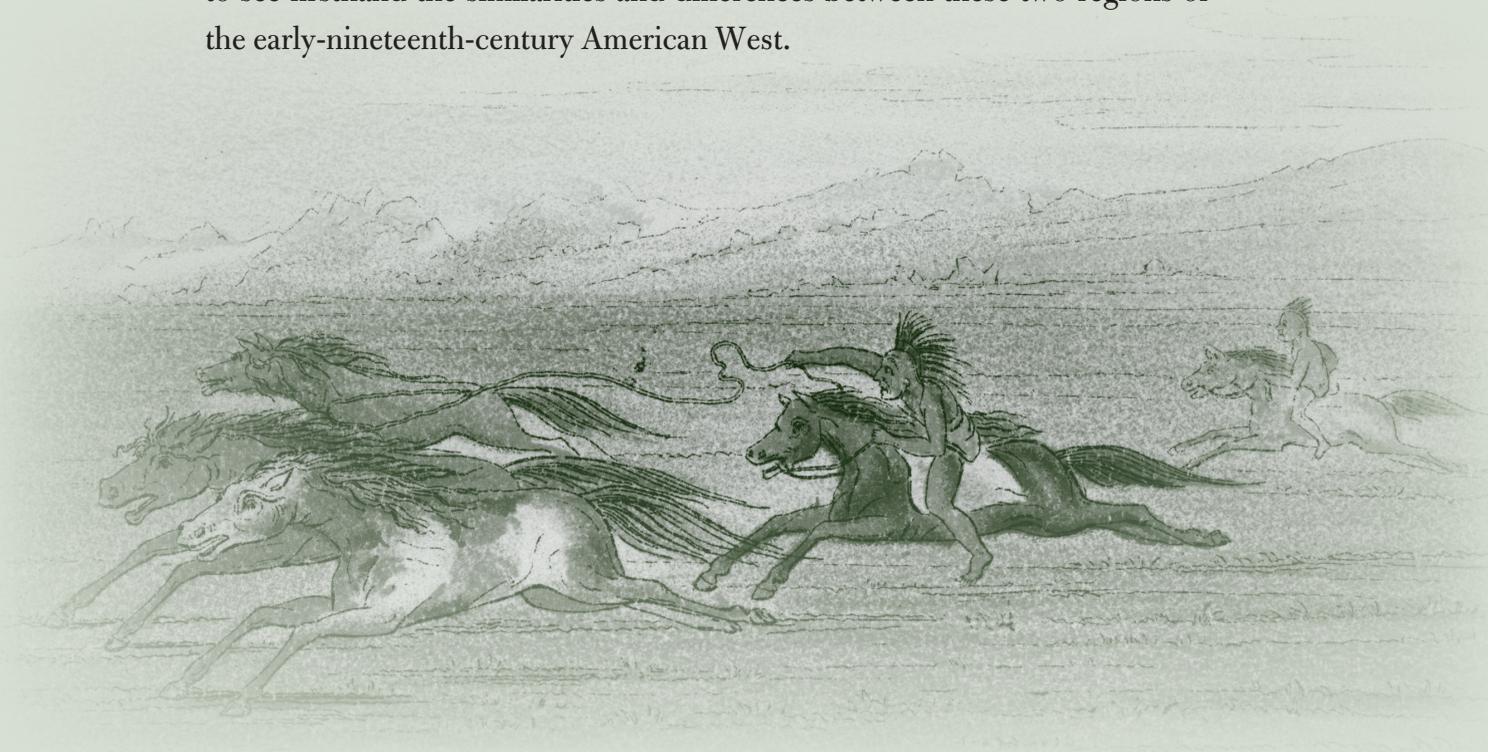


# Bringing Home All the Pretty Horses

THE HORSE TRADE AND THE EARLY AMERICAN WEST,  
1775-1825

by Dan Flores

**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1834, just two years after having visited and painted the tribes of the Missouri River and northern plains country, western artist George Catlin got his first opportunity to observe and paint that counterpoint world, hundreds of miles to the south, on the plains of what is now western Oklahoma. Accompanying an American military expedition that sought to treat with peoples like the Comanches and the Kiowas, Catlin had a singular chance to see firsthand the similarities and differences between these two regions of the early-nineteenth-century American West.



From the 1780s to the 1820s, as corporate investment gave rise to the fur trade in the northern West, the wild horse trade on the southern plains generated an economy that dominated the Southwest. In 1834, artist George Catlin visited the plains that are now part of western Oklahoma and recorded his observations of the Comanches and other horse-trading tribes, including their “usual mode of taking the wild horses . . . by throwing the lasso, whilst pursuing them at full speed.”

