

NEVADA MUSTANGS: *roughing up the range*

Archie Murchie worked for the U.S. Forest Service for 36 years, including postings as a ranger in five Western states from the era of the Great Depression to the end of the 1950s. His final appointment as a ranger for the U.S. Forest Service was to the Ely District of the Nevada (now Humboldt) National Forest on the eastern border of the state from 1947 to 1959. In this interview, taken by the University of Nevada Oral History Program in 1990, Murchie explains what it was like to round up mustangs on the open range and how overgrazing by the animal caused problems in land stewardship for rangers.

What brought about the mustang problem on the Nevada Forest was that ranchers would turn their horses out on what then was public domain that later became BLM land. When they wanted some horses, they would just go out and round them up and bring them in. Some ranchers were good ranchers, and every spring they'd go out and round up all their horses, brand and castrate the colts, and turn them back out. But other ranchers weren't that energetic, and they wouldn't round up their colts. Pretty soon you had mature studs and mares running

around unbranded, and these were the animals that eventually they called the mustang.

The Indians in the Ely area had horses with which they'd do the same

thing. In fact, it was probably more common among the Indians than among ranchers not to round up their stock and castrate and brand. For example, an Indian by the name of Adams had a Forest permit for 15 or 16 head of horses that were running on Ward Mountain. For a while at the end of the grazing season he would faithfully round up his horses and bring them in, but finally he started

getting on in years and he quit rounding them up. In the wintertime they didn't bother the Forest because they were running on BLM land, but in the summertime they were right back up on the Forest.

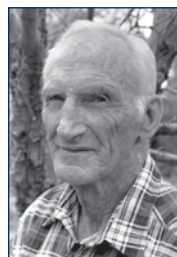
Adams finally decided that he wasn't going to pay grazing fees; that he didn't want a grazing permit. So we told him, "OK, get your horses off."

He said, "I can't. They're too wild. I disown them." There you had the start of another mustang band, and it built up to a fairly good size.

If you let them go, mustang can overgraze or damage a considerable area, probably more so than cattle. One of the big problems with them is that they are on the range 12 months of the year, and in the spring when the snow is melting they can do a lot of trampling damage. I have seen where mustangs have left tracks six inches deep in the mud on a hillside where they were grazing. They also are grazing the range a long time before it is ready to graze in the spring. The grass and other plants never get a start under this kind of use, and they soon die.

Mustang will trail long distances to water. They'll water, and they'll hang around water for maybe an hour or two; then they will drink again, and then they'll move out. For some distance around those water holes they clean up just about all the vegetation there is — a lot more so than cattle will do.

You'd have a fairly small spring where deer would come in and drink, and maybe it was big enough that there'd be water running down out of it and a few head of cattle or sheep could come in and water. But mustangs have a bad habit when it comes to a little spring: if they can't get enough water to drink, they start pawing, and pretty soon they have that spring all tore up and so muddy...how



Archie Murchie

they can ever drink that water. Mustangs can really ruin a spring. This is one of the reasons why ranchers were very much in favor of closing orders.

In the 12 years that I was at Ely we had to have closing orders two different times to bring the mustang population down. They were actually damaging the range—they were cropping it too short, and their trails in and out to water were causing erosion. When it got too extreme we'd go to the county commissioners and ask for a closing order for one year. They would issue one, and during that time we could go out and shoot any horse that we found on the Forest.

The closing order wouldn't go into effect for three or four months. We would notify all the livestock people, whether they ran on the Forest or not, that the order was going to go into effect on such-and-such a day, and that if they had any horses out in trespass on the Forest, to get them off. Notices were published in the paper for maybe four or five issues, and signs were put up on the road so that anybody that had a horse in trespass had adequate time to get out and round it up and bring it in. Most of them did that.

HUNTING MUSTANGS

The first time we hunted mustang was probably 1950, and the next time was 1955. We were just about due for another hunt when I left the district in 1959, but I doubt very much if they ever hunted mustang again, because by 1955 there was beginning to be some talk against it. The county commissioners were kind of reluctant to give us a closing order, and when they did they pretty much told us that this would be the last one that they would issue.

