

The Choctaw Indian Pony: An Endangered Treasure

—WRITTEN BY SCREENWRITER JOHN FUSCO FOR *WOMEN & HORSES MAGAZINE*, MARCH/APRIL 2006



The women were the Keepers of the Horse.

It was the way of the Mississippi Choctaws: the men did the hunting, their wives later tracked the catch--on horseback, with little more than a broken twig here and there to mark the trail. On her sunset-and-cornsilk-colored pony the Choctaw Woman would ride into a tangled maze of indigo bush and brambles, follow the trail without breaking gait, and locate the gift deer. Even five moons pregnant it didn't matter; her Choctaw Pony was born gaited, like riding a cloud. With her knife she'd dress the deer and sling the heavy meat up across the packsaddle. Laying some tobacco in gratitude, she'd remount and start for home.

This was life on the Good Red Road. Apookta—a place of happiness.

In the dusk, while cooking for her children and the elders, her horse would fatten on grass nearby, small bells fastened to his outsized mane keeping him in earshot. Before dawn she would travel to the bean fields for harvest, walking alongside her horse while her small children—all three of them—would sit up in the packsaddle which was also bundled with supplies. She needed no rope to lead her partner; he just followed where she walked, sometimes snatching a bite of foliage or wayside grass.

The dun pony came from a line that her grandmother passed down to her, a line that the Choctaws could trace back three-hundred years to when they first acquired some of the strange “spirit dogs” from De Soto. It was in October of 1540 when the Spaniards arrived, riding their large and magnificent dogs, and seeking the rumored Seven Cities of Cibola. De Soto introduced himself to the people as a civilized Christian. But when the Choctaws refused to surrender their chief as his slave, he

attacked. The native people suffered devastating loss of life that October, but so did De Soto; the Choctaws were not easily pushed around by invaders. Holding onto their rightful lands, the Choctaw took a few of the Spanish spirit dogs into their lives, absorbed them into their culture. As one Native elder would recall, “Because the white man brought the horse...we can almost forgive him

for bringing whiskey.”

To the Choctaw Woman in the 1800's it seemed that the “ponies” had always been a part of her people's hunting and farming culture in Apookta, the place of happiness. Then came the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek:

At gun point she and her family were forced to leave their home and start marching. Women, children, old people--many of them barefoot. From their ancestral farms and forests toward a place called Oklahoma, they were escorted by white men with paperwork and rifles. The Choctaw Woman, now with an infant in her blanket, walked the entire way so that her horse could carry her other children and an old woman who could no longer keep the pace. She recalled hearing the many bells tied into manes, like wind chimes. In a blizzard she spotted one of the small Choctaw ponies carrying five children on his back at once. He had been a partner in the good hunting days and he was with them now, in times of hardship on a long strange road. From green Mississippi to bone-dry Oklahoma they walked the road.

Of the 12,000 Choctaw people forced to relocate, 2,500 would die along the way. The dead-- many fallen to cholera or diseased meat rations-- were allowed burial only at designated stops along the trail.

President Andrew Jackson called this forced march Relocation. The Choctaw Chief, Nitikechi, called it “a trail of tears and death.” As tragic as this crime against humanity was, the people

would survive in the new lands and some would even return to Mississippi to thrive.

But the tough little Choctaw horse who shared the journey with them would not be so fortunate.

Just as the U.S. government ordered the removal of all Indian peoples west of the Mississippi River, so, too, would they later sanction the extermination of Indian horses. The motivation was a simple one: remove the Indian from his horse and they'd be easier to force onto reservations.

"If you don't catch an Indian Pony in the first two miles," General Crook is reputed to have said, "then give up the chase, because they'll run a hundred miles in a day and be fresh to do it again come morning."

Indeed, the military knew that Native warriors on their small horses comprised perhaps the finest light cavalry in the world. But this equicide wasn't simply designed to clip the warrior's wings; military men like Custer knew that the horse was as much a spiritual part of Native culture as the land itself. Taking away the horse was an attempt to break a people's spirit.

