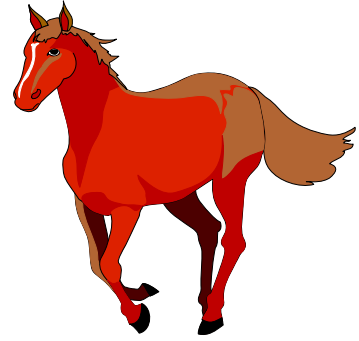


PLAINS INDIANS, HORSES AND THE VORE BUFFALO JUMP



By Gene Gade

Introduction of horses into the cultures of bison-hunting Plains Indians caused changes at least as rapid and profound as did the introduction of automobiles and trucks into early 20th Century America. How incredible it must have been to people who had hunted for millennia on foot.

Entire paradigms of travel speed, distance, load-carrying capacity, communication, trade and warfare were transformed within a very short time. Now Indians could hunt year-round from horseback. Hunters could range much farther from camp to find their quarry. A skilled rider with a good mount could now run with the bison and pick individual animals to kill. They could load the meat and hides on to much larger and stronger animals for the journey home. They didn't have to feed any of the meat to their beasts of burden as they had for the thousands of years when dogs served that role.

As the numbers of available horses increased, tribes were less dependent on communal hunts in the fall. Within a generation or so of the arrival of horses, "buffalo jumps," including the Vore site, essentially became obsolete.

As usual, archaeology at the Vore Buffalo Jump provides inferential evidence about this major cultural shift. In all of the early, deeper cultural levels at the VBJ, the buffalo carcasses were broken down into relatively small pieces of meat and bone. Presumably this pattern was necessary because a human being (possibly an adolescent) had to manually lug them out of the sinkhole and transport them on a dog-propelled travois to a processing camp that may have been several miles away.

However, the photo at right shows how the butchering pattern changed in the last couple of times the Vore site was used. Basically, the carcasses were broken into much larger segments, too big to be carried out of the sinkhole by an individual human of any age, gender or stature. Almost certainly this change was made possible by the arrival of a larger beast of burden—namely the horse. The archaeological record at the Vore site indicates that this dog-to-horse **(Continued)**



**Butchering Style Changed in
Cultural Level Two—@ 1790**

Horses and the VBJ continued—

transition happened in the late 1780's or 1790's.

Presumably during the early stages of transition, any given tribe would have had few horses and they would probably have been in the hands of high-status males. As more horses became available, more of them would have been used for important, but relatively mundane tasks like dragging quarters of bison carcasses out of a sinkhole and carrying them to camp.

By about 1800, activity at the Vore site stopped fairly abruptly. Possibly because, by then, the regional tribes had enough horses they could hunt for fresh meat in all seasons and no longer needed to acquire massive amounts in autumn communal hunts using buffalo jumps.

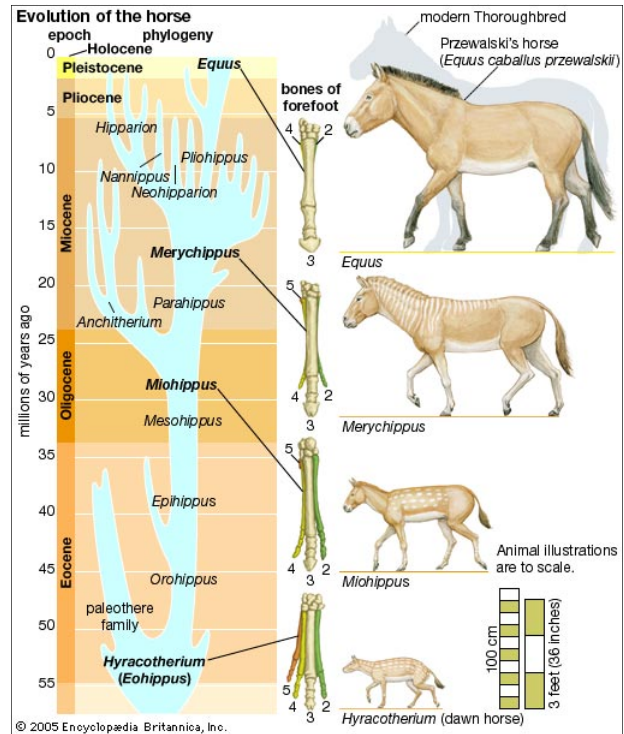
Origin of Horses

Horse-like animals appeared in the fossil record over 50 million years ago. After separating from their relatives, rhinos and tapirs, during the Eocene Epoch, the horse family tree radiated into a number of forms, most of which became extinct leaving no ancestors. Originally a forest animal less than 20" tall, horses had four toes on their front legs and three toes on their hind appendages and teeth adapted to browsing woody plants.

