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# Horses and the Economy and Culture of the Choctaw Indians, 1690–1840

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**Abstract.** Although scholars have studied horses extensively among the Plains tribes of North America, they have largely overlooked the importance of horses in the economic and cultural life of the Southeastern Indians. As the Choctaws adjusted to profound changes caused by contact with Europeans and Americans, horses became agents of both cultural continuity and economic change. Horses were important in activities ranging from ball games to funerary rituals, and they were essential to the development of the deerskin trade, the Choctaw market economy, and the cattle economy that flourished in Indian Territory. Unfolding over a century and a half, the horse's role in the cultural and economic evolution of the Choctaws demonstrated the tribe's remarkable capacity to adapt to their changing world.

In the course of a generation, horses revolutionized life among many of the Plains tribes. Many agricultural peoples were able to drop their hoes and to pick up and follow the buffalo herds in a nomadic hunting lifestyle. Unlike the Plains Indians' experience, however, horses did not suddenly transform Choctaw society. Lacking expansive flat plains and roving buffalo herds, the dense woodlands of Mississippi precluded the innovative use of horses in nomadic hunting and predatory warfare. Nevertheless, among the Choctaws, horses proved to be an equally influential, if less dramatic, social, economic, and symbolic innovation that stimulated an evolution, rather than a revolution, of lifestyle. From the 1690s, when the Choctaws first acquired horses, to the 1830s, when the United States removed the Choctaws to Indian Territory, horses allowed the Choctaws to alter substantially their economic life and simultaneously to preserve much of their social values and traditions.<sup>1</sup>

In traditional Choctaw society, men and women performed distinct

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socioeconomic tasks. Women directed domestic life and enjoyed a special relationship with the plant world. Among their many duties, they fabricated utensils and earthen containers, prepared food, drew water, and sowed and harvested crops. Their wide fields of corn, beans, pumpkins, and squash provided two-thirds of the Choctaw diet and made the Choctaws what Bernard Romans termed a “nation of farmers.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to their household and farming duties, women accompanied men on long hunting expeditions to prepare the men’s meals because cultural taboos forbade males from doing so. Women also transported the game killed by the men, which contributed the remaining third of the Choctaw diet, from the forest back to the villages, where they processed the animals’ skins, meat, and bones into clothing, food, and tools.

Men also performed certain functions in Choctaw society. They directed the external affairs of the village or nation, and they shared a unique relationship with the animal world. They performed rituals, oversaw relations with surrounding peoples, and, above all, waged war and hunted. One common ritual activity that combined the strength and endurance of warfare and the close relationship to animals characterized by hunting was the ball game. In the mid-eighteenth century Frenchman Jean-Bernard Bossu visited the Choctaw Nation and observed such a game between two rival villages. Commenting on the fast-paced action and furious contact between opposing players, Bossu noted that many Choctaw players had affixed wildcat tails and white bird feathers to their ballsticks and breechcloths. For the Choctaws, such decoration imbued the ballplayer with the wildcat’s spirit and ferocity and the bird’s swiftness. The ball game, or the “little brother of war,” provided entertainment for women and men alike and allowed men to test the skills that would be essential in hunting and warfare.<sup>3</sup>

Hunting and warfare were the Choctaw male’s greatest social responsibilities, and his importance in society often depended on his success in these endeavors. During the fall and winter hunting season, Choctaw males, often accompanied by women and children, set up in winter hunting camps far from their villages or relied on their knowledge of the Choctaw borderlands to locate white-tailed deer closer to home. More than any other wild animal, deer provided Choctaw families with meat for food, skins for clothing, and antlers and bones for tools. If Choctaw men could control its timing, they preferred to make war after the hunting season during the spring and summer months. Exhorted by their wives who followed them on distant forays “to die like real men,” Choctaws used warfare to defend their hunting grounds and to still the “crying blood” of kinsmen who had lost their lives at the hands of outsiders. Warfare provided an arena for young men to gain adulthood and for warriors to demonstrate

the judgment and expertise that society esteemed. Exploits on the battlefield led to civic responsibilities, and leaders often introduced themselves to assemblies and diplomatic delegations with “a recital of [their] feats in war.” Such success permitted gradual advancement up the social hierarchy, but advancement and prominence came with risk. If a chief failed in war, he could lose his position. Although Choctaw males served a variety of important functions in their society, warfare and hunting were the cornerstones of their lives, and without these activities Choctaw males would have lost much of their social, economic, and political significance.<sup>4</sup>

Hunting, fighting, and trading carried Choctaws far and wide, put them into contact with tribes west of the Mississippi River, and exposed them to a vast and ancient trade network that stretched as far as New Mexico. By the 1690s the Choctaws had encountered horses as trade goods. Acquired originally in New Mexico, horses were traded across the Great Plains and distributed among several tribes that bordered the western reaches of the Choctaw Nation. By 1690, the Caddo Indians as well as the neighboring Osage, Wichita, and Avoyello tribes had acquired horses. The Caddo in particular had been carrying on a substantial trade in horses with the Spanish and other Indian groups but had not integrated horses into their culture. Their name for horses, *cavali*, derived from the Spanish *caballo*, suggests the regional trade of horses in conformity with Spanish conceptions of trade and alliance. Consequently, horses served these tribes as an important exchangeable commodity in the trade with Europeans for guns, cloth, and other manufactured items.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike the Caddo, the Choctaws developed an indigenous term for the new animal. Jesuit priest Jacques Gravier recorded in 1701 that Choctaws called horses *isuba*, which derived from *isi holba*, or deer-resembler. As a four-footed grass-eating animal, the horse fit into the same category as deer and would have also been considered to be edible. Like most tribes unfamiliar with horses and their utility, the Choctaw hunting parties who initially encountered the animals most likely shot the horses and ate them, a practice they continued well into the eighteenth century. Initially integrated into the Choctaw diet, horses were soon a part of Choctaw culture, for the trade network among the Spanish, Caddos, Wichitas, and Avoyellos introduced enormous numbers of horses into the native Southeast.<sup>6</sup>

