

Kara L. Stewart  
5012 N. Highway 67  
Sedalia, CO 80135  
303-688-1432  
Fax: 720-286-9452  
karastewart2001@yahoo.com

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## **Nokota: The smart, hardy horse from the North Dakota plains**

*What brothers Leo and Frank Kuntz began as an effort to merely cross their ranch horses with some sturdy and athletic local wild horses has burgeoned into an admirable life's work to preserve the Native Horse of the Northern Prairie.*

Following the defeat of General Custer at Little Big Horn in 1876, Hunkpapa Lakota leader Sitting Bull and his people headed north to seek refuge in Canadian territory. After five years, Sitting Bull and several other Lakota leaders and their tribal members returned to Fort Buford, North Dakota. There, they surrendered. As part of the terms of their surrender, Sitting Bull and the others were required not only to give up their weapons but also the horses that had been crucial partners in the lives of the Northern Plains Indians for more than 100 years.

### **A Little History**

After the confiscation, Sitting Bull's herd and other herds of Northern Plains horses were dispersed through sales and trades. About 250 of the horses were sold to the Marquis de Mores, a French aristocrat and rancher in the area, who founded the nearby town of Medora and named it after his wife. Together the couple developed the cattle industry in the southwestern part of North Dakota, building stock facilities and even a packing plant.

Many people did not value the bloodlines and abilities of these "Indian ponies" and other wild herds of the area, denigrating them as essentially worthless. However, de Mores and his wife saw the merits of these hardy, smart horses with tremendous stamina.

The couple planned to raise large numbers of these horses. Some horses were kept on the ranch and used as saddle and ranch horses. As was common practice at the time, the rest were turned out to live and breed on the open range land among other bands of horses calling the Little Missouri badlands their home.

De Mores sold 60 mares to neighboring rancher A.C. Huidekoper, who grazed them on 100 square miles of unfenced range land in the area. Huidekoper was interested in creating a superior line of ranch horses, and he believed the Northern Plains Indian-bred horses were perfect foundation stock to cross with his Thoroughbreds.

The de Mores' plans were curtailed by the deadly winter of 1886-87, after which they left the harsh northern plains and returned to France. Another notable inhabitant of the area during this time was Theodore Roosevelt, who lived and ranched in the area. The same brutal winter forced him to leave as well.

The horses, however, survived and continued to live unhindered in the harsh western North Dakota badlands, full of natural draws and hills, dotted with scrub pine, cedar and poplar.

### **Fast Forward**

Following the Great Depression, the federal government began managing public lands and developed agricultural policies. Wild horses were considered competition to domestic livestock and were commonly eradicated during the 1940s and 1950s.

In honor of former president Theodore Roosevelt, an area in North Dakota was established as Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Park in 1947. The National Park Service changed the designation to Theodore Roosevelt National Park (THRO) in 1978. Thousands of acres were fenced in, and several bands of the horses from de Mores' herds of Sitting Bull's horses and other bands were inadvertently captured within the park boundaries.

Unlike public lands governed by the Bureau of Land Management, those under the control of the National Park Service are not bound by the Wild and Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act and its regulations, passed in 1971. Because of this, the wild horses living within the boundaries of THRO were seen as unwanted nuisances.

“Between 1950 and 1970, the NPS attempted to remove all horses from Theodore Roosevelt National Park,” says Dr. Castle McLaughlin, ethnologist and curator at Harvard's Peabody Museum, an ardent supporter of the Nokota horse and vice president of the Nokota Horse Conservancy. “Most of the captured horses were sold for slaughter. However, increasing public opposition to the removal of horses from THRO and a growing recognition that wild horses had been part of the landscape during the open range days when Roosevelt himself had lived in the area, led to a change in THRO policy during the 1970s. Since that time, THRO allows a limited number of horses, which are managed as an historical demonstration herd.”

This may sound like a beneficial decision for the horses within the park's boundaries, but the NPS also decided to change the appearance of the herd to one that was more familiar to visitors than some of horses found in the early THRO herds. To do this, starting in the 1980s, they began removing the most dominant stallions from the herd and replaced them with more typical breeds, including Quarter Horse, Arabian, draft-cross and BLM mustang.