All across the West, Native American horses were rounded up and either slaughtered—as Custer orchestrated at a Cheyenne camp on the Washita River--or had their herd stallions exterminated and replaced with studs from larger breeds. This practice would allow the cavalry to cull and use larger horses with "upgraded" blood. West Point men like Custer—although knowledgeable equestrians--were blinded to the fact that the "squaw ponies" carried the pure bloodlines of Spain's most regal horses.

By the turn of the century, most people believed that the authentic Indian Pony only survived in the bronzed imaginations of Remington and Russell. Little did they know that, in remote pockets on reservations, a few Native families were secretly preserving the bloodlines of their ancestral herds. Such was the case with the Choctaws. Individual Oklahoma families such as Brame, Crisp, Thurman, Carter and Locke jealously guarded and bred their tribal horses.

A Choctaw cowboy named Hal Brame used to bring his little overo "Ind'n Pony" to parties and fairs and bet on races over 50 yards. As his wallet grew in size so did the reputation of his stocky little pinto.

The handful of Choctaw horses remaining at that time sported long Spanish manes and came in a spectrum of color that ranged from blacks and bays to linebacked dun, varnish roan, and leopard. Between 13.2 and 14.2 hands they were small, but remarkably intelligent with tough

feet that could go unshod over any terrain, and a digestive system that evolved to get by on scrub where other horses might perish. Occasionally gaited and with unusual flexion, they offered a butter-smooth ride on the trail. Like General Crook had once bemoaned, their endurance put military horses to shame. A fast-learning mount with cow sense who could work all day without being shod? White cowpunchers began to show interest. But by then, it was almost too late.

Come 1950, many tribal elders had crossed over, and with them went the interest in preservation and the esoteric knowledge of the rare pedigrees. If that wasn't loss enough, U.S. government policy again turned its guns on the Indian horses, this time under an imposed Tick Eradication Program. Every wild pony in Oklahoma was ordered shot. There seemed no hope left for the Choctaw horses that had already come so far up the Trail of Tears.

Then, into Oklahoma, drove a young cowboy named Gilbert H. Jones. G.H. Jones had a life-long passion for pure Spanish Mustangs, (now more accurately called Colonial Spanish Horses), the rare breed to which all true Indian Pony strains belong. Jones was so impressed by the remarkable abilities of the hardy breed that he dedicated the rest of his life to preserving them. It was never easy for Jones: the reason he had left New Mexico in the first place was that his Mustangs were being slaughtered by neighbors, the meat sold in Albuquerque.

With his one remaining stallion, a few work mules, furniture, and wagons, Jones moved with his family into the Kiamichi Mountains where he obtained grazing permits from a timber company. He was planning to put together a pure Colonial Spanish Horse herd with his friend Robert Brislaw, when he met a few old-time Choctaw men. These elders appreciated the way a young white man valued the horses that most locals slandered as "squaw ponies" or "broomtails."

Impressed by this nearly-extinct treasure, Jones acquired several Choctaw mares and one outstanding stallion known locally as "Rooster." A buckskin and white pinto, Rooster's ancestry ran directly back to the Trail of Tears. Jones began restoring a small herd of pure Choctaw horses, researching the pedigrees as he went.

Jones had been a long-time admirer of Frank T. Hopkins, a fellow Spanish Mustang proponent who proved the breed's merits through long endurance races (Jones was a fan of Hopkins' accounts of his Indian Pony Hidalgo and would later seek out and acquire a mare from that reputed bloodline). Jones, like Hopkins, knew that the best way to make a case for the threatened breed was by entering them in

long trail rides and hard endurance events. Jones's Choctaw horses not only proved exceptional, they became modern legends in 50 and 100 mile races. Rooster's bloodlines became the most sought-after for endurance and performance.

In 1983, a long-maned, bay roan mare named Choctaw Star became the first Spanish Mustang on the North American Continent to earn the 1000 Mile Horse Award in NATRC. She finished 1000 competitive miles without so much as a leg blemish.