By the 1730s horses had become a fixture among the Choctaws and other Southeastern Indians. Moreover, the animals played a crucial role in the development of the growing deerskin trade with the French and the British. Indeed, the incorporation of horses into Choctaw culture is virtually inseparable from the deerskin trade, for horses provided the wherewithal to rapidly expand the scope and intensity of Choctaw hunting expeditions. Choctaw men learned to ride horses to reach distant hunting

grounds, and women began to use horses to fetch the game. Women also drove horse trains laden with provisions when they accompanied their husbands on long hunting journeys and returned with horse trains weighted down by the skins procured by their husbands and processed by hand. A Spanish ship captain traveling in January 1793 on the Mississippi River just north of its confluence with the Yazoo River observed such a party. Twenty-five men, their wives, and their children were leading a train of fifteen horses laden with skins and pelts.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of the deerskin trade and the importance of horses in that trade dramatically imprinted the Choctaw landscape. Footpaths became horsepaths, and routes previously used for intervillage and intertribal communication expanded to serve the burgeoning deerskin trade. Consequently, Choctaws began to incorporate *isuba* into their toponymic system and horses into their functional conception of the landscape. Traveling from Mobile into the Choctaw Nation in the early 1730s, Régis du Roullet reported two such toponyms. The first, *conchak ou soubaille* (canebrake where a horse drowned), commemorated perhaps the personal loss of a Choctaw man or woman. The second, *Bouk ite tchuie souba* (the bayou where there is a tree that marks a horsepath) indicated the regular passage of horses along the route from the Choctaw Nation to Mobile and bore testimony to the substantial horse traffic between the two.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the instrumental role horses played in the deerskin trade, Choctaws did not just use them for their labor. The animals also entered into Choctaw ritual life, as Louis Leclerc de Milford observed in a Choctaw funeral. Choctaws placed the bodies of the dead on open air scaffolds until they had decayed sufficiently for bonepickers to remove the flesh. The bones were then bundled for presentation to the deceased's clan and interment in the village bonehouse. After the bonepickers completed their task, they slaughtered the deceased's horse(s) and roasted the carcass(es) for a feast. Sharing the feast with kinfolk or the community, the deceased's relatives celebrated his or her passage and reaffirmed the bonds of community and kinship that bound Choctaws together.<sup>9</sup>

Such scattered observations of the impact of horses on Choctaw life point to a broad acceptance of the animals in a number of functions. The growing need for more horses, for trade or personal use, further influenced Choctaw behavior. Choctaw warriors quickly became embroiled in a regional pattern of horse raiding and herding. Sometime before 1763 a band of Choctaws settled permanently among the Caddo Indians along the Red River, close to the French trading post at Natchitoches. These Choctaws participated in slave, cattle, and horse raids against the Osage and Wichita Indians. To capture horses, Choctaws used the same guns with which they hunted the deer. They would train their aim on the horse's

mane and fire so as to graze the animal's neck. Stunned, the horse would collapse, and the hunter would run up and secure the animal. By the 1780s the areas around the Sabine, Red, and Arkansas Rivers had become thriving centers for such activities. In 1807 John Sibley, United States Indian Agent at the Natchitoches post, reported several groups of Indians passing both eastward and westward through his district with enormous herds of horses.<sup>10</sup> The same economic imperatives that motivated Choctaws to range across the Mississippi River in quest of more horses were part of the deerskin trade, but the fate of the latter did not determine the fate of horses among the Choctaws, for horses had become essential to Choctaw daily life and culture independent of market fluctuations.

The French who had settled the lower Mississippi River valley at the end of the seventeenth century had inaugurated the trade in deerskins, but the trade intensified after the French ceded control of the eastern lower Mississippi River valley to the British in 1763. By the 1780s, after two decades of British trade, the Choctaws' demand for European goods had exceeded their ability to pay British prices. To compensate for this unfavorable balance of trade, the Choctaws overhunted the white-tailed deer for their valuable skins. As the deer became scarce in the immediate vicinity, the Choctaws ventured beyond the borderlands surrounding their towns and crossed the Mississippi River, where they had already found horses, to find more deer.<sup>11</sup> Because deer hunting was essential to traditional Choctaw male and female life and material culture, the disappearance of the deer meant the potential disappearance of a substantial part of their culture. By the late eighteenth century, deer were harder to come by, and the deerskin trade had taken a permanent downward turn. Coinciding roughly with the collapse of the deer economy in Mississippi, Choctaw warfare suffered a similar fate.

Traditional forms of warfare and colonial client warfare largely ceased after the United States had asserted a tenuous sovereignty over the southern frontier with treaties negotiated at Hopewell, South Carolina, in the 1780s. The treaties established peaceful relations between the United States and the Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Cherokees and opened the way for increasing American intervention and interference in Choctaw affairs. In 1798 the federal government organized the area surrounding the Choctaws into the Mississippi Territory with the expectation of settling the region.<sup>12</sup> Because of the chronic overhunting of deer, the collapse of the deerskin trade, and the diplomatic efforts of the United States to suppress hostilities, deer hunting and warfare had declined substantially by 1800. This state of affairs imperiled the roles and responsibilities of Choctaw males in their society and affected women as well.

