Brought to southeast Montana and northeast Wyoming by British émigrés in the late nineteenth century, the sport of polo soon became an economic and social foundation of Big Horn, Wyoming. By World War I, Big Horn was home to a regional champion polo team composed of upper-class Brits and local horsemen, supported an international horse and polo pony industry, boasted three fine polo fields, and had been visited by the sport’s biggest names. Pictured in this undated photograph are the members of Malcolm Moncreiffe’s Magpies: (left to right) rancher Lee Bullington; Moncreiffe, the youngest son of a Scottish baron; ranch foreman John Cover; and banker Robert H. Walsh.
Although it had been a cool and cloudy morning, the afternoon of Sunday, August 11, 1918, brought blue skies and perfect conditions for the charity event scheduled on the Moncreiffe estate—a game of polo between the Magpies and the Sun Flowers. As Malcolm Moncreiffe, the youngest son of the baron of Moncreiffe, left his house and walked toward his polo field for the event that would benefit the local Red Cross, he passed the estate’s large vegetable garden, grass tennis court, and “sporting little seven-hole mashy golf course.” By the time the fifty-two-year-old horseman reached the field and readied the Magpies’ ponies, several hundred spectators had already arrived for the game. Later he would record in his diary the Magpies’ loss to the Sun Flowers that afternoon, four goals to three. He also noted that some $38.00 had been collected for charity and that many of his friends had gathered in his home after the game.¹

Surprisingly, the setting for this match was neither the Moncreiffe ancestral home near Perthshire, Scotland, nor a famous American polo club near New York, Boston, or Palm Springs. Rather, Moncreiffe’s polo field was located in the “Cowboy State” of Wyoming. Outside Big Horn, in the shadow of the Bighorn Mountains near Sheridan, Malcolm Moncreiffe; his older brother, William; Oliver Henry Wallop, Malcolm’s brother-in-law, neighbor, and the third son of the earl of Portsmouth; and several “old-money” families created a close-knit, Anglo-American polo community. However, theirs was not a typical enclave of elites but, rather, a curious blend of expatriates and polo-playing locals. In the game played on that summer afternoon in 1918, Moncreiffe and his Magpie teammates—a fellow Brit and two nearby ranchers—used the traditional English saddles, while the four cowboys on the Sun Flowers rode western saddles and wore cowboy hats, chaps, and spurs. This unusual western scene was repeated nearly every summer Sunday between the Spanish-American War and the Great Depression.²

Historians of sport argue that elite pastimes such as polo often serve to bring together members of a sporting subculture as well as act as a barrier between social classes. Benjamin Rader, for example, points out that the upper class used sport as a “means of strengthening the bonds that held together distinctive elite communities,” while Elliott Gorn and

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The object of polo is to hit a small wooden ball with a long croquet-like mallet through the opponent’s goalposts. All players must play right-handed to avoid collisions, and a player can hit the ball only while traveling in the same direction as the ball. The horse is the player’s most important piece of equipment and is “selected for quick bursts of speed, stamina, agility, and maneuverability.” This July 1920 game was likely held at a ranch near Cheyenne.
Warren Goldstein concur that sporting organizations formed “part of a complex network of elite connections ... that allowed whole families to live and die, [and] work and play ... with the ‘right’ social circles.” Indeed, in Big Horn, polo united families, created businesses, and reshaped the community’s cultural landscape.3

But sport can also break down social, class, and cultural barriers, creating a “classless society full of class,” as polo also appears to have done in Big Horn. As player Robert H. Walsh pointed out, although many thought of polo as a “rich man’s game” in the East, things were different in Wyoming. Here each man acted as his own groom, and there were no club dues, ensuring the game’s enjoyment for “anyone with the inclination ... and the price of a couple of ponies ... [which] also have their uses in other directions.” The polo ponies themselves did “not live a life of luxury with expensive stables and high-priced grooms” but grazed “as they have always done—on range pastures” and were “ordinarily used in the work of handling cattle except on polo days.”4

The question of whether Big Horn polo gave rise to an egalitarian sporting community or if the Moncreiffes and their set invited their neighbors to play simply because they lacked the “critical mass” needed to fully establish their own sporting subculture can never be definitively answered. However, as the New Western History seeks to understand the region’s complexity, the convergence of elites in Big Horn and the establishment of a unique polo culture with connections to the national and international horse business must be considered.5

Polo’s beginnings are found far from the plains and mountain valleys of Wyoming. The game probably originated in Persia twenty-five hundred years ago and spread eastward to India; Alexander the Great may have introduced the game to the many lands he conquered. For equestrian cultures, polo served as a form of recreation but also a way to hone military skills. The modern word polo is derived from the Tibetan sport po-lo, named for a type of willow root used as the material for the game ball. Modern polo was introduced to the British colonial cavalry in India, and cavalrymen brought it back to England in 1869. While visiting England, James Gordon Bennett Jr., the publisher of the New York Herald and one of the leading sports promoters of his day, became captivated by polo, and he launched the game in the United States in 1876.6

