HISTORY NOW
ISSUE TWENTY-EIGHT, JUNE 2011

The Historian's Perspective

The Impact of Horse Culture

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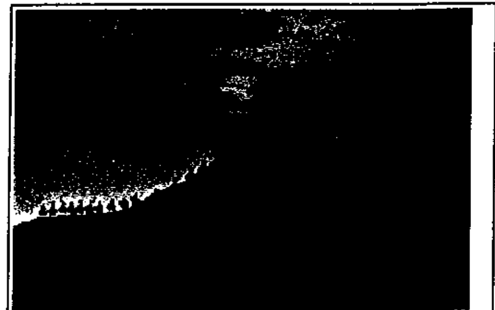

Photograph of American Indians by Joseph K. Dixon (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC 03911.08.17) **Click on image to enlarge.**

For all the calamities that came in the long run, European contact at first offered American Indian peoples many opportunities and advantages. Old World technologies provided a range of trade goods that brought vast improvements to everyday life. Iron pots lasted virtually forever. Compared to a fish hook whittled from bone, a metal hook seemed a miracle. Woolen blankets were lighter than animal hides and served better in keeping a body warm.

What was arguably the greatest contribution, however, was not made of metal but of flesh and blood—the horse. Its effects, especially on western tribes, were truly revolutionary. It altered their material lives, rearranged their relations with their environments, and fed a burst of power and affluence. Ironically, over time horses contributed also to American Indians' mounting difficulties as the tide of white settlement rolled over them.

When Spanish explorers rode into the West in the 1540s, their horses were, in a sense, coming home. They were native to the Great Plains, descendants of the collie-sized *hyracotherium* that appeared more than thirty million years ago, but like dozens of other species, horses had gone extinct in the New World about ten thousand years ago at the end of the last ice age. Before that, however, some had crossed the exposed bridge of land that once connected today's Alaska with Siberia, and as their cousins vanished in the Americas, they survived and flourished in central Asia, the largest grassland on earth.

Roughly five thousand years ago people on that vast pasture first domesticated horses, and the first horse culture—that is, a way of life centered on the animal's gifts and possibilities—was born. Life on horseback offered enormous advantages in trade, hunting, and especially warfare, and beginning with the peoples of central Asia, most horse cultures would turn to conquest, and most peoples conquered by them would in turn adopt the horse and its expansive life. Thus horse cultures spread to China, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe.

Among the most successful was that of the Spanish, who developed a superb equestrian military tradition. After 1492 that horseback prowess was turned to the conquest of the Caribbean, South America, and Mexico. From there conquistadores led columns of horsemen northward into present-day Arizona and New Mexico and from there onto the Great Plains. With that, the horse had come home, completing a ten-thousand-year circumnavigation of the world.

In a sense, however, it was not the same animal at all. Horses had left their birthplace wild. They

returned in cultural partnership with humans. The American Indians whose distant ancestors had hunted and eaten horses millennia before now saw them as living tools offering to expand their lives in ways none could have imagined. In time that dawning dream of possibilities would spread across the West and transform the lives of tens of thousands of Native peoples.

There was a lag between the horse's homecoming and its spread, however. Spanish colonizers, concentrated in the Rio Grande valley of New Mexico, well knew that their horses were a key to their control, and so they kept them, quite literally, on a tight rein. Only in 1680, when Pueblo Indians rose up and overwhelmed their Spanish overlords and drove them out of northern New Mexico for a dozen years, did Indians gain access to the Spanish herds. Once they did, horses and the horse culture expanded at a breathtaking pace. Horses were traded and stolen from one tribe to another. By 1700 the tribes of the Great Basin had them, and thirty years later those of the northern Rocky Mountains. By around 1780, a mere century after it had begun, the spread of the horse culture across the West was complete, and peoples from the Columbia River basin to the Great Plains were reshaping their lives and redreaming their futures according to its promises.

Astride horses, American Indians could hunt far more effectively in many parts of the West, especially among the vast herds of bison on the Great Plains. Those bison were hunted not just for their meat but also their hides, which women processed into robes to feed a hungry market in the east and Europe. Horses thus expanded Native trade and brought a flow of new items into their lives—a trade invigorated also because Indians could travel so much farther and faster than before. As from the time of the first horse cultures in central Asia, western Indians exploited a new military potential. Some groups quickly developed astonishing skills as mounted warriors and proceeded to expand their hunting and trading territories against weaker neighbors. Less apparent were changes in Indians' perceptions of the world and its possibilities. As they adapted their lives to horses and all they offered, they felt what others must have over the millennia, a burst of confidence, empowerment, and freedom. Referring to his people, the Kiowas, the writer N. Scott Momaday put it this way: "They became centaurs of the spirit."

