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The Rise and Fall of Plains Indian Horse Cultures

Pekka Hämäläinen

After more than a century of intense academic scrutiny and popular fascination, the history of Plains Indians and horses has become a quintessential American epic. A sweeping story of cultural collision and fusion, it tells how the obscure foot nomads of the Great Plains encountered and embraced the peculiar Old World export and, by reinventing themselves as equestrian people, created one of history's most renowned horse cultures, personified in the iconic figure of the mounted warrior. Such romantic images may have lost much of their appeal for modern historians, but recent academic trends have, rather curiously, only further glorified the history of Plains Indians and horses. As studies in Indian-European relations and environmental history have established the destructiveness of the Columbian exchange, it has become standard academic practice to set the splendor and prosperity of the mounted Plains Indians against the dark backdrop of death, disease, and despair that defines Europe's biological expansion to the Americas. In today's scholarship, the Plains Indian horse culture represents the ultimate anomaly—ecological imperialism working to Indians' advantage.¹

Taking a cue from that juxtaposition, virtually all modern histories portray the rise of the Plains Indian horse culture as a straightforward success story. According to this view, horses spread northward from the Spanish Southwest, repeatedly creating a frontier of fresh possibility, opening for each tribe in its path a new era of unforeseen wealth, power, and security. With the dispersal completed by the late eighteenth century, the entire Plains became the scene for an equestrian experiment that lifted the Indians, both materially and figuratively, to a new level of existence, while uniquely equipping them to resist future Euro-American invasions.² Arguably, this view holds its appeal because it makes for a compelling and fundamentally uplifting story that is easy to incorporate into historical overviews and textbooks.

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¹ See, for example, Alfred W. Crosby, *Germes, Seeds, and Animals: Studies in Ecological History* (Atmonk, 1994), 55; and Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001), 49.

² See, for example, Alice Beck Kehoe, *North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account* (1981; Englewood Cliffs, 1992), 297–98, 311–13; and Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *Civilizations* (London, 2001), 91.

That success story has a bleak undercurrent that went largely unnoticed until recently, when ground-breaking studies shed light on the harmful effects of horses on Plains Indian socioeconomic systems and the environment.³ Horses did bring new possibilities, prosperity, and power to Plains Indians, but they also brought destabilization, dispossession, and destruction. The transformational power of horses was simply too vast. Although Plains Indians had experienced constant and profound culture changes before European contact, the sudden appearance of horses among dog-using pedestrian people set off changes that could spin out of control as easily as they could make life richer and more comfortable. Horses helped Indians do virtually everything—move, hunt, trade, and wage war—more effectively, but they also disrupted subsistence economies, wrecked grassland and bison ecologies, created new social inequalities, unhinged gender relations, undermined traditional political hierarchies, and intensified resource competition and warfare. The introduction of horses, then, was a decidedly mixed blessing. The horse era began for most Plains Indians with high expectations but soon collapsed into a series of unsolvable economic, social, political, and ecological contradictions.

The purpose of this essay is to trace those contradictions. Rather than merely listing the evils of equestrianism, it shows how both the drawbacks and the benefits of horse use shaped the history of Plains Indians. Indeed, conventional histories have not only underestimated the negative aspects of horse use; they may have even more glaringly underestimated some of its empowering effects. The history of Plains Indian equestrianism, in short, is a story of astounding successes and inevitable, daunting failures. Moreover, this essay argues, the patterns of success and failure took widely different forms in different parts of the Plains, giving rise to several distinctive horse cultures. Traditionally, scholars have recognized only two Plains horse cultures: the classic, flamboyant equestrian culture of the western Plains nomads and the less dynamic horse culture of the eastern Plains village farmers. Inherent in that model is a tendency to cast the villagers as cultural reactionaries who failed to embrace the liberating powers of equestrianism and, locked in space and time, were crushed by the double invasion of the aggressive nomads and the encroaching Americans.⁴

The east-west, farmer-nomad dichotomy reflects both continuing academic efforts to categorize native societies into such artificial entities as culture areas and, more broadly, the long-standing scholarly conviction that North American history is best understood along longitudinal lines. In that view, the Mississippi watershed, the line of semiaridity along the ninety-eighth meridian, and the Rocky Mountains were and

³ Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of American History*, 78 (Sept. 1991), 465–85; James E. Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic: High Plains Indians and Their Horses in the Region of the Arkansas River Valley, 1800–1870," *Environmental History Review*, 16 (Summer 1992), 61–84; Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, 1998); Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, 1983).

⁴ The classic treatise is Preston Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains: A Study of Cultural Development among North American Indians* (Lincoln, 1970). The recent *Handbook of North American Indians* volume on the Plains presents a less biased view of the villagers but retains the east-west dichotomy. See Raymond J. DeMallie, "Introduction," in *The Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. XIII: *Plains*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Washington, 2001), 6.

are great geographic barriers and ecological fault lines that have forced humans to make fundamental adjustments to their ways of life. The farmer-nomad paradigm of Plains Indian history and the very idea that there is a distinctive western history are expressions of the still prevalent east-west focus of our historical thinking.

For scholars trying to understand the multifaceted history of Plains Indian equestrianism, however, the most revealing dynamics might be latitudinal rather than longitudinal. The central fact in the rise of Plains Indian horse cultures was the south-north orientation of the grasslands, which meant that the northward spreading horse frontier crossed several climatic belts. As a result, there were vast differences in the horse wealth of the tribes, particularly along the south-north axis, differences enough to generate contrasting patterns and distinctive histories. Moreover, all tribes—whether nomads or farmers, rich or poor in horses—faced difficulties in balancing horse numbers, ecological constraints, economic-military demands, and cultural imperatives, and the search for balance elicited a wide range of creative but variously successful equestrian adaptations that transcended the farmer-nomad dichotomy.

A comparative view that highlights variations in Plains Indian equestrianism also illuminates the history of Indian-Euro-American relations in the center of the continent. Reflecting their contrasting equestrian adaptations, Plains tribes adopted very different policies toward Euro-American colonists, policies that had deep and far-reaching effects and reverberated across a vast geographic expanse. At its height, the effective sphere of influence of the equestrian Plains Indians extended from northern Mexico into central Canada and from the Continental Divide to the Deep South. Finally, a comparative approach helps sharpen our understanding of the westward expansion of the United States. It explains, for example, why the U.S. Army waged long and costly wars against the Lakotas, while it managed to defeat the Comanches—in many ways the Lakotas' equals in power and influence in the early nineteenth century—with only a few decisive battles that, unlike Red Cloud's War or Little Bighorn, never made it into the lexicon of American history. More generally, the comparative approach shows that the oft-cited Lakota example represents the exception rather than the norm of Plains Indian equestrian experience.

Horses, Pastoralism, and Overabundance: The Southern Plains

Plains Indian horse cultures emerged from one of the great failures of Spanish colonialism. Spain's explosive expansion across the Americas was essentially equestrian. Horses—which had not lived in the Western Hemisphere since the Pleistocene extinctions—allowed the conquistadors to cover and claim vast areas and to shock and subjugate more numerous native forces. The Spanish preserved their military edge with relative ease in the tropical lowlands, where horses rarely became feral, but things became increasingly difficult in the late sixteenth century, when they approached the Great Plains. Discouraged by the vast, seemingly resource-devoid grasslands, the Spanish stopped in their tracks and built the colony of New Mexico. The horse frontier, however, kept moving on toward the Plains, hardly even losing momentum. The Jumanos, a multiethnic community of hunter-traders occupying

the Texas Plains, may have obtained horses through their northern Mexican trade links even before the Spanish established colonial roots in New Mexico. The more northerly Apaches, the Jumanos' long-time rivals, received horses from Pueblo Indian apostates, who had run away from the missions in New Mexico. Instructed by the renegades, Apaches emerged as skillful riders and raiders by the 1650s.⁵

The rapid shift to equestrianism was made possible by a nearly perfect fit between Spanish horses and the southern Plains environment. The region's long growing season guaranteed an ample supply of grass, and although the hot and dry summers exposed horses to ailments ranging from dehydration to starvation, those hazards did not thwart the proliferation of Spanish Barbs, descendants of hardy and heat-resilient North African stock. As Jumanos and Apaches traded for, and stole, horses from New Mexico and Texas, they experienced a profound techno-economic revolution. With horses, they could search for and kill bison with exhilarating ease and travel farther to trade, raid, and wage war. Horses also made nomadism infinitely more agreeable, especially for women, who were relieved of carrying belongings when moving camp. Most significant, horses opened a more direct way to tap energy. Dogs, Indians' only domesticated animals before horses, used the Plains' greatest energy source—the grasses—only indirectly, by consuming the meat of grass-eating animals their owners acquired for them, whereas horses drew their energy directly from grasses, bringing their masters one step closer to the ultimate energy source. Seizing the seemingly unlimited opportunities, Jumanos and Apaches built the first distinctive horse cultures of the Plains. Jumanos forged a long-distance trade network between New Mexico and the Caddo villages in eastern Texas, while Apaches integrated horses into their mixed hunting-farming economy, fashioning an intricate but dependable blend of part-time agriculture with seasonal mounted bison hunting and nomadism.⁶

Despite their innovativeness and dynamism, the Jumano and Apache horse cultures would not last. Growing rapidly in numbers and eager to win a more secure outlet for their bison products in New Mexico, the Apaches destroyed the Jumanos as an ethnic group, annihilating some bands and absorbing others. By the early eighteenth century, Apaches dominated the entire southern Plains. But while they were still expanding their farming and hunting ranges to the east, north, and south, a different kind of mounted people, the Comanches, pushed down the Arkansas Valley from the southern Rocky Mountains, bringing with them the rudiments of a specialized mounted hunting system. That horse complex had been pioneered by the Rocky Mountain Utes, who had been experimenting with equestrianism since the mid-seventeenth century. Having migrated from the northern Plains to the southern Rockies in the late seventeenth century, Comanches simply borrowed the hunting culture of their Ute allies and transplanted it to the Plains. Other improbable promoters of Comanche equestrianism were the Pueblo Indians, who in 1680 drove the Spanish

⁵ Jack D. Forbes, "The Appearance of the Mounted Indians in Northern Mexico and the Southwest, to 1680," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 15 (Summer 1959), 189–212.

