Horses move in the light of sunset on an Eastern Arizona ranch. In Arizona and elsewhere, horses are an enduring symbol of Western culture.
SCOTT BAXTER

THE MANE COURSE

The history of horses in North America began about 5 million years ago. They were here, and then, about 11,000 years ago, they appear to have disappeared. Their return to Arizona dates to 1540, when Francisco Vázquez de Coronado came looking for gold. Since then, horses have played an integral role in the state's history. They've been militarized for conquest, they revolutionized transportation, and they helped domesticate the wilds by making large-scale ranching possible. **BY MATT JAFFE**

ARIZONA'S STORY IS INSEPARABLE FROM the story of horses. From the Spanish *entrada*, through the Mexican era, and into the period when Arizona became part of the United States, horses have played an integral role, reshaping the land and both disrupting and transforming the American Indian societies that had been here for thousands of years.

Horses were militarized for conquest, revolutionized transportation and helped domesticate the wilds by making large-scale ranching possible. If no longer as central to daily life in our digital age, horses retain a hold on many Arizonans for recreation and sport, and as a connection to the past.

Arizona's equine culture is as diverse as the state itself. Scottsdale is a hub of the Arabian horse world, and each year, 2,400 of these statuesque animals, with their distinctive dished faces, compete in the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show. But Scottsdale is also the end of the trail for the rough-and-ready Hashknife Pony Express, an officially sanctioned U.S. Postal Service operation that, every January, delivers 20,000 pieces of mail carried 200 miles from Holbrook and through Payson.

For the state's tribes, horses retain a deep spiritual meaning. During the 2020 election, Allie Young, a Navajo activist, organized a series of ritual trail rides to the polls to symbolize a commitment to the Earth and pay tribute to tribal ancestors. As Kelsey Dayle John — a University of Arizona assistant professor of gender and women's studies and American Indian studies, whose work has focused on horses — says: "From my worldview as a Navajo person, I believe that horses are people. They have all of the characteristics necessary to be considered a person. They have their own stories, and they would tell the story about their history. Would it be the same one that humans tell? Who knows? Maybe not."

Consider the story of the Wilbur-Cruce herd. They are true Arizona horses, hearty survivors shaped by the land and descended from the very first horses that came into this part of the Southwest more than three centuries ago. For more than 110 years, the herd remained largely isolated on a remote borderland ranch northwest of Nogales, where the unforgiving desert terrain of ocotillo and mesquite, as well as the ever-present threat of mountain lions, challenged and strengthened them. Over the years, the horses also outlasted range wars, rustlers, drought and drug traffickers.

Named after Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce, the ranch's third-generation owner, these animals are perhaps the closest living descendants of the Spanish Barb horses that arrived in the Americas with the earliest expeditions from Europe. A cross between Iberian and North African breeds, they are a living link to an earlier Arizona and beyond — they go all the way back to the Moorish invasion of Spain in the 8th century.

More specifically, the herd traces a direct line to the horses that Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, the Italian-born Jesuit priest, brought north into the Pimería Alta, as Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora were then known. In her book *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*, Wilbur-Cruce — granddaughter of Dr. Reuben Augustus Wilbur, the Harvard-educated physician who homesteaded the property in 1867 — recounted how these horses became part of her family's and Arizona's heritage.

In 1877, a livestock trader named Juan Zepulveda arrived in Arizona while transporting 600 horses from the ranch at Mission Nuestra Señora de los Delores in Sonora, where Kino had established his breeding operation. Bound for an auction at the stockyards in Kansas City, Zepulveda stopped at the Wilbur property as he visited ranches in Arizona to check for interested buyers. Wilbur bought a *manada*, a breeding group of 25 mares and a stallion.

In her book, Wilbur-Cruce called them "rock horses" for their deftness in traversing the steep, boulder-strewn terrain. While the Morgans her grandfather had brought from Colorado couldn't survive the ranch's conditions, she wrote, "the Spanish horses thrived in the desert and were the horses of the day. They were our companions from sunup to sundown and sometimes deep into the night, year in and year out. They had speed, stamina and intelligence, and, strange as it may seem, they had feelings. I have seen them die heartbroken."

She continued, "And so the Spanish horses were made for the country and were much like the country itself, rugged and beautiful."

