

Comanche migration to the Southern Plains, 1700-1750. From Gerald Betty, "Comanche Pastoralism, 1700-1850," M.A. thesis, Arizona State University, 1992.

“SKILLFUL IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE HORSE” THE COMANCHES AS SOUTHERN PLAINS PASTORALISTS

by
Gerald Betty

In the summer of 1719, several New Mexican Pueblo and Spanish settlements observed an increase in Comanche and Ute horse stealing. On August 19, participants at a Council of War held in Santa Fe discussed the prospects of waging war on these Indians. Several council members related testimonial accounts of the depredations on the horse herds. Captain Don Francisco Bueno y Bohorques, *alcalde mayor* and war captain of Santa Fe, indicated an increasing presence of these peoples in New Mexico. He concluded: “according to the common opinion of the Indians of the rest of the frontiers, [Comanches and Utes] have appeared in greater numbers tha[n]...they are accustomed to go about...they are coming determined to declare war.” Shortly thereafter, Juan de Archibeque of the same villa revealed that the behavior these Indians exhibited hardly appeared to be a new experience for New Mexicans. He told the Council that “for more than seven or eight years [the Utes and Comanches] have come to [New Mexico] to steal horses and rob herds and run away with the goods in the trade which this kingdom has with the Apaches of El Cuartelejo.”¹

Historical testimony, such as that of Bueno y Bohorques and Archibeque, suggests that Spanish horses helped precipitate a relocation of Comanche groups from the Great Basin to the Southern Plains. This theory has been generally accepted, and is probably true to a certain extent.² Scholars of Comanche history and culture, however, should not be content with this explanation of historical motivation. I contend that Comanche history in the 18th century was much more complex than a response to the presence of horses in New Mexico. Rather certain requirements necessary for the management of a pastoralist society based on horses motivated Comanche groups to move into New Mexico and the Southern Plains. Ultimately, the desire of these peoples to increase horse production and pastoral specialization culminated in a prolonged state of warfare throughout the region. This article argues that Comanches consciously engaged in a strategy of horse pastoralism as early as the 18th century.

In 1940, E. Adamson Hoebel, an anthropologist noted for his work on the Comanches and other Plains Indians, wrote:

It is usual to speak of the Comanches as a tribe of hunters. Insofar as they depended primarily on game for sustenance, this is true. But it is equally true,

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and usually overlooked, that they were just as definitely a pastoral people. Great herds of horses were accumulated. The most notable form of wealth was in this form of chattel; horses were individually owned by both men and women.³

Although Hoebel acknowledged certain pastoralist attributes among Comanches, he ultimately dismissed the significance of pastoralism in their culture because contemporary academic notions of Plains Indians stressed subsistence patterns and ecological adaptation. A survey of the recent scholarship on pastoralism in Asia and Africa leads one to recognize many behavioral traits similar to those exhibited by Comanches in the historical records. Warfare, trade, herding, hunting, migrations, taking captives, and territorial expansion—traits associated with Comanches and other Plains Indians—can equally be attributed to Mongol tribes as well as the Maasai of eastern Africa.

Whether they herd sheep, reindeer, cattle, horses, turkeys, or llamas, pastoralist peoples all share certain characteristics that define a pastoral mode of life. Basically, a pastoralist society is one that involves the ownership of animals by individuals, the biological reproduction of the owned animals, and the inheritability of these animals from one generation to the next. Hoebel identified all of these conditions among Comanches in his studies.⁴ From the information Hoebel's Comanche informants provided, it seems clear that these people had met the basic requirements for a pastoralist lifestyle by the late 19th century. Unfortunately, exactly when Comanche society became pastoralist is not so apparent. Nonetheless, horse pastoralism played an important role in Comanche history from the Spaniards' first mention of these people in the early 1700s. Even though the essential necessities for the existence of pastoralism in the 18th century are not readily identified by the sources, Comanche behavior reported in these sources intimate that these conditions existed at this early date.

