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WILD WEST SHOWDOWN

A DETERMINED LADY CALLED WILD HORSE ANNIE AND HER GANG OF SCHOOL KIDS HAVE VALIANTLY RISEN TO THE DEFENSE OF THE BELEAGUERED MUSTANG

SI STAFF

Looking out the living-room window of her hilltop house near Reno, Velma Johnston says, "I'm 5'6", 104 pounds, a 62-year-old widow and I'm tired and overworked, but I'm unbelievably tough." Velma Johnston is the heroine of what may well be the final epic Wild West drama. As Wild Horse Annie, she is commander in chief of a crusade to save the last of America's wild mustangs, a saga complete with shotgun blasts, screaming planes, heavy politics, spies and the blood of men and horses.

When Wild Horse Annie answers the door at home it is with a .38 in hand. Anonymous callers phone to tell her, "You'd better lay off, sister." And there are threats that "a tree limb is waiting here for you." In large measure, her battle is foolhardy, for she is greatly outnumbered, woefully underfinanced and totally dedicated to fighting according to the loftiest ethical standards.

Wild Horse Annie is a nickname she got 20 years ago. It was intended to ridicule her but it has merely added an aura of romance to her campaign. Siding with her are a handful of staunch supporters and a Kiddie Cavalry of thousands of school children, most of whom have never seen a wild horse. Annie has instilled in her followers the belief that the mustangs are a national heritage, that they should be granted protection and spared the savage treatment they frequently suffer before they are ground up for pet food and fertilizer.

Aligned against Annie's organization—Wild Horse Organized Assistance (WHOA!)—is a vast phalanx of cattle and sheep ranchers, hunters and bounty seekers. They and their predecessors have been largely responsible for the decline of the wild horse population from 8 million in 1800 to a present low of between 10,000 and 45,000. Exactly how many are left is unknown because counting techniques are imprecise.

Some stockmen graze herds on the public domain, for which they pay a minimal fee to the federal government. These men begrudge every blade of grass nibbled by the mustangs because it leaves that much less for their cattle and sheep, and they say the proliferation of wild horses could "create a serious economic hardship for meat consumers...by causing a major rise in meat prices." There are big-game hunters who want to replace mustangs with trophy animals, such as bighorn sheep. And there are other hunters who receive a bounty for shooting wild horses. They are motivated by money.

While these formidable foes wage combat on the open range with deadly weapons and behind doors with considerable lobbying power, Wild Horse Annie has challenged them armed with little more than what her husband called "the special kind of courage that comes from fear." One of her rebuttals to the livestock industry is that talk of increased prices is a "gross exaggeration. On a nationwide basis, only 1% of food cattle and 6% of food sheep are grazed on public lands." She has also developed a revolutionary philosophy concerning use of the public domain, arguing that ranchers have no right to their long-uncontested belief that livestock is entitled to "dominant use" of public lands. It is Annie's contention that this land "belongs to all Americans, to you and to me."

As for hunters, she feels they have enough game to shoot. And the mere thought of bounty seekers sends shivers through Annie, who realizes that the 25 years she has spent opposing them has resulted in state and federal laws that are only halfheartedly enforced. Despite what she has felt was overwhelming evidence in a number of cases, no one has ever been found guilty of violating a horse-protection law.

For the past two years Wild Horse Annie has been involved in a case concerning a six-week roundup of horses in the rugged Lemhi Mountains near Howe, Idaho. In all, 53 horses were driven by men on horseback and aboard snowmobiles and a helicopter. As they were being driven to a corral, seven suffered grotesque deaths. Annie found out about the incident from an informant who phoned her from Idaho.

The Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service investigated and stated there was ample evidence to proceed with a case study. Still, the Justice Department did not prosecute because of "insufficient evidence." That might have been the end of it, except for Annie.

Working in concert with undercover agents and cohorts, she got enough photographs and testimony to have the case reopened. To a large extent the destiny of the wild horses hinges on the outcome of this case, for if a conviction is not obtained it would, as Annie puts it, "mean that rustlers will be able to get away with just about anything."