⁶ Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic," 68–74; Dan Flores, *Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest* (Albuquerque, 1999), 82–100; West, *Contested Plains*, 34–54; Gary Clayton Anderson, *The Indian Southwest, 1580–1830: Ethnogenesis and Reinvention* (Norman, 1999), 15–54.

out of New Mexico, confiscated their horse herds, and embarked on a vigorous live-stock trade with Comanches and Utes. Supplied by Pueblo Indians and guided by Utes, Comanches moved rapidly into equestrianism. By the 1710s they had enough horses to invade the bison-rich grasslands.⁷

At the heart of the ensuing Apache-Comanche wars was a collision between two highly contrasting horse cultures. Having become a remarkably adaptive society during their wide-ranging migrations, Comanches were able to transform themselves into a fully mounted society with astounding speed: Within a generation after their arrival on the southern Plains, they had mastered equestrian nomadism, hunting, and warfare and were able to challenge Apaches across the region. Moreover, Comanches' burgeoning horse wealth made the wars against Apaches not only possible but inevitable. To support their growing herds, Comanches needed reliable access to grass and water, which made it imperative for them to remove Apache gardens from the river valleys, the only spots on the grasslands where the crucial resources were available year-round. It was then, in competition with the fully equestrian Comanches, that Apaches found their mixed economy restraining and troublesome. Tied to their farms and only partially mounted, they were all but defenseless against the swift and unpredictable guerrilla attacks. By the early 1760s, Comanches had swept virtually all Apache bands from the southern Plains to their margins.⁸

Comanche victory introduced the Plains to the era of full-blown equestrianism that was marked by highly efficient mounted bison chases, extensive reliance on bison for subsistence, and intensive nomadism. In fact, so complete was the equestrian shift that the Comanches can be viewed as pastoral people as well as hunters. The core of Comanche pastoralism was intensive trade in horses and mules, which was stimulated by a shifting political and economic geography. In 1750 the bulk of the horse wealth in the continent's center was still in the Southwest, a situation Spanish officials desperately tried to maintain by prohibiting all livestock trade with Indians. Twenty-five years later, however, Comanche raiders had transferred much of the New Mexican horse wealth into their own camps, turning the Comanchería into the main livestock surplus area for three deficit regions: the northern Plains, where climatic conditions kept the Indians chronically horse-poor; the southern prairies, where most tribes did not have a direct access to Spanish ranches; and New Mexico, where the Comanches themselves stimulated artificial demand through raiding.⁹

⁷ On the Jumano collapse, see Anderson, *Indian Southwest*, 55–66. On Comanche migrations, see Gerald Betty, *Comanche Society: Before the Reservation* (College Station, 2002), 85–87; and Ned Blackhawk, "Violence over the Land: Colonial Encounters in the American Great Basin" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1999), 36–38.

⁸ On Comanche horse wealth, see Charles Wilson Hackett, ed., *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas* (4 vols., Austin, 1931–1946), III, 323, 348. On the Comanche-Apache wars, see Pekka Hämäläinen, "The Western Comanche Trade Center: Rethinking the Plains Indian Trade System," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 29 (Winter 1998), 488–89.

⁹ For Spanish trade restrictions, see "Copy of the Instruction which Don Thomas Vélez Cachupín, Governor and Captain General of New Mexico, left to his successor, Don Francisco Marín del Valle, at the order of his most excellent sir, Conde de Revilla Gigedo, viceroy of this New Spain," in *The Plains Indians and New Mexico, 1751–1778: A Collection of Documents Illustrative of the History of the Eastern Frontier of New Mexico*, ed. Alfred Barnaby Thomas (Albuquerque, 1940), 133; and Francisco Marín del Valle, "Bando," Nov. 26, 1754 (microfilm: frames 1191–96, reel 8), Spanish Archives of New Mexico (State of New Mexico Records Center, Santa Fe). On New



The Plains Indians in the early nineteenth century. Over the preceding century and a half, the use of horses had spread from south to north, and different tribes had created very different horse cultures.

Capitalizing on these imbalances, in the late eighteenth century Comanches built a multifaceted trade empire that mantled the entire midcontinent. The focal point of the trade system was the upper Arkansas basin, where western Comanches ran a thriving seasonal trade center. In winter and summer, the principal trading seasons, native and European trading parties traveled to western Comanche camps, where they purchased horses and mules with guns and other manufactured goods and then took the animals to the northern and eastern Plains, Mississippi Valley, and New

Mexico's horse reserves, see Pedro Fermín de Mendinueta to Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa, Aug. 19, 1775, in *Plains Indians and New Mexico*, ed. Thomas, 184.

Mexico. Another key trading sphere was on the northern part of the Llano Estacado, the vast flatlands of New Mexico and Texas, where Comanches did business with New Mexican traders known as *comancheros*, exchanging horses and bison products for metal goods, fabrics, flour, and corn. Farther east, along the middle Red and Brazos rivers, eastern Comanche bands operated a sprawling raiding-trading system. They plundered vast numbers of horses and mules during large-scale summer raids into Texas and then channeled the animals into New Mexico through the upper Arkansas trade center and to Louisiana through Wichita middlemen. In the early nineteenth century, after having ousted Wichitas from the trade chain, eastern Comanches controlled a bustling trade gateway, which funneled horses and mules to Americans, Osages, and the immigrant tribes of Indian Territory and absorbed guns and other manufactured goods. The volume of these eastern transactions could be staggering. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Comanches often sold hundreds of horses and mules to American trading parties, and in 1847, at a single trade fair, they reportedly sold fifteen hundred mules to Osages for seventy-five thousand dollars worth of manufactured goods. The ramifications of the trade were felt far beyond the Mississippi watershed, where Comanche horses and mules fueled the expansion of the American settlement frontier into Missouri and the opening of cotton lands in the South.¹⁰

The effects extended to the north as well. The flourishing Comanche trade empire became a magnet for other nomads, who began to gravitate to the south and mimic the Comanche livestock economy. This changed the equestrian history of the western Plains. In the 1760s, soon after having acquired horses on the Black Hills, the Kiowas attached themselves to the Comanche trade network and began shuttling horses from the upper Arkansas center to the northern Plains. In the 1780s, drawn by warmer climates and greater horse wealth, Kiowas left their Black Hills homelands for good, pushed south of the Arkansas River, and, after a period of fighting, in 1806 made peace with the Comanches. Thereafter, the two tribes operated as close allies, sharing a similar horse culture. The next migration wave followed soon after. Enticed by the vacant niche in the trade chain, several Cheyenne and Arapaho bands migrated from

¹⁰ Hämäläinen, "Western Comanche Trade Center," 490–509; "Report by Athanas de Mézières of the Expedition to Cadodachos, Oct. 29, 1770," in *Athanas de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768–1780*, ed. Herbert Eugene Bolton (2 vols., Cleveland, 1914), I, 212; Juan María Vicencio, barón de Ripperdá, to the viceroy, April 28, 1772, *ibid.*, 269–71; Athanas de Mézières to Ripperdá, July 4, 1772, *ibid.*, 300–303; de Mézières to Theodore de Croix, April 5, 18, 1778, *ibid.*, II, 195, 203; Pedro Vial and Francisco Xavier Chavez, "Diario que siguieron los Emisarios, Pedro Vial, y Francisco Xavier de Chavez, en su envejada á las Rancherías de la referida Nacion [Comanches]," Nov. 15, 1785 (certified copy enclosed in José Antonio Rengel to José Gálvez, Jan. 28, 1786), legajo 286 (microfilm: reel 10), Guadalajara, Archivo General de las Indias, Seville (Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman); Anthony Glass, *Journal of an Indian Trader: Anthony Glass and the Texas Trading Frontier, 1790–1810*, ed. Dan L. Flores (College Station, 1985), 10–15, 51, 55, 61–82; Jean Louis Berlandier, *The Indians of Texas in 1830*, ed. John C. Ewers (Washington, 1969), 48; Eugene C. Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin: Founder of Texas, 1793–1836* (Nashville, 1925), 54; Victor Tixier, *Tixier's Travels on the Osage Prairies*, ed. John Francis McDermott (Norman, 1940), 150–51; Randolph B. Marcy, *Adventure on Red River: Report on the Exploration of the Headwaters of the Red River by Captain Randolph B. Marcy and Captain G. B. McClellan*, ed. Grant Foreman (Norman, 1937), 173–75; J. M. Richardson to W. Medill, March 31, 1847 (microfilm: frame 248, reel 858, National Archives Microfilm Publication M234), Texas Agency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs, RG 75 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.); Flores, *Horizontal Yellow*, 90–91, 107–19; David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821–1846: The American Southwest under Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1982), 95–97.



Comanche Feats of Horsemanship. The Comanches, the most renowned of the Plains horse pastoralists and traders, demonstrated to George Catlin how they used horses' bodies as shields when attacking. Painting by George Catlin, 1834–1835. Courtesy National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, NY.

the Black Hills to the central Plains, positioning themselves between the Arkansas center and the Mandan-Hidatsa trade nexus on the middle Missouri River. By this time, the Comanche and Kiowa livestock economy had reached such magnitude that Cheyennes and Arapahoes could become highly specialized intermediaries. Trade was disrupted briefly in the 1830s, when Cheyennes and Arapahoes made a bid to monopolize access to the newly established Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River, but commercial gravity soon pulled the tribes back together. The four tribes formed a peace in 1840, agreed on a joint occupancy of the Arkansas basin, and embarked on extensive livestock trade with Charles and William Bent, who in turn supplied the Santa Fe traders, overlanders, and the booming mule industry in Missouri.¹¹

The livestock trade made the Indians extraordinarily wealthy, but the new economy also required profound and often difficult adjustments. The southern Plains tribes were balancing between two economies—a trade economy demanding large

¹¹ Hämäläinen, "Western Comanche Trade Center," 493, 506–7; Patricia Albers, "Symbiosis, Merger, and War: Contrasting Forms of Intertribal Relationship among Historic Plains Indians," in *Political Economy of North American Indians*, ed. John H. Moore (Norman, 1993), 103; West, *Contested Plains*, 66–72; George E. Hyde, *Life of George Bent Written from His Letters* (Norman, 1968), 68–71, 93–95. For the influence of Comanche horse cul-

numbers of surplus horses and a subsistence economy demanding large numbers of bison—and the balancing act created a perennial dilemma: they had to maintain much larger domestic herds than specialized bison hunters would have found optimal. In fact, the southern Plains pastoralists and horse traders kept two sets of animals that served different economic and cultural needs. The stolen horses and mules were reserved for trade and passed through the trade networks rapidly, whereas the animals they raised themselves were treated almost like family members. “Some men,” Post Oak Jim, a Comanche, told an anthropologist in 1933, “loved their horses more than they loved their wives.” In the 1850s, Sanaco, a Comanche chief, refused to sell his favorite horse to an American official, explaining that trading the animal “would prove a calamity to his whole band, as it often required all the speed of this animal to insure success in the buffalo chase . . . moreover, he said (patting his favorite on the neck), ‘I love him very much.’”¹²

Trying to meet their commercial, domestic, and cultural needs, the southern Plains pastoralists acquired and maintained vast herds. According to contemporary estimates, an average early-nineteenth-century Comanche or Kiowa family owned thirty-five horses and mules, five to six times more than basic hunting and transportation needs would have required. As middleman traders, Cheyennes and Arapahoes could get by with smaller herds, but they too had more horses than was needed for effective mounted nomadism.¹³ The wealth did not come without complications. In a Cheyenne tradition, the All-Father Creator, Maheo, told Cheyenne priests, “You may have horses,” but he warned them about the inevitable sacrifices: “If you have horses everything will be changed for you forever.” He offered specifics. “You will have to move around a lot to find pasture for your horses. . . . You will have to have fights with other tribes, who will want your pasture land or the places you hunt. . . . Think, before you decide.”¹⁴

Like other southern Plains tribes, Cheyennes became hunter-pastoralists who lived on their horses’ terms. They geared their movement patterns, annual cycle of subsistence activities, and labor organization—all long determined by the habits of the bison—around the foraging requirements of their horses. They spent winters in river bottoms, seeking shelter, water, and cottonwood for their animals and making only sporadic hunts. Winters were particularly onerous for women, whose responsibility it

ture on other tribes, see James Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians* (1898; Washington, 1979), 160–65; and Alice Marriott and Carol K. Rachlin, *Plains Indian Mythology* (New York, 1975), 96–98.

