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THE USE OF SADDLES BY AMERICAN INDIANS

By D. E. WORCESTER*

THAT Indians always rode their horses bareback is a common American belief, but one without basis in fact. All of the tribes that had horses used saddles. The saddles were of two main types; the earliest used and most common was patterned after that of the Spaniards. It had a wooden tree and iron or rawhide-covered wooden stirrups. The other type was composed merely of leather-covered pads of animal hair, generally with stirrups of wood or of rope. Some Indian saddles had a pommel of deer, elk, or buffalo horn for hitching a rope. When Indians wanted to extend their horses to the limit, they sometimes rode with nothing but a robe over the animal's back.

The Apaches, one of the first of the Southwestern tribes to acquire horses, copied Spanish riding gear whenever they could not obtain saddles and bridles actually made by Spaniards. They used bridles with Spanish bits, and had iron stirrups on their saddles. Leather armor for themselves and their mounts was also very similar to that used by the Spanish soldiers of New Mexico.

The early French accounts of the Touacara (Wichita) Indians on the Arkansas river mentioned saddles and bridles, very well made, as well as leather armor.¹

A description of the Hasinai Indians by Pénicaut in 1714, told of their riding gear:

They have no other curb or bridal for their horses than a piece of hair-rope; their stirrups are made of the same material, which are fastened to deer-skin, three or four in thickness, thus forming their saddle.²

*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. D. E. WORCESTER, Lt. SC USNR

1. P. Margry. *Mémoires et documents pour servir à l'histoire des origines françaises des pays d'outre-mer*, (Paris, 1879-1888, 6v.). vi. 294.

2. B. F. French, ed., *Historical collections of Louisiana and Florida . . .* (New York, 1869). 121.

The Indians of the Southeast acquired horses from the Spanish settlements in Florida, and they consequently borrowed the Spanish style of saddles and bridles. The Cherokees, though not the first Southern Indians to possess Spanish horses, were found in the 1770s to make saddles:

They are good sadlers, for they can finish a saddle with their usual instruments, without any kind of iron to bind the work; but the shape of it is so antiquated and mean, and so much like those of the Dutch West-Indians, that a person would be led to imagine they had formerly met, and been taught the art in the same school. The Indians provide themselves with a quantity of white oak boards, and notch them, so as to fit the saddle-trees; which consist of two pieces before, and two behind crossing each other in notches, about three inches, below the top end of the frame. Then they take a buffalo green hide, covered with its winter curls, and having properly shaped it to the frame, they sew it with large thongs of the same skin, as tight and secure as need be; when it is thoroughly dried, it appears to have all the properties of a cuirass saddle. A trimmed bearskin serves for a pad; and formerly, their bridle was only a rope around the horse's neck, with which they guided him at pleasure. Most of the Choktah use that method to this day.³

When Anthony Hendry visit the Blackfeet in Canada in 1754, they had many horses. At night the animals were turned out to graze, tied by long thongs of buffalo hide to stakes driven into the ground. They had hair halters, buffalo-skin pads, and stirrups of the same material.⁴ Alexander Henry commented on the saddles of the North Plains Indians around 1800:

The saddles those people use are of two kinds. The one which I suppose to be of the most ancient construction is made of wood well joined and covered with raw buffalo hide, which in drying binds every part tight. The frame rises about ten

3. S. C. Williams, ed., *Adair's History of the American Indians*, (Johnson City, Tenn., 1930), 457.

4. L. J. Burpee, ed., *The Search for the Western Sea . . .* (New York, 1908), 130.

inches before and behind; the tops are bent over horizontally and spread out, forming a flat piece about six inches in diameter. The stirrup, attached to the frame by a leather thong, is a piece of bent wood, over which is stretched raw buffalo hide, making it firm and strong. When an Indian is going to mount he throws his buffalo robe over the saddle, and rides on it. The other saddle which is the same as that of the Assiniboines and Crees, is made by shaping two pieces of parchment on dressed leather, about twenty inches long and fourteen broad, through the length of which are sewed two parallel lines three inches apart, on each side of which the saddle is stuffed with moose or red deer hair. Under each kind of saddle is placed two or three folds of soft dressed buffalo skin to keep the horse from getting a sore back.⁵

French traders who visited the Crees, learned as early as 1753 that horses and saddles could be obtained from that tribe.⁶ In 1790 the Mandans were known to use saddles and bridles of Spanish style.

