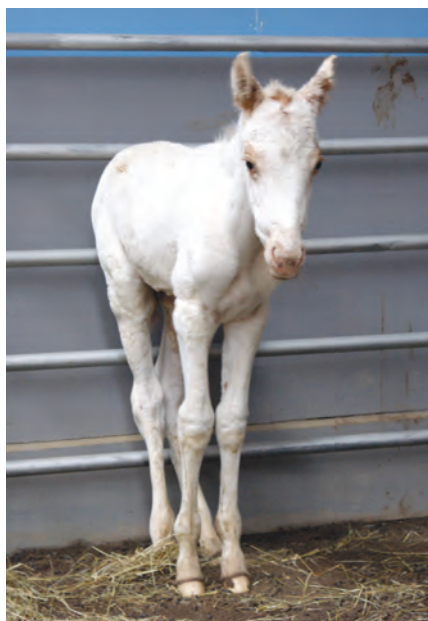


# Nurse Mare Foals: An Interview with Anna Twinney

By Kari Hagstrom

**R**ecently, "The Valley Equestrian News" spoke with internationally recognized holistic and natural horsemanship clinician, Anna Twinney, founder of Reach Out to Horses®. The nurse mare foal industry is predominantly known to be a sub-industry of the racing and performance horse industries. It is a practice in which the thoroughbred or performance mare is bred and gives birth. The foal is taken from its mother and placed with a surrogate mare who has just given birth and is lactating. The surrogate mare's foal is removed from its mother, often within 24 hours of birth, and usually left to figure out how to survive on its own, with a bucket of milk replacer in a stall, and little to no idea of how to drink from a bucket. The general attitude is one of "if they make it, they make it." Apparently no provisions are made for these foals. The sole purpose of the nurse mare industry is to continue the breeding, racing or performance availability of the thoroughbred or performance mare: immediately breed her back, or keep her racing/performing. The racing industry requires live cover of a mare; it does not allow the use of artificial insemination. It is important to point out that many breeding farms do not do this practice. Many breeders allow the foal to accompany the mare. A lot of nurse foals are rescued, but many are not. Many die of neglect. The VEN spoke



Foal Diary Day 1: Snow

with Twinney about her involvement in rescuing and working with nurse mare foals.

Anna Twinney: How it came about for me was that I was at Ray of Light Farms in

East Haddam, Conn., and I'd been involved with the PMU [pregnant mare urine, used in the estrogen replacement product, Premarin®] industry for maybe a decade at that point, and what I'd developed, was not just the "Success: Foals in Training™" DVD, but I'd developed the course. As part of the trainers' course, I ask my trainers to participate in gentling foals. I think it's really a unique course, because not many individuals will hand over their foals for training, so here's an opportunity for novices in the field of foal gentling and foal handling to have that opportunity to put the first touch on the foals and begin to train them. And the course also involves the early learning of what is imprint training, how much handling should we be doing, and what is considered to be over-handling. What

is expected from the foal at birth, at weaning, etc. You really encompass the whole thing on this course.

That particular year, I think we had about eight PMU foals come in from a joint rescue, we teamed up with Ray of Light and Equine Angels. I had been asked through social media whether or not I could find some foals homes, I found myself on the telephone, saying, "Rescue the foals; we'll figure it out."

It's one of those things where you hear yourself saying that, and immediately ask yourself: "Now what have I done now? How is this all going to come together?" Although I had never met the lady before, the next thing I knew they had been rescued and were attending the foal gentling clinic. "What I can do, is put the basic training on them, get some exposure for them, show them in



Foal Diary Day 1: Getting acquainted.

front of the audience, and then at the end of the six days' training we will have an open day for people to come and learn about the foals and see how far they've come; an adoption day."

Their names were Sunday and Macey. And the story goes like this: My client went to visit the nurse foal farm, and she found Sunday. Sunday was in a little weaning stall, tiny baby, and she had a bucket in front of her to drink from. She was on her own. And when asked how the foal will do, or how well she knows to nurse, the answer was, "she'll either figure it out, or she dies." It was a Sunday, this is how Sunday found herself a new home.