¹² Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman, 1952), 36; Marcy, *Adventure on Red River*, ed. Foreman, 158.

¹³ The horse numbers are based on estimates and calculations made by contemporary observers. If the source gives only the number of Indians in the camp or village, the number of households has been derived by dividing the number of people by ten, the estimated average household size. See John Sibley, *A Report from Natchitoches in 1807*, ed. Annie Heloise Abel (New York, 1922), 41; Glass, *Journal of an Indian Trader*, ed. Flores, 67; Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains, Performed in the Years 1819, 1820* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1823), II, 108; Jacob Fowler, *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*, ed. Elliott Coues (Lincoln, 1970), 65; Berlandier, *Indians of Texas in 1830*, ed. Ewers, 43n18; Albert Pike, *Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country*, ed. David J. Weber (College Station, 1987), 47, 50; Lewis H. Gartard, *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail* (Norman, 1955), 53, 56; and Edwin Thompson Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri: Sioux, Arickaras, Assiniboines, Crees, Crows*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman, 1961), 167–68.

¹⁴ Marriott and Rachlin, *Plains Indian Mythology*, 96–97.



Buffalo Herds Crossing the Upper Missouri. Each year, thousands of bison drowned crossing the Missouri River. Their carcasses provided the semisedentary and only partially mounted Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras along the middle Missouri with a reliable source of meat. *Painting by George Catlin, 1832. Courtesy National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C./Art Resource, NY.*

was to secure additional winter forage, such as cottonwood bark, for horses. In late spring the Indians returned to the open grasslands, where they broke into numerous small groups that migrated constantly, carefully coordinating their moves to guarantee a steady supply of grass and fresh, low-saline water for their herds. Hunting assumed a greater role, but since the horses demanded continuous management and protection, major hunting efforts had to be limited to a few concentrated sprees. The southern Plains Indians did most of their hunting in early summer, when their horses had recovered from the hardships of winter, and in late fall, when bison had completed mating and had grown their thick winter robes. Those brief, communitywide hunts were the only time when the scattered bands could come together and nourish a sense of tribal identity and communal solidarity. The southern Plains Indians were not full-fledged pastoralists in that they still relied on bison for the bulk of their dietary needs and used horseflesh only as an emergency food. By all other criteria, however, they had become pastoral people.¹⁵

This pastoral shift also restructured foreign relations. In a process that mirrored the evolution of many other pastoral cultures, intensive livestock herding and trade

¹⁵ Hackett, ed., *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas*, III, 317, 324, 348; de Mézières to Ripperdá, July 4, 1772, in *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier*, ed. Bolton, I, 297; Vial and Chavez, "Diario"; Glass, *Journal of an Indian Trader*, ed. Flores, 67–68, 81; José Francisco Ruiz, *Report on the Indian Tribes of Texas in 1828*, ed. John C. Ewers (New Haven, 1972), 8–9; Tixier, *Travels on the Osage Prairies*, ed. McDermott, 266; Marcy, *Adventure on Red River*, ed. Foreman, 60–61, 141–42; U.S. Congress, House, *Report of Captain R. B. Marcy*, 31 Cong., 1 sess., 1850, p. 45; John H. Moore, *The Cheyenne Nation: A Social and Demographic History* (Lincoln, 1987), 154–74; West, *Contested Plains*, 49–86. On pastoralism in general and in other settings, see, for example, John G. Galaty and Douglas L. Johnson, eds., *The World of Pastoralism: Herding Systems in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1991).

entangled Plains pastoralists in almost constant raiding warfare with neighboring sedentary groups. Although ingrained in the male warrior cult, raiding was for Plains pastoralists primarily an act of resource extraction. Even though wild horses were readily available on the Texas Plains, the pastoralists always preferred to supplement their domestic production by raiding. There were compelling economic reasons for this. Raiding not only supplied domesticated, ready-to-sell horses but also allowed the Indians to capture mules that commanded high prices in eastern markets. Raiding also yielded an important by-product: slave labor. In the early nineteenth century, as Comanches and Kiowas extended their livestock raids toward the untapped ranches in Texas and northern Mexico, they also brought back hundreds of captives, emerging by the 1820s as large-scale slave owners. The captives formed the core labor force that allowed Comanches and Kiowas to elevate their livestock herding and trade into the largest industry in the midcontinent.¹⁶ Comanche and Kiowa raids had an enormous impact south of the Rio Grande, turning much of northern Mexico into an exploited and fragmented raiding hinterland. One observer wrote in 1846 that “scarcely has a hacienda or rancho on the frontier been unvisited, and every where the people have been killed or captured. The roads are impassable, all traffick is stopped, the ranchos barricaded, and the inhabitants afraid to venture out of their doors.” The destruction proved critical during the Mexican-American War; through their power politics, Comanches and Kiowas had inadvertently paved the way for the United States’ takeover of the Southwest.¹⁷

Meanwhile, the Indians themselves were struggling to cope with the massive injection of privately owned human and horse wealth into their societies. By the early nineteenth century, marked status distinctions had emerged among Comanches and Kiowas. At the top of the hierarchy were the few men who had accumulated dozens or even hundreds of surplus horses that allowed them to dominate the wealth-generating livestock trade. By giving away valuable trade goods and horses, those men could acquire several wives and slaves, prestige, and political support. The most successful of them became band leaders and, if their diplomatic skills matched their business skills, divisional headmen. Kiowas called them *óngop* (the fine, distinguished, perfect, or best). The women of prominent families enjoyed extensive privileges as well. It was not uncommon for the *paraiño* (chief wife) of a wealthy Comanche man to command several “chore wives” and captive boys who did most of the heavy work from hide dressing to daily horse herding.¹⁸

The vast majority of people belonged to the second tier of middling sorts who owned ten to twenty horses—enough for comfortable nomadism but not for exten-

¹⁶ Ruiz, *Report on the Indian Tribes of Texas in 1828*, ed. Ewers, 9; Hyde, *Life of George Bent Written from His Letters*, 69; James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 180–93.

¹⁷ For the 1846 statement, see George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (New York, 1855), 112. See also Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, ed. Max L. Moorhead (Norman, 1954), 135, 435–37; Ralph Adam Smith, *Borderlander: The Life of James Kirker, 1793–1852* (Norman, 1999), 67–68, 106–8; and Weber, *Mexican Frontier*, 83–121.

¹⁸ For Kiowa and Comanche terms, see Bernard Mishkin, *Rank and Warfare among the Plains Indians* (New York, 1940), 35; and Wallace and Hiebel, *Comanches*, 141.

sive livestock trade or a place among those considered well-off. Although the heads of such middling families sometimes built large herds as a result of gifts from wealthy relatives, their ascendancy to the highest social rank was blocked by their position at the receiving end of the status-producing generosity chains. Lacking access to large-scale captive labor, the women of the middling families spent more time herding horses than the women of the elite families. Kiowas called the middle-rank people *óndeigúp'a* (second best). At the bottom of the ladder were men with only a few or no horses, known simply as the *kóon* (poor) among Kiowas, who deemed it necessary to assert, "The poor are also allowed. They are our own people." The poor men had to borrow horses for hunting and serve as herders in return, but their anguish was more social than material in nature. Lacking horses, they also lacked the crucial social capital that opened access to marriage, the fundamental symbol of masculine honor, and in frustration often tried to steal the wives of higher-ranking men.¹⁹

In the end, however, the greatest threats to native societies from pastoralism were ecological. The very strategies that had made possible the extraordinary florescence of the southern Plains horse culture also precipitated its collapse. Intense horse herding, growing domestic horse herds, and large-scale trade proved too heavy for the grassland ecology, triggering a steep decline in bison numbers. Large domestic herds competed with bison for the limited riverine resources, depriving bison of their means of winter survival and possibly transmitting deadly bovine diseases such as anthrax. Making matters worse, Comanches opened their hunting territories to foreign groups in exchange for trade privileges, and Cheyennes and Arapahoes embarked in the 1820s on intensive production of buffalo robes to fuel their trade with Americans. Pressured from all sides, bison herds became seriously depleted on the Texas Plains by the 1830s. By the 1850s, following a deep drought and the opening of several heavily trafficked overland trails across the central Plains, the bison herds were vanishing all across the western Plains below the Platte River, causing periodic famines.²⁰

As their subsistence economy crumbled with the dwindling bison herds, Comanches lost the ability to restore their numbers after disease epidemics. Their population fell from some 20,000 in the 1820s to fewer than 5,000 in the 1860s, forcing them to scale down their political and economic ambitions. They dismantled their trade empire, yielded large tracts to the Anglo-Texan ranching frontier, and, together with Kiowas, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes, concentrated on opportunistic raiding along the Santa Fe Trail. The decrease in the bison herds also fueled internal rivalry, splintering the Cheyennes and Arapahoes into bitter factions that struggled

¹⁹ For wealth and rank distinctions, see Marcy, *Adventure on Red River*, ed. Foreman, 158; David G. Burnet to Henry R. Schoolcraft, Sept. 29, 1847, in *Texas Indian Papers*, ed. Dorman H. Winfrey (5 vols., Austin, 1959–1961), III, 87; Mishkin, *Rank and Warfare among the Plains Indians*, 19–20, 35–42, esp. 36n4; Wallace and Hoebel, *Comanches*, 141–42; Brooks, *Captives and Cousins*, 174–80; and Jane Fishburne Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford, 1988), 197–223.

