

# How the West Was Lost

by Richard Rhodes

*Notes on some American misfits*

*Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student of divinity.* —Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Y**ou must see the wild horses of the American West to see the point, see them running along a ridge, the mare who is their real leader ahead of the band, the stallion trotting alertly behind. They are small for horses because their bloodlines run back to Spanish horses and they grow one less vertebra than our standard-breds. They live in territories around water holes, range and graze and visit the water hole at night when the men they fear are sleeping. They run to all colors, reds, duns, smokes, greys, bays, blacks, bluecorns, but as they adapt to the wilds they go to roan, probably for camouflage. No one knows for sure. The sum total of ecological information about the wild horse is contained in a thirty-nine-page thesis written by a Master's candidate at the University of Nevada-Reno. They eat what they can get, which isn't much in the desolate hills where they've been driven by man: grass, roots, a few browse off the mountain mahogany. They have shade areas they favor and trees to scratch their backs on and at their canyon-rim lookouts they pile up dung posts. They control their own population too, depending on next year's weather. No one knows how they determine next year's weather but it appears that they do because they breed in the spring and drop their foals late the following winter; when it's a winter of heavy snow they drop more foals. Their standard organization is one stallion and a harem of half-a-dozen to a dozen mares. Old stallions get forced out of their harems by young stallions and finish their days alone. Young stallions run in teen-age bands and spend a good deal of time trying to entice away the harem mares. But whatever their organization, the wild horses graze and water and run and rest and scratch and—who knows—discuss ethics just as Gulliver saw. They are one of the largest beasts on the continent, but they are not carnivores or we would have put an end to them long ago. They're not a target animal and they have no real use, but if you're lucky enough to catch a glimpse of them they seem like the wind and the West itself.

Men were putting an end to them until very recently and it's worth backtracking a little to see why. In 1887 the Smithsonian Institution sent a zoologist, Wil-

liam T. Hornaday, to find out what had happened to the buffalo that had blackened the Great Plains, and this is part of what Hornaday wrote of his search:

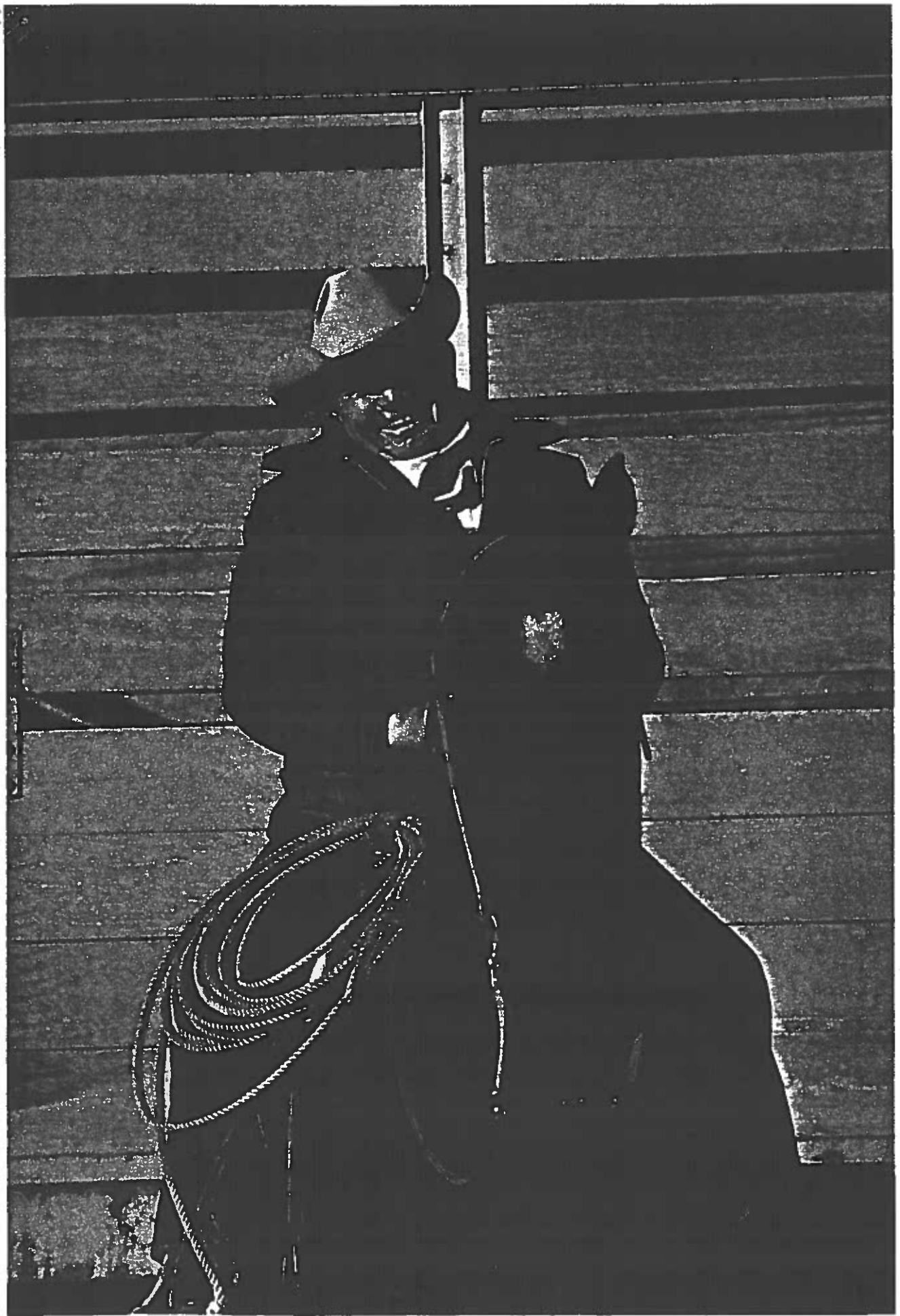
"Could the southern buffalo range have been roofed over [in 1873, at the height of the slaughter] it would have made one vast charnel house. Putrefying carcasses, many of them with the hides still on, lay thickly scattered over thousands of square miles of the level prairie, poisoning the air and water and offending the sight. The remaining herds had become mere scattered bands, harried and driven hither and thither by the hunters, who now swarmed almost as thickly as the buffaloes. . . ."

