

# THE *Spirit* OF THE NATURAL HORSE

This Study Lets the Wild Horse Speak to Us

by Jaime Jackson

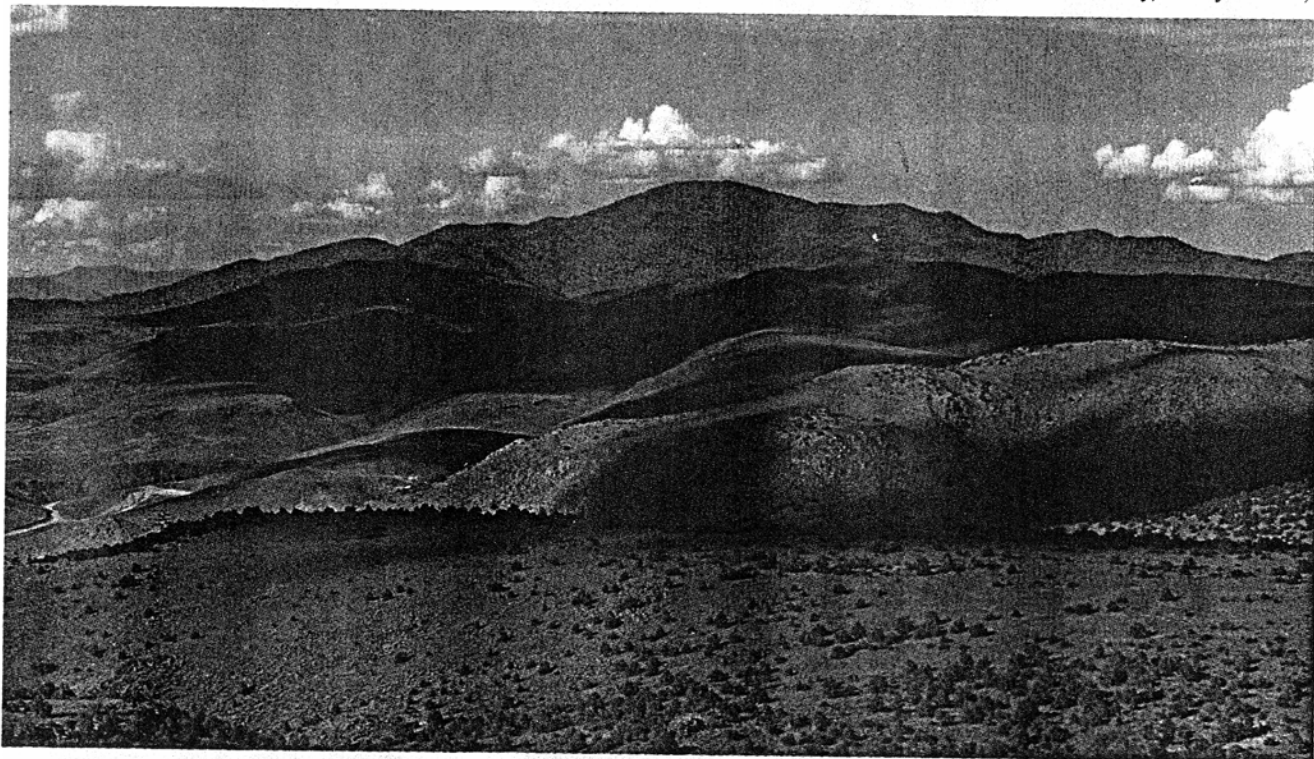
**W**hat is a natural horse? The idea of what it means for a horse to be "natural" is a notion that I have tried to come to grips with for as long as I've had anything to do with horses. Indeed, the word *natural*, itself, has been exploited to such notorious ends in our society, that, in fact, it can mean just about anything one wants. For example, in our domestic horse world, we

hear variously from product manufacturers, vets, trainers, etc.: "This hoof dressing is *natural* for your horse's feet—it makes them strong, moist, and supple"; "Use this wormer; it rids the horse of *unnatural*, harmful bot larva"; "When backing your horse, it is *natural* for him to move his legs at the lateral, simultaneous (i.e., the 'pace' in reverse)." But by whose or what code of defini-

tion are any of the foregoing proclamations accorded relative naturalness or unnaturalness? Is a natural hoof moist and supple? Are bot larva, in fact, harmful and unnatural? Does a horse even move backward naturally?

## Uncertainties in the Horse World—Plaguing Questions

As a shoer who, over the years, has been faced with many, many horses, I



**Figure 1.** This photo characterizes the sparse yet dramatic lay of the land that these wild animals roam upon. This "wild horse country" is in central Nevada. (Photo by the author)

have always been intimately aware of the broad range of opinions held by different horse enthusiasts concerning their animals—including their feelings about what is *naturally* in their mount's best interest. From my vantage point—as one who has been in the ditch for fifteen years making a living with domestic horses—it also has been clear to me that their concepts of nature, like my own, were invariably jaded or shaped by hearsay, the slick advertisements of manufacturers and their high paid jingles, or the intimidating harangues of kudo-enriched experts who always profess to know everything there ever was to know about horses. What all of this boils down to is that, throughout the horse world, the meaning of “natural” is held hostage to a reign of unsubstantiated opinion—opinion derived entirely from horses in captivity.

