

MUSTANG MAN

Dayton Hyde has more horsepower at 86 than most cowboys half his age

By Judy Love

Photos: James Van Nuys



There were few boys Dayton Hyde's age in the late 1930s in his hometown in northern Michigan, and of those he knew not many wanted to be pals. While other youths talked incessantly of cars, sports and other "manly" pursuits, Dayton expounded on the behavior of cedar waxwings and Blackburnian warblers. He shared the love of all things wild with his father, who taught him to identify the birds of the north woods by their calls, but many of Dayton's peers thought him an oddball. The boy found solace in the forest. "My friends were in the woods, the ground squirrels, the grouse, all sorts of animals," Dayton says, adding, "I dreamed of becoming a naturalist."

It has been his fate through the years that some people have seen as strange or even radical his respect for all creatures, including "varmint" like the coyote. Others have hailed him as an outstanding environmentalist and champion of wildlife. He has received numerous honors for his conservation work, including the Oregon Governor's Conservationist of the Year, National Cattlemen's Association Region 7 Environmentalist of the Year, Eddie Bauer First Hero of the Earth and Black Hills, Badlands and Lakes Association Special Achievement awards. For the past 23 years, his nonprofit organization, the Institute of Range and the American Mustang, has operated the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary in Hot Springs. Now 86, Dayton oversees operation of the 13,000-acre sanctuary, which also is home to a variety of other critters.

As a child, Dayton had few opportunities to learn about horses. He recalls a day when he watched trot by a young woman astride a ponderous farm horse and wished that he, too, could ride. When he turned 13, his family received a letter from his Uncle Dayton Williams, his mother's brother, who owned several large cattle ranches in Oregon. His uncle wrote that his hands had captured some 30 wild horses on his home ranch, Yamsi, and were starting to break them. "I just had to get out there and help," Dayton relates. He hopped a freight train heading west. Uncle Dayton, who as a youth also ran away from home and lived for a while with a family of Cree Indians in Canada, delegated to several of his seasoned cowboys the task of turning the young dude into a horse wrangler. Unable to resist a good prank, the men complied by assigning the ranch's most notorious buckers to the boss's nephew as mounts. Dayton learned to ride, he quips, "by falling off. When I fell off enough, the cowboys took me under their wing. I had a lot of try in me, and they liked that."

During World War II, Dayton served in the Army and took part in some major battles on the European front, including the Battle of the Bulge and the Rhineland campaign. When the war ended, he remained abroad, organizing rodeos and bullfights in southern France to entertain the troops. He rode saddled broncs, dodged bulls as a rodeo clown and dazzled the crowds with his graceful capework as a torero in Portuguese-style bullfights. Back in the states, Dayton continued rodeoing. He met Louis Burton Lindley Jr., also a bronc rider and clown, who became his mentor. Lindley, better known by his stage name "Slim Pickens," went on to become an actor, usually portraying cowboys in comic roles. He starred in numerous films, including *Blazing Saddles* and *Dr. Strangelove*, and television shows. The duo remained friends until Pickens's death in 1983.

Although Dayton graduated from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in English, he considers Yamsi his true alma mater. Located at the headwaters of the Williamson River about 60 miles east of Crater Lake, the 6,000-acre spread seemed the ideal place for Dayton and his wife, Gerdi, to start their own cattle business and raise their children. When his uncle retired, the former broncobuster bought the ranch from him.

Consisting of dense pine forests and marshes as well as grasslands, Yamsi rekindled Dayton's suppressed longing to become another Audubon. He resolved to set aside one-quarter of his ranch for wildlife. He improved his wetlands, creating habitat for sandhill cranes, by developing springs and diverting seeps and snow melt to form pools, and he planted vegetation to provide food and cover for various species. "Yamsi gave me the opportunity to see nature at work on a piece of land," Dayton says. "I learned to encourage nature rather than fight it, to team up with wildlife and get it working for me. The cranes ate the grasshoppers. The wetlands acted as a big radiator which moderated the temperature so that the grass grew better, and we ended up with an increase in beef tonnage. I welcomed coyotes on my land, and they got rid of the ground squirrels, which previously had been epidemic."

