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AN AWARD-WINNING REMUDA
THE HERITAGE BEHIND NEBRASKA'S
HAYTHORN RANCH CO.

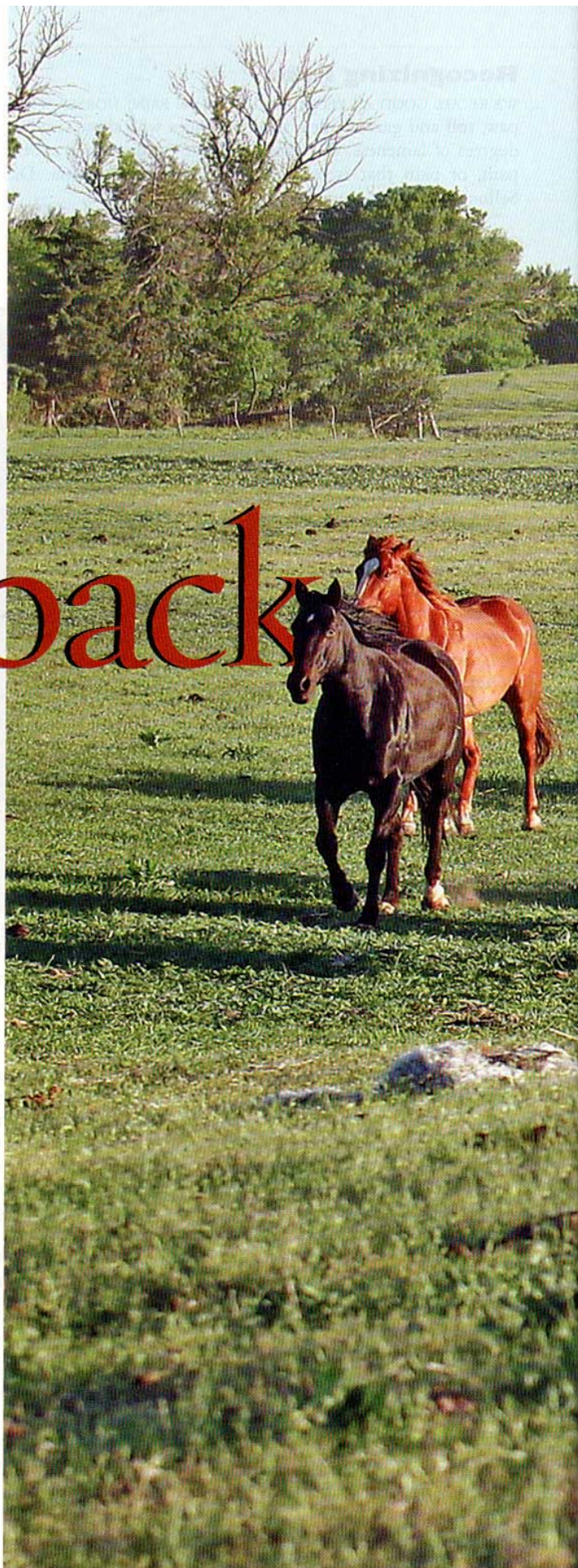


Going Home Horseback

In the Sandhills of west central Nebraska, this award-winning ranch has continually produced top cow horses for almost 70 years.

Story and photos by Jim Jennings

IT WAS A GREAT ADVENTURE FOR Howard Haythorn, 13 years old, helping his father drive a herd of cattle and horses across the Nebraska Sandhills to his new home. Almost like his granddad, Harry Haythorn, who first came to Nebraska on a cattle drive from Texas in the early 1880s.



The saddle horse remuda consists of about 40 geldings, and someone on the ranch is using at least one of them every day of the year.





Harry came to Nebraska to stay, and when Howard reached his new home, just northeast of Maxwell, Nebraska, he stayed, too. During the next almost 70 years, Howard, first with his father and then with his son, Harry Byron Haythorn, carved out a ranch, created one of the best cow-calf operations in Nebraska and raised some of the best cow horses. That ranch has now been honored with the AQHA-Bayer Best Remuda Award, an honor that goes to ranches that have been judged to have the best remuda of saddle horses.