I suppose that I might not ever have arrived at the point of trying to clarify the meaning of nature—the horse's natural world, in particular—if it weren't for the fact that it has become increasingly apparent to me that many, many domestic horses suffer at the hands of human beings—some quite brutally, in fact. For those readers who doubt this, I remind them of a recent, nationally syndicated article by the President of the American Humane Association of the United States, John Hoyt, who was commenting upon the gruesome transgressions against racehorses in this country—a plight I know many horse people are aware of already:

“The first week in May [1991] marks the annual running of the Kentucky Derby, perhaps the world's most famous horse race. In the surrounding celebration for the ‘sport of kings,’ however, the dark side of horse racing—the drugs, the breakdowns, the fate of the horses that don't make it—gets lost between the mint juleps and the lawn parties.

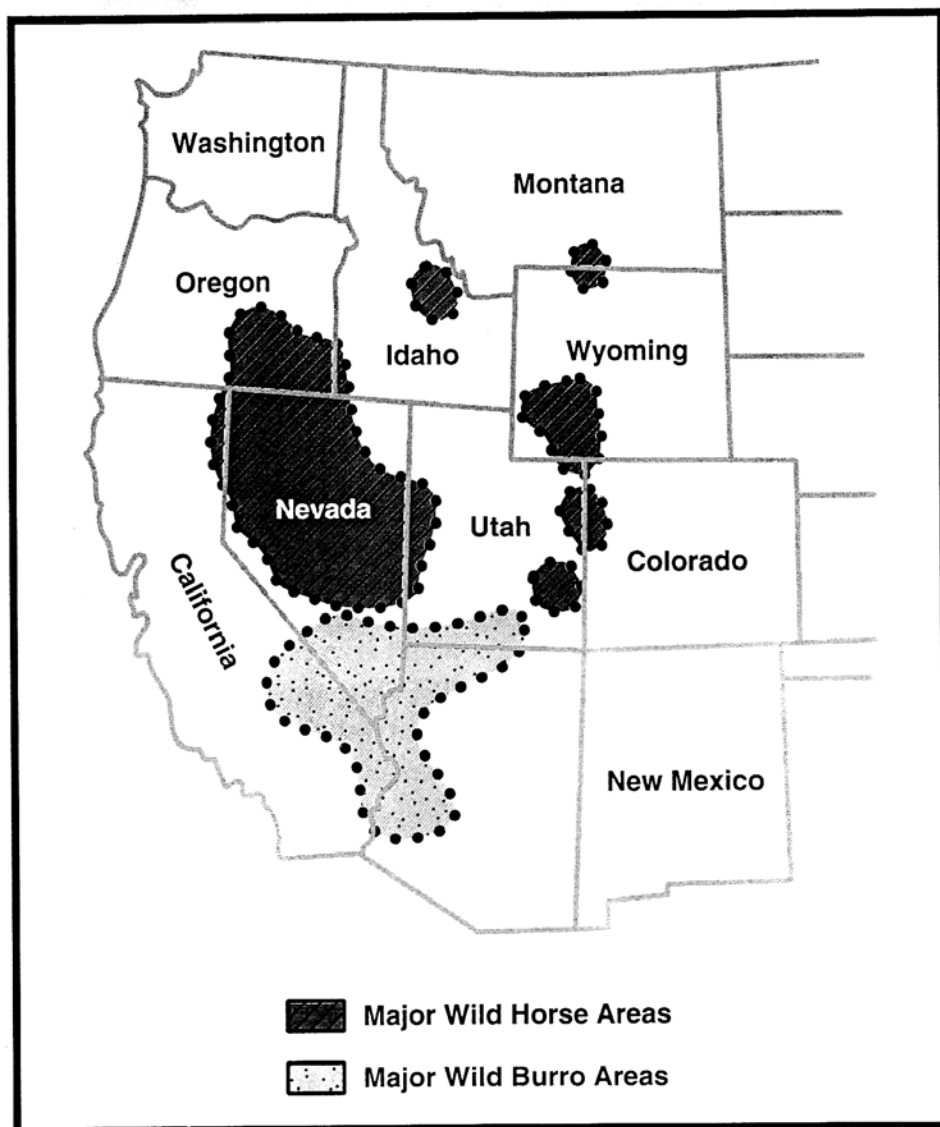


Figure 2. These are the major wild horse and burro areas in the West.

