Chapter 1: Historic Horse Types of Western North Dakota, 1750-1947

This section examines types of horses found throughout the Northern Plains in the nineteenth century, particularly horses of Montana and western North Dakota. Based on the accounts of historians and contemporary observers, a general description of Indian horses, wild horses, and ranch horses of the Northern Plains region is provided, with an emphasis on horses found in the Little Missouri Badlands of southwestern North Dakota.

[1] Indian Horses and Wild Horses

The earliest modern horses to occupy the Northern Plains and the grasslands of western North Dakota during the historic period were Indian ponies. The Spanish reintroduced the horse to North America in the middle of the seventeenth century.¹ Feral animals, called mestenos, soon populated the Southwest and had expanded as far north as Saskatchewan within one hundred years (Dobie, 1952:40). Never as plentiful in the northern areas, by 1850 there were an estimated one million wild horses on the Texas plains alone, another million scattered across the western range (Dobie, 1952: 108). The primary agent in the expansion and dispersal of these animals was their acquisition, trade, and use by Native

¹ The horse evolved on the North American continent but was one of many mammalian species that became extinct during the Pleistocene, ten thousand years ago.
American groups, many of which became mounted equestrians prior to
direct contact with Anglo-Europeans (Ewers, 1955).

The acquisition of the horse by the Indians, its tremendous
economic and cultural impact, and the process of this diffusion,
constitutes a classic theme in American anthropology (eg. Ewers,
1955; Haines, 1938; Hanson, 1986; Roe, 1955; Wissler, 1914).
Horses, and the knowledge of their care and use, spread among the
tribes primarily by trade. In this network the Missouri and Knife
River villages of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara played a criti-
cal role. These village communities were key distribution centers
in an indigenous trade network prior to and throughout the entire
post-contact era of 1730-1850 (Ewers, 1955; Wood and Thiessen,
1985). Early European traders took advantage of this established
trade system; by trading directly with the village groups, they
secured indirect trade relations with more nomadic hunter-
gatherers throughout the Upper Missouri and intermontane West.
Horses and guns were the chief commodities in this economy.

Horses were reported in the Mandan villages by 1741 (La
Verendrye, 1927; in Ewers, 1955), marking the beginning of the so-
called "Horse Culture Period" in the Northern Plains. Throughout
the next hundred years, the riverine villages served as a primary
source of horses for trading companies and explorers as well as
for other Native American groups (Ewers, 1955; Wood and Thiessen,
1985). It was here that the spread of guns southward met the
northward expansion of horses, the latter diffusing from the
Spanish Southwest and radiating out of the villages to tribes
north, east, and west.
Ewers (1955:7-10) has postulated two routes for the diffusion of horses to the Northern Plains at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The older route led north from the Spanish territories of New Mexico and Texas to the village groups via the Black Hills and Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Comanche middlemen. A second route led from the Upper Yellowstone east to the Hidatsa and Mandan villages on the Missouri. In this trade the Crow, relatives of the Hidatsa and principal trading partners of the villagers, served as intermediaries between Indians of the Northwest and Plateau (Nez Perce, Flathead, Shoshoni, etc.) and those on the Upper Missouri (see map, figure 1).

Large-scale brokers and expert horse thieves, the Crow became the most horse-rich of all northern groups, amassing at least 10,000 head by 1820, a ratio of 15 animals to each lodge group (Ewers, 1955:24). A contemporary observer said of the Crow:

> It is not uncommon for a single family to be the owner of 100 of these animals. Most middle-aged men have from 30-60. An individual is said to be poor when he does not possess at least 20 (Denig, 1961:145).

Another nineteenth-century Plains traveler declared, "The horses of the Crows are principally of the maroon race of the prairies."² (De Smet; in Roe, 1955: 23).

As elsewhere, the horse among the village Indians served as a beast of burden, a means of transportation, a status symbol and measure of wealth, a recreational device, and an animal of considerable symbolic import. However, these horticulturalists and traders had little incentive to amass the large numbers of horses

² According to the 1988 edition of Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus, "maroon" was at one time used as a synonym for "wild" or "abandoned," as in "marooned" on an island.
commonly held by their more nomadic neighbors (cf. Hanson, 1986). One source credits the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara as having for personal use a total of only 1,000 horses in the first half of the nineteenth century (Ewers, 1955:24). While this figure may be low, grazing requirements would place a strong constraint on the number of horses such sedentary horticulturalists could maintain; Boller observed the Mandans habitually grazing their stock 5-6 miles from camp (1972: 53). The chief function of the horse here seems to have been that of an economic commodity. Thus, the Arikara were said to be "not well provided with horses" (Denig, 1961: 48); likewise it was said of the Mandan, "Even for the sole purpose of hunting, their horses are too few" (Thompson, 1916; in Ewers, 1955:25). At the same time, a trader among the Arikara in 1803-1804 noted of the European exchange of guns for horses in their villages:

The horse is the most important article of their trade with the Ricaras. Most frequently it is given as a present: but, according to their manner, that is to say, it is recalled when the tender in exchange does not please. This is an understood restriction. This present is paid ordinarily with a gun, a hundred charges of powder and balls, a knife and other trifles (Tabeau, 1939; in Ewers, 1955:9).

Plains Indians relied primarily on raiding and trade for their supply of horses; the Mandan and Hidatsa also practiced relatively careful husbandry, including castration. Wolf Chief, a Hidatsa, recalled this advice from his father:

These horses are gods, or mystery beings. They have supernatural power. If one cares for them properly and seeks good grazing and water for them, they will increase rapidly (Wilson, 1924:145).
In discussing Hidatsa horse breeding practices, Wolf Chief implied that his people credited stallions with having a dominant influence on their offspring:

The best stallion was kept for breeding. Stallions were not all alike; some gave more attention to mares than others. This we thought a sign of vigor. . . . Stallions that grew to be two years old and were slow and lazy, were castrated; also those from which no colts were born. . . .

My grandfather, Big Cloud, had a fine stallion name Amanu Kac, or Digs-out-dirt, because he always pawed up the dirt with his hooves when he came to a herd. He was often threatening to the boy herders, putting his ears far back on his head and looking savage, but he never really bit or harmed them. He was a good stallion, forcing his attentions, in spite of avoidance and kicks. He raised blue colts (Wilson, 1924:149).

There is evidence for the presence and utilization of wild herds in central North Dakota during the early nineteenth century.

Writing of the Mandan villages in 1832-1833, Catlin says:

The horses which the Indians ride in this country are invariably the wild horses, which are found in great numbers on the prairies; and have, unquestionably, strayed from the Mexican borders, into which they were introduced by the Spanish invaders of that country; and now range and subsist themselves, in winter and summer, over the vast plains of prairie that stretch from the Mexican frontiers to Lake Winnipeg on the north, a distance of 3,000 miles. These horses are all of a small stature, of the pony order; but a very hardy and tough animal, being able to perform for the Indians a continual and essential service. . . .

. . . Scarcely a man in these regions is to be found, who is not the owner of one or more of these horses; and in many instances of 8, 10, or even 20, which he values as his personal property. . . . Horse racing here, as in all more enlightened communities, is one of the most exciting amusements, and one of the most extravagant modes of gambling (Catlin, 1973:142-43).

Washington Irving observed Arikara horses in the 1840s:

The horses owned by the Arikaras are, for the most part, of the wild stock of the prairies; some, however, have been obtained from the Poncas, Pawnees, and other tribes to the southwest, who had stolen them from the
Spaniards . . . These were known by being branded, a Spanish mode of marking horses not practiced by Indians (in Wyman, 1963:283).

During his stay among the Mandan and Hidatsa at Fort Akinson in the 1860s, Boller described their use of Spanish riding gear and perhaps Appaloosa horses, bred primarily by the Nez Perce in the Columbia plateau:

Young bucks parade about on their fancy horses, some of which are spotted in a remarkable manner. . . . Those who are so fortunate as to possess one, use the heavy Spanish bit with its long iron fringes, jingling with the slightest movement of the horse (Boller, 1972: 67-68).

All of the wild horses of the Americas\(^3\) were originally feral animals that had escaped or been stolen from their Spanish masters. As Catlin notes, the feral herds of the Southwest gradually extended their range, but this movement was largely a product of their expanding use and subsequent loss. Indians often drove herds numbering in the thousands to trade or as the product of a raiding expedition; it was inevitable that many were lost (Dobie, 1952; Ewers, 1955). It was a common practice among both Indians and whites to turn worn-out horses loose, and many Plains travelers unwittingly lost stock to passing wild herds or to other travelers (e.g., Parkman, 1883).