IN MOST TELLINGS, the story of horses in Arizona begins with the Spanish: Deep within Canyon de Chelly National Monument, near Standing Cow Ruin in Canyon del Muerto, a large Navajo pictograph panel depicts a Spanish cavalry unit on horseback. Riders wielding lances wear capes and hats with broad brims and flat

A Navajo Nation wild horse — one of perhaps 50,000 on the tribe's sprawling territory — eyes its photographer at sunset near Red Mesa.
MYLO FOWLER

crowns. One horseman's cape is dark and emblazoned with a prominent cross. While this rock art is believed to date to the early 19th century, it's also an accurate depiction of the scenes Arizona's Indigenous people witnessed as the Spanish pushed into the region.

The first horses to appear in Arizona came with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's 1540 expedition, which traveled up the eastern part of the state and included side explorations that led to the discovery of the Grand Canyon. Although it's correct to say the Spanish brought horses to the Western Hemisphere, it's more accurate to say that they brought them *back*. Because North America is the ancestral homeland of the earliest equids, which emerged 50 million to 55 million years ago.

At one time, as many as a dozen horse species lived in North America. Modern horses appeared between 4 million and 5 million years ago and eventually dispersed into Asia and other parts of the world via the Bering land bridge. But the animals disappeared from North America by about 11,000 years ago, possibly hunted into extinction or gradually succumbing to changing climate conditions during the ice age. Fossils of several horse species have been found at locations throughout Arizona.

Emergence, evolution, extinction and reintroduction by the Spanish: That's the accepted narrative of horses in the United States. But Indigenous people have lived in Arizona for at least 12,000 years, and John, the UA professor, notes that according to the traditions of many cultures, horses never left. Dr. Yvette Running Horse Collin, who operates an Alabama horse sanctuary, wrote a dissertation about the relationship between Indigenous people and the horse. Collin's argument, which has been disputed, is that when

Clayson Benally, a Navajo horseman and healer, shares a moment with his mare, Momma, at the Navajo Nation's Grand Falls.
SCOTT BAXTER

taken together, fossil evidence, tribal stories and early Spanish accounts suggest horses never actually disappeared from North America and were already here when the Spanish arrived.

John says her Diné father believed in the sacred nature of horses and that they had been with the tribe from the beginning. "Tribes tell stories of horses being around prior to any contact with colonial folks," she says. "It's an interesting thing. The narrative of the horse as a colonial introduction, as a colonial tool, is not one that people are really willing to let go of. But Native people forever have been saying that the story doesn't start at colonization — there's actually a lot of story that happened way before that. They're just not stories that have been recorded or written down."

More than 140 years after Coronado's expedition, Kino, who moved a step closer to sainthood last year, brought large numbers of horses into Arizona. Kino was many

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things: explorer, mathematician, cartographer, astronomer, writer, skilled equestrian. Records indicate he rode as much as 50 miles a day and once traveled 1,500 miles by horse in 53 days to reach Mexico City. He became known as *El Misionero a Caballo*, "The Missionary on Horseback."

On scores of expeditions, Kino established mission ranches that he stocked with horses and cattle, helping to establish the foundation for Arizona ranching. But even by Kino's time, horses were increasingly common in Arizona. During the middle of the 17th century, as more horses escaped, were captured in raids and were acquired through trade with Pueblo communities, American Indians incorporated the animals into daily life. An estimated 1,500 horses became available after New Mexico's Pueblo Revolt in 1680 forced residents to abandon Santa Fe, leaving the animals unguarded, and as Kino traveled north from Sonora in 1691, herds of horses freely ranged across the land, according to descriptions by members of his party.

Small and quick, and in an array of colors and paint markings, the Spanish Barb became the Indian pony of legend. The Apaches' mastery of horsemanship, rivaled only by that of the Comanches, allowed tribal groups to hunt with far greater efficiency and expand their territories. The animals also helped neutralize the Spaniards' advantage as the Southern Apaches raided settlements, often for more horses and guns. As one National Park Service account described the changes the horse brought to the Chiricahua Apaches: "From the time they acquired the horse and developed a lifestyle incorporating raiding for livestock and booty and warfare based on revenge, the Chiricahuas were almost constantly in conflicts with Spaniards — priests, soldiers and settlers — who encroached on or were within striking distance of Apache traditional territory."

In one famous raid, Apaches made off with a herd of 500 horses from the presidio in Tubac. The raids certainly worked both ways: Both Mexican and American forces frequently captured or killed the horses of American Indians as the cycle of frontier violence continued through most of the 19th century.

But John says it's important to remember that horses' role in Native cultures transcends functionality. "There's definitely a shared working history, but also a deep respect and reverence for the being of the horse in a way that doesn't just equate the horse to a form of technology, as a form of assistance or transportation," she says. "Certainly, Native folks use horses for working, but one of the biggest things that I try to argue in my work is that while many Native societies may do the same things as non-Natives, they operate from a totally different worldview. When it comes to horses, they're respected as a partner, but also respected as this creature to be considered as sacred and knowledgeable. And autonomous."