America was clearing the prairies then, knocking off the buffalo and packing the Indians onto reservations in order to use the land. The same thing has happened in the past fifty years to the wild horses, the horses that numbered about two million in 1900 and number about ten or fifteen thousand today, most of them in Nevada, but the clearing operation has been less noisome because instead of leaving the carcasses out to rot the horse hunters have shipped them off to dog-food factories. That's where old horses go and until recently that's where wild horses went; the shame of it is that we didn't have enough pets back in 1873 to use up all that good buffalo meat. Today the horses are protected by a new federal law that declares them to be "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West" and makes it a crime punishable by a fine of \$2,000 or a year in prison or both to hunt or sell them. Cowboys and cattlemen took on ladies and schoolchildren and the ladies and schoolchildren won; now there is a federal law. The cowboys are pissed because they were getting six cents a pound for their labors and the cattlemen are worried because they have to share the public-domain lands they lease with the horses, and the ladies and schoolchildren are delighted, though they aren't apt to catch more than a glimpse of the wild horses on any field trip because the horses have learned to stay away from predators. They live like soldiers who haven't got word the war is over.

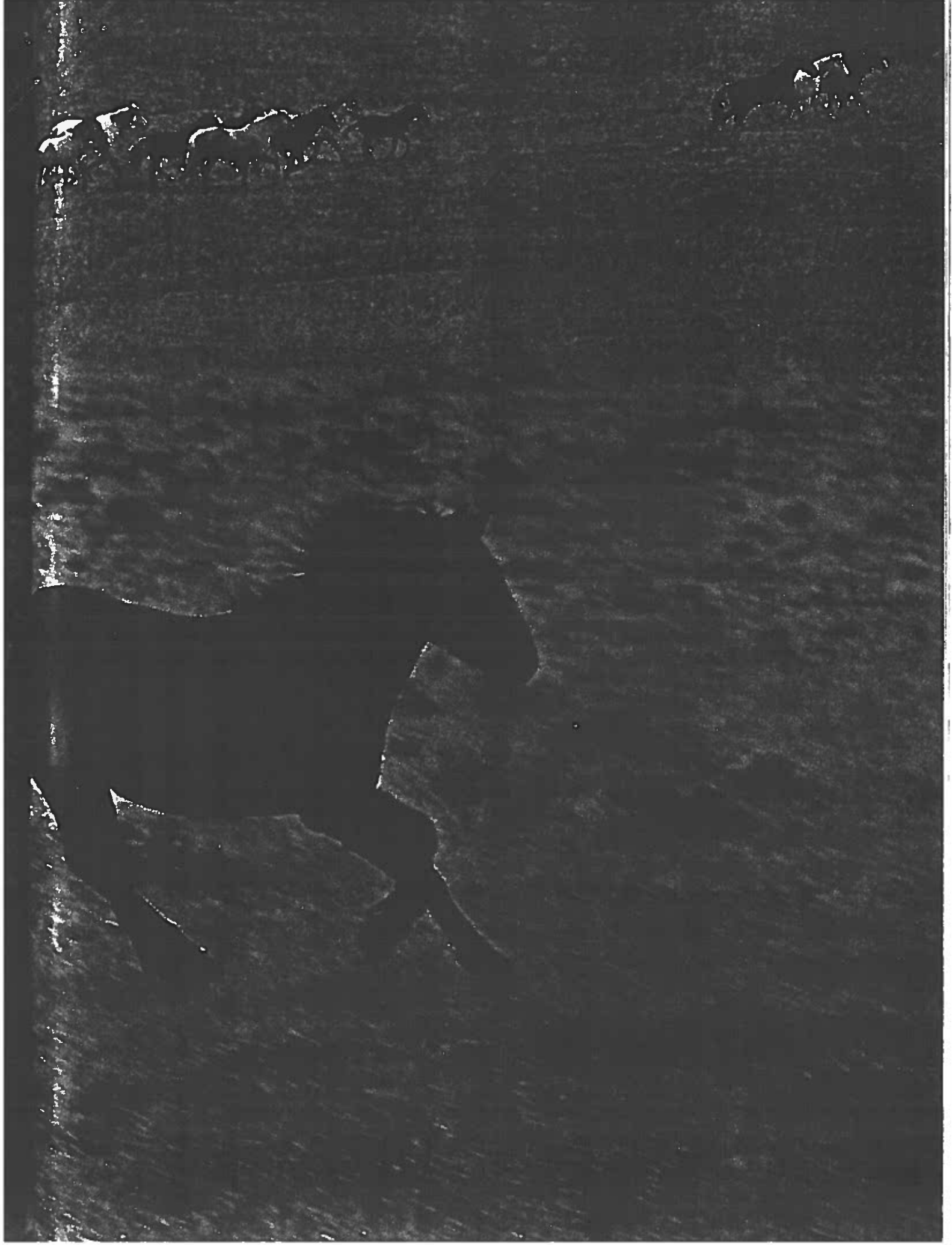
Horse hunting wasn't exactly the sport of kings in