Other factors further contributed to a sense of crisis among the Choctaw

taws during the late 1700s. Natchez, formerly a French colonial town that had produced tobacco and cattle, burgeoned with an influx of Loyalist settlers from the East after the American Revolution. Cotton soon supplanted tobacco as Natchez's most profitable staple crop, and the town's population grew from 1,926 in 1788 to 4,436 in 1792. Consequently, plantation agriculture began to expand along several large creeks, and settlers crept inland along these creeks into the Choctaw borderlands. Moreover, droughts had ruined the Choctaw corn crops of 1792 and 1793, exacerbating the difficulties brought on by an epidemic that struck the Choctaws in 1790 and killed most of their horses. Many observers commented on the Choctaws' lack of food, resources, and their imminent starvation. Holding American settlers responsible for these catastrophic events, Choctaw warriors sought to drive the settlers away from their villages and borderlands by raiding their property, burning what they could, and stealing the settlers' horses. Consequently, Choctaw males transferred techniques perfected in the trans-Mississippi horse raids and brought them to bear on American settlers.<sup>13</sup>

Choctaw horse raids combined an aggressive territorial defense with strategies for economic gain into an innovative form of warfare that perpetuated male values and traditions in the absence of deer hunting and traditional warfare. Choctaw warriors commenced their horse raids on American settlers during the traditional hunting season, between late August and late April, perhaps because they considered horses as deer-resemblers. However, the horse raiders also displayed certain warlike characteristics, for, by raiding frontier farms, they both defended their territorial boundaries and punished a threatening foe.<sup>14</sup> The location of horse raids in relation to the marked boundaries between the Choctaws and the United States cannot be determined precisely, but the Choctaws most likely targeted illegal squatters who had crossed the surveyed borders onto Choctaw land. In a confrontation with such squatters, Choctaw leaders threatened: "You are all Americans and usurpers of these lands, and as such I warn you to leave them with all your property within the next two weeks. Then I shall return with my warriors . . . to compel all of your people to evacuate this territory."<sup>15</sup> Anxious to protect their borders, Choctaw headmen constantly reiterated to federal and territorial officials a desire to have their national boundaries clearly marked to prevent trespassing by Americans. In an attempt to clarify the boundaries between the Choctaws and United States, the two nations negotiated three treaties: Fort Adams (1801), Fort Confederation (1802), and Hoe Buckintooopa (1803). During the 1801 Treaty of Fort Adams negotiations Choctaw headmen specifically asked the federal commissioners to remove Americans and their livestock

from the Choctaw side of the boundary. Governor Winthrop Sargent supported the Choctaw claim, fearing that as long as the United States refused to accommodate their wishes the Choctaws would continue to steal horses and destroy farmsteads.<sup>16</sup>

The Choctaws possessed a legal right to protect their territory in such a manner. The Treaty of Hopewell reserved for them the right to punish illegal squatters “as they please,” and they employed the horse raid to fulfill this stipulation. The raids frequently forced settlers to abandon their farmsteads, but the complaints lodged by settlers never mentioned fatalities. According to the Hopewell Treaty, if any Choctaw murdered an American citizen, Choctaw leaders had to deliver the perpetrator to the appropriate authorities who would punish the offender according to United States law. By not harming American citizens, the Choctaws avoided potentially dangerous conflicts with settlers and the federal government but still accomplished their ultimate goal.<sup>17</sup>

American settlers and officials equated horse raids with stealing, an antisocial and illegal appropriation of another person’s private property. Historian William McLoughlin has concurred with this assessment, arguing that horse stealing among the Cherokees indicated a breakdown of their culture. However, like their Plains Indian counterparts, the Choctaws incorporated horse theft into their war complex. Consequently, raiding the enemy and taking his horses became perfectly legitimate and even desirable activities.<sup>18</sup> The Choctaw warriors’ determination to perpetuate their hunting and warring ways through the theft of horses, and their underlying motivations for such behavior, surfaced secondhand in a letter penned by the governor of Mississippi Territory, Winthrop Sargent, that demanded the return of some stolen horses:

In a case of some horses demanded from them . . . they have declared their determination sooner to shoot and take them for food than make the surrender. Observing that their Country, once affording abundance, had become desolate by the hands of a People who knew not but to increase their Wretchedness . . . they were determined in future to Consider our Domestic Animals as fit Objects for the chase.<sup>19</sup>

Choctaw males fully appreciated the impact American settlement had had on their hunting and warfare traditions, and “roguish young men,” growing to maturity in a society where the traditional means of social and political advancement were no longer present, provided eager levies for the horse raids.<sup>20</sup> For these young men the horse raid and horse stealing affirmed and perpetuated male cultural values and traditions, defended the integrity of the Choctaw Nation against settlers—“the plague



of locusts”—and dissuaded settlers from venturing too far from what the Choctaws perceived as an acceptable frontier between the two peoples.<sup>21</sup>

The 1790s and 1800s, the era of the horse raids, culminated the Choctaws' ascendancy on the frontier. During this time the Choctaws enjoyed a great measure of power and independence from the United States. Ruefully admitting the strength of the Choctaw Nation, Mississippi Territory Governor William Claiborne lamented that American settlers had suffered great “inconvenience” at the hands of the Choctaws, but counseled them to acquiesce to Choctaw aggression in the broader interests of diplomacy. In his instructions to the commissioners who negotiated the 1801 Treaty of Fort Adams, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn cautioned them to regard the Choctaws as “the most powerful Nation of Indians within the limits of the United States.”<sup>22</sup>

However, Choctaw political power in relation to the United States began deteriorating in 1803 and was decisively broken with the negotiation of the Treaty of Mount Dexter in 1805. In 1803 Governor William Claiborne charged recently appointed Choctaw Agent Silas Dinsmoor with reclaiming the Choctaws from “a State of Savage ignorance.”<sup>23</sup> The agent's presence and broadly conceived mission of “civilization” allowed the United States to affect directly Choctaw culture, politics, and factionalism. Besides the arrival of Agent Dinsmoor, the firm of Panton, Leslie, and Company, based in Spanish Pensacola, began to demand from the Choctaws repayment of substantial debts incurred by their purchase of bullets, guns, and powder on credit. Unable to repay these debts, the credit trap ensnared the Choctaws. With Choctaw debts totaling over forty-six thousand dollars in 1803, the firm demanded a land cession by the Choctaws to retire the debt.<sup>24</sup> Opposed to the cession of Indian land to private individuals, the federal government held treaty talks with the Choctaws. Negotiated in 1805, the Treaty of Mount Dexter ceded a substantial portion of southeastern Mississippi to the United States for fifty thousand dollars, and the federal government used the cash settlement to liquidate the Choctaw debt owed to Panton, Leslie, and Company. Perhaps more significantly, however, the treaty invalidated the right conferred by the Treaty of Hopewell to allow the Choctaws to defend their territorial integrity. What proceeds remained after paying the debt owed to Panton, Leslie, and Company were earmarked to compensate citizens who had suffered depredations committed “on stock, and other property by evil disposed persons of said Choctaw nation.”<sup>25</sup> This stipulation successfully discouraged further horse raiding, for shortly after the conclusion of the treaty horse raids disappeared from the historical record.

