



Figure 1.—Map showing trade in horses to the northern plains before 1805.
 Source: Ewers, 1955, page 11

THE ARRIVAL OF THE HORSE ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

by
David Kvernes

In the opening pages of his excellent book on the horse in Blackfoot culture, John C. Ewers has a word of caution for anyone who attempts to do research on the arrival of the horse on the western plains: "In tracing the northward spread of horses from the Southwest to the Plains and Plateau tribes we must acknowledge the meagerness of the historical data bearing on this movement."¹ This lack of dependable information probably accounts for the scarcity of published research on the subject and the tentativeness of the conclusions reached. Familiar as many of us are with the impact of the horse on the plains Indian culture, we still do not have a very clear idea of when and how the horse spread across the plains. Yet some interesting data and persuasive conclusions based on that data are available. After first dismissing a popular theory on the subject, I will provide some background on the means by which horses first spread beyond the Spanish ranches in New Mexico, then give the approximate dates of arrival at various points on the plains, and finally discuss how they were passed from tribe to tribe until the entire plains area was supplied.

There is a popular theory on this subject which I vaguely remember hearing when in grade school to the effect that the horses that were so numerous on the plains by the nineteenth century were all descended from animals that were lost or abandoned by the exploring parties led by De Soto and Coronado in 1541. The anthropologist Clark Wissler, though probably not the first to offer this theory, had much to do with its wide acceptance. In his well-known 1914 article he not only proposed the theory but suggested that the horse may have spread north to the Crow and Blackfoot tribes near the Canadian border by 1600, at least 120 years before its probable arrival in that area, as more

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recent research makes clear.² It was not until 1938 that Francis Haines, in a pair of articles in the *American Anthropologist*, convincingly showed that this theory had little merit. His careful review of the evidence led him to conclude that "the chances of strays from the horse herds of either De Soto or Coronado having furnished the horses of the Plains Indians is so remote that it should be discarded."³ Haines first argues that the horses lost by De Soto were very likely killed by Indians shortly after they were abandoned. As to Coronado, he points out that of the roster of 558 horses taken on that expedition only 2 were mares, and there is no clear evidence that either was lost. Had one or the other escaped, the chances of its surviving to become mother to the great horse herds of the West are extremely small.⁴

How then did horses get into the hands of Indians and spread northward? Haines again provides the most convincing explanation when he suggests that in the period from 1600 to 1650 Indian workers at Spanish missions and ranches in New Mexico, after learning to ride and care for horses, stole a few and introduced them to neighboring tribes. These horses were then augmented by escapees and by those taken in raids on the ranches by the newly mounted Indians. The Pueblo revolt of 1680 probably provided a big boost to Indian horse herds with the scattering of livestock that accompanied that rebellion.⁵

Since the Spaniards had a policy of not trading horses to Indians, presumably fearing that they would be a means to power, which they certainly proved to be, the initial dispersal was very likely not by trade nor by theft by outsiders nor by capture from wild herds, as will be explained later. Once a few Indian tribes had acquired horses, however, the further extension of the horse frontier probably depended on peaceful trade.

The steps in the movement of the horse frontier beyond the Spanish ranches and missions can be traced mainly by using scattered reports of early explorers and by making deductions from later observations about the progress of the frontier in areas where the white man had not yet penetrated. The northward movement was in two paths—a broad one across the central plains and a much narrower one west of the continental divide.

The movement northward on the central plains was rather slow. By citing reports of early travelers, Francis Haines shows that by 1690 all the plains tribes of Texas had horses; by 1719 they could be found in southern or black Pawnee villages on the Arkansas River in Oklahoma, and by 1724 they were in the hands of Kansas Indians, indicating that the frontier had by that time reached the junction of the Kansas and Missouri rivers. On the western side of the

plains horses had probably reached the Black Hills by 1730 in the hands of Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Comanche, and Cheyenne Indians who had brought them up from New Mexico or Texas.⁶ The Verendrye journals provide the next good indication of the advance of the frontier around 1740. One of Verendrye's sons brought two horses, probably acquired in the vicinity of the Black Hills, to the Mandan villages on the Missouri River. At this time there were no horses north or east of the Missouri. Although an occasional horse was seen there in the hands of visiting western tribes, the sedentary village tribes—Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa—had no horses and were not yet trading them.⁷ By 1760, however, records of travelers show that the Arikara in central South Dakota were well supplied with horses and were trading them to their neighbors to the east and north, including the Teton Dakota. By 1770 horses were owned by all the village tribes on the Missouri including the Hidatsa and by the Dakota tribes east to Minnesota. Explorer Peter Pond reports seeing a few on the Wisconsin River in 1773, but it may have been closer to 1780 before most of the Santee in Minnesota were supplied. At the northern limits of the plains, the Assiniboin and Plains Cree were supplied by the Missouri village tribes after 1760, the first dated observation coming in 1766.⁸

