

# The Horses were Saved by Children

Daily News May 1960  
Sable Island Ponies  
Destined for Dog Food

In May 1960 headlines like this started Canadians.

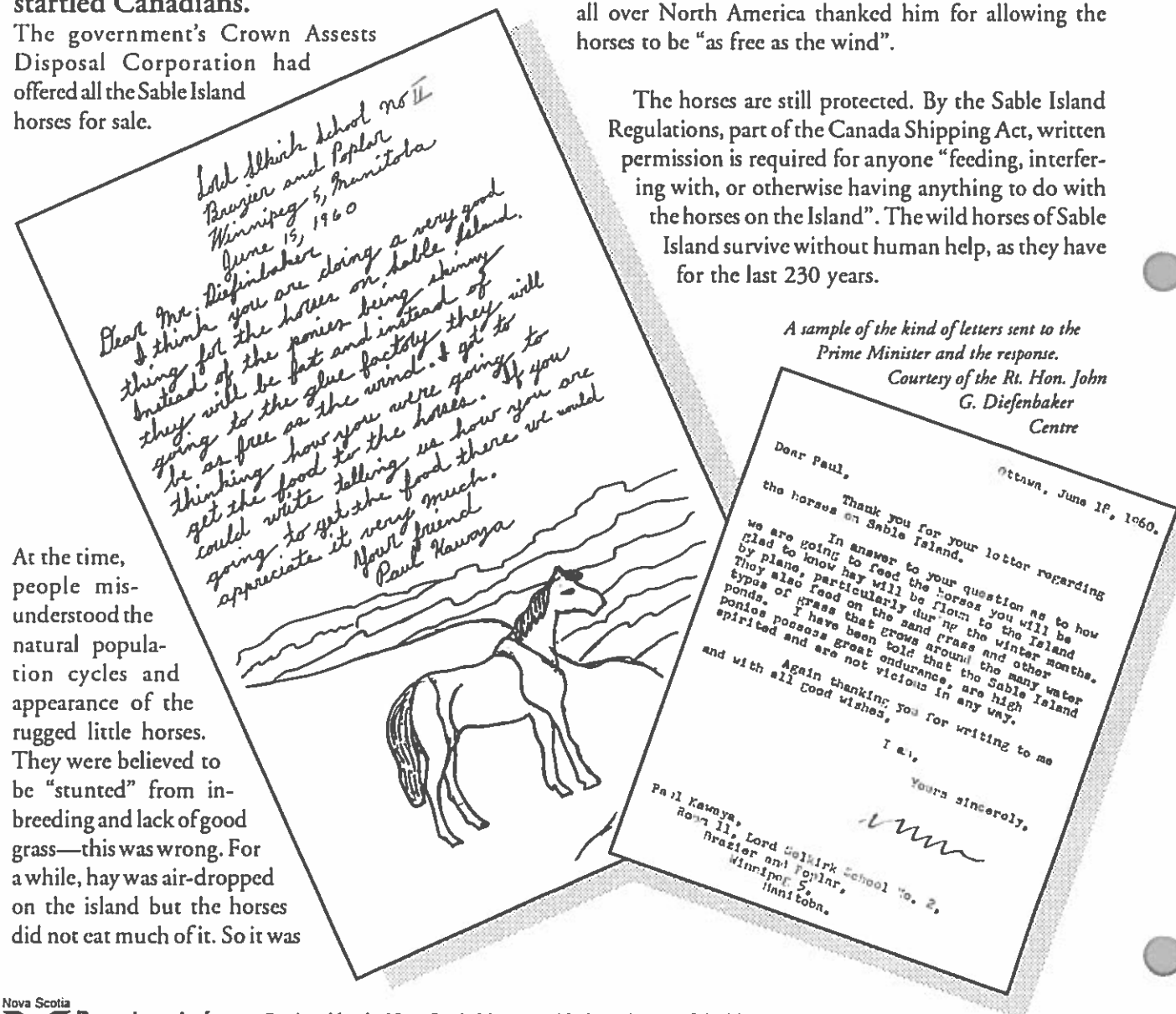
The government's Crown Assets Disposal Corporation had offered all the Sable Island horses for sale.

thought that the best thing to do was sell the horses to someone who would take them off the island before they all starved to death, and use them for something functional like dog food or glue.

Many children wrote letters to the Prime Minister. Because of these letters, the horses were saved. On June 2, 1960, Prime Minister Diefenbaker intervened and protected the horses from all human interference. Children all over North America thanked him for allowing the horses to be "as free as the wind".

