



Jeff Scheld/Review-Journal

LIVING SYMBOLS OF THE WEST - Bands of mustangs still run free in central Nevada near where investigators have found

the bones of 450 wild horses. Rewards of \$12,000 have been offered for information leading to the conviction of the killers.

Killing of 450 horses a mystery

Ranchers say U.S. policies are to blame

By Ed Vogel
Review-Journal Capital Bureau

LANDER COUNTY — The cowboys around the dinner table at the Grass Valley Ranch fall silent when Molly Knudtsen speaks her mind about the recent slaughter of 450 wild horses.

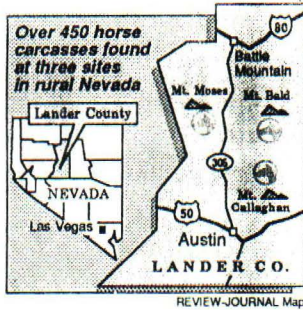
"I can't in my wildest dreams think of any rancher killing so many horses," she says. "We've all felt like killing one or two at times, but we're too busy to do something as awful as this."

Barely 5 feet tall, Knudtsen, a former New York debutante who sounds like Kathryn Hepburn, can buckaroo with the best of Nevada's cowboys.

She arrived at Grass Valley as a bride in 1942 and over the years has written two books about life among the sagebrush and jackrabbits.

Her ranch stretches through a dry 50-mile-long valley. The ranchhouse rests a half-hour by four-wheel-drive from the nearest paved road.

Despite the remoteness, her Grass Valley ranch and other Lander County ranches have not been overlooked by U.S. Bureau of Land Management investigators.



In recent weeks, they stopped here and at every other spread to seek information about the wild horse shootings.

The bones of many of the slaughtered horses were discovered just on the other side of Mount Callaghan from the Knudtsen ranch.

"They are going to nail somebody to the cross," Knudtsen said. "The ranchers sure are getting a bad image from all of this."

Lunch concluded, Knudtsen saddles up her horse and once again rides into the distant hills to look for stray bulls.

Her husband, Bill, remains around the barns to oversee workers pouring a concrete grainery floor.

"Here they shoot at horses," he said. "Down in L.A. they shoot at people."

Before the passage of the original "Wild Horse Annie" Act in 1959, Knudtsen ranked among the



THEY WOULDN'T KILL HORSES - Lander County ranchers Molly and Bill Knudtsen are upset over the recent killings of wild horses in valleys adjacent to their ranch. They say ranchers are not responsible for the killings.

West's biggest mustangers. The federal law banned the use of aircraft and motor vehicles in gathering wild horses.

Flying in his Piper Cub, Knudtsen rounded up horses on the public ranges and sold them to slaughterhouses for 3 to 5 cents a pound.

"We used to call the horses 'chicken feeders' because they ground them up and used them as chicken feed," he said.

After World War II, Knudtsen gathered 20,000 wild horses in a single year that were shipped to famished Europe for human consumption.

Please see HORSES/18A

FILE COPY

Humane Society of Southern Nevada



Bones of 450 wild horses have been found in central Nevada. Residents theorize the horses may have been shot wantonly by a deranged person or an angry rancher.

Horses

From 1A
sumption.

"Horse meat is good meat when you are hungry," he said. "I've eaten it myself."

Like many ranchers, Knudtsen views wild horses as a menace that should be removed from the primary cattle ranges. He sees them as competition for the vegetation needed by his cattle, particularly in drought years.

"I wouldn't kill a wild horse," Knudtsen said. "I would capture them and sell them to a slaughterhouse."

Despite the prevailing feeling, ranchers are not necessarily suspects in the wild horse killings, said Len Sims, chief BLM investigator.

"We aren't pointing our finger at one particular group," said Sims, resting on a bed in a Battle Mountain hotel.

On this day, Sims and investigator Marty Phillips of Salt Lake City have spent 14 hours tagging horse carcasses at Bald Mountain, about midway between Austin and Battle Mountain.

In the process, Sims sighted six rattlesnakes slithering among the rocks. Several black widow spiders popped out as he shuffled among the horse bones.