## **First Encounter**

North Dakota ranchers and brothers Leo and Frank Kuntz were involved with the regional sport of the Great American Horse Race—contests based on races that cowboys, cavalry and Native Americans took part in. In a race of speed and control, contestants would race cross country, over hills, through draws, around trees and back to the starting point, covering between 3/4 and 1-1/2 miles.

“We were running Thoroughbreds and Quarter Horses,” says Frank, “and just as our horses were reaching their prime at eight or nine years old, they started breaking down. We wanted a horse to cross with our horses that would add more bone, and that’s when we found the horses from the THRO.”

In 1979, the Kuntz brothers purchased a single mare named Katz from one of the first auctions at THRO. “Before long, we knew there was something special about these horses.”

## **Conservation Begins**

The Kuntz brothers began their own small-scale conservation effort, focused on maintaining genetic quality of this unique horse. They bought all the horses they could at the THRO auctions, which were held whenever the herd needed to be thinned. Needing a name for the hardy horses, Leo came up with the name Nokota, signifying their North Dakota roots.

In 1986, Dr. Castle McLaughlin received a three-year grant to do historic research on these horses. Ironically, she first met Leo and Frank at a THRO auction—bidding against them to save a particularly impressive stallion.

Discovering they were after the same goal of keeping these horses from going to slaughter, they began a more concerted effort to help save as many of these horses as they could. That was a fortuitous decision. The NPS continued to thin the herd within the THRO, removing the least “modern” looking horses. Today, the park’s herd consists mostly of Quarter Horse-cross types.

## **Beginnings of the Nokota Breed**

As the Kuntz family continued to save and selectively breed the herd to restore the numbers to a safe level, they knew they would need help to do this. They needed to spread the word about these unique North American horses and the need to preserve their bloodlines and heritage.

In a stroke of good fortune, the efforts of Frank and Leo Kuntz to save the Nokota horse were profiled on ABC World News with Peter Jennings in 1996, and word started to spread about their plight.

A few years later, a couple from Pennsylvania was vacationing on a guest ranch in Montana where Leo was working and riding some Nokota horses. Charlie Fleishmann, a former steeplechase rider and current polo player, and his wife Blair were so impressed by the horses that they then went to North Dakota and eventually purchased Nokotas from Leo and Frank. They also helped create the Nokota Horse Conservancy in 1999, which was later granted nonprofit 501(c) (3) status, and designed a breed registry and created a database of known Nokota horses.

In addition, Team Nokota—a group of Nokota owners and admirers—was formed to spread the word about these horses at horse expos, fairs and other venues.

Today, the NHC owns about 40 Nokotas and the Kuntz family cares for nearly 500 on its own 1,100 acres of central North Dakota prairie and 6,000 additional leased acres of hay land and pastures. There are fewer than 1,000 Nokota horses in the world, although the number increases each year.

### **Nokota Conformation and Colors**

The Nokota is a sound, athletic, handy, agile and durable horse with great stamina. “They’re also some of the most surefooted horses I’ve ever ridden,” says Frank. “They know how to take care of themselves.”

Nokota horses have a square, angular frame, tapering musculature, V-shaped front quarters, angular shoulders with prominent withers, distinctly sloped croup, low-set tail and strong bone/legs/hooves. Many have feathered fetlocks, and often their ears are slightly hooked at the tips. Nokota horses tend to mature slowly.

There is a predominance of the blue roan coat in the Nokota horse. While this coat color is quite rare in other breeds, it is a hallmark of the Nokota horse. A few Nokota lines produce grulla and dun coats, sometimes with striping on the withers and legs.

Other coat colors are found, such as black, grey, bay, brown and chestnut as well as pinto markings of frame overo and sabino, with the occasional “medicine hat” pattern occurring occasionally. Tobiano markings occur only in Nokotas that are cross-bred.

### **Nokotas Can Do**

“These horses are so versatile,” says Frank. “You really can do just about anything with them.”

