

1/29/89

Ranching town defends cowboys in horse killings

Trial brings protest of BLM policy guarding wild herds

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LOVELOCK, Nev. — In arid, overgrazed Nevada, federal protection of wild horses is regarded by stockmen as romantic foolishness.

"Wild horses don't put any value on the land. Cattle do," said cowboy Don Whitney.

But because federal law protects wild horses, five Nevada cowboys accused of killing 42 of them have been indicted after a high-pressure, high-visibility investigation by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The horses, which have no natural predators, compete for forage with about 600,000 head of livestock grazing the public land that comprises 87 percent of the state.

Consequently, the shock and revulsion that swept the country last fall when it was disclosed that more than 500 wild horses had been slaughtered in north central Nevada was not felt here.

Least of all in Lovelock, where a dozen leading citizens, including the mayor, traveled to federal court in Reno Friday to testify for a cow boss accused by eyewitnesses of shooting several horses.

Total overprotection

"I'm not by any means condoning the random shooting of wild horses, but they've gone from zero protection to total overprotection," said Mayor Hugh Montrose. "There has to be a mechanism for control."

It has taken the BLM more than five months to crack the case, and it's not over yet.

Despite the offer of an \$18,000

reward, few informants have come forward. North central Nevada, it will be recalled, is where trapper Claude Dallas once cowboied and where he hid out for 15 months, with the help of friends, after killing two game wardens in 1981.

With the indictment of the five suspects, the code of silence broke.

Two former cowboys at the 1.5 million-acre C Punch ranch northwest of Lovelock have pointed the finger at cow boss David R. Morehead, 37.

Mark Claypool and John Bradley Morgan appeared before acting U.S. Magistrate John Kavlic to testify they feared for their lives if Morehead was released before his trial.

'Drag 'em out'

It was Morehead's policy to shoot wild horses grazing where the C Punch was running cattle, Claypool said. "He said to shoot 'em and drag 'em out. He didn't want any bodies lying around."

Claypool also said that Morehead usually went armed out on the open range and warned him that "what happened on that ranch was to stay on that ranch and that he'd kill anybody who talked."

Morgan said he shot and killed three wild horses on Morehead's direct orders and saw Morehead shoot several himself. He also said Morehead had threatened to kill him if he carried tales off the ranch.

Morehead's boss, C Punch ranch President Larry Irvin of Reno, said he had suspended Morehead from his range work pending the outcome of the trial. But "as far as I've known him, he's done everything to my satisfaction."

Several witnesses — Lovelock businessmen, ranchers and politicians — testified or wrote letters to the effect that Morehead is not the violent type and that the fears of



EXAMINER/CAROLYN COLE

Old bric-a-brac sculpture with horse hide at center, on an abandoned ranch at Thunder Mountain off Interstate 80 in Nevada, symbolizes many stockmen's long-held protest of federal law that guards herds of wild horses

Claypool and Morgan were unfounded.

"I figure you could parade half of Lovelock in here," Kavlic told Morehead's lawyer Don Hill.

From misdemeanor to felony

In a brief statement to the court,

Morehead said, "I'm not going to commit a felony to get out of a misdemeanor."

Kavlic released Morehead but ordered him to turn over all his firearms — he owns several — to Hill, to give the court control of his \$12,000 savings account and not to

leave northern Nevada.

Claypool acknowledged that on Morehead's orders he had tried to sell a wild horse and a wild burro at a Fallon, Nev., livestock auction yard. Morgan said he had been granted immunity from prosecution in exchange for his testimony.

Morehead and one of his cowboys, Shannon Brannan, 20, a Californian who has worked at the C Punch for the past two years, are accused of killing 34 horses and three burros.

"Morehead is a damn good cattleman," said Whitney, who has rounded up horses for the BLM.

The other three suspects are cousins Eugene "Skeeter" Thacker, 27, of Mill City; David Thacker, 22, of Unionville; and Ronald E. Hage, 23, of Winnemucca. They are accused of killing five horses.

Silver boom family

The Thackers are from one of the families that founded Unionville in 1861 during a silver boom.

David Thacker is known in the area as an exceptionally good cowhand and horsebreaker. Ironically, according to his mother, Jill, he recently was offered a job on the C Punch by Morehead.

Three-time world saddle bronc riding champion Shawn Davis, who coached David Thacker on the College of Southern Idaho rodeo team in Twin Falls in 1986-87, describes him as "a pretty good rider and a good kid. Like any kid, he'll have a few drinks and maybe find some trouble, but he's a good hand with a horse and a rope."

Skeeter Thacker has a wilder reputation in the area. At Wednesday's court appearance, his attorney said he was an unlikely flight risk because "he has several children in Nevada," although he is now unmarried.

Hage, the fifth suspect, has been in big trouble in Winnemucca during the past two years. He is facing trial on half a dozen charges, including battery and trespass for allegedly beating up a bar owner and a casino manager and for allegedly slugging his live-in girlfriend.

BLM permits to shoot

Until 1970, Nevada ranchers were able to thin out wild horse herds by obtaining BLM permits to shoot them.

Passage of the Wild Free Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971

changed all that. It made killing and harassing wild horses a federal crime. The penalty is a two-year sentence and a \$1,000 fine per horse.

Stockmen complain that the BLM has not lived up to its obligation to manage wild horses. There were just 17,000 wild horses roaming the West when the law was enacted — down from an estimated 2 million in the 19th century; there are about 38,000 today.

Nevada has 70 percent of the West's wild horse herd. Cattle and sheep raisers, who may be forced to reduce their herds by 20 percent or more because of overgrazing, say BLM is underestimating the wild horse numbers.

C Punch ranch

The C Punch ranch illustrates the stockmen's plight. It has two permits to run 2,000 cattle year-around on the public range. That vast range has just one perennial stream. BLM wild horse specialist Dick Wheeler said the C Punch grazing allotments contain six wild horse management areas and support nearly as many horses as cattle.

Bruce Sandifer, a cowboy who works with Whitney at the Nevada Nile Feedlot in Lovelock, believes that "they ought to allow the herds to be culled and sell the culls for dog food."

Whitney adds: "That's all they're worth. Most of them are so inbred they're no good for riding. And you can't get anybody to adopt a 10-year-old stud." Both cowboys find the uproar over shooting wild horses curious, since many of the animals die of starvation and exposure each year.

BLM has been handling the investigation with inordinate secrecy. Its own communications staff often insists it is in the dark about the case, such as the location of the shootings and numbers of animals slain.

The shootings on the C Punch ranch were in Pershing County, which never was mentioned as a killing ground until the indictments were made public. Just five of the horses involved in the indictment were killed in Lander County, where most of the killings occurred. The five horses the Thackers and Hage are accused of killing were found in the Fish Creek Mountains of Lander County.