

A photograph of two horses in a field of yellow wildflowers. One horse is dark brown, and the other is white with brown patches. They are both looking towards the left. The text 'THE ART IN HORSES' is overlaid at the top in a serif font.

THE ART IN HORSES

THE WIND HORSE'S *Prayer*

Story and photos by Sandra Wallin

Return to Freedom... Don't you just feel your heart skip a beat when you read those words? Mine sure did, and does, for I know within the loving and protective embrace of America's Wild Horse Sanctuary awaits the stuff that dreams are made of... MUSTANGS! So when I read about Tony Stromberg's photography workshop there in June of 2008, I knew I had to go.

Interestingly enough, though I knew the story of Spirit the Kiger Mustang, and had seen pictures of Freedom, a poster horse for equine power and beauty, I was unexpectedly drawn to a breed of horse I had never heard of. The Choctaw horses, also known as the *Trail of Tears* ponies.

My husband would tell you there was nothing unexpected about it. He would tell you that once I discovered there was a connection between actor and renaissance man Viggo Mortensen and the Choctaw ponies, there was no reining me in. I will admit to some kernel of truth in his words but what really caught my heart were stories of the relocation of America's native peoples along what came to be called the Trail of Tears, and a touching Choctaw Legend I read online.

... *At the time when day and night were still deciding who comes first, there lived a Horse that will never be seen again. The Horse was not*

one that would become as the dying buffalo, for this Horse had no enemies.

The reason that this Horse would not be seen again was because of love...

Because of love??? How could a horse disappear because of love?

I read on to learn that this Horse, who was called Wind Horse, was the kindest and gentlest of all ponies. So kind in fact that he rescued a young native boy who had been caught in a trap. The Boy, who had no name, could not believe that this beautiful Horse would come to him as a friend. All his life he had lived alone, for he had a bad leg and no one wanted him. As he rode the wind on the back of the Horse, he could feel the good feelings that Wind Horse felt. He felt whole. Like he had a family.

Wind Horse knew that the Boy's wound could not be healed. He knew he had to take the Boy to the Native Hunting Ground, where all were made whole and there was no fear or need.

As they journeyed, Wind Horse felt the feelings of the Boy and knew that if he continued to carry the Boy, he himself would no longer be free. As the last of his race, a race of Horses that could feel the feelings of their rider, Wind Horse felt a bond forming with the Boy. As he listened to the Boy making wishes to be loved and cared for, Wind Horse began to feel such love for the Boy.

...“Yes,” Wind Horse thought, “This is my last ride for I have found one who needs the feelings I can give and who in return, can give me the feelings that I need.”

Wind Horse turned and nuzzled the Boy's leg. He began to slow, for the end of their journey was near. The Boy looked up and saw the home of those who had gone before. He realized that this was his last journey. He began to feel fear. But as the Horse stopped to let the Boy down, the Boy realized that he had two good legs and that all his wounds, hunger, need, and hurt were gone. The Horse made no move to leave and the Boy knew that the Horse had also made his last journey.

Wind Horse would miss his travels and the friends he had made and helped along the way. He prayed to the Great Spirit to send a reminder to the Indian People of the friendship they had shared. And with Wind Horse's prayer, Horses were given to the Indian People as friends...

History has seen horses offer themselves to humanity over and again. At Return to Freedom, humanity is giving back. As I finished packing for my trip, I couldn't help but wonder at the parallels between what happened to America's indigenous peoples and what is happening now to its wild horses. Being relocated from their home lands, the wild horses are traveling their own trail of tears. What a blessing for us all that programs like Return to Freedom exist.