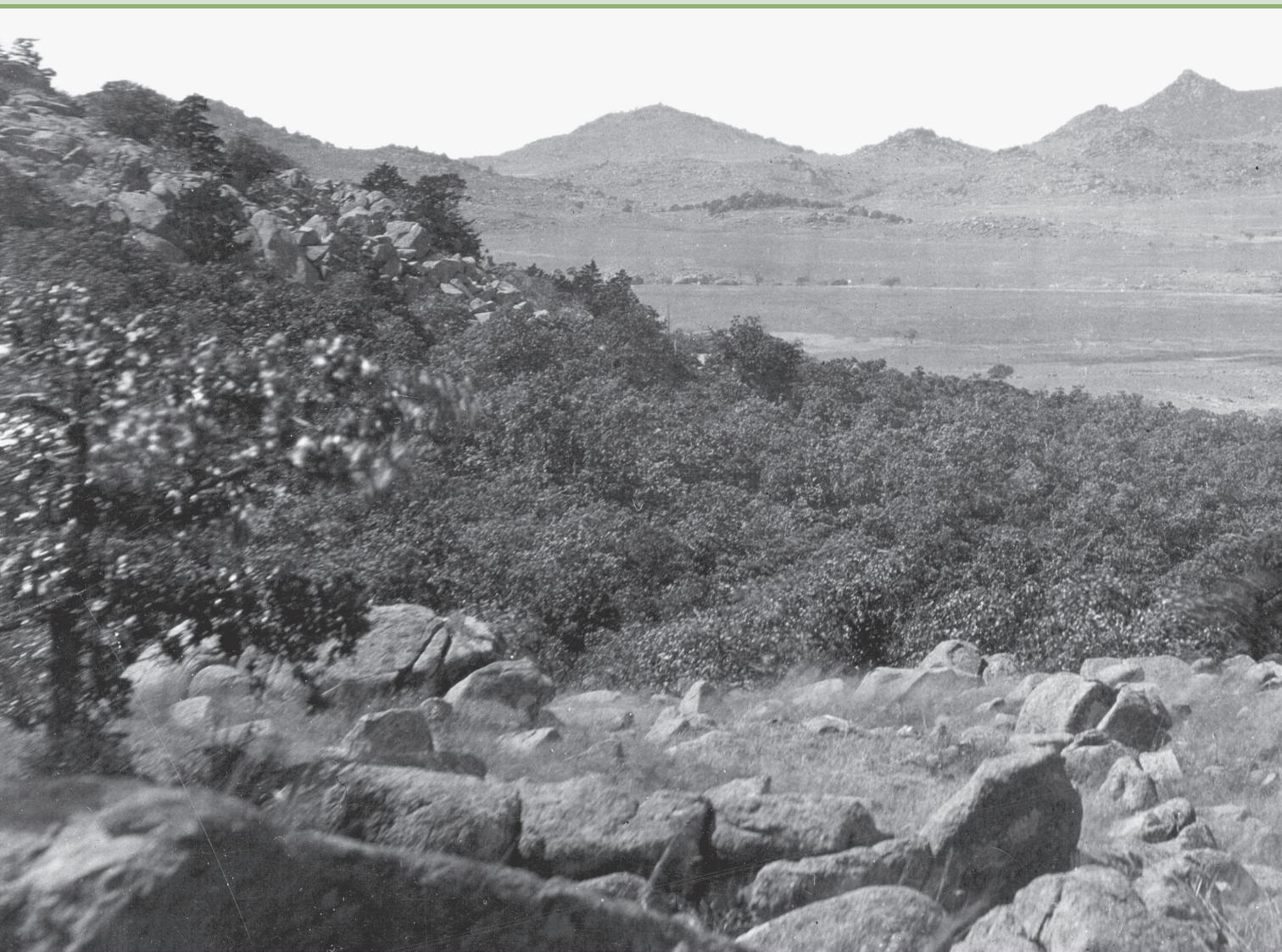
Detail, George Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1926), 2:plate 161, quote p. 65