Howard's grandfather Harry started the Haythorn line of horses that have become famous for their ability to work a cow. Born Harry Haythornwaite in England in 1861, Harry, at the age of 16, stowed away on a ship bound for America. When he was discovered, he was put to work caring for the Hereford bulls that were on board. When the ship docked in Galveston, Texas, Harry helped unload the bulls and then went to work for the Texas rancher who owned them.

During the next few years, Harry shortened his name to Haythorn and began to learn the cowboy ways, making a hand on his boss' ranch. When the railroads reached Kansas and Nebraska, providing a market for Texas cattle, Harry made four cattle drives north, two of which went all the way to Ogallala, Nebraska. At the conclusion of his second trip to Ogallala, he stayed.

Harry spent his wages on a livery stable in Ogallala and then married Emma Gilpin, the daughter of a local veterinarian. Before long, Harry, wanting more out of life than a livery stable, sold his business and went to work for the Yeast Ranch as wagon boss. Emma cooked for the cowboys, and while she saved almost every penny she made, Harry took his

wages in cattle. As soon as they could afford it, Harry and Emma filed on a homestead four miles west of Arthur, Nebraska and in 1884 established their ranch.

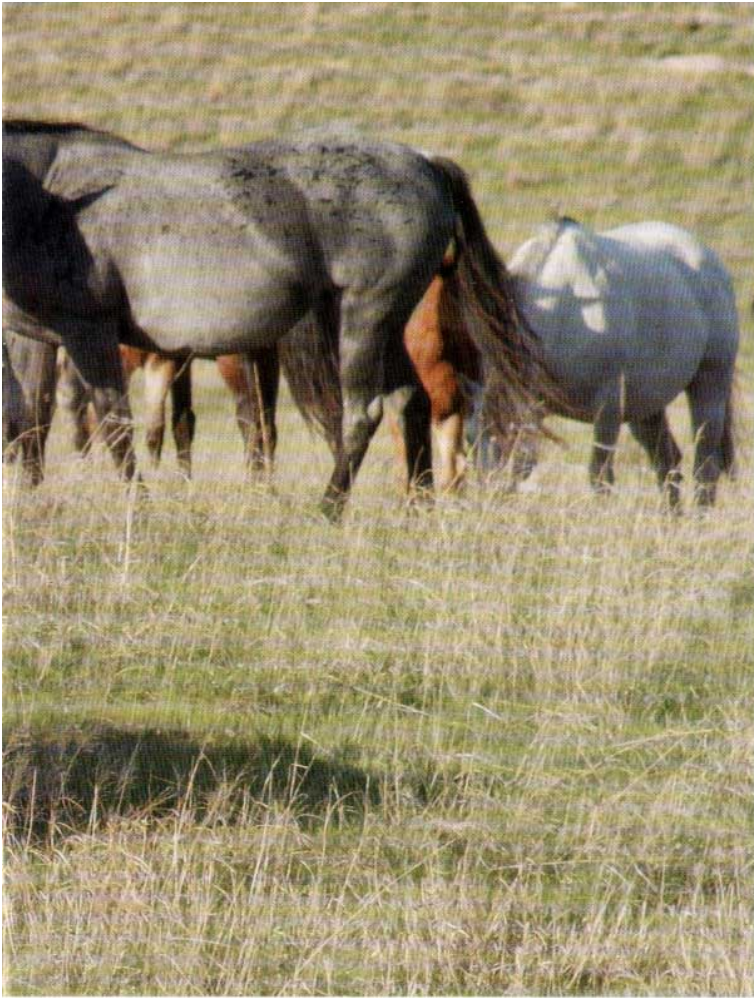
Through the years, Harry and Emma added to their land holdings, and when their two sons, Walter and Harry Jr., were born, both became intimately involved in the family ranch. At one point, the boys and their mother had to take care of everything for a three-month period while Harry went to Oregon, purchased 500 head of horses and drove them back to Nebraska. He had a government contract to furnish horses for the Rosebud Indian Reservation.

When Harry died in 1923, the boys took over the ranching operation and became partners. Walter ran the north end of the ranch and Harry Jr. the south end, near the North Platte River. That all came to an end, however, in 1940, when Kingsley Dam was built on the river. The subsequent lake flooded almost 37,000 acres, much of which was Haythorn land.

In the meantime, Walter and Harry Jr. had both married and had families. When they lost the south end of the ranch, the brothers knew that what was left would not support both families.