We had an extraordinarily severe winter in 1948-1949 that was tough on mustangs, and there were quite a lot that perished. I've seen places where mustangs had finally worked their way down into a creek bottom, where

The University of Nevada Oral History Program produces and preserves primary-source oral histories that document the history and culture of Nevada and the Intermountain West. Visit <http://unr.edu/oral-history> for more information.

they'd eaten the willows down to the size of your thumb, and the sagebrush the same way. They had eaten off all the hair on the manes and tails of each other; they'd eaten coarse food, like sagebrush or the limbs of juniper, and the sticks were so big (and maybe the mustangs were so weak that they couldn't chew adequately) that they passed through, and in the rectum the sticks had gouged the colon so bad before they died, there'd be these sticks pushing out of their rectums and you could see where blood had run onto the ground.

Nobody in the Forest Service ever considered so-called mustangs to be real mustangs—they were just tame horses that had gone wild. In other words, none of them have any ancestry tied to horses that the Spanish brought over. In the southern parts of the United States, maybe down in Texas, there still may be a few wild horses that have a faint trace of that Spanish blood.

The mustang is an interesting animal: he's far more alert than deer or elk or just about any other wild animal, and he can see the farthest, I believe, of any four-legged animal that's out in the mountains. He also has good hearing and an excellent sense of smell, and if you're upwind from one he can smell you for a long way. And they are fast learners—you don't have to shoot up a mustang herd more than once until you're going to have an awful time getting in to them again.

I preferred to hunt alone, but I once got together with the Forest supervisor and two other rangers, and we set up camp at Murphy Wash [15 miles south of the Nevada border town of Baker]. The first day we had pretty good luck. After that we couldn't even get within gunshot distance of them.

Hunting alone, and having your rifle with you when you were riding, you could see a band and stop and sneak up on them and get off a shot. Once in a great while you could catch them in a patch of timber or a patch of mahogany, and sit down and get set and decide to shoot them as fast as they came out



Photo courtesy of Archie Murchie Family

Archie Murchie with his horse, Tom, in 1949, just before they set out on a mustang hunting trip on the Ely district of the Nevada National Forest.

of the mahogany. Then before they could get away from you, you could get two or three.

The best way to locate mustang is to go around to all the springs and find where they are watering. You can tell by the tracks and their droppings just how long it's been since they've been there. Mustangs often water at night; if they've been there that night, they can't be too far off, because they only go out to where the first good feed is and they stop. So you get on your horse and you follow their tracks until maybe you came to a ridge. You stop, get off your horse, and sneak up on top of the ridge and look over; and if they're there, then you do your best to try to stalk them like you would a deer. Sometimes you can get close enough, and sometimes you can't.

If you shot the stud out of a mustang band, and the mares couldn't tell where you were concealed, they would sometimes just mill around for a little bit. When you shot again they'd take off, but if you waited—and sometimes you'd have to wait for half an hour or maybe an hour—lots of times the mares would come back looking for the stud, and then you'd get maybe one or two more.

The stud watched over the band to a certain extent, but there was always an old mare in the bunch that probably had as much to do

with controlling the herd as the stud did. When you jumped a bunch, the mare would take off. She'd be the lead animal, and she was the one that determined where they were going to go. The old stud would stay behind to see that everybody kept up, and if a mare lagged a little bit, he'd give her a good, big bite on the rump.

Towards the last of the mustang hunting, one of the big complaints was about all this meat left out there just going to waste. To me, very little of that meat was wasted. If you shot a horse,

you'd be surprised how soon animals and birds like eagles, buzzards, hawks, coyotes, bobcats, skunks, weasels, badgers . . . you name it—how soon they could clean up a carcass.

MUSTANGS HAVE A PLACE ON THE FOREST

Even though mustang overpopulation on the old Nevada Forest was a recurrent problem we never tried to eliminate the herds entirely, because we felt the mustang had a place on the Forest. We just tried to reduce the population to a number the range could handle.

If the Forest Service and the BLM had continued the policy that we had back in the 1950s, you'd still have plenty of mustang, but you wouldn't have all the problems that there are now. They have reached a point now where I don't think there's any solution other than an extremely tough winter.

*In 1991, the University of Nevada Oral History Program first published *The Free Life of a Ranger*, by Archie Murchie with R. T. King. In 2002, three years following Murchie's death at age 91, the program published the second edition of the book chronicling, in Murchie's own words, his action-packed career.*