

Jake Wenger

HIS 301 Historical Writing

TR 2:00

April 26, 2020

“Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.”

-Bitzer, *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens

For much of recorded history, the horse has had a profound impact on humanity. It allowed the Mongols under Ghengis Khan and his successors to quickly - and fiercely - establish one of the largest empires in human history. The European knight, a symbol of the Middle Ages, was not complete without their own mount. And although the horse lost its strategic importance in terms of warfare with the introduction of the tank in WWI or even its importance in travel mode to the rising popularity of the automobile, the horse also has had a tremendous impact on various cultures throughout recorded history as well. Whether it be in books like Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, in films such as *The Lone Ranger*, or even the spectacle and importance of horse racing in the US and the UK, the horse has had a presence in many cultures during the modern era.

In recent history, the horse has had a cultural impact on many groups throughout time, arguably one of the most interesting being the cultural impact on various Native American tribes such as the Apache and the Comanche. Although the horse was of strategic importance to numerous Native American tribes in terms of resource gathering and warfare, it had an even greater impact on the culture and traditions of these tribes.

While Native Americans are generally associated with the horse, it may be shocking to some that the horse is not native to the Americas, but rather was brought

over by Europeans as they began to explore and settle the new world. Although trading for horses did occur between various native tribes and European colonists, some colonial powers forbid the natives from being able to own or ride a horse; as was the case with the Pueblo and Spanish settlers in New Mexico for much of the 17th century.<sup>1</sup> Overtime, however, various Native American tribes acquired horses, and in many cases eventually learned how to ride them through a process called cultural transfer.

At its core, cultural transfer means a behavior that's learned, generally through observation and imitation.<sup>2</sup> Besides learning how to tame and ride the horse, there are also artifacts that support the principle of cultural transfer. Numerous horse riding artifacts such as indigenous saddles, such as the Apache's cottonwood saddle, are similar to Spanish saddles that have been uncovered in the southwestern United States.

<sup>3</sup> This is because the cottonwood model was actually based off of similar Spanish models from around the late 17th century.<sup>4</sup> Since the horse was not native to the Americas, groups like the Apache did not have their own horse riding tools and saddles at first, so they based their tools and designs off of the Spanish as they were the only ones who were masters at horse riding, at least throughout much of the 16th century.

Native Americans also adopted another practice from the Spanish that many believe to have originated from the natives in North America: bison hunting via horseback. While native peoples did hunt bison before the horse, due to its massive size and aggressive manner, it was rare that Bison were hunted for food and pelts by

---

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, Peter. *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

most Native Americans. The tactic actually has its roots in southern Spain and the West Indies, and it was utilized by the initial wave of Spanish colonists that started to colonize New Mexico. These initial colonists quickly ran through their livestock of cattle, even resorting to killing the oxen they had intended to use for intensive labor. As a result, some of the settlers began to hunt bison as a source of food, using those methods that had been brought over from southern Spain and the West Indies (82). The settlers would hunt the bison via horseback, riding up to the bison and either trying to kill or injure the beast with a lance, as horses were essentially the only domesticated animal that could keep up with the speed of a bison (82). Over time, various native groups in what's today New Mexico, including the Comanche, adopted the practice of hunting bison via horseback.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately all Plains Indians inherited the bison hunting method from Spanish settlers, which is a perfect example of cultural transfer. It's key to understand the importance of cultural transfer in regards to the horse and Native Americans because although the absence of it doesn't necessarily mean the horse wouldn't have had a cultural impact on Native Americans, its adaptation into native society and life would've taken far longer and would've been far less influential on native societies.

When examining the influence horses had on Native Americans, rock carvings are one example that shows the horse was greatly valued by different native tribes, such as the Comanche. A specific rock engraving from Tolar, Wyoming depicts a Comanche horned warrior riding on the back of a horse.<sup>6</sup> These rock carvings can be

---

<sup>5</sup> Betty. *Comanche Society* (82)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Collier and Larry Loendorf. "Engraving of a Comanche warrior riding a horse."

found across the midwestern and southwestern United States, and their importance cannot be understated. Horses are widely known to have had an impact on various Native American cultures, but not only does the engraving show how the Comanche viewed themselves, this rock carving expresses that horses were a key part of Comanche life and society. Rock engravings similar to the one in this photo were actually seen by the Comanche as a way to seek spiritual help prior to a fight, battle, or other endeavours.<sup>7</sup> By including horses as a key part of how Comanche warriors viewed themselves, their carvings showed how important horses were to them. The image and ideals of a Comanche warrior would not exist without the horse.

