

Where Taming WILD HORSES is Child's Play

by

Steve Edwards

Photos by Hay Hardy



Jessie Peterson, left, and Danielle Jones pull away from Brenna Hornbaker and Lea Etichison, right, as these young riders give their horses a chance to stretch out.

The frost was still shining on the grass as several excited young riders rolled out of the back of the station wagon. “Steve, Steve, it was in the newspaper today! There are some wild horses on an island near here that need homes, and we have to help them!” said the oldest of the group. From that December 2006 morning on, Mill Swamp Indian Horses located near Smithfield, Virginia became a focal point for efforts to prevent the extinction of the wild horses of Corolla.

Remnants of 16th-century Spanish exploration and attempted colonization, these wild Spanish mustangs, along with a small herd on Shackleford Banks, are all that is left in the wild from herds that have roamed the Outer Banks of North Carolina for centuries. As recently as the 1920s, as many as 5,000 wild horses inhabited the Outer Banks. Today, fewer than 90 wild Corollas remain. Most geneticists agree that at least 100-150 horses are needed to maintain genetic viability.

To further complicate the plight of the Corolla mustangs, the management plan, which seeks to balance the needs of the wild horses with a delicate ecosystem, called for only 60 horses to remain in the wild. Strict adherence to that plan would guarantee the eventual extinction of the Corolla strain of Spanish mustangs. Foals were captured and placed for adoption to meet that mandate, but no effort was made to develop a program to register those foals and breed pure Corolla mustangs in captivity.

Karen McCalpin, the newly hired director of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, saw the need to promote the breeding of the adopted horses. She approved the adoption of Manteo, a two-year old stallion, to Mill Swamp Indian Horses, and he soon was joined by another stallion and a mare. Several Mill Swamp students have adopted Corolla mustangs. Mill Swamp Indian Horse’s pastures now accommodate 11 formerly wild Corolla mustangs. The Corolla stallions at Mill Swamp are available

for breeding at no cost to any Corolla mare. Another stallion was recently placed in North Carolina, and Vickie Ives of the famous Texas mustang ranch Karma Farms has adopted several Corollas. A filly will soon begin a new life in Maine as a result of this program. Of course, with breeders so far-flung, much of the breeding will be accomplished by artificial insemination.

When Manteo came to Mill Swamp Indian Horses, he stepped out onto the home of the largest herd of registered American Indian Horses on the East Coast. Many of those horses were wild mustangs from the deserts of Nevada who had been gentled and trained by my students, some as young as five years old, and by me. For more than five years, students at Mill Swamp Indian Horses have learned how horses think and how best to communicate with them.

My little riders are well known in the world of mustang aficionados. They have demonstrated the Mill Swamp training



Some of the ponies were captured in the Nevada deserts and others on the beaches of the Outer Banks, but all have found a home at Mill Swamp Indian Horses.

The author helps Red Feather, a wild Corolla mustang, learn to accept human presence.



methods in several states, from Delaware to North Carolina. In November 2006, we produced a commercial DVD to give step-by-step instruction in the gentle and humane method of training used at Mill Swamp. Many of the riders have purchased colts bred at Mill Swamp and have

participated fully in the colts' training. Several have become so proficient at gaining a horse's trust and respect that they are able to train a young horse without further assistance from their teacher.

Natural horsemanship, often referred to as horse whispering, is a method

of training horses that relies on using the horse's psychology and body language to communicate with the animal. The majority of horse trainers still do not use natural horsemanship, but its popularity is steadily increasing. The Mill Swamp program may be unique in that some of these students begin to learn and practice natural horsemanship at age five. Rachel Dunningham began as a five-year-old student five years ago. Now at age 10, she proudly rode Croatoan, a wild Corolla stallion captured only nine months earlier, in the 2006 Christmas parade in Smithfield. Ashley Neighbors, then 13, assisted me at a training clinic by mounting a mustang that had never been ridden. The eighth horse that Brenna Hornbaker got on had never had a rider. She gave the young mustang a ride around the corral absolutely without incident.

In the summer of 2007, the young riders of Mill Swamp took on a tremendous challenge. One day each week, groups of riders showed up early in the morning to

put an entire day into training wild or untrained horses. In that time, they trained eight horses and one donkey well enough so that each could be safely ridden in the woods. Amazingly, they did so without having a single horse ever buck with a rider. Anyone looking for the excitement of a rodeo would have been sorely disappointed.

Slowly and progressively, the young riders gave each horse a new challenge to master. As the horses' trust and confidence grew, so did that of their adolescent trainers. The same could be said of the patience that both horses and trainers developed in the hot August sun. Patience is the key to the success of the program.

The gentling process takes time and dedication. Rebecca Stevenson, an adult trainer from Chesapeake, learned to excel at natural horsemanship by getting up before sunrise and driving half an hour to Smithfield five mornings each week to work with me on a few particularly difficult horses. As I developed these programs and training techniques, I relied on Rebecca constantly. Without her help there is no way that I could have ever developed our program for kids and horses.

Yes, it is true that such an endeavor

Though captured only eight months earlier, this stallion demonstrates his innate gentleness with his six-year-old rider, Sarah Lin Kerr-Applewhite. (Photo by Kaitie Amos)

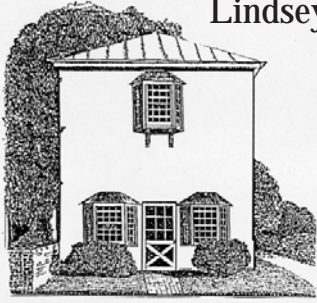


Final safety check for Lea Etchisonon before a trial ride, as Danielle Jones waits



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requires hard work, dedication, and commitment, but there is something else that is special about Mill Swamp Indian Horses. Visitors are welcome, and over the past four years nearly 2,500 people have come to watch the training that transforms wild and terrified animals into warm, friendly, and contented horses. I am surprised by the description that I hear most often from guests—they call the place “magical.” As often as I hear that word, it still surprises me. We have crooked posts and sagging fences. In the summer, my pastures grow dust, and in the winter they grow mud. But people call what we do here magical.

Perhaps author Doris Gwaltney put it best in her description of Mill Swamp Indian Horses as a “place of love.” It must be love that makes a prosecutor nearly 50 years old spend over 20 hours in the saddle every week teaching his young riders to ride with comfort and ease. It must be love that makes teenagers roll out of bed early on a Saturday morning and rush to spend the entire day with the horses. It must be love that makes formerly wild mustangs walk up to total strangers to nuzzle them, not looking for a treat but simply to be scratched and hugged.

After all, what is more magical than love?

Steve Edwards is a member of the Board of the Corolla Wild Horse Fund and the author of *And a Little Child Shall Lead Them: Learning From Wild Horses and Small Children*. He has mostly recently been honored with the Keeper of the Flame Award by the American Indian Horse Registry. A graduate of William and Mary and the Marshall-Wythe School of Law, he is a prosecutor in Southampton County, VA. He resides in Smithfield, VA, with his wife, Beth Edwards.