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THE SPREAD OF SPANISH HORSES IN THE SOUTHWEST

By D. E. WORCESTER

WHERE did the Plains Indians get their horses? This question has been the basis of much speculation and research.¹ The accounts of the early explorers and settlers of the Southwest make the answer clear indeed. The Plains Indians did not acquire horses through strays being lost by Spanish expeditions, as has been suggested by some writers. Spanish ranches—of New Mexico, Sonora, Chihuahua, Nueva Vizcaya, and Coahuila—supplied both the horses and the horsemanship of the Indians of the Southwest. The use of horses spread rapidly to the north and east, though few tribes possessed large numbers until the 18th century. The purpose of this paper is to trace briefly the diffusion of Spanish horses in the Southwest during the 17th century.

Ranches were begun in New Mexico around 1600. Apache raiding on Spanish herds ensued. By 1608 the settlers were so discouraged that they requested permission to return to New Spain.² It became increasingly difficult for the missionaries to keep their Pueblo converts satisfied. As a reward for their faith, Fray Francisco de Velasco recommended, in 1609, succoring them with gifts of cattle, goats, ewes, and mares.³

In 1621, the *encomenderos* of New Mexico were authorized to use Indians as herders and teamsters.⁴ Thus, at an early stage of the settling of New Mexico, converts were allowed to use horses, in contrast to the usual Spanish custom of prohibiting Indians from riding.

Spanish livestock became very abundant in New Mexico, according to the report of Fray Alonso de Benavides, in 1630. He mentioned especially the horses, which were said

1. See Wissler, Haines, Aiton, and Denhardt.
2. Fray Lázaro de Ximénez, *Mandamiento para que el gobernador de la nueva mexico* . . . 6 marzo, 1608, Archivo General de Indias, 58-3-16.
3. Fray Francisco de Velasco, *Memorial de nueva mexico*, 9 abril, 1609 Archivo General de Indias, 59-1-5.
4. Marqués del Guadalcázar, Archivo General de Indias, 58-3-18.

to be excellent for military purposes. Benavides estimated that the *encomenderos* of Santa Fé had in their service 700 Indians; so that, including Spaniards, *mestizos*, and Indians, there were 1,000 persons in the villa. These people, he stated, were very punctual in obedience to the governor, and came forth with their own arms and horses whenever required.⁵

A number of documents verify the abundance of livestock in New Mexico, while others refer to Indians possessing cattle and horses. In 1638, Fray Juan de Prada wrote that without cattle-raising it would be difficult for the missions to survive. He also reported a tendency on the part of disgruntled converts to apostatize and join the heathen tribes.⁶ It is impossible to determine exactly when the Apaches began using horses otherwise than for food, though very likely it was between 1620 and 1630; possibly earlier, but certainly not later.

In 1639, the governor of New Mexico wrote:

In some *doctrinas* I saw they had some sheep and cattle, but I always heard it said they were the property of the natives themselves, and I cannot with certainty say a thing to the contrary.⁷

At the same time, the *cabildo* of Santa Fé wrote the viceroy deploring the fact that the missions had so much livestock. It was suggested, inasmuch as the king contributed to the support of the missionaries, that their cattle be divided among the settlers.

The same should be done with the horses that all of them have—as many as twenty, thirty, forty apiece—for there are many soldiers so poor that through inability to buy horses and arms they are incapable of serving his Majesty. In this way a great deal of trouble would be saved the Indians, for they are occupied in guarding the cattle and horses . . . and the stables where they keep three or four saddle horses very daintily, for they are

5. Alonso de Benavides, *Memorial*, 1630, (E. Ayer translation, Chicago, 1916), 23.

6. C. W. Hackett, ed., *Historical documents relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, and approaches thereto*. (Wash., D. C. 1926-37), iii, 111.

7. *Ibid.*, 117.

quite valuable, and are taken to be sold in New Spain . . . The worst thing . . . is that the religious hold most of the armor for the horses, leather jackets, swords, arquebuses, and pistols . . .⁸

By 1650, there are reports of horses being used by Indians in conflicts with Spaniards. Apaches and Teguas joined in an attempt to overcome the colonists, and horses were stolen to be used in the revolt. The attempt failed, and the horses were recovered. The Spaniards learned that they had been delivered by the Christian Indians of Sandía and Alameda.⁹

The desire of many tribes to possess horses eventually resulted in the disappearance of livestock from around the Spanish settlements. Though these forays were attributed mainly to the Apaches, tribes from Texas and the Plains participated in them. In 1672, Fray Francisco de Ayeta declared that the province of New Mexico was totally sacked. With the supplies which he procured for New Mexico a few years later, Ayeta brought 1,000 horses.¹⁰ He returned to the city of Mexico to petition for more men and arms, and for an additional 1,000 horses.¹¹

