

The Aboriginal North American Horse

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional Dakota/Lakota people firmly believe that the aboriginal North American horse did not become extinct after the last Ice Age, and that it was part of their pre-contact culture.

Scientists know from fossil remains that the horse originated and evolved in North America, and that these small 12 to 13 hand horses or ponys (sic) migrated to Asia across the Bering Strait, then spread throughout Asia and finally reached Europe. The drawings in the French Laseaux caves, dating about 10,000 B.C., are a testimony to their long westward migration. Scientists contend, however, that the aboriginal horse became extinct in North America during what is (known) as the "Pleistocene kill," in other words, that they disappeared at the same time as the mammoth, the ground sloth, and other Ice Age mammals. This has led anthropologists to assume that Plains Indians only acquired horses after Spaniards accidentally lost some horses in Mexico, in the beginning of the XVIth (16th) century, that these few head multiplied and eventually reached the prairies.

Dakota/Lakota Elders as well as many other Indian nations contest this theory, and contend that according to their oral history, the North American horse survived the Ice Age, and that they had developed a horse culture long before the arrival of Europeans, and, furthermore, that these same distinct ponys (sic) continued to thrive on the prairies until the latter part of the XIXth (19th) century, when the U.S. government ordered them rounded up and destroyed to prevent Indians from leaving the newly-created reservations. Although there is extensive evidence of this massive slaughter, no definitive evidence has yet been found to substantiate the Elders' other claim, but there are a number of arguments in favour of the Indian position.

Post-glacial remains

Some biologists have pointed out that Elders could indeed be correct, for while the mammoth and other Pleistocene mammals died out during the last Ice Age in both continents, if the horse survived in Eurasia, there is no reason for it to have become extinct in North America, especially given similar environment and climate on the steppes and prairies.

In Eurasia, scientists have been able to trace the domestication of the horse through extensive archaeological work, fossil remains, burials, middens (garbage heaps) and artifacts. Such finds have, for instance, enabled them to determine that peoples there ate horses, buried them with notables, and helped them establish that men started riding about 3,500 B.C.

By comparison, very little archaeological work has been done on the prairies due in large part to budget constraints. There are also other problems. Whereas the Seythians, for instance, left magnificent gold jewelry which can be dated to 400 B.C., Indian petroglyphs are usually impossible to date accurately. Digs have also concentrated mainly on villages sites, but if prehistoric prairie Indians had the same aversions to eating horsemeat as Dakota/Lakota people have today, then middens (garbage heaps) would not contain the necessary evidence either. It is well known that Dakota/Lakota people have traditionally eaten dogs, and indeed they still do at certain times, but conversely they would no more eat horses than Europeans would eat dogs. So that if both these cultural traits, in regards to horses and dogs, are ancestral, it would be useless to seek horse remains in garbage heaps.

Dakota/Lakota burial customs are well documented: Bodies were placed on scaffolds on the prairies, and the bones were collected, cleaned and buried about one year later. As there is no tradition of ceremonial horse burials, with or without humans, one can assume that horses were simply left to die on the prairies where wolves and other scavengers would have efficiently dealt with their carcasses, thereby leaving scientists, once again, with few, if any, remains to discover.

So whereas the Eurasian cultural practices insured the survival of physical evidence of the presence and domestication of the horse thousands of years ago, it might well be that pre-contact Indian cultural practices and environmental factors are responsible for the absence of the same evidence on this continent.

The Indian pony and its characteristics

Dakota/Lakota people have an extensive "horse vocabulary," and they distinguish between their "own" horses, which among other names they call "sunkdudan," the small-legged horse, and the European imported horse which they call the long-legged horse, or the American Horse.

Between 1984 and 1987, this writer conducted extensive research on the prairies to retrace the itinerary of Louis-Joseph LaVerendrie who left a village site near Bismark, North Dakota, on 23 July, 1642, in an attempt to find the "People of the Horse." He hoped they would take him to the "Western (China) Sea," which Europeans had long sought in North America. He traveled 20 days, guided by two Mandans, and on 11 August (1642), he reached the "Mountain of the People of the Horse" where he waited 5 weeks for their arrival. In trying to locate this campsite, this writer used LaVerendrie's maps and diaries, as well as other documentation and interviewed numerous Elders and old ranchers. Eventually the site was located in Wyoming, and all of the people he met and traveled with were found to be Lakotas. But these interviews also lead to a wealth of information about the Indian pony.

