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THE SPREAD OF SPANISH HORSES IN THE SOUTHWEST 1700-1800

*By D. E. WORCESTER**

AT THE beginning of the eighteenth century, the use of Spanish horses was very widespread among the Indians of New Mexico and Texas, and had spread among certain tribes as far north as the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Horses had been distributed among the Indians both by trading and by stealing, the latter method being the more popular one.

Of the Southwestern Indians, the Apaches were foremost in the use of horses in warfare. During the eighteenth century, however, they were surpassed in this respect by the more numerous Comanches. Other horse-using tribes in the vicinity of New Mexico were the Navajos and Utes. The Texas tribes also were fairly well-mounted; the Hasinai, Caddo, Bidais, Sana, Tonkawa, Quitseis, and others possessing herds of horses.

The southern Plains tribes which had horses at this time were the Pawnees, Osages, Kansas, Wichitas, and Comanches. Trading parties made trips to Spanish settlements to exchange furs and slaves for horses, knives and other implements, and beads. Raiding by these tribes also was felt by the Spaniards. Sometimes men of several tribes would join together for a raid.

*The opinions contained herein are those of the writer, and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the Navy Department or of the naval service at large.

(signed) D. E. Worcester,
Lieutenant SC USNR

The horse trade was well-established in New Mexico during the seventeenth century, large numbers of horses and mules having been exported prior to the Pueblo revolt of 1680. The horse trade of the Indians grew out of the practice of bartering captives. The advent of the French to Louisiana gave an added stimulus to the trade, because they needed horses, and because they introduced an important trade item—the gun. Prohibiting the sale of firearms to the natives was one of the cardinal points of Spanish trading policy. Consequently, there grew up a very lively commerce between the French and the Indians of Texas, in which the French received horses and mules (usually stolen from the Spaniards) and skins in exchange for guns, powder, and lead. By this trade the French obtained many Spanish horses. A *Memoir sur les Natchitoches*, written about 1700, stated that the greatest commerce that could be expected with the Indians would be in horses, peltry, and slaves.¹

Wherever horses were raised in the Southwest, there was trouble from Indian raiding parties. Illustrative of this is a report of Father Kino from Pimería Alta in 1701:

At this time, in January and February, the Apaches came in, for their accustomed annual robberies; and after stealing horses . . . in various places . . . they . . . did serious damage . . .²

Inter-tribal trading was active, although there are fewer reports concerning it. There was mention in the seventeenth century of Apaches trading captive Indian women of the Quivira nation to the pueblos of the Pecos for horses. And in 1717, the Canadian Derbanne wrote that it was very easy to reach the Illinois by way of the Caddos, as the latter for years had been taking horses to the Illinois.³

In 1719, Du Tisé explored the Arkansas river. La Harpe, a member of the expedition, observed that the Tou-

1. P. Margry, *Mémoires et documents pour servir a l'histoire des origenes françaises des pays d'outre-mer*, (Paris, 1879-88), vi, 230.

2. H. E. Bolton, *Kino's historical memoir of Pimería Alta*, (Cleveland, 1919) i, 267.

3. Margry, *op. cit.*, vi, 211.

acara were mounted on very excellent horses, and that they used saddles and bridles of Spanish style.⁴

These nations raise very fine horses; they value them highly, being unable to fight or hunt without them . . .⁵

Of the Osages, La Harpe wrote:

They stay in their village like the Missouri, and pass the winter chasing the buffalo, which are very abundant in these parts. Horses, which they steal from the Panis [Pawnees] can be bought of them . . .⁶

And of the Pawnees:

They have in these two villages three hundred horses, which they value so much that they do not like to part with them . . . According to their reports, it is fifteen days' journey to the great village of the Padoucas [Comanches], but they encounter them frequently in six days' journey. They have a cruel war now between them . . . When they go to war they harness their horses in a cuirass of tanned leather. They are clever with the bow and arrow, and also use a lance, which is like the end of a sword inserted in a handle of wood.⁷

In the same year, Du Tisné traded three guns and some powder and shot to the Pawnees for two horses and a mule, all marked with Spanish brands. The Pawnees told him that they previously had been to the Spanish villages to trade, but that at the present time the Comanches barred the way.⁸ The Comanches appeared around the Spanish settlements early in the eighteenth century, and by 1743 were seen in the vicinity of San Antonio.⁹

The Apaches generally were at war with most of the Texas tribes. The Lipan Apaches became increasingly troublesome to the Spaniards around San Antonio, frequently

4. Margry, *op. cit.*, vi, 288.

5. *Ibid.*, vi, 294.