²⁰ Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 480–84; Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, 1995), 51–83; Pekka Hämäläinen, "The First Phase of Destruction: Killing the Southern Plains Buffalo, 1790–1840," *Great Plains Quarterly*, 21 (Spring 2001), 101–14; Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 2000), 80–92.

for the shrinking resources and for political power.²¹ Starving and desperate, the southern Plains tribes began to raise even more horses, which they increasingly used for food. With up to eighty horses per family in the 1850s and 1860s, they were in the process of becoming bona fide pastoralists who relied on domesticated animals for much of their food supply.²²

When the U.S. Army pushed to the southern and central Plains after the Civil War, the pastoral conversion was still incomplete. Fully aware that the Indians' greatest weakness lay in their shifting economy, the army launched a total war that combined cooperation with professional buffalo hunters, prolonged winter campaigns that disrupted the Indians' herding cycle, and systematic slaughtering of captured Indian horses. American hunters finished off the remaining bison from the central Plains by 1868, setting the stage for a brutal and decisive campaign against the Cheyennes and Arapahoes the following winter. The army then took the total warfare to Comanche and Kiowa territory, where American hunters, protected and supplied by army soldiers, virtually exterminated the bison herds by the fall of 1874. The following winter campaign, the so-called Red River War, was merely a stamping out of people who had lost their ability both to feed and to defend themselves.²³

A World Divided by Horses: The Northern Plains

During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when the southern and central Plains saw the rise and fall of several horse cultures, the northern Plains tribes continued their traditional pedestrian existence. For more than a century, the horse frontier remained locked in the south, its expansion curbed by an unfavorable commercial geography: horses remained scarce on the southern Plains before the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 unleashed large-scale diffusion, and the region's Indians preferred to trade their valuable animals to the wealthy farming villages in the east. In fact, the first horses spread to the north, not through the Plains, but via the ancient Rocky Mountain trade network, which connected the Rio Grande valley to the northern Rockies. This trade chain carried horses, along with the knowledge of how to use and train them, to Shoshones and Flatheads by 1700 and to Blackfeet and Crows by 1740. After this breakthrough, horses spread rapidly across the northern Plains, reaching the region's farthest corners by the 1750s.²⁴

²¹ Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 484–85; Thomas W. Kavanagh, *Comanche Political History: An Ethnohistorical Perspective, 1706–1875* (Lincoln, 1996), 193–477; Moore, *Cheyenne Nation*, 191–204.

²² U.S. Congress, *Report of Captain R. B. Marcy*, 45; John W. Whitfield to C. E. Mix, Jan. 5, 1856 (frame 102, reel 878, M234), Upper Arkansas Agency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior communicating . . . information in relation to the Indian tribes of the United States* (Washington, 1867), part II, 214–15; W. Eugene Hollon and Ruth Lapham Butler, eds., *William Bollaert's Texas* (Norman, 1956), 361; Hyde, *Life of George Bent Written from His Letters*, 37.

²³ On U.S. Army tactics, see David D. Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865–1883," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 25 (Autumn 1994), 313–38; and James L. Haley, *The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874* (1976; Austin, 1998), 169–83.

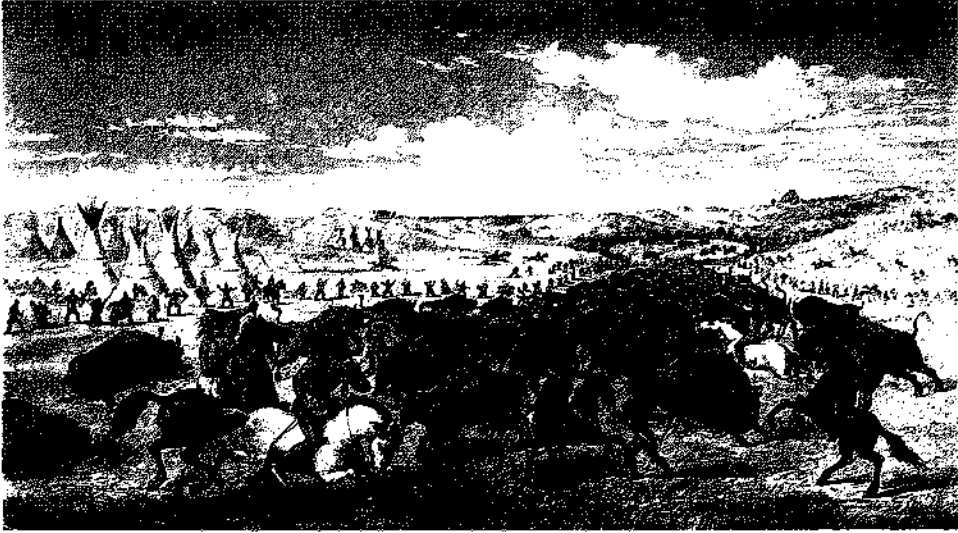
²⁴ John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture: With Comparative Material from Other Western Tribes* (Washington, 1955), 5–19.

An account of Saukamappee, an elderly Cree Indian who lived among the Blackfeet and related Blackfoot traditions to the English fur trader David Thompson in 1787, provides a window into the cultural dynamics of horse adoption on the northern Plains. In about 1730, Saukamappee joined several Blackfoot bands that planned to slip into Shoshone territory to hunt bison and deer and, they hoped, "to see a horse of which we had heard so much." Locating the mounted Shoshones proved difficult for the pedestrian Blackfeet, but finally, "as the leaves were falling," they heard of a horse that "was killed by an arrow shot into his belly." The Blackfeet gathered around the dead animal, trying to make sense of the singular encounter: "we all admired him, he put us in mind of a Stag that had lost his horns; and we did not know what name to give him. But as he was a slave to Man, like the dog, which carried our things; he was named the Big Dog." Saukamappee's account captures two important aspects of the equestrian shift. First, Indians' prior experience with dogs greatly facilitated the incorporation of horses: having turned dogs into their beasts of burden, they were culturally preadapted for the utilization and subjugation of horses as well. The close association between dogs and horses was universal on the northern Plains, as various tribal names for the horse indicate: big-dog (Blackfoot and Cree), great-dog (Assiniboiné), seven dogs (Sarcee), and medicine-dog (Lakota). Second, the idea of horses as superior dogs reveals a central feature of Indians' expectations: with the shift from dog to horse power, a future of unforeseen material prosperity seemed to have opened for them.²⁵

But the elation faded almost immediately, dissolved by harsh ecological realities. Climatic conditions became increasingly unsuitable for horses above the Platte, turning outright hostile north of the Missouri, the ecological fault line of Plains Indian equestrianism. The long and cold winters reduced the quantity, quality, and availability of forage, exposing the animals to starvation and causing heavy winter losses. In the winter of 1773 on the Saskatchewan Plains, a camp of Hudson's Bay Company traders, Assiniboines, and Crees lost large numbers of horses, "which," the Indians noted matter-of-factly, "is the case at this season of the year." The average winters were demanding enough, but in vicious ones, with deep snows and prolonged cold spells, the consequences could be catastrophic. In 1801–1802, for example, Blackfeet and Gros Ventres suffered heavy losses during an uncommonly severe winter; the latter lost between 80 and 100 horses to the cold (as well as more than 100 to enemy raiders), which left them virtually horseless. Such difficulties kept most northern Plains tribes chronically horse-poor.²⁶ The household average varied between one and five, and many families had no horses at all. Only the southernmost of the three

²⁵ David Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784–1812*, ed. J. B. Tyrrell (Toronto, 1916), 334. For the horse names, see Frank Gilbert Roe, *The Indian and the Horse* (Oklahoma, 1955), 61–62.

²⁶ Alan J. Osborn, "Ecological Aspects of Equestrian Adaptations in Aboriginal North America," *American Anthropologist*, 85 (Sept. 1983), 568–70; West, *Contested Plains*, 70–71; Theodore Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Norman, 2001), 153; Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., "Journal of Matthew Cocking from York Factory to the Blackfeet Country, 1772–73," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, ser. 3, vol. 2 (1908), 114; "Journal of Peter Fidler, 1801–1802," in *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence: Edmonton House, 1795–1800; Chesterfield House, 1800–1802*, ed. Alice M. Johnson (London, 1967), 309, 317n1.



Mounted Plains Cree drive bison into a pound through a converging funnel of pedestrian hunters and bundles of grass. Reprinted from Henry Youle Hind, *Narrative of the Canadian Red River Exploring Expedition of 1857 and of the Assiniboine and Saskatchewan Exploring Expedition of 1858* (London, 1860).

Blackfoot tribes, the Piegans, were relatively wealthy, possessing approximately ten horses per family. Piegans' success in herding was made possible by two ecological advantages: they had access to the protective Marias River valley, a superb winter sanctuary for horses, and their home territory was in the chinook belt along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains, where warm dry winds made winters tolerable.²⁷

Their poverty in horses prevented most northern Plains tribes from making a complete shift to mounted nomadism. To do so, they would have needed at least six horses per family—one for hunting, two for riding, and three for dragging the lodge poles and carrying the tipi cover and other possessions. On the northern Plains only a few families managed to acquire enough horses for the nomadic takeoff. Most families relied heavily on dog transportation, which in turn kept them poor by general Plains standards: their tipis were small and crowded, they had few belongings beyond necessities, they walked when camps were moved, and they continued the pre-horse practices of abandoning the sick and disabled.²⁸

The scarcity of horses also precluded the shift to effective mounted hunting; with the exception of the Piegan Blackfeet, all northern tribes continued to make extensive

²⁷ "The Bradley Manuscript," *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, 9 (1923), 298; Edwin Thompson Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. J. N. B. Hewitt, in *Forty-sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1930), 456; Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of the Hudson Bay, 1660–1870* (Toronto, 1974), 162; Ewers, *Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, 20–21, 43.

²⁸ On the minimum requirements for mounted nomadism, see John H. Moore, "The Dynamics of Scale in Plains Ethnohistory," *Papers in Anthropology*, 23 (no. 2, 1982), 234. Alexander Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry and David Thompson, 1799–1814*, ed. Elliott Coues (1897; 2 vols., Minneapolis, 1965), II, 517–18; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 96–97.

use of the traditional pounding method. Pounding did not require as many horses as the mounted chase, but it was very labor-intensive, involving the construction of extensive funnels and elaborate log and stone corrals into which the bison were driven. Pounding was also unpredictable. In mounted chases hunters went to the bison, but in pounding bison had to be brought to hunters—a complicated task that could fail in several ways: the bison could bolt prematurely, the flanks could fail to contain the frightened animals, or the corral could break under the mass of the frenzied herd.²⁹ All in all, the great increases in material wealth, comfort, security, and spare time that became the standard for most southern and central Plains tribes remained unattainable for most northern Indians.