The aftermath of the Creek Civil War accelerated the decline of Choc-

taw power that had begun in 1803. The 1814 Treaty of Fort Jackson, negotiated with the Creeks, opened central Alabama to American settlement, and, consequently, settlement pressures on the Choctaws in Mississippi greatly increased. Thousands of settlers came to Mississippi; the population soared from just over thirty thousand in 1810 to seventy-five thousand in 1820. Immigrants typically claimed the cheap undeveloped land on the Choctaw frontier and had no compunctions about crossing the surveyed lines and squatting on the Choctaws' remaining land.<sup>26</sup> As the American population grew to outnumber the Choctaws, the shift in the balance of power was completed. The decline of Choctaw political power and increased pressure from encroaching settlers signaled the beginning of a new era of Choctaw history, one marked by instability and doubt about their future in Mississippi. But the horse continued to play an integral role in the historical evolution of Choctaw society.

Many of the substantive ways Choctaws exploited horses in the eighteenth century extended well into the nineteenth century, but there were significant alterations of earlier practices. Choctaws still used horses to carry goods for trade with Americans, but the saddlepacks were loaded primarily with beeswax, honey, chestnuts, and tallow, not with deerskins. Choctaws still traveled on horseback throughout the nation and beyond, but they also hired themselves out as guides to travelers for a cash fee. Women also probably used horses, rather than manual labor, to plow fields. One Choctaw word for the plow, *isuba inchahe*, suggests the intimate association between the animal and the implement. Furthermore, Choctaw leaders occasionally requested fancy saddles, saddlebags, bridles, and spurs for themselves and their wives as part of the annual annuity distributed by the federal government.<sup>27</sup>

Although such finery separated the leaders from the common Choctaws, who used wooden bits and rags to outfit their horses, horses still functioned to bind the society and to reinforce the Choctaws' sense of community and place in the world. In an attempt to interdict the alcohol trade, to check frontier violence, and to defend the nation's borders, the Choctaws organized a national police force in 1823. This "first instance of the organization of a civil power among the Choctaws" proved somewhat successful in controlling the flow of rum into the nation.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the force consisted of mounted men, and the light horse patrols thus allowed Choctaw males, who could no longer rely on deer hunting, traditional warfare, or even horse raids, to maintain a martial function in their society.<sup>29</sup>

The conservative function of horses in Choctaw traditions found further expression in other activities, especially in the evolution of the ball game and funerary rituals. Visiting the Choctaws in 1820, Adam Hodg-

son, an Englishman who traveled through Mississippi while visiting the Choctaw missionary stations, noted that males wore long white horsetails, rather than wildcat tails and white bird feathers, as part of their game dress. The shift from the association of masculinity with wild animals, witnessed by Bossu in the mid-eighteenth century, to one with domesticated animals reveals not only a transformation of the regional animal ecology over a century but the creation and acceptance of new symbols of power and manhood. Hodgson also noted a change in the funerary practices seen by Louis Leclerc de Milford during his visits with the Choctaws over forty years earlier. By the late eighteenth century they had begun to bury their dead men with their guns, tomahawks, and favorite horses, so that they would have something to ride to the afterlife. Horses had thus attained a significance inseparable from the hunting and warfare traditions and essential to the passage from life to death. Unfortunately, Hodgson did not record how the funeral rituals for women changed or persisted.<sup>30</sup>

By the 1820s, however, rather than kill the valuable animals and eat them in a communal feast as was done in the early 1700s, or bury them as in the late 1700s, Choctaws instead preferred to believe that the horse's spirit accompanied the deceased into the afterworld while its body remained to render useful live service on earth to the deceased's kinfolk or community.<sup>31</sup> As men and women came to depend on horses for much of their livelihood, eating or burying horses no longer made sense, and funeral traditions changed to reflect this new sensibility.

Horses had been an important part of the Choctaw economy since contact with Europeans, but when the deerskin trade collapsed, horses passed from an economic means to an economic end. In the early nineteenth century a Choctaw horse economy developed in response to the broader emergence of the market economy, and it encompassed an external trade in horses overseen by men and an internal trade involving horse-related products overseen by women.

The external horse economy involved the exchange of horses with Americans, a transaction fraught with theft and violence. Attracted to the large numbers of horses in the Choctaw Nation, Americans increasingly filtered into the nation to steal, to trade, or to purchase horses and drive them to markets in surrounding towns. A Choctaw woman named Nancy Gillett complained to Choctaw Agent William Ward that some white men had stolen one of her horses, valued at fifty dollars, while it grazed in her front yard. Quickly borrowing a neighbor's horse, Gillett pursued the rustlers to the Tombigbee River at the Choctaw Nation border—a journey of thirty-six miles. Revealing a commonplace acceptance of Americans visiting the nation to trade for horses, two Choctaw men

who had seen the fleeing whites thought nothing of the matter, just as Gillett thought nothing of jumping on a horse and galloping over thirty miles in pursuit of the thieves.<sup>32</sup>

Nancy Gillett's story was typical. Little Leader, a Choctaw headman, also lost a bay mare, a stud colt, and a brown mare and her colt to rustlers. Having branded his horses, Little Leader hoped for several years to reclaim them. One wandered back to his house, but he never located the remaining horses. Other Choctaws accused a ring of American rustlers of coordinating the horse thefts. One prominent Choctaw leader, David Folsom, charged that "there are some white men who sit near the edges of our country, who steal our horses . . . [and] who lay whiskey there."<sup>33</sup>

