

Palomino Valley, Tule Peak and Winnemucca Ranch

What do a space ship and wild horses have to do with each other?

by John C. Evanoff

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The largest herd of wild mustangs in North America once ranged in Northern Washoe County. When I was growing up and playing Little League baseball where the Washoe County fairgrounds and the indoor arena is now located, a stinky factory across the street on Wells Avenue was putting wild horse parts to use as glue. A bunch of wranglers I used to know occasionally went out into the North Valleys and picked up some extra cash by catching mustangs. That went out of style in the early 60's but not until after a film was made called "The Misfits" starring Clarke Gable and Marilyn Monroe. The film depicted these fellows and the unmistakable beauty of Palomino Valley, Winnemucca Lake and Tule Mountain. Much of the movie was filmed at the Quail Canyon Ranch just west of Pyramid Lake and if you watch the film closely, you'll see several landmarks from around the area north of Reno. The Sky Ranch airport was used during filming for the airplane sequences near what is now the middle of Spanish Springs housing on the Pyramid Highway. The little dirt airstrip was later the very first site of the Reno Air Races now held every September at Stead Air Field north of Reno.

One spot just north of Spanish Springs on Pyramid Highway 445 leads to the right up into a canyon and an old dry gulch. In the spring, the creek runs out of the hill there but near the top you will come to some unusually large concrete structures. This is where Rockwell International, later known as Rocketdyne, tested the engines that put the United States on the moon. This site was the only site in the world to test the massive F-1 and J-2 main stage engines for the Saturn V launch vehicle. The rocket engine firing could be heard all over the northern valleys and even as far away as Reno and Sparks during testing throughout the early 60's. The Apollo missions were launched and man walked on the moon in 1969. Northern Nevada was a part of that success.

Just past this area on the left is a road that goes northwest to the Winnemucca Ranch and the base of Tule Peak. This area is some of the most beautiful in Northern Washoe County. If you have a day or two to hike in the area, you could see what I mean by hiking up the slopes of Tule. Little valleys over each rise give way to spectacular sights and herds of deer, antelope and bighorn sheep. From the valley, it's hard to tell so much natural beauty exists atop Tule, but believe me, you'll be astounded. The top of Tule gives wonderful views of all of Pyramid Lake and most of the Red Rock, Honey Lake and Smoke Creek Desert Areas. The Paiute Indians, who lived in the area near Winnemucca Ranch and the Old Milk Ranch nearby, held Tule Peak in high esteem. Glancing up from the valley at the sheer cliffs on its southern face, gives you a feeling the spirit of the mountain is still alive. The area is still revered as sacred to the Pyramid Lake Indians.

A bit further down Highway 445 on the right is the Bureau of Land Management Wild Horse and Burrow staging corral. Thousands of mustang and burrows have come through these corrals to eventually become someone's riding partner. The BLM still runs a successful adopt-a-horse or burrow program at this spot. The animals are safely captured and corralled in the wild and brought to this center to be examined, given shots and eventually sold for a nominal fee to folks who want a trusty riding horse or pack animal.

The wild mustang is well known as a melting pot of many horses but the history of the mustang is indeed much more. Tens of thousands of years ago, North America was the original home of the horse. That horse was much smaller and more timid than the horse that eventually evolved into the animals we see today in races and rodeos. When man came across the land bridge connecting the two continents about eleven or so thousand years ago, he hunted the prehistoric horse into extinction. Several fossils have been found around Pyramid Lake and throughout Washoe County indicating that horses lived successfully for thousands of years prior to man ever coming to Northern Nevada.

Amazingly, horses came back to North America with the Spaniards and their missionaries in the 1500's. Many thousands of the animals were captured by the Indians and some eventually became free again to roam the American west. In the 1700's, ranchers from Europe brought more mixtures to the range and by the mid 1800's the wild horse was firmly a part of the plains and western desert mountains. The plains horses were captured in huge herds during the move west by settlers and again during several wars including the Civil War. Then the automobile came along, and eventually put the horse out of business and into the pet dish. The animals that were left to roam the range were timid but strong. Ranchers and sheepherders didn't like them grazing on their lands so they began to hunt them down. Certain wranglers knew there was extra money in doing this job for the ranchers so they banded together and became the first "Mustangers". That's where the name of horse came from and then a Northern Nevada gal by the name of Velma Johnston, later known as Wild Horse Annie, took up a campaign to save the horse in the early 1950's. Nevada Congressman Walter Baring, eventually got a bill through Congress to save the horse from the Mustangers but it wasn't enough for Annie and her army. In 1971, the Wild Horse and Burrow act was signed and the Mustang was saved from certain extinction.

Further down the Pyramid Highway, you'll come along the Washoe County shooting range. Just past it on the left are some unusual outcrops. These black pinnacles are what is left of volcanic pipes that pushed up from under the ground millions of years ago. This part of the Tule Mountain area is another wonderful area to explore. Many four-wheel drive roads lead into the area, but the best way to see the region is by hiking or horse back riding. If you watch the "Misfits" again, you'll recognize a couple of these canyons as the ones used to show how Mustangers corralled the wild horse with planes and vehicles.

Not many folks in Northern Nevada know the wonderful story of the northern valleys. From Saturn rocket engine test site to the home of the

wild horse, a look down from atop Tule Mountain will give you the knowledge that this land is historical and certainly beautiful.