



# Saving Sitting Bull's Horses

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By Patti Maguire Armstrong

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**J**ust east of Linton's rolling hills, over 200 horses pick their way through uneven pasture, oblivious to their historical genealogy. The horses are descendants of Sitting Bull's war ponies and represent North Dakota's rich living history according to Frank and Leo Kuntz. For over a decade, the Kuntz brothers have struggled to save this piece of equine heritage before it's too late.

Inside the weathered corral that hems the south border of their 1,180-acre pasture, Frank Kuntz laughs as a blue roan mare turns away after he calls her.

"Just watch. I'll act like I'm ignoring her and then she'll come right over to me."

Sure enough, within seconds, 'Blue' is nuzzling Frank, who is now flanked by three other horses, all wanting attention.

Like an impartial parent, Kuntz claims he loves all the horses on his place. He says that he and his brother have horses in their blood. "We were born with the disease," he chuckles.

It is the combination of this 'disease' and the desire to preserve history that has dedicated the Kuntz brothers to become the caretakers to this wild breed which they have christened the "Nokota".

The horses come from the south unit of Theodore Roosevelt National Park where their ancestors roamed freely during TR's first visit to the rugged Badlands. In his essay, "In the Cattle Country", Roosevelt mentions the wild horses and speculates to their origins as being runaways from ranches or Indian outfits, and describes them "...as wild as the antelope on whose domain they have intruded."

Historical records and vintage photographs have led many to speculate that these horses are direct descendants from Sitting Bull's confiscated war ponies. In 1883, seven years after the Battle of the Little Bighorn, the Marquis de Mores bought 250 horses from traders at Fort Buford, where Sitting Bull had surrendered to the army in 1881. This

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Photography by Les Baumgartner