

*The Horse in
Blackfoot Indian Culture*

With Comparative Material from Other Western Tribes

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
Foreword.....	XI
The acquisition of the horse.....	1
The northward spread of horses.....	2
Sources of the horses of the Plains Indians.....	2
Dating the northward spread of horses among the Indians.....	3
The process of diffusion.....	7
Acquisition of horses by the Blackfoot.....	15
Wealth in horses.....	20
Blackfoot tribal wealth in horses.....	20
Wealth in horses of other Plains and Plateau tribes.....	22
Horse wealth of individual Blackfoot Indians.....	28
Horse wealth of individuals in other tribes.....	31
Care of horses.....	33
The Indian pony.....	33
Fate of the Indian pony.....	34
Means of identification.....	35
Daily care of horses.....	37
Hobbling.....	38
Picketing.....	39
Pasturage.....	40
Winter care.....	42
Rustling.....	42
Supplemental winter horse food.....	43
Night care.....	44
Winter losses of horses.....	44
May storms.....	45
Spring condition.....	46
Common horse remedies.....	46
Treatment of saddle sores.....	47
Treatment of sore feet.....	47
Treatment of colic and distemper.....	48
Precautions against chills.....	49
A general tonic.....	49
Treatment of broken bones.....	49
Treatment of unknown illnesses.....	50
Losses of horses.....	50
Losses from disease.....	50
Losses from animal predators.....	51
Losses from stock-poisoning plants.....	51
Care of old horses.....	51
Horse breeding.....	53
Important role of horse breeding.....	53
Selection of studs.....	53
Maintenance of color lines.....	54
Magical breeding formulas.....	55
Care of gravid mares and colts.....	56
Gelding.....	56

THE HORSE AS A FACTOR IN SOCIAL RELATIONS

SOCIAL STATUS

A century and a half ago David Thompson (1916, p. 363) observed that the Piegan possessed "an inherent sense of the rights of individuals to their rights of property, whether given them, or acquired by industry, or in hunting. All these belong to the person who is in possession of them; and which gives him the right to defend any attempt to take them from him." Individual ownership of all property other than land was the rule among the three Blackfoot tribes. Even sacred bundles, such as the natoas or Sun Dance bundle, the beaver bundle, and the medicine pipe bundle, which were manipulated for the good of the whole community, were individually owned and were transferred from one individual to another through elaborate ceremonies. Individual ownership of horses followed the Blackfoot pattern of ownership of other property.⁷⁵

Blackfoot social stratification was grounded in respect for the right of the individual to own and to accumulate property. In historic times social stratification followed the economic status of the family head, whose wealth was determined primarily in terms of horse ownership. Three Calf stated that in his youth there were three classes among the Blackfoot: the rich, the poor, and the "in between" (middle class). Other informants frequently mentioned the two extremes without naming the middle class specifically. The classes may be briefly characterized as follows.

THE RICH

A man who owned some 40 or more horses was considered wealthy. This number of animals was more than ample to meet his normal family needs for horses to move his possessions and obtain food through hunting. His horses provided the means of acquiring a plentiful food supply, either through his own efforts or through those of other men to whom he loaned horses for buffalo hunting. Moreover, he obtained sufficient food surplus to enable him to entertain through feasts following a successful hunt and still permit his women folk to prepare extensive supplies of pemmican and dried meat in the fall

⁷⁵ Goldfrank's (1945, p. 6) informant who spoke of "band horses," either was misinformed or did not mean what he was reported to have said. The concept of community ownership of horses was foreign to Blackfoot economic theory and practice.

for winter subsistence. His many horses were the means of transporting surplus foods, one or more large lodges, and many other bulky possessions. His surplus of robes were exchanged at the trading posts for the most improved weapons, metal tools and household utensils, ornaments and trade cloth. He and members of his family dressed well. They owned several changes of clothing including expensive and elaborately decorated dress outfits. Their saddles and riding gear were well made and showy. He possessed the means to purchase membership in men's societies, to obtain important sacred bundles through ceremonial transfers, and to pay leading medicine men to care for sick members of his family. If his favorite wife had the moral qualifications she could reasonably anticipate an opportunity to play the role of medicine woman in the Sun Dance of the tribe. He and his sons could marry well, could have a large choice of mates and could support several wives. Before he died he could make a verbal will dividing his wealth among his children to provide for their continued enjoyment of his many advantages.

Through careful management of his breeding stock he could increase his horse herds and hence his wealth. Yet he lived in constant fear of losing his horses from an enemy raid. Three Calf told of his father's loss of his entire herd through capture by an enemy raiding party. His father died not long afterward and friends said his death was due to his grief over the loss of his horses. Whether the grief was due primarily to his love for the stolen animals or to his feeling of loss of status and lowered standard of living after the horses were gone, is not clear. Probably both factors were involved.