By the early nineteenth century, wild horses were a common feature of the western landscape, from Texas to California and throughout the Rocky Mountains north into the Canadian plains (Dobie, 1952; Wyman, 1963). Wild horses were so populous in the Southwest, and their capture and sale so economically significant,

\(^3\) There were many more wild horses in South America than in the northern colonies; see Denhardt, 1947; Dobie, 1952.
that it has been suggested that this business was analogous to the
fur trade of the Upper Missouri (Flores, 1987). The chasing and
capture of wild horses was an integral aspect of cowboy culture
that has been perpetuated by ranchers and professional
"mustangers" into the present century (Dobie, 1952; Wyman, 1963).
Lastly, wild horses achieved a prodigious symbolic import within
western thought and culture. Historian Frank Dobie stated, "The
aesthetic value of the mustang topped all other values. The sight
of wild horses streaming across the prairies made even the most
hardened of professional mustangers regret putting an end to their
liberty" (1952: 111).

It is possible that the grassland expanse between the Mis-
souri and Yellowstone Rivers supported a population of wild horses
throughout the nineteenth century, owing both to the excellent
range and to the utilization of the area by Indians, traders, and
travelers. The Crow alone drove large numbers of horses to and
from the Missouri River villages, and the area was a hunting
ground for the Sioux and Blackfoot (Denig, 1961). Dobie (1952:79)
states that the smallpox epidemics that devastated the Missouri
River tribes of central North Dakota in the 1830s "released thou-
sands of horses to run wild."

Types of Indian Horses

The Indian horse of the American West was originally of
predominantly Spanish descent (Bandy and Bandy, 1982; Denhardt,
1947; Dobie, 1952; Wyman, 1963). Two principal strains were
imported to the New World: the Moorish Barb and the Spanish Andalusian, both of which were developed as war horses and possessed hardiness and endurance (ibid.; see Appendix A). Once feral, they were called mustangs, from the Spanish mesteno, or "roving" (Dobie, 1952). Later the term "mustang" acquired a more generic meaning, being used to refer to any wild horse. Wild horses were also called "broomtail," "bronco," and "cayuse"—all terms which had been appropriated from an originally specific meaning.

The diffusion of the true Spanish mustang may be suggested by the fact that Lewis and Clark found Spanish-branded mules and horses among the Indians of the Columbia River basin in 1805. They described the horses as "of an excellent race, lofty, elegantly formed, active and durable. Many of them look like fine English coarsers and would make a figure in any country"; hardly a horse "could be deemed poor, and many were fat as seals" (in Dobie, 1952:54).

Descriptions from contemporary observers of the Indian pony vary markedly: they have been described as "mostly beautiful, spirited animals," and as "the best proportioned, the swiftest and the most beautiful" but also as "descendents of strays and castaways . . . medium in size, wiry, hardy beasts, with a very decided tendency toward horse ugliness" (Dobie, 1952:57, 72; Wyman, 1963: 277). Over time the latter assessment became predominant, then stereotypical (see Figure 2). Most scholars attribute the degeneration of appearance among Indian horses to

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4 There is some dispute about the origin of the term "mustang," but this is the predominant interpretation.
indiscriminate breeding both in captivity and on the range (cf. Dobie, 1952; Wyman, 1963). It was for their "bottom," or endurance that the mustang/Indian pony won praise. J. Frank Dobie, foremost scholar of early western horses, summed it up thus:

Performance counts, and Indian horses often deceived their looks. Among those he saw on the Upper Missouri, a European cavalryman found "only now and then noble animals of European form," but added, "It is almost unbelievable how much the Indians can accomplish with their horses, what burdens they are able to carry, and what great distances they can cover in a short time..." Never stabled, washed, curried, shod, doctored or fed, he starved through the winter, but when grass came he filled out and, with ears up and eyes lighted, was ready for any ride. Adversity brought out his values. "Praise the tall but saddle the small," a Mexican saying went (Dobie, 1952: 59).

Artist Frederic Remington observed Indian horses first-hand and chronicled them in paint and on paper (see Figure 3). He said of the Indian horse:

He may be all that the wildest enthusiast may claim in point of hardihood and power, as indeed he is, but he is not beautiful. His head and neck join like the two parts of a hammer, his legs are as fine as a deer's, though not with the flat kneecap and broad cannonbone of the English ideal. His barrel is a veritable turn, made so by the bushels of grass which he consumes in order to satisfy nature. His quarters are apt to run suddenly back from the hips, and the rear view is decidedly mulish about the hocks (Remington, 1960: 106).