"That's when my father started looking for another ranch," said Howard, who is Harry Jr.'s son. "He looked everywhere and couldn't find anything that suited him. Then one day he was on the train coming back from Omaha, where he had shipped some old cows. He ran into a friend on the train who said he had a ranch near Maxwell for sale. They got off the train and come out and looked at it. He got back on the train and come home, told us to start packing."

Walter and Harry Jr. split the cattle and horses, and



Harry Jr. trailed his half the 70 miles or so to his new ranch. Thirteen-year-old Howard went along on the drive. It took them nine days, including the three days they were camped at Birdwood Creek where they split the heifers.

"We had some country leased on Birdwood Creek where we ran yearling heifers," Howard said. "Dad and Uncle Walt had already split the cows and bulls, and when we got there, they split the heifers, with Dad keeping some and Uncle Walt keeping some. Then those that neither of them wanted, we drove 35 miles south to Sutherland and shipped them to Omaha on the train."

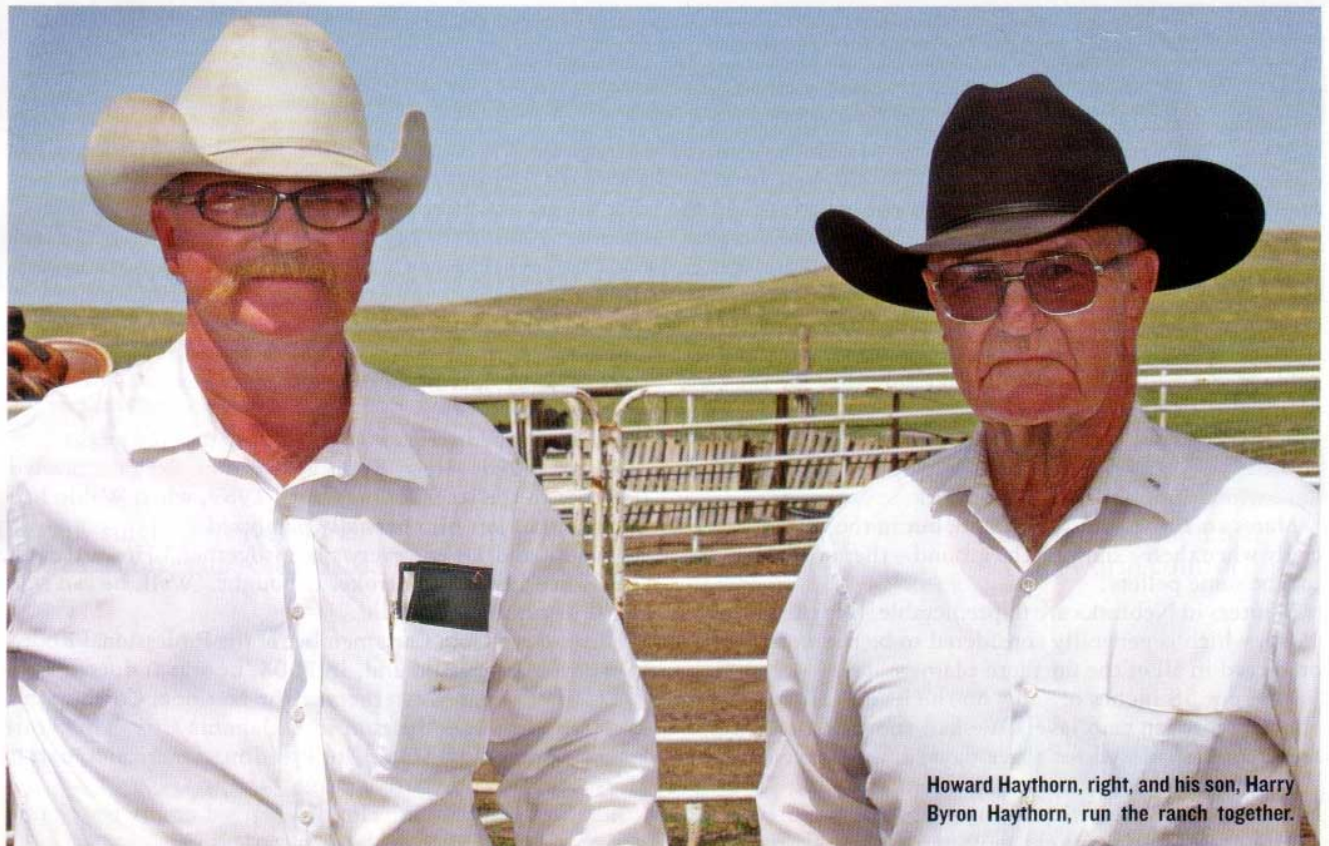
Howard said that they arrived at his new home in the middle of the night, and even though there was a house and barn there, it was so dark he couldn't see his horse's ears, much less anything else. But they moved in and started their ranching operation.

