Charles Banks Williams’ sketch of the Pacing White Stallion from Frank Dobie’s 1952 publication, *The Mustangs*. 
A NOTE ON THE PACING WHITE MUSTANG LEGEND
by James T. Bratcher of San Antonio

By 1832, the year Washington Irving reported him in his camp journal that became A Tour on the Prairies, stories of a remarkable wild stallion were making the rounds of western campfires. Mustangs had gone after the horse but without success. According to those who had chased him or heard about him in locales as far separated as the Rio Grande Plain to the south and the Canadian Rockies to the north, he was snow white in color, of regal bearing, and with a flowing mane and tail. In some accounts, however, his color varied in a notable detail. Western chronicler Josiah Gregg, and also Mayne Reid, the Irish adventure-novelist who spent time in the West, reported him as having black ears. Neither Gregg nor Reid had seen the horse with his own eyes, nor had Irving. In Commerce of the Prairies (1844), Gregg shrewdly guessed that the stallion was “somewhat mythical from the difficulty one finds in fixing the abiding place of [this] equine hero.”

Leaving aside Gregg’s skepticism for the moment, a second memorable feature, along with the stallion’s color, was his unusual gait. This was a pace or rack that remained as smooth as glass even during pursuit. The animal’s swift propelling motion, virtually a glide, had thwarted mustangers despite their riding good horses and chasing him as fast as their horses could run. One mustanger had chased him by moonlight: “He moved like a white shadow, and the harder we rode, the more shadowy he looked.” The pacer’s ability to outdistance running horses was uncanny.
Herman Melville wrote of the pacer’s serene majesty and “cool milkiness” in chapter 42 of *Moby Dick*, the essay on whiteness. Melville had become acquainted with the horse while doing research for his masterpiece, perhaps encountering him in George Wilkins Kendall’s *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition* (1844). He attributes the legend, which he cites as a further example of phantom whiteness, to “old trappers and hunters,” duplicating Kendall’s use of the same words, “trappers and hunters.” Kendall had written:

Many were the stories told in camp that night . . . of a large white horse that had often been seen in the vicinity of the Cross Timbers and near Red River [in northern Texas]. . . . As the camp stories ran, he has never been known to gallop or trot, but paces faster than any horse that has been sent out after him can run; and so game and untiring is the “White Steed of the Prairies,” for he is well known to trappers and hunters by that name, that he has tired down no less than three race-nags, sent expressly to catch him, with a Mexican rider well trained to the business of taking wild horses. . . .

Some of the hunters go so far as to say that the White Steed has been known to pace his mile in less than two minutes, and that he could keep up this rate of speed until he had tired down everything in pursuit. Large sums had been offered for his capture, and the attempt had been frequently made; but he still roamed his native prairies in freedom. . . .

A hundred years following Kendall’s report, Texas historian and folklorist J. Frank Dobie, who pursued the pacer in library stacks and elsewhere for nearly three decades, provided the fullest treatment in his 1952 book *The Mustangs.* While Dobie’s book stands as a monument to the western horse, it overlooks (for some
unexplained reason, considering how long he worked with the legend) a central fact about the Pacing White Mustang. The horse had a European counterpart in Celtic “faery” horses. These were noble animals characterized by an exceptional gait (often referred to as “amblers,” with ladies as riders) that during the Middle Ages inhabited the same mystical realm that gave us Avalon, King Arthur’s enchanted retreat. Usually their body color was white. How the qualities of Celtic fairyland horses came to be transferred to a western mustang, it is impossible to say with certainty. But despite Americans’ willingness to accept the Pacing White Mustang as a native-born son of the West, on whose boundless prairies he was unique in history, there are signs he was neither native-born nor unique to the West. Gregg’s skepticism was justified.

The story of “Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed,” as found in the eleventh-century Welsh collection of tales known as *The Mabinogion*, presents us with a mysterious white pacer (here ridden by a ghostly lady) that pursuers on swift mounts cannot overtake. In the Pwyll story we find faery stag-hounds that are shining white except for having red ears, an oddity that Celtic folklore elsewhere assigns to fairyland horses and that the American white pacer almost shares in reports that give him black ears. In “Pwyll,” also, the white pacer is sighted from a mound, as the pacing mustang often was.

“Pwyll” involves a nobleman who visits the Celtic otherworld, a realm of magic and marvels. As strongly suggesting the origin of the American white steed in this mythical dreamland, relevant passages from *The Mabinogion*, as translated from the Welsh by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones,7 are as follows:

Pwyll arose to take a walk, and made for the top of a mound which was above the court and was called Gorseddd Arberth. “Lord,” said one of the court, “it is the peculiarity of the mound that whatever high-born man sits upon it will not go thence without one of two things: wounds or blows, or else his seeing a wonder.” . . .
He sat upon the mound. And as they were sitting down, they could see a lady on a big fine pale white horse . . . coming along the highway that led past the mound. The horse had a slow even pace. . . . [Pwyll sent a man on foot after the lady.] He followed her as fast as he could on foot, but the greater was his speed, all the further she was from him.

