

When Wild Horses Roamed

The hills of Eastern Washington were once heaven for herds of horses

By Victoria Walker

Some may wonder where the name Horse Heaven Hills came from, and why there are no horses there now. Gaylord Mink knows the answers.

Gaylord is soft spoken, with a photographer's eye for the right shot and a love for his work. He worked on a number of projects for the Washington State Fish and Wildlife Service and spent many years working with the Yakama Nation Wildlife program, researching and photographing the wild horses that still roam free on reservation land.

Gaylord hails from a small farm in Indiana. He went to college at Purdue University and left with a doctorate in plant pathology. In 1961, he came to the Washington State University Irrigated Agriculture Research and Extension Center in Prosser as a virologist. He spent 36 years at the facility as a researcher and professor.

Gaylord's passion for photography began with trips to East Africa—including Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania—with the U.S. Aid for International Development program researching the common mosaic virus of beans.

Videotaping and documentation was a part of his job overseas.

Gaylord has numerous photographs and short videos to his credit—primarily of wildlife. He was named Photographer of the Year in 2011 by www.FotoFanatics.com.

His current project is a video documenting the history of the horses that used to roam the Horse Heaven Hills and the Columbia Plateau.

"My interest is really an extension of the 10 years I spent with the Yakama Nation and studying the wild horses on their reservation," he says. "This documentary is a labor of curiosity. I wanted to know what happened to the horses of Horse Heaven Hills.

"The name Horse Heaven Hills has some romance to it, but it didn't take long to discover all the horses were long gone."

For two centuries, the Columbia Plateau was



The wild horses of the Yakama Reservation.

Photo by Gaylord Mink

home to wild horses. They played a significant role in the transformation of what is now Eastern Washington.

"Most of the horses that were free either had escaped or were released a couple of hundred years ago by various Indian tribes," Gaylord says. "There were numerous accounts of the horses documented by explorers and settlers to the area."

Alexander Ross, an early explorer, reported "hoards of wild horses" in the hills near the Yakima and Columbia rivers.



A wild horse roundup.

Photo courtesy of Yakima Cultural Center collection

In 1805, the Lewis and Clark expedition wrote in their journals there were “herds of wild horses” here.

In 1867, James Gordon Kenny, an early settler, said, “This is surely a horse heaven” and termed the phrase, Horse Heaven Hills.

That name remains today.

“Once you get into the 20th century, as soon as the gasoline-powered equipment came in, you couldn’t give horses away,” Gaylord says.

The area’s economy was based on wheat. In the 1920s, when the wheat market collapsed and the stock market crashed on the heels of that, it affected the horses. For two decades, the horses had little or no value.

During those difficult times, some people turned horses loose rather than kill them outright. The larger European draft horses interbred with the local mustang herds in the wild. All of them became unwanted pests. The wild horses damaged commercial crops foraging for food as their populations increased.

At the same time, the land they could roam was getting smaller as wheat farms grew.

“When the two met, the horses didn’t stand much of a chance,” says Gaylord.

In 1939, Time magazine reported one company in Portland was said to have killed 350,000 horses in the area, and shipped the meat overseas.

Public sentiment of the time was summarized by author Archie D. Ryan from the Department of the Interior: “The wild horse consumes forage needed by domestic livestock. They bring in no return and serve no useful purpose.”

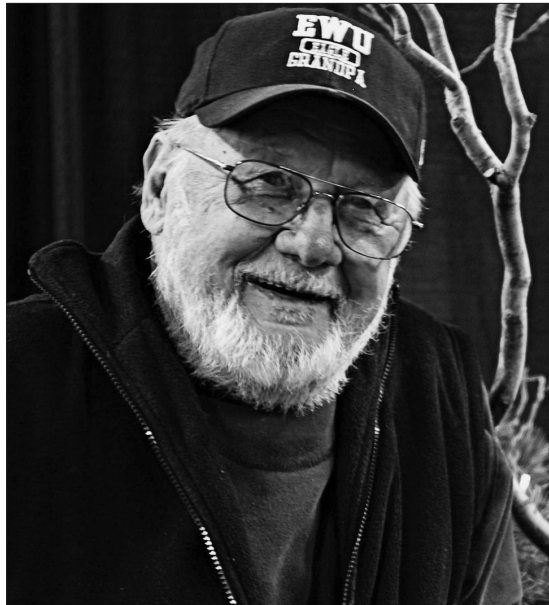
A report from a newspaper in Othello said there was a round up where two trains were filled with 4,000 to 5,000 horses and shipped them east.

“A lot of farmers back then would have a drive, round them up and slaughter what they could,” says Gaylord.

The last of the known wild herds were reportedly on the Hanford Reservation.

“I have heard stories about this,” Gaylord says. “There is no documentation about it. The horses were still here during the ’40s and ’50s, but even then they were a nuisance. They were getting hit by cars, like the elk, and they weren’t following human rules. In the 1960s or ’70s, the government gave the order to get rid of them.”

If the goal was to eradicate the horses, it was



Gaylord Mink: researcher, plant pathologist, artist and photographer.

Photo courtesy of Gaylord Mink

successful. The horses were eliminated in fewer than three decades.

“Today, wherever wild horses are being managed, the results have been the same,” Gaylord says. “Horses reproduce at a rate of 25 percent a year. They live 5 to 15 years in the wild. Using data prior to 2007, we projected there would be over 12,000 horses on Yakama reservation by 2012.

“People love wild horses. Their presence is romantic. People go out of their way to see them, but not to take care of them.”

Though he says horses “haven’t been a driving force in my life,” Gaylord says he likes them and likes to photograph them.

“They have become my trademark, of sorts,” he says. “I tried to put the video documentary together so that it was an honest presentation of what happened. It begins by tracing the movement of horses from Mexico to the Columbia Plateau and ends with the recognition that their descendants are left in the hands of the Yakama Tribes, which is where it began. It has come full circle. The Yakamas control the future of the horses’ wild descendants in Washington state.”

Now, the land where the horses originally roamed is covered in wheat farms, vineyards, vegetable farms and rows of wind machines. Gone are the herds of wild horses. ■