



CURLY HORSE COUNTRY

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History of The Curly Horse

The origin of the Curly Horse is a mystery and is debated to present day. It was once believed that these curly coated horses were ancestors of the Russian Bashkir of Bashkortostan, however in recent years this was found to be untrue and unfounded. Research done by Shan Thomas for the CS Fund and resulting in the report, Myth and Mystery: The Curly Horse in America, indicates that the Russian breed most often found with the curly coat is the Lokai breed, found in the Tajikistan region. This information came many years too late and the name "American Bashkir Curly" had stuck. The [American Bashkir Curly Horse Registry \(ABCR\)](#) members voted to keep it to spare anymore confusion. With the birth of the [International Curly Horse Organization \(ICHO\)](#), the "Bashkir" title was dropped and the members chose to simply go with North American Curly Horse, sighting the fact that they truly are an American Breed. So in describing the Curly horse you will see many variations of the title, such as American Bashkir Curly, American Curly horse, North American Curly horse or just Curly Horse.

Theories

The name isn't the only mystery surrounding this breed. Various theories have been proposed to explain the presence of the Curly horse in North America. Some have suggested that they came across the Bering Strait land bridge during the last ice age, but no fossil evidence has been found to support that. Others suggest that curly coated horses were imported while the Russians occupied parts of the West Coast of North America. However, Thomas' research shows there was no mention of the importation of horses into North America by Russian settlers in their ship logs. Horses were used on a limited basis during the Russian experimentation with farming during the late 1700s and early 1800s in present day Alaska. Stock breeding was not very successful with most settlements only able to keep a small number of cattle, sheep, pigs and perhaps chickens. In 1817 there were only sixteen horses in Russian America and they were more than likely the hardy Yakut and not the Bashkir or Lokai breeds. It is very unlikely that even this breed of horse could have made the treacherous journey from Alaska to Nevada.

Another theory is that a man by the name of Tom Dixon imported curly horses from northern India to Nevada around 1880. Although this theory cannot be fully proved or disproved the Curly horse was already present in America by that time. Evidence shows that Sioux Indians had Curly horses as early as 1801-02 and in his 1848 autobiography circus master, P. T. Barnum, writes of obtaining and exhibiting a curly horse.

As early as the late 1700s, sightings of curly horses were reported in South America. It seems possible, but cannot be concluded, that the Spanish conquistadors may have brought curly horses, or the curly gene, to South America, as there are several European breeds with curly hair. Another suggestion is that Norse or Celtic explorers brought curly horses to North America prior to 1492 but this theory has yet to be fully investigated. With all of these possibilities as to the origin of this unique breed no definitive answers have yet to be agreed upon.

In separate research, the CS Fund has done blood typing of 200 curly horse in the Serology Lab at UC-Davis. Although one can not definitively identify a horse's breed by its blood type characteristics there are characteristics common to an individual breed. This testing was seen as a method to determine if the Bashkir Curly did in fact display the blood characteristics of a distinct breed. The findings, however, were that the modern curly horse is not a genetically distinct breed, but has been crossed with many other breeds, particularly Quarter Horses and Morgans. The rare and unusual variants that did emerge from this testing are found only in feral horses or those bred based on feral herds. No single blood marker was found to be common in all curly horses.

The Facts of U.S. History & the Curly Horse Today



1906 photo of US Soldier on a Curly horse. (This old photo was sold on eBay, purchased by Michelle Ives)

I think we need to start with the story of the Damele Family in writing historical facts about the American Curly Horse. I believe the Dameles were the most instrumental family in bringing about the breed as we know it. While searching online, I found the history best written by a man by the name of Mike Laughlin in the Western Horseman Magazine, April 2004 issue. (This was approved for posting on Curly Horse Country). This history is very well known among Curly owners & Breeders and is a very fascinating one to say the least. Many modern day Curlies can be traced back to many of the original Damele stock.

