



Evaluation of the Cruce Herd of Horses (1991)

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The Cruce horses are one of a very small handful (five would be a very optimistic estimate) of strains of horses derived from Spanish colonial days that persist as purely (or as nearly as can be determined) Spanish to the present day. Most other strains have long been absorbed into the Quarter Horse breed (with draft and Thoroughbred influence) or have undergone extinction. They are the only known "rancher" strain or pure horses that persist in the southwest. The Cruce horses are of great interest because they are a non-feral strain. The only other strains of Spanish horses that persist to this day are feral strains in certain isolated areas (Kiger and Cerbat BLM herds currently, although examples of pure horses of other populations now extinct or contaminated are present in owned, managed herds), and the Choctaw/Cherokee strains which originated in the Southeast. To this very short list can be added the Belsky and Romero/McKinley strains, but neither of these can claim the historic isolation that the Cruce horses have had, and both are somewhat doubtful purity as to Spanish ancestry. The Cruce horses, as a non-feral strain, are therefore truly unique.

Visual examination of the Cruce herd indicates that the herd history is very likely accurate. The horses are remarkably uniform, and of a very pronounced Spanish phenotype. In some instances this is an extremely Spanish type, such as is rare in other Spanish strains persisting in North America. This type is illustrated in paintings of Spanish horses during the colonial period, and it was a pleasant though great surprise to see it persisting to this day. The horses varied over a very narrow range from this extreme type to a more moderate type that is more common in other North American strains and Iberian strains today.

The need to conserve this herd is great, since they do represent a unique genetic resource. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations has become interested in rare breed conservation over the last fifteen years, and their interest in horses is limited to those breeds that are uninfluenced by the Arabian and the Thoroughbred. The reason they have limited their interest and energy to horses without such influence is the incredible scarcity of such populations worldwide. The Cruce horses fit in this category very securely, and are therefore of great interest and importance not only in North America, but in the worldwide efforts to conserve genetically unique populations of livestock.

The American Minor Breeds Conservancy is very interested in this population. It must be emphasized that this interest is very great in the case of the Cruce horses, and very limited with regard to most other horse types. For example, the AMBC has no interest

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in the conservation of western feral populations except for the few (two) of purely Spanish phenotype. The Cruce population is a most significant discovery of a type of horse thought to be gone forever.