

# The Lac La Croix Indian Ponys Journey Home

Jane Mullen – Dec 2009

Lac La Croix is a relatively large border lake and is the home of one village of the Boise Forte Band of Ojibwe. The village is located on the Canadian side of the lake. The other two villages of the Boise Forte are at Nett Lake and at Lake Vermillion, both reservations on the U.S. side of the border. Although there are three locations, they are all one people, inter-related. Although once prevalent in both upper Minnesota and northern Ontario, this hardy beast of burden became extinct in Minnesota in the mid 1900's and came perilously close to extinction in Canada. In 1977, only FOUR MARES of this unique breed were known to exist when Fred Isham stepped in to rescue them.

In years gone by, the reserve was apparently an isolated location – accessible only by water in the summer and over ice roads in the winter. There is an island nearby called 'Pony Island' where the ponies were herded by their Chippewa keepers over the ice just before spring. They stayed on the island all summer, foaling and breeding again for the next year, and foraging for food. In the winter when ice covered the lakes they were herded back to be used for hauling, logging, etc as required until the spring was imminent, and the cycle began again.

In any event, the ponies in more recent years were allowed to wander free, living in the woods and browsing for food like the deer and other wildlife. By the 1960s they were seldom used, being largely replaced by machines, but were still considered part of the landscape by their people. However, the Canadian Government (Ministry of Health) had decided that the ponies were some sort of health risk because they wandered about the village, and should be put away. Village elders did not want to see this happen, but were also powerless to stop it. Fred Isham had relatives at Lac La Croix and became aware that the ponies were to be "disposed of" and he stepped in to help the remaining ponies.

They have a long history with the Indian people of northeastern Minnesota as well as northern Ontario. As far back as Fred Isham's people were concerned the ponies had always been there, at least as far back as memory and oral tradition tell the story. To the northeast of Lake Vermillion is Nett Lake, where Fred Isham lived. Nearby is Pelican Lake where Walter Saatala had his farm. These two men were the central figures in saving the ponies.

The only answer appeared to be to spirit them across the border back into northeastern Minnesota. Fred contacted Walter Saatala who was a friend and fellow horseman. A former rodeo man, Omar Hilde, from Embarras, Minnesota joined Fred and Walter in the roundup. These three men, along with two others, collected the ponies and rescued them. He was to do the roping, as the mares were semi-wild, having lived in the forest near the village for some years. The mares reportedly accepted the halters after a bit of a struggle and although they had not been handled by humans for 8 – 10 years, they were still gentle and appeared to be in good shape when collected – full coats, good feet, and well nourished (see the photos of the mares that were transported – link on home page).

Walter had the acreage needed for a home and the savvy to make the necessary arrangements. The village of La Croix still had no road access, so the only possible way to get them over the border was to wait for winter in order to haul them out by truck over the ice. The mares were semi-wild, having lived in the forest near the village on their own for some years. It took a number of people from the village helping and a couple of tries before the mares were caught and successfully loaded into the horse trailer.

After being rescued, one of the mares "practically starved to death", as she seemed unable to digest the baled hay and oats given her. The ponies had been living on mostly wild grasses near the lake, browsing tender buds and twigs much like deer and by stripping bark off the poplar trees. Years back before the advent of snowmobiles the people used them to pull toboggans to haul loads of wood and to run the trap lines. At that time they were fed dried but unhusked wild rice as grain and did very well on that feed. It took some time to develop the digestive bacteria to be able to handle her new, commercial feed.

Walter [Walt] Saatala kept and bred the ponies on his farm for many years. When the job became too much for him, the position of caretaker of his herd was taken up by Bob Walker. For many more years Bob tried to keep them in the same manner that they had been tended by Walter. They

had free range over a large acreage with little intervention on his large, wooded property, continuing to forage largely for themselves but with hay available as they need, water and a run in shelter.

In the early 1990's, Bob Walker began making inquiries at Fort William in Thunder Bay to inquire about returning the ponies to Canada and he was directed to contact Rare Breeds Canada (then Joywinds Farm Rare Breeds Conservancy). He believed that this pony had historical significance, and that Canada, their country of origin, could have an important role in their care and survival. In 1993, Jy Chipertzak (the founder of Rare Breeds Canada) initiated some research and visited Bob Walker. Satisfied that there was sufficient historical data to support the possibilities, negotiations began and a repatriation project was launched. Rare Breeds Canada became began the first of three importations bringing the ponies "home". The second and third importations were completed in 1996 and 1999. While there are still a few ponies in Minnesota, the majority of the breed now resides in Canada. It is our mission to bring this breed back into the hearts and homes of all horse lovers.

It is reported that part of the history of this breed in the US includes ponies at Vermillion, put to death by missionary people in the 1930's and at Nett Lake by school and religious authorities in the 1950's (horses breeding before the eyes of curious village children were considered a moral dilemma by the white authorities, solved by killing the ponies). There apparently were a good number of wild ponies near Silver Lake in the same region that were shot and harvested to sell as dog food by white men. In time, the ponies disappeared from North Eastern Minnesota altogether. Our records today [2009] indicate that there are only about a half dozen ponies remaining in Minnesota now.

The Lac La Croix Indian Pony was so named to designate the location of the final drama of saving these animals from extinction and to honour their heritage and the people who were most directly responsible for saving them. Fred Isham and Walter Saatala are no longer with us. They were both just simple men, one an old Indian and the other an old Finnish horse logger. Because they cared, we still have the breed. Other key figures that helped to keep these ponies alive in Minnesota were Walter McElderry and Lloyd Haas – both purchasing ponies and breeding them when Fred and Walt could no longer carry on.