It was the first introduction to me, as a clinician, after all these years, of the nurse foal industry. I'd never heard of it. And so, I cannot blame anybody else having not heard about these industries when they're not involved with horses, or if they are amateurs, not

professionals in the field. Unless you're doing this all the time, or in the rescue industry, they don't just simply cross your path. And these industries go under cover, or are hidden for so



Foal Diary Day 1: Snow and handler.

many years, and unless you are seeking it out actively, it may be that it never crosses your path as a horsewoman. It crossed my path in 2012.

And it shocked me to hear about the industry.

How it appears to me, this industry's been around since 1970, at least, that we know of. Predominantly you

find nurse foal farms near race tracks. So that would mean in Florida, New York, Connecticut, California, Kentucky, you'll find the nurse foal farms. And the nurse foal industry is such that the performance horse mares, be that through the eventers or jumpers, dressage, or race horse mares, go into foal, and they may

carry the foal. Now, as we know, the thoroughbred industry, do not approve of AI [artificial insemination], it has to be live cover. Breeding mares carry their foals throughout the full gestation period, and when they give birth, they either go back to be served again, and some locations don't want the foal at foot, while others will want that mare to go back into performance right away. They wean the baby, and I've heard that it happens at about 24 hours, within 24, 48 hours. That baby goes to another mare, she's called the nurse mare, and this mare could be anybody. Generally speaking, a warmblood of some kind, Appaloosas, warmbloods, etc. And these mares will of course have given birth to a baby. Well, sadly, this baby is classed as a by-product of the nurse foal industry. They are weaned from their mother there and then, so that she lactates for the new foal. She doesn't take the two, she just takes the new foal; she becomes the surrogate mare. That foal is

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**Anna Twinney on Nurse Mare Foals**

*Continued from page 3*

then either put out, I guess, to pasture, or in a stall to fend for themselves.

As a horseperson, we tend to know that these foals don't adapt well to artificial nursing. They start to look for places to nurse; they start to look for the udder of the mare. And so when the water or the milk just stays in the bucket, many of them struggle to know the milk from the bucket is drinkable. And that's the thing, either they make it or they don't make it. You find orphan foals because they've been pulled from the mare at 24 hours, 48 hours, could be a week old, depending on when that mare's needed.

Now, sadly in the industry, these foals are also known as "ponyskins." And "ponyskins" is the reference made to when they go to the feedlot, and truly their skins are used for leather in and around the world. You have to look very carefully at the labels as to who supports that industry and who doesn't.

So these two beautiful foals survived, they found themselves on the clinic. And Sunday was a peach, absolute peach. Really beautiful to gentle, and she had

multiple people handling her. Macey had learned to have a bit of an inappropriate behavior. On the second day she went to double barrel (kick) the student, and we had to literally get her [the student] to jump out of the pen. [Macey] had learned to move a human's

*"Now, sadly in the industry, these foals are also known as 'ponyskins.' And 'ponyskins' is the reference made to when they go to the feedlot, and truly their skins are used for leather in and around the world."*

that and they quickly learn that they can maneuver a person out of that area, that they own it. And if they've got a nice big ego it will get inflated and they can become quite unhandable. A similar situation occurred when we went to lead. She was so smart, she would [position] the person [back far enough] during leading, that she could put a cow kick in, or run forward and kick them or [put the person] forward enough that she could bite them. So she had learned how to move people when she was free, and also how to manipulate them when they were on the lead rope, so to speak. So we really had to instill some guidelines and ground rules for her.

This awakened something in me, that I said, "I want to be part of this." This is happening right here in our backyards. These were barns in New York and Connecticut, in the backyard, and we needed to kind of expose the industry.

Now, there's many rescues that hone in purely on nurse foals, they have been highlighted, and it's wonderful; they will save the foals. We went all out and

feet. She had been adopted, as far as I know, or she had gotten a home, but the person wasn't quite clear on how to handle foals. And if we allow the whisper; there may be a look, a glance, ears pinning, a butt turning, all it takes is one, two, three times for a foal to do

*Continued on next page*



*Foal Diary Day 2: Group interaction.*



## Anna Twinney on Nurse Mare Foals

*Continued from page 10*

we saved mares and foals. We saved mares with foals at foot, we saved foals that had been orphaned, and we saved mares that had yet to give birth. Well over 18 were saved; and the idea here was that if we could remove the mares, we could either slow down or begin to shut down that particular location. That was the idea. We thought, and were told, they would most likely give

to be, generally speaking, kind, gentle, and have all of their needs met. When we look at the PMU industry, the foals have been with the mares approximately two to four months, depending on when they were born, they've been out in a herd, out in a beautiful pasture, and weaned abruptly. But generally speaking they've had time with their mothers, they've had mother's

for orphan foal syndrome—a phrase I coined.