Testimonies of the 1719 Council of War suggest that Comanches acquired significant numbers of horses through raids on settlements in New Mexico during the early 1700s. Unfortunately, these accounts tell little of the motivation behind these people's horse stealing behavior. Likewise, the increase of Comanches in New Mexico in the early years of the 18th century is noted but not adequately explained by the Spanish sources. Examined through the perspective of pastoralism, the rise in horse stealing activity and the swell of Comanche visitors to New Mexico in the first decades of the 18th century suggest a maturation of a Comanche pastoralist society.

Livestock holdings provide the social and economic foundations for pastoralists. Chattel, in the form of animal herds, not only can help ensure economic and nutritional sustenance for the group, but such property can also encourage the creation and maintenance of various forms of social relations. Although greater numbers of animals produce greater quantities of commodities for subsistence and trade, they also have an influence on the growth and persistence of the group. Marriages, for example, are secured through customs in which livestock is exchanged, generating an expansion of kin relationships and children, vital elements in the propagation of a cooperative and

productive society.⁵ Also, the bequeathing of animals to subsequent generations provides descendants with the basic means to continue pastoralist traditions. The horses' many valuable roles in Plains Indian societies encouraged great demand for the animal.

One way pastoralists stimulate horse production is by increasing the group's mobility and by expanding into new pasture lands at the periphery of the group's territory. Such movement allows pastoral groups to overcome the resource depletion that occurs within a commonly used region, and to favor pasture and water resources in less depleted areas. Although a group benefits from these strategies, such tactics usually infringe on other groups' territory. These infringements often cause conflict to erupt between the two groups.⁶

The conflict between Comanches and Apaches over the control of Southern Plains lands resulted in a violent competition over critical resources found within the region. Between 1719 and 1724, Comanche warriors eliminated Jicarilla Apache groups from the northeastern frontier of New Mexico with a persistent series of vicious attacks in which villages were sacked, many young men were killed, and large numbers of women and children were taken captive.⁷ In 1725, a decisive nine day battle between Comanches and other Plains Apaches took place on the Wichita River in north Texas from which victorious Comanches proceeded to drive Apache groups south and west from the Southern Plains.⁸ Comanches vigorously maintained brutal pressure on the fleeing Apaches through the 1730s and 1740s, forcing Apaches to acquire outside assistance by making peace with the Spanish authorities at San Antonio in 1749. This action did little to protect Apache groups from the Comanche onslaught, and it ultimately triggered the infamous 1758 San Sabá "massacre" in which over 2000 Comanches and allied Indians razed a Spanish mission that had attended to the Apaches in the region.⁹ In July of 1767, Nicolás de Lafra reported Lipán Apaches inhabiting the mountains of Coahuila south of the Rio Grande.¹⁰ Athanase de Mézières commented eleven years later in 1778 that the Comanches continued to "persecute [Apaches] with such constant war, that they have driven them far from the said presidios and estates [of Texas], which the Apache were also molesting; and not being able to find them, [Comanches] become angry and even suspect us [the Spanish] of concealing them."¹¹ By the 1780s, the total amount of territory which Comanches acquired from retreating Apaches extended east from the southern ranges of the Rocky Mountains to the Cross Timbers in central Oklahoma and central Texas, and south from the Republican and Arkansas Rivers in Colorado and Kansas to the Balcones escarpment and the Texas Hill Country.

