

Horses from the wild can become usable mounts

For the love of horses

By Frank J. Buchman

Wild mustangs can become fine family horses.

That was the emphasis of spokespersons in Topeka at the recent Wild Horse Adoption hosted by the Wild Horse & Burro Program of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

"These horses are iconic symbols of America's western heritage and are renowned for their strength, endurance, agility and intelligence, characteristics bred into them in the wild that make them ideal for work or recreation," emphasized Paul McGuire, public affairs specialist out of the Moore, Oklahoma, Bureau of Land Management field office.

While working with a mustang offered at the adoption, Cindy Branham, renowned mustang trainer, competitor and clinician from Auburn, echoed, "I've found the horses to be very trainable. They are very smart. Yet, each one is an individual, and don't all come along at the same price." About two dozen people gathered to watch the free program.

The first two weeks of ownership is the most important time for an adopted horse. Human contact is strange to these wild animals, but they are willing

to learn if we teach them properly," Branham analyzed. "People are seen as predators to these horses. They must learn to accept us, but we have to explain to them what we want.

"The horses need to understand it's easier to cooperate than to escape like they do by instinct during times of danger in the wild," Branham critiqued. "Don't forget they are a horse. They never do anything to intentionally make you mad or to get even with you; they do not understand human emotions. They only want to be safe and content."

"Inmates at the Kansas Correctional Facility in Hutchinson have had great success working with the mustangs in our program," verified Dexter Hedrick, program manager there for six years.

Fifteen inmates are employed in the horse unit, being paid 60 cents an hour. They typically work with 10 to 15 horses at a time, with 100 wild horses going through the program annually. Horses were also offered for adoption at Hutchinson during May.

"This partnership adds value to the horses that the BLM offers for adoption, and it helps inmates develop important life skills that will aid in their eventual reintroduction into

society," inserted Hedrick, who was riding a three-year-old gelding trained in the program.

It was offered for sale as one of only a couple trained mustangs in the offering. Some yearlings had been gentled by local volunteers.

There were 70 horses offered in this adoption, one of 15 such events conducted annually. "These are all adult and yearling wild horses that once roamed free on public lands throughout the West," McGuire explained.

The BLM periodically removes excess animals from the range to ensure herd health and to maintain ecological balance. "The adoption program is essential for achieving these important management goals," clarified McGuire.

Freeze brands are on the left side of each horse's neck, using the International Alpha Angle System, a series of angles and alpha symbols. The mark contains the registered organization, which is the U.S. Government, year of birth and registration number.

Horses were penned according to age and sex, with most of the males being castrated. Signs indicated the horses had originated in California, Kansas, Ne-

vada, Oklahoma, Utah and Nevada. Horses were of every color possible, with size variation and body condition score also in a broad range.

While visitors were invited to view the offering on Thursday evening, adoption opened at 10 a.m., Friday, with an auction to determine adoption fees for any animals sought by more than one person. Adoptions continued throughout Friday and Saturday morning.

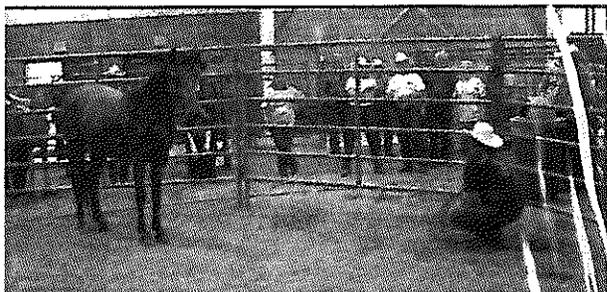
"The minimum bid for untrained animals is \$125, as set by law," according to McGuire.

Minimum bid on the trained riding horses was \$250, with McGuire indicating that the adoption price would likely be substantially above that. He expected about 65 percent of the total offering to be adopted.

"To adopt a mustang, people must be at least 18 with no record of animal abuse," McGuire pointed out. "Adopters must have suitable facilities and can adopt no more than four animals."

It was required that horses be loaded in covered stock-type trailers with swing gates and sturdy walls and floors. BLM staff was on hand to assist adopters.

Topeka was a test site



Horses raised in the wild can become excellent family riding horses if handled properly, according to Cindy Branham of Auburn during a horsemanship presentation conducted in conjunction with a recent wild horse adoption hosted by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management at Topeka.

For a new adoption incentive program in which BLM pays a \$500 care-and-feeding allowance to adopters of selected horses four years and older. However, there were only a limited number of the more mature horses.

"This allowance is paid in full after one year when adopters receive official ownership title for their horse," McGuire clarified. Younger horses are not eligible for this incentive.

"If successful, this incentive program could save taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars in long-term pasturing costs," McGuire stressed.

A wild horse belongs to the federal government until the BLM issues a Certificate of Title. After one year, adopters receive a Title Eligibility Letter, which must be signed by a qualifying person verifying that the horse has been

given humane care and treatment

The Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971 gave the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Land Management and the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service the authority to manage, protect and control wild horses and burros on the nation's public lands in order to ensure healthy herds and healthy rangelands, described Gary Hughes of the mustang adoption program from Sulphur, Okla.

Federal protection and a lack of natural predators have resulted in thriving wild horse and burro populations that increase each year. The BLM monitors rangelands and wild horse and burro herds to determine the number of animals, including livestock and wildlife, the land can support.

(Continued on page 11)

Continued from page 10) "Each year, the BLM culls the excess wild horses and burros from areas where vegetation and water could become scarce if too many animals used the area," Hughes related. Excess horses are offered for adoption.

Since 1973, the BLM has placed more than 220,000 horses and burros into private care through adoption," McGuire tallied.

Once trained, Hedrick claimed, the animals do well. In fact, fewer than 1 percent come back into BLM. Wild horses have become everything from fam-

ily pets to champion dressage horses.

The Commanding General's Mounted Color Guard, based at Fort Riley, uses six horses that were wild mustangs when obtained, commented First Sgt. Greg Bunce.

There are also wild horses on a ranch in Butler County near Cassoday. The BLM has leased 15,000 acres of land on the ranch where pregnant mares will remain until they foal. The offspring will eventually be adopted, along with the mares that are not too old.

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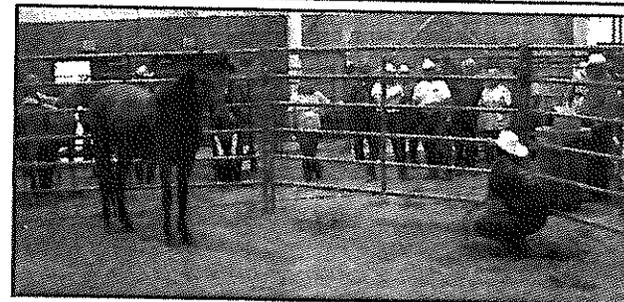
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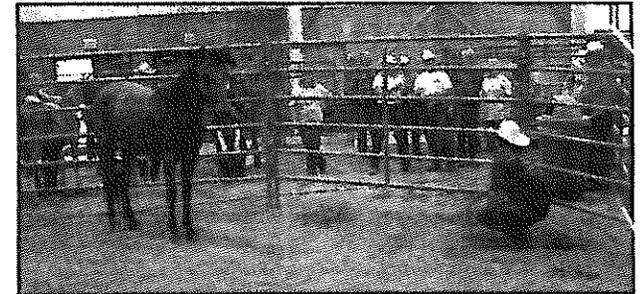
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