The climate of North America became drier during the Oligocene Epoch. Forests shrunk and grasses became more abundant. Horses adapted by becoming larger and faster and by becoming more of an open country animal.

By the Miocene, about 24 million years ago, large grasslands had appeared. One of the three main branches of the horse family expanded into this new niche and, over time and with many failed experiments, became the large, fast, single-toed, grass eater that we know as *Equus*, the modern horse. During their development, horses successfully spread to Eurasia. Ironically, they became extinct in their continent of origin—North America—during the late-Pleistocene only 10 to 20 thousand years ago.

Some people believe that, along with rapid and major climate change at the end of the Ice Ages, horses and some other by species were



extremely stressed and that hunting by the newly arrived human population tipped a number of Pleistocene mammals over the edge and into extinction here in North America.

A Legacy of the Conquistadors

There are legends that the horses that Plains Indians acquired were descendents of half a dozen feral animals that escaped from the would-be Conquistador, Coronado. Following the example of Cortez and the Aztecs and Pizarro and the Incas, Coronado went all the way to Kansas in 1540 looking for another rich Indian culture to pillage and plunder. There are also stories about horses escaping from a Spanish ship the wrecked on the coast of Texas.

It's possible that a very few horses escaped in such a fashion, but they did not propagate the hundreds of thousands of horses that ended up with the Plains tribes.

The Spaniards were indeed the folks who brought horses north from Mexico to their missions and settlements near Santa Fe and in California. However, they understood how much of an advantage horses provided and they tried very hard not let their horses fall into Indian hands. In fact, it was illegal under their rule for Indians to ride or own horses.

However, some Indians who were slaves on Spanish Rancheros learned to handle the speedy and powerful new animals.

Comes the Revolution

The event that changed the entire situation was the Pueblo Rebellion of 1680. Having chafed under the heavy hand of the Spanish for over a century, the normally peaceful farming villages along the Rio Grande River and its tributaries, rose up and violently chased the Spanish back to Mexico. As the Spaniards retreated in disarray, much of their livestock, including many horses, were captured by regional Indian tribes. The Pueblos apparently did not keep the Spanish animals, but some of their more nomadic neighbors, especially the Utes and Comanches took as many horses as they could catch, capture or trade for.

When the Spaniards returned a dozen years later, the Comanches on the Plains and the Utes in the Mountains were committed horse people. Moreover, those tribes had relatives and trade partners. The genie was out of the bottle. The cultural revolution was on.

The Spanish colonial horses that the Indians acquired were derived from several European breeds including Spanish Barbs, Arabians and Lipizzaners. They came in a wide variety of color, size and conformation. The average Indian horse was small in stature, but strong and wiry. They probably stood only 13.2 to 14 hands high and they probably weighed about 700 pounds on average. (By comparison, modern quarterhorses are usually 15 to 17 hands high and weigh over 1,000 pounds.) Indian horses are described as having a "large head with a good eye; short thick neck; large round barrel; relatively heavy shoulder and hip; fine limbs and small feet."

By trading (and probably raiding) horses were transferred from tribe to tribe. The transfer occurred on both sides of the Rocky Mountain chain. The Utes apparently took horses across the mountains and into the Great Basin. The Comanches and their trading partners took them north via the Plains, east of the Rockies.