From its inception, American polo was associated with the wealthy. Nelson Aldrich, in Old Money: The Mythology of America’s Upper Class, suggests that “polo is the sport of the ‘country’ or aristocratic side of Old Money’s imagination, just as America’s Cup racing belongs to the ‘city’ or patrician side.” Aldrich argues that polo is more exclusive than sailboat racing because of the time needed to master the horsemanship of the game. To play it well, “one has to have always—past perfectly—played it.”7

Polo has aptly been called hockey on horseback. As in hockey, players play both offense and defense. The object of the game is to hit a small wooden ball with a long croquet-like mallet through the opponent’s goalposts. Each team is composed of four players mounted on horses that can range anywhere on the 12.4-acre field—an area equal to nine football fields. The game is divided into six seven-minute chukkers, with a five-minute rest period between each chukker. All players must play right-handed so as to avoid collisions, and a player can hit the ball with his mallet only while traveling in the same direction as the ball. Reversing the momentum of the ball must be done in a backhanded fashion.8
The horse is the most important piece of equipment for a polo player. Mounts are often either thoroughbreds or thoroughbred crosses “selected carefully for quick bursts of speed, stamina, agility, and maneuverability.” Polo ponies must be even-tempered, unbothered by being bumped by other horses, and trained to be handled with one hand while being “responsive to the rider’s leg and weight cues for moving forward, turning, and stopping.” Because they must be nimble, polo ponies are often shorter than most thoroughbreds, and because the size of the field and the pace of the game create such tremendous physical demands, they must have great lung capacity. In highly competitive games, a player will use a new mount for each period. More often, however, each pony plays two chukkers, with a rest in between periods. Thus, the great expense of polo is that a serious player must have anywhere from three to six highly trained, well-bred horses at the ready. For a 1914 polo tournament, for example, Malcolm Moncreiffe and his three teammates took four ponies each to Denver.9

The West first came to know polo with the arrival of British expatriates. As early as 1878, a group of British émigrés established a colony near Le Mars, Iowa. There they began playing polo and by 1885 had formed their own club. At Miles City, Montana, British immigrants played polo and raised polo ponies, and by the end of the nineteenth century, similar groups in Colorado had founded clubs at Colorado Springs, Glenwood Springs, and Denver. By 1902, the U.S. Army had joined the United States Polo Association (founded in 1890), and cavalymen across the West were playing the sport at Fort Walla Walla, Washington; Fort Riley, Kansas; Fort Robinson, Nebraska; Fort Logan, Colorado; Fort Reno, Indian Territory (Oklahoma); Jefferson Barracks, Missouri; and Fort Meade, South Dakota.10

Although northern Wyoming was prime horse country with its high-altitude environment and nutritious native grasses, Big Horn’s early history gave no hint that the town would become a polo center. Founded in 1881, Big Horn served as a trading center for nearby horse and cattle ranches, and an early homestead map shows more than a hundred small farms and ranches patented on the land surrounding the town. However, in 1888, after Wyoming’s Tenth Legislative Assembly carved out Sheridan County and made the town of Sheridan its seat, Big Horn declined. The town’s founders, businessmen, and newspaper moved on, and land prices fell. In 1893, the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad

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The British expatriates who moved to Wyoming maintained ties with the Montana British community, including Ewen and Evelyn Cameron, who settled in Montana in 1889 and a few years later began raising polo ponies for export to England. The polo game pictured here was played in Miles City in 1894 and may be the first ever photographed in the West.
cemented Big Horn's fate when it built its line through Sheridan.11

Whether these changes made Big Horn more attractive to the British "remittance men" who chose the Little Goose Valley as their new home is unclear, but the town did offer certain advantages to men with capital and connections. It was close to Sheridan and the railroad yet provided better land prices,

room to expand, and some seclusion. The first British expatriate to arrive, Oliver Henry Wallop, was the third son of Isaac Newton Wallop, the fifth earl of Portsmouth. The family estate at Farleigh Wallop, Southampton County, dated from the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century. Educated at Eton and Baliol College at Oxford, the twenty-eight-year-old Wallop came to the American West in 1884 after failing

Many of the British expatriate ranchers were, like O. H. Wallop, the younger sons of British gentry who received remittances from home. In 1884, Wallop used his payment to start a horse ranch south of Miles City, Montana. Six years later, he moved his operation south to Wyoming and in 1895 purchased the property he named Canyon Ranch in the Little Goose Valley on the east edge of the Bighorn Mountains, illustrated in the etching "Little Goose—Wyo." First State, by Hans Kleiber (above). At the Canyon Ranch (right, 1909), Wallop raised and trained the tandem horse teams and polo ponies that he shipped to the East and to England.
his naval entrance exam for health reasons. He used his remittance—payments mandated by rules of primogeniture to younger sons of British gentry—to capitalize on a horse ranch on Otter Creek, near Miles City, Montana. As a gift, his father sent him two Englishbred stallions to further his business. Six years later, Wallop moved south to Wyoming and purchased his homestead of Big Horn founder Oliver Perry Hanna. Over the next few years, Wallop raised and trained tandem horse teams and polo ponies that he trailed to the railroad to ship to the East and to England. In 1895, he bought a ranch at the mouth of Little Goose Creek from early Big Horn citizen William F. “Bear” Davis, renaming it the Canyon Ranch.  

