

**NEW MEXICO
FARM & RANCH
HERITAGE
MUSEUM**

CONSULTANT: Carlos LoPopolo

DATE OF BIRTH: Not given GENDER: Male

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: November 25, 2006

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: LoPopolo home in Los Lunas, New Mexico

INTERVIEWER: Ramona Caplan

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: January 30, 2007

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: LoPopolo's life work tracing and preserving Spanish heritage horses. Through the New Mexico Horse Project, LoPopolo has done extensive research and DNA testing in an attempt to prove that the horses he has on his preserves are the direct descendants of the horses of the Spanish Conquistadors.

DATE RANGE: 1948-2006

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with background information on LoPopolo's birth and childhood. He always wanted to be a cowboy and work with horses. He recalls his school days, and the troubles he had as a youth, which eventually led up to his running away from home at the age of fifteen.

His love for horses led him to ranch work and the rodeo. After leaving home, he traveled to New York and Chicago and finally worked his way west to Texas. LoPopolo came to New Mexico in 1968 from California, where he had married his wife, Kay—a native New Mexican. He became the first certified aquarium builder in New Mexico. In addition to ranch work, rodeo, and aquarium building, he has worked as a cartographer.

His involvement with heritage horses began fifteen years later when his second wife, Cindy, wanted to get an Arabian horse. They began breeding them and purchased fifty acres to run them on, but the Arabian horse market bottomed out shortly thereafter.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

After the Arabian market dropped out, his first Arabian horse broke a leg and had to be put down. Cindy wanted nothing to do with horses after that for a period of seven or eight years, but LoPopolo continued. He began researching New Mexico history, which led to an interest in the history of Spanish horses. He wrote several genealogies with a focus on historical settlements and began documenting and dispelling incorrect information of the past using primary sources. His claims were not taken seriously because he was not a credited historian. LoPopolo disputes the location of the Camino Real and provides a lengthy explanation for his opinion.

In 1999 LoPopolo was first contacted about doing a newspaper article about the old Spanish horses. At first he “blew him off because everyone knew these horses didn't exist anymore,” but he later agreed to write the story. He begins talking about how he researched horses in the area. It started with DNA testing of horses on the Foch Romero land (now McKinley Ranch). DNA specialist Dr. Gus Cothran (University of Kentucky geneticist) was brought in to test the horses. LoPopolo reveals that, of the forty-one horses tested, only two were a potential close match to the Spanish horses brought into New Mexico by the Conquistadors. Testing was also done on horses on the Laguna [Pueblo] reservation.

LoPopolo remarks that it was during this time that he was first introduced to people who did not keep their word. He talks about a bad experience with McKinley Ranch reneging on their agreement to allow LoPopolo to take any horses that were found to have ties with the Spanish heritage horses and a similar incident at the Laguna roundup. LoPopolo felt it was best not to tell anyone about the results of the DNA testing. National Geographic contacted LoPopolo, though, about doing a story on the Laguna reservation roundup. He explains that the purpose of the Laguna roundup had been to transfer horses with the DNA link to Spanish heritage horses onto preserves LoPopolo had set up.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

LoPopolo continues to explain the problems from the Laguna roundup. He did not get any of the horses after the DNA testing, and eventually the Indians slaughtered all the horses.

Six months after the first Laguna roundup, CNN inquired about doing a story about it. The Laguna reservation agreed to do another roundup. LoPopolo explains that he had an agreement to pen the horses and he would purchase hay for feed for three weeks until CNN arrived. The residents used the hay for their own horses and did not tend to the wild horses. By the time CNN and LoPopolo saw the horses, they had lost an average of two hundred pounds and were emaciated. Laguna claimed the horses got into locoweed. CNN decided instead to do a story on the treatment of horses by Laguna reservation. LoPopolo says that six horses were eventually saved, but all the wild horses on Laguna reservation were sent to slaughter. LoPopolo feels this was done because they wanted to erase the problem—the wild horses were a nuisance and the residents wanted the land for grazing their own stock.

When asked if he has had any luck with institutional support, LoPopolo said no. He talks about three preserves that he owns or operates—in Sandia, Socorro, and Willard—and their support. He estimates that he has spent \$600,000 of his own money in the last seven years. The objective of the preserves is to allow the horses to run wild and free “so that hundreds of years from now our ancestors can see the animals that made this nation and changed the face of the world.

LoPopolo addresses how he knows the horses on his preserves are Spanish heritage horses. He says they probably are, but no one trait has been isolated that determines they really are descendants, only certain characteristics or markers that no one has identified before.

It was suggested that horse bones from archaeological sites be examined for matching DNA. Bones from several centuries have been examined and tested; the DNA results should be announced in the next two years. LoPopolo hopes this will provide firm scientific proof of the horses’ lineage. While he is aware that there are some in the scientific community that believe that LoPopolo is on the wrong track, that he does not know what he is doing, that he is running a con game, and that he is “full of crap”, he believes that he will have the proof to his claims and the proof will speak for itself.

LoPopolo talks more about the financial support for the project. He does not receive grants, relying only on individuals. Although grant funding would help the project, LoPopolo believes that the majority of the grant funding would be for personal recognition and control of the project. He is very firm when he says, “The project belongs to the New Mexico Horse Project.”

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

The subject of DNA testing is revisited. He says that even if the findings show that the horses are not descendants of Spanish horses, they are still unique in that there are anomalies that have never been seen before. He says there is no horse today that can be proved to be Spanish without examining bones, and no one else to date has done that.

LoPopolo currently has fifteen horses on the leased land preserve in the Sandias. The government says he can have thirty-six, but LoPopolo feels that the land cannot support more than fifteen because of overgrazing issues. The Socorro preserve of 2,000 acres owned by LoPopolo supports eight horses, while the Willard preserve, also owned by LoPopolo, runs five horses on its 320 acres. He goes on to explain that each preserve is a horse sanctuary, but they benefit persons with specific diseases or ailments. When LoPopolo dies everything that he owns will go to the New Mexican Horse Foundation.

He says that he does not deal with livestock organizations because they have reacted negatively to him. Most organizations believe wild horses should be taken off the land because they cannot be traced back to the Spanish horse. State Senator Steve Komadina has been the only public backer that LoPopolo has received.

Other breeders have called LoPopolo a charlatan. He believes they say this because some of them breed horses they claim to be descended from original Spanish horses. If LoPopolo's claims were true, then others would be liars and could face lawsuits based on their false claims. He says the DNA findings will be his "way of eventually shutting his critics up." He also states that since the news of the DNA testing went public, he has not heard any more derogatory comments or read nasty comments on the Internet. Canada has shown interest in his work and has contacted him for advice on setting up wild horse preserves there.

LoPopolo discusses at length the terms "wild horses" and "wild mustangs." He says that, in the literal sense, a mustang is "a horse without an owner." He does not call his horses mustangs because they have an owner. He briefly talks about horses tested on Bureau of Land Management lands, which were found to have some Spanish heritage in them. He points out that Arabians, Przewalski and a few other breeds commonly referred to as having Spanish bloodlines are not Spanish heritage horses at all.

He knows of only five preserves in the nation that keep wild horses. The majority of wild horses in the New World have at least some Spanish blood because Spanish colonists turned any horse they did not want to keep loose in the wild.

[After Tape Two ran out, the interviewer decided they had pretty much covered everything and elected not to start a third tape just to "finish the interview properly." The transcript includes some notes on what was said after the tape ended.]