6. *Ibid.*, vi, 311.

7. *Ibid.*, vi, 312.

8. *Ibid.*, vi, 314.

9. J. A. Morfi, *History of Texas, 1673-1779*, (Quivira Soc., 2v.), ii, 294.

running off the presidio horse herds.¹⁰ In 1732, Apache raiders even crossed the Rio Grande and harassed the settlements and ranches of Coahuila.¹¹ The Apaches in the early eighteenth century were described as preferring horse and mule meat to any other, and as being very dextrous in the handling of horses.¹² Du Rivage wrote of the Apaches:

The advantage which the Cancy [Apache] have over their enemies is that they have excellent horses, whereas the other nations have few. . . .¹³

The use of firearms by certain tribes offset the advantages which others had gained by the possession of horses. In this regard, it was said of the Hasinai, in 1722:

For this reason they make a show of handling their guns with dexterity and running their horses at great speed, for although the Natchitoches have a greater number of guns than the Texas Indians, the number of horses they have is limited. The latter thus travel on foot while the Texas Indians ride on horseback with great skill, their feet hanging loose and, traveling at a great rate, they guide their horses with only a slender cord which they use in place of a bridle.¹⁴

Two years later, Bourgmont visited the Comanches, of whom he said:

They have also many dogs, which carry their equipage when they lack horses. . . . When they go to war, they go always on horseback, and they have leather armor which protects the horses against arrows.¹⁵

The Comanches told Bourgmont that they traded many buffalo robes to the Spaniards for horses, axes, and knives. Three buffalo robes was the price paid for one horse.¹⁶

10. *Ibid.*, ii, 280-282.

11. H. K. Yoakum, *History of Texas* . . . , (N.Y., 1856 2v.), i, 388.

12. J. D. Arricivita, *Crónica seráfica y apostólica* . . . (Mexico, 1792) ii, 339.

13. Margry, *op. cit.*, vi, 279.

14. "Description of the Tejas or Hasinai Indians, 1691-1722," in *Southwestern historical quarterly*, xxxi, 179.

15. Margry, *op. cit.*, vi, 446.

16. *Ibid.*, vi, 440, 445.

When Bourgmont tried to buy horses from the Kansas Indians for his journey to the Comanches, he offered them two measures of powder, thirty bullets, six strings of beads, and four knives for a horse. They told him that Frenchmen and Illinois Indians had come the previous year to barter for their slaves and had offered double the merchandise that he proposed.¹⁷

The Sieur de la Veréndrye visited the Missouri river region during the 1730s and 1740s. They reported that the Mandans—who formerly lived in the same villages with the Pawnees—had horses which they used for hunting. When the explorers were with the *Gens du Chevaux*, or Arickara, on the Cheyenne river, they wrote:

All the tribes of those countries have a great many horses, asses, and mules, which they use to carry their baggage and also for riding both in the chase and in their travels.¹⁸

I enquired about their commerce. He told me that they . . . did a large trade in ox-hides and slaves [with the Spaniards], giving in exchange horses and goods at the choice of the savages, but not guns and ammunition.¹⁹

Many horses raised in New Mexico and Texas were sold or traded by the Spaniards to the Indians and French, although direct trade with the latter generally was prohibited. In the 1720s there were a number of instances of trade between Spaniards and French outposts, where there was a constant demand for horses. In 1737, 250 horses were taken to New Orleans from Natchitoches.²⁰ In New Mexico the officials regulated the horse trade: in 1754, for example, the price of one horse was twelve to fifteen skins. An Indian slave girl who might pass for ten years old was valued at two pack horses without anything to boot; a smaller *pieza*

17. *Ibid.*, vi, 406.

18. L. J. Burpee, ed. *Journals and letters of P. G. de V. La Veréndrye and his sons* . . . , (Toronto, 1927), 414.

19. *Ibid.*, 426.