At the root of this flowering of opportunity was a fundamental realignment of people and their environment. The West, and any place on earth, can be imagined as a vast reservoir of energy waiting to be tapped. All of that energy comes from the sun, all life relies on it. It takes many forms. Plants such as trees and grasses absorb and transform solar energy. Some animals, herbivores, then eat plants to make that energy their own, and in turn other animals, carnivores, eat those animals. Thus the sun's energy flows through and among all living things (and much is stored in things long dead, like coal, oil and natural gas).

In each step of that movement, however, most of the sun's energy is lost. Plants lose about 90 percent of what they take in and transform. A cow or a deer or a bison in turn loses 90 percent more when it eats grasses or shrubs, and people eating one of those herbivores lose 90 percent of that. In this "energy pyramid," then, available power declines sharply as it moves through the food chain. A man eating a bison steak was acquiring only .1 percent, or one thousandth, of the original solar energy making its way through the system.

Much of the West, like the Asian steppes where the horse culture first arose, is a vast grassland, one of the planet's largest. People, however, were unable to tap directly into most of that enormous pool of solar energy. They had to wait for others—bison, deer, elk, pronghorns, or other grazers—to do so before they could take their turn. A horse, as a herbivore, gets its power by eating grasses. By leaping onto the back of a domesticated horse and guiding it to his purposes, whether hunting or trading or making war, a man in effect was moving one step down the energy pyramid. With that leap, suddenly he had direct access to the energy of grasses. He effectively expanded his potential power ten times over.

That was the essence of the horse culture. It spanned what had always been an unbridgeable gap in

people's ability to tap into the energy around them. In effect it transformed a mounted Sioux or Comanche or Nez Perce man into a new creature, one with the brain and imagination of a human and the grass-fed power, speed, and grace of a horse. As Momaday wrote, such a person had become one of those mythical creatures, a centaur, half-man and half-stallion.

And like those mythical beasts, horseback Indians flexed their new power and put it into play in the world around them. One result was a boom in population on western grasslands. Nearly all tribes that whites encountered on the Great Plains—Comanches, Lakota Sioux, Cheyennes, Kiowas, Crows, Blackfeet, and others—migrated there during the era of horses, drawn by the new access to energy and

power. With the benefits of expanding trade, they enjoyed an unprecedented affluence. Peoples from the Plains to the Columbia plateau lived in far larger tipis, lodges they now could move with the help of horses. Inside such a lodge might be an array of items, everything from New England firearms and English blankets to carpets and coffee grinders, purchased with the fruits of a new hunting prowess. The goods were daily reminders of how, via the horse, American Indians were plugged into a global economy and had far easier access to traditional trade with other tribes.

Some groups took fuller advantage than others, which resulted in a dramatic shifting of power across the West. With thousands of forbidding horseback warriors, Comanches created the largest Indian empire in North American history, stretching from the central Great Plains deep into Mexico. The Lakota Sioux and Cheyennes dominated the northern Plains and warred with the Blackfeet, Crows, and others over neighboring regions. On the Columbia Plateau the Nez Perces used their huge horse herds to range over hundreds of miles and to funnel trade from the Pacific coast to today's North Dakota. For every winner, of course, there were losers. Village-dwelling groups, like the Pawnees and Mandans on the Missouri River and the Pueblos on the Rio Grande, suffered terrible raids from mounted enemies.

There were costs even for the winners. The quickening warfare over control of prime territories took an awful toll among warriors. By one census Cheyenne women outnumbered men three-to-two. The enormous herds needed to sustain a horse culture, numbering several animals for every man, woman, and child, soon had an alarmingly corrosive impact on streamside ecologies where many American Indians had to spend their winters, leaving fewer and fewer sanctuaries during those desperate, storm-wracked months. Although other factors were involved, the prodigious hunting by horseback contributed to a dramatic decline in the number of bison, the animal essential for survival, especially on the Plains.

The enhanced connections to the wider world brought more than abundant goods. It likely was no coincidence that the first time smallpox swept across the West was in 1780, when the horse culture was in place and the virus could spread from people to people, from New Mexico to Puget Sound, during its short window of contagion. Even the vigorous flow of new goods had its downside. American Indians' growing reliance on metal goods, firearms, and other items they could not make for themselves left them increasingly vulnerable to the outsiders who supplied them.

The far graver vulnerability was the partnership with the horse itself. The West, birthplace of the horse, in the end was the last place where the horse culture rose and flourished. Its reign was brief. After barely a century the westward roll of white society, with its irresistible numbers and its revolutionary technologies, including that of the railroad, undercut and overwhelmed the way of life that had brought unprecedented power, affluence, and glory to dozens of Indian peoples of the American West.

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For a list of books and websites about the impact of horse culture, visit our **Additional Resources Page**

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