“Both the federal government and the states need to make serious efforts to outlaw the use of drugs and penalize trainers, jockeys, and racing officials that abuse and tolerate the abuse of these animals. For every multimillion dollar star like Secretariat, there are thousands of worn-out, sick, drugged horses that are run into the ground and end up in a slaughterhouse. Surely the ‘sport of kings’ owes more to its royal competitors than that.”<sup>1</sup>

I know, from first-hand observation, that much of the abuse of horses that goes on in our society results

from ignorance—and let there be no doubt, of this there is surely plenty. But it also stems from the lack of personal accountability, as Mr. Hoyt suggests, and the widespread absence of a solid, honest foundation in horsemanship. Anyone can buy a horse. Anybody can ride one. And, once you get up there in the saddle for the first time, put your foot in the stirrup, and pull back or let go of the reins, you will find yourself alone—to do as you please. The rules, the regulations, the guidelines—if there are any—and the pressure to perform, like the ideas about horsemanship

ship you probably have come to embrace, all seem to be seated in the vast domain of horsemanship by opinion. You're basically free to do whatever you want to do. But what of the horse? Does he have any say in all of this?

I have been around the horse world long enough to know something about the joy and sorrow of equestrians and their mounts. Mainly, it is the deep sense of disappointment I've seen in riders who fail, again and again, to attain the levels of rapport and effective horsemanship with their mounts that brought them to the horse in the first place that alarms me the most. Some quit the first day. Others go on, and on, and on for years, with the vast majority getting nowhere significant in their efforts to excel. Miraculously, the horse weathers, or tries to weather, all of this effort, including his rider's frustration and disappointment. Many riders I know have tried to deny this disappointment—to themselves, to others, and even to me. But it is my custom in recent

years to challenge this denial by inquiring earnestly: What do you know of what your horse thinks and feels about all of your demands made upon him? If you don't know, then it is time to quit. Time to stop. Time to start over from the beginning.

Stop. That's what I did ten years ago one day, after doing something I had never done before. I began to listen . . . listen closely—to a tiny, distant voice coming from what, at first, I thought was my own mind, but learned later was the voice of nature itself. It was the spirit of the natural horse trying to get me on course, in tune, away from all that opinion jamming my senses and better judgment. Everything I thought I knew about horses was about to change forever.

### Confronting the Wild Horse Mythos

For years, I had been aware of wild horses roaming about in America's outback—the high desert country of the West's Great Basin (Figures 1 and 2). I had never been among them

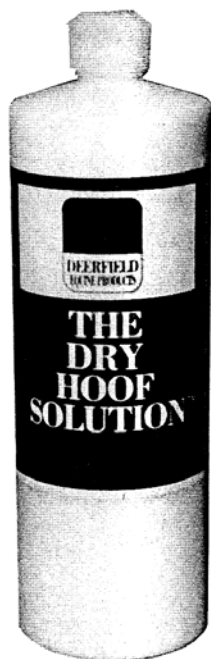
personally, and the few that came into my professional care through government adoption programs struck me as being nothing out of the ordinary. To a large extent, I, like most horse enthusiasts, had allowed my thinking about these animals to be influenced by rumor, myth, and Old West stories.

On one level, my understanding was that the vast majority of wild horses were "cayuses"—that is, poor, unsound, inbred, equine runts. But, on another level, my intuitions told me that this view was superficial and problematic: Why would nature select for the rugged outback an equine freak so ill-prepared for adaptation that it would be destined for genetic self-annihilation? This made no sense, and with further reflection, I began to see past this derogatory image of the wild horse, beyond the stereotypical illusion—hurdling a great mental wall—into the potential reality that perhaps nature has provided us after all with a true, living model of the horse's natural world.

I remember this day well, for not long after, I packed up my belongings and headed alone into the outback. I was going to wild horse country to see for myself what was going on out there—free from the racket of all that opinion and barnyard *bavardage* jammed in my head. I was about to make the "wild horse/natural horse" connection.

### Heading Into the Outback

My first day in the outback was one of my most memorable. After driving all day in my four-wheel-drive truck over what seemed like billions of rocks and potholes, I finally reached the area where locals had told me I would find wild horses. The first thing that struck me when I shut off the engine was the profound feeling of solitude and quiet. I fell in love immediately with my new surroundings—just as I imagine the descen-



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**Figure 3.** This lava-strewn field is typical of wild horse country. The dry, rocky, firm ground is essential to healthy, naturally shaped hooves and balanced locomotion. (Photo by the author)



**Figure 4.** This is a close-up of the volcanic field shown in Figure 3. It illustrates the perilous terrain over which wild horses are able to move. The field stretches over 100 yards and is strewn with dung. (Photo by the author)

dants of the first wild horses might have when they arrived here over a hundred years before.

As I looked around, I noticed that an immense butte (a rise that is more than a hill, but less than a mountain) rose a short way off in the distance. This strange, almost eerie promontory would provide me with the perfect vista I needed to find the wild ones still beyond my view. I could hardly wait to reach the top. But two steps toward the butte's western flank, I realized immediately that the desert floor beneath me, a vast carpet of abrasive volcanic rock strewn everywhere, would have to be negotiated first (Figure 3).