Pwyll then sent the man on horseback after the lady. At this point the translated text says, “The more he pricked on his horse, the further she was from him.” The next day, Pwyll sent a second rider on a swifter horse, but with his similar failure the words are repeated (and once more recall the American mustanger’s words, even his sentence structure: “The harder we rode, the more shadowy he looked.”) On the third day, Pwyll said:

“Where is the company we were yesterday and the day before, at the top of the mound?” “We are here, lord,” said they. “Let us go to the mound,” said he, “to sit. And do thou,” said he to his groom, “saddle my horse well and bring him to the road, and fetch with thee my spurs.” . . . They came to the mound to sit; they had been there but a short while when they could see the rider coming by the same road . . . and at the same pace. . . . Pwyll mounted his horse . . . and let his horse, mettled and prancing, take its own speed. And he thought that at the second bound or the third he would come up with her. But he was no nearer to her than before. He drove his horse to its utmost speed, but he saw that it was idle for him to follow her.

Earlier in “Pwyll” we read of enchanted stag-hounds that are shining white except for having red ears:
And then he [Pwyll] looked at the colour of the pack, without troubling to look at the stag; and of all the hounds he had seen in the world, he had seen no dogs the same colour as these. The colour that was on them was a brilliant shining white, and their ears red; and as the exceeding whiteness of the dogs glittered, so glittered the exceeding redness of their ears.

R. S. Loomis, in a well-known comparative study that focuses on Celtic legendry, *Arthurian Tradition and Chrétien de Troyes*, assures us that red ears (also a red mane) were a mark of the Celtic faery horse, as well as of hounds. Typically, the horses were white and possessed of a pacing gait that no galloping horse could match for speed:

[The Celtic faery horse] was likely to have a white body, a long red mane, and red ears; . . . we find unearthly ladies mounted on horses distinguished by preternatural celerity and smoothness of motion. The Breton lai [*Lai du Trot*] describes a cavalcade of lovely ladies issuing from a forest. “They had palfreys entirely white, which carried them so gently that if a person sat upon one and if he did not see the palfrey moving, he would surely think that it was standing still; and yet they moved far more fleetly than one would gallop on the tallest Spanish horse.”

As to sighting the pacer from a mound, as in the Pwyll story, Texas rancher Joe Cruze’s family-legend of the Pacing White Mustang names a particular mound from which his grandfather’s vaqueros had watched for the horse. This was at a time not long “after the fall of the Alamo.” A lifelong resident of Hays County, south of Austin, rancher Cruze contributed his story to a book of
local history published in 1967, *Wimberley’s Legacy*. He writes, his words faintly recalling the Pwyll story, which he could not have consciously known:

There is a high mound north of Creedmore [Creedmoor], Texas, called Pilot Knob. There is where Bill Cruze [the grandfather] kept scouts planted day and night to watch for Indians and outlaws. . . . One day, one of his scouts told him he had seen a snow white horse . . . that acted like a stallion. The scout gave chase to see for sure and the horse hit a pace and single foot and never broke it. . . . Bill Cruze doubted his yarn, but in a week or two, two scouts came up with the same yarn; they had seen the white horse and chased him with the same results. The horse paced away from them, just as he had from the first scouts. Bill Cruze decided to see for himself. He ordered the next man who spotted the horse to notify him. . . .

The Texas family-legend includes a mound, an overlord (the grandfather), retainers (“scouts”), and a dramatic build-up in which eventually the overlord decides he will “see for himself,” as when Pwyll called for his horse and spurs. While the shadowy parallels to “Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed” could be mere coincidence, it is tempting to view them as evidence of mythic survival and influence. At long range, the Pwyll story could have conditioned the way Joe Cruze heard and repeated the legend of the Pacing White Mustang. Possibly in the early 1800s or earlier, a Welsh or a Breton (that is, native of Brittany) storyteller sat among the “old trappers and hunters,” spinning out his yarn and reintroducing the Celtic pacer—onto fresher pastures—when the talk turned to mustangs. It is something of a stretch to accept the theory, but the supernatural Celtic pacer had to come from the folk mind, and likely so did the phantom mustang who roamed throughout the West.
ENDNOTES

1. Chapter XX records stories Irving listened to on the night of October 21, 1832, while camped with frontiersmen west of the junction of the Cimarron and Arkansas rivers in what is now northeastern Oklahoma.

2. Reid’s report took the form of his novel set partly along the Rio Grande, *The War Trail, or the Hunt of the Wild Horse* (New York, 1857). His novel *The Headless Horseman* (1865) draws on a South Texas folktale.


4. Quoted by J. Frank Dobie in *The Mustangs*, page 162 (see note 6 below). Dobie quotes the sentence from a collection of “Frontier Tales” that appeared in *Putnam’s Magazine* 8 (1856): 503–7. As the present article suggests in passing, the sentence may hold significance as an archaism.


9. The cavalcade of otherworld ladies, richly dressed and seated sidesaddle on white amblers that a rider can follow but not overtake, turns up in John Gower’s fourteenth-century dream-vision poem *Confessio Amantis*, Book IV, “Tale of Rosipheelee.”

10. Edited by Williedell Schawe (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1967), 17–19. Editor Schawe published the first edition privately in 1963; the 1967 edition is revised. Following page 116 is a photo of Joe Cruze as a young cowboy. *The Mabinogion* would have been as foreign to him as Thomas Aquinas or modernist poetry.