Choctaw leaders had good reason to be alarmed at the vulnerability of the nation's horse stocks. Estimates based on a missionary census taken in 1829 indicated that the Choctaw herd was worth just under half a million dollars. To squander such a resource on alcohol drew the ire of several headmen. Of particular concern to leaders were Choctaw men who received rum from American traders, traded it to Choctaws for their horses and other items, and then traded the horses to the American traders for more alcohol and other supplies. One leader from the Six Towns district, Hwoolatahoomah, declared that he would destroy any whiskey brought into the nation by Choctaw warriors to trade for the "blankets, guns, and horses" of the nation.<sup>34</sup> Hwoolatahoomah's efforts suggest that the external trade of horses was exerting an enormously disruptive influence on the internal state of the nation. Men, who had traditionally overseen the external affairs of their villages, oversaw the nineteenth-century external horse economy, but they were unable to fully control its more pernicious aspects.<sup>35</sup>

Women, who had also used horses since the eighteenth century, drew on their traditional prerogatives to create an internal horse economy that rivaled the external economy and seems to have had a much less deleterious impact on the nation. Horses required food, and Choctaw women exploited their traditional links to the plant world to profit from this need. The amount of corn and fodder sold to other Choctaws cannot be ascertained, but American travelers were beholden to the women for essential provisions. Although the cash transactions between Americans and Choctaw women were small—seventy-five cents for pumpkins for a horse or a dollar for some corn and fodder—the women set the prices, and this hard currency exchange enabled them to purchase goods from factors and traders without resorting to the barter of furs and skins procured by males.<sup>36</sup>

Women had made the Choctaws what Bernard Romans had termed

in the mid-eighteenth century a “nation of farmers.” However, in the early nineteenth century the Choctaws were a nation of horsemen and horsewomen. They owned approximately fifteen thousand horses in 1829, a ratio of .7 horse per capita. (The state of Mississippi in 1840 had a ratio of .8 horse per capita.) Further attesting to the widespread ownership of horses, the American Board missionaries reported that even most Choctaw children possessed “some of these animals.”<sup>37</sup> Because horse ownership was undifferentiated by gender or age, most Choctaws were able to profit and perhaps prosper within the horse economy. However, the prosperity would not last in Mississippi because settlers and politicians from that state in collusion with the administration of Andrew Jackson pressured the Choctaws to remove to Indian Territory in 1830.<sup>38</sup>

The 1830 Choctaw removal treaty made no provision for the transportation of the Choctaw horses to Indian Territory and did not, as it did with cattle, set up a program whereby the federal government agreed to value and pay for animals left behind in Mississippi. To accommodate the Choctaw herd, William Armstrong, the agent supervising removal, recommended to Secretary of War Lewis Cass that the United States construct a special ferryboat for the exclusive transport of Choctaw horses over the Mississippi River.<sup>39</sup>

The federal government never built such a boat, and after three years of removal to Indian Territory, Agent Armstrong estimated that the Choctaws had lost two thousand horses to death, disease, and theft. David Folsom, one of the Choctaws’ principal leaders, lost seven horses valued at \$235, and his archrival Nittakechi lost twelve valued at \$310. Women also suffered. Unnohoka claimed \$140 for the five horses she lost, and Nancy Gillett, who had earlier been victimized by horse thieves, suffered even more. She lost six horses worth \$230. Altogether, hundreds of Choctaws requested compensation in Indian Territory for the loss of over two thousand horses worth almost eighty thousand dollars.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the enormous numbers of horses lost during removal, the animals assumed a critical importance in Indian Territory. The environment of Indian Territory was conducive to large-scale cattle raising, and Choctaw cowboys bought new stocks of horses to help them control their vast herds. Horses were so essential that for most Choctaws “to ride on horseback was the first lesson ever learned.”<sup>41</sup> Rivaling the herds of the Texas cattle barons, the Choctaw cattle economy thrived until their herds were decimated in the Civil War. Nevertheless, the horse-driven cattle economy drew the Choctaws further into the nineteenth-century market economy and undermined the traditions and values that had characterized Choctaw

society before contact with Europeans. However, certain traditions did remain intact.

One old tradition that survived the rough journey from Mississippi to Indian Territory was the ball game. Visiting the Choctaws in Indian Territory some years after removal, George Catlin witnessed a game and recorded his impressions in ink on paper and in oils on canvas. Those who played the ball game no longer wore wildcat tails or white bird feathers. Like their counterparts in the 1820s, Choctaw ballplayers continued to attach tails made of white horsehair to their backsides and draped colored manes of horsehair around their necks.<sup>42</sup> Their dress transformed them into horses, a vital part of their contemporary economy and life, but it also symbolically transformed them into deer-resemblers, thus linking the players and spectators to a lifestyle and culture far removed in time and space. Horses had prompted substantial changes in the Choctaws' culture and economy over a century and a half, but their power as symbols enabled equally important continuities that underlay the first one hundred fifty years of tumultuous contact with Europeans and Americans.

## Notes

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- 1 For a discussion of innovation theory see Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation* (London, 1962), 77–124; Robert L. Rands and Carol L. Riley, "Diffusion and Discontinuous Distribution," *American Anthropologist* 60 (1958): 247–97; and Lawrence P. Brown, *Innovation Diffusion: A New Perspective* (London, 1981).

Horses among the Plains Indians have attracted more interest than horses among the Indians of the Southeast. See John C. Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 159 (Washington, DC, 1955); Gilbert L. Wilson, "The Horse and the Dog in Hidatsa Culture," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 15, pt. 2 (New York, 1924), 125–310; Clark Wissler, "Material Culture of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 5, pt. 1 (New York, 1910), 1–177; David G. Mandelbaum, "The Plains Cree," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. 37, pt. 2 (New York, 1940); Frank Gilbert Roe, *The Indian and the Horse* (Norman, OK, 1955); and Willard H. Rollings, *The Osage: An Ethno-historical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains* (Columbia, MO, 1992).

