

The Passing of the Horse

By Dody Fugate

The horses that came into New Mexico with the Spanish Expeditions of conquest and colonization were the product of tough, thrifty animals that a generation before had endured a long ocean voyage of close confinement and short rations, and, at the last, swimming the gulf surf to reach land on their own. Their strength would show itself time and again. The horses arriving in the New World would be needed for more than moving men and supplies: they would be ridden to victory.

“Next to God we owe our victory to the horse,” wrote one soldier who rode with Hernán Cortés on one of the first horses to reach the western hemisphere. In his memoir of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Bernal Díaz heaped praise on the beasts of burden that were “our fortress,” “our only hope of survival,” “our salvation.”

A horse arriving with Cortés armada from Spain had weathered storms, suspended in a sling on the open deck of a ship, and given only occasional meals of grain and grass. Most were strong and hearty Spanish Barbs from stock bred by the Berbers of Morocco. They were small and well built with short backs, convex heads and a reputation for quick movement, great stamina, and sound hooves. Others were Spanish Arabians, another “hot-blooded” breed, and some were the larger but not-so-vigorous Andalusian.

When Cortés brought the first horses to set foot on the mainland, there were only seventeen: eleven stallions, five mares, and a foal born on the trip over. Imported soon after were burros and mules, or, more probably, hinnies (a product of a stallion and a burro that is more horse-like and smaller than a mule).

What one rode reflected the status of the rider. Burros or hinnies and mares—never stallions—were for priests to ride, because they reflected the rider’s humility. On the other hand, no *caballero* or *hidalgo* would be caught dead riding anything but a *caballo*, a horse entire. A gelding would not do. *Caballos* were thought to make the best war horses and many were trained as fighting weapons. A well-trained war stallion was a powerful advantage in a fight. They were trained to rear and pivot, bite, kick, and strike controlled by knee pressure alone, leaving the soldier free to wield weapons.

The first horses to actually arrive in New Mexico came with Francisco Vasquez de Coronado's massive exploratory expedition. By his own testimony, in 1547, he brought with him some 1,000 horses and 500 mules and donkeys. Many of them did not return with him to Mexico, a few ridden by small scouting parties that were sent out from the main column and never came back. It is likely that while the scouts died their horses survived to run wild and breed. Others simply strayed from the herd and were lost. In 1598, Don Juan de Oñate and the first colonists brought with them large numbers of livestock that included 100 mares and colts and 700 horses and mules, some known to have made the area their permanent home before the first cornerstone of the settlement was laid. Oñate complained in a letter to the Viceroy that some of his horse herd wandered off or were stolen even before he reached the Rio Grande.

With the colony established, the importance of horse to the developing New Mexico culture grew, as did the business of growing horses. The monks of Spain had long been famous for their horse breeding projects, and the same became true of New Mexico missionaries. From the horses that belonged to the missions, the production of fine horses became a mission of itself. And the horse became more coveted than ever.

An early Spanish law enacted after the conquest decreed no Indian was allowed to ride a horse. Nevertheless, because flocks of sheep and herds of cattle had to be managed, and because in New Mexico Pueblos were enlisted to do that work, the law was ignored from the beginning.

The desire to own a horse led to additional laws especially against theft, apparently also broken because Oñate's *caballada*, or horse herd, kept dwindling. The presidio's *caballada* needed at least six horses per soldier, and through the years, new horses had to be purchased. Attrition and the cost of replacement eventually led to another complaint, in 1639, to the viceroy from the cabildo of Santa Fe that while the missions had "thirty or forty horses a piece," the Presidios' soldiers were on foot and couldn't defend the colony.

Defense was made even more difficult as the continual trade of horses from hand to hand, band to band, tribe to tribe, eventually enabled Native American of the Great Plains and non-Pueblos of the Southwest to become formidable powers. In *A Song for the Horse Nation: Horses in Native American Cultures* (published by the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2006) W. Richard West, Jr., writes: "At first, the horses scared the Indians. They had never seen an animal that could carry a

person. They called the horses “sky dogs,” believing that they were monsters or messengers from the heavens. The first Hopi to see horses paved their way with ceremonial blankets.”

This awe did not entirely wear off even as the horse became more and more a necessity. Among the Indians on the Great Plains and some of the peoples moving onto the plains, the acquisition of horses so revolutionized their way of life that horses might as well have been heaven sent.

The creatures indeed were a godsend for Native Americans, and their value instantly apparent. The Spanish who had come to conquer them by force and save them through religion, left livestock and precious horses behind during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. By the 1700s, the Indian and the horse were inseparable.

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