The Moncreiffe presence in the West began in 1883 when Malcolm, the sixth son of the baron of Moncreiffe, left home at seventeen, landed in Miles City, and eventually settled near present-day Gillette, Wyoming. Five years later, in 1888, the baron’s fourth son, William, came to visit his brother after graduating from Cambridge and embarking on a round-the-world vacation. After stopping at Malcolm’s Crook County ranch, William traveled on west to see O. H. Wallop at Big Horn. Liking the country, William purchased land near Wallop in 1892 and settled down to raise cattle on his Quarter Circle A Ranch. In 1898, when William joined the Wyoming-based Second U.S. Volunteer Cavalry, known as “Torrey’s Rough Riders,” to serve in the Spanish-American War, Malcolm came from Gillette to watch over his brother’s place. With William’s return from the service, Malcolm stayed on at the ranch.  

The British formed an expatriate community in the northern West, and O. H. Wallop and the Moncreiffes maintained friendships within it. Among them were Evelyn Cameron and her husband, Ewen, who had come to Montana in 1889 to raise horses, and later polo ponies, for sale back in England. Having met Wallop in Miles City, they continued to visit him after he moved south to Big Horn in 1890, joining him in “the English pleasures of hunting and polo.” Indeed, the earliest description of a polo game in Big Horn comes from Evelyn Cameron’s November 29, 1893, diary entry. She recorded that Wallop’s bronco buster, when delivering a few horses for inspection, reported that the English at Sheridan “have organized a polo club. . . . [W]hen practicing once, one of them knocked another off his pony with [his] polo stick in an effort to reach the ball!” At some point during 1893, Wallop even offered Ewen a job managing his “polo pony ranch.” Although they seriously considered the proposition, especially after the Miles City...
In the late 1890s, Wallop, the Moncreiffe brothers, and Walsh joined forces to sell horses to the British army for use in the Boer War in South Africa. Horses from herds like this one photographed in southeast Montana may have served as British cavalry mounts when Lord Roberts advanced toward Johannesburg (left, circa 1900).

Camerons had started selling stock in 1895, reported that he bought a pony from O. H. Wallop in 1898; the previous year, in London, Drybrough had acquired from Malcolm Moncreiffe three horses produced from western mares and imported thoroughbred sires. Bought in the United States “in the rough” for between forty-five and one hundred dollars, the horses had been “broken in the English style and worked with cattle during the summer,” then “played on a private polo ground at Bighorn.”[^1] It is irritating to know,” Drybrough lamented, “that roaming over Montana prairies there are thousands of excellent ponies purchasable at from £5 to £15 each, good enough to play in Champion Cups, and worth Champion Cup prices when properly broken, yet unavailable simply

[^1]: http://example.com/footnote
because the ranchmen have not learned how to make them suitable for the English market.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1899, the Moncreiffe brothers, O. H. Wallop, and fellow polo player Robert H. Walsh joined forces and significantly expanded their horse business. Capitalizing on the availability of inexpensive animals, the men began supplying horses to the British cavalry for use in the Boer War in South Africa (1899–1902). The war provided tremendous economic opportunities, since horses worth five to thirty-nine dollars in the northern West could be resold to the British for as much as ninety-seven dollars. During the three years of the operation, the partners collected and sold over twenty thousand horses, turning the Sheridan area into a massive horse market. Even though most of the horses were intended for the British cavalry, Floyd Bard, a Moncreiffe cowboy and horse buyer, remembered that Malcolm also had “riders on the lookout for ponies that might make good polo ponies.” These mounts could be played and then sold for even better prices.\textsuperscript{17}

The Boer War horse business both acted as a foundation for further investments and tightened the bonds of the Big Horn British. Moncreiffe became O. H. Wallop’s brother-in-law when he married Amy Walker, the younger sister of Wallop’s wife, Margarette, in 1901. Later that fall, Moncreiffe paid over $28,000 for parcels from four homesteads that he combined into a 1,700-acre ranch situated between his brother William’s and O. H. Wallop’s ranches.\textsuperscript{18}

Moncreiffe named his new place the Polo Ranch and in 1902 paid $19,500 to another neighbor to add 1,280 acres. By 1908, the Polo Ranch was appraised at $203,600. Also in 1908, Malcolm, his brother William, and Robert Walsh acquired the First National Bank of Sheridan from John B. Kendrick, later Wyoming’s governor and U.S. senator.\textsuperscript{19}

As the Big Horn British expanded their polo community, Owen Wister, a Harvard-educated writer and a buddy of Theodore Roosevelt, worked to democratize the game through articles in popular magazines. Wister’s “How They Taught Me Polo,” which appeared in \textit{Harper’s Weekly} in 1895, described Wister’s trip to a British enclave in Colorado Springs and his failed attempt at learning the game. In a 1900 issue of \textit{Outing}, a second Wister article, “Educating the Polo Pony,” addressed the question of whether western polo was as class conscious as the eastern game. Wister indicated that a common Texas horse could rise to the ranks of polo pony and therefore be more socially acceptable. He also outlined polo’s growth in the region over the previous decade: the “industry has become recognized,” he wrote, and the “call for ponies in the East has come to be heard widely in the West.”\textsuperscript{20}