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*In the old days, hunters like C.C. "Chug" Utter (right) used to harvest wild horses and sell the meat for six cents a pound, but that was before the do-gooders came West. The horses still run free in Nevada (overleaf) where "they live like soldiers who haven't got the word that the war is over."*







the first place, any more than buffalo hunting was. Arthur Miller thought horse hunting was the sport of misfits and he gave it his grudging admiration but left out most of its gore. The cowboy in the plane carried a sawed-off shotgun and he'd pepper the horses to keep them bunched while he drove them down out of the mountains to the flat valley below and by the time they'd run about thirty miles over the rocks some of them had worn their hooves to the raw bone and some of them had their eyes shot out and their lips hanging loose and bloody wounds on their shoulders and rumps, and then the cowboys in the valley would either rope them from trucks, just like Clark Gable in *The Misfits*, and hobble them with hundred-pound tires or they'd run them into camouflaged corrals and then up the loading chute with cattle prods or clubs the size of fence posts. The cowboys weren't the kind of guys you'd want to meet in a Reno alley either. A Reno biologist named Michael Pontrelli who helped lead the fight to save the wild horses did one of the hunters a good turn a few years ago and the hunter decided to do Pontrelli a good turn too and warned him never to go anywhere alone. "One man don't come back," he told Pontrelli. "Two men do." That may sound like a line from an old John Wayne movie, but Pontrelli has had strange types standing in his driveway for hours waiting for him to come home, driving his baby-sitters into hysterics.