*On the Missouri*, Catlin had traveled and lived with fur traders from one of the big companies engaged in competition for wealth skinned from the backs of beavers, river otters, muskrats, and bison. The artist had painted (and mourned) the great destruction then under way there. In the different ecology of the southern plains, however, Catlin saw only a small-scale facsimile of the great economic engines that were stripping the northern landscapes of valuable animals, and on these southern prairies an altogether different animal caught his attention. “The tract of country over which we passed, between the False Washita and this place,” he wrote while traveling in the vicinity of the Wichita Mountains that summer

of 1834, “is stocked, not only with buffaloes, but with numerous bands of wild horses, many of which we saw every day.” He went on, with obvious admiration: “The wild horse of these regions is a small, but very powerful animal; with an exceedingly prominent eye, sharp nose, high nostril, small feet and delicate leg; and undoubtedly, . . . [has] sprung from a stock introduced by the Spaniards.”<sup>1</sup>

No other denizen of the plains was “so wild and so sagacious as the horse,” Catlin wrote. “So remarkably keen is their eye, that they will generally run ‘at the sight,’ when they are a mile distant . . . and when in motion, will seldom stop short of three or four miles.” Like many observers, the artist was struck with the

**In the Wichita Mountains (below, c. 1900) where Catlin traveled during the summer of 1834, he observed that “[t]here is no other animal on the prairies so wild and so sagacious as the horse.”**



sheer beauty of the horse in its wild state: “Some were milk white, some jet black—others were sorrel, and bay, and cream colour—many were an iron grey; and others were pied, containing a variety of colours on the same animal. Their manes were very profuse, and hanging in the wildest confusion over their necks and faces—and their long tails swept the ground.”

At roughly the same point in time that Catlin expressed his admiration for the wild horses of the southern plains, back in the horse country of Kentucky, John James Audubon, Catlin’s fellow painter (and, in private, a thorn in his side), wrote that he had become acquainted with a man who had just returned from “the country in the neighbourhood of the head waters of the Arkansas River” where he had obtained from the Osages a recently captured, four-year-old wild horse named “Barro.” While the little horse was

“by no means handsome” and had cost only thirty-five dollars in trade goods, Audubon was intrigued enough to try him out. The horse proved a delight. He had a sweet gait that covered forty miles a day. He leapt over woodland logs “as lightly as an elk,” was duly cautious yet a quick study in new situations, and was strong and fearless when coaxed to swim the Ohio River. He was steady when birds flushed and Audubon shot them from the saddle. And he left a “superb” horse valued at three hundred dollars in the dust. Audubon quickly bought Barro for fifty dollars silver and, gloating over his discovery, concluded that “the importation of horses of this kind from the Western Prairies might improve our breeds generally.”<sup>22</sup>

What is most intriguing, historically, about Catlin’s and Audubon’s wild horse epiphanies is that they came so late. In fact, nearly simultaneously with the evolution of the fur trade on the northern plains, the remarkable wild horse herds of the southern plains had generated an economy of capture and trade (and often, theft) that, from the 1780s to the 1820s, had fairly dominated the region. Wild horses from herds like those Catlin saw in Oklahoma had been driven up the Natchez Trace to the horse markets in New Orleans and Kentucky at least as early as the 1790s, half a century before Audubon’s test ride on Barro. That neither man seemed aware of this in the 1830s is fairly strong evidence for the underground nature of the early horse trade in the West—which is why historians, as well as Catlin and Audubon, have missed it.

Yet on the sweeping plains south of the Arkansas River, during the period when Americans were becoming such a presence in the West, this was the fur trade’s equivalent, if on a smaller scale. The wild horse trade schooled many diverse Indian peoples in the nuances of the market economy,



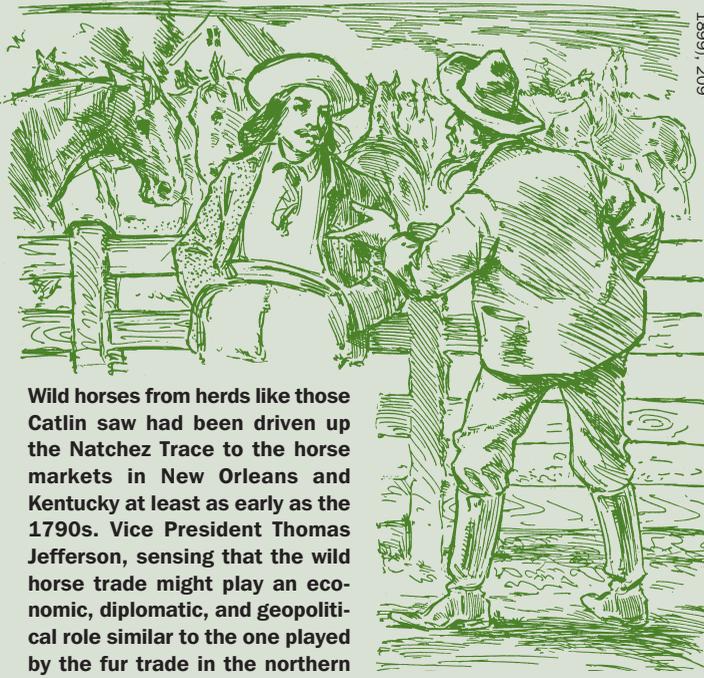
J. A. Taft, photographer, U.S. Geological Survey, quote, George Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1926), 2:64