And here my mind reeled immediately with this question: How could any horses, especially unshod ones, possibly cross such terrain, when I could barely walk through it myself wearing thick-soled hiking boots? Maybe these wild horses were just "myths" after all, but, if true, surely no one back home would ever believe me.

Finally reaching the base of the butte, I discovered next that its steep, craggy, boulder-strewn slopes, surrounded variously by deep canyons,

alluvial fans, sparse stands of twisted juniper, and an endless sea of jack-rabbit bush, would provide no easy department-store escalator with which to reach its summit. Nevertheless, up, up, up I went, at times climbing on "all fours" to keep my balance.

Halfway to the summit, I stopped

to catch my breath, and there in the cracks and sparse patches of earth, I began to notice that some kind of plant had rooted itself upon the slope of the butte. Staring, fully amazed by the plant's tenacity, nature swooped on me again in another frenzy of slap-stark awareness, for there, scattered in between the sharp rocks,

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## Spirit of the Natural Horse



Figure 5. Small bands of horses are scattered over the countryside. (Photo by Jim Hansen)



Figure 6. This band is taking its turn at the watering hole. (Photo by Jim Hansen)

large smooth boulders, and plants, lay dried horse dung (Figure 4). Those horses had somehow climbed up the side of this steep, rugged butte to eat this plant life—and here

I was, stooped over and acting like a mountain goat, just trying to get to the top.

Finally, when I reached the summit, I was dazed by the grand, sweep-

ing panorama around me, including the equally awesome cloud formations that broke and filtered the sun's warm rays which fell upon the desert landscape creating pockets of shadow and brilliance. Then I saw them.

In virtually every nook and cranny were small groupings—"bands"—of horses (Figure 5). There were probably several hundred of them in all—as far as I could see. It was like watching a movie about horses made just for me. There were buckskins, grullas, one albino, several paints, chestnuts—practically every color combination I'd ever seen. One band was entering a pond to drink (Figure 6). A second band, moving away nearby, had apparently just left the pond minutes before and was now out of sight of its replacement at the water hole. Elsewhere, a band of eight horses, including a gold paint, was apparently getting ready to climb the eastern flank of the butte. There was so much interesting activity below me that I didn't know how to take it all in. I still don't.

At any rate, the myth of the stereotyped, pathetic "equine hillbilly" quickly melted away. These robust, muscular animals were anything but lame, tatter-coated runts with chipped, broken hooves. With my

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binoculars, I could see clearly their immaculate hooves and vibrant, healthy coats; their curious but alert eyes probing every inch of their environment; the bold and silent presence of the Monarch stallions—the sentinels and “Generals” of the horse’s natural world (Figure 7); the harems of mares—for wild horse society is normally polygamous; and all the many horse children, who are forever frolicking playfully with each other one moment, only to spar somewhat seriously the next before retreating to their mothers’ sides. So it goes—enough to fill a book!

### A “Horse Is a Horse”!

Soon I found my way among those horses below. I now think fondly of them as my horse “relatives.”<sup>2</sup> Properly, these animals are known as the “Wild, Free-Roaming Horse of the American West”—according to Congress. I have been among them now, off and on, for ten years. They have taught me, through their fine living examples, what the meaning of “natural” is for their species. In fact, it is through them that I have been able to make what I call the “wild horse/natural horse” connection—a mental bridge that spans the real outback world of the wild horse and the abstract paradigm of the *natural horse*. It is the philosophy by which I now try to gauge all my activities with domestic horses. Let me explain.

The exemplary wild horse makes the expression “a horse is a horse” come fully to life. It endows the phrase with all the richness and meaning it was meant to exert upon the human psyche. As history will show, all breed, conformation, and temperamental types are represented in the wild horse population—nature welcomes them all. By virtue of his natural way of life, the wild horse provides us with a working model through which his species can speak