Wister’s choice of polo as a subject shows the sport’s rising popularity across the United States. In New York, international matches between the United States and Great Britain began in 1886, with the Americans winning their first game in 1902. In 1904, enthusiasts hosted the first United States National Open Championship. Leading polo centers included Newport, Rhode Island, with its Westchester Polo Club; Meadow Brook on Long Island; and Aiken, South Carolina, the winter home of many northern players. In the intermountain West, the growth of British expatriate clubs led to new squads in Cheyenne, Glenwood Springs, and Denver.\textsuperscript{21}

For Moncreiffe’s team, the increasing number of polo clubs across the West provided opportunities to participate in interstate tournaments. In the summer of 1904, the Magpies traveled to Hot Springs, South
After the turn of the century, the sport of polo gained popularity nationwide, and by 1902 the U.S. Army’s cavalry units were playing the game to improve their riding skills. This 1913 army game was held in an unidentified location.

Dakota, to compete in a six-team tournament. When only the Tenth Cavalry team from Fort Robinson, Nebraska, showed up, the two clubs decided that they would play a best two-out-of-three series for the trophy presented by the townspeople. The Tenth Cavalry prevailed sixteen to one in the first game and took the trophy when it won the second, seven to four. The next year, Moncreiffe and his teammates traveled to Colorado, where they played Denver, Colorado Springs, and the Tenth Cavalry, which they defeated before a crowd of eight thousand spectators, claiming a victory cup. 20

Another tournament highlight came in September 1911 when Moncreiffe’s Magpies defeated the Denver Freebooters at the Denver Polo Club’s interstate tournament. According to the Denver Times, the teamwork of the Big Horn team “was splendid and the best seen on the Country Club field during the present tournament.” The Times was most impressed by the play of the “intrepid” Malcolm Moncreiffe, “who is by all odds the most dashing and talented individual player in the tourney.” According to the story, Moncreiffe “got the ball at the far corner of his own goal, and, riding furiously and malleting beautifully, took it the entire length of the field for a score.” In another game, against a Kansas City team, Moncreiffe came from behind in the fourth period “with a resolute determination to even things, and by some dandy individual riding took the ball, with two full strokes, the length of the field for a score.” The paper added weight to its story by publishing a photo of the Big Horn team under the caption “These Men Play Real Polo.” 21

With its growing reputation, the Big Horn polo community began to expand as old-money American families settled in the area. One Big Horn newcomer was Goelet Gallatin, an assistant district attorney and polo player from New York, whom William Moncreiffe met while on a winter vacation in Santa Barbara, California. Gallatin brought his family to visit the Moncreiffes in Big Horn. Liking what they saw, the Gallatins acquired half of William Moncreiffe’s ranch in 1911, reputedly for $110,000, and established their E4 Ranch. While the ranch’s thirty-eight-room house was being built, Gallatin laid out a polo field adjacent. Not to be outdone, Malcolm Moncreiffe added a second polo field on his ranch. 22

In 1915 and 1916, two of the country’s top players, Tommy Hitchcock and Foxhall Keene, visited Big Horn. The seventeen-year-old Hitchcock, who
in the undated photograph above, Malcolm McNeill's Magpies (right, in two-toned vests) pose with members of other teams at a polo match, possibly in Denver or Colorado Springs.
would become the greatest American player of the 1920s and 1930s, participated in the first match played on Gallatin’s new field, teaming up with Goelet Gallatin, neighbor and fellow New Yorker Milt McCoy, Lee Bullington, and Gallatin ranch foreman Roy Snyder. According to the Sheridan Post, Hitchcock “played a strong consistent game, but did not outshine the local players.” The Post also reported that the day’s audience was by far the biggest of the summer with almost one hundred automobiles, scores of people on horseback, and “rigs from Sheridan, Big Horn, nearby ranches, and ranch resorts.”

The following summer, Foxhall Keene, the first American player to earn the coveted ten-goal handicap and the first to score in international competition (during the 1900 Olympics), played in a three-team exhibition match at the Polo Ranch while vacationing at nearby Teepee Lodge. Keene played with Sheridan banker Robert Walsh, Francis Johnson of Chicago, and Goelet Gallatin. Milt McCoy led a squad consisting of ranch foreman Roy Snyder, dude rancher Harold Hilman, and rancher J. W. “Tip” Wilson. Malcolm Moncreiffe headed the Polo Ranch team that included foreman John Cover, farmer Fred Skinner, and dude rancher Doc Spear. According to the Sheridan Enterprise, nearly three hundred people witnessed the exhibition.

These newspaper stories and other accounts show the extent to which ordinary Wyoming horsemen were competing with the elite players on the Big Horn fields. Self-described “granger” and cowhand Floyd Bard was always invited to play in weekend polo matches. “[E]very Sunday for five years I went either to the Moncreiffe or Gallatin polo field for a game,” Bard recalled in his memoir. Gallatin’s daughter, Beatrice Beuf, later recounted that during Hitchcock’s visit, the easterner had been amazed at the polo skills of Moncreiffe’s ranch foreman John Cover. According to Beuf, one day Hitchcock followed Cover “up and down the Moncreiffe field trying to copy how he hit backhands.” “Later on,” Beuf added, “when Tommy was a polo celebrity he told Milt [McCoy] that, had John had the opportunity, he certainly would have made the international team.”