Dayton believes that if ranchers reserve grassy areas where coyotes can hunt voles and meadow mice, they will not prey on domestic animals. In 50 years as a livestock producer he never lost a calf or a lamb to a coyote.



Convinced that private landowners can be more effective than government agencies in preserving the nation's wildlife, Dayton is a zealous spokesman for grassroots environmentalism. He has penned nearly 20 books, most on his conservation work and experiences with wild animals. In 1979 he founded Operation Stronghold, a nonprofit corporation that helped ranchers and farmers create wildlife habitat on their lands.

"All wildlife is welcome here," Dayton tells me as he takes me on a tour of the sanctuary. "We've got mountain lions, bighorn sheep, elk." He stops his pickup truck on the dirt road and gestures toward the distant cliffs. "A golden eagle nests up there every year, and on that one, a peregrine falcon."

Although cougars have taken a few foals over the years, the pragmatic naturalist does not see their presence on the sanctuary as a problem. He maintains that predators keep prey populations vigorous by removing the sick and the weak. "These mustang mares take a lot better care of their babies when there are mountain lions around," he contends, adding, "I've seen a horse fight off a mountain lion and almost kill that lion." He confides that he once kept a mountain lion in his cabin. Surprised, I ask, "You had a pet cougar?" As if he remembered that his fondness for the coyote is legendary, and suspected that such an admission might boot him up to an even higher level of weirdness in the minds of some of his fellow ranchers, Dayton quickly clarifies that the big cat was not a pet. "She was a friend," he explains. "I went hunting with her. We would go to opposite ends of a brush pile, and I would run a rabbit out to her."

Dayton wrote a book, *Don Coyote*, about one such wild canid at Yamsi that he befriended by sharing his

lunches with him. The animal regularly waited for the rancher's visits, and when Dayton "howled," the coyote often answered with his own gleeful yodeling. When a hunter entered the ranch uninvited, shot Don Coyote and cut off his tail for a trophy, Dayton furiously drove off the trespasser and grieved for his wild friend. But, the animal proved more resilient than Dayton had imagined. Although tailless and missing a leg, he survived.

For a while, Dayton had a Don Coyote lookalike at the sanctuary. Someone brought him a bitch in need of help. She had only three legs, no tail, no ears and six pups. "I turned her loose in the canyon, and she stayed around for two years." The prairie "wolf" constantly picked fights with other coyotes and domestic dogs, Dayton remembers. "Once she came in horribly ripped up, so I took her to a vet in Edgemont who sewed up her wounds. She got better but not smarter," he jests. "She tackled the next big dog she ran into."

At another overlook, Dayton points out faint trails on the mountainsides where the mustangs habitually come down to drink from the Cheyenne River. "What is it about wild horses that so appeals to you? I ask. He responds, "They are free. They are tough. They are survivors."

The sanctuary has about 500 horses. There is a small band of pure Spanish mustangs, descendants of the steeds brought to this continent by Columbus and other early explorers. The rest are of no particular strain. "They come from Oregon, Wyoming, Nevada and Utah, whatever the Bureau of Land Management (which oversees the nation's wild horse program) captures," Dayton explains. "Some are beautiful and some kind of homely, but we like them all."

Opposite page:

Left: A young Dayton clowns around
(Photo by William D. Scunack)

Right: Dayton with Governor George
Mickelson and, left to right, Mel
Lambert, Montie Montana, and Betty
Zane Breslau. (Photo by Paul Horsted)



Dayton, rides the Mustang
“Lark,” while moving horses.
(Photo by John Gunderson)

We park alongside the river to enjoy the scenery, and suddenly several horses come over the hill and head toward the water. “Isn’t she a beauty?” he says of the lead horse, a sorrel mare. He indicates a bay mare. “That one is about 35 years old. Don’t they look wonderful after coming through winter?”

