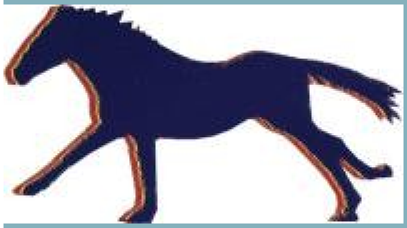
LA Weekly – Article 2 - Burros They Also Served

So long, Mojave burros

By DEANNE STILLMAN

Tuesday, January 31, 2006 - 12:00 pm



Illustrations by John E. Miner

There's a statue of Brighty the burro in the Grand Canyon Lodge. Brighty lived at the Grand Canyon from 1892 to 1922, along with countless other burros whose ancestors had come with the Spanish and carried the ensuing parade up mountains, across deserts, into mines and history. Named after the Bright Angel Creek in the canyon, Brighty originally belonged to a gold prospector. When the prospector was killed, Brighty was adopted by the park service. He helped build the canyon's first suspension bridge across the Colorado River and carried Teddy Roosevelt's packs on a hunt for mountain lions. He was an icon of the West when he died, and it would seem only fitting that the government honor his life by making sure that others of his kind could flourish in their desert home.

Passage of the federal Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act in 1971 did exactly that — but in spirit only. It gave authority for mustangs and burros to the Bureau of Land Management, which meant that other agencies such as the National Park Service could make their own policy toward these animals if they lived on NPS land. To the park service, burros were not free-roaming but non-native, which meant that they had to go. In 1979, the extirpation began — with Brighty's descendants. Because getting them out of the Grand Canyon would be difficult, all 577 of them were to be shot. The late writer and animal defender Cleveland Amory intervened, along with his organization, the Fund for Animals, putting together a daring and complicated rescue in which the burros were airlifted from the canyon and taken to his Black Beauty Ranch in Texas, which he founded for this occasion.

That was the beginning of the end for the burro in national parks and preserves, which the park service oversees. Since then, NPS has continued its policy of "direct reduction," and thousands of burros have either been shot by contract hunters or harried to their doom or into overcrowded government adoption pipelines in cruel airborne roundups. From 1987 to 1994, the park service shot 400 burros in Death Valley alone — just one of various burro sites all over the desert West. When Death Valley went from monument to park status in '94, the park service amped up its plans to remove burros — and Death Valley's remaining wild horses.

But another friend of the burro stepped up, just in time. This was Diana Chontos. In 1990, the longtime rescuer of burros had taken six of them and made a two-year cross-country wilderness trek through California to draw attention to their plight. When she heard what was about to happen to the Death Valley burros in '94, she approached NPS with a plan. After lengthy and difficult talks, she and NPS came to an agreement: The agency would not shoot burros if her organization, Wild Burro Rescue in Olancha, California, just to the west of Death Valley, would organize, pay for and remove the burros itself.

And that's what she's been doing ever since. "These annual live captures are conducted in hazardous conditions in rugged and remote mountain wilderness," she says. She almost died of renal failure at a recent capture because she just couldn't get enough water over a six-day period. There were only two people aiding in the capture — Chontos and her late partner, Tom Allewelt, who trimmed the hooves of the rescued burros and horses and helped to gentle them at their sanctuary in the Owens Valley.

There are still a few burros in Death Valley and soon, perhaps sometime this year, another capture will be planned — if Chontos can raise the funds and head off a park-service hunt.

In 2006, the last of the Mojave Preserve burros may be taken off the land forever. Then the burros will be gone, visible only as statues at parks, or ancient greeters of tourists in ghost towns. For the park service that runs the Mojave National Preserve has now turned its sights on the last remaining burros in that part of the desert, including the Clark Mountain herds, whose home turf is the highest peak in the Mojave Desert at 7,929 feet. This is on the north side of the preserve, and sometimes, if you're driving east on I-15, you can see them hanging out at Excelsior Mine Road. As with wild horses, there's a dispute about exactly how many burros are left. Locals say maybe 30; NPS says 200 to 300.

Last fall, another herd was taken off the preserve, and — according to the desert grapevine — two burros may have been shot in the process. There are photos of one burro with a bullet to the head circulating in the ether. The rumor is that he died a very slow and painful death as the contractors stood by. Not surprising if true; I have heard and seen evidence of a staggering amount of tax-subsidized government abuse before, during and after roundups of wild horses and burros. Two years ago in Nevada, six mustangs, presumably rounded up to keep them from dying of thirst during a drought, died of thirst in a BLM corral after a worker forgot to turn on a spigot and then left for several days; a couple of months ago in Colorado, six more died after eating a poison weed in a corral where they should not have had access to toxic plants; and since October 2005, 46 wild horses at the BLM corral in Susanville, California, have died of strangles, an upper-respiratory infection that can kick in after a horse is stressed — or after, for instance, being run too hard during a helicopter roundup.

"The preserve has designated the elimination of the burro from within its borders as a top resource-management priority," NPS announced a couple of years ago. Of course, there's always a reason. In this case, the burro, like the wild horse, is seen as an animal that destroys habitat — habitat that should only be destroyed by cattle — but of course that's not how NPS frames it. As this organization sees it, the burro is an enemy of the endangered desert tortoise. But according to the late Barry Bledsoe, who was an advocate for the Eastern Mojave and Death Valley burros, the animals "pose no threat to the tortoise. There is no documented sighting of a tortoise that has been stepped on by a burro. Burros do not eat tortoises. Burros typically roam in the high country, while the tortoise is in the low flats." Still, since the tortoise is a California native, it takes priority in the what-to-save contest.

I have no argument against protecting the desert tortoise — to me, it's a living totem and, with the Desert Protection Act of 1994, it was given a slim chance of surviving decades of predation and unchecked development. But the answer is: Let's manage the burro, not wipe it out. If government strives for diversity in human population centers, then why not in parks? There's plenty of room for burros, tortoises and even one or two cows. Moreover, the non-native argument is disingenuous, given that NPS violates this rule when it feels like it. On the Cape Cod National Seashore, for instance, it releases non-native pheasants for sport shooting.

"They are destroying our Western heritage," says Jennifer Foster, a 23-year resident of Hesperia, near the preserve. Jennifer is one of a small group of high-desert locals who are planning a legal action to stop this impending and most final act. "The Clark Mountain burros are special," she says. "They're the last of their kind." Any sort of lawsuit, however, could take months, if not years, and meanwhile, burro sanctuaries around the region are counting on new arrivals in 2006 as the NPS gets ready to wipe Brighty's descendants off the map.

As Diana Chontos says, burros have much to tell us. In 2000, she rescued a burro from Death Valley and called him Yaqui. "He was respected by all of the younger jacks — the male burros — and they didn't chase him from food or water. He loved to be brushed and hugged. But one day he began to grow weak and could no longer get up from his naps without being helped, and toward the end we rigged a blanket for shade and called a 'vet' to ease his passing. One by one, all 32 jacks came by and touched him some place on his body, then went back to their hay. Shortly after the last jack paid his respects, Yaqui took a deep breath and died." He was 50 years old, the vet said, the oldest equine he had ever seen. Had he helped a miner named Pegleg Pete find water? Maybe he had once led a lost pilgrim back to the trail. Or maybe he just lived in the Mojave Desert — for a long time, until he had to go.