Actual pics and history of the Damele Ranch and more by clicking the link below



Great Basin Curly Horses, Western Horseman April 2004.

By Mike Laughlin

Eureka, first settled in 1864, is in the heart of central Nevada's wild-horse country and known as the home of the American Curly Horse breed. This remote ranching and mining town also has been named "The Loneliest Town on the Loneliest Road in America," US Highway 50. The surrounding Great Basin countryside is a cold, high-altitude desert dominated by sagebrush flats and surrounded by steep mountains. Only the strongest people and animals survive this harsh environment. However, there's always been a lure of adventure about this remote region. Perhaps that's what brought Giovanni, "John" Damele to Eureka, where he came to appreciate the curly-haired horses.

John Damele arrived in Eureka from Genoa, Italy, in 1879. He worked as a woodcutter for 11 years, providing wood for the charcoal ovens that fueled smelter furnaces for local silver and lead mines. John saved enough money to bring his wife and three children from Italy to join him in Eureka.

In 1898, John and his family made a down payment on the Three Bar Ranch northwest of Eureka near the Roberts Creek Mountains, where the Damele family began raising cattle and horses. While checking cattle, John and his two boys saw horses with curly hair running with the mustang wild-horse herds. The sight of the horses with long curly hair wasn't easily forgotten.

Wild horses in Nevada originated from several sources, primarily animals that were released by or escaped from Spanish explorers, ranchers, miners, the US Cavalry, and American Indians. Around 1931, the Dameles caught a Curly Horse from a mustang herd and took the horse back to the ranch, where they broke the horse to ride, and later sold it. According to Damele family history, this was their first experience with handling and training Curly Horses.

In 1932, during a devastating winter in the Three Bar Ranch country, deep snow and bitter cold hung on for months. When spring came and the ranch horses were gathered from where they'd "wintered out," the only horses the Damele boys could find alive were curly-haired horses. All the straight-haired horses had perished in the hard winter. No one needed to tell the Dameles what they'd witnessed, which was a real turning point in their thinking. True stockmen that they were, they realized that if the Curlies could be broke to ride and turned into cow horses, they certainly could be relied upon to stay alive when other horses perished in the harsh central-Nevada winters.

In the fall of 1942, John's son, Peter L. Damele, his wife and two sons, Peter J. and Benny, bought and moved to the Dry Creek Ranch that's on the Pony Express trail 25 miles southwest of the Three Bar Ranch. A Pony Express horse-changing station had been located near the Dry Creek Ranch headquarters during 1860 and 1861. The family also purchased the Ackerman Ranch, 12 miles north of Dry Creek.

The Dameles registered the 3D brand and placed it on a horse's left thigh and on the left hip on cattle. This 3D brand is still used on horses and cattle on the Dry Creek and Ackerman ranches, which the Dameles still own today.

The winter of 1951 and 1952 was another brutal, cold one with deep snow. When spring came, once again, the only horses left alive were the Curlies. The Dameles decided to start breeding Curly Horses in earnest that spring. Before that, Curlies had just been part of the horse herd. The Dameles caught their first Curly Horse stallion out of a herd of mustangs, named him Copper D, and broke him to ride as a 2-year-old.

Breeding Curlies

The Dameles continued to breed Curly Horses and raise cattle on the Dry Creek and Ackerman Ranches. At one time, hundreds of broodmares ran outside in stud bands. A single stallion could cover about 30 mares outside, so quite a few stallions were needed in the big, open country. Handling big numbers of horses on the open range meant having good hands on horseback. The Damele boys were among the best. Running horses and catching them in different ways occupied much of their time.

