

*Alberta Mustang, the true Canadian NWMP Mount.* By Gail Praharenka

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In light of the recent shooting [*Note: this was written in 2008*] of an Alberta wild horse north west of Calgary, it is fitting that one comes to understand that this death is not just about a horse but a legacy that western Canadians own and created; a past so rich, sadly so forgotten that if one understood the significance I wonder that maybe finally the law would protect not just an animal but a tradition that epitomizes the heritage of the western provinces, cowboys and a police force in mounted form that staked out the claim of freedom for all and made the west a peaceful and free place to settle.

It may be said that Canada lacks a common heritage, however heritage has to be appreciated to be valued. One thing is for sure. The west holds claim to cowboys and a way of life that was both rugged and romantic; the rider facing long rides across vast prairie and foothills of these great provinces. And as Westerners we should honour the mustang or wild horse as a symbol of a conveyor of the law, the principle strength of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP) force in its infancy in 1873; without which you can't have the mounted part, as then a man without a horse had a long walk across the prairies. The wild horse of the west was the true mount of the NWMP.

In 1873, 278 eastern breed horses were given to the first NWMP stationed in what was the Stone Fort north of Winnipeg and Fort Garry. They were brought out by train to the 350 troops and were to carry these "mounties" on their long march west into the new province of Manitoba, and the newly acquired lands of the Hudson Bay Company—the North-West Territories which consisted of B.C, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Nunavut.

Major James Morrow Walsh (a true Canadian hero) was one of the leaders to make the early trek west in 1874 leaving Dufferin on the banks of the Red River just north of the Dakota border. The mounties had bodily strength to ride into the prairies but their naivety of the west was obvious and within a week of the trek the eastern breed horses did not have the stamina to withstand the long vast prairies distances, the hot arid landscape with little food and water.

In Ian Anderson's book "*Sitting Bull's Boss*" he writes that "two months and 700 miles out from Dufferin" and into the "Great Lone Land" . . . "34 eastern horses selected had fared poorly compared to the mongrel mustangs most of his officers favoured." By the time they had reached Fort Benton many more horses had died. Obviously those officers had begun to understand that the rigours of our western landscape demanded a horse bred and naturally made to survive here.

Henri Julien was an artist with the *Canadian Illustrated News*. He sketched the trek of the NWMP and the picture of the hand picked eastern mounts was of dying horses on the unforgiving trail.

Those early days saw the NWMP make better decisions and with the help of early guides such as Jerry Potts they acquired horses which were native American prairie ponies traded and bought from natives and ranchers living in the west.

Those early years prior to 1900 saw the NWMP patrol this vast country on horses as strong and determined as they were, and if you study those old photos you can see the dust from the countless trails. The pictures tell a brave story and the horses are often the star of the photos for those men hold these horses in high regard. They were the backbone of their accomplishments and meant living or dying in a wild frontier, our western prairie.

All the horses were stout native ponies, mirror images of mustangs. They were not the black long-legged warm bloods seen in today's RCMP musical ride. I wonder where we would be had it not been for those gritty NWMP preparing peace in the land for our ancestors' arrival. And of their horses which carried them over miles of wilderness; a testament of stamina. Of course we value our police and the traditions of the RCMP are evident. Everyday when you see a patrol car there's a picture of a long legged dark horse and rider with the redcoat. A wonderful tradition we should be proud of; but a bittersweet tradition as the politics outranks reality and the dark long legged picturesque creature Ottawa wanted as the chosen photo mount of our soldiers. Yet that horse failed the western test and the true spirit of the Canadian west is shot down.

Our traditions need to be saved and upheld. The NWMP—now the RCMP—is a national icon. The west shaped them as heroes on horseback. Now our wild horses of Alberta need saving and given their rightful place of honour and remembered as the first true Canadian mount of the RCMP.

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