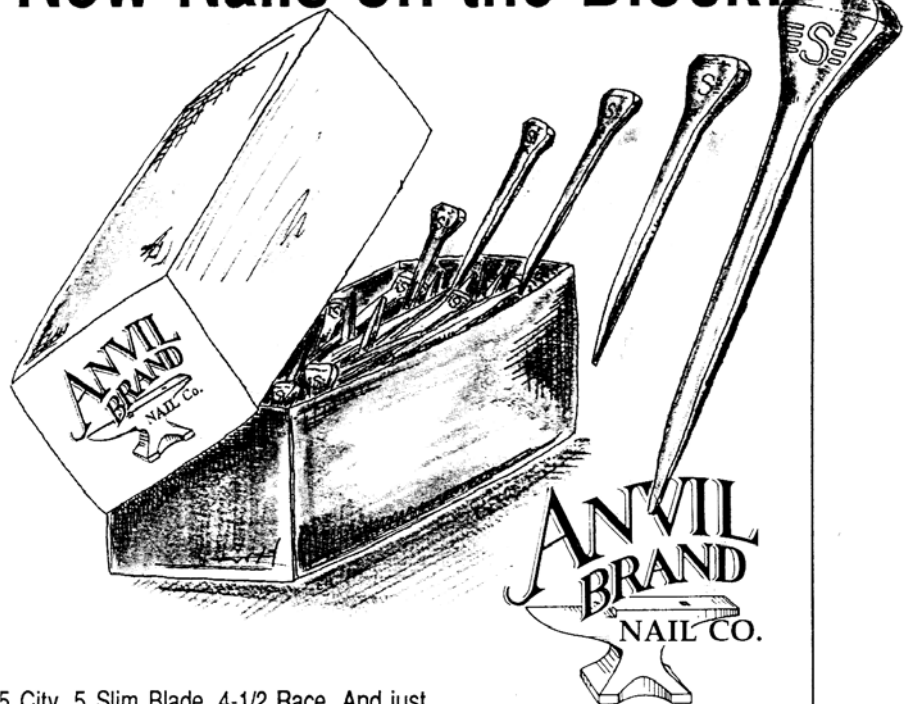
**Figure 7.** The stallions serve as sentinels in the wild horses’ natural world. (Photo by Jim Hansen)

for itself of the real meaning of the natural equine state. Here in the outback, there is no dogmatic, human-based opinion to muddle one’s thinking about the horse’s natural

world. Horses simply do what is natural for horses to do—whatever that might be. We have only to observe and learn . . . simple as that.

There are many examples of how the natural horse can “speak” to us—again, enough to fill a book. As a farrier, I had many, many questions to “ask” of these wild horse friends: What exactly are your natural front and hind hoof shapes supposed to be (Figure 8)? Are those shapes influenced greatly by your individual conformations? What range of toe angles and toe lengths might I find among the members of your society? Is it true that white-colored hooves are inferior to black-colored hooves as so many people insist here among your near-relatives in civilization? What forces do you bring to bear to shape your hooves? Does laminitis occur among you and, if so, are you able to

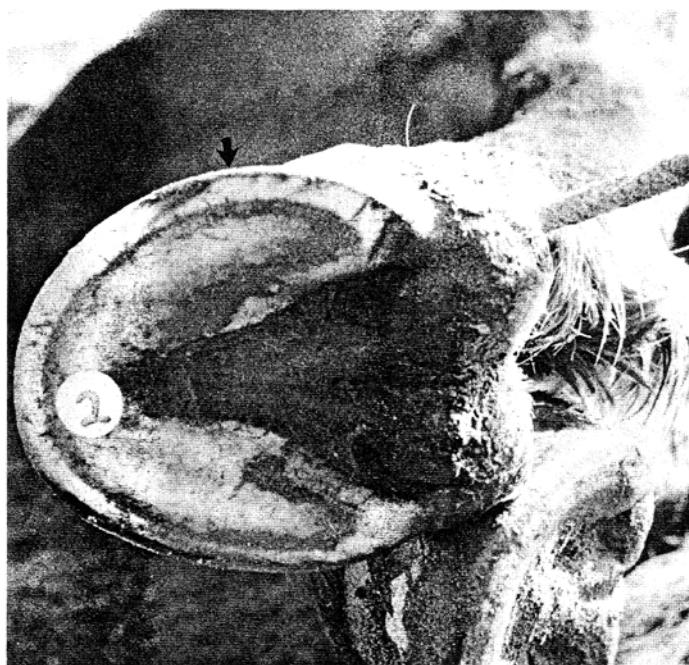
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# Spirit of the Natural Horse



**Figure 8.** These exemplary natural hooves are smooth, thick, rugged—and white! Toe length seldom exceeds three inches in the wild. Note the concavity of the hind pair in the photo at right and the thickness of the outer wall. (The arrow designates the lateral quarter of the left hind.) (Photos by the author courtesy of Northland Press)

treat it effectively with what nature provides you? And on and on.

As a horseman, I had numerous other questions to ask: How did na-

ture intend for you to move?—for it is so difficult, probably impossible, to figure this out among your brethren in captivity. What is your basic unit of social organization—is it the “family” as my intuitions keep telling me? What means of veterinary care do you provide for yourselves—for it is apparent that you are almost always healthy and seldom lame. I have noticed that you systematically seek out certain feeds provided by nature to achieve some purposeful end (such as dealing with parasitic infestations). Has this something to do with your intuitive knowledge of the land’s pharmacopoeia? And, oh yes, if nature has intended that there be a close companionship between horse and man, is there a way—a special language—through which nature will let us talk with one another?