The horses are still protected. By the Sable Island Regulations, part of the Canada Shipping Act, written permission is required for anyone "feeding, interfering with, or otherwise having anything to do with the horses on the Island". The wild horses of Sable Island survive without human help, as they have for the last 230 years.

A sample of the kind of letters sent to the Prime Minister and the response.  
Courtesy of the Rt. Hon. John G. Diefenbaker Centre



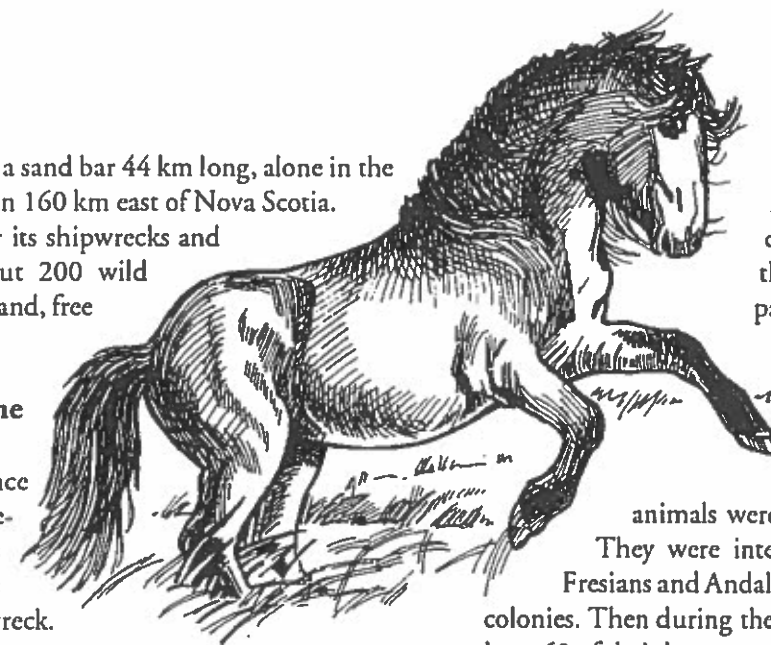
At the time, people misunderstood the natural population cycles and appearance of the rugged little horses. They were believed to be "stunted" from inbreeding and lack of good grass—this was wrong. For a while, hay was air-dropped on the island but the horses did not eat much of it. So it was

# The Wild Horses of Sable Island



Nova Scotia Museum 1747 Summer Street Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3A6, Phone 429-4040

Sable Island is a sand bar 44 km long, alone in the Atlantic Ocean 160 km east of Nova Scotia. It is renowned for its shipwrecks and wild horses. About 200 wild horses roam the island, free as the wind.



forced to abandon all their livestock. It appears that Hancock helped himself to some of their horses and put them to pasture on Sable Island.

## How horses came to Sable

There is no evidence for the popular belief that Sable's horses arrived as survivors of a shipwreck.

## What kind of horse?

The first horses brought to Acadia in 1632 came from France. These animals were a mixture of several breeds. They were interbred with stallions such as Fresians and Andalusians from the New England colonies. Then during the deportation of the Acadians, about 60 of their horses were shipped to Sable Island and became wild. They are horses, not ponies.

## The true story—Acadian Horses

A Boston clergyman, the Reverend Andrew Le Mercier, sent the first horses to graze on the island in 1737. Most of them were probably stolen by privateers and fishermen. Then about 1760, Boston merchant and shipowner Thomas Hancock shipped 60 horses to Sable. These horses survived and became wild.

But whose horses were they? Between 1755 and 1763, Acadians were deported from Nova Scotia by British authorities. Hancock was paid to transport Acadians to the American colonies. The Acadians were

From 1801-1940, Sable horses were regularly rounded up and sold in Halifax, but prices were low. A variety of stallions were sent to breed with the wild horses, in hopes of increasing the price—Morgan Horses and Canadians for example. The most "improved" horses tended to be the ones chosen for round-up, so the horses left on the island were more like the original stock. Sable Island horses still look like the horses of the early Acadian settlers. They are rugged animals well suited to life on the island.