Pontrelli got slapped with a \$65,000 lawsuit last year for something he said he didn't do. (The judge dismissed the case with prejudice, and the two horse hunters had to pay all court costs.) He works with the queen of the wild horses, a Reno lady named Velma Johnston whose nickname is Wild Horse Annie. Last year one of Annie's informants, whom she calls Zeke to protect from reprisals, sidled up to her in a stationery store and whispered the news that two locals were building a corral, a trap, on some rangeland that belonged to the Curtiss-Wright Corporation and were planning a wild-horse roundup just a few weeks before the new law was due to be passed. Zeke said the men had released a few branded horses of their own into a herd of about three hundred wild horses that roams the hills around Virginia City. That release was designed to circumvent a Nevada law that makes aerial and motorized wild-horse hunting illegal on private land but excludes domestic horses from its protection.

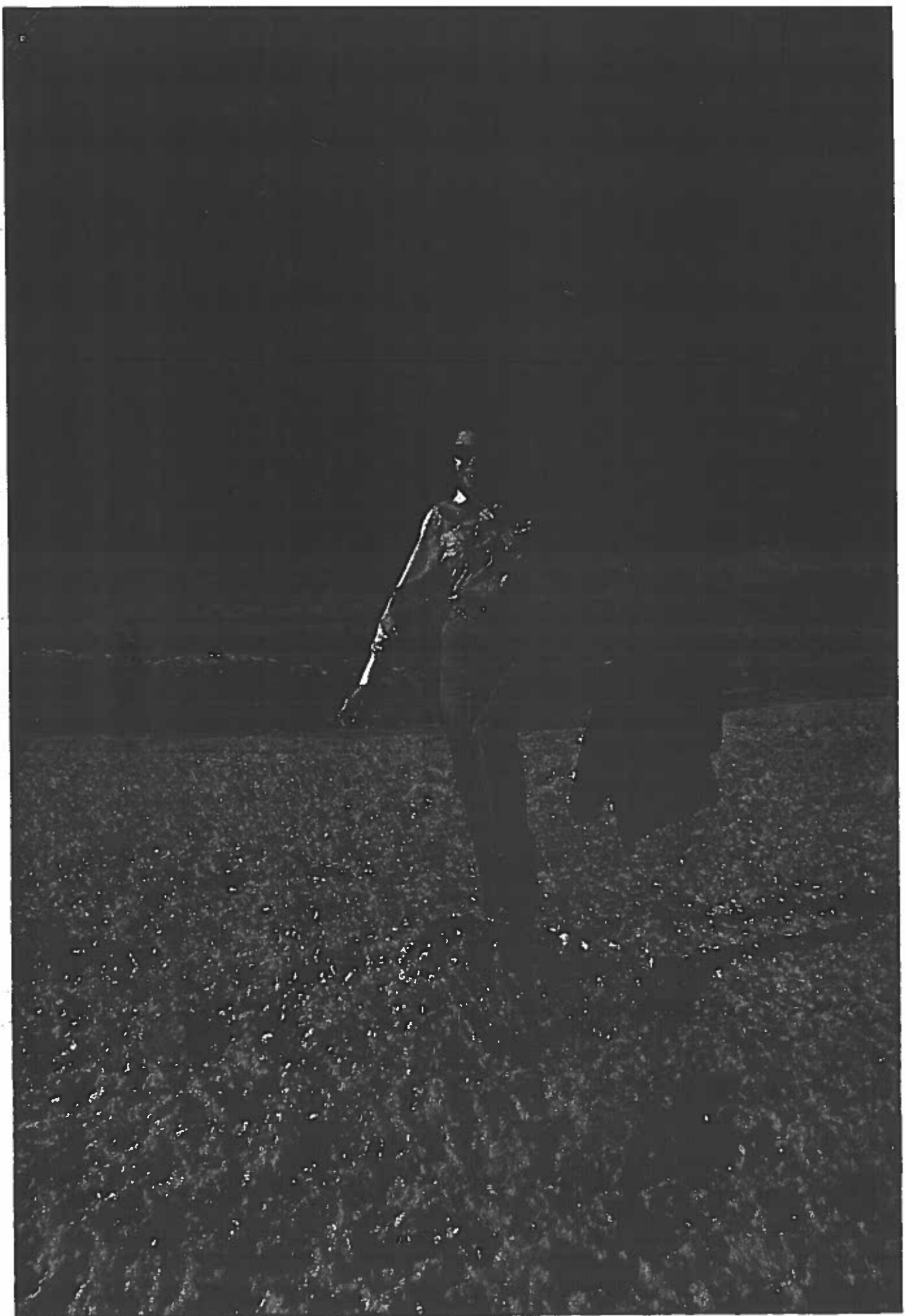
Annie had some money that had been donated to help her campaign to protect the wild horses and she used it to charter a private plane and every morning for months the pilot and Pontrelli would fly down to Virginia City and check out the corral the Reno men had built. Annie's got pictures of it; they have the same eerie barrenness to them as the pictures Adlai Stevenson unveiled at the U.N. of the Soviet missile installations in Cuba. The corral was damned clever. It was built at the bottom of a hill with an uncamouflaged fence running across a flat beside the hill that the plane would herd the horses through. The horses would see the fence and then see a trail leading along what looked like a row of low bushes and naturally head for the trail and freedom. Except that the low bushes disguised another fence that would lead the horses right into a disguised corral where a cowboy would drop a canvas flap to block the horses inside long enough to get the gate closed and then they'd go into a holding corral until the trucks could be brought up, and off they'd go for dog food. The two Reno men who built the corral, Jerry Utter and Bill Victor, deny it was intended for wild horses. They claim they built it to herd their own horses.

