

Herd of 200 horses in jeopardy after North Dakota horse breeder dies unexpectedly

LINTON, N.D. --Leo Kuntz was a lifelong bachelor. He lived alone on the family ranch in Emmons County and tended a large herd of horses whose very existence was his greatest achievement.



Leo Kuntz, right, and his brother Frank were instrumental in saving Nokota horses, which were named the North Dakota honorary equine in 1993. Tom Wirtz photo / Special to The Forum

LINTON, N.D. -Leo Kuntz was a lifelong bachelor. He lived alone on the family ranch in Emmons County and tended a large herd of horses whose very existence was his greatest achievement.

The horses came to be called Nokotas, a name Leo coined to signify the North Dakota horse, which was named the honorary state equine in 1993.

Kuntz scraped by, never spending money on himself, saving every penny to care for a herd of Nokota horses that grew over the years to number more than 200 on his ramshackle ranch.

"He took care of them," said Felicia Rocholl, one of Leo Kuntz's sisters. "They were his life. It's all he had."

Now Leo's legacy is at risk.

Kuntz died Sunday, Aug. 12, at the age of 69 from injuries he suffered days earlier when crashing his all-terrain vehicle while checking on his herd.

His unexpected death has left his family and friends scrambling to make arrangements to care for Kuntz's beloved horses. They hope to preserve the herd he dedicated his life to saving, an important breeding repository for the Nokota line he helped establish.

"We'd all love to see his dream go on," Rocholl said. But it will be a challenge to come up with the money and manpower to keep such a large herd fed and properly tended. "The horses are literally his children."

Ripples of alarm spread through the Nokota horse community when news of Kuntz's death spread quickly. He comprised such an integral part of maintaining the breed, which has supporters around the United States and in Europe, that it's not clear how the effort can be sustained without him.

"It is a moment of reckoning for all of us who are involved in this preservation," said Castle McLaughlin, a co-founder of the Nokota Horse Conservancy who has studied the horse's origin, part of which can be traced to the war ponies confiscated from Sitting Bull and his followers when they surrendered at Fort Buford in Dakota Territory in 1881.

"All of us who are concerned about the fate of those horses, and the fate of that ranch, have to step forward," she said.

Leo Kuntz's love affair with his horses began decades ago when he was a young man who came home broken from war. He would spend hours wandering the maze of buttes and ravines in the Badlands to quiet his mind.

It was in the 1970s and Kuntz was a veteran of the Vietnam War. He came home with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star and a dark disillusionment about life. But the horses stirred something inside of him.

He followed the horses in Theodore Roosevelt National Park, the last stronghold of wild horses on the Northern Plains, getting to know the stallions and their bands. What started as a pastime would turn into an obsession.

"I would kind of view Leo as a wounded warrior," McLaughlin said.

"Something about the horses kept alive the part of him that was a dreamer and idealist. He kind of was a throwback. There was something about Leo that was connected to an earlier time when horses were more important and money was less important."

In the late 1970s, Kuntz began buying the horses after roundups to cull the park herd. He used them for "suicide ride" racing, run over punishing terrain. He prized the mustangs for their sturdiness, endurance and intelligence.

In the early 1980s, the National Park Service decided to introduce outside horses to the park herd, including a quarter horse stallion and mares, to change the bloodlines of the horses in the park.

The park also stepped up its cull of the herd, removing many of the horses Leo and others regarded as the most vital to the genetic health of the herd. A turning point came with a major horse roundup in 1986.

Leo and his brother Frank bought 54 horses from the roundup. They also ended up with a horse that McLaughlin bought, a spirited blue roan stallion. All of the horses were sold in lots, by the pound-most fated to be acquired by slaughterhouse buyers.

"None of us had a clue at that point how it was all going to develop," said McLaughlin, now curator of North American Ethnography at Peabody Museum Harvard University. "Pretty soon those horses were running Frank and Leo out of house and home."

It was the beginning of a collaboration that a few years later would become the Nokota Horse Conservancy, a nonprofit group working to preserve the horse. About five years ago, Leo formed a solo effort he called the Nokota Horse Preservation Ranch, the largest single herd of Nokotas in existence.

"That became his reason for living," McLaughlin said.. "The horses became a blessing and a curse."

Kuntz, who suffered chronic health problems, many suffering from his war wounds and an infection he acquired during the war, struggled for years financially to keep his ranch going.

"I don't know how he did it, honestly," his sister Felicia said.

All who knew Leo Kuntz marveled at his natural abilities as a horse trainer. He had an instinctual way of working with horses, and was generous with his knowledge.

Although he was a lifelong rancher, Kuntz defied the stereotype. He wore a short-brimmed hat instead of a cowboy hat because the wind had a way of stealing cowboy hats. He wore trademark suspenders and favored shoes over cowboy boots.

"He was just so authentically himself," McLaughlin said. "He was never pretentious."

Kuntz was the subject of a documentary film, "Nokota Heart," in which he spoke of his admiration for Sitting Bull, with whom he felt a mystical connection, which helped to explain his dedication to the horses.

Butch Thunder Hawk, a Hunkpapa Lakota artist from the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, home of Sitting Bull, once worked with the Kuntz brothers and the Nokota Horse Conservancy.

"He had a lot of passion for horses," Thunder Hawk said of Kuntz. "He devoted his whole adult life to saving and preserving that herd."

Leo and his brother Frank gave several horses to residents of Standing Rock, where the horses are prized because they are descended from Sitting Bull's ponies, and where there is a revival of Lakota-Dakota horse culture, Thunder Hawk said.

"That gentleman's going to be missed by a lot of people," he said. "Those that didn't get to know Leo missed a great opportunity. To a lot of people, he had the status of a hero to continue to save and honor these horses that were on their way to being extinct."

If someone told Kuntz to have a good day, he was likely to respond by saying, "Make it a good day." He believed in making your own luck through hard work.

Now, with the pasture grass drying out and a hard winter looming, his family and friends are scrambling to care for the herd. They are hoping to spare the horses from the auction barn, where they might fall into the hands of buyers for the kill market-the very end he dedicated his life to prevent.

"If that would happen, it would be terrible," Rocholl said. "He fought so hard for that not to happen."

Days after Kuntz's death, his family isn't sure how they're going to be able to provide for so many horses. Rocholl's 20 horses consume a round bale of hay in a single day; Kuntz's much larger herd will require much more than that.

"It's a short window to get organized for winter," she said. "We'd all love to see his dream go on."

How to help

A benefit fund has been established to help the late Leo Kuntz and his herd of Nokota horses. Donations can be made to The Leo Kuntz Benefit Fund and sent to The First State Bank, P.O. Box 129, Beach, N.D., 58621.

"Nokota Heart," documentary film about Leo Kuntz:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnqpQIABRI0>



1/3: Leo Kuntz' dedication to the Nokota horse started when he spent hours observing the wild horses at Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where he went for solace after returning from the Vietnam War. Photo courtesy of Sean Garland/Nokota Heart



2/3: Leo Kuntz, shown at his ranch near Linton, N.D. Kuntz, who was instrumental in preserving what is called the Nokota horse, died unexpectedly. Photo courtesy of Sean Garland/Nokota Heart



3/3: Leo Kuntz operated the Nokota Horse Preservation Ranch near Linton, N.D. Photo special to The Forum