In 1945, Harry Jr. died, and young Howard took over. In 1951, Howard married Sue Ann Cochran, who, incidentally, is the sister of his cousin Waldo's wife. Waldo was the son of Howard's uncle Walter.

Howard and Sue have three children, Mary Helen, Margaret and Harry Byron, and today, Howard and Harry Byron run the ranch together.

On approximately 20,000 acres, they run about 1,500 cows and replacement heifers. They also have 20 to 30 mares that they breed to four stallions that they own. The saddle horse remuda includes about 40 geldings.

The stallions are Rusty Gun 876, by AQHA World Show Superhorse Real Gun; Peppy San Kai, by a son of Senor George; Snickelfritz Mickey by Snickelfritz Chex; and Mickey 612, a 3-year-old by Snickelfritz Mickey. Most of the mares are homebred – only three or four have been purchased – and most of the mares and stallions go back to the Haythorn



Howard Haythorn, right, and his son, Harry Byron Haythorn, run the ranch together.

foundation breeding established by Walter and Harry Jr.

Walter, with his son Waldo and his grandson Craig, continued to operate the original Haythorn ranch after Harry Jr. and his family left, and the breeding of their horses is much like that of Howard's. Walter and Waldo have both died, and Craig and his sons run that ranch today, known as Haythorn Land and Cattle Co.. In 1992, Haythorn Land and Cattle Co. was the winner of the first Best Remuda Award.

Howard and his son Harry Byron Haythorn operate as Haythorn Ranch Co. Working with them is Harry Byron's son, Harry Marshall Haythorn, who also has a son, Harry Edward Haythorn.

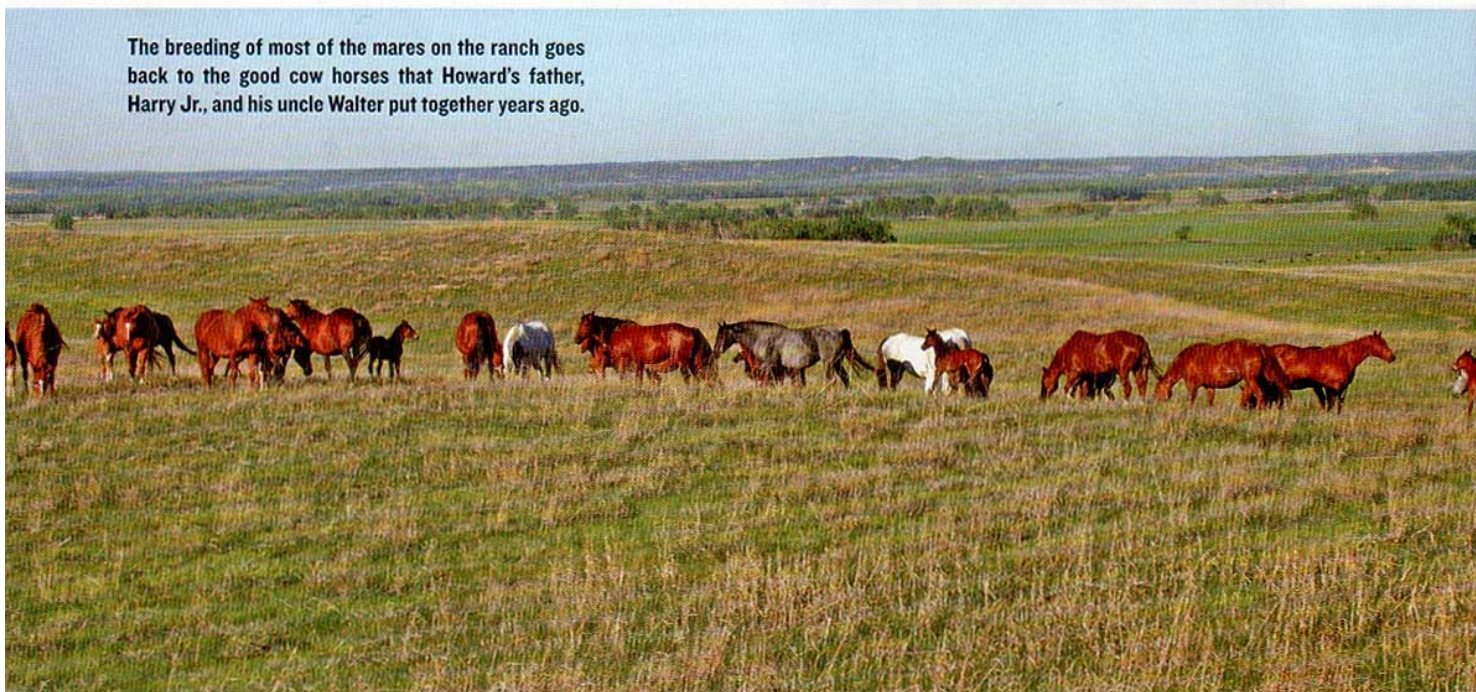
down in a valley, you couldn't see anything, but after it quit snowing, if you got up on a hill, the sun was shining.