The Comanche were a society built around mobility and trade, and their lifestyle differed considerably from other Native American tribes, such as the Apache. Once an equestrian-pastoral tribe themselves, the Apache became more of an agricultural-based tribe when the Comanche began to rise in power, meaning they migrated less frequently. More importantly, though, was that because of their limited mobility, the Apache could only own a limited number of horses for fear there wouldn't be enough grazing lands for both their herds as well as their domesticated animals.<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest conflicts the Comanche were involved in was their war against the Apache in the southwest over control of wooded river valleys, which were essential for survival during winters in the southwest. By the 1740's, however, the Comanche were able to push the Apache completely out of the wooded river valleys the Comanche needed for survival.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

Since their lifestyle was built around mobility and trade, the Comanche had a superior number of horses within their herd. And because their society was based on mobility, the Comanche didn't need to worry about preserving pastured land for their herds as much as their Apache counterpart, as they could move on to new lands if their herds ate up all the surrounding pastures. Having a larger herd of horses also allowed the Comanche to trade more often with their European counterparts, at times trading their sought after horses in exchange for European firearms, which gave them an advantage over other native societies like the Apache.<sup>10</sup>

Besides rock engravings, horses played a crucial role in Native American ceremonies. For instance, when a baby boy was born, the Navajo would cut the umbilical cord and tie it to the end of a horse's tail to ensure that the boy would grow up to be a master at horseback riding.<sup>11</sup> The Apache, similarly, would bury the umbilical cord underneath a horse's tracks following the birth of a boy to ensure the same. Both birth rite examples demonstrate how important it was to some native societies that each new generation of the tribe would be able to master riding the horse.

The Navajo and Kiowa also had a death rites passage ceremony as well when someone had passed away. At these death rite passage ceremonies, the Navajo would have the deceased owner's horse at the ceremony, where sadly the horse was killed over the owner's burial site. This was fairly similar to the Kiowa, though the death rite passage ceremonies for a Kiowa Chief were clearly of greater significance: up to 70 horses were killed at the chief's burial site.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell. *Horse Nations*.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (110)

Although the slaughtering of dozens of horses may seem senseless, there's a reason as to why the Kiowa, Navajo, and even the Comanche did so. Besides killing a deceased owner's horse at their death rites ceremony, the Kiowa also buried their dead with valuables and important tools, many of which were meant for horse riding. This was done so the deceased would be able to continue horse riding after death. In addition, it also indicates that horses were killed in order to be reunited with their deceased owner in the afterlife. Killing the horses of the deceased at their death ceremonies and burying the dead with important horse riding tools showcases that the horse was important to many native groups, even after death.

Horses were also involved in other Native American ceremonies and ritual practices, as well as being depicted in Native American folklore. For instance, the Navajo would carry around fetishes such as shells and stones, believing these holy items would protect their horses as well as themselves.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Apache folklore tells of mythical water horses that were able to cure illnesses related to snakes, water, or lightning.<sup>13</sup> The mythical water horses were associated with the weather, and the intensity of the storm determined the water horse's gender: a calm, more gentle storm signaled the presence of a female, while more violent and thunderous storms were associated with male water horses.

The Navajo and Apache were not alone in their supernatural perspective of the horse. In the 1540's, towards the start of European colonization, Pueblo communities would rub the sweat of horses onto themselves as a source of spiritual blessing, as well

---

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (109)

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (110)

as a blessing to guarantee rain for their crops.<sup>14</sup> The Navajo, Apache, and Pueblo spiritual practices and beliefs give an idea of how important the horse was to these groups. The practice of carrying around fetishes by the Navajo to protect their horses demonstrates how much they valued their herds. And the spiritual associations of the horse by the Apache and Pueblo build on this; they found horses to be so valuable and vital to their respective societies, groups like the Apache and the Pueblo began to associate the horse with supernatural beliefs and ceremonial practices, ones that usually dealt with protection or nature.