It seems that a respect for skilled horsemanship and athletic ability could transcend class differences on the polo fields. The roster of players noted in Floyd Bard’s memoir underscores this point. His list included rancher Ray Wood; foreman John Cover; Clyde Sackett and Fred Skinner, the sons of Big Horn merchants; and Harold Hilman, the son of a nearby dude ranch operator. Still, it should be noted that the extent of their opportunities to play polo seemingly did not reach beyond Big Horn teams.
The irony of polo’s presence in the Cowboy State was not lost on the eastern guests of nearby dude ranches. One visitor remarked that the “rustic simplicity” of the place was “rudely dissipated by the announcement of some polo games to be played on a neighboring ranch.” While “smiling amusedly” to himself “at the prospect of plow horses or at best cow ponies burlesquing the strenuous game of polo,” this visitor agreed to attend a game, where he was “astonished” to be informed of three large area ranches devoted entirely to the breeding and training of ponies. His pride was “further humbled” to learn that these same animals were shipped back east to “wealthy fashion centers” and to England.27

By the outbreak of the Great War, then, the town of Big Horn, Wyoming, with a population of just over five hundred, was home to a regional champion polo team composed of upper-class Brits and local horsemen; supported an international horse and polo pony industry; had three fine polo fields where “lovers of the sport, either as players or spectators, [could] get their fill during the summer and early autumn months”; and had been visited by the sport’s biggest names.28

World War I brought another burst of economic opportunity to Big Horn as the firm of Moncreiffe Brothers, Wallop and Walsh again collected horses for the British, then later for the French and Italian armies. And, again, the Moncreiffes hired cowboys like Floyd Bard to buy horses throughout the West. Bard traveled first to the Loup River country of central Nebraska, where he filled a railroad car with twenty-five horses before pushing on to the Black Hills of northeastern Wyoming. Moving from ranch to ranch near Sundance, Bard paid up to $125 for small cavalry horses, up to $150 for light artillery animals weighing up to twelve hundred pounds, and as high as $165 for heavy artillery horses. In all, the firm employed twenty-nine buyers throughout the western states, including O. H. Wallop himself, who worked out of Oregon and Washington.29

Throughout the war, the Moncreiffe field frequently served as the site of charity matches to benefit the war effort. In the late summer of 1917, for example, an exhibition championship match pitted the Magpies—Luther Barker, Ira Thomas, Tip Wilson, and Moncreiffe as captain—against men from the “rest of the country”—team captain Robert H. Walsh, Harold Hilman, Roy Snyder, George Gentry, and Doc Spear. During the 1918 season, Moncreiffe twice hosted benefit games between the Magpies and the Sun Flowers. In the first meeting, the Sun Flowers—captain John Cover, Harold Hilman, Doc Spear, and Floyd Bard—defeated Moncreiffe, Tip Wilson, Lee Bullington, and Ira Thomas four goals to three. Although attendance was free, organizers collected $250 for “the canteen maintained in France by Mr. and Mrs. Wallop” for the purchase of “chocolate, candy, cigarettes [sic] and other articles which cannot be supplied through the French Red Cross.” Two weeks later, Moncreiffe’s Magpies defeated the Sun

![Of the Big Horn players who often competed on Moncreiffe’s Magpies team, three of the nine could be considered part of the “polo class” while six were local horsemen. Right, two unidentified Big Horn teams pose in an undated photograph.](image-url)
Flowers in the return match, with $226 presented to the Sheridan Red Cross Canteen.30

Again, an analysis of the men playing with Moncreiffe is telling. Excluding Moncreiffe, only Tip Wilson and Robert H. Walsh could be considered men of the “polo class.” Wilson was a thirty-two-year-old “stock farmer” from New York; Walsh was a banker. The remaining players were all neighbors who happened to be good horsemen. Harold Hilman and Doc Spear made their living in the dude-ranch business, while George Gentry, “one of the best all-round cowboys in the country,” worked as a hired hand on the nearby Eaton Brothers Dude Ranch. Barker was a stock farmer; Snyder and Thomas were ranch foremen for Golet Gallatin and Malcolm Moncreiffe, respectively. Hardly matches between elites, these benefit games, and others that summer, were simply a chance for neighbors to compete for a good cause.31

Following the war, just as American polo was entering its golden age, Big Horn began to shift from an eclectic polo-playing community to an exporter of world-class polo ponies. One factor in this shift was the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps’ Remount Service. Established by Congress in 1908 to “procure horses, condition them, provide initial training, and issue them to using units,” the Remount Service had effectively trained more than a half million horses for military use by the end of World War I. Although the Great War saw the increased use of airplanes, tanks, and trucks, the army employed horses and mules both for riding and for hauling ammunition, water, artillery, and even the wounded, and more than seventy thousand head were killed in the war.32

During World War I, the polo fields on Moncreiffe’s Polo Ranch (above, 1909) served as the site of charity matches to raise money for the war effort, as described in this article in the September 9, 1917, Sheridan Enterprise. Malcolm and his wife were active in other local fund-raising activities as well, and excerpts from his 1918 journal provide a glimpse into Big Horn life. In the summer months, Malcolm worked on the farm during the week; took his wife to Red Cross meetings; participated in the Liberty Loan drive; and played polo on Sunday afternoons, often inviting friends to the house afterward for tea or dinner.