What happened was that after four months of morning flights, Pontrelli and Annie and the spotter they had posted on a nearby hill and the network of informants got tired of waiting and decided that Pontrelli should go out with a group of people from the press on a Monday morning, that he remove a couple of panels from the corral, make a hole in the corral, and then announce where the owners could pick up the panels. They checked with Curtiss-Wright and Curtiss-Wright said that would be fine because the corral was in trespass. But when Pontrelli arrived at the corral site on Monday morning the corral had been reduced to kindling by an anonymous group of chain-saw-wielding Virginia Citizens with the approval of the local sheriff, who was tired of waiting too. The demolition wasn't exactly legal but it had a certain charm, vigilante justice in the name of preserving our American heritage. Jerry Utter and Bill Victor filed the damage suit against Pontrelli for allegedly stirring up the vigilantes.

Jerry Utter's father, C.C. "Chug" Utter, was one of the biggest wild-horse hunters back when roundups were not only legal but encouraged by the Bureau of Land Management as a way of clearing the public domain for cattle at no cost to the taxpayer. Utter is reputed to have "harvested," as the hunters call it, 40,000 wild horses in his time. He is a crack pilot. You have to be a crack pilot to herd horses out of the mountain canyons and survive, and he's smashed up more than once and has a mean scar across his mouth to prove it. Today he's a real-estate man and a rancher; he doesn't like the wild horses any more than he used to and thinks the new law is going to work against itself and guarantee their extinction. When I talked to him at his ranch in one of Nevada's godforsaken valleys he was tired after a hard day of herding cattle and he repeated the same point maybe ten times: that the government is going to give the ranchers ninety days to get their horses rounded up and branded—the horses left unbranded will be declared wild and allowed to roam the range. Utter figures that no sensible rancher is going to leave any wild horses out there to compete with his cattle for the scrub and the browse. He thinks the ranchers are either going to claim all the horses or shoot them dead. Pontrelli disagrees because he figures the government has sense enough to demand proof from the ranchers that they really own the horses—bills of sale or tax receipts. Pontrelli is probably right, but you have to ask yourself why Utter is so cynical about the protection law, and when you ask yourself that you open up the whole can of worms all over again.