When they came in, this group of rescues was more sick or sicker than I'd seen in a long, long time. I had not seen something quite like that. There were behavior patterns that we hadn't witnessed, either. And it brings tears to your eyes when you see foals sucking on the bucket, or having



*Foal Diary Day 2: Snow and Lacy.*

birth in January—I created the clinic around that. They did not. We had to postpone the clinic; we moved it to an April date, and even then not all of the mares had given birth. But we had a good group of mares, foals at foot, and foals, and it was extraordinary to have them.

Now bear in mind, I've been gentling foals for around 15 years-- and all foals are different. We like the saying, "A horse, is a horse, is a horse," but at the same time, we are dealing with an athlete, versus a mustang—very different. When you're dealing with a foal versus a geriatric—quite different. And so the foals also are quite different. If we have a domesticated foal born in a life of luxury, they're going

milk, they have a good body score, maybe some lice, some trauma for sure, and different behavior patterns, but either way they've been with the mare for a number of months.

We found that not to be the case in the nurse foal industry. It was a matter of hours or days that they had the mare with them, so they were deprived of colostrum, deprived of the nutrients in the mother's milk, deprived of the nurturing, and even learning the language of "Equus"; deprived of it all. And if we're looking at orphaned foals, as we did in the last issue ["Valley Equestrian News," January 2014], these would be primary candidates

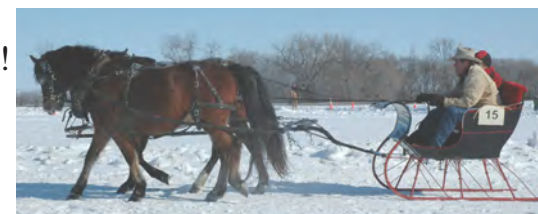
sucked on each other's ears, even on each other's sheaths, because they were looking for something to suck on. It can be seen as cute; to me it was heartbreaking. Heartbreaking to witness the suckling on ears and so on, and looking for that nurturing, and looking for that comfort, and that natural mechanic of the milk coming through that way. It wasn't lovely to see; it was heartbreaking. We would get some foals

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*Anna Twinney*

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# Nurse Foals Have Special Needs

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maybe pinning ears and protecting their food, to say, "This is mine." or foals ignoring people going in, or indeed, really withdrawn, like a learned helplessness, really, really withdrawn, disconnecting.

We named the foals and two foals in particular come to mind. One was called Snow; he was tiny. He was probably the size of a boxer dog, or maybe a German shepherd, about that size, and that gives everybody a visual. He was beautiful, a cremello. And I remember this very clearly, because every time we would stroke his back, he would collapse onto the ground, and it was very evident that there was something not right. We watched him. He really wasn't able to pee, and we didn't see a penis come out in any way. Within a couple of days we had him gentled: we had the halter on, we could touch him all over, and within days we got the vet out. The vet went to explore, with just one or two fingers to see if there was a penis inside, and said she couldn't feel it, but ultimately that area around the sheath was so small and tight that the penis just could not drop. With that, we think there was a urinary infection, and so something on the back, the kidneys, etc., was so painful, he just dropped to the floor. We doctored him every day.

There was an awful lot of preparation, every few hours, preparing the milk replacer, creating the food for them. Making sure that they would be in a herd in the evening, so they could interact and have the body warmth. I remember we put several foals in stalls together, so they got the time in the arena to frolic, to play around, and then they'd go in. I think it was more than two—usually we put two PMUs together, maybe it was two or four of these little guys together, so they had the company,

they had the herd dynamic, the interaction, etc. In the morning, we'd bring them in these stalls, so that we could come in and out. And what that means is, you want to make sure the lessons are short. They could vary from five minutes to 20 minutes, depending on the ability of the little foal, and the handling only as much as they can take, so it might be that we would sit in front of them, interact or just leave. It may be that we would feed from a bucket so that they could connect with us that way, and we'd provide the food.