$250 COLLECTED FROM POLO SPECTATORS FOR CANTEEN IN FRANCE

Two hundred fifty dollars was realized from the collection taken among the visitors at the Polo ranch yesterday to be sent to the canteen maintained in France by Mr. and Mrs. Wallep. This money will be used for the purchase of chocolate, candy, cigarettes and other articles for the soldiers which cannot be supplied through the French Red Cross.

Fully 100 autos made the trip to the Polo ranch where the Sunflowers and Maplec star a hotly contested polo match, the Sunflowers winning to a score of 4 to 3. Three of the four goals for the Sunflowers were made by Harold Hilmian. Floyd Hardmarking the other. Malcolm Moncreiffe made two of the three goals for the Maplec. Lee Hilmia ton making the other. The grounds were in excellent condition.
In 1919, citing the need to provide adequate mounts for a time of national emergency, the War Department established a Remount Board under the auspices of the Remount Service. Consisting of army officers and prominent civilian horsemen, the board would supervise a large-scale effort to lease to breeders registered sires donated to the government. It divided the country into seven geographical regions and established a Remount depot in each, including one in Sheridan, Wyoming. To receive a stud, a breeder needed only twenty quality mares and a small amount of money. The breeder could sell the offspring to the army or to anyone else. Although the intent was to create a ready supply of good horses for military use, the effect of the service was to jump-start the American sport horse industry.\(^{33}\)

The Remount Service had a major effect on the Big Horn polo industry as local breeders began utilizing studs leased from the federal government to supplement their breeding programs. The opportunity to increase both the quality and quantity of horses came at a good time for the polo pony breeders. The loss of animals in the war had caused the price of polo ponies to skyrocket. In 1919, ponies sold for $350 to $400 on the East Coast. Malcolm Moncreiffe’s Polo Ranch profited, and so did Goelet Gallatin, who teamed with Milt McCoy in 1922 to form the Circle V Polo Ranch to raise ponies for sale to the eastern polo center of Aiken, South Carolina. Fifteen miles to the north, W. Cameron Forbes, former governor-general of the Philippines, began raising polo ponies on his ranch at Beckton and by 1926 had sold horses to the Circle V.

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Although polo was considered a “rich man’s game” in the East, things were different in Wyoming, where there were no club dues, each man acted as his own groom, and “anyone with the price of a couple of ponies” could play. The game shown in the photograph above was probably played on a ranch near Cheyenne. At right, spectators watch a match, possibly at Fort D. A. Russell near Cheyenne.
During World War I, the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps’ Remount Service collected and trained horses at Remount stations like the one shown in this photograph, which is labeled “Camp Kea[ryn] Re-mount Station,” December 1917. Also written on the image is “Captain Valentine in command of the Remount Station, 100K head of stock.” After the war, the War Department, seeking to replenish the horse population, revitalized the American horse industry by leasing quality stud horses to breeders, including the Big Horn polo ranchers.

In 1930, Forbes purchased two adjacent properties and the following year established the Neponset Stud Farm on the Beckton Polo Ranch, where he also built his own polo field.34 At Big Horn, the McCoy-Gallatin Circle V Ranch became what a contemporary writer called a “mammoth breeding plant.” McCoy and Gallatin reasoned that the best chance to get a good horse was to breed with two known parents, and unlike their predecessors and competitors who bred registered sires with local dams, the Circle V used only polo mares. This strategy worked, for the Circle V became known as “a horse-breeding enterprise of surpassing excellence.” Visiting the ranch, polo enthusiast Major Henry Leonard found a “singularly fine band of upwards of sixty brood-mares” whose “air of distinction” arose from their “own consciousness of fame and accomplishment . . . [as well as] their structural excellence and high breeding.” Leonard praised the entire Circle V operation, suggesting that the “yearling pasture could well be used as a demonstration of what a breeder should seek to attain.” Almost as an afterthought, he noted “these superior foals may in the fullness of time be called from their careers on the polo fields of Eastern America or England to carry the eagles of the great Republic into the battle line.”35

The military intent of the Remount program was not even mentioned by another chronicler, Newell Bent, who, writing about the Circle V, noted that “never before in this country has such tried and proven polo blood, both in sires and dams, been gathered together.” Enchanted by the pastoral setting and young “frisking foals,” he described the ranch as a “veritable nursery paradise for the baby blue-bloods of polo-dom.” In 1926, the ranch produced fifty two- and three-year-olds, thirty yearlings, and forty foals, with fifty more foals expected a year hence. The three-year-olds trained in Sunday afternoon polo games at the Moncreiffe ranch, meaning that at the end of the season a “goodly number of finished polo ponies of absolutely the highest class” were ready to ship east.36

In the glowing reports about Circle V polo in the 1920s, it is notable that the many local cowboys involved in the breeding operations are absent from the descriptions of Big Horn operations. It is as if the “frisking foals” had taken to polo on their own. A few stories mention John Cover, who was now working for the Circle V, but the 1930 federal census lists thirteen other men employed on that ranch, none of whom were ever referred to in the national stories.37