To make this drawing, Catlin sneaked up on a wild horse herd and “used my pencil for some time, while we were under cover of a little hedge of bushes which effectually screened us from their view.” He also described the wild horse as a “small, but very powerful animal; with an exceedingly prominent eye, sharp nose, high nostril, small feet and delicate leg.”

George Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1926), 2:plate 160, quote p. 64





Capt. William F. Drannan, *Thirty-one Years on the Plains and in the Mountains* (Chicago, 1899), 209

Wild horses from herds like those Catlin saw had been driven up the Natchez Trace to the horse markets in New Orleans and Kentucky at least as early as the 1790s. Vice President Thomas Jefferson, sensing that the wild horse trade might play an economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical role similar to the one played by the fur trade in the northern West, made inquiries about it as early as 1798.

provided Spanish Texas a revenue base, intrigued a famous American president, and drew itinerant American mustangers who quite literally carried the flag with them into vast, horizontal yellow landscapes whose ownership seemed up for grabs.

*The wild horse* trade of the West had first come to the official attention of the United States in the period and in the same flurry of motion that would eventually add the Louisiana Purchase to the early republic. At the turn of the nineteenth century, bands of western wild horses were still primarily confined to the deserts, plains, and prairies of the Southwest. They first stirred interest from the wider world during the years when Thomas Jefferson, as vice president in the John Adams administration, was already contemplating various schemes for understanding and ultimately exploring the West, especially its southern reaches.

As early as 1798, in conversations about the West with informants like General James Wilkinson, Jefferson began to hear stories about an intriguing individual known as “the Mexican traveller.” His real name was Philip Nolan, and he was an Irish-American adventurer who, Jefferson discovered, had made a series of journeys far into the unknown Southwest, returning time and again driving herds of captured wild horses to New Orleans or up the Natchez Trace

to the horse markets of Kentucky. Wilkinson had raised Nolan in his own household, where the young man had no doubt absorbed dinner-table talk of revolution and westward expansion. That may have given Jefferson pause. He asked for other opinions about Nolan.<sup>3</sup>

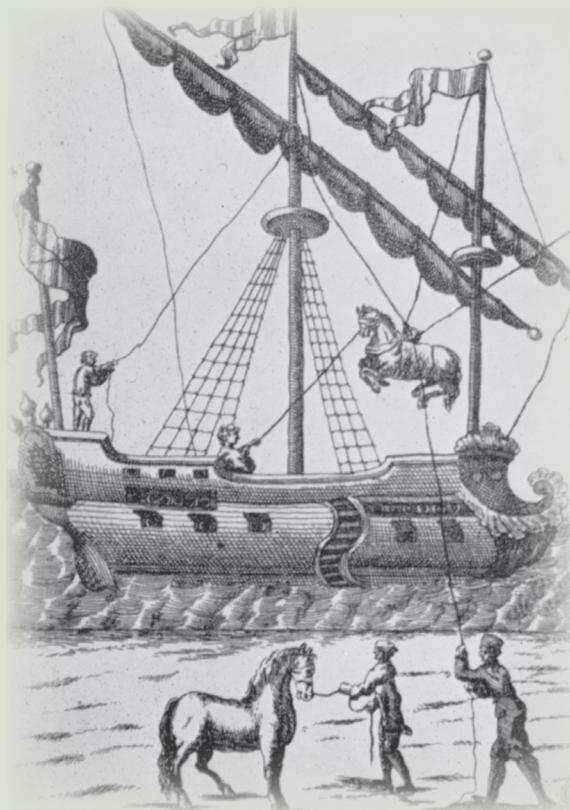
The image that emerges of this shadowy and rather legendary figure is of a literate, athletic, and adventurous young man who was confident enough in his wide-ranging abilities to attempt things about which other men only speculated. William Dunbar, the Mississippi scientist who became Jefferson’s primary associate in assembling information on the southwestern reaches of the Louisiana Purchase, knew Nolan and told Jefferson he thought the man lacked sufficient education and that he was flawed by eccentricities “many and great.” Nevertheless, Dunbar wrote, Nolan “was not destitute of romantic principles of honor united to the highest personal courage.” Another Jeffersonian who knew Nolan, Daniel Clark Jr., of New Orleans, told Jefferson he thought Nolan “an extraordinary Character,” one “whom Nature seems to have formed for Enterprises of which the rest of Mankind are incapable.”<sup>4</sup>