Among the facts gleaned were that some horses died or were killed en route to the corral. Trapped on a narrow ledge, some of them plummeted over the cliff to their death. Rustlers slit the throats of others and used a chain saw to cut off the legs of those whose feet had become wedged between rocks. Other horses had wires driven through their nostrils to restrict their breathing so they could not escape. The 34 survivors were shipped to a meat-processing plant, where they would have been slaughtered had an injunction not been obtained by government officials alerted by Annie. One of the men who participated in the roundup gave a detailed diary of the roundup to a WHOA! agent. When first confronted, the man had acknowledged in a taped interview a great "respect for the horses, who fought so long and hard in the dead of winter for their freedom against numbers and odds they didn't have a chance to beat." Later, fearing his co-workers might kill him if they found out what he had done, he asked to have the tape returned. It was.

North America was the birthplace of the horse eons ago, but by the time of Columbus horses had long vanished. Cortes brought horses to Mexico in 1519; later Conquistadores brought many more. Most of those horses escaped into the wilderness. And therein lies much of the difficulty surrounding the salvation of wild horses. Because of their ancestry they are not recognized as "wildlife," the way fish, birds and deer are. Instead, they are labeled "feral," meaning they are a domestic species gone wild. Animals in the wildlife category are protected by numerous federal and state laws, but feral creatures have been exiled to a limbo, depriving them of similar safeguards.

Wild horse herds in America grew to enormous size. In 1846, Ulysses S. Grant, then a lieutenant, wrote, "As far as our eye could reach, the herd extended." They were a polychromatic wonder—roans and chestnuts, blacks and whites, bays and blue grullos.

Not everyone appreciated their beauty. In *The Wild Horse of the West*, Walker D. Wyman recorded that in the 19th century "thousands of wild horses were driven off the Santa Barbara cliffs into the sea or boxed up in corrals to die." He also wrote about a processing plant in Portland, Ore. where "between 1926 and 1933...over 375,000 animals were processed." Many commercial uses were found for the horses: soap, glue, fertilizer, shoes, coats, mattresses and food for humans, primarily Europeans.

In America's Last Wild Horses Hope Ryden wrote that in 1929, when the Crows refused to allow the Schneider Sheep Company to remove the Indians' horses so its flocks could graze on their pastures, the company "hired airplanes and pickup trucks and in one day shot every horse on the range."

Mustangers, whether stockmen or not, conveniently decided that public land and the wild horses on it belonged to them. One Nevadan, Chug Utter, boasts that he brought in some 40,000 mustangs. He didn't have to worry about being arrested because in those days the absence of wild horse protection laws enabled him to freely exercise his belief about horses: "There's only one end to being a horse, whether he's a champion or a plug—dog food."

Some of the most remarkable documentation concerning roundups was obtained by Dr. Roger L. Slocum of Los Osos, Calif., who taped conversations with mustangers. On one of his tapes Frank Robbins of Glenrock, Wyo. tells of capturing wild horses for 27 years and of how the use of a plane enabled him to corral so many horses that "we couldn't get enough trucks. We could only ship 50 head a day. Eleven years we worked on the Red Desert, which is about 150 miles by 150 miles. We pretty well cleaned out the area except for a few. Then they outlawed the plane for roundups and since then the horses have had it easier. I'm kind of glad, because if they hadn't there wouldn't be a one left."

Another mustanger named Miller Anderson said, "We made pretty good wages. Probably as much as some of them guys aworkin'. Them horses brung us \$12, \$13 apiece and we probably averaged four, five horses a day. We'd rope them and tie three of their feet together. We'd just leave the horses lying there and along toward evening we'd have to backtrack and pick 'em up and take 'em back to the corral."

