

Spanish Colonial Horse and the Plains Indian Culture

Early Indian ethnologists believed the feral Spanish mustangs that roamed the Plains descended from Spanish horses lost by Cortez, and that the Plains Indian horses came from these wild Spanish horses. Roe and others have shown this was not the case. The North American Plains Indians acquired their first horses, and the knowledge of how to handle them, through trade with the Indians of the Southwest. American Indians had to learn to ride and handle horses just like everybody else.

Mesohippus bairdi was a three-toed horse that lived approximately twenty-five million years ago. The precursors of the horse family came into existence about fifty-five million years ago. The first was *Eohippus*. These prehistoric horses weighed about eighty pounds, had four toes on its front feet, three toes on its rear feet, and small teeth suitable for a diet of fruit and leaves. As these prehistoric horses increased in numbers and diversity, they spread across North America and, via the Bering Strait land bridge, to Europe and Asia. About fifteen thousand years ago, the North American habitat started to change and the prehistoric horses began to disappear. Horses were also a food source for Paleo-Indians, which contributed to horses becoming extinct on this continent.

What became the Plains Indian horses were brought to North America by Spanish Conquistadors in the sixteenth century. The original horses from Spain were relatively unselected. These Spanish horses carried the blood of Spanish Barbs, Arabians, Lipizzaners, and some other European breeds. These horses are now referred to by a variety of names: Spanish Barb, Spanish Mustang, Spanish Colonial Horses (Sponenberg). The Spanish Colonial horses exhibited a wide variety of characteristics in terms of color, size, and conformation. The Spanish horses acquired by the Plains Indians spread northward from central Mexico.

By the mid-sixteen hundreds, the Spanish rancheros near Santa Fe and Taos had thousands of horses. The Spanish government issued decrees forbidding Indians to own or ride horses, but as slaves, or as workers, on the Spanish Rancheros, Indians learned to handle horses...it is interesting to note that many Indians were terrified at their first sight of a horse. The Pueblo Rebellion of 1680 forced the Spanish out of New Mexico and many horses were left behind. The Pueblo Indians and other tribes in the area took full advantage of these horses.

The Ute Indians were related to the Comanche and probably supplied them with their first horses. By 1706 the Comanche were well known to the Spanish in New Mexico because of their horse stealing raids on Spanish rancheros. Years later, the Comanche claimed that they let the Spanish stay in Texas to raise horses for them, but warriors still went to Mexico after more horses. September was the month that large raiding parties went into Mexico after horses and captives. Comanche referred to September as the Mexican Moon; Mexicans called it the Comanche Moon. Other northern tribes followed this practice, and soon a wide trail stretched across the staked plain (Llano Estacada) of Texas and New Mexico. The Apaches conducted the same kind of raids into Sonora and Chihuahua.

The Comanche became the epitome of the Plains Indian Horse Culture. There was a saying in Texas that "The white man will ride the Mustang until he is played out - the Mexican will take him and ride him another day until he thinks he is tired - the Comanche will get on him and ride him to where he is going" (Frank Dobie). Within a few decades after acquiring horses, many military leaders considered

the Comanche as the finest light cavalry in the world.

Comanche warriors rapidly emerged as the middlemen in the horse trade between Indian tribes and French settlements east of the Mississippi. Horses spread out of the southwest in primarily two directions: north to the Shoshone and from them to the Nez Perce, Flatheads, and the Crow; north and east to the Kiowa and Pawnee and then to the cousins of the Pawnee, the Arikara.

The Shoshone traded with the Utes and Comanche for their first horses in the early seventeen hundreds. Not long after, the Nez Perce had horses, and by 1740 the Crow had horses. About this same time, the Blackfeet got horses from the Nez Perce and Flatheads. Indians not only acquired Spanish horses, the warriors followed the ways of the Spanish in terms of handling, riding, and use of equipment.

Francis Haines states that by the early seventeen hundreds all the tribes south of the Platte had some familiarity with horses. Pierre Gaultier de La Verendrye a French trader reached the Mandan village on the Missouri River in 1738, while there he heard of Indians to the south that had a few horses. George Hyde estimated that 1760 was the period the Teton Sioux acquired horses from Arikara. In 1768, Jonathan Carver found no horses among the Dakota Sioux of upper Missouri, but two years later the Yankton Sioux had horses.

Horses spread through the Arikara to the Missouri River villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa and eventually to the Sioux and the Cheyenne. When the first white traders reached the Plains none of the Indians North and East of the Black Hills had horses. By the end of the seventeen hundreds, the Indian horse had reached most of the Rocky Mountains and Plains Indians.

An extensive Indian trade network existed between the Indian tribes decades before explorers and fur traders reached the Missouri River villages. The Indian-to-Indian trade covered the Plains to the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. Prior to 1807, the trade between Indians and fur traders centered around trade fairs held at the permanent villages of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara on the Missouri River. From the trade fairs held at the Missouri River villages horses spread to the Cree and Assiniboine in Canada.