What Jefferson learned from these informants was that, as early as 1790–91, when Nolan was barely twenty years old, he had embarked on a two-year journey into the Southwest, carrying a passport from Esteban Miró, the Spanish governor of Louisiana. He ultimately met and traveled with Wichita and Comanche Indians, providing them with an initial, apparently very favorable, impression of Anglo-Americans. Judging from what seem today very precise descriptions of a part of the continent then almost unknown to anyone except tribal people, Nolan got all the way to New Mexico, along the way learning that the numerous southern plains Indians were dissatisfied with Spanish trade and very desirous of replacing their former trading partners, the French, with a new source of guns and European goods. The Osages, enemies of many of the groups farther west, were well armed themselves and made every effort to block traders from St. Louis from establishing relations with the tribes of the deep plains. Apparently, Nolan intended to address that opening.<sup>5</sup>

But—and this was what caught Jefferson’s attention—the vice president learned that Nolan had not returned from the southern plains with the usual

northern plains trader's packs of Indian-processed furs. Instead, it was horses he had brought back from these forays, some of them wild ones that he and his associates had captured, others traded from the Indians.

Although he had found "the savage life . . . less pleasing in practice than speculation" (he could not "Indianfy my heart," as he put it), Nolan had gone on a second expedition into the southern plains in 1794, and a third one in 1796. He had brought back only 50 horses in 1794, but the number had jumped to 250 in 1796, several of which he had decided to take to Frankfort, Kentucky, to sell. This had brought him and his horses to the attention of important people who clamored for more of his product. In 1797, packing seven thousand dollars' worth of trade goods, "twelve good rifles, and . . . but one coward," and a sextant and a timepiece, "instruments to enable me to make a more correct map" (which grabbed the attention of suspicious Spanish officials), Nolan launched a fourth expedition. When he returned in 1798, he was driving a herd variously estimated at between



Robert Moorman Denhardt, *The Horse of the Americas* (Norman, 1949), opp. p. 30

**The Spanish brought the Barb horse to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century. From the Spanish settlements of northern New Mexico, Texas, and California, horses spread across the West. After the Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1680, for example, liberated livestock and horse culture spread northward, passing from Pueblos to Utes, from Utes to Shoshones and Salish and Nez Perce, and, within half a century, to Blackfeet, Crows, and Crees. Centuries later, the conformation of the Spanish Barb is still readily apparent in these mustang stallions photographed in May 2003 in the Pryor Mountains of Montana.**

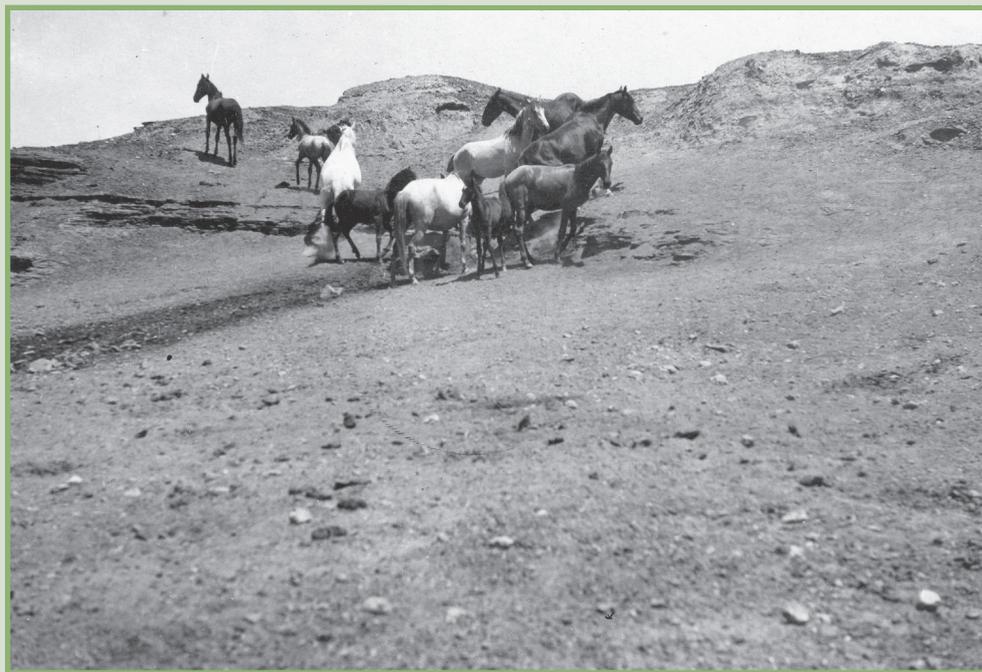
1,300 and 2,500 western horses. In the Kentucky horse markets, these animals reportedly would have brought between \$50 (for ordinary animals) and \$150 (for truly outstanding horseflesh).<sup>6</sup>