Warfare can be understood as competition. Many times warfare is competition for important resources contributing to the existence of a certain way of life. Besides food, pastoralists depend on resources of livestock, water, pasture, and labor for the continuation of their lifestyle. These resources are of such fundamental importance to pastoralists that warfare, while risky and uncertain, is often used as a tactic to acquire them. Pastoralists have frequently been noted as "prone to war," chiefly because of their

competitive approach to scarce resources. Comanche aggression and warfare of the 18th century reveal characteristics of pastoralist competition for scarce livestock, pasture, and labor resources.¹²

The Comanche migration to New Mexico and the Southern Plains has been appropriately portrayed as part of a conscious choice on behalf of Shoshoneans to "shape their lives around bison and horses."¹³ From a pastoralist point of view, however, the decision to move onto the Southern Plains appears to have resulted primarily from a conscious strategy to increase the production of their horse herds. Comanches likely planned and carried out their migration to the Southern Plains with an awareness of the propitious advantages that fresh lands provided horses. The nature of their migration to the Southern Plains—the sudden push into the region, the continued violent advance southward, and the total amount of territory seized—implies that Comanches perceived that Southern Plains resources were worth the competition.

This region, has been generally characterized as advantageous for horses. For example, Walter Prescott Webb argued:

The climate of the southern Plains was the best climate for the horse. He could live and thrive there year around. Since the south was the natural habitat of the wild horses, they soon became more numerous there than on the northern Plains, and therefore the Comanches had more horses than the northern tribes.¹⁴

Since Comanches applied so much energy to the taking of the Southern Plains, scholars have concluded that something about the region made it superior to the Northern Plains. The ecological data, however, seems to suggest the opposite. Indeed, Comanches expended great energy to make their move onto the Southern Plains, but it took even more energy to remain there. The eradication of Apaches from the Southern Plains, and the vast scope of territory acquired, indicated that Comanches prepared themselves to face the extraordinary requirements of maintaining a pastoralist lifestyle on the Southern Plains.

Scholars studying the horse-mounted tribes of the Great Plains have properly stressed distinctions between the numbers of horses maintained by groups on the Southern and the Northern Plains. However, explanations for these differences have been based on inaccurate presumptions. Like Webb, modern scholars have assumed that the Southern Plains climate made for warmer, less harsh winter conditions, allowing Indians to amass a maximum number of horses in this favorable climate.¹⁵ However, Douglas Bamforth's close scrutiny of Plains grassland ecology suggests that the Northern Plains should have been better suited for horses than the Southern Plains.

The quality and quantity of Southern Plains forage is considerably less than that of the Northern Plains. Bamforth cites evidence indicating that the amount of forage produced on the Plains in pounds of dry grass per acre and its nutritional value decreases in relation to a general east-west decline in moisture, and a north-south increase in temperatures.¹⁶ As such, forage growth is less on the Southern than on the Northern Plains.

Figures from the 1874 annual report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs are probably the earliest data to reflect this ecological reality of the Great Plains. Details of the report show that the number of horses owned by Plains Indians coincides with the ecological data supplied by Bamforth. Examining the number of horses owned collectively in Northern and Southern groupings suggests that the Northern Plains had a greater carrying capacity for human managed horse herds. According to these figures, Northern Plains Indians owned almost fifty thousand horses, while Southern Plains Indians had a little over twenty-five thousand, about half the number of Northern Plains horses.¹⁷ These numbers imply that the Comanches' move to the Southern Plains was not influenced by the ecological reality of the region. If ecological factors did determine the decisions and behavior of Comanche herders, then they would have been better off migrating to the Northern Plains where there was enough pasturage to support a greater number of horses.