I would like to say at this point that the fundamental focus of the horse’s natural world is the horse

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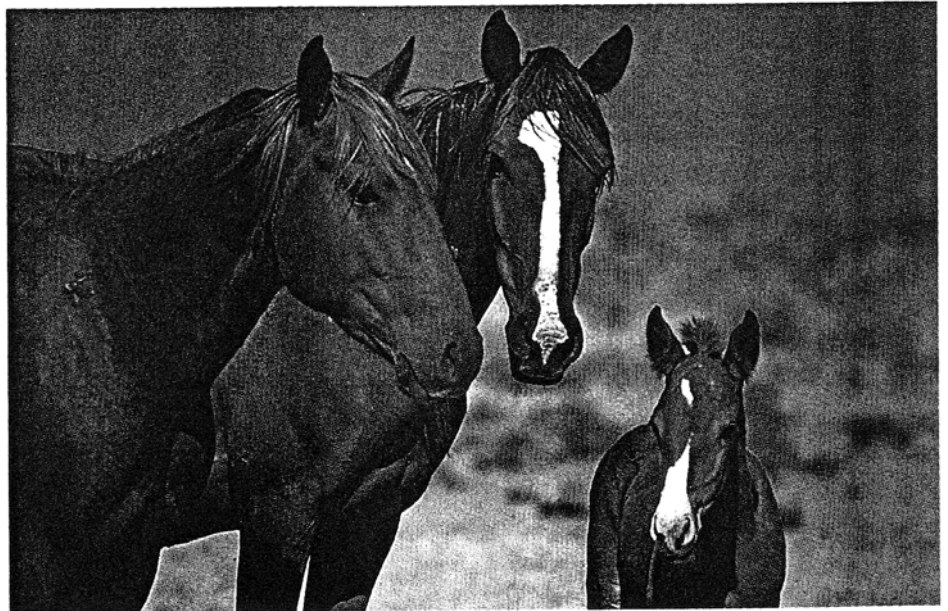
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"family" (Figure 9). It is the beacon that I have learned to follow and trust in the outback, for the simple reason that it is a straightforward, honest, and moral guide. The lives of these horses, though difficult and Spartan in many respects, are, nevertheless, full and blessed. They know nothing of the distressing confusion that pervades, troubles, and eventually numbs the lives of domestic horses everywhere. What is more, lameness—the archenemy of all domestic horses—virtually is not found among them. There are no vets, no shoers, no trainers, no human beings at all, to instruct or force upon them that which their natural instincts tell them is alien.

It is ironic to think that that with which we are obsessed in the care and training of their domestic relations no doubt would be seen by



**Figure 9.** *The fundamental focus of the horse's natural world is the horse "family."* (Photo by Jim Hansen)

them as neurotic. Indeed, the bulk of our daily concerns (e.g., hoof care)

represents matters given no thought whatsoever in their world, for they



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are merely ancillary and are determined by the unvarying, holistic forces of nature. Therefore, it is not surprising that I have found exemplary locomotive grace and balance, unprecedented soundness, awesome hoof integrity, and mutual respect and kindness toward other living things (including bots and strongyles). Further, that wholesome socialization centered around the family is the normal and natural order of their day—not the half-baked, schizophrenic reality of so many horses forced to live and act alone in captivity.

### Understanding Nature

This introductory article has been written to familiarize the reader with what I see to be an important "difference." That difference is the natural world of the horse in contrast to the

unnatural, artificial world we have created for the horse in human society. It will do no good to describe what I've learned about the "natural horse" unless the reader is prepared to abandon all beliefs collected from varying and discrepant opinion. Once this is done, however, the "magic" (i.e., "holiness" . . . not black magic or voodoo) of nature will begin to work on you—to answer tough questions and bring peace of mind where once there was uncertainty and denial.

For example, if you are a farrier, you will no longer need to speculate about such things as what a naturally shaped hoof is and is it best for my horse? And, if you are an equestrian, you can learn to forget about all that mechanically obstructive shoeing (e.g., rolled toes, bar shoes, etc.—because they won't be needed once we

have learned how to ride the horse as nature intended. All horses move basically the same way and, I have found, none of them need fantastic hoof modifications to move naturally. Perhaps we shall even learn to forget using all that hoof dressing stuff, too—I assure you there are no pedicure salons dispensing toenail polish in the outback. So, let's just toss it out with all that opinion and misleading advertising.

In fact, I think we've got to start tossing out a lot of things. Especially all those misguided notions and ego, because nature is awaiting us with new answers to old questions. Not just one or two answers, but an infinite number of them . . . answers designed specifically for you and your horse who, maybe, just maybe, has been waiting and wanting all along to share his thoughts and answers with you.