According to Elders, the aboriginal pony had the following characteristics: It was small, about 13 hands, it had a "strait" back necessitating a different saddle from that used on European horses,

wider nostrils, larger lungs so that its endurance was proverbial. One breed had a long mane, and shaggy (curly) hair, while another had a "singed mane." This writer contacted a specialist in mammals and was told the Elders were describing the Tarpan and the Polish Przewalski horses, and that early, independent eyewitness accounts ought to be investigated to confirm the Dakota statements. This led to further research for creditable European reports.

Frederick Wilhelm, Prince of Wurtemberg, a widely respected naturalist, traveled along the Mississippi and up the Missouri in 1823. Prince Wilhelm had studied zoology, botany and related sciences under Dr. Leuret, himself a student of Jussieu, Cuvier and Gay-Lussac. An English translation of his diary, titled *First Journey to North America in the years 1822 to 1823*, was published in 1938 by the South Dakota Historical Society. His memoirs show that he was a keen observer of the fauna and flora wherever he traveled, and it was interesting to note his remarks on the Indian pony's characteristics:

"I interrupt my discourse, to say a few words concerning the horses of the Indians...At a cursory glance one might mistake them for horses from the steppes of eastern Europe. The long manes, long necks, strong bodies and straight back make them appear like the horses of Poland...On the whole the horses of the Indians are very enduring..." (So. Dak. Hist. Soc., XIX:378).

He explained this curious phenomena (sic) by postulating that the Indian pony had descended from the Spanish horses, but that it has "degenerated," so that "They now resemble the parent (Spanish) stock very little."

If Elders are correct, and if the aboriginal pony did survive, it might well also explain why the ponies so closely resembled the Tarpan or the Polish horses, and perhaps systematic extermination of these ponies by the U.S. government has deprived science of very valuable information.

Early French manuscripts: Evidence of a Dakota horse culture prior to 1650

Other evidence exists which also militates in favor of the Indian position, that the aboriginal horse had already been tamed and ridden at the time of (white) contact.

The first mention of horses in French manuscripts dates from 1657, and led to an amusing misunderstanding. In August 1657, Pierre Esprit Radisson traveled from Quebec to Onondaga (Syracuse, N.Y.) and during this canoe trip, a 50y/o Iroquois told the explorer of a three-year trip he had taken as a young man to the "great river that divides itself in two" -- the Mississippi. (Scull, Gideon G., *Voyages*, 1943:105). During that trip, he assured Radisson he had seen "a beast like a Dutch horse, that had a long & straight horn in the forehead," and this horn was some 5 feet long. Following this story Radisson (Scull:107) comments:

"Now whether it was a unicorn, or a fibbe made by that wild man, yet (that) I cannot tell, but several others told me the same, who have seen severall times the same beast, so that I firmly believe it."

Similar stories had also reached the Atlantic Dutch colonies. O'Callaghan's Documentary History of New York (Vol. IV:77, 1851), has an engraving of this animal, with the title "Wild Animals of New Netherlands" which has been taken from a Dutch work published in Amsterdam in 1671. The description of this strange bea(st):

"On the borders of Canada animals are now and again seen somewhat resembling a horse; they have cloven hoofs, shaggy manes, a horn right out of the forehead, a tail like that of a wild hog, black eyes, a stag's neck, and love the gloomiest wilderness, are shy of each other, so that the male never feeds with the female except when they associate for the purpose of increase, then they lay aside their ferocity. As soon as the rutting season is past, they again not only become wild but even attack their own." (Soull, 1943:107, footnote 42.)

The clue to the identity of this fabulous beast -- whose habits so resembled that of the horse -- was finally discovered in the account of the western journey of the explorer Jean Cavelier de la Salle. He reached the Illinois River, in January 1680, and began to construct Fort Crevecoeur, at Piorea, Illinois. On 17 February (1680), two western chiefs visited him, one of whom had a tobacco pouch made of "the foot of a horse with part of the skin of the leg." Upon being questioned, the chief answered that 5 days west of where he lived "the inhabitants fought on horseback with lances..."