After 2,500 horses had been rounded up, the mustangers drove them to their final destination. Anderson described the scene like this: "About noon they got all strung out to a single file and I guess they was strung out for about five miles, I'd say. I rode off to the side...up on a little knoll there and watched 'em for 15 to 20 minutes.... It was quite a sight. I thought, 'No man will probably ever see the likes of this again.' "

Dr. Slocum got permission from some mustangers to attend a roundup in Oregon a few years ago. The shock of what he saw still lingers. He arrived at the corral an hour after a plane had crashed, killing the pilot and the man riding shotgun. That left six men to conduct the roundup. One was the brother of the dead shotgun-wielder. Dr. Slocum could not comprehend how this man could go on with the roundup. So he asked him and was told, "Now we need the money more than ever."

Always, though, there have been men whose love for horses and respect for life would not permit them to indulge in such slaughter, men who spurned ranchers' offers for sets of wild horse ears: \$2 a century ago, more in recent times.

One such man was Will James, a cowboy-writer who took part in roundups until conscience conquered bankroll. James wrote, "They [the mustangs] belonged not to man but to the country of junipers and sages, of deep arroyos, mesas, and freedom."

Although James and others recanted, it became clear that if the wild horse was to be saved it would take more than contrite men; it would take men of action—or a woman of action.

Although apparently ill-cast for her role as protector of the wild horses, Annie seems almost to have been divinely destined for the part. In 1884 her grandparents and their newborn son began an arduous trek by wagon from Lone, Nev. to Grass Valley, Calif. From the outset the desert sands were deep, the winds fierce, the food and finances perilously low. Starvation threatened the infant. So Grandpa Bronn shot a foal, took the milk from its wild mustang mother and spoonfed it to his son.

Annie's father used horses to lug goods across the mountains, barely eking out a living. As for Annie, she was an uncommonly happy youngster who delighted in romping through the outdoors and playing with the family horses. But when she was five she contracted polio and was treated at a San Francisco hospital.

"They put me in a cast that went from my waist over the entire upper half of my body and over the top of my head," she recalls. "When they took it off and I looked in the mirror..." Even now she flinches at the memory, placing fingertips gently across her mouth. What the mirror showed her was a face disfigured: the cast had distorted her head so that she had almost no chin; the ligaments, tendons and muscles were severely pulled to the right, locking her right eye a full inch above her left. After staring into the mirror, Annie broke into tears.

All she had left were her family and home, and soon she learned both had been altered during her absence. Her brother had died of polio. Her father's Mustang Express had become so unprofitable that he abandoned it, moved to Wadsworth, Nev. and settled at a place he called the Lazy Heart Ranch.

Shame haunted Annie's teen-age years. Children taunted her. She recoiled, hiding from the world and its gibes. But, finding that avoiding people provided little solace, she decided to seek their company.

"I had to face people," she says. "When I'd see kids I'd ask, 'What're you playing? That looks like fun.' They'd let me join in. I know my face is not pretty, but now when people stare at me I know they can't help it and I smile at them. And, you know, they smile back.

"Why Charlie married me I'll never know. He could have had his pick of women. Charlie was big—6'4" and 225 pounds in his prime—and he looked so much like John Wayne. I've always remembered my first dinner date with him: a can of coffee, pork chops, and corn and chestnuts roasted in the coals of our outdoor fire.

"During the war Charlie worked in a magnesium mine in Gabbs, Nevada. Because I had no children I was given a special job my first night in Gabbs. I had to sit with the body of a man who had been shot to death. Gabbs was quite a town. We lived in a little shack—outhouse in back, no running water. The local bar was the Bucket of Blood. When the mine gave out, Charlie took over the tavern, and I was occasionally a barmaid and blackjack dealer.

"In 1945 we bought my parents' ranch and renamed it the Double Lazy Heart. On weekends we had lots of children at our ranch and we taught them how to ride and how to live in the outdoors. It was a beautiful life."

Annie's beautiful life was unalterably changed one morning in 1950. While driving to Reno, where she was working as a secretary, she saw a truck laden with what she thought were cattle. When she got closer, however, Annie was horrified to find it was crammed full of wild horses. "They were injured and bleeding, and the only thing keeping some of them from falling down was that they were packed in so tightly," she recalls. "One horse's eyes had been shot out."