Roe (1955: 92) has said that "by 1773 the Indian horse was already a recognizable and named type of its own," which he described as having "the weedy, decadent appearance which has come to be associated with the very term 'Indian pony,' and so strongly, moreover, that they could transmit its points in recognizable form to a further cross-bred type" (ibid: 69). Ewers (1955:33-34) states,
The Indian pony was close to being a type. . . . The adult male Indian pony averaged a little under 14 hands in height, weighed about 700 pounds, possessed a large head in proportion to its body, good eyes, "neck and head joined like the two parts of a hammer," large, round barrel, relatively heavy shoulders and hips; small fine, strong limbs and small feet. Indian ponies exhibited a wide range of solid and mixed colors. . . .

The Indian pony was no beautiful animal, but it was a tough, sturdy, long-winded beast that possessed great powers of endurance.

Other authorities have drawn attention to regional variation among Indian horses and the development of distinct sub-types (Bandy and Bandy, 1982; Remington, 1960; Wyman, 1963). Remington (1960: 99) noted that "the lapse of nearly four centuries and the great variety of conditions have so changed the American 'bronco' from his Spanish ancestor that he now enjoys a distinctive individuality. This individuality is also subdivided; and as all types come from a common ancestry, the reasons for this varied development are sought with interest. . . ." In general, the horse of the Northern Plains was thought to be larger and perhaps of "better" quality owing to the superior range and the practice of some tribes to breed selectively (Dobie, 1952: 52). Everywhere Indians preferred horses of color: buckskins, roans, Appaloosas and paints, preferably with glass (blue) eyes and striped hooves.

Of course, Indians also acquired Euro-American horse types by a variety of means, including their capture as war trophies during skirmishes with the U.S. Army. In contrast to the Indian type, the so-called "American Horse" of the nineteenth century was a mixture of European breeds and was large, powerful, heavy, and solid-colored (Albert, 1941:12,38; Dobie, 1952:61). L. A. Huffman photographed two Cheyenne warriors with their horses in 1879,
reproduced here as Plate 1. The horse on the left is typical of the "Indian type" on the Northern Plains: a medium-sized, bald-faced roan paint. In contrast, the dark horse on the right is taller and heavier and appears to carry a U.S.-made saddle; it is possible that this was a captured "American horse."

By the middle of the nineteenth century, most horses of the Plains Indians were no longer of straight Spanish blood, although this heritage remained strong in the Southwest (Dobie, 1952; Wyman, 1963). Francis Parkman observed Indian horses near Fort Laramie in 1845:

These were of every shape, size, and color. Some came from California, some from the States, some from among the mountains, and some from the wild bands of the prairie. They were of every hue, white, black, red and grey, or mottled and clouded with a strange variety of colors. They all had a wild and startled look, very different from the sober aspect of a well-bred city steed. Those most noted for swiftness and spirit were decorated with eagle feathers dangling from their manes and tails (Parkman, 1883:288).

The symbolic import of the horse within Native American cultures has far outlasted their economic significance. Government stock reduction programs circa 1880-1930 aimed at reducing herds on reservations and replacing the Indian pony with more useful draft stock met with strenuous resistance (cf. Ewers, 1955; Wyman, 1963). Fort Berthold Tribal Chairman Ed Lone Fight told the writer that when the construction of Garrison Dam flooded parts of the reservation during the 1950s, residents were informed that their horses should be removed or destroyed. One man repeatedly refused to submit his animals, finally imprinting "1,000 TIMES NO" on the crown of his hat. When told that his herd must be removed
or confiscated within 48 hours, he trailed 80 head of horses to the Yellowstone country and remained there in hiding for three years. This feeling persists. I attended a meeting in Twin Buttes in September 1987 during which the chief order of business was discussion of a "wild horse resolution" being developed by the tribe and the BIA to control feral horses in the western half of Fort Berthold Reservation. When I asked a tribal councilman his opinion of the proposal, which called for the arbitrary removal of unclaimed animals, he responded: "A horse means more than just a horse."

[2] Northern Plains Ranch Horses, 1850-1900

The foundation stock of the western cow pony and saddle horse was likewise the Spanish Mustang (Denhardt, 1947; Dobie, 1952; Remington, 1960; Wyman, 1963). This was especially true in the Southwest and California, where the Spanish had practiced large-scale horse breeding for generations and where wild herds reached their maximum density. For example, the founder of the famous King Ranch (Texas) purchased all of his foundation stock, bovine and equine, from Mexican breeders in 1853, and California-bred mustang mares were imported by ranchers throughout the West to establish saddle stock (Wyman, 1963: 99).

The mustang possessed qualities that made it ideal for range cattle work: stamina, thriftiness, and agility. However, ranchmen found them lacking in size and appearance, one man recalling them as "small, wiry little beasts capable of strenuous work day after day, but they were hard creatures to look at" (Wyman, 1963: 99).