From the air and the ground, Nevada, outside its two anodized cities, is grey, grey-brown, grey-black, grey-red, good deer hunting in the mountains, good fishing in the lakes, but grey, dusty and barren enough that eighty-five percent of its land still belongs to the United States Government, because no one bothered to buy it when it was available and the government isn't selling it nowadays. The Paiutes lived there once and the Washo, gathering and small-game peoples, Diggers, the pioneers contemptuously called them, Indians who could live on white grubs and grasshoppers if they had to, though they preferred rabbits and piñon nuts. The (Continued on page 184)

*Right: Velma Johnston, known as Wild Horse Annie, led the fight to protect the mustangs from hunters, and she won. Now a federal statute designates the wild horses as "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West."*



## HOW THE WEST WAS LOST

(Continued from page 154) wagon trains to California passed through the region, following the Humboldt River to its sink and crossing the forty-mile desert to the Truckee and over the Donner Pass. Nevada, the bottom of the Great Basin, was a barren the emigrants disgustingly crossed, spitting spit blackened by the dust, and not until the second half of the nineteenth century did they take note of the horses they saw roaming there, horses that numbered in the millions. America gave the world corn and tobacco and also the horse. The horse evolved here, trading off toes for hooves that could work the hard ground, until about eight thousand years ago, when it crossed the land bridge to Asia, and then it disappeared entirely from America at about the same time the first Indians arrived and probably hunted it for food. The Spanish brought the horse back, a runt of an animal tough enough to sail from Spain to Cuba hanging in a sling in the hold of a ship, a horse bred out from Arabian and Norse and African strains. Some of the Spanish horses got free on the mainland and moved north and west, refilled the same ecological niche in the American West their ancestors had occupied before, and changed Indian culture irrevocably in the space of a few hundred years. By then so many horses ran in the West that the Indians, with the exception of the Nez Percé, never

bothered to learn to breed them. When they wanted fresh stock they stole from each other or caught new horses from the wild herds.

Then the cattlemen came, filling in the basin between the Sierras and the Rockies with cattle, and the horse that had been a reservoir for the Indians and the early settlers became a pest, just as the buffalo had become a pest. The cattlemen thought the horses competed for forage, and perhaps they did, but the cattlemen overloaded the range with cattle, overgrazed the range until the cattle business just about went bust. The government stepped in then with the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934, took control of the public domain and began leasing it out to ranchers, instead of leaving it open to anyone's access.

The West had seen huge horse roundups before then, thousands of horses shipped out to supply the Civil War, thousands more for the Boer War, hundreds every year for the U.S. Cavalry until almost the beginning of World War II, but between 1934 and the mid-1950's and especially in the four years after World War II the roundup went on in earnest to get the horses off the disintegrating ranges and sell them for food, human food and chicken feed and later dog food. The hunters got five or six cents a pound, enough to make it worth their while to hunt them on horseback, and then the airplane came along and made it easy. The government put a bounty on the pests, you could get

rich and do your patriotic duty at the same time by clearing the range of horses. The horses didn't look like domestic horses anyway, short-coupled, broom-tailed, Roman-nosed, shaggy, no more than thirteen or fourteen hands high, ugly and apparently inbred and wild as wild. By 1952 their number was down to 33,000. By then the men who had them hunted were professional ranchers and they considered the government land they leased as theirs and not in the public domain, for they had been leasing it and using it as their own since 1934. They figured the horses were eating up *their* range.

And then this weird, polio-twisted woman who was a secretary in Reno came along and started making a fuss. She wanted to save the wild horses. The ranchers thought the wild horses were no more than degraded remnants of the cow ponies the men who went bust on the range had turned out to forage for themselves. She thought the horses represented the spirit of America and that the roundups were inhumane.

Mrs. Velma Johnston, Wild Horse Annie, stands tall and spare, her shoulders twisted out of line by a childhood bout with polio that kept her in a full body cast for most of a year while she stared from her hospital bed at a painting of wild horses hanging outside in the hall. You meet her in the office where she works as executive secretary to a greying, distinguished Reno realtor and you realize that she has taken

charge of her handicap and made her peace with it, but only later, when you hear her talking on the phone in the next room of her house, do you put her qualities together in your mind: she will never see fifty again but her voice is the voice of a beautiful and talented girl of twenty-five or thirty, the voice of someone with a clear purpose who knows exactly what she is about.