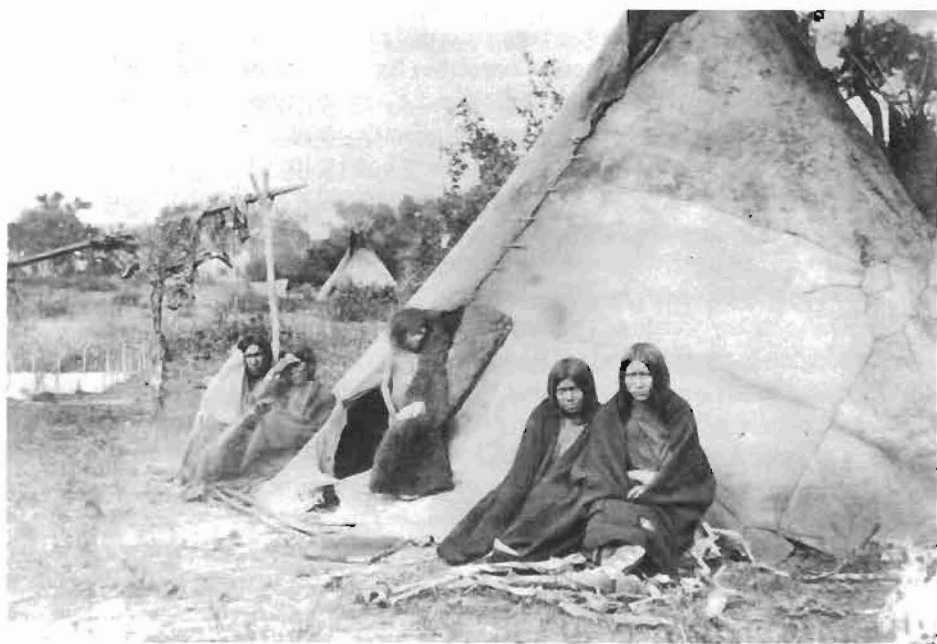
The Comanches' response to Southern Plains ecological conditions in the 18th century seems to be a resort to violent behavior aimed at gaining new pastures, and a highly nomadic lifestyle functioning to sustain a growing horse population. Examples of mobility and intrusions into new range areas reflect the desire of Comanches to increase their horse production in a region less than ideal for large herding operations. Although Comanche mobility has been recorded by several early informants, Pierre Satren, a French trader living among Comanches for two months sometime during the late 1740s, provides the best report of Comanche migratory behavior as a production strategy. Satren reported to Spanish provincial officials at Santa Fe that Comanche groups "were dispersed, with their large droves of horses, for which reason they could not live together, having to seek sufficient pasturage and water for their horses. They change their location according to the necessities of the time."¹⁸ Satren's perceptive description of Comanche migrations indicates that they had an understanding of the relationship between herd mobility and herd production. His statement shows that Comanches actively sought out pasture and water resources for their horses.

In addition to the acquisition of livestock and territory, the desire to obtain captives constituted another component to the Shoshonean drive into the Southern Plains. Comanches realized that the productivity of horse herds could be increased by allowing captives to join their own women and children to fulfill the labor requirements involved with herd management and a pastoralist economy. The potential to acquire suitable captives may thus have also influenced Comanches to move to the Southern Plains.

The reports made by Apaches to Spanish officials in 1719 indicate that the continuous Comanche attacks on their villages resulted in significant losses of women and children. In one incident, Comanches attacked a Jicarilla settlement from which sixty men were killed and sixty-four women and children were taken captive. The Apaches knew that Shoshoneans attacked them to obtain captives. Spaniards discovered numerous flat roofed houses up river from the Jicarilla settlements in which women and children were hidden.¹⁹

Comanches continued to acquire captives as they pushed into the Southern Plains. Residing with the Comanches during the 1740s, Felipe de Sandoval noted the Comanche practice of seizing captives, observing that the men “[have] as many wives as possible, and they keep for themselves whatever [women] they seize from their enemies in war.” In 1779 Comanches launched a “vigorous invasion” in Texas against the Lipán Apaches which “resulted in the loss of three hundred members of that nation, some killed and some taken captive.”²⁰

Labor comprises a very important aspect of pastoralist production because it can restrict the number of animals to be used in husbandry and social, political, and economic pursuits. Scholars of contemporary pastoralists have established a tight relationship between herd size and labor availability. Since individuals can only assume the responsibility for so many head of livestock, a labor force consisting of several individuals is needed to maximize the production of the herd. People are needed to drive, watch, water, and tend to the animals, as well as to procure various products provided directly or indirectly by the herds.²¹



Women and children performed tasks integral to the Comanche pastoralist lifestyle. Important chores like tanning hides and drying bison meat provided people with food, shelter, clothing, and trade items. Photo, taken near Ft. Sill, Oklahoma Territory, 1870, courtesy Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Library.