The sanctuary horses fend for themselves, although the staff provides hay in winter and veterinary care for sick or injured animals. For a while, foals were sold, but a few years ago the stallions were removed from the herds to prevent breeding. The horse market is dead because of the ailing economy, Dayton explains.

The cattleman first saw a need to protect wild horses in 1970 when it became evident that the federal Wild Horse and Burro Protection Act would become law. He claims that a lot of mustangs were destroyed both by government agencies who didn’t want the responsibility of managing them and by ranchers who feared they would lose grazing land to the equines. One day, a government agent suggested to Dayton that he shoot a small herd of mustangs near his ranch. “My way of handling it,” he says, “was to open my gate, put out some hay, and when the horses came in, I slipped down and closed the gate. The horses were on my land, and the government couldn’t do anything about it.”

In 1986, while buying cattle in northern Nevada, Dayton saw some 2,000 doomed mustangs crowded into a BLM feedlot. “I got mad,” Dayton recalls. “I called home and told my family to take care of the ranch because I had something to do. I set out to find

a place where wild horses could run free on their own land.” Dayton would never return to live at his beloved Yamsi, and today his children, Dayton, Ginny, Marsha, John and Taylor, continue to operate the ranch.

Asked why he chose the Black Hills for the sanctuary, Dayton replies, “When former Gov. George Mickelson heard about my plans, he invited me to come here. He took me up in a helicopter to show me the property.” The rancher realized that the rugged peaks, forests, prairies and rivers would provide shelter, forage and water for horses along with spectacular views for visitors. Archaeological sites, where Native Americans once farmed and mined flint, and petroglyphs would be additional attractions. Dayton stops the truck on top of a ridge. “In ancient times, there was an Indian village below on the river. The Cheyenne runs in four directions at this spot, and the Native Americans considered the place sacred,” he says.

A bout with pneumonia recently forced Dayton to slow down a bit. Dan Kursave, manager, and Susan Watt, whom Dayton labels the “brains behind this outfit,” run the sanctuary. There also is a board of directors, which recently added three South Dakota members.

Dayton by no means is retired. “I still look forward to new challenges, new projects,” he says. He just has finished another book, *Alone in the Forest*, a collection of his poems. “They are reflections from my own life. There is a lot about nature,” he says. Asked what he hopes to accomplish through his writings Dayton responds, “I want to educate, to change people’s views. I don’t want

to preach, but I can write humorous stories that allow ideas to come in through the back door.”

He offers an example of a view he believes needs changing. “It infuriates me when I go to a church, and the preacher talks about man’s ‘dominion’ over nature. I say rather that we have a responsibility to it. That tree, those horses, this river. We owe them. They are a part of our lives, part of the beauty of the land.”

Dayton admits that he has had little success in persuading landowners here to try his “team up with nature” techniques. “I do the best job I can on my land and hope that someone notices,” he says reflectively.

I ask how the future looks for mustangs. “There are no easy answers,” he says, “but we think that this (sanctuary) is one. I think we will have to settle for horses that are not quite so wild. There is not enough suitable land to support huge herds like those that once roamed the range. What’s needed is more caring people willing to maintain small groups on their own land.”

Surprisingly, Dayton maintains that ending horse slaughter was a mistake. He opines that humane organizations that oppose slaughter are unrealistic when it comes to dealing with the problem of unwanted horses. “They come out west on vacation and see the vast areas of federal land, and they think, ‘Why can’t we put more wild horses out here?’ They don’t take into account that there may be no water or that there may be four feet of snow on the ground in winter. One spring on my ranch in Oregon, I rode out and found 40 mustangs that had gotten trapped in the snow and starved to death. They had eaten each other’s manes and tails and branches off the trees before they all died in one big pile. I learned a lot from that,” he remarks grimly.



Dayton and Susan enjoy the scenery at the Wild Horse Sanctuary.