Sims insists every lead will be followed. On this day alone, 43 people phoned the BLM investigation number in Reno to report information about the killings.

Nonetheless, he does not speak optimistically about making arrests in the horse slaughter. The \$12,000 in rewards offered by humane organizations may be tempting, but Sims must have evidence before he can file a case.

"There may not be any arrests or we could get lucky," Sims said.

The wanton killing or harassment of a wild horse is a federal misdemeanor punishable by a year in prison and a \$2,000 fine.

In the last 10 years, however, no one has received jail time for killing wild horses. The steepest fines have been \$250.

On Sept. 14, two Las Vegas men, Vern and Duane Dimick, were ordered to pay \$250 fines by U.S. Magistrate Lawrence Leavitt for killing a single wild horse.

They originally had been charged with killing 11 horses, but their attorney, LaMond Mills, secured a plea bargain agreement under which they pleaded guilty for killing a single horse.

Sims said he cannot be preoccupied by the light sentences given those who kill horses.

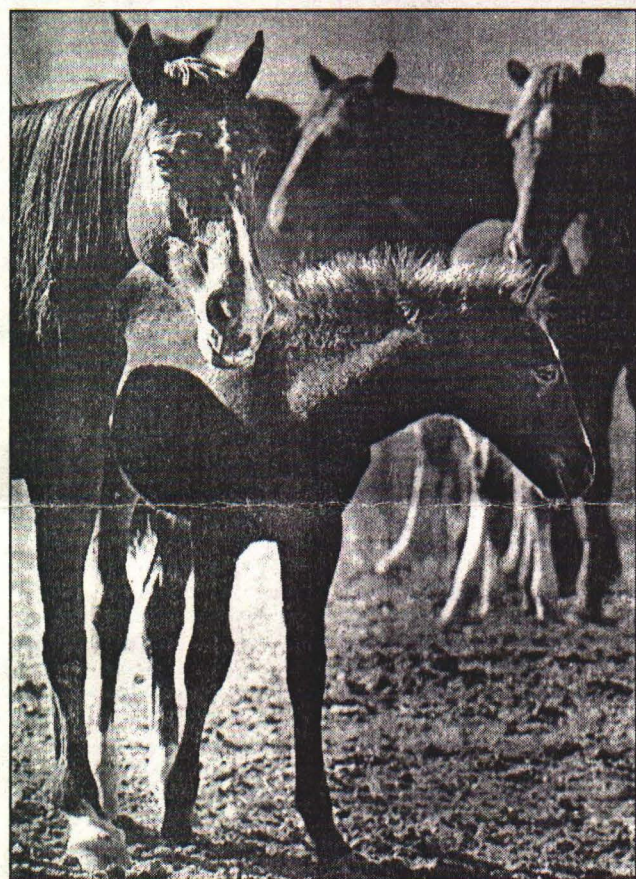
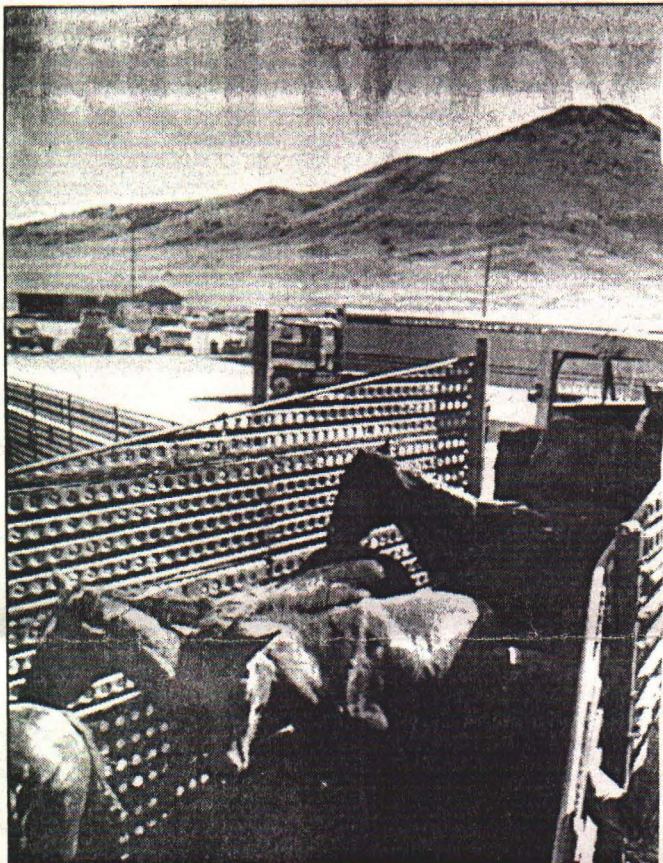
"All we can do is gather enough information for a case and turn it over to the U.S. attorney's office for prosecution," he said. "We don't set the penalty or the fine."