From this description, it became evident that the "unicorns" seen by the Iroquois, in his younger days, were simply horses whose riders, perhaps hunting buffalo at a gallop, held their long spears in front of them, between the horse's ears. As for the "cloven hoofs," these could well have been the seams of the hide horseshoes Indians sometimes used.

Concerning the identity of these expert riders, La Salle thought they were Spaniards:

"(These riders) had long hair. This circumstance made us believe that he was speaking of Spaniards from New Mexico because Indians here do not let their hair grow long."

La Salle was at the time with Illinois Indians and had not yet reached the Mississippi, so he had no way of knowing the hairstyle of other Indian nations, but Radisson had gone to "the great river that divides itself in two," in 1655 and again in 1659, and had met Dakotas. Radisson (Scull, 1943:151) stated:

"Those people have their haires long. They reape twice a yeare; they were called Tatanka, that is to say buff (buffalo)." Tatanka is of course the Dakota/Lakota name of the buffalo, and as Radisson states, it was -- and still is -- the sacred name of the entire "Sioux" nation: Tatanka Oyate, or Pte Oyate, The Buffalo Nation. This passage is interesting because it contains the very first Dakota word ever written by a European, and at the same time gives the true name of the nation, mistakenly called "Sioux" by later Europeans.

Were these expert prairie horsemen indeed Dakota/Lakota people as Radisson's quote states? A manuscript map dated 1673, but probably earlier still, and its lengthy accompanying text indicate that they undoubtedly were. The text states, and the map shows the entire plains area, from Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains as "Manitounie," a French transcription of the old Dakota

term for prairie, "Manitu," and "oni," to live. Hence Prairies Dwellers, a name which the Ojibwa translated into their own language as "Mascoutens Puane," from "Mascoutens," prairie, and "Puane/Boine," the still current term for all "Sioux" people. Both names were also translated into French as "Sioux des Prairies," Prairie Sioux. This same map, part of the Cedex Canadensis, at the Gilchrist Museum in Oklahoma, also shows that near the confluence of the Mississippi and the Missouri, where the Iroquois had seen his "unicorn," there were indeed "Nations who have horses."

Hence, French manuscripts indicate that the entire prairies, from the Mississippi to the Rockies, were occupied by the Dakota/Lakota people when the first French explorers went there, and that they were skilled horsemen. Prince Frederick of Wurtemberg, who witnessed the Indian technique for hunting buffalo, was dully impressed:

"The Indians are extremely bold and daring riders. This is shown especially in their hunting of the buffalo. In this dangerous work it is often hard to say which has the greater skill, the rider or the horse. Since the Indian who manipulates the bow and arrow can not make use of the reins, he must leave the horse entirely to its own discretion. The animal must be carefully trained to approach the bison within a few paces. It must run close to the powerful and often angry bull, and must be ready at all times to evade with the greatest swiftness the charges of the terrible opponent." (S. Dak. Hist. Soc., XIX:379).

The interesting point here is that several years prior to 1657, these Prairie Indians were already expert horsemen, having developed remarkable riding and hunting skills. That such expertise was developed by 1650 is remarkable in many ways: It implies that the original 11 head had so multiplied that within a few short years after the horses appeared, these Prairies Dakotas had devised methods for catching them, had learned to tame them, had become expert riders, had devised the most efficient buffalo hunting techniques on horseback, and had also devised techniques for training their horses in these skills. These accomplishments, in so short a time, seem all the more extraordinary when examining the development of similar skills in other areas of the world.

Eurasia: A comparison

By comparison, in Eurasia the thought of catching and taming horses took thousands of years. An easily accessible Time-Life book, titled *First Horseman*, by Frank Trippet, describes the reasons why it took thousands of years for people first confronted with horses, to even think of riding them:

"The horse's nature obviously had a lot to do with its initial failure to attract riders. Few men would have been tempted to mount so unpredictable a beast -- and fewer still would have been able to stay aboard. (It) had evolved into the most temperamental of all domestic animals, able to elude predators by its sheer speed -- the only possible defence on terrain (the Steppe) that offered no place to hide. In body and mind the horse is perfectly designed for flight, not fight. The horse relies on its uncommonly keen eyesight and marvelously acute sense of smell to send it galloping off at any hint of danger. Yet, once trapped, it kicks, bucks, slashes out with its forefeet and bites -- often lethally. Also stallions protecting mares and foals will attack."

