

Tepees and Horses  
Another argument against the theory  
that horses became extinct in North America  
by David Bolles

Traditional theory holds that horses, while having their origins on the American continent, became extinct in the Americas some 10,000 years ago<sup>1</sup> and were reintroduced to the Americas by the Spanish during the 1500's with the invasion of the Spaniards into Meso-America.<sup>2</sup> However, there is mounting evidence that perhaps horses did not become extinct on the North American continent. Rather, it seems entirely possible that horses did not exist in places where Europeans were making their first contacts with Native Americans but did exist in areas far removed from where the Europeans first landed. Thus it was assumed by Europeans that horses did not exist on the North American continent. The same could be said of bison, which were not generally reported until European explorers penetrated the Great Plains region in the early 1600's.<sup>3</sup>

While there is evidence of a large-scale die-off of large animals in both Northern America and the northern Eurasian landmass roughly 13,000 years ago, there are in fact various large mammal species that span these two landmasses which are known to have survived this die-off, as for example the reindeer / caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), the moose (*Alces alces*), the wolf (*Canis lupus*) and its subspecies, the dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*), the bison / buffalo,<sup>4</sup> and man. Thus, it does not necessarily follow that when this die-off of large mammals occurred that the horse was included in the die-off.

The location of wild horses today may well be an indication of where horses ranged in the pre-contact period. Horses are particularly vulnerable to ingesting blister beetles which are a common insect living in grasslands and today in forage corps. Ingesting five to ten blister beetles can cause death in horses. However, the blister beetle is not found above certain elevation depending on the severity of the winter temperature and are rarely found above 7,500 feet (2,300 m.). It is interesting to note that with the exception of wild horses found in coastal islands along the eastern seaboard, most of the wild horses are to be found in areas which are at an elevation which are free of blister beetles. For example, the Pryor Mountains Wild Horse Range consists primarily of alpine meadows, high desert, rocky ridges, and steep, semi-alpine slopes. The average elevation is about 8,700 feet (2,700 m).

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<sup>1</sup> The fossil record is not complete in defining when the last horses were to be found in North America. Dates vary but most source say that the horse became extinct in North America between 8,000 and 12,000 years ago.

<sup>2</sup> Meso-America is a term applied to Mexico and Central America.

<sup>3</sup> See the following footnote for an exception to this statement.

<sup>4</sup> From the description in Antonio de Solís' *Historia de la Conquista*, Vol. II, it appears that Montezuma had a buffalo in his zoological garden in Tenochtitlan. En el segundo patio de la misma casa estaban las fieras que presentaban a Motezuma, o prendian sus cazadores, en fuertes jaulas de madera, puestas con buena distribucion y debaxo de cubierto: leones, tigres, osos, y quantos géneros de brutos silvestres produce la *Nueva España*, entre los quales hizo mayor novedad el toro Mexicano, rarisimo compuesto de varios animales, gibada y corva la espalda como el camello, enjuto el hijar, larga la cola y guedejudo el cuello como el leon, hendido el pie y armada la frente como el toro, cuya ferocidad imita con igual ligereza y execucion.

## Tepees and Draft Animals

Perhaps one piece of evidence that the horse continued to exist in North America is the existence of tepees amongst the Plains Indians. The use of the tepee type structure is wide-spread amongst the northern Old World nomadic cultures ranging from the Sami in Finnmark<sup>5</sup> to the Nenets, Evenks and Khanty of the Arctic Central Russia to the Chukchi and related groups in northeastern Siberia. They all rely on reindeer to transport their personal effects, including their lodges, from place to place as they follow the reindeer herds to new feeding grounds. Given the weight of these material goods, it would be hard to imagine these migrations taking place without the aide of the reindeer.



Nenet tents and sledges on the tundra

This factor leads to the following question: if the Plains Indians used tepees before the coming of the Europeans, how did they transport these structures and their material goods from place to place while they followed the migration of game animals? It would seem evident that they must have had some beast of burden. Since there is no evidence that they used reindeer, moose or bison for this purpose, the question has to be asked: what type of beast of burden did they use?



A woman, children and household goods loaded on a horse and ready to move.

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<sup>5</sup> Finnmark comprises the Arctic areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland and northwest Russia where the Sami (also called Lapps or Laplanders) live.