Neither Sims nor Phillips suspects old mustangers like Knudtsen. With horse meat now worth 38 cents a pound at a slaughterhouse, mustangers would not likely leave horses rotting among the sagebrush.

"Whoever killed them went to a lot of trouble," Phillips said. "Most you can't even reach with a four-by-four. It took a helluva lot of bullets and a helluva lot of time."

One should not conclude that all wild horses have disappeared from Lander County.

Small bands of horses scatter with the approach of humans to a



spring near Mount Callaghan. Bones of dozens of horses were found near these springs.

A stallion remains in the rear to protect his mares. He snorts, then gallops the band high up the mountain.

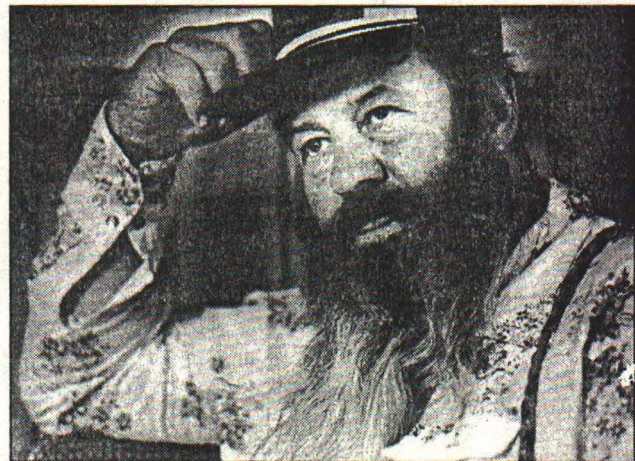
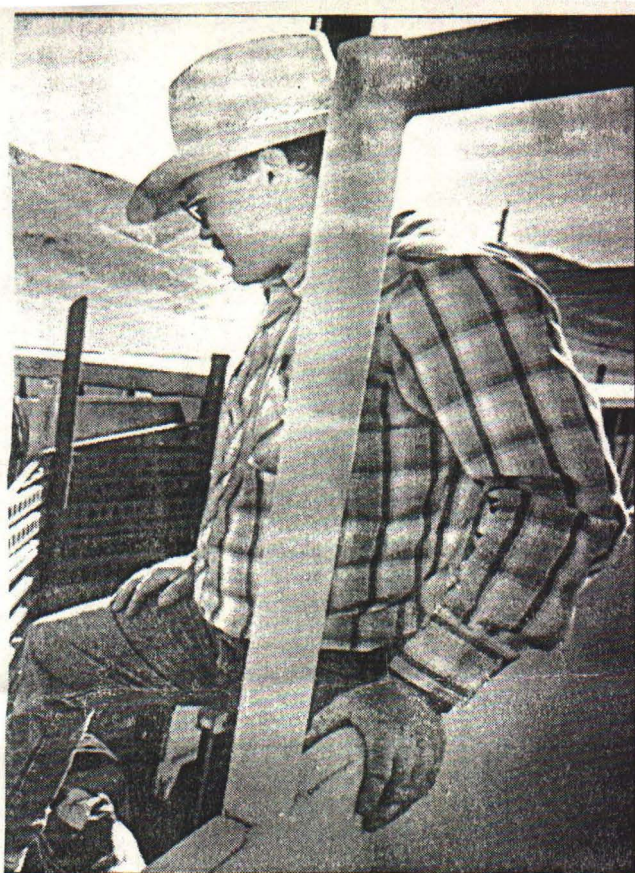
Ranchers persist in claiming the wild horses are mongrels whose bloodlines have been devastated through incestuous breedings.