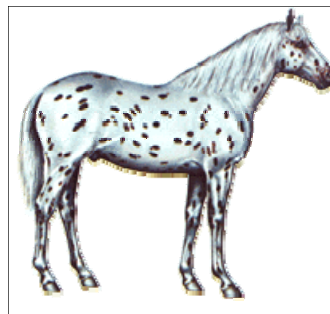


War Chief—A Nakota horse thought to have conformation typical of Indian horses from the pre-reservation period

The Shoshone Connection

Both the Utes and the Comanches were relatives of the Shoshone, so the Shoshone were among the first of the more northern tribes to acquire horses. For a generation or so in the middle 1700's, the Shoshone gained power and expanded their territory to include large areas of the buffalo country. During this period and, perhaps later, they probably used the Vore Buffalo Jump.

Most of the Great Basin groups were linguistically and culturally Shoshonean. Horses kept moving with them through the Basin to the Palouse Prairie in what is now eastern Oregon, Washington and Idaho



where they were acquired by the Nez Perce. The Nez Perce became famous for developing a distinctive breed of spotted horses—the Appaloosa—a somewhat dis-

torted name for the Palouse region where they lived.

The trade continued north and east from there, bringing horses to the Flathead, Black-foot and Cree Indians over the next 20 to 30 years. Written history from the fur-trapping



Postulated Pattern and Time-line for Distribution of Horses Among Indian Tribes in the Western United States

Spanish colonialists brought numerous horses to rancheros and missions in New Mexico and California in the 1600's. The Pueblo Rebellion of 1682 allowed regional Indian tribes to capture horses abandoned by the Spanish. There were two major dispersal paths: from the Utes through the Rockies and Great Basin and from the Comanche northward and eastward from the southern Great Plains, but mostly east of the Rockies. It took over half a century for trade and warfare to disperse horses from the southern to northern Plains, but horses created a cultural revolution everywhere they went.

documents that the Blackfeet had few horses during the early decades of the 1800's.

Dispersion to the Northern Plains

The Crow or Absoraka tribe are often cited as among the first and best horsemen of the northern Plains. However, they probably acquired horses from the Shoshone about 1740. Being relatives of the Hidatsa, they probably also exchanged horses and other trade items with them as well.

The main branch of the Plains trade route was north from the Comanche in Texas and Oklahoma. Around 1720, the Pawnees acquired horses. The Pawnee along with most of the Missouri River Indians made their living partly with farming (corn, beans, squash, etc.) and the rest with hunting (bison) and trading. They lived most of the year in earthlodge villages along river valleys. They were centrally located with a cultural center in eastern Nebraska and from there were also important in trade and warfare both up the Missouri River to the north and west along the Platte River.

The Arikara, who lived farther up the Missouri, were closely related to the Pawnees and were also integral to regional trade. The Arikara almost certainly got horses from the Pawnee sometime in the middle of the 1700's. They, in turn, would have traded with the other earthlodge-dwelling/farming-hunting cultures farther up the river—the Mandan and Hidatsa.

Linguistically and culturally, the Mandan and Hidatsa are similar (Siouan language) and they were renowned in their day as entrepreneurs. Until they were decimated by small pox, the Mandan and Hidatsa were at the hub of tribal trade in the northern Plains. They traded farm goods (corn, etc.) for the meat and hides brought by the bison hunters. As European goods started to arrive via the river and lake transportation routes of southern Canada and as the fur trapping enterprise expanded, the Mandans and Hidatsa were central in that trade as well. It is likely that, when horses arrived, the Mandan and Hidatsa were central to their dispersal to regional tribes including the Cheyenne, Sioux and Assiniboine.

Once horses were available, the switch to the nomadic lifestyle of following the buffalo herds was swift and complete for the Chey



Blackfeet on the move with horses

enne and Sioux.

By the time most of the Anglo-American journals were written, just a few decades later, the Cheyenne and Lakota were the consummate and most powerful buffalo hunting/tipi dwelling/horse riding Indians on the northern Plains. Only the oldest tribesmen could really remember life without horses by then. For Caucasians moving west, it was an easy assumption that the tribes had possessed horses and practiced their 1800's culture for a very long time.

Good buffalo runners and war ponies were among the most prized possessions of 19th Century Plains hunters and warriors. The relationship between Indians and horses seemed inextricable. For most northern Plains tribes, the era of free-roaming, horse-mounted buffalo hunters lasted little more than a century, but it was, for them, a glorious period indeed.



Edward Curtis photo of horse-mounted Cheyenne Warriors—1905