

WERE THE BLACKFOOT RICH IN HORSES?

By JOHN C. EWERS

AT Fort McKenzie, in the heart of the Blackfoot Country, in the summer of 1833, Prince Maximilian, noted European scientist-explorer, was told of a rich and distinguished Blackfoot chief, Sachkomapoh (the child), who had died some time prior to Maximilian's tour of the Upper Missouri, and who was said to have possessed between 4,000 and 5,000 horses.¹ In two recent ethnological works this brief statement of Maximilian has been interpreted as an index of Blackfoot wealth in horses.² One of these writers, Oscar Lewis, after contrasting this statistical statement with the lack of any figures of comparable size on Blackfoot horse herds in earlier literature, has concluded that a considerable increase in the size of Blackfoot horse herds occurred about 1830, producing extensive horse surpluses in these herds, and consequently profoundly affecting Blackfoot economic and social life.³ He apparently assumed that Blackfoot horse herds continued to increase in numbers, or at least remained relatively large, throughout the remainder of the fur trade period in the Missouri-Saskatchewan area.

It seems unfortunate to us that assumptions of such sweeping significance should be derived from a single statement regarding the number of horses said to have been owned by a single individual before his death at some unnamed date prior to the summer of 1833.⁴ Is there not other evidence whether or not Maximilian's statement can be interpreted as a valid index of Blackfoot wealth in horses in circa 1830 and subsequent years? We believe there is. For our data let us turn to other references in the literature, and to statements made to us by elderly informants on the Blackfeet Reservation, Montana, during the fall and winter of 1942-43.

Numbers of Horses in Blackfoot Herds. In 1808, Alexander Henry, Northwest Company trader on the North Saskatchewan, observed . . . "some of the Blackfeet own 40 to 50 horses. But the Piegans have by far the greatest numbers; I heard of one man who had 300."⁵ This is the earliest statement on the size of Blackfoot horse herds of any real comparative value for this study. Lieut. James H. Bradley, early Montana historian, who obtained much of his

¹ *Maximilian's Travels, Early Western Travels*, ed. Vol. 23, p. 121.

² Bernard Mishkin, *Rank and Warfare among the Plains Indians* (Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, 3, 1940), p. 10; Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, etc.* (Monographs of the American Ethnological Society, 6, 1942), pp. 39-40.

³ Oscar Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 40; p. 60.

⁴ Lewis acknowledges that this evidence is scanty (p. 40); but proceeds to make use of it as if there could be little doubt of its accuracy as a basis for reconstructing Blackfoot cultural development (pp. 60 ff., *op. cit.*).

⁵ Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*. (1897) p. 526.

information from Alexander Culbertson (a man who was an executive of the American Fur Company, married to the daughter of a Blood chief, who probably knew the Blackfoot as well as any other white man during the four decades following 1833) wrote of the Blackfoot a quarter of a century later: "The Blackfeet had possessed horses as far back as their traditions extended but never in considerable numbers in early times, and even as late as 1833 they were poorly mounted."⁶ Bradley's table of estimates of the number of horses to the lodge possessed by the three Blackfoot tribes and their neighbors "about the year 1830" is very illuminating:⁷

Crows.....	15
Piegans.....	10
Blackfeet and Bloods.....	5
Gros Ventres.....	5
Flatheads and Nez Percés..	50
Assiniboines.....	2

Bradley also described the Blood Chief, Seen From Afar, who died in 1870, aged about 60: "He was the greatest chief Major Culbertson ever saw amongst the Blackfeet—having 10 wives and 100 horses."⁸ Charles Larpenteur, another fur trader who knew the Upper Missouri tribes well from long acquaintance, wrote of the period circa 1860: "It is a fine sight to see one of those big men among the Blackfeet, who has two or three lodges, five or six wives, twenty or thirty children, and fifty to a hundred horses; for his trade amounts to upward of \$2,000 a year."⁹ Obviously Larpenteur was writing of no ordinary individual. He was describing an important headman or chief. Schultz wrote of the horses of the Piegan in the late 1870's: "Horses were the tribal wealth, and one who owned a large herd of them held a position only to be compared to that of our multi-millionaires. There were individuals who owned from one hundred to three and four hundred."¹⁰

The memories of our informants go back to the period of which Schultz wrote. Some of the older men remember conditions and events of the late '60s. Our oldest informant indicated that in his youth the relative number of horses in the various tribes of the northwestern plains was about the same as portrayed by Bradley's table for about 1830; i.e., "Flatheads had more horses than the Crows, Crows more than the Piegans, Piegans more than Bloods, and North Blackfeet. The Gros Ventres, Crees and Assiniboines had still smaller

⁶ James H. Bradley, *Characteristics, Habits, and Customs of the Blackfeet Indians* (Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana. Vol. IX. 1923), p. 256.

