

Horse Warriors of the Great Plains

When European horses arrived on the Plains, they were coming home again.



JOSEPH SOHM/SHUTTERSTOCK

Black Hills Wild Horse Sanctuary, South Dakota

At the end of the Civil War, the U.S. Army had a surplus of career officers and soldiers, and assigned them to try to deal with the growing conflicts between the indigenous tribes and nations of the Great Plains and the U.S. Government. The soldiers were hardened by four years of brutal and bloody war. However, the situation they found on the Plains was entirely different from anything they had experienced in the East. There were no massive armies or fortified centers to besiege, no battle lines, and indeed they often had little idea where the tribes were located, or whether they were hostile or friendly. The soldiers were charged with protecting an increasing influx of settlers from the East, and they quickly found themselves overmatched.

Less than two years after Generals Grant (1822–1885) and Lee (1807–1870) met at Appomattox Court House to sign the surrender, an Army colonel sent a group of eighty men out from Fort Kearny near the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming. They had heard gunshots and were riding out to help a group of soldiers who were away from the fort, cutting wood. The first officer leading the effort was known for his caution and restraint, but another young Civil War veteran pulled rank and took over the relief mission. He unwisely decided to chase a few mounted warriors who had come near the fort and then turned around and fled. The soldiers were convinced that these were the men responsible for recent raids on local settlers. One of the decoy riders was a

Lakota teenager named Crazy Horse (1842?–1877; *Thašúnke Witkó*, or “His Horse is Crazy”). Ten years later, at the Battle of the Little Bighorn, Crazy Horse would use a similar feint to entrap Colonel George Armstrong Custer (1839–1877). Once led away from Fort Kearny by these riders, the Army patrol found themselves surrounded by hundreds of mounted warriors from several nations—Arapaho, Cheyenne, and three bands of the Lakota. None of the soldiers survived.

The war between settlers from the East and the tribal nations of the Plains occurred in many spasms of violence between 1840 and 1890, as a way of life, based on nomadic buffalo hunting, collided with a settlement system, based on permanent agriculture and fenced cattle ranching. What



A stratagem of war, learned and practiced by every young man in the [Comanche] tribe; by which he is able to drop his body upon the side of his horse at the instant he is passing" from Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians by George Catlin, 1841.

allowed a few thousand warriors to fight off twenty to thirty-thousand U.S. troops? More than anything, it was their intimate knowledge of the Plains environments and their tremendous skill as horse warriors.

U.S. Colonel Richard Dodge (1837–1895) described an encounter with the Indians of the northern Plains in these terms:

To produce a moral effect on [the] enemy, the young and ardent, or those who have exceptionally good horses, are tearing over the ground, circling, at full speed, in front, rear, and flanks of the masses to which they belong, making a great show of force, and appearing to be numerically at least five times greater than they really are...The plain is alive with flying, circling horsemen, now single, each lying flat on his horse, or hanging to his side to escape the shots of the pursuing enemy; now, joined together, they rush upon that enemy in a living mass of a charging, yelling terror.

In what is now the Panhandle of north Texas, the first Battle of the Adobe Walls took place in the autumn

of 1864 in a similar manner. “[I]n their front were about two hundred Comanches and Kiowas...charging at them with their bodies thrown over the sides of their horses, at a full run, and shooting occasionally under their horses’ necks, while the main body of the enemy, numbering twelve or fourteen hundred, with a dozen or more chiefs riding up and down their line haranguing them, seemed to be preparing for a desperate charge on our forces.”

For thousands of years prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the early 1500s, there were no horses in the Americas. The superb horsemanship witnessed by the American cavalry on the Plains was a relatively recent thing, starting only with the arrival of horses from Spain. It was long thought that horses of the Plains were descendants of horses set free during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. In that uprising, nearly fifty Puebloan communities in what is now northern New Mexico joined forces and expelled the 2,000-plus Spaniards who had established missions, presidios, and

other outposts within their towns. Franciscan missionaries from Mexico had established churches in Puebloan communities beginning around 1608, but the foreigners’ demands on the Puebloan people became more and more onerous until Pueblo towns banded together to force them out.