Perhaps Big Horn polo’s changing attitudes in the 1920s can be attributed to the shift in the demographics from British expatriates like the Moncreiffe brothers and Wallop to the old-money Americans, with their connections to the country’s prominent polo centers. One such change occurred in 1923 when William Moncreiffe sold his ranch to Ohio industrialist and polo enthusiast Bradford Brinton. Born in 1886 to a prosperous Illinois family, Brinton graduated from Yale in 1904 and then joined his father’s farm implement business. When his father’s company merged with a conglomerate, the younger Brinton became a director and manager of the J. I. Case Threshing
Machine Company. He met Moncreiffe while visiting Santa Barbara and decided to buy Moncreiffe’s Big Horn Quarter Circle A Ranch.\(^3\)

Just as Brinton settled in, three more events altered the Big Horn landscape. In July 1925, Malcolm Moncreiffe’s main house at the Polo Ranch burned to the ground. Two weeks later, word came to O. H. Wallop that his older brother, John Fellows, had died at the family estate in England, leaving no heirs. If the Wallop family wanted to retain its rank in the British peerage, O. H. would have to renounce his American citizenship and return to England. He did so, taking with him his eldest son, Gerard, who became Viscount Lymington, heir to the estate. Wallop’s second son, Oliver Malcolm, then playing on the Yale polo team, stayed in the United States to run the Canyon Ranch. Oliver Malcolm Wallop’s move to Big Horn proved providential for the town. Wallop married Jean Moore, daughter of Edward S. Moore of Chicago and New York City, a very successful businessman. After the marriage, Moore also moved to Big Horn, where he built a large home on a ten-thousand-acre ranch just south of town and raised Hereford cattle and racehorses.\(^3\)

Big Horn polo has waxed and waned since its glory days between the turn of the twentieth century and the Great Depression. The Big Horn Polo Club maintained its 1931 schedule, including a ten-day interstate tournament during which breeders trailed their horses to the Moncreiffe field in the hope of selling mounts to visiting players. But the next season, the breeding business took a turn for the worse when Goelet Gallatin and Milt McCoy dissolved their partnership, bringing an end to the Circle V Ranch. A year later, in 1933, the Horse made no mention of any of the area’s ranches.\(^4\)

At least some play continued through the 1930s, as evidenced by a 1939 match between area teams in which a new generation of polo players took the field, with old-timers Malcolm Moncreiffe, Robert Walsh, and Goelet Gallatin serving as umpires. The tumultuous years of World War II—and Malcolm Moncreiffe’s death in 1948—further diminished Big Horn polo, but the sport rebounded in the early 1960s when O. H. Wallop’s two grandsons, John and Malcolm; local ranchers Kelly Howie and Doc Connell; and Teepee Lodge owner Ike Fordyce brought polo matches back to the historic Moncreiffe fields. Play continued there until the early 1980s, when the Polo Ranch was sold. Enthusiasts then opened the Big Horn Equestrian Center south of town. With over sixty acres of manicured grass, the center grew into

Among the largest Big Horn polo pony breeders in the postwar years were partners Goelet Gallatin and Milton McCoy, owners of the Circle V Polo Company. Fifteen miles north, in Beckton, W. Cameron Forbes, who as governor-general had introduced polo to the Philippines, established the Neposset Stud Farm on his ranch. The Forbes ranch is pictured above in 1903 with draft horses in the foreground.
one of the largest polo clubs in the country. In 2005, Big Horn horse breeder Skey Johnston expanded his Flying H polo ranch to include barns to accommodate over one hundred horses and dedicated three new fields to the best—or “high goal”—polo matches. With top amateur and even professional players visiting these new fields as well as the nearby Equestrian Center, Big Horn polo once again thrives, recalling the halcyon days between the wars.41

For New Western historians, the polo community at Big Horn, Wyoming, provides an important case study. Historians who look at the convergence of different cultures in the American West often focus on the disfranchised or marginalized, simply setting aside
studies of elite whites. But elite communities such as Big Horn deserve reassessment, for they have much to say about the flexibility of social class in the West and the formation of egalitarian subcultures based on common interest rather than class.

Also notable is the extent to which polo became an important part of the Big Horn economy. For

Although Big Horn polo declined as the old guard passed the ranches to new generations and new owners, a revival that began in the 1960s brought the sport back, first to the historic Moncreiffe field and then to the Big Horn Equestrian Center in the 1980s and to the Flying H Ranch in 1995. Below, Amy Moncreiffe presents a trophy to the Neponset Stud Farm team in a 1948 tournament at Moncreiffe field. The players, from left, Bill Gardner, Merrill Fink, Mike Long, and Bill Gray, won the friendly rivalry with the Big Horn team, which included O. H. Wallop’s son Oliver.
Sheridan County residents, polo brought jobs as horse buyers, trainers, and ranch foremen; even into the 1920s and 1930s, as the breeding operations expanded, ranches continued to employ many locals and served as the economic center of the valley. Further, these jobs were tied to national and international markets and fueled by international capital, war, and federal subsidy. Along the way, polo fundamentally altered the community's cultural landscape, as the ranches of Moore, Brinton, Gallatin, Malcolm Moncreiffe, Wallop, and Forbes gradually subsumed what, just a half century earlier, had been more than one hundred individual homesteads. Within a fifteen-mile radius, these polo enthusiasts constructed four polo fields, each encompassing more than twelve acres of the area's prime farmland. The changing land use is subtle but important; lands that had been used by one group for small-scale market agriculture had been converted by another for recreation.42