WHEN THE UNITED STATES took control of Arizona, horses helped open up the territory for settlement, and the growing American presence not only changed human demographics, but also brought large numbers of non-Spanish horses into the territory. Cavalry regiments commonly used Morgan- and thoroughbred-rooted stock, preferring horses with darker, solid shades to better blend into the landscape. Individual units were organized by the colors of their mounts.

But if less statuesque and more mottled in coloring, Spanish mustangs and Indian horses were increasingly enlisted, because they were abundant and also better adapted to Arizona's climate and terrain. None other than General George Crook, who actually preferred riding a mule while leading U.S. forces in the campaign against Geronimo, recognized the superiority of the Apaches' horses, which easily outpaced the larger Morgans and thoroughbreds over any distance.

A young *charro* shows off his roping skills during a *charreada*, a Mexican variation on rodeo, at Rancho Ochoa in Phoenix.
JILL RICHARDS

In 1858, the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach began operations and connected Arizona to points as far east as Memphis and St. Louis and as far west as San Francisco, spurring the growth of Tucson. Pulled by mules over the most challenging ground, stagecoaches averaged less than 5 miles per hour as they plodded and rumbled more than 400 miles across Arizona. Along the way, there were 27 stations where draft animals could be changed out and weary passengers could find momentary relief from the cramped, barely padded bench seating that did little to soften the jarring ride. The Butterfield ran for only a few years, but an extensive stagecoach network developed in Arizona, with some lines operating during the 1920s and well into the age of the automobile, as the Old West began to bump up against the New West.

In *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*, Wilbur-Cruce captured these tensions. She was as good with words as she was with a gun, and she wrote elegantly about Southern Arizona ranching life, including her memories of being awakened by a procession on its way to Arivaca for the fiesta on San Juan's Day: "The girls sat sidesaddle on their horses, their long skirts reaching below the stirrups. Their hats looked like baskets full of flowers, their ribbons flying on the soft morning air. Red ribbons were tied to the horses' bridles, and the young men wore tall Stetsons and colorful ties. One of them rode toward the door, strumming his guitar, leading the group in singing *Las Mañanitas*."

During the spring *corrida*, Wilbur-Cruce's father would join other riders to round up livestock that had strayed over the range during winter. Wilbur-Cruce recalled a conversation with Barreplata, a ranch hand who first lived on the property in 1865, that took place as her father rode off with the remuda, sending dust into the desert sky:

"[Barreplata said,] 'All this — the horses, the *corrida*, too — those things are dying. All you will see there on that road will be the machines — those new automobiles like the one Robles has, you know.'

"'Where will the cowboys be, Tata?' I asked him, puzzled.

"'They will be ghosts. Dead.'"

Barreplata was right. The machines did come, in greater and greater numbers. But even as more range land gave way to urban development, neither cowboys nor ranching ever went away in Arizona. The Sierra Bonita Ranch, in Southeastern Arizona's Sulphur Springs Valley, is now in its sixth generation of family ownership and still in operation after nearly 150 years, while the Empire Ranch, near Sonoita, began as a homestead ranch of 160 acres in the 1860s and grew to more than 100,000 acres and 50,000 head of cattle.

On Indian land and in towns and cities around the state, Arizona's rodeo tradition remains strong two decades into the new century. Payson's rodeo began in 1884 and is considered the world's oldest continuous rodeo. The *charreada*, a rodeo variation that grew out of the ranching culture of Spain and Mexico, endures, too.

With competitors decked out in their *charro* outfits, the *charreada* is sport, art and cultural ritual. During the *escaramuza*, an all-women event, teams of eight competitors perform synchronized moves to *folklórico* music while riding sidesaddle in the ring. As the horses spin, turn and gallop in an equestrian ballet, the riders' richly colored embroidered dresses — a tribute to the female soldiers who fought in the Mexican Revolution — swirl with the movement, like a vision come to life of that fiesta day Wilbur-Cruce recalled from so long ago.

BUT NOTHING STAYS THE SAME. By the late 1980s, the Wilbur-Cruce herd's days on the range were numbered. After Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce decided to sell the ranch, The Nature Conservancy purchased the property with plans to transfer it to the federal government as an addition to Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Despite their long history on the land, the horses were considered incompatible with efforts to reintroduce the masked bobwhite, an endangered quail species, and were slated for relocation from their home of more than a century.