When Philip Nolan returned from this fourth expedition, a letter, written in a fine, clear hand, awaited him. Vice President Jefferson began: “It was some time since I have understood that there are large herds of horses in a wild state in the country West of the Mississippi.” Nolan, Jefferson averred, was in a privileged position, for “the present then is probably the only moment in the age of the world and the herds mentioned above the only subjects, of which we can avail ourselves to obtain what has never yet been recorded and never can be again in all probability.” Although he pleaded with Nolan to send along any natural history particulars about the horse “in its wild state,” what Jefferson really desired was an interview with a man who had seen a world he himself could only wonder at. Eventually, Jefferson hatched a plan to effect such an interview, writing Natchez scientist William Dunbar in a follow-up letter that he was most desirous of purchasing one of Nolan’s animals, “which I am told are so remarkable for the singularity & beauty of their colours and forms.”<sup>7</sup>

Most western historians who know a bit about

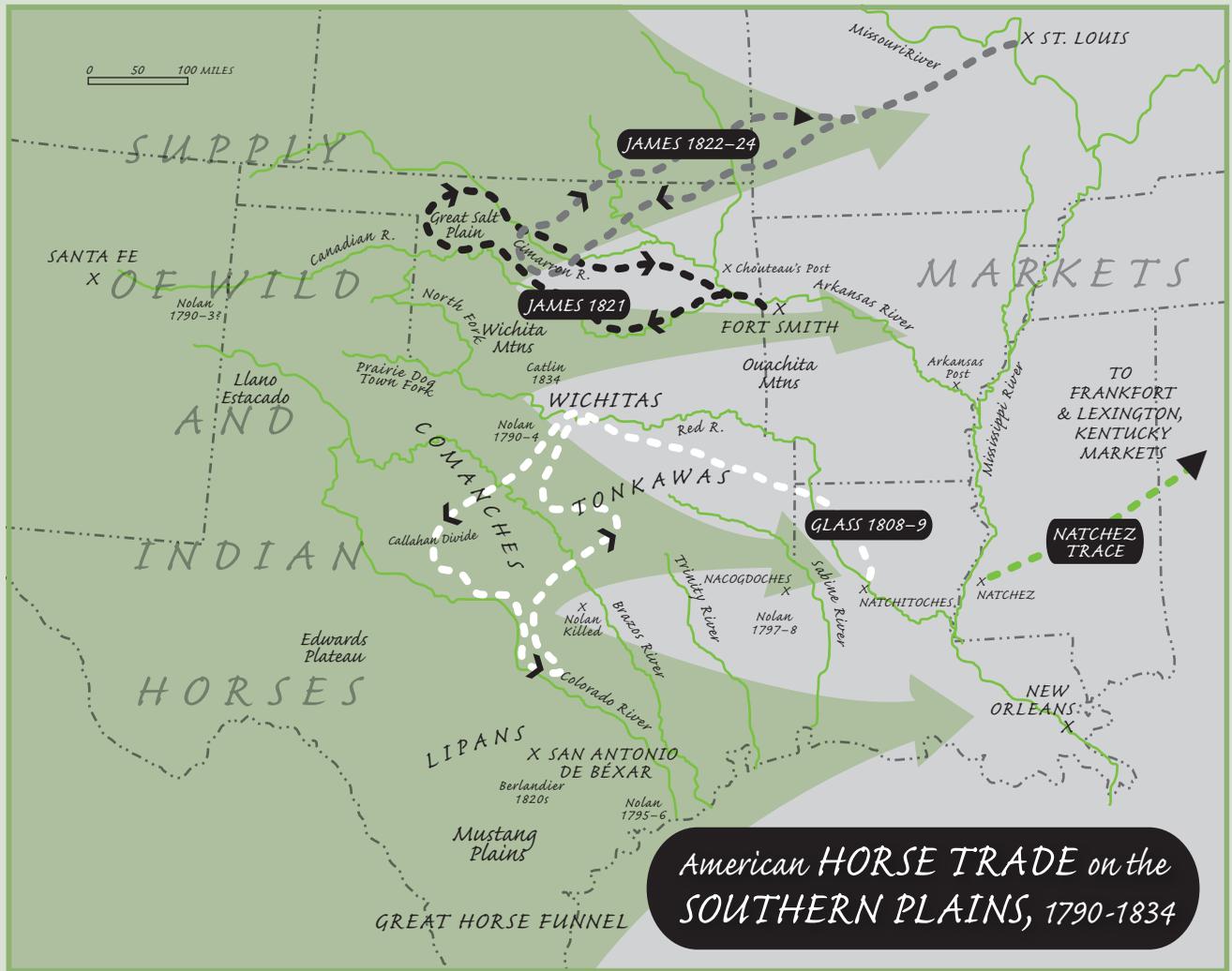
Philip Nolan have long assumed that Jefferson’s letter produced the expected response. According to both Wilkinson and Daniel Clark, Nolan and an “Inhabitant of the western Country” who was a master of Indian hand signs (this was probably Joseph Talapoon, a Louisiana mixed-blood) departed for Virginia in May 1800 with a fine paint stallion for Jefferson. However, neither Nolan nor the paint horse ever got to Monticello. For reasons that are not clear, Nolan got no farther than Kentucky, then turned back. In other words, “the Mexican traveller” stood up the Virginian who was about to be elected the country’s third president.<sup>8</sup>