These factors all point to a complicating of regional identity. Certainly, Wyoming has long embraced its identity as the “Cowboy State.” In 1941, for instance, the Work Projects Administration’s Wyoming: A Guide to Its History, Highways, and People notes, in the first sentence, that “Wyoming was, and continues to be, the land of the cowboy.” Yet, a tension appears when the book discusses Big Horn’s “elaborate houses, surrounded by gardens, tennis courts, swimming pools, rifle ranges, and spacious stables for blooded ponies” and that the “Moncreiffe Ranch . . . has a polo field where local and regional teams play on Sunday afternoons in summer.” Indeed, to this day, in a region and state known nationwide for its cowboys, this tension—the question of what makes a westerner and why—still exists, as do the traditions of Big Horn polo, fascinating both modern visitors and historians seeking better understandings of the complexities of the American West.43

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Notes

‘These Men Play Real Polo’


5. The role of complexity in understanding the American West is discussed in Patricia Limerick, Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckoning in the New West (New York, 2001), 15–28. See also William Robbins, Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West (Lawrence, Kan., 1994).


12. Background information concerning Wallop can be found in the autobiography by Gerard Vernon Wallop, A Knot of Roots (London, 1965); King, Big Horn Polo, 5; and O. H. Wallop obituary; Casper (Wyo.) Tribune-Herald, Feb. 11, 1943. Wyoming Chipping Files, Coe Library, University of Wyoming, Laramie.

13. Sir Edmund Burke, Burke’s Peerage, Baronetage, and Knightage (London, 1999), 1901; King, Big Horn Polo, 6; Big Horn Public Schools, Big Horn Pioneers (Lovell, Wyo., 1985), 59–61.

14. T. B. Drybrough, Polo (London, 1898), 319–33; Lucey, Photographing Montana, 25. Drybrough gives a long description of polo ponies imported from the United States, including a section on “Montana (and Idaho) Ponies,” written in collaboration with “my friend Mr. E. S. Cameron of the Eve Ranch, Terry, Montana, who during the last few years has selected and sent to England all my ponies and hunters.”

15. Drybrough, Polo, 318–19, 323–33. See also Lucey, Photographing Montana, 37–44. Based on the age of the horses sold in London, Bucky King suggests that Moncreiffe and Wallop “were already into polo breeding and playing by 1892.” See King, Big Horn Polo, 9.


21. Denver Times, Sept. 14, 15, 1911; King, Big Horn Polo, 16.


23. Sheridan (Wyo.) Enterprise, Aug. 26, 1915; Sheridan (Wyo.) Post, Aug. 21, 1915; Bard, Horse Wrangler, 298.


25. Bard, Horse Wrangler, 266–67; According to his obituary, John Cover was once ranked as the second best No. 4 polo player in the nation. See "Cover Services to Be Saturday," undated 1935 article from the Sheridan (Wyo.) Press; Beattie Gallatin Beuf to author, Feb. 18, 1991.

26. Bard, Horse Wrangler, 298; Biographies of Sackett, Skinner, Hilman, Bard, and Wood can be found in Deck Hunter, The City, vol. 2 of Big Horn City; and Big Horn Schools, Pioneers, 89–95, 96, 91.


29. Moncreiffe, 1917 account ledger, box 2, Moncreiffe Collection, AHC; Bard, Horse Wrangler, 59–60. For a firsthand description of the World War I horse buying, see Bard, Horse Wrangler, 246–62, esp. 249–53.


34. Godfrey Preece to Malcolm Moncreiffe, July 14, 1919, box 3, Moncreiffe Collection, AHC; King, Big Horn Polo, 22–26, 28–31, 57–58.


40. Bob Tate Jr., interview with author, June 13, 1990, Beckton, Wyo.; King, Big Horn Polo, 32. The July 1933 issue of The Horse reported that W. Milton McCoy had been employed as manager for a Virginia horse breeder. See Broad Rock, "Post, Paddock, and Field," The Horse: The Magazine for the Horse Fan and Breeder, 13 (July 1932), 26; and Capt. E. M. Daniels, "Government Medicine in the Western Horse Country," The Horse: The Magazine for the Horse Fan and Breeder, 14 (May 1933), 8.


42. Deck Hunter, "1900 Homestead Map of Little Goose Creek" map, Big Horn, Wyo.; Sheridan County 1938 Land Ownership map, Wiscos Abstract and Title Guaranty Agency, Sheridan, Wyo.


Montana Deaconess School to Intermountain
1. From the album of Margaret Patricia Williams Kind, courtesy her daughter, Sylvia Kind Waters.

2. Vivian Paladini, "To preach, sing, and encourage people to be good": Brother Van's Call to Montana," ts. copy in the author's files. Founded in 1865, St. Paul's in Helena is Montana's oldest Methodist church with a continuous history.


5. Robert W. Lind, From the Ground Up: The Story of Brother Van, Montana Pioneer Minister, 1848–1919 (Polson, Mont., 1961), 125; Ruth W. Rasche, "Dea-