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# Surviving Sand and Wind

## Food and water

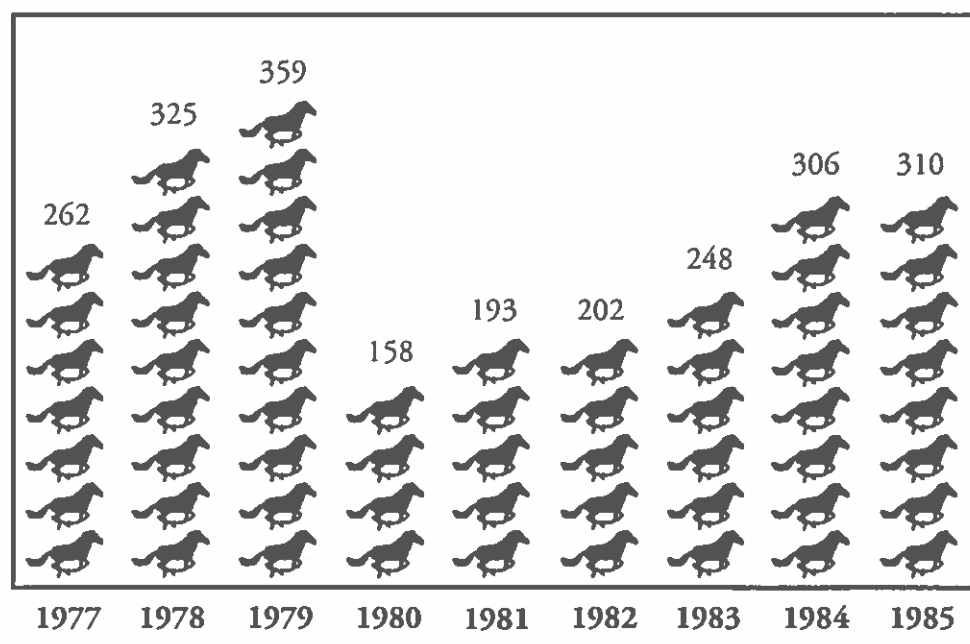
Despite harsh conditions caused by wind, sand, waves and isolation, Sable Island is not barren. Most of the time, there is plenty of food and fresh water. Rain and snow seeping into the sand form an underground reservoir. Small ponds appear at a few sites between stable sand dunes. The dunes give enough shelter from the wind for a thick green carpet of plants, mostly grasses with scattered areas of heath. The grassland plants are mostly Marram, also called Beach Grass.

The horses grow fat grazing on lush summer plants. Summer fat is the key to surviving hard winters, because the dried winter leaves of Marram are not very nourishing. In some seasons the horses must struggle to find a source of drinking water. Horses can sense where to dig for water in a dry season.

## Teeth and sand

Imagine chewing sand every day. The horses take in a lot of sand as they graze. The hard quartz sand grains wear down their teeth. Horse teeth keep growing for about 6 years, so tooth wear is not a problem at first. But older horses may starve when their worn teeth cannot grind the tough Marram.

(Below) Chart showing the fluctuations in the horse population from 1977 to 1985



(Right) The horses hauled people, food and equipment in a variety of carts and buggies, including wagons for the lifeboats.



(Below) Rounding up horses to be shipped to Halifax for sale



## Social behavior

Sable's horses were once domestic. As they became wild, they went back to their natural social system of small herds, each defended by a stallion.

A herd consists of about 6 animals—one stallion, several mares and their young. Bachelor males sometimes tag along, or may form their own herds. Each herd has a home range of about 3 square km. Family herds avoid each other, even at shared water holes. There are 40 to 50 herds on the island.

One of the mares, older and more experienced, usually leads the herd to good food or shelter. Stallions must constantly defend their mares and their breeding rights by threatening other males. This may lead to fierce fights. Most young are born in May or June, after nearly a year in the womb, and will nurse for 10 months.

When bad winters bring snow and freezing rain, the senior mare huddles the herd close together for warmth. The horses grow thick wooly coats and find some protection in the hollows between the sand dunes.

## Death

Death from natural causes prevents the island from becoming over-populated. The pattern of population change tends to be rapid growth interrupted by periodic crashes. After several mild winters the population increases, but many of the old, weak or very young animals will die during the next hard winter. Nutrients from the dead horses enrich the soil, encouraging a lush growth of Marram.

## Horses and Humans

The first settlers on Sable Island came with the Lifesaving Station in 1801. For the next 150 years, people relied on the horses for transportation.



Trixie Boutilier grew up on Sable. She is seen here riding sidesaddle on her horse Midget.



(Above) Lifesaving Crews on horse patrol rode around the island twice a day, looking for ships in distress. Just about everybody also rode for pleasure.