Annie followed the truck for miles. Finally it stopped at a building with a sign reading RENDERING PLANT. There the horses were dragged from the truck to be processed into pet food and fertilizer. That was the day Annie decided that she would not rest until she had done everything possible to stop such atrocities.

Soon she learned that wild horse roundups were little short of mechanized warfare. Rustlers used planes to scout herds and then, by flying at almost sagebrush level, stampeded the horses as a man aboard the plane fired shotgun volleys to keep the mustangs headed toward a corral.

Then men stood on flatbed trucks and lassoed horses chased down by the vehicles. They used no ordinary lariats. Attached to each rope was a huge truck tire, and when a galloping horse hit the end of the rope, the results were sometimes horrifying.

Charlie and Annie photographed such roundups and almost got themselves early tombstones. Vacations were spent writing letters to state and federal legislators, governors and assorted Washington officials to alert them to the perils facing the wild horses and to the need for protective laws. The Johnston kitchen was their headquarters. There Annie typed letters and Charlie folded, stuffed, licked and pasted. It did not take long for them to realize they were a small voice in a canyon of indifference.

Early on, the Johnstons helped get a law passed against the use of aircraft and mechanized vehicles in roundups in their home county of Storey. Elation over the enactment of the law was short-lived; rustlers simply shifted their efforts to other counties. Ranchers were crafty infighters, and both they and their lobbyists were adept at guerrilla politics, the backroom, cloak-closet persuasiveness that swayed lawmakers and, possibly, judges.

Next a Nevada law made it illegal statewide to use airborne and mechanized vehicles in roundups. But what was needed most, Annie knew, was a federal law. With the aid of Congressman Walter Baring of Nevada, with whom she had gone to school, Annie got a bill introduced in 1958. It died in committee.

Worse yet, Charlie had a bad case of emphysema. So the Johnstons sold their ranch and moved to Reno. It was at this juncture that Charlie and Annie realized they had overlooked an untapped well-spring. "The children," Annie says. "The children. They were the ones who would have to help us." So the Johnstons sent letters to grade schools across the country, outlining the plight of the wild horses and telling youngsters they could help by writing to Congressmen.

The first fruits of this campaign came when some children brought a petition to Congressman James C. Wright at his home in Fort Worth. In part, it read: "Imagine...making DOG FOOD out of horses.... We feed the birds...the squirrels and the chipmunks...to SAVE them! Let's see what we can do about saving the beautiful wild HORSES!!!!!!!!!"

That night Wright dictated the following to his constituents: "Am I going to be susceptible to pressure? Am I going to be influenced by a bunch of children? Am I going to support [Baring's revived] bill because kids...are sentimental about the wild horses? You bet your cowboy boots I am!"

And so it went across the country. Urged on by letters from Annie insisting they had a right to be heard and that our democratic system provided the framework for reform, boys and girls from coast to coast joined the crusade and sent money to Annie. One Ottumwa, Iowa class forsook ice cream at its annual picnic and sent the funds to her. Thus endowed, Charlie pasted more stamps on more letters.

In 1959, when Annie appeared before a House committee to testify on behalf of the bill, she gave its members detailed 32-page booklets she had filled with facts, figures and her credos. At the end of her presentation she was asked why, since Nevada had banned mechanized roundups in 1955, there was a need for a federal law.

"For two reasons," Annie began. "First, it is impossible to enforce our state law because it applies only to private land, and most of Nevada is public domain. But an even bigger reason is that the mustang doesn't belong just to Nevada. He is a symbol of freedom for all. He is our American heritage, as meaningful to us as the battlefield at Yorktown or the white church at Lexington. Even more so, because he is a living symbol."

The next few moments were unique in congressional history. As a tribute to her, all the committeemen rose. So, too, did the reporters in the room. In the hush that followed, Baring whispered to Annie, "Curtain speech."

Annie, who felt she had already exhausted all "the special kind of courage that comes from fear" by addressing the committee, searched for words. What she wanted to say seemed too melodramatic. Finally, though, she uttered the words: "We—we the people—have won."