That's hard to believe. These

mustangs are magnificent. Only the strongest horses here could survive in one of the harshest climates in America.

The wild horse is a resilient creature that may be symbolic of the state itself. Nevada has emerged from a history of booms and busts as one of the nation's most economically sound states.

Austin rancher Jimmy Williams suspects the horses were killed by



Roundup time for wild horses

Bureau of Land Management cowboy Jeff Weeks, top, counts the wild horses as they are herded into corrals at Palomino Valley north of Reno. About 100 horses, captured in the Reveille Valley near Warm Springs, were taken to the corrals where they will be offered for adoption. Among the newcomers is a month-old colt, left, that found its mother moments after arriving. The BLM offers horses it gathers on Nevada ranges for adoption at \$125 each. A special deal, however, allows people to adopt both mares and their colts for the same price. Critics of BLM policies include Austin rancher-bar owner Jimmy Williams, above, who blames the recent deaths on the agency. He contends the BLM and animal protection groups have allowed too many wild horses to roam in cattle country.

Photos by Jeff Scheid/Review-Journal

someone firing from a plane. This theory might explain why their bodies generally were found scattered over many miles. Others, however, were found near springs where someone may have awaited their approach.

Unlike the Knudtsens, Williams readily rattles off the names of the people he suspects, including well-known Lander County ranchers.

"I know who did it," said Wil-

iams, who has spoken with the BLM investigators. "There are people around here who drive to church in \$50,000 cars and think nothing of killing a poor horse who is getting grass."

In his colorful life, Williams has alternated as a rustler, a cowboy, a mustanger and a perpetual thorn in the side of the BLM. Williams wears a beard down his chest and holds up his jeans up with a piece

of leather. The outcry over the horses amuses him.

"There have been more people in here about these horses than for any murder we've had," Williams said from a table in his bar.

When riding the range, he runs Austin's Golden Club, a bar with horse and cow skulls hanging on the walls. The rowdier cowboys frequent the establishment, which includes the only blackjack table in town.

"The BLM has stole and killed more horses with a pencil than cowboys can ever take with a rope," Williams said. "They should return the horses to the ranchers."

He still steams about the passage of the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act in 1971.

This federal law formally protected wild horses from their human predators. No longer could any cowboy take a horse off the public ranges.

Since that time, other laws have been passed, including one that specifies the BLM shall "immediately remove excess animals from the range so as to achieve appropriate management levels."

BLM staff employees have devised management plans that set the maximum number of horses, cattle and wildlife for each range around the West.

Those plans recommend limiting the number of horses on public ranges to 21,825.

During its last report to Congress, the BLM placed the wild horse population at 38,000, including almost 28,000 in Nevada.

Nevada's wild horses are scattered in 120 herds over about one-third of the state. Most are found in northern and central Nevada, although as many as 4,000 thrive on the Nellis Air Force Base range.

Before the 1971 law, Williams regularly gathered horses on the public ranges and sold them to slaughterhouses. He considered them his property, since many descended from animals let loose on the range by him and other ranchers.

"The ranchers were upgrading the horses and taking care of them," Williams said. "We culled out the bad ones and improved the herds."

Then in the late 1950s, a Reno secretary, Velma Johnston, dubbed "Wild Horse Annie," crusaded to save the remaining horses.

School children placed nickels and dimes in donation cans to show their support of the cause.

About the same time, playwright Arthur Miller wrote "The Misfits" script.

His wife, actress Marilyn Monroe, and actor Clark Gable, soon filmed a movie in Nevada about mustangers and their vicious treatment of wild horses.

Audiences may remember the scenes when Monroe tearfully pleaded with Gable to stop mistreating the horses.

By 1971, the BLM enthusiasts estimated the number of wild horses at 17,000. As many as 1 million had been reported in an estimate in 1925.