By October 1800, Nolan was in final preparations for a fifth and, as it would emerge, final expedition to the western plains. He told a confidante before he left Natchez that he had two dozen good men, armed to the teeth, and was taking a large quantity of trade goods. This time he did not have a passport from Spanish officials, who had grown increasingly alarmed at his contacts among the expansionist Americans. Since the 1780s, Spain had sought to control and regulate the western horse trade for its own purposes, so the lack of a passport meant that any horses Nolan captured would be illegal contraband. To his contact, Nolan enigmatically added, “Everyone thinks that I



H. E. Gregory, photographer, U.S. Geological Survey

**Spanish horses escaped into the very landscapes that had shaped their ancestors’ hooves, teeth, and behavioral patterns millennia earlier. So successful were they in adapting to the western prairies that their numbers grew into the millions. The ancestors of the wild horses photographed in Arizona’s Painted Desert in July 1909 (above) may have been among them.**



*American HORSE TRADE on the SOUTHERN PLAINS, 1790-1834*

go to catch wild horses, but you know that I have long been tired of wild horses.”<sup>9</sup>

By December, the party was deep into the southern plains beyond the Trinity River. Following a visit to a Comanche village on one of the branches of the Red River, the Americans returned to what seems Nolan’s favorite mustanging country south of present-day Fort Worth. There they built corrals and began running horses on the windswept prairies. In March 1801, Indian scouts operating for a Spanish force that had been sent out to arrest Nolan located the Americans’ camp. When Nolan refused to surrender, the Spaniards attacked. In the ensuing melee, the Spanish force killed Nolan and captured more than a dozen of his men, although seven of his party slipped away into the plains. Philip Nolan’s intriguing adventures were over.<sup>10</sup>

Thomas Jefferson, who assumed the presidency at almost the same moment that Nolan was dying among

his wild horses, would continue to be intrigued for years to come by the knowledge that horses had reverted to the wild in the West. Following Nolan’s death, Jefferson’s hopes for understanding the natural history of wild horses, and his growing sense that in the southern West the horse trade might play an economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical role similar to the one played by the fur trade in the northern West, were embedded in his plans to send a Lewis and Clark-type expedition into the Southwest. With Peter Custis, the young University of Pennsylvania naturalist he attached to his 1806 “Grand Expedition,” Jefferson no doubt thought to put a scientific observer among those herds. But during the same summer that Lewis and Clark were returning from the Pacific, Jefferson’s second major expedition into the West encountered a Spanish army four times its size and turned back. Peter Custis would never get to be Thomas Jefferson’s eyes among those teeming

wild horse herds. Nonetheless, Jefferson's dreams for the West and wild horses would remain linked for years to come.<sup>11</sup>