Annie was driving to work one day twenty years ago behind what looked to her like a cattle truck except that it was dripping blood onto the highway, and when she got close enough to see through the slats she realized it wasn't carrying cattle, it was carrying horses, horses crammed together any which way, and a colt was lying under their feet. She followed the truck and found that the horses were wild and were heading for the slaughterhouse and could not be shot to release them from their torture because they had to be at least barely alive in order to be sold. Something clicked then for Annie, her memories of polio, her memories of a horseback childhood on a Nevada ranch, and she started a long fight to protect the horses. In 1959 she convinced Congress to pass a law making air and motorized roundups, misfit roundups, illegal on public land if the horses were unbranded. She got a state law too making the same thing illegal on private land in Nevada. You could still round up a herd of horses if some of the horses were branded, and the brand inspectors couldn't do a damned thing, even if they cared to, which most of them didn't: one of the inspectors who did care lost his job last year, two years before he was due to retire. He's had a few second thoughts about his dedication to the public good, he says, but even in his bitterness he's proud he spoke out. Lucius Beebe of Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise* spoke out too, back when Annie was just tooling up her campaign and everyone figured she was only another do-gooder. Beebe socked out editorials with punch lines like, "Don't shoot a horse, shoot a legislator!" His estate not long ago gave Annie \$4,000, which she used in part to finance her trip to Washington to testify at a Congressional hearing. Another gift from a local celebrity enabled her to hire a secretary to assist in handling the letters she gets from all over the world, most of them from schoolchildren.

Annie began her campaign because she didn't like to see horses trucked three hundred miles without water and in terror while bleeding from shotgun wounds, didn't like to think they'd all be wiped out, and for most fanciers of wild horses that's still where it's at. But something happened to Annie's thinking along the way. She learned to live with harassment and she learned to marshal her facts to counteract the natural tendency of legislators to think of her as a little old lady in tennis shoes. She also learned that the issue was vaster than wild horses, that the question was who owns the public lands and who benefits from them and how their wealth was being squandered for private gain. She was confronting not

merely a few market hunters too derelict to make an honest buck but also an informal coalition of mining, ranching and business interests who believed the public land belonged to them because they had the means to exploit it. It was no secret conspiracy, though she sometimes thought so, only a tradition as old as the nation itself, a tradition of plunder that goes back at least as far as the arguments among the founding fathers over who should collect interest on the money in the U.S. Treasury. Somewhere back in the beginnings of the nation the Indian belief in communal land had met and merged with the eighteenth century's ideas of democracy and had begun that conflict with Anglo-Saxon notions of private property that continues today. Unknowingly Annie had stumbled right into the center of the conflict with her campaign to save the wild horses. And men who had sweated blood to get ahead by working the public land discovered that in Annie and her schoolchildren the conflict still lived, and the possibility that they might be beaten by such opponents floored them. They hated the government just as much as Annie did before it came around to her view, hated it for laying down rules about how they would run their leases on the range, for telling them how many cattle they could graze, and if the horse issue didn't stand between them, they and Annie would have most of the rest of their politics in common, she's for sure no liberal.

But the cattlemen had long ago made peace with the rules by packing the government advisory boards with their own men, and here was this woman slowly turning the government around to her point of view by flooding Congress with letters from schoolchildren. It's no wonder that Annie considers the new protective law a landmark: the first law to assert that the public land belongs to all the people and must be managed with the needs and wishes of all the people in mind, not just lessees. The issue isn't horses anymore, there aren't enough wild horses left. The issue is keeping a little bit of America's last open land free for a diversity of life-forms, city visitors included, and no one should be surprised that men who have spent their lives working that land as if it were their own should be reluctant to give up even the least control over it. Times change. The problems of the ranchers are finally no different from the problems of the car manufacturers and the corporations whose factory chimneys smoke; they must take the rest of us into consideration even if the cost comes out of their pockets and ultimately out of ours. Chug Utter thinks the price of beef is going to soar so high in this country that no one will eat it anymore, and he may be right, but it won't be because the public domain is being managed for multiple use: the public domain produces less than one percent of the beef we eat.

