

Mustang, Wild Spirit of the West

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Horses were in Annie Bronn's blood. For as long as she could remember, she had been fascinated by the spirited wild mustangs that roamed free throughout the West. So when greedy cattlemen started to round up the mustangs for slaughter, Annie knew it was up to her to save the breed.

The true story of Wild Horse Annie's crusade to save the mustangs is inspiring. Readers will cheer her on, all the way to the White House, in her struggle to preserve these beautiful creatures from extinction.

Marguerite Henry was the beloved author of such classic horse stories as *King of the Wind*, *Misty of Chincoteague*, and *Stormy: Misty's Foal*, all of which are available in Aladdin paperback editions.

Robert Lougheed was raised on a farm in Canada where he developed a passion for painting. He specialized in images of the American West and his work received numerous awards. He died in 1982.

1. Saved by a Mustang

IF GOD has a kind of plan for all of us, I like to think He coupled me with horses right from the start. It is not just my own mustang, Hobo, that is part of me. All horses call to me. We sort of belong together. This could not be just an accident.

I remember the first time I saw a band of wild mustangs. It was only a flash. My Pa and I were freighting a load of wool over the mountains to California when suddenly he reined in and pointed. I saw the reason. Far off on a mesa a string of mustangs was running into the wind. It must have been into the wind, for their tails streamed out behind and their manes lifted like licks of flame. And just by looking I was out there with them, and I could hear their snortings and their hoofs ringing, and I could feel my own hair blowing and my lungs gulping for air, and I shivered in joy at such freedom.

I remember whispering, "Whose are they, Pa?"

And Pa saying, "They're runaways-gone wild." There was a look of wanting in Pa's face, but excitement too at the free wildness.

"Will they always live there, free like that . . . and then their colts and grand-colts?"

Pa startled me with his sudden stern tone. "They could! If men don't get too grabby for every smitch of land for their cattle."

Even as he said it, a cow bawled nearby. And in the distance a fading line of dust was all that remained of the wild ones.

Pa clucked to his team and we drove off. For miles of mountain turns we rode in silence. We were still holding onto the beauty we had seen. I could still hear the echo of faraway hoofbeats. I could listen to nothing else. Yet even as I sighed in joy I felt a vague, uneasy

worry. I didn't want anything ever to happen to them; I wanted them always to be free. But could they?

That was the first time horses called to me. But now I know that God had a plan for me long before that. On clear, cold nights when the stars are all in their rightful places I know He had me in mind as long ago as that time when my Pa was just a baby and almost died on the desert. But he didn't die because . . .

"Oh, the cowards never started

And the weak ones died by the way . . . "

That's how my Grandma always began the true story of how my Pa was saved. Then she'd clear her throat, moisten her lips, and with a look of joy upon her face she'd plunge into her covered-wagon days.

"Our wagon rolled through dust. A choking, sneezy wilderness of dust . . . from nowhere to nowhere." She paused a moment, her small bright eyes remembering. She stared over my head as if the whole panorama of her pioneer days was flashing on the wall behind me. "Our four horses made furrows through it, kicking up great clouds of dust that turned the brown-coated ones to gray and the gray ones to white. Even Nelly's colt tagging along beside her was fuzzy-furred with dust, and its whiskers white like a goat's.

"Annie!" she'd say. "Your Pa couldn't of come into this world at a worser time."

"Why, Grandma?" I'd ask. Even when I got to be ten or eleven, I'd still ask "Why?" right there. And she'd say:

"Why? Because we hadn't a home, and barely enough vittles to last to California. And no money to buy more. That's why.

"How'd you like it, Annie, if one day your husband is foreman of a big silver mine in lone, Nevada. And you have a nice home with pretties on the what-not and red geraniums growing all over the windows, and all to once the mine closes down. Just like that!

"And the very next day," here Grandma's voice turned softer, "you bring into the world the cutest button-nosed baby ever, and hardly a bunting to wrap him in. If he'd just of waited till we got to my people in Grass Valley . . . "

"But he didn't!" I crowed. "And I'm glad, because then there wouldn't be any story. Go on, Grandma. Go on!"