On the west side of the continental divide, mountains and deserts would seem to be barriers to rapid advance, but it was faster there than on the plains. The southern Ute Indians of Utah may have had horses as early as 1640, and the Navaho northwest of Santa Fe almost certainly had them by 1659.⁹ At this point scholars must resort to speculation in deciding on the dates when the Shoshoni and other western tribes first acquired horses. This they do by working back from dated observations among the Blackfoot of Montana and by using the testimony of an aged Blackfoot warrior who spoke to white travelers in the late eighteenth century. Haines thus concludes that the Blackfoot had horses by the mid 1730s; the Flathead, who supplied the Blackfoot, by 1710 to 1720; and the Shoshoni, who were farther to the south, by 1690 to 1700. Haines reminds us that the Shoshoni would thus have had horses at the time the animals reached the Oklahoma-Arkansas border and twenty years before they reached the junction of the Kansas and Missouri rivers.¹⁰ The last tribe to be noted is the Crow, who probably received horses from the west, either from the Nez Perce or the Shoshoni, around 1730. It is now possible to see how it happened that horses entered North and South Dakota by two routes, from the south by the Kiowa from the Black Hills area and from the west by Crows from southeast Montana. The focus of the trade in the Dakotas was the Missouri villages

inhabited by the Arikara, Mandan, and Hidatsa.

One question remains: How were horses passed along from tribe to tribe on the routes that have been described? It has already been noted that the initial transmission was largely by trade rather than by theft or capture of wild horses. This trade tended to follow traditional patterns that were in place before the horse appeared on the scene. Ewers does an excellent job of summarizing the evidence on trade. He concludes that "trade in horses on the northern plains at that time [around 1800] was almost without exception a trade between nomadic and horticultural peoples, and this horse trade was coincident with the exchange of products of the hunt for agricultural produce on the part of these same tribes."¹¹ Thus horses moved from the Flathead to the nomadic Crow, to the sedentary Mandan and Hidatsa, to the nomadic Assiniboin and Plains Cree. On the south-to-north route horses moved from the Spanish settlements to the nomadic Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne; to the sedentary Arikara; to the nomadic Teton Dakota; to the horticultural Eastern Dakota.¹² Looking specifically at the Missouri village tribes, it is clear that they were able to provide squash, beans, tobacco, and corn as well as European trade goods from the east and north to nomadic tribes who traded their buffalo robes, dressed skins, ornamented clothes, and meat. Each was able to supply what the others lacked. When the horse entered the scene it was simply added to the commodities supplied by the western hunting tribes. The same applied to guns when they became available in the eighteenth century to the village tribes, who passed them along to the nomadic tribes by trade. Horses and guns became the most highly prized objects of trade and each bore a standard exchange value at a particular time and place as did several other basic commodities such as corn and buffalo robes.

In addition to trade at the Missouri villages there were also trade fairs established by the Indians before the coming of the white man. Little is known about one at the confluence of Horse Creek and the North Platte near the Nebraska-Wyoming border. More is known about an annual fair at the foot of the Black Hills where the Arikara regularly traded food crops and European trade goods for horses and products of the chase. There was another on the James River near present-day Redfield, South Dakota, where western or Teton Dakota traded with their eastern cousins. It replaced a fair that had been held at the headwaters of the St. Peter's, or Minnesota River, for many years. As the Teton ranged farther and farther west each summer, they found it inconvenient to return all the way to Big Stone Lake, and therefore a more western site was

chosen (see Figure 1, page 30). At these fairs the Tetons traded horses acquired from the Missouri River tribes for guns and other trade goods brought in from the St. Peter's and Des Moines rivers by the Eastern Dakota and Yankton. Although the fair was established by the Dakota, it was frequented by white traders and was well-known to Lewis and Clark, who mention it four times in their journals. In his Statistical Report on Rivers and Creeks, Lewis provides these comments on the James River fair:

The Sioux annually hold a fair on some part of this river, in the latter end of May. Thither the Yanktons of the North, and the Sissitons, who trade with a Mr. Cammaron on the head of the St. Peters river, bring guns, powder & balls, kettles, axes, knives, and a variety of European manufactures, which they barter to the 4 bands of Tetons and the Yankton Ahnah, who inhabit the borders of the Missouri & upper part of the River Demoin, and receive in exchange horses, leather lodges, and buffalo robes, which they have either manufactured, or plundered from other Indian nations on the Missouri and west of it. This traffic is sufficient to keep the Sioux of the Missouri tolerably independant of the trade of the Missouri, and enabling them to continue their piratical aggression on all who attempt to ascend that river, as well as to disturb perpetually the tranquility of all their Indian neighbours.¹³

Lewis goes on to urge that the Dakota's sources of supply on the St. Peter's and Des Moines, controlled as they were by the British, be cut off so that the Teton Dakota would be forced to trade with the Americans on the Missouri and would have an incentive to stop harassing traders. The Teton were by this time a powerful force on the Missouri, and the horse was instrumental in bringing them to that position.

In a manner analogous to the trade at the James River fair, the Assiniboin and Plains Cree also brought guns and other European trade goods acquired from the British in Canada to trade for horses and food crops at the Missouri villages. They in turn traded with the more sedentary Ojibwa, or Chippewa, in northern Minnesota.

In contrast to trade, theft by enemies and the capture of wild horses were not likely means of initial acquisition. Ewers concludes: "I believe peaceful contact was a necessary condition of initial horse diffusion, in order that some

members of the pedestrian tribe might learn to ride and manage those lively animals."¹⁴ Yet theft became an important way of replenishing herds once they had been established in a particular tribe. Indeed, tribes such as the Blackfoot depended almost entirely on theft to keep up their horse herds.

Capture from wild herds was not a possibility in the early stages of the spread of horses since wild herds simply did not exist at that time. Once in existence they were not a popular source even for replenishment. Robert Denhardt probably has the most convincing explanation:

...the natives obtained their original horses, and always by far the greatest number, from the Spaniards or neighboring tribes and not from wild herds. The Indians had mounts by the time the wild herds dotted the plains, and always preferred domesticated animals to the mestenos. Mustangs were hard to catch, and once caught, harder to tame.¹⁵

There is little mention in written records of the capture of wild horses by Indians prior to 1800.

The horse had penetrated to the farthest reaches of the northern plains by about 1800. Its arrival there completed a process that began in New Mexico in the early to mid-seventeenth century and was carried on largely by peaceful trade from tribe to tribe. Trade in horses became part of a long-established system that extended across the entire central plains and into the Rocky Mountains and Great Basin. Theft by enemies and capture from wild herds were not important in the initial northward spread of the horse although theft became important as a means of replenishing herds. The first half of the nineteenth century marked the high point in the horse culture on the northern plains. With the decline of the buffalo herds after 1850 and their disappearance in the 1880s, the horse lost its centrality in Indian culture, the trade system all but disappeared, and the horse herds were often confiscated or dispersed when Indians were confined to reservations. A colorful era in the history of the northern plains had come to an end.

NOTES

1. John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*. Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin 59 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1955), 3.

2. Clark Wissler, "The Influence of the Horse in the Development of Plains Culture," *American Anthropologist*, n.s.16, (1914).
3. Francis Haines, "Where Did the Plains Indians Get Their Horses?" *American Anthropologist*, n.s.40 (1938), 117.
4. Francis Haines, "The Northward Spread of Horses Among the Plains Indians," *American Anthropologist*, n.s. 40 (1938), 429n.
5. Haines, "Where Did the Plains Indians Get Their Horses?" 117.
6. Haines, "Northward Spread," 432-33.
7. Lawrence J. Burpee, ed., *Journals and Letters of Pierre Gaultier de Varennes de la Verendrye and His Sons* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1927), 387.
8. Ewers, 5.
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. Haines, "Northward Spread," 435.
11. Ewers, 11.
12. *Ibid.*, 12.
13. Elliot Coues, ed., *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark*, Vol. I (New York: Dover Publications, 1965; first published under Coues' editorship in 1893), 45.
14. Ewers, 14.
15. Robert Denhardt, *The Horse of the Americas* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 103-04; quoted in Ewers, 14.