- 2 Bernard Romans, *A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida; a Facsimile Reproduction of the 1775 Ed.* (Gainesville, FL, 1962), 71. Romans

expounded on the agricultural capabilities of the Choctaws, their production of surplus corn for trade, and the richness of their soil. Such an impression has echoed to the present, for many historians have accepted Romans's judgment (see John R. Swanton, *Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 103, [Washington, DC, 1931], 46; and Carolyn Keller Reeves, ed., *The Choctaw Before Removal*, [Jackson, MS, 1985], 31–34. William Willis has critically examined Romans's claims in "The Nation of Bread," *Ethnohistory* 4 (1957): 126–41. He argues that the British had employed Romans to survey the Florida Territory and that Romans's resulting work was largely propaganda to attract British settlers. Therefore, according to Willis, Romans's pronouncements must be questioned for their historical merit. Nevertheless, most historians agree that agriculture comprised the lion's share of Choctaw subsistence. For the most extensive treatment of Choctaw subsistence see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln, NE, 1983), chaps. 2, 4.

- 3 Jean-Bernard Bossu, *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751–1762*, trans. and ed. Seymour Feiler (Norman, OK, 1962), 169–70; Swanton, *Source Material*, 44; and Mary Haas, "Creek Inter-town Relations," *American Anthropologist* 42 (1940): 483.
- 4 Romans, *Concise History*, 76; John McKee to Choctaw Headmen, 11 December 1815, United States, War Department, Letters Received by the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800–1823, M271, hereafter cited as US, WD, M271; and Bossu, *Travels*, 164–65.
- 5 Antoine Le Page du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana*, ed. Joseph G. Tragle Jr. (Baton Rouge, LA, 1975), 71–72, 166; Dunbar Rowland, A. G. Sanders, and Patricia Galloway, eds., *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion, 1729–1748* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1984), 4:32; William Bartram, *The Travels of William Bartram*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York, 1940), 185; and Timothy K. Perttula, *The Caddo Nation: Archaeological and Ethnohistoric Perspectives* (Austin, TX, 1992), 11, 29.

Francis Haines, "Where Did the Plains Indians Get Their Horses?" *American Anthropologist* 40 (1938): 112–17, counters anthropologist Clark Wissler's theory that the Plains Indians' horses originated from lost or stolen horses from the De Soto expedition. The Spaniards brought with them just over two hundred horses, and, according to Haines, the fastidious records kept by the expedition regarding losses of horses fail to reveal the loss of enough live horses to constitute a viable breeding population. Moreover, the Spaniards had neither the time nor the inclination to teach the often hostile Indians how to care for and manage horses.

De Soto apparently did not visit the Choctaws, but he did pass through the protohistoric Chickasaws' villages. Rather than steal the Spanish horses, the Chickasaws apparently preferred to kill the animals, for De Soto lost fifty horses, as well as four hundred hogs, during his sojourn in "Chicaza" ("A Narrative of the Expedition of Hernando De Soto into Florida. By a Gentleman of Elvas"; and Luis Fernandez de Biedma, "A Narrative of the Expedition of Hernando DeSoto," in *Historical Collections of Louisiana*, pt. 2, ed. Benjamin F. French [Philadelphia, 1850], 97, 104, 122, 163).

In "The Northward Spread of Horses among the Plains Indians," *American Anthropologist* 40 (1938): 429–37, Haines maps the diffusion of the Plains horse trade and examines exchange patterns. According to Haines, the Plains Indians' horses had originated from the Spanish settlement at Santa Fe. At this outpost, horses existed in large numbers, and the friendly trade relationships between the Spanish and surrounding tribes made the teaching of riding horses and horse care possible. Without the transmission of such essential information, horses would have perished beyond the confines of the settlement. The limited trade in horses, however, did not provide the impetus for the creation of the great herds of Plains horses. Only after the Pueblo Rebellion of 1680 released thousands of horses and cattle from the Spanish corrals at Santa Fe did horses proliferate throughout the West. Seizing the runaway livestock, local Indians initiated a trade in horses that dispersed them across the Great Plains.

The trade network that introduced the horse to the Choctaws probably originated long before the seventeenth century. Archaeological evidence indicates that Mississippian Culture Complex trade, of which the Choctaws were descendants, stretched from the coastal regions of Florida to Oklahoma and from Louisiana to Iowa and Illinois. Cultural remnants of Mississippian culture even reached Saskatchewan and Manitoba. This far-flung range of trade and culture might have been the precursor of later trade networks, but this topic requires much more study before the extent of contact between pre-historic peoples and the persistence of these contacts into the historic period can be adequately described (Patricia Galloway, ed., *The Southeastern Cultural Complex: Artifacts and Analysis* [Lincoln, NE, 1989]; Duane C. Anderson and Joseph A. Tiffany, "A Caddoan Trade Vessel from Northwestern Iowa," *Plains Anthropologist* 32 [1976]: 93–96; James Howard, "The Southern Cult in the Northern Plains," *American Antiquity* 19 [1953]: 130–38; Pertulla, *Caddo Nation*, 199; and Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale, 1614–1754* [Paris, 1888], 6: 230).

- 6 Gravier transcribed the term as *su'ba*; Marc de Villiers, "Notes sur les Chactas d'après les Journaux de Voyage de Régis du Roulet (1729–1732)," *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris* 15 (1923): 234; and Cyrus Byington, *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 46, ed. John R. Swanton and Henry S. Halbert (Washington, DC, 1915), 197.

Francis Haines has argued that when Plains Indian tribes first encountered horses, they often shot and ate them. Presumably the Choctaws followed the same pattern of behavior ("Horses among," 429–31).

Although the analysis of the Choctaw term for horse cannot completely reveal their cognitive world, it offers insights that can be matched with documented behavioral evidence (see Charles O. Frake, *Language and Cultural Description* [Stanford, CA, 1980]).