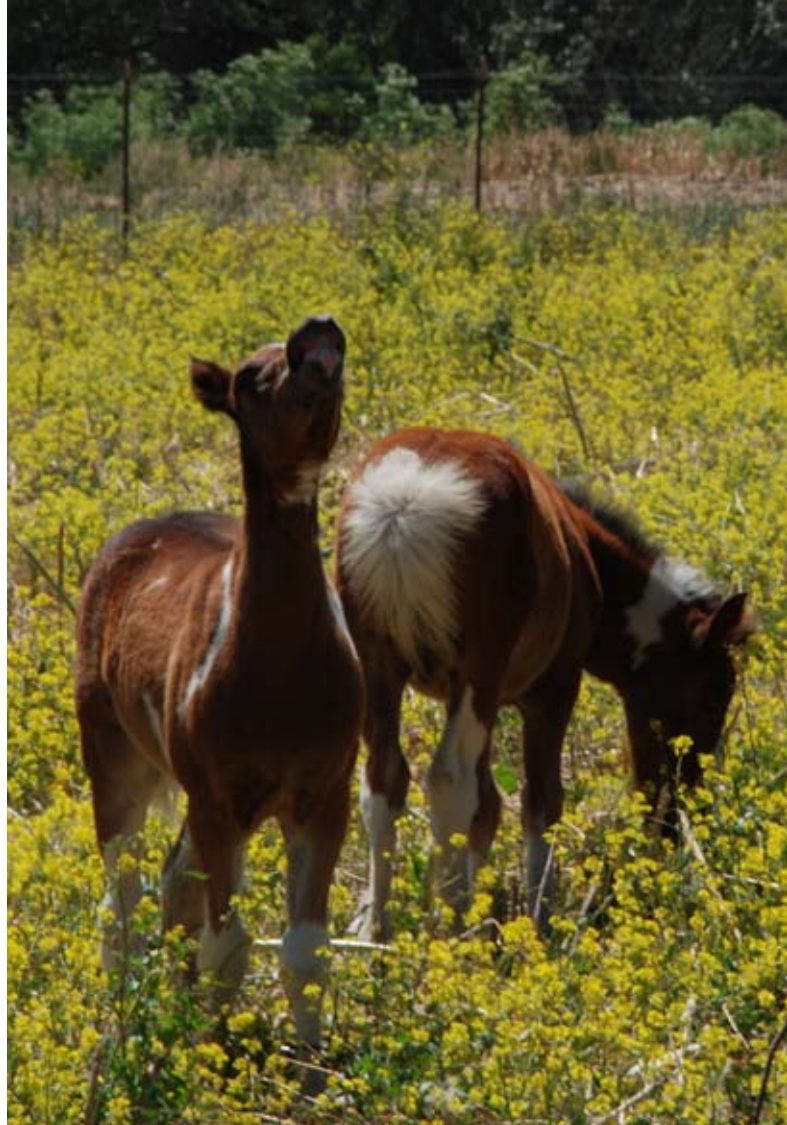
My first in-person encounter with the Choctaw horses came on the last day of photography class. I had the afternoon much to myself as most of my group had hiked up into the hills to photograph horses as the light changed from day into night. Unable to keep up with them due to a riding accident a few weeks earlier, I hobbled down the road with my cane and my camera. There were Choctaw foals to see and I was on a mission.

When I arrived at their field, I joined a few others who had decided to stay behind. It seemed I was not the only one who was drawn to the Choctaws. I found a spot that was close but not too close, and watched as the herd moved about in the afternoon sun. I softened my vision and tried to see the interconnections between the horses. I lost all sense of time and before I knew it, I felt like I belonged, like I was part of the herd.

The stallion approached ever so slowly, grazing his way to within ten feet of me. It felt like he was scanning me and though I watched him softly from the corner of my eye, I knew where he was more through feel than sight. My leg and back began to distract me with pain so once the stallion passed by, I sat on the ground to give my broken body a break. And then it happened... the babies began to approach. Before I knew it, there were three Choctaw foals sleeping soundly around me. Their mothers were close, but not too close... I felt like I'd been given the greatest gift of all – their trust.

The foals stretched and dreamed in the grass around me. I wondered what they were dreaming about. Did they know I had dreamed of them? A soft wind blew across the meadow, bending the long grasses and

The Wind Horse's Prayer continued on page 34 ►





carrying the whisper of a prayer. "And with Wind Horse's prayer, the Horse was given to the Indian People as friends." There, in a circle of horses I felt like more than a friend. I felt like the Boy in the legend. Whole. Loved. And with family.


Author's note: A number of indigenous cultures believe that we dream our world into being. If this is the case, please join me and the Choctaw horses as we dream of overflowing support for programs like Return to Freedom, dedicated to preserving the freedom, diversity and habitat of America's wild horses through sanctuary, education and conservation, while enriching the human spirit through direct experience with the natural world.

HOW HORSES HELP US BECOME OUR OWN MASTERPIECE

Sandra Wallin is a registered clinical counselor, an educator, author and presenter, who divides her professional time between a private practice, working in a local school district and teaching Equine Guided Development and PSYCH-K. As an expressive arts therapist, Sandra often combines the arts with equine guided activities.



SANDRA'S THOUGHTS ON THIS SERIES: Horses have inspired artists throughout the ages and in turn, those of us who look upon their art are captivated by the beauty and majesty of the horse. The cave drawings in Lascaux, Leonardo's sculptures, and the finger paintings that adorn kindergarten classrooms, created by little girls who dream of being a horse. What I want to share however, is a new way of looking at horses, through stories that pay homage to the master artist in each horse. Instead of the painted, they are now the painters, transforming the at times tattered canvas of the human spirit into glowing masterpieces, alive with the colours of love, compassion and joy. Learn more at www.chironsway.com



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