"The cattle all drifted south and when they hit a fence, we would cut the fence and just let them keep going," Howard said. "I ruined two young horses going through those snow drifts trying to find cattle. Then I started riding two different studs that we had in the barn. They were full of hay and oats, so they were in good shape.

"Through all of that, we only lost one cow," he said. "We lost a bunch of yearlings, but only one cow.

"Looking back now, I know it wasn't very smart for me to be out in that alone, but I just felt like I had to do something, and I do think I saved a bunch of cows."

The breeding of most of the mares on the ranch goes back to the good cow horses that Howard's father, Harry Jr., and his uncle Walter put together years ago.



All of the Haythorn Ranch mares are pasture bred, with each of the stallions turned out with a different band of mares. Because Nebraska winters can be very hard, stallions aren't turned in with the mares until mid-May – so there are no early foals. The Haythorns wean in the fall and halter break and brand all the foals at that time.

Only geldings go back into the remuda, but any mares that the Haythorns think might go into the broodmare band are ridden for a couple of weeks to make sure they are the type of mares they want to breed.

Potential saddle horses are started in the fall of their 2-year-old year, but they are ridden very lightly until they turn 4, at which time they are put to work.

Mares are turned out year-round, but in the winter – especially when there's snow on the ground – they are fed hay and maybe some pellets.

Winters in Nebraska are unpredictable, like the winter of 1949, which is generally considered to be the worst winter on record in all of the northern plains states.

"We got 58 inches of snow on the level," Howard said, "but there wasn't no level. We had snow drifts 25 to 30 feet deep. It snowed for three days, and it stayed around 7 (degrees) below zero with the wind blowing 70 miles an hour. Even after it quit snowing, the wind blew for another week and just kept moving that snow. If you were

In addition to ranching, rodeo has always been a part of Haythorn life, and Howard grew up roping calves. He said that his uncle Walter would come pick him up, they'd go to the rodeo, and in the beginning, he would rope on Walter's horse before he got one of his own. He said he also rode some cutting horses, but the calf roping and cutting stopped in the mid-1950s, and he started roping steers.

"I had too many occupations," Howard said, grinning, "so I sold my cutting horse and turned my calf horse into a steer horse."

Howard roped steers for years and competed at the first National Finals Steer Roping. He and Waldo traveled together to the steer ropings until 1989, when Waldo had a stroke that left him partially paralyzed.

"Waldo and I went every place together," Howard said, "but when he had his stroke, I thought, 'Well, he can't go so I'll just quit.' And I did."

Howard is a Gold Card member of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and, in 2008, he was inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. This year, he was honored by AQHA for breeding American Quarter Horses for 50 consecutive years.

Like his grandfather, Howard arrived at his new home horseback. Seventy years later, he still is. 🐾