A herd of horses is silhouetted against a bright, hazy sky, likely at dawn or dusk. The horses are captured in motion, running from left to right across a grassy field. The overall mood is serene and evocative.

A North Dakota Love Story

Cowboys Frank and Leo Kuntz have dedicated much of their lives to saving the Nokota, a horse breed that changed Native American history, but in the last century almost disappeared without a trace

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The American Midwestern state of North Dakota is a place of rugged beauty, all squalling winds, sprawling plains and ancient rocky badlands rich in fossils and quartz. It's a tough, enduring landscape that fosters equally robust lives, most famously that of Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt, who began his transformation from sickly young man to dynamic 26th president of the United States on ranches in the Little Missouri River Valley. He would later describe his long relationship with North Dakota as "the romance of my life."

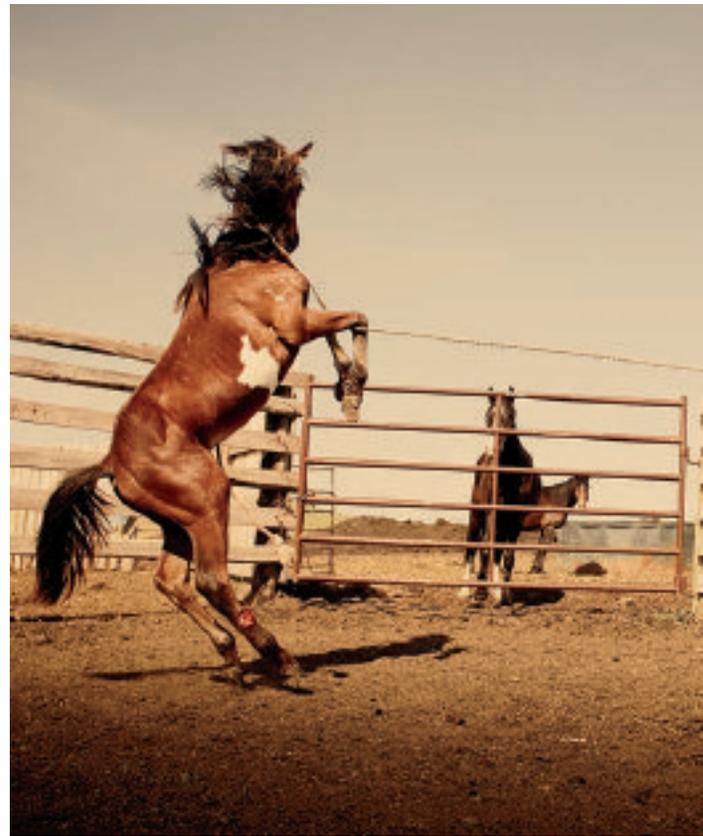
Frank and Leo Kuntz are not famous names. Gruff and modest, the brothers prefer the quiet life. But like Roosevelt they too have a deep connection to North Dakota. Like Roosevelt, they are cowboys, working ranches

in Linton, south central Emmons County. And like Roosevelt, their story may also be headed for the history books. For more than 30 years they have campaigned to save a Native American horse they believe is as integral to North Dakota as the land itself — a Western epic riven with bravery, battle and grit.

The Nokota, as the breed is now known, is descended from the wild horses harnessed by the Lakota Sioux who lived in the Northern Great Plains in the mid-1700s. Horses became key to the Natives' fight for survival. They powered the cavalry that carried the legendary chief Sitting Bull to victory in the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn. The success was fleeting. After the assault, Sitting Bull left for Canada. He was offered a pardon in exchange for settling on a reservation, and when he agreed and returned, the government went on to confiscate most of the tribe's horses as a means of control. He was killed in a police shoot-out in 1890. >



From left to right:
Cowboy conservationist
Frank Kuntz; the
Nokota is known for its
intelligence and stamina



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Beyond separating the horses from the Lakota people, there was little interest in the breed, which most ranchers considered scruffy and small, and the Nokota once again ended up roaming wild in the North Dakota badlands. They remained in this desolate environment until the Great Depression, when the government decided the survival of native livestock such as elk and buffalo should be prioritized, and targeted the “non-native” competition for eradication. Only the hardiest horses survived, finding their way onto terrain that in the late 1940s became part of the new Theodore Roosevelt National Park, where Leo Kuntz would encounter the herd some 30 years later.