⁷ Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

⁸ James H. Bradley, *Affairs at Fort Benton* (Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana. Vol. III. 1900), p. 258.

⁹ Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri* (1898), Vol. II, p. 401.

¹⁰ J. W. Schultz, *My Life As an Indian* (1907), p. 152.

numbers." He also stated, "The Piegans have been known from a long time back as having larger numbers of horses than the Bloods or Blackfeet." This is in agreement with both Bradley's figures and Henry's observations near the beginning of the century. Yet even among the Piegan, informants stated, a man who owned 40 or 50 horses in the time of their youth was considered well-to-do. They named less than a dozen men who could count their horses in hundreds at that time, bearing out Schultz' contention that such men were the "multi-millionaires" of their tribe. When asked to name the Blackfoot who owned the largest number of horses ever possessed by a single individual among the three Blackfoot tribes, all informants, without hesitation, told of Many Horses (Heavy Shield), the Piegan chief who was killed in battle with the Gros Ventre and Crow in 1866. Our informants were mere children when Many Horses died. But several of them are descendants of Many Horses, and the others had heard a great deal about him from their parents and other older Indians. Their estimates of the number of horses owned by Many Horses when his herds were at their greatest size vary from "about 500" to "less than 1,000." One informant, through his grandmother, had heard of Maximilian's Sachkomapoh. He had heard of him as a man who had been very rich in horses, but felt certain that he had never owned more than Many Horses did at a later date.

These figures suggest to us that Maximilian's statement regarding a Piegan who owned as many as 4,000 to 5,000 horses prior to 1833 is open to question as a mere statement of fact; that as an index to the size of Blackfoot herds as a whole it is very misleading, and that as proof of a general increase in the size of Blackfoot herds having taken place about the year 1830, it should have no status whatever.

The figures do not indicate that a rapid rise in the number of horses owned by the Blackfoot took place at any time during the nineteenth century buffalo days. Whether in the time of Henry (1808), in the 1830s, in midcentury, or in the 1870s, a man who owned 40 or 50 horses would have been considered well-to-do. The Piegan whom Henry referred to as an owner of 300 horses in 1808, would have ranked as a very rich man in the tribe had he lived at any other time prior to the extermination of the bison.

Factors Limiting the Increase in Size of Blackfoot Herds. Through the capture of horses from their enemies, the breeding of their own herds, barter and gift, and, to a limited extent, the capture of wild horses, the number of animals in Blackfoot herds were augmented during the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly these additions would have brought about steady and considerable increases in the size of Blackfoot herds through the years had not compensating losses in horses occurred. Owners lost possession of their horses through capture by enemy raiding parties, gift and barter, the killing of horses as grave escorts on the death of important men, through death of horses from old age, acci-

dents, battle wounds, disease and inability to survive severe winters. There were periods during the nineteenth century when the rate of loss was considerably greater than that of replacement. At such times Blackfoot herds showed sharp decreases. These decreases come into sharp focus when we consider historically the matter of winter losses and losses from disease.

Winters in the Blackfoot habitat, the northwestern corner of the Great Plains, vary in severity. Some winters are relatively mild, rather free from heavy snows and extended periods of intense cold, much more pleasant than might be anticipated in that latitude and altitude. But other winters bring blizzards, deep snows, heavy ice, prolonged weeks of temperatures of thirty or more degrees below zero. Blackfoot Indian methods of winter horse care were generally adequate to pull the animals through an average winter in a lean but healthy condition. They fattened quickly on the rich spring grasses. Winter losses in normal years during the nineteenth century were probably light. They were probably somewhat heavier among the bands wintering in the present Alberta than among those wintering south of the International Boundary, because the snows were generally deeper in the north. Mathew Cocking, while roaming the plains between the North and South Saskatchewan in company with a small party of Cree and/or Assiniboin, wrote in his Journal for February 16, 1773: "An elderly man died; also several Horses for want of food; which they say is the case at this season of the year."¹¹ Next day he recorded, "Two more Horses died with hunger & cold."¹² Cocking's Journal indicates that his winter on the plains was a relatively short and mild one. His statement tells us, however, that the Indians at that time normally expected the loss of some horses in winter.

