

# The "White Horse Ranch"

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The little town of Naper, Nebraska, population about 100, nestles in the rolling hills of Boyd County in the north-central part of the state. From a casual glance at the map, it seems about as remote and ordinary as a town can be.

But for seventy years it was famous among horse lovers as home of the White Horse Ranch, whose majestic white steeds have thrilled audiences throughout the United States and Canada.

Although its touring shows ended and the ranch closed to the public when founder Caleb Thompson died in 1963, the ranch reopened in 1989 and remained a tourist attraction through the 2006 season, when its caretakers retired.

A unique Nebraska enterprise, the ranch and its founders were widely recognized for their horses, their traveling shows, and their generosity to the many young people they took in and trained in the art of horsemanship. Said Tom Mooney, Nebraska State Historical Society curator of manuscripts, "Probably the fact that they developed two new recognized bloodlines..." makes the WHR among one of the most significant pieces of Nebraska history.

The WHR grew out of a long-held dream of Caleb R. "Cal" Thompson. Born in 1890 near West Point, Nebraska, Cal and his twin brother, Hudson, became successful Boyd County ranchers. Cal had long dreamed of owning a pure white horse, and for years the brothers had searched for such an animal. Finally, in 1917, they acquired the perfect horse: Old King, a snow-white stallion with pink skin and dark eyes, then siring circus horses in Illinois.

The brothers began a careful breeding program, using Old King and predominantly their own Morgan mares, and by 1934 Cal's dream had blossomed into a herd of white horses, all descended from Old King, with pink skin and dark eyes (not pink-eyed albinos). That year Cal met a schoolteacher named Ruth Hackenberg, who told him she, too, had always dreamed of owning a white stallion. Married in 1936, they bought Hud's share of the breeding program and moved to a ranch south of the Niobrara River where Ruth began training the white horses. Before long white dominated the entire ranch: The buildings were all white; the corrals and fence posts were white; a white spitz cavorted with two white Pekinese; there were trained white goats, a white skunk, a white deer, a white coyote, a flock of white peacocks, white geese, white chickens, white cats, white mice, and white pigeons. Cal and Ruth called the place "El Rancho del Caballo Blanco," but their neighbors called it the "White Horse Ranch," and that's the name that stuck.

In 1937 they opened a riding school for children, who not only learned to ride, but also to guide their mounts through spectacular tricks. Often called upon for local celebrations and shows, the performers' reputation grew.

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Cal & Ruth Thompson

From their breeding program came two new registered bloodlines, the American Albino and the American Crème.

"The Thompsons found it necessary to develop a system of recording progeny. Thus in 1937 the American Albino Horse Club (AAHC) was incorporated to record the progeny of Old King. The first horse registered was Old King's grandson, Snow Chief 2nd, who set the standard of excellence for the new breed. Ranch breeding records had been kept on the foundation mares' and Old King's progeny. Snow Chief 2nd sired 66 foals before having a winter accident on an icy spot in his paddock resulting in a broken neck. However, he had left a breeding legacy in his son, White Wings, who sired 108 foals, all but three being white. White Wings was the star performer in the Thompson's White Horse Troupe and knew about 50 tricks. He was so gentle

he was exhibited many times by a ten-year-old girl performer." [International American Albino Assn., Route 1, Box 20, Naper, NE 68755. Phone: (402) 832-5560.]

In 1938 the White Horse Troupe began touring, thrilling audiences in the United States and Canada with jumping (over hurdles, humans, and even a convertible), "Roman" style riding (up to six horses handled by one rider standing on their backs), balancing acts, and much more. They traveled in a convoy of seven all-white vehicles.





White Horse Ranch founder Caleb "Cal" Thompson on one of the ranch's famous white stallions.  
<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/newsletr/nov06.pdf>

In 1963 Cal died, and Ruth, in poor health, ended the tours, leased out the pastures, auctioned the ranch equipment, and sold the herd. But she retained possession of the ranch and placed breeding stock with friends.

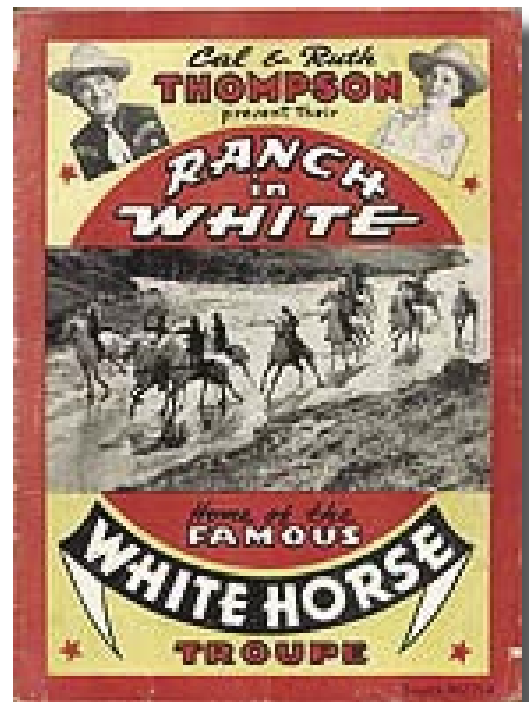
"In 1985 Ruth Thompson returned the registry to the state in which the breed was developed, Nebraska, and reincorporated as the International American Albino Assn., Inc. which is the current title of our registry."

"The 'American White' horse color breed, as it is called today, has been made famous as the Lone Ranger's horse (the White Horse Ranch provided ten of them) and as the Mustang emblem used by Ford Motor Company." [International American Albino Assn., Route 1, Box 20, Naper, NE 68755. Phone: (402) 832-5560.]

In 1989, an ex-student and member of the troupe, Carley Daugherty, and her husband, Dean, returned to Naper to help Ruth restore the ranch and re-open it to the public. Ruth died in 1990, but the ranch remained open, overseen by the Daughertys.

In 1990 Ruth Thompson was inducted into the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Hereford, Texas, for her work in developing a new breed of horse.

Placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, the White Horse Ranch saw its last tourist season in 2006, but its history lives on, preserved by the many fans of the Thompsons' white horses, by former White Horse Troupe riders who return to the ranch for yearly reunions, and now by the Nebraska State Historical Society.



LIFE magazine did a feature story about the White Horse Ranch in 1940

## **We have descendants of OLD KING and the White Horse Ranch right here in Iowa!**



Dana Jo Smith, of Tuf-N-Nuf Stables in Buffalo, Iowa, stated that, "In the mid 60's, I met Ruth Thompson, who was riding 'Abraham' in the same show I was riding in. I was showing a 2-year-old white stallion, 'HI HO Ricky,' who was Reserve Champion. I had bred a white mare, 'Sugar Shu,' to 'Royal Amigo' (a purebred Arabian), and the result was Ricky. The White Horse Ranch purchased Ricky, who became their herd sire for the next 10 years."

Dana Jo stated that, "There are many horses in Iowa and surrounding states with White Horse Ranch bloodlines. These make great family animals. They can perform in most disciplines asked of them with ease. They have short cannon bones, straight legs, neat

small heads, and are very, very loving. Personally, I love to ride my own in parades, show in Futurity, trail ride, and train the foals."

"Riding a WHR horse in a parade, and hearing the crowd clap and cheer is very addicting. I am always having people drive by my farm and stop to ask questions about these stunning white horses of mine. I also have white goats, a white donkey, a white cat, and a white mule."

"My stallion is out of Angelfire, who was the last foal Ruth Thompson had on the WHR."

"I am making sure that six white horses will be escorting me to my grave just a block away. The tombstone will have white horses and ponies running across it."

"Hi Ho Silver; away!"