We'd never deprive them of food and water; and I have heard that, too, that other clinicians have the belief that as the leader, you take them to food and water, in the training area. I've never done that. I've always done food and water for the foals, for the mustangs, so they have access to it, so they can eat at leisure and feel safe. And one thing that the nurse foals in particular would do, if they were a little worried, if they didn't want to interact, if they were concerned, they'd go to the bucket, and they'd put their head in the bucket. This didn't take days for them to do; this took moments for them to do, to realize: "I go and drink, and they will stand back, they will leave me alone." Now, I wanted that to be their

"get out" clause, that any time they were uncomfortable, they needed to be able to tell us, or we needed to change what we were doing and make it better for them. They always had the water, the food; sometimes we'd sit and watch. Within the buddy system with my students, the handlers are always in twos. One would go in with one foal, and the other would watch. And then you'd give that foal a break and you'd go in with the other foal. And that way you're not over-handling, not over-working the foal, you're giving them a mental break, you're not over-stimulating. And it also means that you can buddy-up when it comes to doctoring, sheath cleaning, to be looking at picking up feet, or blanketing for the first time, etc. Because ultimately, when these foals get adopted, they're going to be handled by one or more people. And that also prepares them for the farrier or the vet, so they're not on high alert and disconcerted by the fact that the only time two people come in it's for a pain-related issue. We will

team them up [with people] with time, but only when they're ready. And so it's really neat to see these foals come around, and be so very little. We have morning watches; we have night watches where we have to go in at

wonderful stuff. Then they were handed over to the rescue so that they could be treated with whatever they needed. And it turned out that Lacy was less than 24 hours away from dying, when Bonnie took her to the vets. She took [Lacy]

some kind of e[quine]-fever, either virus or parasites. But either way, it was something that these foals had that could have been prevented by the person breeding the nurse foals. They were put through hell and back, they were put through life-threatening circumstances for weeks and months on end, because of one woman's neglect. That was the sad thing. And yet another saved these foals by making sure she got them to the right vet, and making sure that they got treated with the best care they could have.

Valley Equestrian News: It's the power of one, isn't it?

Twinney: Isn't it amazing. And now one year later—well, now it's 18 months later, Snow is amazing. I took a picture of him not that long ago, but he's gotten huge.

And I never knew, I never knew if his growth would be stunted, what he'd turn out to be, how his health could be compromised, you know, all of these things, and he's just ballooned and blossomed in a year and a half, which is amazing. And then Lacy just got adopted by one of our Reach Out to Horses® trainers, her name is Cindy Corona, she's a vet in Connecticut, and she took a shine to Lacy; she's adopted Lacy. And Lacy's found herself in amazing hands with Cindy; not only does she know the Reach Out to Horse® methods, but she's a vet, and she'll provide a beautiful home for her. And [Lacy's] an Appy; she's a bay Appy with a beautiful speckled butt.

We are tracking these foals, to see how their lives are turning out, as much as we can. A couple of the foals went to North Carolina. I went out there to do a clinic in September, and I saw two



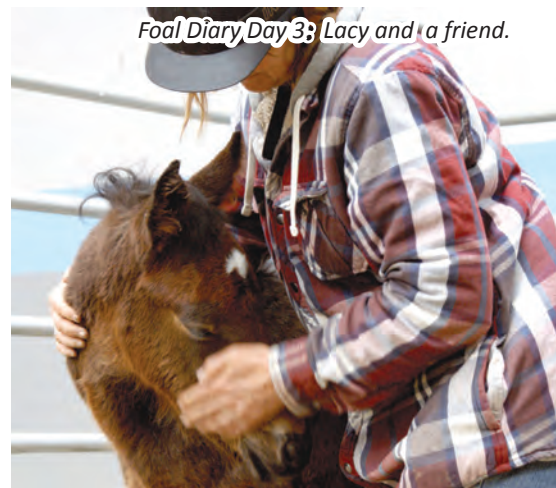
*Foal Diary Day 2: Snow's first halter.*

11 at night and make sure they have their food as readily as possible. Both Lacy and Snow stayed at Ray of Light—Bonnie made sure that she kept them—they needed special care, special attention. And she continued with this hard work we were exposed to for just a week. And we as a team got them ready with the haltering, the leading, picking up feet, the blanketing, the doctoring, farrier prep, and all of that

and Snow to Tufts Veterinary School because they were running temperatures. They always seemed to be eating and drinking, but they were running temps; Snow would be very sensitive over his loin region. And bless her, Lacy must have hidden all this and had a huge pain threshold, because you couldn't tell any of that with her. I believe it turned out to be