I trust that opening oneself thoughtfully and cautiously to the mysteries and uncertainties of the unknown, that is, to the realm beyond the mental walls of dishonest or unsubstantiated opinion, will not jeopardize either one's relationship to the horse—or to nature. On the contrary, it is this very act, an act of humility and kindness, that sets the stage for the spiritual magic, for the order of brotherhood—for that difference I've mentioned before—to unfold and bridge the gap between ourselves and our horses. The horse instinctively will sense this effort and will respond in kind. Believe me if you can: It is within the nature and spirit of the horse, and all living things, to acknowledge and affirm this kindredship when possible. We simply have to recognize that the kinship was there all along—and here I recall the warm, powerful words of Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota (Sioux) leader and writer of the early part of this century who, in his efforts to inspire greater under-

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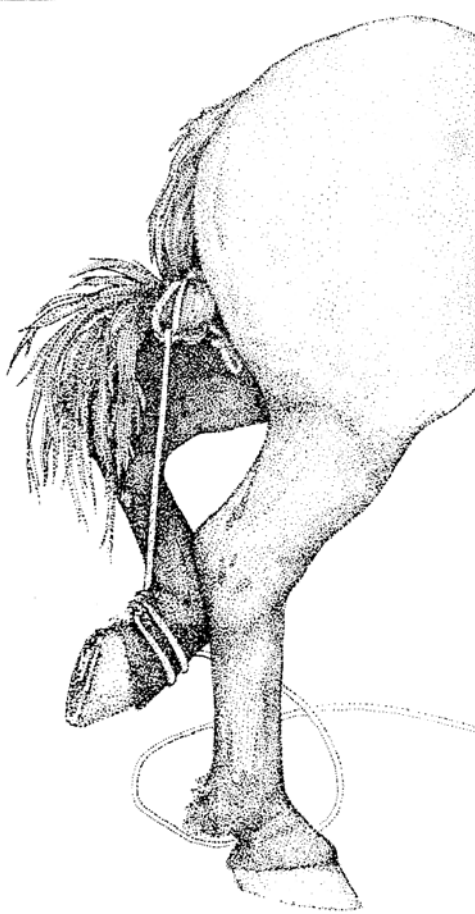
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standing between human beings and nature, wrote:

"From Wakan Tanka [God] there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man. Thus all things were kindred and brought together by the Great Mystery."<sup>3</sup>

I believe now that an essential part of *nature* is a deep, profound, emotional and *spiritual* sense of feeling connected, or kindred, to other living things such as the horse. This implies an order of brotherhood founded upon mutual respect, reverence, and compassion for things other than man. The world's greatest horsemen—our *natural riders* past and present—have always known and testified to this. They've realized that to be in harmony with one's mount, one must know how to have an honest relationship with him . . . one full of mutual communication and that is free from coercion and the presumption that fails to recognize that "a horse is a horse." "Take the trouble to find your way into your horse's mind," wrote the great, genuine natural rider, Richard Watjen, years ago, "without trying to make it human. Only those can become experts who are in tune and as one with their horses both physically and mentally."<sup>4</sup>

We owe it to ourselves and our mounts to look into it—that special difference—to see clearly what nature has breathed into the soul and being of the horse, then to develop an orderly and intuitive system of honest, compassionate horsemanship around that understanding . . . one system that applies to all horses equally, not just to dressage or cutting or racing or whatever kind of horses we may have. A horse is a horse. But let's not start here, at the barn, for goodness sake, where too

many horses are forced into the image of man. Where then? There, way out there, in the outback. There in the land of the spirit of the natural horse.

### Bridging the Gap with the Horse's Natural World and the Role of the Farrier

The paradigm of the natural horse also beckons the farrier to examine and consider the outback reality and value of the *naturally shaped hoof* in relation to his or her own work. But why? Because, foremost, such configured hooves serve best the naturally moving horse to execute his natural gaits, including any *unusual* varia-

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tions, with the utmost balance and athletic grace possible, but also because such hooves, when complemented by an overall regimen of "nature" oriented care, are necessary to maintain the animal's health,

soundness, and well-being.

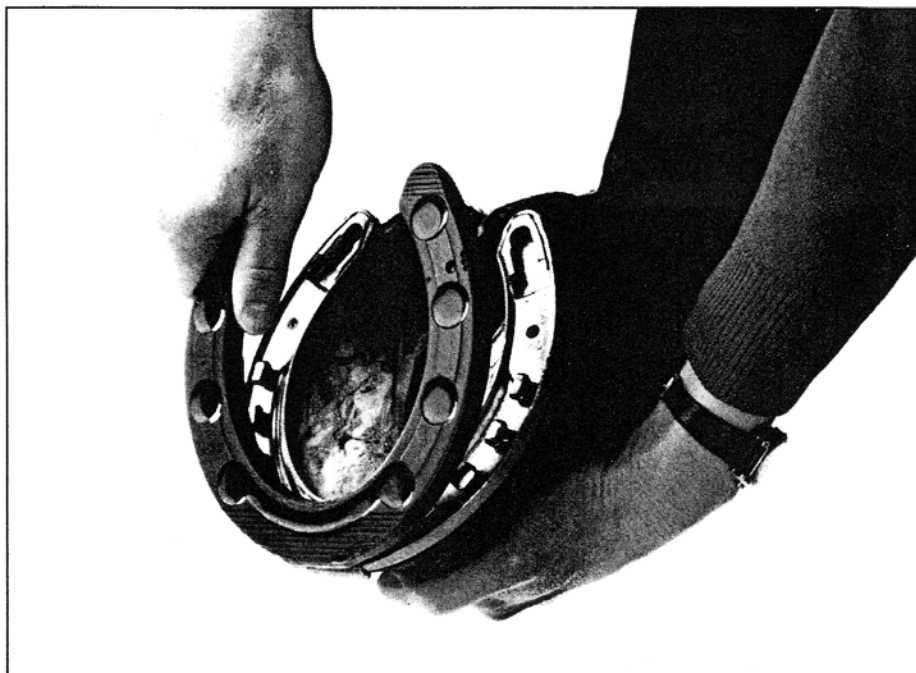
A benefit of this concerted effort of providing the horse with a comprehensive program of natural care, including his naturally shaped hooves, is the potential for the rider to devel-