- 7 Rowland, Sanders, and Galloway, *French Dominion*, 4:151; Horatio B. Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* (Greenville, TX, 1899), 180, 235 (Cushman was the son of missionaries and lived among the Choctaw during the 1810s and 1820s); Lawrence Kinnaird, ed., "Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765–1794," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (Washington, DC, 1949), 4:114; and James Adair, *Adair's History*



- of the American Indian, ed. Samuel Cole Williams (Johnson City, TN, 1930; rpt. Nashville, TN, 1953), 139, 142, 242, 340, 457.
- 8 Villiers, "Notes," 236–37; and P. L. Rainwater, ed., "The Autobiography of Benjamin Grubb Humphreys, August 26, 1808–December 20, 1882," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 21 (1934): 232.
  - 9 Louis Leclerc de Milford, *Memoir or a Cursory Glance at My Different Travels and My Sojourn in the Creek Nation*, ed. John Francis McDermott, trans. Geraldine de Courcy (Chicago, 1956), 204.
  - 10 William Glover, "A History of the Caddo Indians," 888, and John Sibley, "Historical Sketches of the Several Indian Tribes in Louisiana," 721–23, in *The Southern Caddo: An Anthology*, ed. H. F. Gregory (New York, 1986); Gilbert C. Din and Abraham P. Nasatir, *The Imperial Osages: Spanish-Indian Diplomacy in the Mississippi Valley* (Norman, OK, 1983), 31, 97, 162–63, 222, 263, 279–81, 307, 342; Dunbar Rowland and A. G. Sanders, eds., *The Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion* (Jackson, MS, 1927, 1932), 1:100, 3:529–32; John Sibley to Henry Dearborn, 8 August 1807, US, WD, M271; and Milford, *Memoir*, 64.
  - 11 White, *Roots*, chaps. 2, 4.
  - 12 United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Ratified Indian Treaties, 1722–1869, M668 (hereafter cited as US, BIA, M668); and Clarence Edwin Carter, comp., ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Mississippi, 1798–1817* (Washington, DC, 1937), 5:16–18. The Choctaws signed the Treaty of Hopewell on 3 January 1786. It established the boundaries of the Choctaw Nation, described the rights of Americans who ventured into Choctaw territory and the rights of Choctaws who crossed into United States territory, and pledged perpetual friendship and peace between both parties.
  - 13 Jack D. L. Holmes, "Law and Order in Spanish Natchez, 1781–1798," *Journal of Mississippi History* 25 (1963): 192–95; D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1968), 5–46; Kinnaird, "Spain in the Mississippi Valley," 4:77; and White, *Roots*, 28, 101. The horse raid was not new to the Choctaws, but by 1800 the raids seemed to have increased in frequency and intensity. In another time of crisis, 1765, just two years after the French had been forced out of the lower Mississippi valley, the British demanded in a conference held at Mobile that the Choctaws refrain from horse raiding on the Florida frontier (Cecil Johnson, *British West Florida, 1763–1783* (New Haven, CT, 1943), 39–40.
  - 14 For descriptions of the horse raids see Dunbar Rowland, ed., *The Mississippi Territorial Archives, 1798–1803* (Nashville, TN, 1905), 1:33, 45–46, 148, 350, 393, 402, 405, 460; Rowland, *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801–1816* (Jackson, MS, 1917), 2:67, 193, 203, 6:138, 151; and Kinnaird, "Spain in the Mississippi Valley," 3:72, 4:100, 265, 281.
  - 15 Kinnaird, "Spain in the Mississippi Valley," 3:38.
  - 16 Henry Dearborn to Benjamin Hawkins, 24 January 1803, United States, War Department, Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800–1824, M15 (hereafter cited as US, WD, M15); James Wilkinson and Benjamin Hawkins to Henry Dearborn, 18 December 1802, US, WD, M271; Treaty of Fort Adams, 17 December 1801, US, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Documents Relating to the Negotiation of Ratified and Unratified Treaties, 1801–

- 1869, T494; Rowland, *Letter Books*, 1:193; and Rowland, *Territorial Archives*, 1:46.
- 17 Treaty of Hopewell, 3 January 1786, Articles 4 and 5, US, BIA, M668; and Rowland, *Letter Books*, 6:138, 234. The adaptation of the livestock raid as a replacement for more traditional forms of warfare is a common phenomenon frequently associated with conflicts between European colonial interests and indigenous cultures. In the African chiefdom of Ukagaru, Thomas Biedelman has found patterns of behavior similar to those of the Choctaws between the Kaguru and Baraguyu of Tanzania ("Beer Drinking and Cattle Theft in Ukagaru: Intertribal Relations in a Tanganyika Chiefdom," *American Anthropologist* 63 [1961]: 534–44). Furthermore, Louise Sweet has identified striking similarities to this process among the Bedouin ("Camel Raiding of North Arabian Bedouin: A Mechanism of Ecological Adaptation," *American Anthropologist* 67 [1965]: 1132–45). See also R. Brian Ferguson, ed., *Warfare, Culture, and Environment* (New York, 1984), 17, 24, 37, 41.
  - 18 The horse raid demonstrates ethnocentricity as described by William Sumner, whose theories have come under much criticism. Nevertheless, Sumner's schematic use of "in-groups" and "out-groups" provides the most plausible explanation of Choctaw group behavior (see Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior* [New York, 1972], 1–68). William G. McLoughlin, in *The Cherokee Ghost Dance* (Macon, GA, 1984), 30–36, demonstrated that the Cherokees started horse stealing, like the Choctaws, because hunting and warfare had declined substantially in the late 1790s. For a discussion of stealing and its incorporation into the Plains Indians' war complex see Ewers, *Blackfoot Culture*, 173–77; and Mandelbaum, "Plains Cree," 195.
  - 19 Rowland, *Territorial Archives*, 1:148.
  - 20 John McKee to Choctaw Headmen, 11 December 1815, US, WD, M271.
  - 21 Kinnaird, "Spain in the Mississippi Valley," 3:117.
  - 22 Rowland, *Letter Books*, 1:25; Henry Dearborn to William Davie, James Wilkinson, and Benjamin Hawkins, 24 June 1801, US, WD, M15.
  - 23 William Claiborne to Silas Dinsmoor, 28 January 1803, Proceedings of the Governor of the Mississippi Territory as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Territorial Governor's Papers, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.
  - 24 William Simpson, Abstract of Debts Owed to Pantom, Leslie, and Company, 20 August 1803, US, WD, M271.
  - 25 Treaty of Mount Dexter, 16 November 1805, Article 2, US, BIA, M668.
  - 26 Bureau of the Census, *The Statistical History of the United States, from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1976), 30; and James Taylor Carson, "Frontier Development and Indian Removal: Mississippi and the Choctaws, 1788–1833" (M.A. thesis, Tulane University, 1992), chap. 2.
  - 27 Choctaw Agent John McKee's Journal, 2 November 1817, and James Wilkinson to Silas Dinsmoor, 19 August 1805, US, BIA, M271; William Ward to Thomas McKenney, 12 December 1825, Estimated Travel Expenses of Choctaw Delegation Traveling from Washington to the Choctaw Nation, 1825, Memorandum of Goods for the Annuity for Tapanahooma's District for the Year 1826, 16 July 1825, Memorandum of Goods for Mushulatubbee's District for the Year 1826,