The Dameles weren't too concerned with the Curly Horse as a pure breed. When the Dameles first began catching Curlies out of the mustang herds, they were big, coarse-looking horses with unrefined heads, bodies, and legs. The ranches had specific needs for their horses, and certain ideas about what they wanted their horses to look like. The country around the Dry Creek and Ackerman Ranches is steep and rocky on the eastern slope of the Simpson Park Mountain Range. As a result, the Dameles wanted their horses to handle steep mountains, be sure-footed in the rocks, stay sound, survive bad winters, take the "big outside circle: on the flats (when checking cattle), drag calves to the fire, and be gentle. The Dameles wanted to breed a ranch horse that could do it all. They soon found out that the Curly Horse could do all these things and maybe more.

Through the years the Dameles purchased many stallions to use on their outside broodmares. Some of their better-known sires were a registered Morgan stallion, [Ruby Red King](#); and (In 1961 the Curly breed was to get the greatest contribution ever. It was in the form of Nevada Red, an Arabian stallion bred by Susanne Swanson of California. She and the Dameles were very good and long time friends and in that year she stated that if she had another horse-colt born born, she was going to put him in the freezer. Mrs. Damele told her if the foal was a stud-horse instead of a filly, she would fill her freezer full of beef in trade for him. Thus, Nevada Red became a part of the Damele herd and he remained a great influence in it until his death in 1981). The more famous American Curly Horse stallions, as the breed became known, were Peacock D, Grulla D, [Dixie D](#), and Dusty D, and the most famous Damele Curly Horse sire was Copper D. People from several states purchased Damele horses with the 3D brand, and the Curly Horse gene reportedly dominant in their breeding. Many Curly Horses around the world today trace their lineage to Copper D.

A Congressional Change

In 1971 a big change affected the Dameles and other Great Basin ranchers. The US Congress passed the Wild Free-Roaming Horse and Burro Act. Nevada is home to more than half the nation's wild horses, and mustang herds on Nevada rangelands began to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service, which created and monitored herd-management areas. The days of ranchers running mares outside with stallions on Federal lands were drastically reduced. However, recent reports by ranches and BLM employees state that curly-haired horses have been observed running with the mustangs in Eureka County, Nev.

The Curly Horse

The coat of a Curly Horse is the most distinguishing feature that sets it apart from other breeds of horses. In winter, the hair coat has long curls, although most of the long, curly hair often is shed in the summer. Mane and tail hair also is curly.

Another interesting characteristic of this breed: the Curly Horse is reported to be hypoallergenic. People allergic to horses are more tolerant of Curlies.

Curly Horses are intelligent, calm natured, and, when handled correctly, easily trained. The horses share many physical characteristics with primitive horses, including wide-set eyes and strong cannon bones, and Curly Horses have particularly tough hooves, almost perfectly round in shape, which makes them good in rocky country. Some owners compare Curlies to mules because the Curly Horses think things through rather than panic when faced with unexpected situations.

The Birth of the Curly Registries

Establishing The American Bashkir Curly Horse Registry in 1971, the founders set out to save these animals from extinction in the U.S., as it was found that too many of them, through ignorance, were being slaughtered. They then began the process of establishing breeding traits. To accomplish this, owners were asked to list the characteristics unique to the Bashkir Curly Horse. When compiled these brought out several interesting features of the breed.

In the 1990's the [ABCR](#) closed it books to any outcrossing and the [ICHO](#) (International Curly horse Organization) was developed for those wishing to continuing crossing & improving their bloodlines. Later, the [CSI](#) (Curly Sporthorse International) Registry opened it's doors to the development of the Curly Athlete which educates breeders on the benefits of selective breeding and conformational evaluations.

The Family Tradition

The Damele family is still at the Dry Creek and Ackerman Ranches, and they still use Curly horses for working cattle. Tom and Peter Damele raise Curlies and had two "stud bunches" on their ranch last summer.

In October 2003 the International Curly Horse Organization held a convention at the Opera House in Eureka and made a field trip to the Damele Dry Creek Ranch. Curly Horse owners from several states and from Norway, Sweden, and Germany attended the event.

The Damele family is well respected as stockmen, has survived many hard times and carved out a name in Nevada ranching history. The Dameles and the American Curly Horse always will be linked together—as they should be.

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