During the Pueblo uprising of 1680, the Spaniards of New Mexico were deprived of most of the livestock remaining in their possession. Thus, in giving his reasons for abandoning Isleta, Alonso García wrote of the 120 persons who had been killed, and of the loss of their arms, and enough horses and cattle to sustain the Apaches for more than four months.¹² Some *maestres de campo* urged that a report be made to the king so he could

make provision for a return to the reconquest, which today is more dangerous owing to the cunning and audacity of the many treacherous and capable enemies, alike as horsemen and in the handling of firearms, lances, and other weapons . . .¹³

8. Hackett, *op. cit.*, iii, 71.

9. W. W. H. Davis, *The Spanish conquest of New Mexico*, (Doylestown, Pa., 1869), 282.

10. Hackett, *op. cit.*, iii, 291.

11. *Ibid.*, 296.

12. R. E. Twitchell, ed., *Spanish archives of New Mexico*, (Cedar Rapids, 1904), ii, 15.

13. *Ibid.*, 37.

Raiding continued after the Pueblo Revolt. Apache thievery was, in fact, taken for granted in New Mexico. In 1682, Fray Nicolas de Hurtado wrote from El Paso:

Everything here is in good condition, where it has been quiet. Only the Apaches have done what is their custom. For, during the present month of January, there have been stolen two hundred animals . . .¹⁴

In the same year, the Jumanos sent two delegations to El Paso to request aid against the Apaches, who, they said, continually stole their horses.

A description of the state of affairs of Nueva Vizcaya in the 1680s gives an idea of the forays of Cibolos, Apaches, and other nomadic tribes of that region:

At the same time they are voracious when they steal some cattle or horses (which is what they most eagerly desire, since they secure in this way two ends, first their maintenance, for their greatest treat is this kind of food, and second, as a result of the [Spanish] inhabitants being forced to go on foot, they are able without resistance to obtain possession of the province).¹⁵

During the same period, Fray Alonso de Posadas reported that he had seen Apaches trading captive Indian women of the Quivira nation for horses with the Indians of the Pecos pueblos. He also mentioned the usual raids on the herds of the Spaniards.¹⁶

The accounts of the French explorers offer evidence of the spread of horses eastward and northward from New Mexico. In 1682 La Salle saw horses among the Kiowa Apaches. Meanwhile Henri de Tonty was visiting the Missouris, of whom he said:

There are even villages which use horses to go to war and to carry the carcasses of the cattle which they kill.¹⁷

14. Hurtado to Xavier, in *Autos Pertenecientes*, 99, quoted in C. W. Hackett, "Otermín's attempt to reconquer New Mexico, 1681-1682," *Old Santa Fé*, iii, 128.

15. Hackett, *op. cit.*, ii, 221.

16. Posadas, *Report*, 1686; *Archivo Gen. y Pub. Hist.* 3 (Bancroft Library transcript).

17. P. Margry, *Memoires et documents pour servir a l'histoire des origenes francaises des pays d'outre-mer* (Paris, 1879), i, 595.

In 1687, La Salle was among the Hasinai and their allies in eastern Texas. Joutel, chronicler of the expedition, wrote:

Those we were with then were called Teao [Texas] whom we had not before heard named. They talked of a great nation called Ayona and Canohatino who were at war with the Spaniards, from whom they stole horses, and told us that one hundred Spaniards were to have come to join the Cenis to carry on that war, but having heard of our march, they went back . . . He (La Salle) proposed to them to barter for horses; but they caused them to be conveyed out of the way, for fear we should take them away, excepting one bay, which Monsieur de La Salle agreed for and returned to us.¹⁸

Three years later Tonty journeyed to eastern Texas in search of La Salle. He reached a Caddo village on the Red River, and remarked in his memoir:

The Cadodaquis possess about thirty horses, which they call *cavalis*.¹⁹

Tonty continued until he reached the Hasinai village of Naouadiche, where La Salle had been in 1687.