"Perhaps most important, the untamed horse is naturally likely to go all but berserk when anything lands on its back, simply because it has learned through the millennia that anything is likely to be a predator. Thus, if man had dreamed of riding the horse much earlier than he did, he could hardly have expected a hospitable reception from the animal that one day would become his partner." (Trippet, 1974:47).

Thus Trippet explains why inhabitants of the steppes only began riding about 3,500 B.C., thousands of years after they first appeared on that continent. The same reasons, however, would seem to preclude Prairie Dakotas from being so bold and so skillful, so quickly, not to mention adopting an entirely new horse culture in an exceedingly short time. Yet, another point is even more interesting.

It has been argued that Indians had seen Spanish riders, and thus had developed their astonishing equestrian skills, but an example from the Middle East, where a similar situation occurred, shows the time required from the arrival of this "strange beast" into culture, to when its people rode awkwardly for several generations after it first appeared among them, even when experts were there to teach them.

"More than a century passed before the Assyrians, learning from more skilled horsemen, like the Scythians, began to feel at home on horseback...For example, Assyrian cavalymen of the Ninth Century B.C. required aides to ride beside them and manage their mounts so that they would be free to use their weapons." (Trippet, 1974:51)

These examples from other cultures make it difficult to believe that the aboriginal horse had indeed disappeared during the last Ice Age.

First, the initial 11 head herd, released in the early XVIth (16th) century, would have had to multiply rapidly in a few years, and to such an extent that horses in sufficient numbers reached the prairies. Then, between that time and at the latest 1650, Dakota/Lakota people would have had to overcome their "mercurial disposition." Prince Frederick mentions repeatedly how wild these ponys (sic) were. Then, they would have had to learn to catch horses, tame them, learn to ride, become expert horsemen, devise the best techniques for training their horses in these skills. Compared to the time required by the Assyrians -- with expert teachers -- and indeed all other Eurasian horse cultures, to develop such accomplishments, the Indian feat seems unbelievable.

Trippet (1974:47-48) concluded that: "In light of the horse's mercurial disposition, its eventual conquest by man seems in many ways a fantastic achievement." Even more fantastic, then, is the incredible speed with which a horse culture was developed by the Dakota people. It might, however, be explained if the aboriginal North America horse had survived the Pleistocene, and thus had been part of a long-standing horse culture before the arrival of Europeans, as Dakota/Lakota Elders contend. And, therefore, that they had acquired these skills over the millennia, like their Eurasian counterparts, rather than in the space of one or two generations.

Conclusion

Although there as yet (is) no conclusive physical evidence that the aboriginal horse survived the Pleistocene, and was part of the pre-contact civilization on the prairies, there is sufficient evidence -- and indeed much more than is presented in this short paper -- for experts to seriously reconsider that long-held theory that Prairies Dakotas had to wait for the arrival of the white man to give them horses.

According to the Dakota/Lakota oral tradition, the aboriginal horse never became extinct and was part of their pre-contact culture.

The horse is aboriginal to North America, and biologists can offer no scientific reasons for its extinction here and not in Eurasia.

The absence of post-glacial remains could well be explained by Indian/Dakota cultural traits and environmental factors.

The astounding horsemanship of Prairie Dakotas within a few years of the appearance of the "Spanish horse," argues for this having been a traditional skill.

The government pony-extermination policy may well have deprived scientists of unique specimens.

Many theories have taken root because of preconceptions and bias. In this instance, no one can deny a long-standing prejudice against Indians, and the efforts which were made to minimize their accomplishments in many areas, and to discount oral history. In light of the above, one might well wonder if the long-held theory regarding the Indian pony is not a survival of these XIXth (19th) century prejudices.

Definite proof of the survival of the aboriginal North American horse, and of a pre-contact Indian horse culture, might yet be discovered. Whatever happens, the few remaining Indian ponies should be treasured as part of North Dakota's unique heritage.

Horses definitely originated here, and whether the few remaining ponys (sic) are throwbacks, or are they actual descendants, they are a living testimony of the state's contribution to the advancement of many civilizations throughout the world.

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