An even more fundamental difference between the southern and northern Plains equestrian societies was their relationship to Euro-American markets. The horse-rich southern tribes built an elaborate livestock trade system, which allowed them not only to remain independent of Euro-American markets but also to exploit the Spanish and Mexican settlements through horse and slave raiding. In the north, by contrast, the introduction of horses paved the way for Euro-American-driven fur trade and capitalist penetration.

Since the late seventeenth century the fur companies had tried to expand into the northern Plains, but they were invariably rebuffed by the Indians, who were unwilling to engage in laborious beaver trapping. That changed dramatically in the mid-eighteenth century when the Shoshones and Flatheads acquired horses and began to push into the hunting ranges of the pedestrian Blackfeet and Gros Ventres. Desperate to acquire firearms to block this equestrian onslaught, Blackfeet and Gros Ventres established close ties with Assiniboines and Crees, who in turn began an active gun trade with British and French traders on the Plains-woodlands border. The effectiveness of armed warfare—the Shoshone-Flathead coalition was in full retreat by the 1770s—only increased the demand for guns. Seizing the opportunity, the Hudson's Bay and North West companies built several trading posts among Assiniboines and Crees in the 1780s, turning the far northern Plains into a major fur trade district. Instead of beaver pelts, the companies now asked the Indians to produce buffalo robes and pemmican, a concentrated high-calorie mix of dried, pounded buffalo meat, fat, and berries, which they used to supply their extended trading post chains across central Canada.³⁰

²⁹ For the widespread use and unpredictability of pounding, see Duncan M'Gillivray, *The Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan, 1794–5*, ed. Arthur S. Morton (Toronto, 1929), 38–44, 55; Daniel Harmon, *A Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America* (Andover, 1820), 331–32; Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832–1834*, in *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), XXII, 390, XXIII, 108; Hiram Martin Chittenden and Alfred Talbot Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels of Father De Smet* (1905; 4 vols., New York, 1969), III, 1028–30; Denig, “Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri,” ed. Hewitt, 532–34; and Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, II, 518–20, 576–77.

³⁰ This interpretation differs from the traditional view that the rapid expansion of the fur trade resulted from dramatically increased native productivity during the horse era. For traditional interpretations, see, for example, Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982), 177–78. On the importance of the uneven distribution of horses and guns in the military history of the northern Plains, see Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground*, 93–100, 141–60.

The escalating fur trade brought military security to northern Plains Indians, but it also entangled them in a global capitalist economy that was, at least initially, largely beyond their control and comprehension. The fur trade exposed them to market fluctuations and alcohol and threatened to reduce them to debt and dependency. Yet the northern Plains tribes proved remarkably capable of absorbing such threats. They accepted European goods selectively, played off competing fur companies for steady profits, and incorporated alcohol into their ritual life to offset its corrupting effects.³¹ The real threat of market penetration was at once subtler and more profound: the fur trade helped change the relatively egalitarian tribes into highly stratified rank societies. But the fur trade alone did not trigger the process. The fur trade acted as a catalytic agent of social change on the northern Plains because the region's native societies had already been exposed to the disruptive effects of another alien element—the horse.

From the beginning, horse use undermined the egalitarian ethos of the northern Plains societies. Since horses were both extremely valuable and scarce, even the slightest differences in their ownership had far-reaching social repercussions. The owners of several horses not only enjoyed an above-average standard of living but also dominated the fur trade. Hunting on horseback, they could procure meat and robes much more easily than those who still relied on the laborious and uncertain pounding method. The polarization became even more pronounced after 1830, when American merchants entered the upper Missouri and the demand shifted from provisions to bison robes. Since preparing marketable robes was extremely laborious, it placed greater demands on female labor, and only a man with several wives could procure significant numbers of robes to trade. However, because bride-price was now often paid in horses, only the owners of several horses could arrange multiple marriages. Under such conditions, the concentration of wealth, status, and power could be astounding. As one visitor noted at midcentury: "It is a fine sight to see one of those big men among the Blackfeet, who has two or three lodges, five or six wives, twenty or thirty children, and fifty to a hundred head of horses; for his trade amounts to upward of \$2,000 a year."³²

A personal trade of such magnitude translated into stacks of guns, blankets, and tools, but its significance was more than material. By redistributing their wealth in lavish giveaways, the rich could gain status, secure support in councils, and monopolize leadership positions. Such success made the other emerging elite, trading post agents, eager to attach themselves to high-ranking native men by marrying their daughters. Those marriages created the tight web of kinship relations and cultural compromises between native societies and trading posts characteristic of the middle ground, but they also solidified high-ranking families' privileged access to markets and prestige goods. Most important, the rich could use their horses to rig the production system to their own advantage. For example, the wealthy Blackfeet routinely lent their horses to the poor for hunting, collected between 50 and 100 percent of the

³¹ On the fur trade in general, see Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade*.

³² Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833–1872* (1933; Lincoln, 1989), 331. See also Ewers, *Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, 240–44; and Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 505.

robes as payment, and then sold the surplus at trading posts. Among the Crees, the poor and orphans often joined a high-ranking man's camp and became *otockinkima* (laborers) who worked as herders, skinners, and processors in exchange for food and clothes. Although such practices established a safety net for horse-poor families, they also disproportionately benefited the horse-rich men who for all practical purposes had become protocapitalists: they hired people for wages, avoided manual labor, and extracted wealth through their privileged access to the means of production and global markets. At the other end of the scale, people with few or no horses were becoming increasingly marginalized. If they did not attach themselves to privileged members of their bands, they often sold their labor directly to trading posts, working as herders, hunters, messengers, and guides, usually for paltry pay. In either case, they were serving elite people, who harvested great profits from their labor.³³

It has been argued that rigid rank distinctions did not emerge among the horse-rich southern Plains tribes because preexisting reciprocity obligations turned horses into a fluid form of property and prevented the wealthy families from denying non-owners' access to their horses.³⁴ In the north, however, a crucial difference emerged: horses were less often included in the property pool that circulated through the tribal reciprocity networks. The rich always redistributed trade goods and food—often lavishly—to meet their generosity obligations and solidify their social standing, but they generally only lent horses and, as noted, usually in exchange for extensive labor services. Horses circulated freely only within the immediate kinship network, giving rise to rigid and hereditary wealth and status distinctions: Blackfeet called the sons of the very rich *minipoka* (children of plenty). The elite also dominated the horse-raiding industry by manipulating the distribution of spoils so that men with weaker connections were often left with few or no horses. Finally, wealthy horse owners managed to protect their herds against the principal external threats, weather and enemy raids. According to oral tradition, Buffalo Back Fat, a rich Blackfoot chief of the early nineteenth century, advised his family members to diversify their wealth: "Don't put all your wealth in horses. If all your horses are taken from you one night by the enemy, they won't come back to you. You will be destitute. So be prepared. Build up supplies of fine, clean clothing, good weapons, sacred bundles and other valuable goods. Then, if some enemy takes all your horses, you can use your other possessions to obtain the horses you need."³⁵

³³ On horse-lending practices and labor patterns, see Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade* (New York, 1942), 55; David G. Mandelbaum, "The Plains Cree," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, 37 (1941), 221–24; and Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 456. On intermarriage, see Michael Lansing, "Plains Indian Women and Interracial Marriage in the Upper Missouri, 1804–1868," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 31 (Winter 2000), 413–33. For a classic explication of the middle ground, see Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991). On horse-poor people, see "Journal of Peter Fidler, 1800–1801," in *Saskatchewan Journals and Correspondence*, ed. Johnson, 286–87; and Alan M. Klein, "Political Economy of the Buffalo Hide Trade: Race and Class on the Plains," in *Political Economy of North American Indians*, ed. Moore, 151.

³⁴ Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies*, 219–20.

³⁵ For horse lending, redistribution of wealth, and raiding spoils, see Thaddeus Culbertson, *Journal of an Expedition to the Mauvaises Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850*, ed. John Francis McDermott (Washington, 1952), 83; Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 475, 525; Lewis, *Effects of White Contact upon*

The end result was a relatively rigid rank society in which exchange and social relations of production benefited a selected few at the expense of the vast majority. The concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few had a particularly strong impact on the lives of women who married into large polygynous households; Blackfeet used the term "slave wife" to refer to any additional wife beyond a man's first three. Such women worked hard feeding and watering horses, scraping and tanning hides, and cutting and drying meat, and yet, unlike women in general, often had subordinate positions in the households. They had few personal possessions, wore inferior clothes, and were frequently abused by their husbands, who relied on violence to control their growing labor pool. Many of them also married very young, bore children when still in early puberty, and consequently ran a high risk of losing their lives while giving birth. Exploited, controlled, and hoarded by the male elite, the extra wives were considered less companions than instruments of production.³⁶

The most serious threat facing all northern Plains Indians in the equestrian period was the constant warfare that stemmed from the chronic scarcity of horses and the relentless Euro-American economic expansion. Between 1795 and 1802 the competing Hudson's Bay and North West companies built several trading posts deep on the Plains, providing the Blackfeet with a direct access to manufactured goods. No longer dependent on their Assiniboiné and Cree allies for guns, Blackfeet cut off their horse trade and focused on building up their own herds. It was a devastating blow to Assiniboinés and Crees. Discouraged by the harsh climate and the heavy labor investments required by winter herding, both had come to detest systematic winter care of horses as a waste of energy. They often cut their herds loose in forested areas at the beginning of winter and collected the survivors in the spring, when, as one observer put it, the "poor brutes" were "in a shocking condition." They accepted high winter losses as an inevitable part of equestrianism and relied on outside sources to restock their herds. Thus when Blackfeet ended their horse trade, they in effect destroyed the foundation of Assiniboinés' and Crees' equestrian existence.³⁷

Assiniboinés and Crees tried to compensate by using manufactured goods to purchase horses from the Mandan and Hidatsa villages, but they were soon edged out again, this time by American traders who ascended the Missouri River after 1804 and provided Mandans and Hidatsas with a steady access to eastern markets. Twice marginalized by Euro-American markets, Assiniboinés and Crees saw their horse herds

Blackfoot Culture, 55; and Esther S. Goldfrank, *Changing Configurations in the Social Organization of a Blackfoot Tribe during the Reserve Period* (New York, 1945), 7. For Buffalo Back Fat's statement, see Ewers, *Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, 241.

³⁶ Contemporary Euro-American accounts of the status and work load of Indian women should be used with extreme caution, because they were often distorted by the male observers' cultural premise that women should be sequestered and protected. But it seems clear that the "extra wives" in large polygynous households suffered widespread abuse. See Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, II, 516; Culbertson, *Journal of an Expedition to the Mauwaies Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850*, ed. McDermott, 112; Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 505-6; and Lewis, *Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture*, 38-40.