Baring's bill was passed and on Sept. 8, 1959 was signed by President Eisenhower. Annie, Charlie, the children and their co-workers—the people—had won.

Annie's joy in victory was diminished by Charlie's illness. For a year he owed his survival to oxygen tanks. One day in 1964, Annie knew he was dying.

"I wrapped my arms around Charlie and held him one last time," she says. "Then I went down the hall and told the nurses, 'I just helped Charlie over the last hurdle.' "

The primary function of the 1959 bill, which became known as the Wild Horse Annie Law, was to prohibit the use of aircraft and mechanized vehicles in rounding up mustangs. Knowing there was need for more federal legislation, Annie got busy, and her young allies waged another pencil war. Youngsters also held fund-raising drives: bake sales, car washes, sales of bumper stickers and buttons with Save-the-Mustang slogans.

One pencil wielder was Greg Gude, son of Maryland Congressman Gilbert Gude. Greg joined the cause in 1969 after reading *Mustang: Wild Spirit of the West*, a well-written children's biography of Annie by Marguerite Henry. Greg, 11 at the time, lobbied at home. When the 92nd Congress convened in 1971, Gilbert Gude introduced a bill calling for further protection for the mustangs and, for the first time, management and control of herds.

During her testimony before Congress in 1971, Annie told of the difficulty of enforcing the 1959 law. She cited a trial in Nevada in which "defendants readily admitted the use of [an] airplane and did not deny the use of a gun" during a roundup. Annie added that although the defendants claimed they were merely gathering their own branded horses, a county sheriff and a deputy brand inspector who saw the capture "swore under oath they were wild, unbranded.... The jury disregarded the sworn testimony...and brought in a verdict of not guilty."

Annie also told of a 1968 episode in Lander County, Nev., during which 725 horses were transported out of state to a rendering plant owned and operated by members of the family on whose ranch the roundup was conducted. Of those horses 469 were unbranded, yet no charges were brought.

Annie said, "It is our position that the wild horses and burros are part of our national heritage, belonging to all the people of America, inhabiting the public domain that also belongs to all the people of America, and their welfare should become the responsibility of an agency that represents all the people of America, by an Act of Congress that represents all the people of America."

Public Law 92-195, signed on Dec. 15, 1971, begins:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That: Congress finds and declares that wild free-roaming horses and burros are living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West; that they contribute to the diversity of life forms within the Nation and enrich the lives of the American people; and that these horses and burros are fast disappearing from the American scene. It is the policy of Congress that wild free-roaming horses and burros shall be protected from capture, branding, harassment, or death....

This law defines all unbranded and unclaimed horses and burros on public lands as "wild and free-roaming" and makes the Secretaries of Agriculture and Interior responsible for their management and protection. Violators are subject to a \$2,000 fine and/or a year in prison. Laws, though, do not remove men's hatred. A letter to the editor of the Nevada State Journal said, "I predict Wild Horse Annie will be called Dead Horse Annie in a very few short years."

In the Aug. 24, 1972 issue of the Pioche Record there appeared a letter signed and paid for by the Board of County Commissioners of Lincoln County, Nev. It was entitled The Vanity of Protecting Wild Horses and, in part, read, "Be It Resolved that the Congress...repeal...Public Law 92-195 for the reasons that:

- (1) The wild horse is not a symbol of the pioneer spirit of the West.
- (2) The wild horses do not contribute to the diversity of life forms of this nation.
- (3) The wild horse does not enrich the lives of the American people."

In the same issue was a letter from three men stating, "There were a few individuals that were somewhat 'wild' in deportment, but the pioneer is not characterized by a spirit of wildness and adventure. The pioneer came West to improve his economic status—the commendable and major ambition of civilized man.... Feed that now produces a significant portion of our beef and mutton supply and supports useful wildlife is wasted on animals that are of no value aesthetically or otherwise."