op a solid foundation in horsemanship based upon the animal's natural abilities. Insofar as the work of the farrier is concerned in aiding the horse and rider in this effort, I have several observations to make here.

As a shoer, I am aware fully that the role of the farrier is often a difficult one when we move to the realm of horsemanship and how the horse will be used. As I have noted above, it is a world of varying and discrepant opinion. And the farrier, to work, must stand in the middle of it. Indeed, it is no easy task to satisfy a host of riders whose diverse equestrian goals, precepts, and methods often require a range of contradictory manipulations of the horse's hooves. I know from experience as well as any shoer that this also means walking a very thin line between what we know is in the best interest of the animal's health, soundness, and well-being and satisfying the demands and vagaries of an often unpredictable and arbitrary clientele. It is now my belief that the paradigm of the naturally shaped hoof could be an important and effective means to resolving many of these conflicts.

In my forthcoming book, *The Natural Horse* (Northland Press, Spring of 1992), I present to the reader in considerable detail my findings concerning the naturally shaped hooves of hundreds of sound, healthy wild horses I sampled nearly ten years ago in the Nevada outback. How I have applied that information in my own professional work is also discussed in the book. Through personal experience, ongoing experimentation, and the close cooperation of my clients at various stages, I have learned much in these ensuing years about the potential benefits and uncertainties of a regimen of natural hoofcare. Indeed, here in a future article, I would like to share my ideas, discoveries, and frustrations concerning this ap-

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proach to hoofcare. Every passing day strengthens my belief that the spirit of the natural horse has much to teach us as farriers about what is honestly and practically in the best interest of all domestic horses in our collective care. ■

## Article Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hoyt, John A. "Remove Drugs, Abuse from Horse Racing." *Herald and News*, Klamath Falls, Oregon: Monday, April 29, 1991, No. 15,618.

Wrote Alexander Mackay-Smith, DVM, in 1983, in the *American Farriers Journal*:

"American racing causes lameness in mind-boggling amounts. Veterinarians caring for racehorses say that 60 to 90 percent of their charges are significantly lame.

"Racing secretaries and track veterinarians are strained beyond reason to fill their [racing] cards. As more races are carded, more horses get sore, and a vicious cycle, which medication fails to break, drags everyone down. Racing plants must now

house or have available 2500 to 3000 horses in order to provide sound entries." [From "Burden of the Lame Horse" by Alexander Mackay-Smith, DVM, *American Farriers Journal*: September/October 1983, Volume 9, Number 5, p. 389.]

<sup>2</sup>These particular wild horses formerly inhabited the Virginia Range southeast of Reno, Nevada. Tragically, many of the horses I observed that first day were gunned down by horribly perverted nature-haters several years later. The reader may recall from news releases as recent as two years ago a raging controversy looming around these killings. FBI agents, fired into action by outraged animal protection groups, combed the area looking for clues, questioning locals, and finally arresting and bringing charges against a dozen or so individuals believed to be guilty of these crimes. The federal judge handling the case, in a grave miscarriage of justice, threw out the charges—"Dismissed with prejudice," according to court transcripts—feeling the evidence to be too circumstantial for any jury to adjudicate upon fairly.

<sup>3</sup>Chief Luther Standing Bear. *Land of the*

*Spotted Eagle*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1933, p. 193. No irony, living amidst roaming bands of wild horses, Standing Bear's insights into the nature of the horse convey the very essence of the "natural horse" model that this article is trying to develop; these insights mirror also the very integrity of "Classical Horsemanship" espoused by the ancient Greeks (e.g., Xenophon) and, more recently, by a small, eclectic army of *natural riders* dotting the landscape of a very confused, "modern" world.

<sup>4</sup>Richard L. Watjen. *Dressage Riding*. London: J. A. Allen & Co., 1979, p. 127. Richard Watjen, born in Bremen, Germany in 1891 (died 1966), studied with many renowned international horsemen, including Oskar Stensbeck. He also trained and served as guest instructor at the famed Spanish Riding School in the early part of this century. Winner of numerous international and Olympic competitions, he was, in later years, instructor to the U.S. Three-Day Event Team (1948—Gold Medal) and the Equestrian Team at Gladstone, New Jersey.

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