Women and children performed much of the labor within Plains Indian groups. They gathered wood and available fruits and vegetables; they processed food, clothing, supplies and equipment; they tended horse herds; they transported and set up campsites; and most importantly, they married, gave birth, and raised offspring, helping preserve the group's cultural traditions. It is likely that the hostilities of Shoshoneans and Southern Plains Athapaskans reflected, in part, the worth of female and child labor in a pastoralist society. The Comanches' persistence in abducting Apache women and children suggests that Shoshonean horse herders valued these individuals as critical resources for pastoralist production. Apparently, Comanches needed more women and children to fulfill the social and economic requirements of the group and its swelling horse herds.

By 1750 the social identity of Comanches had shifted towards a close identification with horse pastoralism. Pierre Satren's report of Comanche groups dispersed across the Southern Plains in search of pasturage and water for their horses strongly points to the existence of Comanche pastoralist behavior.²² Athanase de Mézières noted Comanche pastoralist practices in Texas in 1772 and 1778. In a July 1772 expedition among the tribes of Texas, he observed that Comanches had to "divide themselves into an infinite number of little bands for the purpose of seeking better pastures for their horses, and cattle for their own food." De Mézières further illustrated the Comanche preoccupation with horse pastoralism in 1778, stating that Comanches and other Indians of Texas "are skillful in the management of the horse, to the raising of which they devote themselves."²³

This article has argued that Comanche society during the 18th century was essentially pastoralist in its orientation. From the accounts of traders, explorers, soldiers, and government officials, students of Comanche Indians well know that these people moved nomadically about the Southern Plains, maintained large herds of horses, and held captives among their population. These cultural attributes were primarily focused towards the management and production of horse herds, and this activity was aimed at important social and economic objectives. Ultimately, horse pastoralism provided Comanches with an agent through which decisions and choices were made in an effort to cope with the historical circumstances of the 18th century Southern Plains.

NOTES

1. Council of War, Santa Fe, August 19, 1719, Opinion of Captain Don Francisco Bueno y Bohorques, in Alfred Barnaby Thomas, ed. and trans., *After Coronado: Spanish Exploration Northeast of New Mexico, 1696-1727* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1935), 106; Opinion of Juan de Archibque, *Ibid.*, 107.
2. This theory was first suggested in Rupert Norval Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement*, (Glendale, Ca: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1933), 19 n. 10.
3. E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Political Organization and Law-Ways of the Comanche Indians*, *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, no. 54 (Menasha, WI: American Anthropological Association, 1940), 14.