20. N. M. M. Surrey, *The commerce of Louisiana during the French regime, 1699-1763*, (New York, 1912), 282.

was worth one horse with something extra.²¹ Each year in July or August, a great fair was held at Taos. To this fair came the heathen tribes to barter slaves and peltry for horses, knives, and other items. The Spaniards found this trade profitable, especially the trade in slaves. In 1761, Fray Pedro Serrano wrote:

When the Indian trading embassy comes to these governors and their alcaldes, here all prudence forsakes . . . because the fleet is in. The fleet being, in this case, sometimes two hundred, or at the very least fifty, tents of barbarous heathen Indians, Comanches as well as other nations. . . . Here the governor, alcaldes, and lieutenants gather together as many horses as they can. . . . Here, in short, is gathered everything possible for trade and barter with these barbarians in exchange for deer and buffalo hides, and . . . in exchange for Indian slaves, men and women, small and large. . . .²²

After 1751, Spanish traders engaged regularly in commerce with the Indians of the lower Trinity river. In defiance of the law, they traded French guns and ammunition for horses and mules, many of which had been stolen from other Spaniards.²³ In 1754, a French trader was arrested among the Orcoquiza. He claimed to have been trading with the Attacapa for more than a quarter of a century, and had in his possession a license from the governor of Louisiana authorizing him to go among the Attacapa to trade for horses.²⁴

Three years later, the colony of Nuevo Santander was

21. Coronado Library (Albuquerque, Univ. of N. Mex.), facsimile of *bando* issued by Governor Marin del Valle, dated Santa Fé Nov. 26, 1754, f. 1 v., has the following: . . . y una pieza de India que pase de diez años por dos caballos matalottes sin que sele añada otra cosa . . . y la pieza mas pequeña, de un caballo, con algun agregado de freno u otra alaja equibalante.

H. H. Bancroft, *History of Arizona and New Mexico*, 276, note, has a surprising mistranslation of this passage.

22. C. W. Hackett, ed., *Historical documents relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, and approaches thereto*. (Wash., D. C., 1926-37, 3v.), iii, 486-7.

23. H. E. Bolton, "Spanish activities on the lower Trinity river, 1746-1771," in *Southwestern historical quarterly*, xvi, 347-8.

24. H. E. Bolton, *Texas in the middle eighteenth century*, (Berkeley, 1915) 337.

estimated to have fifty-eight thousand horses and nearly two thousand burros.²⁵ The fact that this colony was more remote from the hostile tribes than the ranches of Texas and New Mexico lessened the suffering from raids, and made possible the raising of great herds. Nevertheless, the provinces south of the Rio Grande were not free from Apache thievery. In 1760, Fray Juan Sanz de Lezaún wrote:

Let Don Antonio del Castillo, *regidor* of Chihuahua, tell of the many thousand horses, mules, and cattle he has lost at the hacienda of La Laguna. . . . Let Chihuahua tell of the continuous incursions against the droves of horses and mules. . . . The Jesuit fathers bear witness to the invasions which have been made and are still being made into their haciendas, as do the settlers of Chihuahua and its vicinity . . . who, on account of continuous robberies . . . have retired up the river to La Jabonera. As a result, since both the Apaches and the Norteños know every inch of the ground, they have penetrated as far as this side of the valley.²⁶

In 1763, Louisiana was ceded to Spain, and Spanish officials of Texas and the *Provincias Internas* took the opportunity to combat the trade in stolen horses. In this regard, O'Reilly instructed De Mézières, in January, 1770:

You will prohibit, Sir, very expressly, all persons whatsoever, from purchasing, trading for, or receiving horses or mules from the savages or those who trade with them, under penalty to the offenders of the loss of such horses and mules. . . .²⁷

The traders of Natchitoches were prohibited from buying horses and mules from the Taovayas. The latter found a market for their animals with the contraband traders from the Arkansas, or even with tribes from the Missouri; and thus horse-stealing at the Spanish settlements was encour-

25. *Ibid.*, 300.

26. Hackett, *op. cit.*, iii, 478.

27. H. E. Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas frontier, 1768-1780*, (Cleveland, 1914, 2v), i, 135.

aged, while the Natchitoches merchants demanded the removal of the restrictions so they might compete with the contrabandists from the Arkansas.²⁸

The Comanches and Apaches continued to be troublesome to the Spaniards throughout the century. De Mézières described the Comanches in 1770:

The Comanché are scattered from the great Misuris R. to the neighborhood of the frontier presidios of New Spain. They are a people so numerous and so haughty that when asked their number, they make no difficulty of comparing it to that of the stars. They are so skilful in horsemanship that they have no equal; so daring that they never ask for or grant truces; and in the possession of such a territory that, finding in it an abundance of pasturage for their horses and an incredible number of cattle which furnish them raiment, food, and shelter, they . . . have no need to covet the trade pursued by the rest of the Indians. . . .