Still, prejudice persisted against the breed's small size, its Indian breeding, and public confusion with BLM wild mustangs. Just as Jones had faced equine hate crimes and natural catastrophes in the Land of Enchantment, it seemed he was always fighting for the preservation of his Choctaws in Oklahoma. By the 1980's he had built up a herd of around 100 pure horses and continued to work hands-on with them into the 1990's when he was an elderly man.

"Unless another catastrophe hits," Jones told a French journalist, "my horses will be perpetuated for many years. My most sincere hope... is that the years of struggling and losing money won't be wasted, and these horses will go on for future generations to see and enjoy."

Gilbert Jones died in July of 2000 at the age of 93. He never had electricity, gas, or running water. But he had saved the Choctaw Indian Pony. Before his crossing over, he had passed down his important conservation work and vast equine library to Bryant and Darlene Rickman who continue to breed and preserve the Jones' horses on their original range. While inheriting the satisfaction of seeing these endangered horses run free, the Rickman's have also inherited the day-to-day struggle. The tough, little horse that survived forced migration, slaughter, and the Tick Eradication Program, recently found itself attacked by an enemy of another kind: an outbreak of Equine Infectious Anemia, a rare viral disease that devastates a horse's immune system. But with survival instinct seemingly encoded in its DNA, the Choctaw Pony again withstood disaster. Thanks to the help of caring stewards like the Rickman's, he has hung on. There is currently no sign of the virus in any of the remaining 153 or so Choctaws.

Dr. Phillip Sponenberg, a rare breeds expert with a particular passion for the Choctaw horses is heartened by recent conservation efforts, but still considers the strain "perilously close to extinction." Along with his interest in preserving "a fascinating strain that has contributed so heavily to several registries while remaining a pure strain entity," is his dedication to restoring rare coloration that could be lost if the 100% Choctaw horses fade into history.

Toward this goal, Dr. Sponenberg is serving as advisor to the new Red Road Farm: Choctaw Indian Pony Conservation Program, a non-profit organization associated with the Return to Freedom Sanctuary. His own Choctaw horse, Icktinike', a 14-hand varnish roan/tobiano/sabino is the foundation stallion for this 100% pure band. The first foals in the program are due this April.

By no means is the Choctaw Pony safe yet—he remains critical-- but there is growing hope for his future. Perhaps a society that has finally come to value sacred sites along with national landmarks will someday come to recognize this big-hearted little horse as a historical and cultural treasure. Perhaps the Choctaw Nation, now experiencing a cultural revival in both Mississippi and Oklahoma, will one day regain an interest in the horse that was a partner with their people in the good times and bad.

But crucial to the preservation of the Choctaw horses is sharing their unique history and utilitarian abilities with the horse-owning public. "They have largely been ignored," says Sponenberg. "Not only its history and contributions, but also its athletic prowess and ability at a variety of tasks."

Maybe one day, the legendary Indian Pony who walked the Trail of Tears will find his way back to the Good Red Road. That place they called Apookta.

—John Fusco is the screenwriter of the motion-pictures "Thunderheart," "Dreamkeeper," the Academy Award-nominated "Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron," "Hidalgo," and others.

A Colonial Spanish Horse preservationist with a focus on tribal strains, in 2005, he founded the Choctaw Indian Pony Conservation Program at his Red Road Farm in Vermont in collaboration with Return To Freedom -American Wild Horse Sanctuary, a 501 C3 organization.

UPDATE:

In December 2007, 8 Choctaw horses traveled to Return To Freedom sanctuary in Central California, from Fusco's Red Road Farm in Vermont.

These horses were carefully selected by Dr. Sponenberg from the Choctaw herd on Blackjack Mountain, Oklahoma and represent a strong foundation herd of some of the few remaining Choctaw horses.

Today, Return To Freedom is working with John Fusco, Dr. Sponenberg and the Rickman family to raise awareness and interest in the conservation of these horses, who are a rich genetic and cultural resource.