving herd of Spanish Mustangs in the gold grasses of October, 2006

these new settlers were intolerant of anything Indian. With the United States Congress's approval, they felt entitled to the land, including all the wildlife, vegetation and minerals that abounded. This sense of entitlement was challenged not only by strong native resistance but also by the harsh reality of the western landscape. There was no way for the wayfarers who were moving west to know the hardships that lurked on their paths.

By the time the weary travelers who survived the arduous trek arrived as far as Idaho, their oxen and Eastern horse stock were typically exhausted and the settlers needed fresh animals to continue. Indian tribes that recalled having successful trading relations with early explorers and mountain men initially obliged these families. They traded them fresh horses for aprons, metal pans, hats or whatever the settlers had that would entice the natives to give up some of their ponies. These new arriving families most certainly could

not have continued the journey over the Northwest's steep slopes without acquiring fresh horses. The often large draft horses or gaited saddle horses the settlers arrived with would not have had the endurance to continue on while surviving off meager forage in the semi-arid western wilderness. Yet the infusion of more and more new American-bred horses tracing back to English, Dutch, French, Irish and other bloodlines would begin to leave their genetic mark on the wild Spanish Mustangs as well as on the Indian ponies.

The Cayuse Indian nation lay directly on the path of the Oregon Trail. Although early settlers traded with many different tribes they encountered along their way, they generally made no distinction between them, regarding most Indians as "savages," viewing them as less significant than themselves. Since most settlers traveling to the Northwest Plateau encountered the Cayuse tribe, they began to refer to all Indians and



Floating free on the Montana plains, a herd of Spanish Mustangs takes flight on a summer day, 2007



Spotted feral longhorn living in the Kiamichi Mountains, Oklahoma, 2008



Days-old colt does not stray from his dam

their ponies as “ole Cayuses,” and the term Cayuse became a commonly used derogatory reference to both native peoples and their mounts. The slang phrase “ole Cayuse” is still heard in some areas to this day.

Migrants moving west did not understand that the Indian ponies they disparagingly called Cayuse were actually the legacy of horses of proven endurance capability—Iberian horses that had adapted to the conditions of the West for two and half centuries. The Indian ponies were descendants of the Spanish Jennets, Andalusians and Sorraias of medieval times, and their ancestry reached back to the North African Barbs and the Arab warhorses of nearly a millennium before.

When they saw a “savage” mounted on a swift and spirited horse, the settlers felt an instinctive chord of fear struck deep within them. They knew the Native American astride his tireless horse could not be easily contained. Thus, the sight of Indians evoked fear and loathing, emotions that were enflamed by often violent conflicts between marauding natives and invading settlers. Blinded by this dread, most settlers believed that all things Indian were wholly untamed, even sub-human,

and therefore should be eliminated. They strongly felt that they needed and deserved protection against these savages from the United States government, which had encouraged the settlers to move to the West by offering land grants. This sentiment produced political pressure to suppress Indians—particularly the Indians with horse cultures. Over the following decades, the government would respond by unleashing a technologically superior and unforgiving military force to quell native resistance.

But the first devastating assault on the native nations was the onslaught of epidemics. Settlers' wagons were contaminated with invisible calamities of smallpox, measles and scarlet fever, and diseases spread, weakening and destroying thousands of native inhabitants who had no immunities to these plagues. Epidemics felled entire tribes, and many Indian ponies left without owners ran free with the Spanish Mustangs. One of the many epidemics occurred in the Cayuse territory, where nearly half the tribe died in a measles outbreak in 1847. Convinced that a local missionary and physician who were unable to cure them were instead poisoning them in order to clear their land for settlers, the Cayuse attacked the mission near what is now Walla Walla, Washington. They killed the missionary, his wife and some settlers and provoked a war that would result in their confinement to a reservation. For the most part, the tribe's only legacy would be the horses bearing their name. But these Indian ponies continued to be reviled, and in time "ole Cayuse" would face a judgment akin to the harshness of the reservation.

Even though early explorers and settlers initially were greeted with kindness by the Indians of the Northwest, the new wave of homesteaders never relinquished their dogmatic view that all Indians were vile and vicious. Their sense of entitlement grew even stronger in the second and third generations. They believed the Native Americans stood in the way of their continental colonization concept known as Manifest Destiny, and they were determined to subdue any Indian rebellion or claims of rights.

In an ironic twist of similarities, some settlers had an appetite for equine steak just as did some native tribes. When Indians refused on spiritual or other grounds to trade horses to satisfy the settlers' appetite for horsemeat, some homesteaders brazenly poached from Indian herds. These settlers at times butchered the fallen steed on the spot, leaving the horse's severed head along with a token trade item for "payment." Such acts stoked native warriors to retaliate, and Indian retribution on



Young Blackfoot woman aims for a calf, Montana, 2007



Southwestern branding iron with initials J.S., circa 1890



Lasso settles on the neck of a calf

horseback was swift and vengeance often brutal. As hope of peaceful relations with the natives degenerated, the cycle of injustice and reprisal fed violence. Prejudice led to rank suspicions. If a homesteader discovered his horses missing, perhaps they were just grazing elsewhere or maybe the mares had been beckoned by a feral stallion. Regardless, the simple solution was to accuse the nearest tribe of stealing the horses; then the settlers could justify rustling horses from tribal herds. As a result, the tribes would retaliate, which would further inflame the settlers' desire to eliminate the Indians.

Under the direction of the government, the United States Dragoons had sporadically overseen native issues in the West, trying to keep peace. While the government offered natives many treaties, all in time would be broken. As the Civil War loomed in the late 1850s, the military had to pull back from western Indian pursuits to deal with the secession of the Southern states and the eventual destructive conflict. It was only after the Civil War that the Army could begin to turn its cavalry and additional military might toward protecting western settlers from perceived and real Indian dangers.

President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act, which he pushed through the Congress in 1830, officially initiated the United States government's policy of Native American internment. Implementation began in the Southeast, where landowners coveted native grounds to grow cotton. The Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole and Cherokee tribes were forced to walk what became known as the Trail of Tears in a mandated relocation



Native American cowboy wrestles a calf to the ground during Indian Days celebration, Browning, Montana

Spanish Mustang Portfolio

2006 - 2008



Plate V

Dark Horse

With soul on fire and mind a gale,
instincts rustle like leaves before a storm.
Whispered feelings, beyond what is heard;
higher callings vibrate dormant memories.

The dark horse rages of fire and wind,
striking at the heavens in the dead of night.
Lightning's whip of brilliance startles the dark—
Fire in wind, a dangerous blend.

Feelings throbbing in the dark horse's heart,
lit within, a blazing flame, unseen, contained,
reluctantly illuminating the void of truth,
harshly beautiful, attractively terrifying.

Waves of energy roll in this thunder of thought.
Rumblings from long before we were born—
the aurora of lights, so seldom seen,
stampedes the imagination into freedom.





The Wellspring

Vigilantly listening is key to understanding.
The intent of words is to reach across
the wide wake of humanity and nature,
bridging joy, delight, heartache and sorrow.

With all of those who look and listen,
Hoping to hear unspoken truth, it is
the silence that resides between each word,
silence that is the wellspring of all thought.

The source from where gifts emanate
is comprehension and it is found
in the contemplative journey.
Only when a faithful listener
grasps the fine silk of words
lightly sewn together by another
can words become a passageway
that connects souls together, forever.