Horses were the one trade item that did not make the Indians dependant on fur traders. Everything connected with the horse, Indians could do for themselves, and in most cases, they surpassed the white man in riding and handling horses. Blackfoot efforts in breeding horses were directed toward producing one or more of three qualities in the offspring. These qualities were a particular color, size, and speed (Ewers). The owner of a herd of mares selected a stallion with the characteristics that he was interested in acquiring...nothing was done to improve the quality of the mares. Ewers also stated that most men were too poor or too careless to devote much thought or time to stallion selection.

Indian horses spanned the spectrum of colors that exists in horses of today. Despite Hollywood and artists pictures, the nomadic Plains Indians did not predominately ride pintos or paints. These are recessive color patterns that are hard to breed for today. How could nomadic Indians have done it any better with horses in communal herds? A possible exception to this might have been the Cayuse and Nez Perce with the Appaloosa.

Horses were adapted to fit the Indian lifestyle; they did not change it....this statement has been commented on by several people. To understand the meaning of this statement, please read this

comment and my reply. Horses brought about a dramatic change in the Indian Culture, but horses did not materially change the Indians hunter-gather lifestyle. Indians still did the same things in pretty much the same ways except now they used horses. It was the Spanish horse that made it possible for the American Indians to move onto the Plains and become truly nomadic.

The individual, not the tribe, owned the horses. This produced a class system based on ownership of horses...those with and those without. Owners with excess horses traded them to the Hudson's Bay, North West, and the Rocky Mountain fur traders for the fur trader's iron goods. Horses elevated the owner's prestige and power, and often increased the number of wives he could afford. The owners of large numbers of horses loaned them to other members of the village during camp moves, or for the buffalo hunt. In the Indian culture, generosity was the mark of a true leader.

The horse herds within a tribe could be increased through: war parties, breeding, and trade. The only one of these open to a young man was the war party. The vast majority of war parties were to steal horse, not fight an enemy. The methods warriors had previously used for stealing another tribes women, or taking prisoners to be used as or sold as slaves, were applied to the taking of horses.

In pre-horse days, women and dogs moved the camp. This limited the size of the shelters and the accumulation of belongings. The horse was easily trained to pull a travois with several hundred pounds on it and to pack four times as much as a dog. A draw back to the use of horses was in the selection of campsites. Indians villages that had horses were confined to areas with good pasture, and in the winter, a plentiful supply of cottonwood bark was required as well. This made the village vulnerable to attack by other tribes and later the United States cavalry.

Before the horse, the primary way of hunting buffalo was for members of the village to try and surround a herd and drive it into a corral (Piskun), or run the herd off a cliff. At first, the horse was used to drive the buffalo in the same manner as they had done on foot.. Etienne Veniard de Bourgmont, who founded Fort Orleans on the Missouri in 1722, stated the Kanza on the lower Missouri had no horses in 1724, but Comanche to the southwest did. The Kanza told him that the Comanche used horses to drive the buffalo off a cliff, or to chase the herd until it was give out. Once the buffalo stopped, the Comanche would surround them, and then getting off their horses, shoot them. Some Indian tribes into the mid-1800s used the surround method of hunting (Ewers).

Indians seldom used guns in hunting buffalo until breechloaders were available...it was too hard to load a muzzleloader on a running horse. Ewers states that among all the buffalo-hunting tribes the bow and arrow seems to have been the weapons in use before ca. 1870. Joseph Jablow reports that by the time a gun was loaded "the Indian could in that time ride three hundred yards and discharge twenty arrows". Many warriors averaged fewer than two arrows per buffalo killed.

The prized possession among warriors was the buffalo horse. A buffalo horse was trained to run beside the buffalo during a hunt. Without these specially trained horses, it was hard for warriors to provide enough meat for an entire village. The highly valued buffalo horses were kept inside the lodge at night or picketed nearby. For many tribes the highest war honor was to take a picketed buffalo horse from an enemy village.

It took decades for a tribe to accumulate enough horses for their needs. Of the true nomadic tribes only the Comanche, Kiowa, and Crow had enough horses throughout most of the horse period (Haines).

Haines states that it took eight to ten horses to satisfy the needs of each family.

After the smallpox outbreaks of 1782 and 1837, a great many “domesticated” horses roamed the Plains as wild horses. These horses belonged to whoever could catch them, but these feral horses were of little value to the Plains Indians. The feral mustangs were hard to catch, and after they were caught, hard to keep and handle. There was a saying among the old cowboys that “Once a wild one always a wild one” (Dobie). In his book, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, John Ewers’ Indian informants stated that the Blackfeet never tried to catch wild horses, and the only tribe that they had heard of occasionally doing it were the Kiowa.