Originally, the Apache used large body shields in warfare. These shields were purposefully large in order to protect two men on the battlefield. But the adoption of the horse for warfare changed this: the Apache began opting for smaller, leather shields meant to only protect a rider. Additionally, they switched over to short bows and lances as the use of horses in warfare increased. This was necessary, as the original large body shields would have been far too large and heavy for someone on horseback to use properly in battle. A smaller shield and short bow allowed for the Apache to be agile and fight from a distance if needed, with lances used for more close-up fighting.

For many native groups who were mainly hunter-gatherer societies, traveling was a necessity for survival as the surrounding landscapes changed with each season. This began to change as the horse became more commonplace among many Native American groups. With increasing horse numbers came a greater need to provide food and grazing land for their large horse numbers, especially for groups like the

---

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell, *Horse Nations*. (101)



Comanche. By 1800, the Comanche had an average of four horses per person, with a total population of about 40,000 people in the late 1780s – meaning that the Comanche possibly had somewhere close to a herd of 160,000 horses at one point in time. With an estimated requirement of three hectares of grazing land for every 1,000 horses per day, the Comanche's seasonal travel patterns were extremely tied to the grazing needs of their horses. Additionally, besides moving around seasonally as dictated by their horses, the Comanche would also split into smaller groups during different parts of the year as it was easier this way for the Comanche to take care of and find grazing lands for their herds.

In fact, the Comanche horse numbers were so large that their herds actually began to alter local ecosystems as they ate up whole fields of grass. This was another reason the Comanche moved around frequently, as they needed to make sure their horses wouldn't completely consume whatever grazing lands they were settled on. Overgrazing could result in the destruction of grazing lands, meaning less food for the Comanche to feed their horses with the following season. This is why shepherds today in places like Nepal move their livestock around even if their animals haven't completely grazed on all the grass in an area – this way they can use the same grazing lands the following year or season.

Although the horse clearly has had numerous cultural impacts on various native groups in western North America, it also had negative influences on native culture and society as well. One such case was the distribution of horses among the Comanche, where not every member of a tribe had an equal number of horses. Some families

owned hundreds of them, and these families were generally considered to be wealthy compared to other people. Generally, the more horses someone owned, the more wives they would have, therefore resulting in the processing and selling of a larger quantity of hides. This was how class separation evolved among the Comanche.

Class separation was also present in other tribes, such as with the Kiowa. Social hierarchy was much more distinct here, with the Kiowa differentiating between three separate classes: the elite, the well-to-do, and the poor. As with the Comanche, the number of horses someone owned correlated with what class they belonged to. Most Kiowa peoples owned one or no horses at all, while the elites owned whole herds. This also affected people's ability to trade, since someone who owned numerous horses could easily trade them for other fine goods, while the poor needed their only horse for other necessities.

The cultural impact of the horse also highlighted existing social classes among native groups. This was best exemplified with the Pueblo and who was allowed to ride a horse. The Pueblo mainly reserved horse riding for male members of their society, excluding much of their female counterparts. This indicates that males and females did not have the same rights in Pueblo society. It should be noted though that this practice contrasted with neighboring tribes, who allowed both male and female members to ride horses.

Horses were incredibly important to native societies, both due to their physical resourcefulness as well as due to their supernatural association among various native groups, with the cultural impact arguably being more significant. But the influences the

horse has had on the New World, especially the cultural impact, can be useful for multiple reasons. Take the Comanche horned warrior cave painting – it was culturally important because the Comanche made these drawings to give them protection and luck prior to a fight, and including a horse in the depiction of themselves shows how important horses were to the Comanche warrior. In addition though, these drawings can be found in numerous places in the western US, like New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming, which used to be referred to as Comancheria - the lands which the Comanche occupied and controlled. Due to the scattering of these drawings though, historians can get an idea of how far Comanche hegemony extended.

## Bibliography

Betty, Gerald. *Comanche Society: Before the Reservation*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002.

Collier, Richard and Larry Loendorf. "Engraving of a Comanche warrior riding a horse." In *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 118.

Mitchell, Peter. *Horse Nations: The Worldwide Impact of the Horse on Indigenous Societies Post-1492*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Raulff, Ulrich. *Farewell to the Horse: A Cultural History*. Trans. Ruth Azmedzai Kemp, 2018. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015.