Grandma's eyes narrowed and her jaw muscles tightened. "The reason we hadn't any money was because that scalawag of a mine-owner skips off to San Francisco. He

promises to come back with a big roll of money, enough to pay off the miners. But what does he do?"

"He never comes back!" I filled in.

"And what does your dear sweet crazy Grandpa do?"

Here I always waited for Grandma to blow up with pride.

"He parcels out all his own money so the miners could buy wagons and light out for greener pastures. And they did. Meanwhile, we wait weeks and weeks while our little village turns into a ghost town. Then we have to leave, too. We decide to go to Grass Valley, California, where my folks lived. That last morning I watered my geraniums just like always and pinched off the dead ones. Your Grandpa hooked up our four mustangs that he had caught and gentled, and off we went in the wagon that I'd roofed over with our bedsheets."

"Were there only four mustangs?"

Grandma's eyes came to mine and smiled. "Besides the leaders and wheelers there was a skinny little colt tagging along free. He'd make little forays of his own and then come kiting back to Nelly." Grandma stroked my head now as if I was a colt, and she talked fast to get to the miracle.

"Nelly's colt and my baby, who is now your Pa, were born at almost the same hour. Your Grandpa was so busy running betwixt her and me I wondered which mattered more, and when both babies were safely born he was nigh as proud of Nelly's colt as of his own son. Seems the colt had some Arabian or Andalusian blood in him that set him off as something special.

"Well, like I said, we hooked up our mustangs and started off, the colt trailing along. A few days later we run out of water. Everywhere we look there's nothing but dust and rocks and sand and dust and dust and dust. Sometimes we'd ride all day without seeing anything else. When we come to water, it's more like soapsuds, and I try to drink it, but it won't go down. And my milk for Baby Joe dries up. But Nelly is smarter. She eats any old rabbit brush or sagebrush, and her milk runs free and she nurses her colt, but I can't nurse my baby."

My eyes were fixed on Grandma's. "Then what?"

"My baby yelled at first, hour after hour. Then he whimpered. And in no time it seemed he got all shriveled looking, like a little old man. One day your Grandpa says, "There ain't no other way. Nelly's got to be Baby Joe's nurser.' And he milked Nelly and we spooned her milk into the baby's mouth, a slow drop at a time."

The miracle held us both in a web of stillness. I imagined I was right there, helping to milk Nelly, and spoon-feeding Grandma's baby, who was my Pa.

"Your Grandpa was glad Baby Joe was saved. But a few days later a misery came over him when he told me he had to kill Nelly's colt. 'I got to do it,' he said, his eyes full of hurt. 'She ain't got enough milk for two.' Oh, Annie, it hurt him so. He'd rather of shot off his right arm. 'I'll just wait till morning,' he said, "and then I'll do it. Painless as I can."

"Then what?"

"The wind woke us up next morning, tearing at our wagon flaps. When we looked out, all our horses were gone! Nothing left but hoofprints circling the camp, making off in all directions like the spokes of a wheel.

"Your Grandpa howled like a savage. 'Injuns done it!' he yelled. "Only Injuns could thief so quiet.' He buckled on his cartridge belt, a wild look in his eye.

"He was right. Almost at once three young Paiutes appeared out of the brush. Their faces were smeared with green and red paint, and their heads decked out in crow feathers. They were riding scrawny cayuses. It was plain to see why our stout horses were worth the stealing.

"'Grub!' the oldest one muttered. He pointed at our wagon traces, showing he was ready to trade for our missing team.

"Pa's hand reached for his gun; it was all I could do to stop him. Then I ran for the wagon and brought out little Joe. He made pitiful cries of hunger and he seemed all mouth, like a baby bird. I made sign talk to the Indians . . . how my baby would die if they didn't bring Nelly back.

"The oldest one grinned. "What you give?"

"'You find our horses first,' your Grandpa threatened. "Bring all back. Then we parley. We make gifts.'

"They left as silently as they came. Meanwhile I prayed and hugged the baby, and your Grandpa paced in fury around the wagon, his rifle held in front of him. After what seemed a long time the Paiutes came back, leading our four mustangs, three of them willing, but Nelly a-balkin' and a-whinnerin' for her colt. This time the faces of the Indians were grim.

Other Books

Album of Horses, Originally published: Chicago: Rand McNally, c1951.

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