

Living History

The Spanish Sulphur Horse

by Erin Gilmore

With its Baroque ancestry reflected in every flash of the hoof and arch of the neck, the Sulphur Horse is Spanish grace and wild grit thrown together. Zebra stripes adorn their legs, their manes flow long and thick, and their coats are hues of smoky grey and chalky dun. To some they may resemble Mustangs, but this small and special group differ from their more common cousins by way of a very colorful history and the recent stamp of modern science.

During the discovery of North America by European settlers, Spanish missionaries settled throughout what is now Mexico and California and began spreading north and east. As they brought legions of horses with them from Spain, horse thievery became common practice. Native Americans constantly battled with settlers, stealing horses and fighting to regain their homeland.

Around 1840, Indian Ute Chief Walkara and Peg-leg Smith famously stole 1,200 to 3,000 head of Spanish horses from missions up and down California. The stolen horses were direct descendants of pure Spanish horses that the missionaries and conquistadors had brought with them by ship to the New World.

While being driven east along the Old Spanish Trail, a trade route that connected Los Angeles to New Mexico, some of those stolen Spanish horses filtered off from the main herd. They ended up in the Great Basin, an area in the remote Needles Mountain Range of



Chief is a beautiful example of the striking shades of dun that are common in Sulphurs. Chief is the lead stallion of the Sulphur Springs Herd at Return to Freedom Wild Horse Sanctuary in Lompoc.

Photo: Mark Muntean

Southern Utah. The horses subsisted for years on the unforgiving land and grew wilder with every passing generation. In the 1930s and 40s ranchers in the area attempted to cross breed with the now wild Spanish horses by releasing larger draft type domestic stallions into the wild. They hoped to cull stronger horses for their ranch work, but the domestic stallions were quickly banished from the higher regions by the Sulphur stallions. Any mixed breed offspring was not tough enough to live high in the Great Basin, and by remaining in the higher regions where the domestic stallions could not survive, the original herd was kept pure in its isolation.

During the 1950s, ranchers in the area began shooting growing herds of Mustangs, including Spanish Sulphurs, for encroaching on their cattle's grazing land. Many Mustangs were wiped out during this time, but the horses that survived intact in the Needles Mountain Range were the forebears of the Spanish Sulphur horses that exist today.

Modern Day Protection

In 1971, when the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act was created, the Sulphur's habitat became fully protected. The horses gained their official name when their living area was renamed The Sulphur Herd Management Area.

During 1980s herd roundups, Bureau of Land Management managers began to notice the strong Spanish characteristics that the horses from the Sulphur Management Area displayed, and returned some of them to the wild to maintain the quality of the herd. The others were adopted out, beginning in 1988, which sparked the intense interest among Sulphur horse enthusiasts that continues to grow today.

The Spanish Sulphur's isolation of the past has been a huge plus in the eyes of its fans today. This special strain of Mustang retains the blood of its purebred ancestors, leaning closer to a Lusitano than a Mustang in appearance. Their large crested necks, short backs and long manes and tails are the easiest markers to spot. The Sulphur's conformation is also Iberian in its form, and their smooth, flashy gaits have knee action that is very similar to that of their Andalusian cousins.

Although their homeland is in Utah, Sulphurs have been adopted by admirers all over the country. A scattered population of Sulphurs live in both Northern and Southern California, and although they are largely used for pleasure riding, a few owners show their Sulphurs in western disciplines and at Spanish breed shows.

A Valuable Link

A lifelong horsewoman, Deb Baumann of Lakeview Terrace is also a trained historian. In reading the first person accounts and journals of old California vaqueros, she was astonished to find a collective mourning for the original



Sulphur's Vaquero is pictured here at three months. Vaquero will be 1 year old this month, and as the first full Sulphur son of Sulphur's Santiago, many hope that he will prove to be a successful foundation sire for the Vaquero Heritage Foundation.

Photo: Rachel Barlow

California horse. All the vaqueros agreed that the original colonial horses had been diluted and bred down by European influences. "As I read, it became an obsession with me," says Deb. "What were those first horses like? In their accounts, the vaqueros were describing a specific physical type. Later, I came across websites for the Sulphur horse and I was immediately struck by their appearance. They looked like the Spanish horses that the vaqueros were describing. When I read the history that the Sulphurs were descended from horses stolen in the 1800s, it all fell into place."