But what of those unpredictable, unusually severe winters when the snow was deep on the ground and intense cold continued for weeks on end; when the Indians looked in vain for a warm Chinook wind from the west? Our records on the number and frequency of such winters during the nineteenth century are very fragmentary. But they are sufficient to show that they did occur, and that they brought disaster to Blackfoot horse herds. One such winter was that of 1842, when, as the North Piegan, Brings-down-the-Sun told McClintock, "the snows lay so deep that many of our horses perished."¹³ Another was in 1876, "the severe winter when many of our horses were frozen."¹⁴ Our informants recalled the winter of '76, when "pretty near everyone" among the Blood Indians lost his horses. Their animals had become so weakened by the storm they could not paw their way through the deep snow to grass. They

¹¹ Mathew Cocking, *Mathew Cocking's Journal* (Proceedings and Transactions, Royal Society of Canada. 3rd Series. Vol. II. 1908), p. 114. ¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹³ Walter McClintock, *The Old North Trail* (1910) p. 444. Mr. McClintock has informed me that the winter, identified in the book only as the year of his mother's birth, was 1842.

¹⁴ McClintock, *op. cit.*, p. 422.

starved to death. However, the storm had not been so severe farther south. When it abated many of the Bloods went on foot southward to their Piegan friends and relatives, whose horses had survived the storm, and obtained mounts from them. Nevertheless, at least one Piegan band suffered too. The Grease Melters, encamped near the Sweet Grass Hills farther north than the majority of Piegan bands that winter, lost nearly all their horses.

Such losses in severe winters were not confined to the Blackfoot. Field investigation probably would reveal that they were known to all the nomadic tribes of the northern plains who possessed no warm earthlodges in which to stable their horses. We have possibly a complete record of such occurrences among the Teton Dakota in their winter counts. A study of four Dakota winter counts reveals no less than four winters over a period of a half-century when the Teton suffered severe losses of horses—1826–27,¹⁵ 1852–53,¹⁶ 1865–66,¹⁷ and 1880–81.¹⁸ It seems probable that if we had as complete records during this period for the Blackfoot as for the Dakota, whose habitat was considerably farther south, we would find as many if not more severe winters when many horses were lost by the former people.¹⁹

At least twice during the latter half of the nineteenth century, disease decimated Blackfoot horse herds. Father Hoecken wrote from the Flathead Mission to Father De Smet in the spring of 1857:

I am distressed at learning that an epidemic disease is making terrible ravages among the Blackfeet. According to the last news, about 150 Indians had perished in one camp alone, near Fort Benton. When the malady had ceased scourging men, it fell upon the horses. Many are dead already and many dying. We have lost five. Our hunters are forced to go to the chase on foot; for according to their account all the horses are sick. If the Nez Percés lose their horses in the war with the Government, horses will be very dear here.²⁰

Informants stated that about the year 1880, a great many of the Piegan and Blood horses died from a skin disease, which some identified as mange.²¹

¹⁵ Lucy K. Cohen, *Swift Bear's Winter Count* in *Indians at Work* (Feb. 1942), p. 30 . . . "a very severe winter which killed most of the ponies . . . 1826–27."

¹⁶ *Battiste Good's Winter Count* in *Tenth BAE Report*, p. 323 . . . "1852–'53. Deep-snow-used-up-the-horses-winter." Kill's Two's copy of *Big Missouri's Winter Count* in the Rapid City Indian Museum, S. D. ". . . So cold, so much snow, horse feed so scarce, most all Indian horses died."

¹⁷ *Battiste Good's Winter Count*, *op. cit.*, p. 326. "1865–66. Deep-snow-used-up-the-horses-winter"; *Lone Dog's Winter Count*, same volume . . . "Many horses died for want of grass."

¹⁸ Kill's Two's copy of *Big Missouri's Winter Count* in the Rapid City Indian Museum, S. D. . . . "greatest blizzards known in the northwest. Indian horses nearly all frozen."

¹⁹ Twice within the present century, in 1906–07 and 1919–20, severe winters have brought disaster to Blackfoot Reservation livestock.

²⁰ Chittenden and Richardson, *Life, Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J.* Vol. 4, p. 1248, ²¹ Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

This blow, which followed so closely the destructive winter of 1876, left large numbers of these Indians afoot at a time when the buffalo had become scarce and they could ill afford to be without good horses. Young men were encouraged to recoup their losses through frequent expeditions to the Crows, Assiniboines and Crees in the early '80s, at a time when intertribal horse raiding should have become an anachronism in the Territory of Montana. In the late '80s, after the discontinuance of horse raiding, Indians on the Blackfeet Reservation, still poor in horses, encouraged the Government to import a larger breed of farm horse to enlarge their herds. Part of the money owed the Blackfoot for their cession of a large area in northern Montana in 1888 was used for the purchase of these horses.