From these perpetual comings and goings it arises that the Comanchés, relying upon one another, made proud by their great number, and led by their propensity to steal, let few seasons pass without committing the most bloody outrages against the inhabitants of New and Old Mexico.²⁹

The Nations of the North—Bidais, Wichita, Comanches, and others—who had been obtaining guns from the French, refused to maintain peaceful relations with the Spaniards as long as they were not supplied with firearms and ammunition.

It is more to their interest to make war on us; for, in exchange for the horses which they steal they secure whatever they desire from the French; and failing to get it from them, they will obtain it easily, with greater injury to us, from the English, whom they have so close by that only the Mississippi intervenes. . . .³⁰

28. *Ibid.*, 76.

29. *Ibid.*, 218.

30. Bolton, *De Mézières, op. cit.*, i, 269-70.

In the same year, 1770, De Mézières wrote to Ripperda concerning an Indian who took droves of horses from the Taovaya villages to the Missouri to trade with the Panis-Mahas, returning with English guns and ammunition.³¹ Gaignard made an expedition up the Red river in the years 1773 and 1774. While among the Pawnees, he saw two groups of Frenchmen from the Arkansas river who had come to trade for horses and mules.³²

Peace was established with the Norteños, but it was short-lived. On this subject, Ripperda wrote in 1772:

Up to the present these latter [the friendly nations] are keeping the promised peace, excepting the Comanches, who keep us disturbed by stealing our droves of horses.³³

In the following year, more than one thousand horses were stolen.³⁴

The Comanches continue to steal horses in this region [San Antonio]. . . . It has been difficult to overtake the more than one hundred horses which they carried off. . . .³⁵

The prices for horses around San Antonio at this time were: half-broken horses, six pesos; mares in droves, one peso a head and less; wild mules, eight pesos.³⁶

The efforts of Spanish officials to stop the trade in stolen horses generally were of no avail. In the first place, they were unable to prevent horse-stealing. In 1774, Medina reported to O'Connor:

The French continue to trade in guns, powder, and balls, and owe their suppliers more than six hundred horses. The latter do not raise horses and mules, and therefore, in order to supply the lack they have to get them from the Indians in trade; and for this it is the rule that the latter, for they

31. *Ibid.*, ii, 301.

32. *Ibid.*, ii, 87-90.

33. *Ibid.*, i, 334.

34. J. D. Arricivita, *Crónica seráfica y apostólica* . . . (Mexico, 1792), 393.

35. Bolton, *De Mézières, op. cit.*, ii, 31.

36. *Ibid.*, ii, 241-2.

have no other occupation, come to steal in our country, as in fact they are doing now. They never enter this presidio [San Antonio] without taking of horses and mules when they leave.³⁷

In the same year, the governor of Louisiana complained that English traders crossed the wild lands and traded with the Indians in spite of his efforts to prevent it. Juan Hamilton and others, he said, *continued* to make journeys to the mouth of the Trinity to buy horses and mules from the Indians.³⁸ These men were the forerunners of such later traders as Philip Nolan.

Horse-stealing was as widespread as the use of horses. Spaniards who visited tribes in their own territory frequently spoke of seeing herds that had been stolen from the Spanish ranches, but they also mentioned the numerous raiding parties sent against other tribes. Peter Pond, a fur trader, was among the Sac Indians of the Mississippi valley in 1773, and he observed how weaker tribes sometimes supplied themselves with horses:

The men often join war parties with other nations and go against the Indians on the Miseure and west of that. Sometimes they go near St. Fee in New Mexico and bring with them Spanish Horses.³⁹

The province of New Mexico began to be in serious straits because of the loss of so many horses. In 1775, as a century earlier, it was necessary for the officials to request that horses be sent from New Spain to be used in the defense of the province. Fifteen hundred horses were needed immediately for use against the hostile tribes, Comanches, Apaches, Navajos, and Utes.⁴⁰

In 1777, the Panis-Mahas moved south into Texas from

37. Bolton, *De Mézières*, op. cit., ii, 34.

38. *Ibid.*, i, 77.

39. H. A. Innis, *Peter Pond, fur trader and adventurer*, (Toronto, 1930), 37.

40. Archivo General y Publica de la Nacion (Mexico), Provincias Internas, tomo 65, pieza 6^a. "Es expediente formado en el año de 1775, para franquear el auxilio de 1500 cavallos a los vecindarios del Nuevo Mexico, a fin de q. pudieran defenderse, y hazer la guerra a los Yndios Enemigos."

the Missouri.⁴¹ Probably their movement was caused by a desire to be nearer the source of horses, but pressure from the powerful northern Plains tribes may have been an inducement.