³⁷ Binnema, *Common and Contested Ground*, 164-94. For the observation on horses' condition by spring, see Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, I, 47. See also Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the Years 1760 and 1776*, ed. James Bain (Rutland, 1969), 316.

quickly disappearing and, facing collapse as equestrian peoples, turned to the only available option: they began raiding the neighboring Mandans, Hidatsas, Blackfeet, and Gros Ventres for horses. Inevitably, the wars spilled over to the bordering regions. Desperate to find additional supplies of horses, Assiniboinés and Crees began to trade guns to Kutenais and Flatheads, thus making it possible for those mountain tribes to renew their expansion into Blackfoot and Gros Ventre lands. Losing horses to the north and west, Blackfeet and Gros Ventres in turn launched ferocious raids into Crow country to the south. Although the primary causes for the wars were the chronic scarcity of horses and their unequal distribution among different tribes, the warfare also reflected internal social conditions. This is illustrated by a Cree tale of a well-off man who instructed his son not to participate in horse raiding: "Here, my son, dress yourself. . . . Poor men are they who go on the warpath . . . for they hope to steal horses; but you, your horse is handsome; he is fleet of foot. And you yourself are handsome; you are not poor."³⁸

Punctuated only by short truces, the horse wars raged for over half a century, corroding the northern Plains horse culture from within. Although in theory the raids focused on property, in practice they led to frequent and bloody clashes, which sparked deadly counterattacks as the relatives tried to avenge their dead. It was estimated that women constituted between 65 and 75 percent of the total population of many northern Plains societies, a disparity that speaks volumes about the lethal nature of the horse wars. The endemic warfare also generated acute economic insecurity; dozens of animals were often taken in a single raid, which could leave already-poor bands virtually horseless.³⁹ Finally, warfare was critical to the decline of bison herds. By fueling a fierce arms race, constant fighting compelled the tribes to maintain high-level production of buffalo robes for markets and to discard traditional checks against overhunting. In the 1840s bison herds were declining on both sides of the upper Missouri River, causing widespread starvation. So intense was the rivalry that it did not have the usual effect of creating buffer zones, neutral lands where game animals could find respite from human predation. On the contrary, the wars over buffalo-hunting ranges pitted even the oldest partners, Blackfeet and their Gros Ventre allies and Assiniboinés and their Cree allies, against one another, critically weakening all sides. That made Euro-American military takeover virtually effortless.

³⁸ "François-Antoine Larocque's 'Missouri Journal,'" in *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains: Canadian Traders among the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians, 1738-1818*, ed. W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen (Norman, 1985), 143-44; Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, II, 526; Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*, ed. Tyrrell, 208; Harmon, *Journal of Voyages and Travels in the Interior of North America*, 337, 352-53; "Journal of Peter Fidler, 1801-1802," 309; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 91; John S. Milloy, *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy, and War, 1790 to 1870* (Winnipeg, 1988), 47-65, 83-99. For the Cree tale, see Leonard Bloomfield, *Plains Cree Texts* (New York, 1934), 63.

³⁹ For losses, see M'Gillivray, *Journal of Duncan M'Gillivray of the North West Company at Fort George on the Saskatchewan*, ed. Morton, 62; "Journal of Peter Fidler, 1800-1801," 281; "Journal of Peter Fidler, 1801-1802," 309, 317n1; Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, II, 726; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 77, 82, 89-97, 145-48; Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels of Father De Smet*, II, 519-21, III, 948. For sex ratios, see Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*, ed. Tyrrell, 352; and Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters, and Travels of Father De Smet*, III, 952.

Exhausted by starvation, disease, and decades of fighting, the northern tribes could rally only weak resistance against the encroaching Americans and Canadians. By 1877, after only a few fights with the U.S. Army, all northern tribes were confined on reservations on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel.⁴⁰

Among the northern tribes the horse wars were especially detrimental to the Crows, who thus far had largely escaped the negative aspects of equestrianism. An offshoot of the Hidatsa nation, the Crows migrated in the seventeenth century to the Yellowstone River, where they cleared small gardens. Soon after, they obtained horses and, like the other northern tribes, found mounted life both liberating and troubling. Encouraged by the possibilities of equestrian hunting, they cut off their farming activities—only gradually to realize that horse herding was complicated in the northern climate. However, in their quest to make equestrianism work in the harsh latitudes, Crows had a crucial advantage: they had access to the Rocky Mountain foothills and, through South Pass, to the Wind River basin. Fashioning an elaborate system of transhumance, they moved their herds each winter to the protective mountain canyons, where the growing season was longer and where their animals could escape the elements on the Plains. Migrations to the highland pastures not only minimized winter losses but also allowed Crows to meet Shoshone traders at regular fairs and tap into the Rocky Mountain horse reservoir.⁴¹

The famed Crow chief Arapooish, speaking around 1830, told a visitor that the Great Spirit had put Crow country “exactly in the right place,” emphasizing winter conditions: “To the north it is cold; the winters are long and bitter, with no grass; you cannot keep horses there, but must travel with dogs.” In Crow country, by contrast, winters were much more tolerable: “when winter comes on, you can take shelter in the woody bottoms along the rivers; there you will find buffalo meat for yourselves, and cotton-wood bark for your horses; or you may winter in the Wind River valley, where there is salt weed in abundance.” Making the most of the favorable geography, the Crows built sizable herds. The household average varied between 15 and 22 horses, many families owned between 30 and 60, and the accepted poverty limit for a family was between 10 and 20—more than the tribal average of most northern Plains groups. Such wealth allowed Crows to become successful middleman traders who channeled large numbers of horses from the Shoshone rendezvous to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages, where they routinely marked up their prices by 100 percent. They were known across the Plains for their trading savvy, large stocks of manufactured goods, and fierce independence of Euro-American markets.⁴²

⁴⁰ William A. Dobak, “Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821–1881,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 27 (Spring 1996), 44–51; Milloy, *Plains Cree*, 103–18; Anthony McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses: Intertribal Warfare on the Northern Plains, 1738–1889* (Evergreen, 1990), 129–48.

⁴¹ For Crow ethnogenesis, see Frederick E. Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805–1935* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 37–42. For equestrian adaptations, see Katherine M. Weist, “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Crow Political Alliances,” *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 7 (no. 4, 1977), 37; “François-Antoine Larocque’s ‘Yellowstone Journal,’” in *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, ed. Wood and Thiessen, 192; Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXII, 352; and Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 144, 147.

⁴² Washington Irving, *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville in the Rocky Mountains and the Far West*, ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman, 1961), 164–65. For horse numbers, see “François-Antoine Larocque’s ‘Yellowstone Jour-

That very prosperity was the Crows' undoing. The hard-pressed Blackfeet and Gros Ventres made raiding in the horse-rich Crow country a destructive routine by the 1820s. Desperate to obtain guns to block these incursions, Crows opened their lands to American fur traders and, inevitably, to the traders' microbes. Already reeling from war and disease, Crows suffered another blow in the 1830s when the Lakotas reached the Black Hills, where they were within striking distance of Crow horse herds. Caught between two aggressive fronts, Crows faced a rapid decline. One observer noted in the 1850s that they lived "in the hourly expectation of losing all their horses" and predicted that they "cannot long exist as a nation." Crows tried to escape annihilation by forging a series of desperate alliances, first with the much-weakened Assiniboinés and Gros Ventres, then with the Americans, who recruited them as army scouts while driving them onto ever-smaller reservations.⁴³

The Incompatible Element: The Horse among the Eastern Plains Villagers

As troubled as equestrian history was among the southern and northern Plains nomads, the complexities and contradictions of horse use were even more tangible among the eastern Plains village farmers. But at first horses seemed to offer only advantages and spread rapidly to the east; supplied by Jumano and Comanche traders, all villagers had horses by 1750. Even the Cheyennes, who had left the upper Mississippi Valley under Chippewa pressure, encountered the horse frontier on the Sheyenne River in the 1750s. Thus equipped, they began a grand migration that would take them across the eastern, northern, and central Plains and through almost every equestrian adaptation of the Plains. Two decades later, they had moved to the Missouri River, where they built farming villages near the Arikaras and gained a secure access to horses.⁴⁴

As elsewhere on the Plains, the benefits of equestrianism were immediate and irresistible. All villagers incorporated the horse into the hunt and began to make extended biannual forays to the bison-rich western Plains. Most villagers also added a new dimension to their traditional food trade by becoming middlemen between western horse nomads and Euro-American colonists in the Mississippi Valley. But horses simultaneously placed unprecedented pressure on village life. If not carefully watched, horses destroyed cornfields with their voracious appetites and sharp hooves, and horse pastures competed with farms for the limited tracts of arable bottomland. In winter, when grass was in short supply, horses consumed enormous amounts of cottonwood bark, depleting the scarce timber resources. The villagers' privileged access to the colonial markets also invited attacks from the neighboring nomads,

nal," 213; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 144–45; Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXII, 351–52; and "Bradley Manuscript," 288. On Crow power, see "François-Antoine Larocque's 'Yellowstone Journal,'" 170–72, 213–15; "Charles McKenzie's Narratives," in *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*, ed. Wood and Thiessen, 245; and Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri*, 36–38.

⁴³ Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 145–47, 184–85, 199–200, esp. 145 and 204; McGinnis, *Counting Coup and Cutting Horses*, 134–42.

⁴⁴ Ewers, *Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, 4–5; Joseph Jablow, *The Cheyenne in Plains Indian Trade Relations, 1795–1840* (New York, 1951), 4–10.



Yellow Horse, a Cheyenne, captures a herd of mules in this Native American drawing (c. 1865–1870). The sturdy mules, resilient even in hot climates, were highly valued as draft animals by the southern and central Plains pastoralists. Peter J. Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain: A History of the Northern Cheyenne Chiefs and Warrior Societies, 1830–1879* (2 vols., New York, 1981), II, 545.

which forced the less mobile villagers to acquire even more horses and thus to place even greater pressure on local environments.⁴⁵

Previous scholarship has documented the inbuilt contradictions and mounting external threats. What has been less clear is the diversity of the villagers' responses to those equestrian dilemmas. The late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century eastern Plains saw the emergence of several distinctive horse cultures, which all exhibited remarkable cultural flexibility and creativity in the face of overwhelming odds.