I told their chief I wanted four horses for my return, and having given him seven hatchets and a string of large glass beads, they gave me the next day four Spanish horses, two of which were marked on the haunch with an 'R' and a crown above it, and another with an 'N.' Horses are very common among them. There is not a cabin which has not four or five. As this nation is sometimes at war with the Spaniards, they take advantage of a war to carry off their horses.²⁰

Later on, Tonty added:

I forgot to say that the savages who have horses use them both for war and hunting. They make pointed saddles, wooden stirrups, and body

18. H. R. Stiles, ed., *Joutel's journal of La Salle's last voyage 1684-87* (New York, 1906) pp. 126-127.

19. L. P. Kellogg, ed., *Early Narratives of the Northwest 1688-1699* (New York, 1917), 316.

20. L. P. Kellogg, *op. cit.*, 317.

covering of several skins, one over the other, as a protection from arrows. They arm the breasts of their horses with the same materials, a proof that they are not very far from the Spaniards.²¹

The effect of the use of horses in inter-tribal warfare can be seen first in the success of the Apaches against neighboring tribes. In 1689, Father Massanet wrote of them:

The Apaches form a chain running from east to west, and wage war with all; with the Salineros alone do they maintain peace. They have always had wars with the Spaniards of New Mexico, for although truces have been made, they have endured little. In the end they conquer all the tribes; yet it is said they are not brave because they fight with armoured horses. They have offensive and defensive weapons, and are very skilful and war-like Indians.²²

Methods of Indian warfare and horse-stealing in Parral were described by José Francisco Marín, 1693.

Their first care is to strike down the horses. This, with the great skill that attends them in the use of such arms, they easily accomplish, and being dismounted, the travelers are left defenseless and become victims of their customary cruelties. If they perceive they cannot make the attack without danger to themselves, they keep quiet—all of them, as is their custom, being painted and varnished the same color as the earth and generally covered with *sacatón* [grass]—and permit the travelers to pass . . .

In their robberies of horses they use the same methods. They keep watch on ranches and pastures, and upon the slightest carelessness they drive off the animals, not more than three or four being employed in such robberies. No matter how quickly some citizens and soldiers assemble to follow them, they always have a start of twenty or thirty leagues, so that it is . . . a piece of good fortune if they overtake them, and if this does

21. *Ibid.*, 320.

22. *Diarios de los padres misioneros, 1691*, in *Memorias de Nueva España*, XXVII, f 100, quoted in W. E. Dunn, "Apache relations in Texas, 1713-1750," *Texas State Historical Association Quarterly*, XIV, 203.

happen, and they perceive it, they shoot with arrows some of the cattle, in order afterward to come and eat them. Their principal food consists of horses and mules . . .²³

Sonora experienced ravages similar to those of the neighboring provinces. The Relation of Padre Kino told of the depredations there during the 17th century.

For many years this province of Sonora has suffered very much from its avowed enemies, the Hocomes, Janos, and Apaches, through continual thefts of cattle and horses, and murders of Christian Indians and Spaniards . . . injuries which in many years not even the two expensive presidios, that of Janos (northern Chihuahua) and that of the province of Sonora have been able to remedy completely, for still these enemies continue to infest . . . all this province of Sonora . . . They have already reached and they now go as far as Acenoquipe in the Valley of Sonora itself; and as far as Taupe in the Valley of Opedepe (San Miguel) and as far as San Ygnacio and Santa María Magdalena in Pimeria.²⁴

As more and more tribes sought horses, raiding parties traveled greater distances. Livestock, instead of being plentiful in the northern provinces, became scarce. An indication of the increase of horse-stealing during the latter half of the century can be seen in a letter of the *sargento mayor* Juan Bautista de Escorza, written in Cerro Gordo, 13 July, 1693.

The truth is, that in these parts affairs are in a worse state and the consequences are worse than they have ever been, and I give as a reason two evident causes. One is, that the ancient enemies, who under the name of Tobosos have invaded these kingdoms for many years, are now driven by necessity itself and their own bad disposition to increase the ravages, for, having consumed the thousands of cattle and horses that roamed through these lands, they now have no recourse except to seize

23. Hackett, *op. cit.*, ii, 283.

24. H. E. Bolton, ed., *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (New York, 1916), 451.

those raised by the Spaniards on their estates, committing frequent outrages that they did not formerly commit so often. The other cause is that formerly they (the local Indians) were so numerous that they not only had no need to make use of other Indians from the country farther in the interior, but on the contrary they could prevent them from coming in. But now . . . not only do they not prevent the strange Indians from coming in, but rather they solicit them and invite them, subordinating themselves to them, as we have just seen . . .²⁵

All of the available evidence indicates that the horses, the style of riding, the saddles, the armor and some of the weapons used by the mounted Indians of the Southwest, were of Spanish origin or design. There is nothing to suggest that there were mounted Indians in the Southwest before the 17th century, nor any reason to believe that the natives of that region learned to use horses except from the Spaniards.²⁶

25. Hackett, *op. cit.*, ii, 325.

26. The opinions contained herein are the private ones of the writer, and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Navy Department or the naval service at large. (signed) D. E. WORCESTER, Lieut. SC, USNR, Treasure Island, Calif.