Congress ordered a halt to any mustang gatherings, declaring the wild horses "living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West." Wild Horse Annie had won.

Please see HORSES/19A

Horses

From 18A

Although almost everyone refers to wild horses as mustangs, few if any pure mustangs exist.

Mustangs were the small Spanish horses first brought to the Americas by Hernan Cortez in the early 16th century. The word mustang is the Americanization of "mestenos," meaning a wild or unbranded horse.

Some mestenos, of course, escaped from their owners, and slowly made their way north to the American West.

By the 1840s, explorer John Bidwell wrote of seeing herds "20 miles long" in California's San Joaquin Valley.

With the settlement of cattle herds in northeastern Nevada in the 1870s, conflicts between ranchers and wild horses became inevitable.

The 1897 Nevada Legislature passed a law that allowed county commissions to issue permits that let ranchers shoot wild, unbranded horses.

Four years later, the law was repealed when ranchers complained too many branded horses were being killed.

California ranchers found other ways to dispose of the horses. Thousands were run off cliffs into the Pacific Ocean.

Williams maintains the recent killings might be a reaction to lawsuits by the Animal Protective Association of America.

The Sacramento-based humane organization has secured court injunctions that block the BLM from gathering horses in some areas in Lander County.

Ted Crail, creative services director for the association, resents that allegation.

"I don't think a sane person would see a connection between our lawsuits and the killings," he said.

Crail said the Animal Protection Association sued the BLM because too many horses gathered by the federal agency were given to people who sent them to slaughterhouses.

Under federal law, the BLM can gather excess horses on public land and take them to corrals where they may be adopted for \$125 each.

Several years ago, however, the BLM ordered a waiver on the fees, allowing some ranchers to take hundreds presumably for use as work horses.

Scandal racked the fee waiver program. Reports circulated that 400 horses given to Jerry Cudworth of Sheyenne, N.D., starved. More than 600 given to M.F. Eddleman of Worden, Mont., allegedly were sold to a slaughterhouse.

"We don't oppose true adoptions of wild horses, we oppose programs that allow wild horses to go to

slaughterhouses," Crail said.

Despite the estimates that only 17,000 wild horses remained when the protection act was passed in 1971, later censuses showed three times that number.

Consequently, the BLM inaugurated its Adopt-a-Horse program in 1976.

About 86,000 horses have been adopted from holding facilities, such as the Palomino Valley corrals north of Reno.

Under pressure from cattlemen, Congress has increased the budget for the roundups and care of wild horses to about \$15 million a year.

In 1985, 17,142 horses and burros were removed from the range. Many, however, remained unadopted and were taken to feedlots, such as one in Lovelock. Costs for their care reached \$2.25 per animal per day.

Since then, the BLM has reduced its collection goals. About 5,600 horses may be taken off Nevada ranges this year. That barely matches the normal reproduction rate of the mustangs.

Until someone is charged with the wild horse killings, ranchers expect they will remain as suspects.

"Ranchers wouldn't kill the horses," said Assemblyman John Marvel, R-Battle Mountain. "If they were caught and convicted, then they could lose their grazing permits. That's their livelihood."

A rancher himself, Marvel worries that too many city folks see ranchers as Old West desperados who take the law in their own hands.

"People are going to say it is the ranchers," he said. "It could be someone on a lark or a sportsman. It had to be somebody with a vendetta."

On a warm fall afternoon, BLM cowboy Jeff Weeks oversees the unloading of about 100 wild horses into empty corrals at Palomino Valley.

"They are in surprisingly good shape," Weeks said as the horses stumble out of long trailers down a chute into the corrals.

Mares whinny until they find their frightened colts, some less than a month old.

An old mare stumbles and struggles in vain to regain her feet.

"She has a charlie horse," Weeks said. "We may have to put ice on it."

The horse falls in the middle of the chute in obvious pain. Other horses stumble over her prone body as they rush into the corrals.

Hooves cut into the shoulders of the fallen mare. Blood gushes from one of her eyes.

Hours before, she roamed free under the immense desert sun. Now she struggles just to survive.