John A. Chugg, supervisor of Utah brand inspectors, has been quoted as saying, "Which is more important, to allow herds of wild, useless mustangs to deplete the mountain plains and rangeland...or to intelligently manage the grasslands so that food—beef and mutton—can be produced for the survival of mankind? The law that was pushed through Congress by busybody women's clubs and elementary schoolchildren is ridiculous, unrealistic and dangerous to our environment and economy."

Not long ago, Wild Horse Annie received an envelope containing a large yellow poster of a coiled snake, beneath which was this warning:

DON'T TREAD ON ME THE VIGILANT COMMITTEE OF 10,000

A story about this vigilante committee in the Rexburg (Idaho) Journal was based on an interview with an unidentified member of this dues-paying group made up then of 3,500 members from Idaho, Wyoming, Utah and Nevada. Said the spokesman: "I wouldn't want to be on the outs with these boys...they're tough people.... I want to tell you, they get it together." He also mentioned the possibility of "an Old West shootout" and that, if need be, committee members would protect their farms and ranches "over some dead bodies."

Laboring in such a hostile atmosphere all these years has been exhausting for Annie, who at times has said, "I guess the best thing that could happen would be if one of those men killed me." Attaining martyrdom might help convince lawmakers that their efforts are needed and might focus widespread public attention on the needs of the mustangs. Annie, however, has no intentions of seeking such an early demise.

With a chuckle she recalls, "One night years ago a man peeped in the kitchen window. I got my gun, went to the window and when he saw it he took off so fast you could have played checkers on his coattail. Another time the doorbell rang at about two in the morning. Mom [Annie's 80-year-old mother] and I got up. We were terrified. I had my gun. We decided to jerk the door open to find out who was there. All we found was a notice on the doorknob that a special delivery letter was in the mailbox. There was snow on the ground and it was cold as Billy be damned, but Mom said, 'If you'll cover me, I'll get it.' So she got the letter and that's all there was to that."

There is an endearing Auntie Mame quality about Annie, who gleefully tells of going on exhausting field trips to study wild horses, tramping over mountains and across fields from 6 a.m. until 9 p.m. "I found that hair spray and a tight girdle held me together," she says. "When one of the men fainted on one trip I said, 'I guess I should have brought my bourbon from the room.' Everybody's eyes popped when I said that, and that night we all finished off my bourbon. Earlier I had been treated like Typhoid Mary, but thereafter I was one of the gang."

Annie drives—what else?—a Mustang, keeps an immaculate house and recently retired after 27 years as secretary to Gordon Harris, a Reno realtor. Harris' friendly interest and compassion enabled her to tend to wild horse matters whenever necessary. Annie founded WHOA! four years ago at the insistence of friends who knew of her need for funds to continue her crusade. "I guess it was pride that kept me from listening to them sooner," she says. "The response has been excellent. Some people have even named WHOA! in their wills. But there's so much work to do and I'm weary and running out of time."

Annie is not fighting alone. Others who have helped are Hope Ryden, who in 1968 produced a superb documentary on the wild horses for ABC-TV and has written three books on the subject; Al Kania, founder of FOAL—Feral Organized Assistance League; Cleveland Amory of the Fund for Animals; Dr. Michael Pontrelli of Reno; Belton P. Mouras, Animal Protection Institute of America; Actresses Amanda Blake and Janet Leigh; and legions of adults and children.

Annie has been instrumental in establishing wild horse ranges at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada and in the Pryor Mountains along the Wyoming-Montana border. In 1964 the Bureau of Land Management rounded up and planned to auction off 200 wild horses, but were forestalled by angry citizens, primarily from Lovell, Wyo. BLM officials were caught lying about a corral they said had not been built at taxpayers' expense and about a range survey critical of the horses, which had not been made. In 1968, Stewart Udall, then Secretary of Interior, upset by the embarrassment the BLM had caused his department, designated part of the Pryors as a wild horse refuge.

Members of the Rod and Gun Club met in Billings, Mont, and complained. "Our harvest of game animals has fallen off and we want the horses out of there," their spokeswoman, Bonnie Stark, said. But those who had championed the mustangs prevailed and the Pryor range has remained a haven for the beleaguered horses.

