



The Rescue of the Wilbur Cruce Mission Horse

Written by Dr. Phil Sponenberg PhD, DVM

Edited and Updated by Jane Dobrott

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The American Minor Breeds Conservancy was recently fortunate to have been able to directly intervene and conserve a unique herd of horses. This was exciting work for the AMBC, and this rescue was very helpful in formulating the ways and means by which a rescue can be effectively accomplished. Such rescues always have two sides to them. One side is that if AMBC is truly effective, then direct intervention and rescue should be unnecessary because all populations and breeds will have dedicated breeders. However, on the other side, in cases where unique populations are in peril, it is essential for AMBC to move in, and to do so effectively. With these comments as background, I will describe and evaluate this rescue. Many lessons can be learned from this sort of work, and the lessons are as important as the specific rescue, since the lessons can be reused with other populations in the future.

The Wilbur-Cruce Mission herd was located on the Wilbur-Cruce Ranch near Arivaca, Arizona. This ranch had been in the ownership of one family since the 1880s. The horses on the ranch had been bred by three generations of the ranch family, (originally Wilbur, but now Wilbur-Cruce through marriage). Eva Wilbur-Cruce, the present and elderly owner, states that the herd began with the purchase of 25 mares and a stallion from Juan Sepulveda in 1885, who gathered the horses from Father Eusebio Kino's Rancho Dolores area. Mission Dolores and Rancho Dolores were established by Kino not long after his arrival in the Pimeria Alta, the area made up of southern Arizona and northern Sonora during the late 16 hundreds and early 1700 hundreds. Kino was essential in establishing the production of livestock in the Pimeria Alta. He brought in good quality stock of various species and was responsible for the establishment of the mission chain in the Pimeria Alta. Because of this background, interest was increased in the horses, for we do not know how many of this sort of horse survive in Mexico.

Editor's Note: The Wilbur family's oral tradition concerning the horses was corroborated in 2019, when Rene Celaya, the grandson of Juan Sepulveda, attended a promotional event for the Wilbur-Cruce Mission horses. He confirmed the story of his grandfather driving herds of horses from the area of Kino's Mission Dolores and Rancho Dolores.

No other horses had been added to the herd with the exception of a single stallion, reportedly a "paint Morgan" from Colorado that ran with the herd for two years in the 1930's. This history is interesting, since these horses were very



likely to be purely Spanish, mission/ranch stock from the Southwest. Such stock is very rare, even in the Spanish Mustang registries, which cover pure Spanish stock, (Spanish Mustang Registry and the Southwest Spanish Mustang Registry). As to the “paint Morgan,” who could have had some effect on the herd, but was unlikely to be the same as Morgans today, (color alone would rule that out) and was likely Spanish himself. The terrain is very rugged on the ranch and he could only have had minimal impact on the herd at any rate having not been raised there and adapted to the environment.

The land on which the horses ranged varies from steep, rocky terrain with Mesquite trees, and cactus such as Ocotillo to a Cottonwood, riparian woodland along Arivaca Creek. This land was adjacent to the Buenos Aires Wildlife Refuge, and Mrs. Wilbur-Cruce was selling the land to the Nature Conservancy to be added to the Refuge. The Refuge has a specific mandate to reintroduce the endangered Masked Bobwhite Quail. Since the Refuge has no such mandate for horses, they had to be removed.

Fortunately, the mustang grapevine found out about these horses through Mary Ann Thompson, a long time conservation breeder of Spanish Mustangs. Steve Dobrott, employed by the Refuge as wildlife biologist, contacted Mary Ann as registrar of the Spanish Mustang Registry, because he had read Eva Wilbur-Cruce’s book, *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*. In it Eva tells the story of the family’s “little rock horses” and this made him curious to know if the current horses on the ranch could be Spanish in origin. That is how I became aware of them and their history. This really is the first important lesson in the rescue: each breed and each species benefits from a network of interested people that keep their ears and eyes open. This is the best way to turn up leads of new populations, or herds about to be dispersed. This informed network is one of the very important functions of AMBC, and keeps rare or unusual herds and flocks from disappearing without a trace, and without anyone’s knowledge that something unique has been lost.

Mary Ann Thompson was the specific part of the grapevine that informed me of the horses. She is essential in the conservation of a very unique horse strain based on feral horses from the Marble Canyon of the Cerbat Mountains in Arizona. I had not seen her in years, so I decided, at the bribe of wild horses and hot food, to go out in January and evaluate the Wilbur-Cruce herd with her. We also had an opportunity to evaluate some horses recently captured from the Marble Canyon area, which was an added bonus.

We evaluated what horses we could find. The herd was estimated at between 75 to 100, and we certainly saw 60 or so in one day. A drought had begun, and the lack of water forced the horses to use a few waterholes along the creek. One of those had been dug out of the sand by the horses. This concentrated the horses for easy viewing. It is amazing, in the mountains, to witness how quickly horses



can disappear. This first inspection was a critical part of the assessment, for it allowed us to determine if the history made sense, based on appearance.