There is evidence that wiser heads saw the folly of storing up treasure in horses alone. Buffalo Back Fat, head chief of the Blood tribe at the time of George Catlin's visit to Fort Union in 1832, handed down this sage advice to members of his family. It was remembered by Three Calf, a descendant of that chief:

Don't put all your wealth in horses. If all your horses are taken from you one night by the enemy, they won't come back to you. You will be destitute. So be prepared. Build up supplies of fine, clean clothing, good weapons, sacred bundles and other valuable goods. Then, if some enemy takes all your horses, you can use your other possessions to obtain the horses you need.

Call in the son of a man who owns a lot of fine horses. Offer the lad something valuable—a shield, a beautiful suit of clothes or some sacred object. The boy may not want it for himself but he will tell his father. When his father hears of your offer he will bring fine horses to obtain transfer of title to the proffered object. You can continue in this way to rebuild your herd by disposing of other valuable possessions.

Furthermore, you will be sure of acquiring horses of the very best quality with which to start your herd anew. You know that when a man seeks to obtain a bundle or other valuable object every one in camp, his rivals as well as his relatives, knows about it and watches to see what he is offering in exchange.

So he will make a show of liberality by offering the best horses he has. Any other property he may offer along with the horses will be of the best quality—blankets, robes, guns or other articles.

Wissler (1912 a, p. 276) found that the prestige gained from ownership of sacred bundles was never lost. "Even though one may fall a victim to utter poverty, he may still, if the ex-owner of many bundles, be spoken of as wealthy and powerful." The wealthy man who was also kind and generous need never fear reduction to abject poverty through loss of his horses. His many friends and relatives would give him horses to care for the needs of his household.⁷⁶ However, the wealthy man who was stingy was genuinely disliked by his fellow men. Generosity was felt to be a responsibility of the wealthy. They were expected to loan horses to the poor for hunting and moving camp, to give food to the poor, and to give away horses occasionally. They were expected to pay more in intratribal barter than were Indians who were not well to do. If the man of wealth had political ambitions it was particularly important that he be lavish with his gifts in order to gain a large number of followers to support his candidacy.

In numbers the wealthy comprised by far the smallest of the three Blackfoot social classes. It is doubtful if they totaled 5 percent of the Blackfoot population in buffalo days.

THE MIDDLE CLASS

The middle-class Blackfoot owned from 5 to less than 40 horses. He was economically independent, possessing enough horses to hunt buffalo and move camp. Generally he could obtain adequate meat for his family, although many middle-class families could prepare and transport little winter reserve. He lived in a smaller lodge and entertained much less frequently or lavishly than the rich man. He had fewer robes to trade and consequently received less of the trader's desirable goods. Yet he tried, to the best of his ability to follow the styles set by people of wealth in clothing, ornaments, weapons, tools, household utensils, riding, and transport gear. But his possessions were fewer and, unless his wife or wives were expert and industrious craftswomen, his possessions usually were less elaborate than those of wealthy men. With the help of relatives he could muster horses and other costly items necessary to purchase a valuable sacred bundle. But, as Wissler (1912 a, p. 277) has stated, it was only the wealthy who could purchase large or important bundles without help.

In numbers the middle class comprised the largest of the three Blackfoot classes, and the majority of the population. This class

⁷⁶ Denig said of the Crow, "If a man has all his horses stolen or killed, he can generally find friends to give him others, tho the giver expects payment when the receiver shall have retrieved his horses or be able to pay in some way" (Denig, 1953, p. 32).

graded almost imperceptibly into the wealthy class at the top and the poor class at the bottom. Loss of a portion of their herd from an enemy raid could reduce many a middle-class family to poverty.

THE POOR

At the bottom of the economically determined social scale were the poor. They were far more numerous than the wealthy, but less numerous than the middle class. At times they may have numbered 25 percent of the total population. Poor families were dependent upon their relatives or band leaders for even the economic essentials. They borrowed horses to move camp or used dogs for transport animals. They borrowed horses to hunt or received food from the more fortunate. Even their small homes often were the tops of old lodges discarded by wealthy owners, cut down to a size the poor people could transport. The poor family, owning less than 5 horses, had few other possessions. This family was easily recognized by the smallness of its lodge and the shabby appearance of its clothing, transport gear, household utensils, and weapons. Generally the poor owned no fancy dress clothing. Their parfleches were old, worn, and greasy; their rectangular rawhide bags unfringed. The poor man's gun, if he owned one, was generally an old muzzle-loader, broken and tied together with buckskin cord.

Undoubtedly, if the poor man had pride or ambition, he suffered greater mental anguish than physical discomfort. Fellow tribesmen saw to it that he did not starve. Yet he realized that he made a poor appearance among his people and that he owned none of the desirable possessions of members of the upper and middle classes. His self-respect suffered through inability to participate actively in many facets of Blackfoot life. He could not purchase important sacred bundles or membership in a society. His desires and opinions carried no weight in decisions involving band and tribal movements. His marriage prospects were very limited. The aged poor were sometimes left behind when camp was moved owing to lack of adequate transport facilities.