The Crow Indians had many horses, and were said to be skilful in the making of saddles.

Their [the children's] saddles are so made as to prevent falling either backwards or forwards, the hind part reaching as high as between the shoulders and the forepart of the breast. The women's saddles are more especially so. Those of the men are not quite so high, and many use saddles such as the Canadians make in the North West Country.

They are excellent riders. . . . In war or hunting if they mean to exert their horses to the utmost the[y] ride without a saddle. In their wheelings and evolutions they are often not seen, having only a leg on the horse's back and clasping the horse with their arms around his neck, on the opposite side to where the enemy is. Most of their horses can be guided to any place without bridle only by leaning to one side or the other[;] they

5. E. Coues, ed., *New Light on the early history of the greater Northwest. The manuscript journals of Alexander Henry* . . . (New York, 1897, 3v.), ii, 526.

6. Margry. *op. cit.*, vi 650-1.

turn immediately to the side on which you lean, and will not bear turning until you resume a direct posture.⁷

In 1787, David Thompson saw about thirty horses that the Piegans had taken in a raid on a Spanish caravan far to the south of their country, and he described the Spanish saddles:

The saddles were larger than our english saddles, the side leather twice as large of thick well tanned leather of a chocolate color with the figures of flowers as if done by a hot iron, the bridles had snaffle bits, heavy and coarse as if done by a blacksmith with only his hammer.⁸

West of the Rocky Mountains the Indians used the same methods in making saddles as those of the tribes previously mentioned. Sergeant Gass, one of the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition, left this description of the saddles of the Walla Wallas found near the Koos-Kooshe river:

The frames of their saddles are made of wood nicely jointed, and then covered with raw skins, which when they become dry, bind every part tight, and keep the joints in their places. The saddles rise very high before and behind, in the manner of the saddles of the Spaniards, from whom they no doubt received the form. . . . When the Indians are going to mount they throw their buffalo robes over the saddles and ride on them, as the saddles would otherwise be too hard.⁹

G. Franchere observed the Salishans, and made a detailed account of their saddles.

For a bridle they use a cord of horse-hair, which they attach round the animals mouth; with that he is easily checked, and by laying the hand on his neck, is made to wheel to this side or that. The saddle is a cushion of stuffed deer-skin, very

7. L. J. Burpee, ed., *Journal of Larocque from the Assiniboine to the Yellowstone, 1805* (Ottawa, 1910), 64.

8. J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *David Thompson's narrative of his explorations in western America, 1784-1812* (Toronto, 1916), 371.

9. P. Gass, *Gass' journal of the Lewis and Clark expedition* (Chicago, 1904). 285-286.

suitable for the purpose to which it is destined, rarely hurting the horse, and not fatiguing its rider so much as our European saddles. The stirrups are pieces of hardwood, ingeniously wrought, and of the same shape as those which are used in civilized countries. They are covered with a piece of deer-skin which is sewed on wet, and in drying stiffens and becomes hard and firm. The saddles for women differ in form, being furnished with the antler of a deer, so as to resemble the high pommelled saddle of the Mexican ladies. . . . The form of the saddles used by the females, proves that they have taken their pattern from the Spanish ones. . . .¹⁰

From the above accounts it can be inferred that the Indians of the horse-using tribes of the present United States generally used saddles. Probably the widespread belief that Indians were bareback riders grew out of some artists' conceptions of Indian horsemen. The Hollywood version of the American redskin has followed the erroneous notion that saddles were unknown to the Indians. Actually there were very skillful saddle-makers among all the horse-using tribes, and very few instances when Indians chose to ride without saddles.

10. R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Early western travels, 1748-1846* . . . (Cleveland, 1904-07, 32v.), vi, 340-341.