4. For the identification of these conditions in Comanche society see E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Political Organization and Law-Ways of the Comanche Indians*, and Ernest Wallace and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Comanches: Lords of the South Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952).
5. John G. Galaty, "Land and Livestock among Kenyan Maasai," in *Change and Development in Nomadic and Pastoral Societies*. John G. Galaty and Philip Carl Salzman, eds (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1981) 69.
6. Pierre Bonte, "Non Stratified Social Formations Among Pastoral Nomads," in *The Evolution of Social Systems*, eds. J. Friedman and N. Rowlands (London: Duckworth, 1978), 181; Bonte, "Ecological and Economic Factors in the Determination of Pastoral Specialization," in *Change and Development in Nomadic and Pastoral Societies*, 39-40.
7. Bustamante to Casa Fuerte, Santa Fe, January 10, 1724, in *After Coronado*, 261.
8. For the nine day battle between Comanches and Apaches on the Wichita River in 1725 see Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780*, vol. I (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1914), 24-25, and Odie B. Faulk, "The Comanche Invasion of Texas, 1743-1836," *Great Plains Journal* 9 no. 1 (Fall 1969): 11; For the history of Apache-Spanish relations in Texas see Elizabeth A.H. John, *Stornis Brewed in Other Men's Worlds* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1974), 258-303.
9. For a description of the incidents at the San Sabá "massacre" see *The San Sabá Papers: A Documentary Account of the Founding and Destruction of San Sabá Mission*, trans., Paul D. Nathan and ed., Lesley Byrd Simpson (San Francisco: John Howell-Books).
10. Nicolás de Lafora, *Relacion Del Viaje Que Hizo A Los Presidios Internos Situados En La Frontera De La America Septentrional* Acotaciones por Vito Alessio Robles (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Pedro Robredo), 182.
11. De Mézières to the Viceroy, San Antonio de Bexar, February 20, 1778, in Herbert E. Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780* vol. II, 181.
12. J. Van der Dennen and V. Falger, "Introduction," in *Sociobiology and Conflict*, J. Van der Dennen and V. Falger, eds. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1990), 8; John G. Galaty, "Land and Livestock among Kenyan Maasai," in *Change and Development in Nomadic and Pastoral Societies*, 69; R. Brian Ferguson, "Explaining War," in *The Anthropology of War*, Jonathan Haas, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33.
13. Dan L. Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1880 to 1850," *Journal of American History* 78 no. 2 (September 1991): 471.
14. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1981), 63.
15. Alan J. Osborn, "Ecological Aspects of Equestrian Adaptations in Aboriginal North America," *American Anthropologist* 85 (September 1983): 563-591.
16. Douglas B. Bamforth, *Ecology and Human Organization on the Great Plains* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), 62-63.
17. The data from the 1874 Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs are in John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture: With Comparative Material From Other Western Tribes*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of Ethnology, Bulletin 159 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955), 28; I use this source because Alan J. Osborn used it in his attempt to demonstrate empirically that southern areas of the Great Plains were better suited for aboriginal horse pastoralism.

18. *Auto* of Governor Don Tomás Vélez Cachupín, Santa Fe, March 5, 1750, in *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas* vol. 3, Charles Wilson Hackett, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1941), 317.
19. Antonio de Valverde, Diary of the Campaign of Governor Antonio de Valverde Against the Ute and Comanche Indians, 1719, in *After Coronado*, 112-115.
20. Felipe de Sandoval, Declaration of Felipe de Sandoval in the *Auto* of Governor Don Tomás Vélez Cachupín, Santa Fe, March 5, 1750, in *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas* vol. 3, 323; Don Tomás Vélez Cachupín, Report, Santa Fe, November 27, 1751, 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: University of New Mexico Press, 1940), 68; Teodoro de Croix, Report on the Province of Texas, Anzpe, Sonora, October 30, 1781, in *Teodoro de Croix and the Northern Frontier of New Spain, 1776-1783: From the Original Document in the Archives of the Indies, Seville*, ed. Alfred Barnaby Thomas (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 74.
21. Pierre Bonte, "Ecological and Economic Factors in the Determination of Pastoral Specialisation," 33, 40; John G. Galaty, "Introduction: Nomadic Pastoralists and Social Change, Processes and Perspectives," 17, and "Land and Livestock among Kenyan Maasai," 69; André Bourgeot, "Nomadic Pastoral Society and the Market: the Penetration of the Sahel by Commercial Relations," in John G. Galaty and Philip Carl Salzman, eds. *Change and Development in Nomadic and Pastoral Societies* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1981), 121.
22. *Auto* of Governor Don Tomás Vélez Cachupín, Santa Fe, March 5, 1750, in *Pichardo's Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas* vol. 3, 317.
23. Athanase de Mézières to the Baron de Ripperda, July 4, 1772, in *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780*, vol. I. Herbert Eugene Bolton, ed. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1914), 297, Athanase de Mézières to the Viceroy, February 20, 1778, in *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780*, vol II, 175.