Case in point, they have great innate jumping ability. For that reason, they are seeing success in the fox hunting, three-day eventing, and Pony Club circles. “I delivered a horse to a woman in Georgia who owns a jumper on the Canadian Olympic team,” adds Frank. “She thinks her Nokota will be a Grand Prix jumper.”

Other Nokota owners are enjoying their horses in dressage as well as reining, roping, cutting, trail riding and gaming. Some Nokotas are gaited.

Spreading beyond their initial territory, Nokota horses are now found in California, Washington, Montana, Georgia, Florida, Pennsylvania and the east coast.

### **Temperament**

These go-anywhere, do anything horses are brave and reliable, and they are intrinsic problem solvers. Belying their wild past, they tend to be kind and form very strong bonds with the humans in their lives that treat them with trust and respect.

“Nokota horses are very smart,” says Frank, “and you can actually see them thinking and figuring things out. This happens a lot, where I deliver a Nokota to a new owner and in a couple weeks when I call to check in, the person will tell me, ‘I must have the smartest Nokota ever!’”

That said, “Nokotas dislike rote repetition and not just anyone can handle them,” says Frank. “I’ve seen some very good horse trainers not do so well with a Nokota because they are using techniques that may work on 90% of horses, but they just don’t work so well with these horses. If you keep them challenged but not dominated and earn mutual respect, you’ll do all right.”

## **Registry**

The single registry for Nokota horses is managed by the Nokota Horse Conservancy and is designed to support the conservation, breeding and individual ownership of the Nokota horse.

The registry currently contains about 1,000 horses, including both the breeding stock owned by the Conservancy and those horses owned by individuals. It seeks to preserve and promote the family lines and phenotypes of the original Nokotas removed from the THRO while also recognizing the offspring of Nokotas bred to non-Nokotas

## **Nokota Type**

When Frank and Leo began acquiring Nokota horses during the 1980s, they noticed two distinct types. Since that time, these two types—Traditional and Ranch—have been further segregated by selective breeding.

### Traditional Type

In 1994, Dr. Phillip Sponenberg, DVM, Ph.D., noted equine genetic expert and authority of Spanish Colonial horses, evaluated the Kuntz herd and identified about 20 horses that were phenotypically consistent with accepted standards for Spanish Colonial horses. At Dr. Sponenberg’s advice, the Kuntz family has selectively bred Traditional type Nokotas to preserve these characteristics and maintain this bloodline, as well as continue to Ranch type Nokotas.

Designated National Park Traditionals (NPT) in the registry, Traditional Nokotas are 14 to 15 hands.

### Ranch Type

The Ranch Nokota, noted as National Park Ranch Types (NPR) in the registry, share the same conformation as the Traditional type, but are generally more heavily boned and taller, often maturing at 16 hands or better. This is due to their heritage of intentional and unintentional cross breeding to Thoroughbreds, draft horses, and perhaps larger Iberian horses such as Andalusians.

### Cross-Bred Nokotas

Cross-bred Nokotas also have been organized into two subtypes: National Park Cross (NPC) and National Park Part Bloods (NPPB).

NPC horses must be at least 50% foundation bred (horses and offspring removed directly from THRO), and all non-Nokota influence must have derived from the original Kuntz Breeding Stock (BS) that was used for the first several generations when the gene pool was small. BS horses

included a champion AQHA stallion, champion Paint mare and several grade mares from Standing Rock Reservation. Some NPC horses are actually more than 95% foundation bred, and some foundation Nokota lines are only represented in NPC descendants.

NPPBs must be at least 25% foundation bred, and their non-Nokota influence can come from any breed. Such non-Nokota, non-breeding stock horses are designated as “Other” (O) in the registry.

### **Equine Ambassadors**

Northern Plains Indians tribes have a history strongly rooted in horse culture. However, since being forced onto reservations, many have lost this connection to horses and to their past.

“We’re looking for ways to give the horses, culture and land back to the native children who are on reservations,” says Frank. “There’s a lot of land that they no longer have access to, and a lot of kids no longer have access to a horse culture, so we look for ways to give this back to them. We want to not only teach them about horses and how to care for horses but also give them ways to train the horse in traditional and also modern western ways, and also perhaps consider careers that center around horses, such as vets, farriers, trainers and saddle makers.”