As managing director of The Vaquero Heritage Foundation, an educational non-profit dedicated to preserving and promoting the equestrian heritage of Old California, Deb has more than a personal interest in Sulphurs. The VHF chose to use Sulphur Horses for its rare breed conservancy program. After much research, Deb adopted two young Sulphurs—a stud colt and a mare. The stud, Sulphur's Vaquero, is a son of Sulphur's Santiago, a stallion with remarkable Spanish characteristics that was adopted from the Sulphur HMA as a 4 year old. The mare, Sulphur's Vanhi, is one of the last daughters of a very famous Sulphur stallion, Sulphur's Chance. With future plans to breed the two, the VHF hopes to preserve the Spanish characteristics of the Sulphurs and promote the breed's unique link to old California.

There are also wild Spanish Sulphurs living in California. Return to Freedom Wild Horse

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Sanctuary in Lompoc is home to a free roaming herd of Spanish Sulphurs. The founder of Return to Freedom, Neda De Mayo, recognizes that separating wild horses from their family bands is a second trauma on top of the initial shock of being taken into captivity. Her sanctuary is unique in that, whenever possible, she tries to rescue intact family herds of Mustangs, and relocates them to the 310 acre sanctuary. The result is a handful of intact family herds of wild horses, among them the Sulphur Springs Herd.

Even with the growing number of people discovering the Sulphur Horse, there are only a handful of Sulphurs scattered across the country. California, the state with the highest concentration of Sulphurs, is home to less than 100. Exact numbers of the feral herd in the Needles mountain range are difficult to come by,

but roughly 300 horses are believed to make up the breed's population there.

Science Steps In

The Spanish Sulphur Horse is not only unique by way of history. Within the last 10 years, the breed's individuality has also been proven right down to its blood. In a study by Dr. Gus Cothran at The University of Kentucky, Spanish Sulphurs were tested to



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The Iberian characteristics of Spanish Sulphurs are especially apparent in Sulphur's Santiago, an eight year old stallion who was adopted from the Sulphur Springs HMA in 2001. Santiago is owned by Diane Black (dianbla@netscape.net) and is standing at stud in Hildale, Utah.

Photo: Rachel Barlow

have Iberian markers in their genotype. This makes them proven cousins to pure Spanish horses such as Lusitanos and Andalusians. However, while other Spanish breeds are the product of generations of human-controlled genetics, Sulphurs have evolved in a completely different way, free of human intervention. It is nothing short of miraculous that this breed has retained its purity over two centuries of feral living and natural selection, and the result is a very rare foundation-type horse, essentially a genetic treasure trove.

Consequently, maintaining the purity of the Spanish Sulphur Horse is very important to Sulphur enthusiasts. Owners who breed their Sulphurs for purebred offspring must be cautious of inbreeding due to the small number

of the breed in captivity. And genotyping is extremely significant to those same owners in order to ensure that the horses they are breeding retain those extraordinary Iberian markers in their DNA. In addition, while Sulphurs culled directly from the wild will clearly have more genetic diversity than those bred in captivity, it is easy for non-Sulphur Mustangs to be mixed in with the Sulphurs in BLM roundups.

The specifics can be complicated, but beauty isn't determined by a registry, and a horse's nobility doesn't increase due to genotype markings. Sulphur horses remain a striking link to California's past, and although their genetic differences give them a special place in history, at their core they remain wild horses. And

all wild horses are under threat today, from shrinking public lands to the recent Burns Amendment, which threatens to send tens of thousands of wild horses to slaughter. In the same way that the bald eagle represents liberty for America, wild horses represent the tenacity and enduring freedom of the West. Spanish Sulphur Horses are an exceptional symbol among that group, and Sulphur enthusiasts are emphatic that these unique horses deserve attention and protection just as much as that once endangered eagle.

There are many informational websites about Spanish Sulphur Horses. Visit the Vaquero Heritage Foundation at www.colonialspanishhorse.com, the American Sulphur Horse Association at www.americanspanishsulphur.org, or the Sulphur Horse Registry at www.sulphurhorseregistry.com to find out more. Visit Return to Freedom Wild Horse Sanctuary at www.returntofreedom.org to find out more about wild horses in general, as well as the intact family herd of Sulphurs living at the sanctuary.