By the time that fur traders penetrated the Northwest, Spanish horses and mules were common among the Indians of that area.⁴² David Thompson told of a Piegan raiding party of 1787 which traveled far to the south in search of the Snake (Shoshoni) Indians. The scouts discovered a file of horses and mules led by Black Men (Spaniards). The Piegans attacked the train, and the Spaniards withdrew, leaving the loaded animals. Said Thompson:

I never could learn the number of the animals[;] those that came to the camp at which I resided were about thirty horses and a dozen mules, with a few saddles and bridles. The horses were about fourteen hands high finely shaped, and though very tired yet lively, mostly of a dark brown color, head neat and small, ears short and erect, eyes fine and clear, fine manes and tails with black hoofs. 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 made by a blacksmith with only his hammer.⁴³

A number of traders believed that Indians as far north as the Mandans and Gros Ventres traded with the Spaniards, as those tribes were well provided with Spanish saddles and bridles, as well as many horses and mules marked with well-known Spanish brands.⁴⁴

During the eighteenth century wild horses became very numerous in the Southwest. In 1778, De Mézières traveled from Bexar to the upper Trinity, Brazos, and Red rivers, and wrote:

41. Morfi, *op. cit.*, 89-90.

42. Innis, *op. cit.*, 126.

43. J. B. Tyrrell, ed., *David Thompson's narrative of his explorations in western America 1784-1812*, (Toronto, 1916), 370-1.

44. A. P. Nasatir (ed.), "Spanish explorations of the Upper Missouri," in *Mississippi Valley historical review*, xiv, 58, 66, 67.

After leaving the Guadalupe I crossed the Colorado and Brasos, where there are . . . an incredible number of Castilian cattle, and herds of mustangs that never leave the banks of these streams.⁴⁵

Morfi, in his history of Texas, also spoke of the herds of wild horses:

Nothing proves the fertility of the land and the richness of the soil more than the incredible number of wild horses and cattle found everywhere.

The number of wild horses and cattle that graze here [San Gabriel river] . . . is incredible.

There are found . . . a thousand other aromatic plants and species of grass that attract the wild horses and cattle which multiply so rapidly that one cannot journey through the province without meeting herds of two, three, and even four thousand head at a time.⁴⁶

The first American to engage in the western horse trade on a large scale was Philip Nolan, who spent several years among the Comanches. He drove fifty horses to New Orleans as an experiment; the animals sold so well that Nolan was induced to make another trip west for horses. In 1794, he took a herd of 250 to Natchez, where the majority was sold. Forty-two head were driven to Frankfort, Kentucky, and disposed of there. Nolan returned to San Antonio, where he planned to gather a herd of one thousand horses. Horse-raising had so declined in that region that it was necessary for Nolan to go to Nuevo Santander for most of his herd. In 1800, Nolan was again in Texas after horses. He saw thousands of wild horses on the Trinity and Brazos rivers. Near the latter river he built a corral, and caught about three hundred mustangs. At this time, Nolan was killed by a force which had been sent to apprehend him for illegal entry into Texas. That he was not the only American engaged in the trade was inferred by Gayoso, governor of

45. Bolton, *De Mézières, op. cit.*, ii, 187.

46. Morfi, *op. cit.*, 49, 54, 65-6.

Louisiana, who complained of the constant furtive penetrations by Americans into the *Provincias Internas* in search of horses.⁴⁷

An interesting account of some of the western horses which reached Kentucky was given by F. A. Michaux in 1802:

During my sojourn in this State I had an opportunity of seeing those wild horses that are caught in the plains of New Mexico, and which descend from those that the Spaniards introduced there formerly. To catch them they make use of tame horses that run much swifter. . . . They take them to New Orleans and Natches, where they fetch about fifty dollars. The crews belonging to the boats that return by land to Kentucky frequently purchase some of them. The two that I saw and made a trial of were roan coloured, of a middling size, the head large, and not proportionate with the neck, the limbs thick, and the mane rather full and handsome. These horses have a very unpleasant gait, are capricious, difficult to govern, and even frequently throw the rider and take flight.⁴⁸

47. Garnet M. Brayer, *Philip Nolan*, (Thesis, Berkeley, 1938), 55.

48. R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Early western travels, 1748-1846*, (Cleveland, 1904-1907, 32v), iii, 245.