The Kuntz brothers didn't know any of this history when they first encountered the horses. In the '70s they were competition cowboys, simply looking for ways to improve their own herd. “Leo had spent quite some time observing the feral horses in Theodore Roosevelt Park and thought we might be able to breed them for better hoof and bone,” Frank recalls. It was far from love at first sight. “They were mulish in the hocks, round-boned, square-built and generally roan in color. I thought they looked kind of coarse. It was only when we



Above, from left to right:
A barn on Frank Kuntz's
ranch; brother Leo
wrangles a Nokota;
Frank rides out

started working with them that I changed my mind. These were smart, compassionate animals that were different from other breeds — markedly different. It was then we started doing a little research into what they were and where they had come from.”

By the time the horses came under threat once more in the '80s — park administrators were vying to introduce new bloodlines in a bid to improve their sales value — the brothers were convinced this was a fight worth taking on. Together with Castle McLaughlin, now a Harvard curator but at that time a horse-lover with a summer job at the park, they began buying the native stallions and dominant mares the park had intended to kill off.

The trio vowed to do everything in their power to save the breed. For the brothers, this ultimately meant buying up as many horses as they were able to. McLaughlin, for her part, spent three years researching their heritage. She was eventually able to prove that the horses were native to North Dakota and were directly connected to the animals ridden by

the Sioux, including those who fought in the Battle of Little Bighorn. “As we saw it, that meant this was their land and they deserved to stay here.”

In 1991, buoyed up by their knowledge of the breed's pedigree, the Kuntz brothers tried to register the Nokota name as a trademark, hoping official recognition would provide more leverage in the battle to preserve them. “We didn't get it passed that year,” Kuntz says ruefully. “The horses on the house floor were called mongrels, mutts and jackasses and Leo and I were called hoodwinkers and scam artists.” Undeterred, they tried again a few years later and this time succeeded. The Nokota went on to become the honorary State Equine of North Dakota, just as Idaho had adopted the Appaloosa and North Carolina the Spanish Mustang. In 1999, the not-for-profit Nokota Horse Conservancy was founded in Linton.

There are now around 1,000 Nokotas in existence — not as many as the brothers would like, but 800 more than there were when they first became involved in the fight to save them. The conservancy owns 91 while Frank and Leo each have 180 that they care for on their own ranches. Others have gone to France, Belgium and Sweden, and the conservancy is also working to re-establish the horses >



Above, from left to right: Frank Kuntz's nephew Brandon Deil helps work the horses; Frank and wife Shelly have bonded over their love of Nokotas

with local Native American communities, many of whom had also been unaware of their significance. "We're continuing to promote the breed as best we can," says Kuntz. "But we're still desperately looking for money for land to build a sanctuary for the core herd, mainly to make sure we never change it. When you consider how these horses were chased and how people tried to get rid of them, it was only the strongest that survived. We don't want to mess with that."

Their dedication has cost the brothers relationships, their health and most of their money. Both suffer from cancer as a result of exposure

to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and for years have chosen to spend their disability checks on their horses. Frank even turned down treatment for his illness initially, because "if they had cured it I would have received less money." His commitment to his work also cost him his first marriage, although he later went on to meet his second wife, Shelly Hauge, a woman he describes as his "church." The couple met when the Kuntz family ran a buggy stand in Medora, a small town at the gateway to Theodore Roosevelt National Park, and, says Hauge, "I fell hard." They recently celebrated their 24th wedding anniversary. >



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While the past couple of decades have been challenging at times, Shelly insists that it would be impossible to imagine their life without the Nokotas. “One of the things that first drew me to Frank was seeing him talk about the horses. His eyes sparkled. He was incredibly animated,” she says. “There was so much passion there and it turned out that rolled over to the rest of his life, too.”

If the Kuntzes’ journey has meant certain sacrifices, it isn’t a word either of them would use. “You make a choice and you deal with it,” says Frank. “We had no idea where this was going to end up. If we’d realized, we probably

wouldn’t have gone much further. But we didn’t do it alone. Our parents helped us with land and resources, my wife spent many hours — still does — building the conservancy, and then there are all the people we’ve met who have lent their time to the campaign.

“We’ve come up against resistance from a lot of directions, but these horses are unique and we have to make sure they have a future. They can’t speak for themselves and through no fault of their own they ended up in a situation where someone had to speak up for them. It turned out that job fell to Leo and me.” **CL**

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