And that, really, is the heart of the conflict insofar as the opponents of the wild horses are concerned. The West used to be thick with life and now it is grass, dust, memories of dust and bliz-

zard snow. Ghosts blow across the West, ghosts by the millions as shocking to see as any starving refugees of war, Indian ghosts, buffalo ghosts, the ghosts of dead horses, bighorn sheep, bald eagles, antelope, giant elk. Men run a few cattle and sheep out there now and a few horses, but most of the cattle we eat in this country grow fat in huge feedlots where they never see a blade of grass. And the men are bitter because their freedom to use the narrowing bounty of the land is progressively cut away by laws and rules made up by people whom they believe to have no knowledge of their problems. The men live with horses and use them in their work. The wild horses are a threat to them because the men are working margins that narrow more with every year. If the government did not lease the men land they could not continue to live on the range, so they must at last take hat in hand and go to government for permission to live as they would like to; that was all right when government spoke their language, but government is telling them that it's going to speak a more urban language now. Their life isn't whole anymore: they are reduced not to raising cattle but to maintaining them until they reach fattening age, when they are shipped off to efficient feedlot operations.

And the trouble is that the ranchers' instincts about the ecology movement are right, that the ecology movement as it is proselytized today carries within it a contradiction that in their plain rough way they sense, because if we truly want the natural world to operate according to its own benevolent principles then we must allow nature to take its course and not manage it at all, and nature includes man, and man rings his changes on it as naturally as fire or flood or drought. Preservationists today want not the natural world but an imitation of the natural world, a natural world managed by man. Men who have grown up with barer versions of the wilderness find that desire sentimental. With the range as bare as it is today they can't imagine why sentimental folk would want to turn it into a giant zoo.

So the ranchers will continue to live their imitations of the way they used to live—even now they feed their cattle protein blocks and count the scrub on the range as no more than filler—for a little while yet, but eventually they will disappear into lives less arduous and more artificial, as most of us have. When the beaver were trapped out of the mountains the mountain men disappeared, and when the buffalo were wiped out the buffalo hunters disappeared, and now horse hunting is illegal and cattle raising on the open range less and less profitable, and eventually the horse hunters and range ranchers will disappear too, but is it perverse of me to think that we will all have lost something by their disappearance, brutal men though some of them were? We would have lost something too if the horses were hunted to extinction, but in the tender checks and balances of our national life ought there not to be room for both?



You have to see men like Chug Utter for the proposition to make any sense, men who spend their days riding herd on cattle up and down dusty valleys forty miles long and come in wind-burned and exhausted and toss down a Scotch or two to wash the dust away; you have to see women like Wild Horse Annie with the guts to fight for twenty years for a principle that has only recently become popular, and then you have to see the horses themselves running along a ridge or taking careful turns at a seepage and when you've seen all three you find yourself wanting not a resolution of the triangle but a permanent continuation of its leverages, because if any side of the dispute were finally to give way then we would all be the less: we live on conflict, not on resolution; that is our dynamic in this unique land, that is what made us Americans, the conflict between loving the land and raping it, between becoming Indians and becoming shopkeepers, that is who we are and that is what keeps us alive and kicking. And there had better be at least one hard-bitten rancher for every ten preservationists and at least one Annie for every ten ranchers and at least one horse for every ten Annies or this land is going to be turned into a park for schoolchildren. Or so it sometimes appears. But new problems arise to replace the old. That is Emerson's point: that no matter how we slice it we still must deal with a nature that cannot be whitewashed. Consider this exchange of testimony between Congressman Dellenback of Oregon and Boyd Rasmussen of the Bureau of Land Management at the horse-protection law hearings:

Mr. Dellenback: If I may go back to this matter of reducing the population, I must confess we are having some concern as to what your bill would provide. You say on page 2 of your bill, 4(c):

"The Secretary may reduce the population of the free roaming horses and burros in any humane manner; however, he shall not sell any free roaming horses or burros for use in rodeos or the preparation of commercial products." Suppose you need to reduce the population? You could sell for any other purposes besides rodeos and commercial products. I don't know what those purposes might be. You might sell a few to a zoo or something. If you don't sell, I presume you could take them off and put them on other land, but I assume that doesn't really solve the problem of oversupply. Your third choice is to kill them. That means you go out and shoot them, poison them, or do something else with them. What would you do with the carcasses? I don't know what you mean by reducing or controlling population.

Mr. Rasmussen: I suppose we would bury the carcasses.

Mr. Dellenback: You might go out and kill the horses and bury them?

Mr. Rasmussen: Yes. . . .

Which means that the government, on a lesser scale and more humanely, now will do what the horse hunters did before. Management. Gardening. Zoo keeping, and cleaning. For there is really no solution. Annie and her schoolchildren will have to contend with that. #