One such example is Horses on the Prairie Camp, which brings kids out to the open land where they use GPS systems provided by NASA to mark spots in the pasture to do soil and water samples, geology examinations and so on. Butch Thunder Hawk, an arts instructor at United Tribes College and member of the Hunkpapa Lakota tribe, teaches them about native plants, how to use them and harvest them. “He also incorporates the horse culture and the whole horse social structure—how the foals learn from the older horses and eventually go out on their own—hoping to draw parallels in their own lives,” explains Frank.

Frank adds, “A lot of kids here on the reservation grow up in poverty, grow up with the problems of alcoholism in their families—it’s a hard place to grow up. While we can’t help or change them all, if we can help some of these young adults, we feel pretty good about that.”

### **A Little Help From Their Friends**

Frank is modest when he talks about the strides they’ve made to preserve the Nokota horse. “It’s not just been Leo and Frank doing the work,” he says. “We’ve had so much help from family, friends, and now the Conservancy. There’s always someone there helping us take the next step, even if it’s a partial step. It all helps.”

### **Looking Ahead**

Whether it was on a 100-mile ride, chasing bison into a draw during a hunt or fighting valiantly in battle, the Nokota horse proved its mettle as a tough, smart, hardy equine partner to the Northern Plains Indians. Linked so indelibly to the past, the Nokota deserves a prosperous future. If people like the Kuntz family and those who love the breed have anything to do with it, that future looks promising.

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**BIO:** The author wishes to especially thank Dr. Castle McLaughlin for her assistance with this article and ensuring the accuracy of historical details.

### **Sidebar**

#### **Help Desperately Needed for the Nokotas**

Right now, North Dakota and the region is in the third worst drought in recorded history. Rain didn't fall for many months in the summer of 2006, causing pastures to dry up and leaving no grass to cut for hay.

For Frank and Leo Kuntz, their hay crop was a total loss, and the governor of North Dakota declared a drought emergency in their county. To feed the Nokota herd through this winter, the Kuntz brothers have driven to hundreds of miles away seeking hay or pasture for the horses.

The need for hay and donations is always important for the Nokota Horse Conservancy to keep the herd in good health, but it is a dire necessity this year and the people who care for these horses appreciate any assistance readers can give.

### **Sidebar**

#### **For More Information**

Nokota Horse Conservancy, [www.nokotahorse.org](http://www.nokotahorse.org); 701-254-4302

### **Sidebar**

#### **Nokota Tidbits**

- Nokota named the Honorary State Equine of North Dakota in 1993 by the state legislature.
- Brothers Frank and Leo Kuntz win the Rio Vista Hank Award for Outstanding Achievement in Equine Rescue in 2002.
- Blue Moon Rising, a traditional Nokota gelding owned by Margaret Odgers, was accepted into the Horse of the Americas registry, an umbrella organization for horses of Spanish Colonial descent.

### ***Caption ideas***

In 1996, the efforts of Frank and Leo Kuntz were profiled on ABC World News with Peter Jennings, and word started to spread about these unique North American horses and the need to preserve their bloodlines and heritage.

Western artists Charles Russell and Frederic Remington portrayed (and rode themselves) many ranch- and Indian-bred horses that look like today's Nokota.

Renowned equine genetic expert Dr. Phillip Sponenberg estimates that Frank and Leo Kuntz have the largest blue-roan herd in North America, if not the world.

The Nokota is a horse with a colorful past, now providing a link to the future for Native American children.

Initially used as sturdy crosses with ranch horses, these athletic natives of the northern prairie have come into their own as a worthwhile and admired breed.

## **COMP LIST**

### **Dr. Castle McLaughlin**

Peabody Museum  
Harvard University  
11 Divinity Avenue  
Cambridge MA 02138

### **Frank Kuntz**

420 South Broadway St.  
Linton, ND 58552

### **Leo Kuntz**

Rt. 1 Box 54  
Linton ND 58552