"When the state of Montana insisted it owned the wild horses on its side of the Pryors, I knew that was wrong because I had been at the meeting where determination had been made," Annie says. "When the directors who supervise the range met again we straightened out the record to indicate that it had been decided the wild horses of the Pryors belong to the people of the United States. I have also objected to the fact that the boards that advise the BLM are comprised almost exclusively of cattle operators."

On March 3, 1974, the Los Angeles Times carried a story headlined LAW BACKFIRES—NOW WILD HORSE POPULATION EXPLODING. Annie denounced this as a "propaganda campaign," found the BLM official who gave the story to the Times and got him to admit, "I made the statement and it was wrong." And shortly after the roundup in Idaho's Lemhi Mountains, Associate BLM Director George L. Turcott conceded that someone in his organization had violated rules by authorizing the roundup.

Late in 1974, two men revealed they had planned to kill Annie. "One said he had a good chance to shoot me a couple years ago and regretted that he had not done so," Annie says. "And a mountain lion bounty hunter commented that he had intended to kill me 'but there were too many people around.' "

However, two months ago Annie suffered one of her most severe setbacks when a three-judge federal panel in New Mexico ruled that the 1971 law was unconstitutional. This decision was a result of a suit filed by the State of New Mexico and the State Livestock Board and meant that protection of the horses and burros reverted to the states. It also meant permits could be issued to hunt wild horses, either to kill them or round them up for sale to rendering plants, which now pay up to 250 a pound.

A cattle rancher in Nevada immediately began hiring men to shoot 800 horses in his region. Before he could implement his plan, though, a stay of judgment was obtained and an appeal was filed with the Supreme Court. The Court will hear the appeal next year, until which time the 1971 law will remain in force.

"I think the cattlemen overplayed their hand this time," Annie says. "Two men risked professional reprisals and possibly their lives to help us to stop the panel's ruling. But I'm afraid that there will be bloodshed over this matter and that it won't be only the horses' blood."

As Annie said recently, "Often I want to lash out, but I can't because I must not lose my power to reason. Even my detractors say I'm cold-bloodedly logical rather than emotional. I have never referred to the wild horses as beautiful, noble creatures, because they are neither. Today's wild horse is not the glamorous mustang of long ago. He is, for the most part, underfed, scrubby and inbred."

Why then all the effort to save the wild horses? Surely, Americans can survive without them and surely there are more important issues. That is true. It is also true that man can live without music, without colors or soft breezes, without friendships or embraces or kindnesses. Each "without," though, is precisely that: something our lives must do without. Removing the wild horses from America would simply remove a portion of America by allowing men of preferred rank and power to manipulate nature.

There is a serenity about Annie. It communicates rare sincerity and reveals beyond doubt that she is not a phony out for notoriety, that she is genuine in her devotion to helping the mustangs, at the expense of her money, her time and even her skin. "I've become allergic to horses," she admits. "Now I break out in hives when I'm around them."

Annie has been honored by local, state and federal groups, has had poems and a song written about her and has attended Wild Horse Annie Days at elementary schools. "I get goosey wobbles whenever a young girl puts her arms around me and says, 'Annie, I want to grow up to be just like you,' " she says.

One youngster wrote her, "I believe in merricles because I am writing to one right now. And out of all the merricles that have occurred, you are the very best, ever." Another letter ended: "A man learns early to be ashamed of tears but I am not ashamed of mine now; I'm very proud of you, Wild Horse Annie. And I know you belong to America."

A plaque at the Eastwood Elementary School in Roseburg, Ore. is inscribed: "Your example of courage and determination offers an inspiration to all Americans to work within the framework of our government to accomplish those goals which we, the people, feel are just and good."

Says Annie, "My theme song has been The Impossible Dream. I've been told so often-that saving the wild horses is impossible. People keep asking how I can hang on to this dream and I tell them, I don't think the children would like it if I quit now.' "

THREE PHOTOS

PHOTO

Velma Johnston's affection for mustangs is reflected even in her choice of a car.