As we head back toward the visitor’s center, Dayton seems more upbeat. “Here, at least, we can give a few mustangs a good life. You won’t see a sad-eyed horse in the bunch. They won’t ever have to leave this place until they die and become part of the eagles and the coyotes.”

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100-Watt Susan

By John Christopher Fine

Dayton Hyde may be the brains behind the Wild Horse Sanctuary he founded back in 1987, but he is quick to clarify just exactly who it is that pumps energy into the place on a daily basis.

“This place couldn’t survive without her,” Dayton Hyde says of Susan Watt, his friend, companion and dynamo that keeps the Sanctuary going.

Born in Childersburg, Alabama, Susan grew up Southern Baptist. She attended the University of Alabama and earned a degree in home economics and English. Her southern drawl takes some getting used to. When something has to go out fast, for example, Susan tells the volunteers to send it “paaarrty mail.”

“P-R-I-O-R-I-T-Y mail,” Susan laughs. “A lot of people don’t understand my southern accent.”

Susan’s path from the South to the Southern Hills has been a fascinating one. “For the first few years after graduation I taught mentally challenged children. I got married to my high school sweetheart in 1968, when we were both in college. He went into the Air Force. We adopted Wendy, our first daughter, then adopted a brother and sister for her,” Susan reminisces.

Like a lot of young girls, Susan dreamed of horses as a child—but interestingly, didn’t get her first horse until she was 28. “We moved to Texas. My husband had a motorcycle. He agreed to sell it so I could get a horse. He got \$350 for the bike, and I bought two horses,” Susan says. “When the kids were old enough we got them horses and went on family rides”

The family moved back to Alabama in 1986. Tragedy struck in 1990, when her daughter died. When her husband died in 1994 after a protracted illness, Susan, his caregiver, was exhausted and desperate for a new direction to her life. “I went on a trip to Africa. I looked out over the Serengeti and knew I had to work at a wildlife sanctuary. The thought came to my mind of Dayton Hyde. I remembered seeing him on a television news program,” Susan reflects.

While connecting with Dayton seemed like a good idea, actually getting in touch with him was something else entirely. “I got back to the states, did a little

research, went to the grocery store and bought a horse magazine. There was a picture of a mustang from the BLM. I didn’t know what BLM was. I looked it up in an encyclopedia and found out it was the Bureau of Land Management. I called the BLM and they told me Dayton Hyde is in South Dakota,” she said. She started calling, but couldn’t get an answer. She later discovered that Dayton doesn’t like telephones and his work takes him outside most of the time from dawn to dusk. “It took me a week to get him on the phone. He suggested I come out. He told me to read some of his books before I came. I went to the library and checked out *Yamsi* and *Don Coyote*. That was Wednesday. Friday I was on an airplane,” Susan smiles, warmth and affection in her brown eyes.

Her first venture into the Black Hills was one she’ll never forget. “It was the first weekend of December 1995 when I entered this world I was to become a part of. There were several inches of snow on the ground. I stayed the weekend. I went back to Alabama, packed my things and drove to South Dakota with my dog and my bird,” Susan recalls.

During her years as full time volunteer project development director at the Sanctuary, Susan has seen some very moving events. There are countless poignant and dramatic stories, and Susan loves to tell them. One is about a mother’s love that is as real for horses as it is for humans. “We assumed Mrs. B was dead. She was an older mare. One day she came across Hell’s Canyon, crossed the Cheyenne River and stood at the gate until Dayton let her in. She had her two babies with her, a yearling and a weanling. Two days later she lay down and died,” Susan says reverently. “She led her babies off the open range back to where she knew they would be cared for.”

There are no jobs Susan doesn’t do on the ranch. She mails out sponsorship kits, takes people out on adventure tours to special areas of the 11,000-acre Sanctuary—even drops 1,800 pound round bales of hay to the horses from the tractor. Most of all, Susan is determined to do all that she can for the 500 wild mustangs in the Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary. “This is one of the last great wilderness prairies where wild horses live out their lives in peace and run free,” she says. “What we do here makes a huge difference.”

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