The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras chose to continue intensive agriculture and to suppress nomadic tendencies. Although they channeled massive numbers of horses through their villages, a typical household kept only one or two animals—far from enough for successful mounted hunts. In 1797 a visitor remarked that “even for the sole purpose of hunting their Horses are too few.” All groups preferred small-scale hunts that seldom took more than a few days.⁴⁶ Indeed, instead of leaving the Mis-

⁴⁵ See White, *Roots of Dependency*, 167–71, 178–84; Jeffery R. Hanson, “Adjustment and Adaptation on the Northern Plains: The Case of Equestrianism among the Hidatsa,” *Plains Anthropologist*, 31 (May 1986), 97–103; and David J. Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln, 1994), 24–25.

⁴⁶ Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (13 vols., Lincoln, 1983–2001), III, 401; Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, I, 336–37, 350–51; Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXIII, 272, 367–70; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 48; Donald J. Lehmer, “Plains Village Tradition: Postcontact,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*,

souri Valley to chase bison on the Plains, Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras let the river bring resources to them. Each spring and early summer, they collected huge numbers of drowned buffaloes floating past their villages and in time grew to favor the meat "to any other kind of food." "The stench is absolutely intolerable," an observer noted, "yet the soup made from it which is bottle green is reckoned delicious."⁴⁷

Those strategies had immediate rewards. The small herds did not compete with farms for the floodplain acreage, and the livestock trade allowed the villagers to trade away extra horses before the herds became ecologically unmanageable. As a result, their farming economy remained strong and crops voluminous. Given the northern climate, crop failures were strikingly rare, and their large fields yielded enough corn for their own use, trade, and even for their horses. Besides helping stabilize the farming economy, the livestock trade also brought handsome profits to Mandans and Hidatsas, who became the main horse suppliers to the vast deficit region north of the Missouri.⁴⁸

The sedentary and trade-oriented way of life followed economic incentives, but it also exposed Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras to fatal external threats. Essentially garrison communities, they were relatively safe against frontal assaults but vulnerable to siege tactics. The Lakotas—who had reached the Missouri by 1800—frequently besieged the towns for weeks and forced the villagers to pay corn as tribute or, alternatively, interrupted the villagers' farming and hunting cycle and then sold them overpriced meat and robes. When Meriwether Lewis and William Clark probed the region, they dubbed the Arikaras "tenants at will," people who were at once exploited by and dependent upon the Lakotas. More destructive still, the villagers had become prime targets for epidemic diseases. Trade brought in deadly microbes that thrived in the crowded towns, while the small domestic herds and fear of Lakota attacks prevented the villagers from escaping the epidemics to the Plains. Huddled in their villages with "2. 3 & 4 families in a Cabin, their horses & Dogs in the Same hut," as Lewis and Clark reported, Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras were struck repeatedly by devastating smallpox, measles, and influenza epidemics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The final blow came with the smallpox epidemic of 1837–1838, which killed a third of the Hidatsas, half of the Arikaras, and nearly all the Mandans.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the more southern villagers—Pawnees, Omahas, Poncas, Otoe-Missourias, Kansas, Osages, and Wichitas—chose a different strategy. They acquired large horse herds, put more emphasis on hunting, and became increasingly nomadic.

XIII, ed. DeMallie, 254. For the 1797 visitor's statement, see Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*, ed. Tyrrell, 230.

⁴⁷ "Charles McKenzie's Narratives," 239. See also Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, I, 341; Pierre Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie Heloise Abel (Norman, 1939), 74–75.

⁴⁸ Waldo R. Wedel and George C. Frison, "Environment and Subsistence," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, XIII, ed. DeMallie, 57, 60; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 44–47; Thompson, *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America*, ed. Tyrrell, 230; Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, I, 338; "Charles McKenzie's Narratives," 245–46.

⁴⁹ Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Abel, 131; Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXIII, 228–32; Moulton, ed., *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, III, 401, 489; John F. Taylor, "Sociocultural Effects of Epidemics on the Northern Plains: 1734–1850," *Western Canadian Journal of Anthropology*, 7 (no. 4, 1977), 55–81.

By 1800 all those groups were spending up to seven months a year on the Plains and relying on bison meat rather than corn as their main source of food. The Cheyennes not only traveled to the west to hunt but stayed there permanently. Fleeing Lakota attacks and disease, they abandoned their Missouri villages in the 1780s and migrated two hundred miles west to the Black Hills. There, in the unique wet microclimate created by the mountain range, they continued to cultivate small plots while gradually gearing their society and economy toward intensive bison hunting and mounted nomadism.⁵⁰

On the surface, the nomadic shift seemed a success. Large horse herds gave protection against the western nomads, the hunts yielded robes that could be traded for guns at American posts along the Missouri, and the prolonged absences from villages reduced exposure to diseases. The hunts also doubled as an ecological safety valve by providing forage for horses and time for the overtaxed home environs to recuperate and for the farming system to operate. Combined, these factors made possible a relatively stable demographic development and the preservation of military power. The most numerous groups, Pawnees and Osages, were still major players in the complex borderland rivalries and negotiations among the Spanish, Americans, and Indians in the 1800s and 1810s. In the long run, however, nomadism created more problems than it solved. The extended hunts resulted in tangled and overlapping claims over hunting ranges, turning the eastern Plains into a viciously contested war zone where even the oldest allies often clashed violently. Worse still, the intensified hunting pressure depleted bison at an alarming rate, nearly exterminating the herds from the eastern Plains by 1825. Facing starvation, the villagers had to push even deeper into the western Plains, where good hunts were still possible. However, these hunting excursions elicited an ultra-aggressive reaction among the western nomads, who saw the hunts as an invasion of their homelands.⁵¹

The rising level of warfare was evident in the southern section of the villager-nomad front in the 1820s, when Comanches were continually attacking Wichitas and sending two thousand-strong war parties against Osages. The attacks locked Osages to the east just when their homelands were becoming flooded with eastern immigrant Indians and infested with disease. Having ceded most of their lands north of the Red River by 1825, the increasingly nomadic Osages pushed aggressively southward, forcing the Wichitas to cluster in small fortified villages along the Brazos and Trinity rivers, where they soon fell under the shadow of the Texas republic. Some Wichitas even joined Comanche bands and, in effect, became naturalized Comanches.⁵²

⁵⁰ Wishart, *Unspeakable Sadness*, 25–29; Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia, Mo., 1992), 81–83; Moore, *Cheyenne Nation*, 69–73.

⁵¹ White, *Roots of Dependency*, 183–90; Wishart, *Unspeakable Sadness*, 25–36; Pike, *Prose Sketches and Poems Written in the Western Country*, ed. Weber, 48. On Pawnee and Osage power, see, for example, Moulton, ed., *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, III, 390–93, 396, 483; and James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, I, 445.

⁵² Berlandier, *Indians of Texas in 1830*, ed. Ewers, 67, 140; Tixier, *Travels on the Osage Prairies*, ed. McDermott, 150; F. Todd Smith, *The Wichita Indians: Traders of Texas and the Southern Plains, 1540–1845* (College Station, 2000), 111–12, 135–53. For ethnic incorporation, see José María Sánchez, “A Trip to Texas in 1828,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 29 (April 1926), 263; and Anderson, *Indian Southwest*, 225–26.

The warfare was even more intense in the north, where Lakotas confronted the westward-pushing Omahas, Poncas, Otoe-Missourias, and Pawnees. The villagers' weakness in those wars stemmed from a typical equestrian paradox: their shift toward nomadism had put them on a collision course with Lakotas, yet they were not nomadic and mobile enough to defend themselves successfully in the ensuing wars. When they moved to the Plains to hunt, the villagers clung to their traditional social structure and moved in large units. Such mass parties were relatively protected against full-scale assaults yet easy to detect and vulnerable to hit-and-run attacks. By the 1830s the hunts had become a high-risk venture that produced little meat and high death tolls. While some Lakota bands thwarted eastern tribes' hunts in the west, others spread even greater destruction in the near-empty villages, stealing horses, burning houses, pillaging and destroying food caches, and killing the old and sick who had been left behind. The motive for such destruction was obvious: to eliminate the villagers' subsistence base and undermine their ability to compete for bison.⁵³

The Plains villagers' predicament during the equestrian period was thus both simple and daunting: the new era favored specialization and intensive nomadism, not their adaptive diversity. In hindsight, there seems to have been only one feasible solution—become fully nomadic and face the western tribes on more equal military terms. But such a transition could not be reduced to a simple cost-benefit calculation. Traditional leaders resisted nomadism, as they would lose their central roles as the controllers and redistributors of the agricultural surplus, and strong historical and spiritual ties connected the villagers to their ancestral lands, making the transition unthinkable for many and difficult for all. Moreover, to the villagers farming was more than a source of sustenance; it represented the very foundation and continuity of the universe. In Pawnee folklore, for example, corn and life were inseparable—"the voice of Mother Corn," renewed each year by painting a mouth and windpipe on a corn stem, "was the 'breath of life.'" As a result, most eastern tribes remained attached to their villages even when it had become clear that balancing between nomadism and farming would only weaken their chances of military survival. Only few experimented with nomadism. Facing assaults, disease, and death in their villages, Omahas, Poncas, and Arikaras deserted their homes and fields several times in the early nineteenth century for desperate attempts at life on the western Plains, but each time brutal Lakota attacks pushed them back. By 1850 the three groups had returned to their villages, where they were soon engulfed by the American settlement frontier.⁵⁴

Only one village group, Cheyennes, made a successful transition to nomadism. They had found nearly perfect conditions for this demanding shift in the Black Hills.

⁵³ On hunts, see Wedel and Frison, "Environment and Subsistence," 60; Lehmer, "Plains Village Tradition," 248–49; and James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*, I, 205–10. On Lakota attacks, see Wishart, *Unspeakeable Sadness*, 76–81, 84–85, 93.

⁵⁴ On factors hindering the shift to nomadism, see Holder, *Hoe and the Horse on the Plains*, 142–43. For the statement about "Mother Corn," see Gene Weltfish, *The Lost Universe: Pawnee Life and Culture* (Lincoln, 1965), 258. On attempts at nomadism, see Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loxel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Abel, 99–100; Moulton, ed., *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, III, 399; Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXII, 284, 335–36; Louis Pelzer, ed., "Captain Ford's Journal of an Expedition to the Rocky Mountains," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 12 (March 1926), 557–58; and Holder, *Hoe and the Horse on the Plains*, 104–5.

Soon after their arrival in the early 1790s, they formed an enduring alliance with Arapahoes, longtime residents of the area, and opened a trade relationship with Lakotas. According to Cheyennes' oral history, their generosity with horses was the basis of the Lakota treaty. "The Sioux . . . only had dogs. . . . The Cheyennes gave them horses and other gifts. That practice is still in vogue." The Lakota accord resulted in a generation of relative peace during which Cheyennes gradually gave up farming and shifted to full-scale nomadism. With the conversion completed by 1810, their options seemed wide open.⁵⁵ Some Cheyenne and Arapaho bands migrated to the central Plains, where they experienced a rapid rise and an equally rapid fall as horse traders and pastoralists. The remaining bands stayed in the north and forged an alliance with the expanding Lakotas. In doing so, they became participants in the only true success story of Plains Indian equestrianism.