- 27 August 1825, Abstract of Articles Delivered to Choctaw Leaders . . . for the Year 1828, and William Ward to Thomas McKenney, 26 March 1825, US, BIA, M234; John Hersey to Thomas McKenney, 25 June 1821, and Eden Brashers to Thomas McKenney, 26 April 1820, United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received by the Superintendent of Indian Trade, 1806–1824, T58; Henry Dearborn to Silas Dinsmoor, 9 January 1804, US, BIA, M15; Adam Hodgson, *Remarks During a Journey through North America in the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821, in a Series of Letters*. . . (New York, 1824), 272; and Byington, *Choctaw Dictionary*, 520.
- 28 Cushman, *History*, 393.
- 29 *Missionary Herald* 19 (January 1823): 8; William Ward to Thomas McKenney, 26 March 1825, US, BIA, M234.
- 30 As part of their horse complex, the Choctaws learned rudimentary veterinary skills, probably from Europeans or Americans. Hodgson reported that to cure colic in their horses, Choctaws would slice open a vein in the horse's mouth, force it to swallow the blood, pour a quart of alcohol mixed with soot down the animal's throat, and walk the horse for hours. Horses get certain forms of colic from drinking cold water too fast, and the mixture of blood and alcohol heated the horse internally, dissipating the effect of the cold water. A similar treatment was being recommended by specialists in the treatment of horse ailments into the twentieth century (Adam Hodgson, *Letters from North America Written During a Tour in the United States and Canada* [London, 1824], 1:214, 220; Hodgson, *Remarks*, 271; Cushman, *History*, 363; *Panoplist and Missionary Herald* 15 (October 1819): 461; and Leonard Pearson et al., *Special Report on Diseases of the Horse* (Washington, DC, 1903), 57.
- 31 Hodgson, *Remarks*, 271.
- 32 William Ward to Thomas McKenney, 4 November 1825 and 14 September 1826; and Iahocautubbee and Tishohuabbee Testimony, 14 September 1826, US, BIA, M234.
- 33 George Gaines to William Ward, 24 January 1824; Middleton Mackey Deposition, 4 July 1826; William Ward to James Barbour, 11 July 1826, US, BIA, M234; and *Missionary Herald* 25 (December 1829): 378.
- 34 *Missionary Herald*, 19 (January 1823): 10.
- 35 Horse values fluctuated between twenty-five and seventy-five dollars. I have used sixty dollars as an average price because it was the standard price of a horse according to the missionaries in the Choctaw nation (*Missionary Herald* 17 [April 1821]: 110; 25 [February 1829]: 62; and 25 [May 1829]: 62, 153).
- 36 *Panoplist and Missionary Herald* 15 (October 1819): 460; and various lists of sundry travel expenses, Records of the Choctaw Trading House, Under the Office of Indian Trade, 1803–1824, Miscellaneous Accounts, 1811–1815, T500. Eron Opha Rowland, "Peter Chester, Third Governor of the Province of West Florida under British Dominion, 1770–1781," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, Centenary Series (Jackson, MS, 1925), 5:83–84.
- 37 *Missionary Herald* 25 (February 1829): 61.
- 38 Romans, *Concise History*, 71; *Missionary Herald* 25 (May 1829): 153; Document 27, *Senate Documents*, 20th Cong. 2d sess. (Washington, DC, 1829), 1:6; Bureau of the Census, *Statistical History*, 30; Lewis Cecil Gray, *History of Agriculture in the Southeastern United States to 1860* (Washington, DC, 1933), 2:1042; and Schedule of horses alleged to have been lost during removal,

8 October 1837, United States, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Choctaw Agency West, 1825-1838, M234.

The Choctaw horse population of .7 horse per capita offers an interesting comparison with various Plains Indian horse populations. Among Plains tribes one finds the following horse per capita ratio: Apache (1871) 3.3, Comanche (1786) 2.7, Osage (1850) 2.2, Crow (1833) 2, Flathead (1805) 1.2, Cheyenne (1864) 1.2, Navahos (1786) .3 or .4, Hidatsa (1833) .2, Pawnee (1820) .7. For a more complete census of Plains Indian horse populations see Ewers, *Blackfoot Culture*, 21-27.

- 39 William Armstrong to Lewis Cass, 20 April 1832, US, BIA, M234.
- 40 Jonathan Coleman to Lewis Cass, 10 February 1833; William Armstrong to Elbert Herring, 25 April 1834, 12 May 1834, and 25 May 1834; and Schedule of horses alleged to have been lost during removal, 8 October 1837, US, BIA, M234. The schedule corroborates Armstrong's estimate. The figure of twelve thousand five hundred removed Choctaws left a remaining population of six thousand to eight thousand Choctaws in Mississippi (see Arthur H. DeRosier Jr., *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians* (Knoxville, TN, 1970), 147, 153, 162.
- 41 Michael Doran, "Antebellum Cattle Herding: Indian Territory," *Geographical Review* 66 (January 1976): 48-58; and Henry Clark Benson, *Life Among the Choctaw Indians*. . . (Cincinnati, OH, 1860), 55.
- 42 George Catlin, *North American Indians* (Edinburgh, 1926), 2:142. Calvin Brown witnessed the use of horsehair manes in a ball play among the Mississippi Choctaws in 1923 as well (*Archaeology of Mississippi* [Jackson, MS, 1926], 363).