*Foal Diary Day 3: Snow learning halter cues.*



*Foal Diary Day 3: Lacy and a friend.*

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# Nurse Foals

Continued from page 13

of the foals there, as well. It was amazing to go to North Carolina; and in those days [one foal] was called Ranger, I think, and Freckles. They were both there, grown up to both be stunning, stunning horses, a buckskin and another Appy. Just stunning horses, really long-legged, beautifully put together. And how tragic would it have been if these foals would have lost their lives. Now, you just don't know what you're going to get when you get a nurse foal, because you don't know the parents, and you don't know the demeanor of the mare, etc., but it was a highly successful rescue. It was very touching and very taxing.

It was one my most challenging rescues I've ever been part of, and so much so, that I took a little backseat after it and [chose] to not be part of rescues for a little while. I can certainly go in as a trainer and clinician, but to truly be part of the rescue, it was too taxing. We received some positive mails

from the press releases, but we also received some hate mail, and I took it personally and it was very hard to overcome that. It was very hard because my name was on all the press releases, and so it went all over the United States and people were critiquing it and were full of malice. And some were full of pride that we were doing something with it. So we got such a kickback from it that that also affected me at the time, and so I had to revisit how I would approach the rescues, or at least take a break from it to get refreshed again.

VEN: What you think about the possibility of any solutions?

Twinney: This industry is not done in the UK, it's not done in New Zealand, so I can't tell you

every country around the world, but I can tell you there are countries that do not do this. Although [to put] the whole thing on the positive side, the nurse mare can be needed if a foal is orphaned; you find another mare. Or if the foal is rejected, you find a mare willing to help. So there's certainly a good intention around some of it. But when you start breeding, basically breeding for slaughter of that foal, it's not the way to go. We treat them as livestock: "She'll survive or she dies," or she goes for sale. If you want to rescue it's a high price. We forget that they're innocent. We forget they're babies. That's not acceptable.

So there's ways to either change this, to realize that, one, a lot of the thoroughbred industry will allow the foal at foot. I worked in the thoroughbred industry, and all of the breeding barns that I knew of in the Santa Inez Valley would allow the foal at foot, so that's certainly acceptable, while others won't. We also need to consider laws to prevent these innocent beings being treated like livestock.

It's amazing where it goes; people start breeding, they get into it as a business, and then they get lost in it. Like the PMU industry, or "let's breed for live consumption." To breed and rent out your mares and just allow those on the side to die if they don't make it, that's not humane. Surely there should be laws that horses are kept adequately.

VEN: With the horse racing industry it's such an iconic image of the foal and the mare running together in the green pastures of Kentucky. It's sad. You wonder who came up with this idea, and then got other people to join in with it.

Twinney: Yeah, exactly. You know, where did it get lost? Was it truly a compassionate person that began it, offering their mare to nurse an orphan foal, and then suddenly it evolves into money only. As with anything it's sad when there are lives at stake.

VEN: Where does the imperative come in to either continue racing or to breed the mare back? You don't need to get rid of the foal to breed her back.

Twinney: There needs to be a little more thought behind it. So

you'll be up against the racing industry which is like challenging a pharmaceutical company.

VEN: My hope is, as we are seeing social structures crumble from within, pretty much across the board, that raising awareness in this fashion will help. Off-the-track thoroughbreds are so popular now, that's got to be a helpful tie-in to "these are not just disposable 'things.'" They're living beings.

Twinney: The point is to just keep going.

*There are many nurse foal rescues out there that could use your help or your support in rescuing these innocents. And many horses that need a good home and could be adopted. Do your research. For more information on Reach Out to Horses® and Anna Twinney's foal gentling methods, go to [www.reachouttohorses.com](http://www.reachouttohorses.com). You can also experience the foal gentling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPWGUDJ1P-U>.*

*Next month, "The Valley Equestrian News" will discuss the plight of feedlot foals with Anna Twinney.*

*Photos by Anna Twinney*



*Foal Graduation: Anna Twinney and Snow. Photo by Susan Solomon.*



*Lacey and Lorraine practicing leading.*