For decades mustangs have waged a losing battle with ranchers for a share of the Western range. Now many are thriving in Kentucky reins.

THE VAST ROUNDUP

Like small ships sailing on a sage-green sea, the first herd of horses appeared on the horizon. As a helicopter flew above, the herd seemed to undulate over the hills and dales of the Wyoming range.

In minutes, the 40 or so wild horses had neared a funnel-like trap-fence made of burlap. Quickly, four cowboys on horseback shot out from hiding and began swinging their lassos toward the horses. The helicopter remained directly above to force the horses into the mouth of the trap.

The wild mustangs came streaming in, pursued by the yipping cowboys. Then, in a corral at the end of the trap, cowboys on foot closed the gates behind the bewildered horses.

The helicopter dipped to one side and darted away toward the horizon — in search of yet another band of mustangs.

This roundup was one of many being

Continued

TAMMY LECHNER is a staff photographer.

Text and photographs by Tammy Lechner

Like an island on the Western range, a corral, far left, serves as the first station on the way to a new life for a group of captured wild horses. Below, lasso-swinging cowboy Bruce Stevens of Rock Springs, Wyo., resembles a figure from the past as he drives a herd of horses toward captivity before taking a well-earned break, left.

At a holding center where the horses remain for several weeks after capture, a veterinarian determines the horse's age by checking its teeth, far left. Then the horse is tagged with a freeze brand.

Captured horses are sprayed to disinfect them and eliminate insects, right. Manes that have grown long in years of running wild on the range are clipped.

conducted in several Western states as part of the federal Bureau of Land Management's "Adopt-A-Horse" program, begun in 1976. The program is designed to control the wild-horse population on the ranges of Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Idaho, Oregon and California in a humane fashion. Among states east of the Mississippi River, Kentucky ranks second only to Tennessee in the number of horses adopted. Together the two states have accepted nearly 3,000 of the 50,000 wild horses gathered under the program.

The ancestors of these wild horses were brought to this continent by Spanish explorers in the early 1500s. Inevitably, some escaped or were set free and began to reproduce in the wild. Bands formed; natural selection took over; and the animals survived in, and were molded by, their harsh environment.

They became vitally important to the Plains Indians, who captured and redomesticated many of them, but the majority continued to roam the prairies.

More than 1 million wild horses may once have roamed the Western states. But by 1969 the number had dwindled to fewer than 20,000. Encouraged by ranchers whose livestock competed with the wild horses for precious rangeland, "mustangers" were slaughtering the animals for sport and profit.

Western cattlemen have long worried about the impact of the wild horse on their grasslands. Economics justifies the presence of cattle and sheep on the range. These stock animals, after all, equal income. But the wild horses do not.

"We're the ranchers that fought for so many years to preserve this range," said Leonard Hay, of Rock Springs, Wyo., now in his mid-70s.

Hay, whose range property runs about 70 miles from Rock Springs into the Wyoming Red Desert and across the central part of the state's Continental Divide Basin, said that he spent his life "riding among the wild horses."

"And believe me when I tell you that there is no other animal harder on this range than the wild horse."

It takes 40 acres of dry, steep and rocky Wyoming range land to feed one cow. It takes the same amount of that land to feed one wild horse.

The only two proven methods of dealing with proliferating "mustangs," as the wild horses are called out West, is to round them up for slaughter or adoption. Slaughter, now outlawed, was once the accepted practice among ranchers. Horse hunting was a sport, and not a fair sport at that, by most standards.

Old-time ranchers who participated in "horse harvests" tell tales more full of gore than of glory. The hunters often worked from airplanes, and a common weapon was the sawed-off shotgun. The herd would be peppered with ammunition to keep the horses bunched while the hunters drove them down out of the mountains to the valley below.

They would be run over the rocky range until some had worn

Continued

THE VAST ROUNDUP

Continued

their hooves raw to the bone. Some had eyes shot out, lips hanging loose and shoulders and rumps covered with bloody wounds. In the valleys, cowboys would either rope them from trucks and hobble them with 100-pound tires, or they would run them into camouflaged corrals and then up the loading chute with cattle prods or clubs.

In those days there was no legal apparatus for protecting the horses, and it was only a matter of time, given the vivid excesses, before public indignation began to mount. Bowing to intense pressure from humane groups spearheaded by a tireless Nevada housewife known as "Wild Horse Annie" Johnston, Congress passed the "Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act" in 1971. That legislation bans the killing, capture and harassment of wild horses and burros on federal lands.

But with protection the horses' population doubled in seven years. So in 1976 the Bureau of Land Management undertook the Adopt-A-Horse program. The program now costs about $4 million annually. Its goal is to reduce the overall population to about 22,000 free-roaming wild horses.

After capture, the herds are wormed, vaccinated, tested for disease through blood samples and cataloged. Then, after several weeks, they are shipped to adoption centers around the nation.

Virtually all of the horses gathered under the program are adopted. Although officials say that none of the animals gathered in government roundups are sold for slaughter, they also admit that a small percentage of the animals "unadoptable" because of sickness, old age or just plain ugliness are offered for sale at public auctions. The fates of these horses vary. Ultimately some are slaughtered; some are used in rodeos; some become work animals or even family pets.

Randall Steele, 57, and his wife, Beverly, 54, of Somerset, Ky., are considered model adopters. They say that their bay mare, which they've named "Penny" for her pretty copper color, is the most spoiled wild horse in the world.

Kentuckians Randall and Beverly Steele, with daughter Lenore, adopted Penny.

"I learned about the adoption program in 1979," said Steele, "and we've had it in mind to adopt a mare or a mare and a colt ever since. But we wanted to wait until we had the proper facilities with which to care for the animals."

After retiring from his job as an architectural designer with Chevron in Louisville several years ago, Steele bought 95 acres of wooded property along the Cumberland River near Somerset and began working on plans to build a barn, a house and a corral and clear a pasture, in that order.

Steele finished work on the corral just a few months ago, and in mid-October he and Beverly drove to the Eastern adoption center in Cross Plains, Tenn., and brought Penny home to Kentucky.

For about a month the Steeles merely fed the mare and talked to her from a distance. Then, one day in late November, the horse allowed Beverly to pet her. "I was so pleased that she came to me," said Beverly. "After days of calling to her through the corral fence she finally came near and let me touch her."

"It's best to let them come to you," said Steele, "and in that way allow them to develop trust and confidence."

Steele plans to progress carefully with Penny. "It's all going to happen very gradually. Eventually I'll be able to lean my body over her back, and from there I can set a saddle out and occasionally put it on her."

People who adopt wild horses must prove that they can provide adequate shelter and corral space and have at least some experience with livestock, say Randall and Paula Carr, who operate the adoption center in Cross Plains.

At the time of adoption, the applicant signs a legally binding agreement to provide appropriate facilities and care and pays $125.

Animals remain government property for 12 months after their adoption. During that period they may not be sold or used for commercial purposes. After 12 months, adopters may apply for ownership; if their veterinarian signs a form to certify that the animal has been given proper care, the government routinely conveys title.

For more information and an application form, telephone Randall and Paula Carr at (615) 654-2180. □