One beast of burden which was known to have been used is the dog. Dogs did play an important part of domestic life amongst the Native Americans, including being used as draft animals for dragging sledges in the arctic and travois and packs in more temperate areas. However, judging from the size of loads carried by dogs on travois, which is what the Plains Indians used, it still would be hard to imagine how entire households were moved on the backs of these animals.

The existence of tepees amongst the Plain Indians raises yet another logistical question: lodge pole pines and other similar trees used for the framework of tepees are not uniformly available on the Great Plains. This suggests that in some cases this building material had to be brought in to a camp site from a great distance, something which humans alone without the aide of a beast of burden would not have accomplished.



Another factor is the that there is a fairly rich vocabulary for “horse” which exists in various Plains Indian languages. As pointed out by Claire Henderson in her article “The Aboriginal North American Horse”,<sup>6</sup> the “Dakota/Lakota people have an extensive ‘horse vocabulary.’”<sup>7</sup> From information supplied by Caroline Mills of the Learning Center at Ft. Washakie, Wyoming, the Shoshones also have their own word for “horse”.<sup>8</sup> This is in contrast to Meso-American languages such as Nahuatl<sup>9</sup> which have incorporated the Spanish word for horse, “caballo”, into their language, or in the case of the Maya who have applied the term for an animal which vaguely looks like a horse, namely the tapir, or “tzimin” in Mayan, to the word “horse” in their language.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Claire Henderson

1991 *The Aboriginal North American Horse*, Laval University, Quebec, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> However, as pointed out by Arvo Wolvengrey, linguistics professor at the First Nations University, many of these languages use such terms as “big dog” for “horse”, indicating that before horses the dog was their beast of burden.

<sup>8</sup> A search through the Online Shoshone Dictionary yields in particular two words for “horse”, “bungu” and “de hee’ya”. The second word is very close to the word for “deer”: “de heya”. See the following note about the use of “deer” for “horse” in Nahuatl. (For the Online Shoshone Dictionary see: <http://www.shoshonidictionary.com/shoshonidictionary.asp>)

<sup>9</sup> Nahuatl is the language spoken by various groups of the Mexican highlands such as the Aztecs, Tlaxcaltecs, Toltecs, etc., and remains a fairly extensive language. It should be mentioned that in the very early literature written in Nahuatl using Latin script, such as the Florentine Codex (mid-1500’s), the word “mazatl” = “deer” is often used for horse.

<sup>10</sup> Today in northern Yucatan the word “tzimin” is universally understood as “horse”. This is in part due to the fact that the tapir is all but extinct in Yucatan, with only a few individuals to be found in zoos such as the zoo in Chetumal.

The Shoshone lived and still live in an area which is prime wild horse territory. One of the nation's more famous daughters, Sacajawea, related the story of her early life to some Blackfeet Indians who passed the story on to James Willard Schultz.<sup>11</sup> In this account she talks about her capture by the Hidatsa. From her account it seems that the Shoshone were constantly being raided by various other nations such as the Blackfeet, Mandan and Hidatsa, mainly in order to capture horses, although they also took captives as slaves, as was the fate of Sacajawea.

It thus seems that there was a long history of wild horses populating the area where the mustangs now roam and proliferate. These horses were captured by the Shoshone who in turn were raided by other nations which did not live in prime horse breeding territory and therefore were in the need of horses.

While none of the above comments provide proof that the horse continued to exist in North America after the large mammal die-off, they do indicate that further study is needed to find out what really happened. As pointed out by Claire Henderson, it seems rather difficult to imagine that given the sophisticated state of horsemanship and use of the horse by the Plains Indians within a 150 years after the European horses arrived that such a horse culture should have emerged so swiftly.

It might be mentioned in passing that the horses brought to the Americas by the Spanish were fairly small compared to the wild horses of today. They were also uniform in color unlike the pinto horses which were used by the plains Native Americans. These small horses are still to be seen in rural parts of Mexico, especially in the more tropical areas such as Yucatan. One has to wonder how these smaller horses, if they are in fact those from which wild horses are derived, gave rise to the larger wild horses.

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<sup>11</sup> James Willard Schultz  
1918 *Bird Woman(Sacajawea), The Guide of Lewis and Clark*, Houghton Mifflin Company.