The horses did indeed look pure Spanish, except for two, very tame, tattooed, racing, Quarter Horse mares that obviously were not a part of the ranch population. As had been observed by those who made a census of the herd when they were still at the ranch, the mares were unable to join the herd because they had not developed locally and been adapted to the extremely steep, rocky terrain. We were curious about these, but figured it would be easy to sort through and remove from the breeding population. The horses were about 14 to 15 hands, slightly larger than many wild strains. They had various shades of chestnut, bay, black, and grey, with some Tobiano, Overo, and Sabino paints. These were very interesting and indeed popular in the local area as using horses in the mountains. Recent captures made to reduce the size of the herd, had removed many pintos and all the Grullos, Duns and Palominos, as they were seen as easy to sell. The lesson here is that conservation breeders need to watch the rare variants to assure that they persist in the population.

Editor's Note: It was later discovered the mares had been stolen by their owner's neighbor because they so frequently trespassed on the his property. The neighbor chose the unoccupied Wilbur Ranch as a good spot to hide the mares.

At this point the main lesson was to hurry up and wait. The horses were to be removed by June, but we were hoping that a reversal of policy would be possible and the horses could remain as a managed herd on the refuge. We did negotiate the donation of the horses, by Mrs. Wilbur-Cruce to the AMBC, in order to more effectively monitor their status. At this point Mrs. Wilbur-Cruce had a stroke, and we were in fact lucky to have timed the donation when we did, so that the horses could be saved. She is now largely recovered from the stroke, but the stroke does serve to illustrate how precariously perched are those populations in the hands of elderly breeders without interested, younger generations.

The drought continued into the late spring, which had the unfortunate consequence that foals were being killed by mountain lions. This happened to several foals, and indeed some of the adult horses had scars that are consistent with bouts with lions. We also had a few horses stolen off the range. Some of the very interesting individuals were never found. The Arizona State Livestock inspectors must be given full credit for helping effectively with the legal ramifications of the horses, including the stolen ones. They really went out of their way to help, and were essential to the success of the whole operation.

With the drought and a deadline of June, it was decided to remove the horses and place them with interested breeders. Once again, the mustang grapevine worked well, and we had plenty of breeders used to working with range horses



and familiar with conservation breeding that wanted these horses. Some people were disappointed in not getting horses, some were critical that it was not more widely publicized. Still, the horses are now in the hands of good breeders, and that was the first priority of the rescue.

Because of the drought, the creek was the only water source and it was fairly easy to trap the horses at water near the ranch homestead. They were then loaded by using the ranch's old, mesquite, corral chute into an open topped bob-tailed truck and removed to a defunct feed lot where they were held until all horse had been captured.

This went fairly smoothly under the guidance of Richard Jordan of Benson, Arizona. His work cannot be praised highly enough. The herd numbered 77, including only 7 surviving foals. One half of the herd consisted of stallions and the other half, mares. Very few yearlings were present, because of lion predation. The horses were then taken to a rural area outside of Tucson, Arizona, to an arena and a few pens owned by the "Old Tucson" movie set and amusement park which gave the public some chance to see them.

At that point I went back out to Arizona, in the record breaking heat of 114 degrees, to sort through the herd and place the animals with the various owners. We placed all the mares with breeders, and enough of the stallions to have a viable population into the future. The goal was to place the horses in such a way that the genetic variability was fairly evenly distributed throughout the breeding groups. Excess stallions were auctioned on a very hot evening. They brought less money than expected, but Mary Ann Thompson, who attended the auction, says that all ended up as using or breeding horses and none went to the meat market. This is amazing given the age and sex of the horses sold.

Blood samples were also taken for blood typing. It became apparent in looking at all the horses captured, that some few were probably not Spanish and the blood typing was the final clue. A few horses were obviously not consistent with a Spanish origin. There were the two quarter horse mares previously mentioned. It is uncertain the extent to which similar escapades had gone on in the past, but this would certainly change the opinion of the purity of the herd. Fortunately, blood typing in horses can help sort through this sort of thing, and Dr. Gus Cothran of Kentucky (now Texas A & M), helped immensely by blood typing this herd. This is a time consuming process. The results of the typing indicate that the history is accurate; these are indeed a unique population with a long history of genetic isolation from other horses. The few outside horses had been introduced so recently as to not have any genetic effect on the herd.

The whole rescue was expensive. Some \$14,000 in total, although the AMBC probably saved something very rare in the process. AMBC was fortunate in



getting a \$5000 donation towards the rescue from a donor in Arizona. The auctioned horses produced about \$3000, with another \$1000 coming from the sale of some of the excess stallions to adopters of the mares. This leaves AMBC about \$5000 in the red for this rescue. This figure discounts loads of volunteer time, and a very and a very huge number of phone calls while getting everything in place.

AMBC has done something very worthwhile in this rescue. Valuable contacts were made with the BLM, wild horse organizations, and others interested in conserving rare sorts of horses. AMBC also learned a great deal about the value of a network of informed and interested people, as well as how to use the network effectively. In the next few years other such rescues may be possible. It is an excellent accomplishment, if AMBC can step up and take imperiled animals for which they can be responsible and then place them with breeders. With that in mind I hope that AMBC can build a rescue fund so that future, such endeavors have a secure base of funding.