Balance and Power: The Lakota Expansion

The remarkable ascendancy and staying power of Lakotas, their aggressive westward invasion and their ability to resist Americans well into the 1870s, have traditionally been explained by volume and organizational capability: they had more people, more horses, and more guns, and they possessed a more efficient military organization than their Indian and American rivals.⁵⁶ But sheer volume and military efficiency is only half the explanation. Lakotas also became so dominant because they succeeded where almost all other Plains tribes had failed—finding a functional equilibrium among horse numbers, ecological constraints, and economic, cultural, and military imperatives.

Seen from one angle, large horse herds were the foundation of Lakotas' power: there was a direct correlation between their growing horse wealth and their ability to conquer. In the mid-eighteenth century, when horses were still a rarity among them, Lakotas were neither expanding nor domineering. In fact, they were facing a deepening crisis. Still largely untouched by European diseases, they were growing rapidly in numbers, and their homelands between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers were becoming depleted of bison and beaver. To the west, across the Missouri, stretched the vast bison-rich grasslands, but the pedestrian Lakotas were unable to penetrate the barrier of the populous and horse-using Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras. So firm was the villagers' blockade that some Lakota bands settled down near the Arikaras to cultivate small fields, apparently abandoning their expansionist ambitions. The balance of power did not shift until the 1780s, when Lakotas managed to buy and steal enough horses from Arikaras to employ effective mounted tactics. At the same time, between 1780 and 1795 smallpox outbreaks ravaged the Missouri Valley, inflicting much higher casualties among the villagers than among the mobile

⁵⁵ "Trudeau's [Trudeau's] Description of the Upper Missouri," in *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804*, ed. A. P. Nasatir (2 vols., St. Louis, 1952), II, 379-80; Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, ed. Coues, I, 384; Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Abel, 152-53; François Marie Perrin du Lac, *Travels through the Two Louisianas, and among the Savage Nations of the Missouri* (London, 1807), 62-63; Moore, *Cheyenne Nation*, 148, esp. 117.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Guy Gibbon, *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations* (Oxford, Eng., 2003), 88.

Lakotas. After the epidemic outburst had exhausted itself, the dozens of villages that had lined the Missouri Valley had been reduced to a scattered few. By the mid-1790s, mounted Lakota war parties had driven the Arikaras upriver, thus opening a wide entranceway across the Missouri.⁵⁷

Once established on the west side of the Missouri, Lakotas had better access to horses and were soon ready to invade the prime buffalo range between the Missouri and Platte rivers. The expansion took place largely beyond Euro-American observation, but the Lakota calendars, or winter counts, hide paintings that recorded the most important or memorable events a group experienced in a year, suggest a close link between horse raiding and conquest. Many early-nineteenth-century Oglala Lakota winter counts note massive horse raids and military victories. The terse but telling accounts also capture the thrill of discovering the abounding equestrian possibilities that existed on the western Plains. Many winters were remembered for equestrian breakthroughs, such as catching "many wild horses south of the Platte River" or bringing "home iron shod (horses)," "curley-haired horses," and "decorated tails." While committing themselves to nomadism and full-time hunting in the West, the increasingly mobile Lakotas regularly returned to the middle Missouri to raid the Arikaras for corn. They also prevented American attempts to mediate an accord between Mandans and Arikaras that might strengthen the latter, "because," as one observer put it, "they would lose, in the Ricaras, a certain kind of serf, who cultivates for them and who, as they say, takes, for them, the place of women."⁵⁸

By the 1830s Lakotas had seized the coveted Black Hills and forged an alliance with northern Cheyennes and Arapahoes, who were absorbed into the Lakota military-economic complex. However, those critical triumphs did not abate their expansion, which took on an added dimension: The Lakotas started to transform themselves into a hegemonic power. Once again, equestrian power played a crucial role. Moving in wide-ranging parties, they raided Crows for horses in the west, captured large numbers of wild horses along the North Platte River, and then used their cavalry power to drive the Pawnees to the south and east and to plunder and collect tribute at the middle Missouri villages. By weakening the eastern tribes, the Lakotas could also dominate the burgeoning American fur trade along the Missouri. By 1850 they controlled a vast region between the Platte and upper Missouri rivers. Late converts to equestrianism, they had mastered mounted hunting and built an awe-inspiring military-economic complex that allowed them to become the dominant power of the northern Plains.⁵⁹

The extraordinary expansion and endurance of the Lakotas stemmed from a mixture of adaptive genius, favorable circumstances, and historical contingency. They were a populous nation with strong allies, a steady access to American markets, and a

⁵⁷ Richard White, "The Winning of the West: The Expansion of the Western Sioux in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of American History*, 65 (Sept. 1978), 322–27.

⁵⁸ For winter counts, see James R. Walker, *Lakota Society*, ed. Raymond DeMallie (Lincoln, 1982), 131–32. On the Arikaras as "serfs," see Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Abel, 130.

⁵⁹ Moulton, ed., *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, III, 415–19; Elliott Coues, *The Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike* (3 vols., New York, 1895), I, 344–45; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. Ewers, 16–21; White, "Winning of the West," 328–39.

flexible political system that allowed the autonomous bands to take periodic unified action. They were also surrounded by weakened native groups, Crows, Pawnees, and Arikaras, and they largely escaped the deleterious effects of the changes sapping the strength of many Plains nomads after 1830—the removal of eastern Indians to Indian Territory, the opening of overland trails, and the consequent invasion of deadly microbes.⁶⁰ But a comparative view shows that the Lakota success story had a paradoxical ecological component—relatively small horse herds. Although Lakota territory was more suitable for horse herding than the far northern Plains, it was nevertheless a region of harsh winters and a rather short growing season. Such conditions placed strict limitations on horse use and posed serious dangers to animal husbandry. Lakotas often found their horses too weak for hunting even during regular winters, while deep snows and severe colds could leave entire bands horseless. Such disasters, coupled with the exigencies of winter care, encouraged Lakotas to keep the herds comparatively small. Several contemporaries estimated that they were about as wealthy as Crows, which would put them in the twenty-horses-per-household range. Such herds were sufficient for mounted hunting and warfare but paled in comparison to the enormous wealth of the southern nomads.⁶¹

This at least partially imposed management of herd size was a blessing in disguise; moderate in size, Lakota herds never became a serious threat to the riverine ecosystems and bison herds. Although Lakotas became much more heavily involved in the fur trade than the southern nomads—from the early 1830s on, they produced tens of thousands of robes for eastern markets each year—the bison ecology in their homelands remained relatively stable. Bison herds did not weaken noticeably until the mid-1840s, and even then the decline was less drastic than in the south. In the 1850s and 1860s, Lakotas were still enjoying good hunts, especially in the western ranges they had seized from the weakened Crows. Meanwhile, the southern Plains bison herds had been shrinking since the turn of the century, compromising the tribes' ability to rebuild their populations after epidemic outbreaks.⁶²

These contrasting ecological and demographic trajectories sent Lakotas and Comanches, who in the 1840s had shared between them the greater part of the western Plains, into sharply contrasting political trajectories. In the 1820s, both had numbered more than 20,000; by the early 1870s, however, the total Comanche population had dropped below 4,000, whereas the Lakotas still had more than 11,000 people living outside the agencies. Those 11,000, together with their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies, forced the United States into prolonged wars and delivered two stinging defeats—in 1868 and 1876—to the emerging world power.⁶³ Having developed

⁶⁰ See Gibbon, *Sioux*, 89–94.

⁶¹ Maximilian, *Travels in the Interior of North America*, XXII, 327; Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 504; Ewers, *Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, 32; John C. Ewers, "Were the Blackfoot Rich in Horses?" *Plains Anthropologist*, 45 (no. 4, 1943), 606.

⁶² On the robe trade, see David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West, 1807–1840: A Geographical Synthesis* (Lincoln, 1979), 54–56, 85; and Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 105–6. On hunts, see Denig, "Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri," ed. Hewitt, 460–61; and Ray H. Mattison, "The Harney Expedition against the Sioux: The Journal of Captain John B. S. Todd," *Nebraska History*, 43 (June 1962), 99–101.

⁶³ On population and warfare, see Raymond J. DeMallie, "Teton," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, XIII, ed. DeMallie, 796–99.

the only truly functioning equestrian culture of the Plains, the Lakotas, northern Cheyennes, and northern Arapahoes were also the last to be defeated.

For decades the Lakota experience has dominated our views of Plains Indians: it has become the model for all Plains nomads and their histories. The Lakota exodus from the Mississippi Valley into the heart of the northern Plains has become the metanarrative of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Plains, a story that supposedly encapsulates the full spectrum of Plains Indian experience from the adoption of horses to the exhilarating affluence of the buffalo days and from the fierce resistance against the American empire to the final, dreadful defeat. The Lakota story has also become the centerpiece of the corrective histories that have challenged the ethnocentric interpretations of colonial history in general and Plains history in particular. As Richard White has shown, the power struggles on the nineteenth-century northern Plains were not simply native resistance to overwhelming Euro-American onslaught, but rather a collision between two expansive powers, the United States and the Lakotas. White's celebrated essay revealed how the pivotal chapter in the continent's past, the westward expansion of the United States, appeared from the Lakota perspective, a point of view that has tended to dominate our perception of that history ever since.⁶⁴

Yet, for all its compelling, universal features, the Lakota experience was in many ways anomalous. The traditional interpretation emphasizes horses and equestrian warfare as the critical factors behind Plains Indians' exceptional ability to resist and postpone the American takeover. This view has been strongly influenced by the history of Lakotas and, as it turns out, really applies only to them. Viewed broadly, the history of Plains horse cultures was a promising experiment that eventually became marred by in-built contradictions that compromised the power of most tribes well before their first confrontation with the U.S. Army. The Lakotas became the most enduring native power of the equestrian Plains by default: they escaped the adaptive complications of the eastern Plains, the overabundance and ecological instability of the southern Plains, and the destructive divisiveness and social and military volatility of the northern Plains.

The overemphasis on the Lakotas in historical overviews is problematic on an even more fundamental level: it creates distorting historical shortsightedness. The rise of Lakotas' equestrian culture on the Plains was a late phenomenon that existed only in the nineteenth century, and the excessive focus on that brief, glorified period conceals the deep, multidimensional, and often troubled equestrian history that shaped the story of the continental center for almost three centuries.

⁶⁴ White, "Winning of the West."