In 2023, William Taylor and a team of researchers from the University of Colorado, many indigenous nations, and several international DNA labs analyzed thirty sets of horse remains from archaeological settings and compared them to several hundred horse genomes from around the world. Their research clarified a number of facts: First, all the horses came from populations native to Europe and Asia, and most came from Spanish bloodlines. Second, the horses on the Plains were not closely related to Icelandic or Scandinavian horses, so they had not come over with the Norse around 1000, nor had any ancestral horses survived early Holocene extinction. Third, they found evidence that the dispersal of horses onto the Plains began in the mid-1500s, more than a century before the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Finally, they showed that the

horses that came into the Plains were traded among indigenous groups; they did not become feral and then get re-domesticated. The first horses in indigenous sites on the Plains had skeletal attributes of horses that had been bridled and ridden.

This introduction of horses in the Western Hemisphere closed a very interesting historical loop. The genus *Equus*, which includes all modern horses, asses, and zebras, evolved on the Great Plains of North America around 3.5 million years ago. Their descendants were living here when humans first arrived in the Americas around 20,000 years ago [see “Arrival Time of the First Americans, Reconsidered,” by Lionel Jackson, Michael C. Wilson, Steven Holen, and Kathleen Holen, NH, April 2020]. The ancestors of modern horses of the genus *Equus* had migrated across to Asia one of the times the vast land bridge connected Alaska and Siberia and they moved onto the steppes and grasslands that spanned from Siberia to Europe. They were domesticated by people living on the edges of the Eurasian steppes and prairies and spread from China to the Atlantic.

When people migrated to the Americas at the end of the Ice Age, they hunted the horses living here to extinction. They were part of the demise of the Pleistocene megafauna—mammoths, giant sloths, larger bison, and other large fauna. When Europeans came across the Atlantic 500 years ago, they brought their horses with them, and these domesticated horses repopulated much of their ancestral range. Very quickly they became an integral part of the lives of the indigenous people living on the edges of the Great Plains and opened



PATRICK GRIES AND VALERIE TORRE/MUSEE DU LOUVE BRANLY

“The Grand Robe” (circa 1800-30), by an artist from a Central Plains tribe

up new worlds for them. These people saw horses as powerful beings and respected them as the Horse Nation, on a par with other indigenous nations. Humans were charged with protecting their horse brothers. Together they became a military powerhouse.

The arrival of horses on the Plains radically transformed these societies. Before horses, pedestrian groups could not make full use of the prairie’s resources because of the long distances involved, and the difficulty of hunting buffalo on foot. They kept to the river valleys on the edges of the Plains and lived a semi-sedentary, agricultural life. With horses, they quickly became more nomadic, following the migratory buffalo herds and raiding and competing with each other, but also cooperating. In summers in the upper Arkansas River valley in western Kansas and eastern Colorado, thousands of people and tens of thousands of horses would gather for trade, socializing, and planning. At one such event in the early 1800s, the Comanche were joined by Apache, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Shoshone.

The arrival of horses upset the sociopolitical and gender norms of many societies. Men with greater access to horses accumulated wealth and power quickly within their bands, and this upset the seniority-based leadership of bands, where men and women gained access to more and more spiritual knowledge by passing through rituals associated with stages of life. This ancestral knowledge helped Plains people adapt to the long-term changes of a very difficult environment. The Plains have hot summers and long, cold winters and the movements of migratory animals are sporadic and unpredictable. The wisdom that came from thousands of years in these lands provided societies with stability and resilience, but only if the voices of elders were heard.

Samuel M. Wilson is professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of Texas, author of *The Emperor’s Giraffe and Other Stories of Cultures in Contact*, and a contributing editor to *Natural History*.