Yet the lot of the poor in horses was no worse among the Blackfoot than among the majority of other nomadic tribes and the horticultural tribes as well.⁷⁷

Ferris (1940, p. 300) writing of the Indians of the northern Rockies prior to 1835, stated:

⁷⁷ Dorsey and Murie (1940, p. 115) estimated that the poor among the Skidi Pawnee comprised "less than one-half the members." They were "without influence or power, their lodges were smaller and not so completely furnished, they had few or no ponies, and were often the objects of charity." In 1840, Tixler (1940, p. 135) observed that among the Osage "there are poor people; and those who are poor have no horses, no means of hunting the bison in order to secure meat. They own neither huts nor blankets; they live, so to speak, at the expense of the community."

Some of the poorer classes, who do not possess horses, and are consequently unable to follow the buffalo in the prairies, ascend the mountains where deer, and sheep are numerous, and pass their lives in single families—are never visited by the horsemen of the plains, but sometimes descend to them, and exchange the skins of those animals for robes, and other articles of use and ornament.

Probably Ferris was referring to horseless Shoshoneans. Nevertheless, Alexander Henry (Henry and Thompson, 1897, vol. 2, p. 723) in describing the Piegan in 1811, observed:

There are 30 or 40 tents who seldom resort to the plains, either in summer or winter, unless scarcity of animals or some other circumstance obliges them to join their countrymen. This small band generally inhabit the thick, woody country along the foot of the mountains, where they kill a few beavers, and being industrious, they are of course better provided for than those Piegans who dwell on the plains.

My informant, Richard Sanderville, believed these were the ancestors of the North Piegan who now reside on a separate reserve west of Macleod, Alberta. The "North Piedgans" were named as a distinct band in 1850 (Culbertson, 1851, p. 144). In late buffalo days they still held their own Sun Dance and were recognized as skilled hunters and trappers of small game. Although by Henry's time these Indians were profiting from the fur trade and no longer appeared poor in comparison with the other Piegan, it is possible that their semiseparation from the main Piegan tribe may have been caused by poverty in horses at an earlier date, which made it difficult for them to live by hunting buffalo on the Plains in competition with other Piegan bands better supplied with horses.

CHANGES IN SOCIAL STATUS

In so far as the individual was concerned the Blackfoot system of social status was not crystallized. It offered no positive security to the wealthy. Overnight, as result of an enemy raid or a severe winter storm the rich man might lose his wealth in horses. There was always opportunity for the poor boy, who was also courageous and ambitious, to better his status. As Wissler (1912, pp. 288-289) observed, "the rich young dandies" did "not always turn out the greatest war chiefs, for it has often happened that poor young men have gone on the warpath, captured horses, bought fine clothes, and medicine bundles and become leaders among their people." Informants said ambitious boys of poor families generally started to war at an early age, were frequent participants in horse raids, and were inclined to take the most desperate chances. A few of these men became wealthy, many became respected members of the middle class, some never were successful in acquiring many horses, and others lost their lives in skirmishes with the enemy. The road from rags to riches via the horse-capture route was a long and perilous one.

Another avenue of advancement for the poor boy was through service to a wealthy man, in caring for his horses, and helping him in hunting in return for his own food and care. Orphans commonly were taken into this service (Grinnell, 1892, p. 219).

Adoption into a family of wealth and distinction offered another means of advancement for the poor boy. Three Calf cited the case of a little boy found by Boy, a chief of the Small Robes band of Piegan, in an abandoned Gros Ventres camp. Although Boy had children of his own, he adopted the homeless waif. When the lad grew older he cared for Boy's horses. Later he helped in hunting and went on horse-raiding parties. He was successful in taking enemy horses and once took a gun from an enemy. He began to raise a herd of his own. He married a girl of good family, set up a medium-sized lodge, and raised fine pinto horses. He began to acquire the best of clothing and horse gear. Finally, after he had acquired 2 wives and some 30 or more horses, he became a subchief of the Small Robes band. As an old man he took the name of his Piegan benefactor, Boy.

The practice of medicine offered a specialized medium of advancement for young women as well as men. A number of highly respected women practitioners were remembered by informants. Through their own visions and/or the teachings of established doctors young people learned the use of various medicinal plants and techniques of their administration. The person who could cure the sick or foresee the future was able to demand payments for his services in horses and other valuables.

Some men and women were able to better their condition through their skill as craftsmen. No individual was remembered who attained wealth solely on the basis of his or her skill in crafts. However, there were men and women of the middle class whose incomes were materially enhanced through their ability to manufacture bows and arrows or pipes of high quality (in the case of men), or lodges, clothing, riding and transport gear (in the case of women). Many fine craftsmen were older men whose age prevented their active participation in hunting or horse raids.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

THE BAND

Wissler (1911, p. 22) properly considered the band "the social and political unit" among the Blackfoot. In 1856, Blackfoot Agent Hatch stated, "Each tribe is divided into bands, which are governed or led by either a chief or a band-leader, the former office is hereditary, the latter depends upon the bravery of the individual and his success in war" (U. S. Comm. of Ind. Affairs, 1856, p. 625). Bradley's ex-