Thus at least four times in less than forty years (1842-1880), severe winters and disease took heavy toll of Blackfoot horse herds, setting many families afoot and virtually bankrupting ambitious men who had attained wealth in horses. In course of time, and at repeated risk of life and limb, energetic young men could amass new fortunes through capture of enemy horses. However, informants stated that raiding parties rarely succeeded in taking more than 60 horses in a single raid. The danger of being overtaken by the enemy while attempting to drive larger herds home was great. By the time the horses taken in a raid were divided among the participants, and after they in turn had distributed some of their shares as gifts to other people in the village, each warrior had but a few animals left to add to his own herd. The road from rags to riches via the horse stealing route was a long and perilous one.

Horse Numbers and Horse Needs. The term "wealth in horses" is meaningless unless it can be defined. A man who owned merely enough horses to perform the necessary tasks required for subsistence, primarily hunting and the transportation of his tipi and household effects when camp was moved, might live well, but he was not wealthy. He possessed no surplus horses with which to purchase powerful medicine bundles or give away to enhance his social standing in the tribe. He was not a public charge. But he was definitely a middle class mortal. To be rich in horses a man had to own a considerable number of animals over and above those required for subsistence.

Our Blackfoot informants agreed very closely with Mishkin's Kiowa ones, on the number of horses required to support a family.²² They stated that the average household needed between 10 to 20 horses. A young childless couple could get along with 4 or 5 animals, but a large family consisting of more than five adults needed more than 20 horses. An average requirement of 15 horses per lodge throughout the camp would seem to be a conservative estimate.

Comparing these needs with Bradley's estimate of the number of horses per lodge among the Blackfoot in 1830 enables us to understand his conclu-

²² Mishkin, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

sion that "the Blackfeet were poorly mounted in 1833." Although the Piegan lodges were roughly twice as well supplied with horses as their Blood, North Blackfoot and Gros Ventre allies, they too fell well below the requirements for a smoothly functioning horse culture on the buffalo plains. Of course the number of horses was not evenly divided among the households. A few individuals, no doubt, were owners of large herds. But there must have been a much larger number who owned one or two horses, or none at all. As late as the 1870s, informants said, there were "a lot of people," even among the Piegan, who had only one horse or none at all.

Where horses were few in quantity they were rather sure to be poor in quality also among the nomadic plains tribes. Necessity required the owner of few horses to use them almost constantly throughout the year. A gravid mare was worked almost up to the day her colt was born. She was given little rest after the birth. Horses with poor feet, saddle sores or any of the many other ailments horses are heir to, could not be rested until they were completely recovered. These horses could not be rested after a hard winter in order to regain fat and strength. Consequently men who owned few horses generally possessed an odd assortment of scrawny, short winded, slow, overworked nags, of little value for barter, and not very desirable even as gifts. On the other hand, the owner of large horse herds could select only swift horses for hunting and riding, and strong, healthy animals for transport duty. He could change riding horses from day to day and rest his most valuable buffalo runners most of the time. The herds of the rich man were improved and increased in value through use, while the few horses of the poor man were worn out.

Care of the Poor in Horses. The horseless Blackfoot was regarded by his more fortunate fellows with mixed emotions. As Schultz has aptly expressed it: "A Blackfoot who was horseless was an object of reproach and pity."²² Which of these emotions dominated depended to a great extent upon the character of the poor man himself. If he was known to be a lazy, cowardly fellow, who hung around camp and made little effort to improve his lot by joining horse raiding parties, he received little pity. He might succeed in borrowing horses from more ambitious relatives. But one informant stated that when such a man sought to borrow horses to transport his meagre belongings when the camp moved he was sometimes refused. People said, "Let him walk." Sometimes, if he could not obtain the use of enough dog travois to cart his effects, he was left behind, in the hope that such treatment would jar him out of his lethargy and cause him to go after horses from the enemy in the future. Such men were few, however, in comparison with the number who were poor in horses as result of misfortune or "bad luck." The latter were able to borrow horses from their more fortunate relatives or friends.

²² Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

A number of the wealthy Piegans of buffalo days are remembered today as much for their generosity as for their large horse herds. Many Horses, the wealthiest Piegan of the early '60s, owner of between 500 to 1,000 horses, is said to have been very liberal with them, loaning them to others for hunting, collecting wild fruits and roots, and for moving camp. Stingy, a blind Piegan, who was unusually successful as a breeder of horses, and who was considered by some informants to have been the wealthiest man in the tribe in the '70s, was equally generous. Through their generosity such men gained the gratitude of their fellows and enhanced their own social prestige, for among the Blackfoot generosity was as much a mark of greatness as was courage and common sense.

The loaning of well trained, long winded, intelligent buffalo horses was most common. Such loans were not limited to poor people. A man might own a good many horses without possessing a fast buffalo runner. Since the quality of horse used in large part determined the measure of a man's success in the buffalo hunt, men who owned several fast buffalo horses were frequently asked for the loan of one of them by other men in the village who owned none. It was customary for a wealthy Piegan to keep ten or more well trained buffalo horses so that he might loan a number of them to able hunters who lacked these animals. Some wealthy men also gave one or more buffalo runners to their wives, who in turn loaned them to young men for hunting. When buffalo were plentiful, it was not obligatory for the borrower to repay the loan in meat, unless the owner was old, physically incapacitated or for some other reason unable to supply his own household. But in times when buffalo were scarce the borrower always divided his kill with the horse owner, although not necessarily on a 50-50 basis. Thus the owner of many horses used them to insure a steady food supply for his household. Thus the aged and infirm (such as the blind man, Stingy) who owned good horses insured their subsistence. At the same time some of the surplus horses owned by the rich were put to work to help the poor.

This loaning of horses was an intelligent method of alleviating the condition of the poor. It benefited both owner and borrower. However, it was not a solution to the problem of poverty. The poor remained entirely or relatively horseless. The rich retained their large herds. If, at any time, the rich man's horse herds were stolen by the enemy, the system broke down.

Significance of the Survival of the Dog Travois. The continued use of the dog travois among the nomadic tribes of the northern plains in the latter half of the nineteenth century might, at first thought, seem to be an index of poverty in horses. Undoubtedly, poverty in horses was an important factor in the reliance of numerous Assiniboine and Plains Cree bands on dog transport. But what of the Blackfoot? Informants said that poor people, owners of few or no horses, who were unable to borrow a sufficient number of horses to transport

their belongings in moving camp placed their effects on dog travois. Nevertheless, people with plenty of horses also made some use of the dog travois in moving camp for carrying small, light household articles such as skin dressing tools and pemmican pounders encased in rawhide containers. The dogs could move along at a rapid pace and keep up with the more heavily laden horse travois if their own burdens were light. Therefore, the presence of dog travois in the moving camp was not necessarily a sign of poverty in horses. The dog travois was also valuable for light work near camp. It was commonly used for collecting wood, and also roots or berries. More than a century after the Blackfoot began to acquire horses the dog travois had not outlived its usefulness. For the desperately poor, the dog travois stood between them and the necessity of packing their belongings on their backs or leaving them behind. For the other people of the tribe, it afforded an auxiliary transport particularly useful for light work near camp, and an insurance against the evil day when an enemy raiding party, a severe storm or some other misfortune might set them too afoot.

Conclusions. Maximilian's mention of a Blackfoot Indian who was said to have owned 4,000 or 5,000 horses some time prior to the summer of 1833 must be regarded as a dubious statement unconfirmed from other sources. That it is very misleading as an index to Blackfoot horse wealth is shown by Bradley's estimates of the number of horses per lodge among the Blackfoot tribes in 1830. In reality the Blackfoot at that time were relatively poor in horses. They did not possess enough of them adequately to meet the needs of their nomadic existence.

There is no proof that a rapid increase in the size of Blackfoot horse herds took place at any time during the nineteenth century buffalo days. Even gradual increases in the size of Blackfoot horse herds were limited by offsetting losses which, at least four times within forty years (1842-80), took the form of disastrous and rapid losses from disease and severe winters, and resulted in sharp decreases in the size of the herds.

It is clear that large herds of horses were owned by some Blackfoot individuals in the 19th century. But the number of these large herds was small. Probably the majority of men owned barely enough horses to meet their daily needs, while "a lot of people" were desperately poor in horses. The common practice among owners of large herds of loaning horses to the less fortunate not only for hunting but also for transporting camp equipment helped to alleviate the condition of the poor, to enable them to keep pace with camp movements and to prevent their starving. We find no reliable evidence to indicate that, at any time prior to the extermination of the buffalo, the Blackfoot people collectively were rich in horses.

MUSEUM OF THE PLAINS INDIAN
BROWNING, MONTANA