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Wildlife biologist Steve Dobrott and his wife, Janie, traveled to the ranch to inventory the horses. Not long after finishing the fieldwork, Steve read *A Beautiful, Cruel Country* and speculated that the horses the couple observed on the ranch might indeed be the Spanish Barbs that Wilbur-Cruce described. He contacted Marye Ann Thompson, a breeder of Spanish mustangs, who then brought in Dr. Phillip Sponenberg, now a professor of pathology and genetics at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, to evaluate the population.

Because of an ongoing drought, the herd was easy to find, clustered along a creek where mountain lions easily

picked off the foals. After observing the herd, Sponenberg wrote, "The horses looked as if they'd walked right out of the past — 14 to 15 hands high, and in every shade of black, chestnut, bay, gray and paint."

Despite their historical significance, the horses faced an uncertain future once removed from the ranch. The herd could have ended up dispersed in auctions — thus diluting their rare bloodline — or, far worse, been sent to slaughterhouses. Wilbur-Cruce decided to donate the horses to the American Minor Breeds Conservancy (now known as the Livestock Conservancy), an organization dedicated to preserving heritage livestock breeds. The conservancy sorted the animals into breeding groups as part of a program designed to preserve the strain, and Wilbur-Cruce, by then 87 and in a wheelchair, watched as the herd left the ranch.

Dr. Gus Cothran, now a professor emeritus at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, performed a blood typing analysis that provided the scientific corroboration of the herd's heritage; he later confirmed his conclusions with DNA testing as that technology advanced. He observed, "These horses, based upon the analysis I have just done, are probably the best or near-best representative of the old Spanish type that was brought to the New World. … These horses are like a genetic time capsule." Sponenberg later declared that the Wilbur-Cruce herd represented "a most significant discovery of a horse thought to be gone forever."

Although the line has been saved, it's bittersweet to think that the horses no longer live where they had for generations. "That would have been the best-case scenario, if they could have stayed there and remained with nature selecting them and in the environment in which they were adapted to," Janie Dobrott says. "But, as I'm sure you're aware, the federal government is not real happy to have to deal with wild horses."

The Dobrotts were among those who took ownership of Wilbur-Cruce horses as part of the breeding program. Janie was taken with the horses' compact strength thanks to bone size, even at their typical weight of 700 to 900 pounds, that rivals that of 1,200-pound quarter horses. "They have the same bone size, but they're just much shorter," she says. "And they make such good partners. They're sensible. A lot of today's breeds, because people have been making decisions about what gets bred, have become more excitable, more reactive. These horses are not like that, for the most part. They're different to work with and easier to train. They bond with you."

Antonie Cunningham moves the ranch remuda across Schoolhouse Pasture during fall works on Apache County's X Diamond Ranch.
SCOTT BAXTER

While there are nearly 200 Wilbur-Cruce horses, the line is still considered "critically rare." These days, other wild horses, if not genetically pure stock like the Wilbur-Cruce horses, are by no means scarce in Arizona and raise vexing humanitarian and environmental questions.

The mustangs powerfully symbolize the wildness of the country's frontier past and a spirit of independence that many Arizonans cherish. But as their numbers have grown, the horses find themselves competing with both wildlife and livestock for scarce resources, raising the ire of hunters and ranchers alike. As many as 50,000 horses range freely across the Navajo Nation, and the tribe faces difficult and costly management decisions about how to control the population, from sterilization to culling the herds by hunting or selling the animals to foreign slaughterhouses.

Many Arizonans love seeing the majestic Salt River horses in the Tonto National Forest northeast of Phoenix, but biologists worry that the animals are destroying vital riparian habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife. And clearly, not everyone loves wild horses: Early last year, 15 animals in two family groups of the Heber herd were

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shot and killed on the Mogollon Rim in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests.

While the Heber horses' ancestry has never been conclusively proved, near Kingman in the Cerbat Mountains, there's a herd that's considered the purest of the Spanish Barbs still living freely in Arizona. In one of the state's two designated wild horse areas managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the herd has lived largely isolated from other horses since 1862. Like its Wilbur-Cruce brethren in Southern Arizona, the Cerbat herd has survived the unique challenges of its range, including a wide temperature variance and times of sparse rainfall.

During a drought in 1971, ranchers shot members of the herd, believing the animals had depleted scarce water supplies needed by cattle. A number of the horses were subsequently captured and used as a breeding herd to preserve the line. But nearly 20 years later, a surviving group of wild Cerbat horses was found in the mountains, living as they always had. Today, there are an estimated 70 horses in the Cerbats. It's not an easy life, but it is the life they were born to, in the Arizona mountains where their ancestors ran freely for centuries before them. Just imagine the stories these horses could tell. AH