*Jefferson never* got to know what history can now reconstruct, however imperfectly, about the wild horses of the nineteenth-century West. Deep-time horse history commences with an irony. Euramericans like Jefferson understood that their predecessors had brought the horse to the Americas and that, after overcoming an initial fear of the animal, many indigenous peoples in both North and South America had adopted the horse. That simple act had revolutionized their cultures. And yet, back in the depths of time lay a surprising story that Jeffersonians never suspected. Unlike many of the iconic animals of the West, including even the bison, which had come to the Americas from an evolutionary start in Asia, the horse was actually a true American native. The ancestors of the horses Philip Nolan sold in Kentucky had evolved 57 million years earlier as American animals. If anything, the irony was even more profound than that. Ten thousand years ago, after millions of years of evolution and after their spread to Asia, Africa, and Europe, horses unaccountably became extinct in the Americas. Equally perplexing, the horses that had migrated out of America to other parts of the world survived the Pleistocene extinctions. So thousands of years later, the Barb horses that danced and nickered beneath the Spaniards in their first entradas into the American West were in a real sense returning to their evolutionary homeland.<sup>12</sup>

That history is why horses were so phenomenally successful in going wild in the American West. From their primary seventeenth- and eighteenth-century distribution centers in the Spanish settlements of northern New Mexico, Texas, and California, feral horses escaped into the very landscapes that had shaped their ancestors' hooves, teeth, and behavioral patterns millennia earlier. When the Pueblo Indian Revolt of 1680 drove the Spaniards out of New Mexico for more than a decade, liberated livestock and horse culture famously got traded to tribes northward up the Rockies, passing from Pueblos to Utes, from Utes to Shoshones and Salish and Nez Perce, and, within half a century, to Blackfeet, Crows, and Crees.<sup>13</sup>

But in the chaos of the Pueblo Revolt, many animals also escaped to the plains. Similarly, when

Spain abandoned its initial attempt to establish missions in Texas in the 1690s, the retreating Spaniards simply turned their mission livestock loose. Spaniards commonly did not geld stallions, and when they returned to Texas in 1715, they found the stock they had left had increased to thousands. In some places, the countryside was blanketed with animals. A century later, a similar phenomenon was well under way in California.

By Jefferson's day, across the southern latitudes of the West, wild horse herds had become enormous in size. In Texas, Spanish bishop Marin de Porras wrote in 1805 that everywhere he traveled there were "great herds of horses and mares found close to the roads in herds of four to six thousand head." The California missions and presidios—having commenced with virtually no horses in the 1770s—found themselves surrounded by such growing bands of feral animals twenty years later that, beginning in 1806 in San Jose, then in Santa Barbara in 1808 and 1814, in Monterey in 1812 and 1820, and generally throughout the California settlements by 1827, ranchers and colonists slaughtered large numbers of horses as nuisances and as threats to grass and water needed for domestic stock.<sup>14</sup>

With a century's natural increase, wild horses on the southern plains had become a sensory phenomenon, one observer noting that "the prairie near the horizon seemed to be moving, with long undulations, like the waves of the ocean. . . . [T]he whole prairie towards the horizon was alive with mustangs." And another: "[A]s far as the eye could extend, nothing over the dead level prairie was visible except a dense mass of horses, and the trampling of their hooves sounded like the roar of the surf on a rocky coast." And a third: "Wandering herds of wild horses are so numerous that the land is covered with paths, making it appear the most populated place in the world."<sup>15</sup>

It is fascinating to imagine a Great Plains ecology that integrated horses with bison herds, bands of pronghorns and deer and elk, wolves, cougars, and grizzlies. How large a component of that ecology they were is difficult to judge, since we have little beyond anecdotal accounts for estimating their populations. No one has been able to suggest horse numbers in the way we have worked out bison estimates. The writer J. Frank Dobie speculated that there were never more than 2 million wild horses in the West.

**The exchange of horses became a central feature of western Indian life, with tribes adapting their cultures to the acquisition of horses through capture, trade, and theft. Horse stealing became a means to gain both property and prestige. In this ledger drawing, the Southern Cheyenne Elk Society member Arrow depicted himself driving off a large number (denoted by many tracks) of branded horses in 1874.**

He thought that well over a million of them ranged south of the Arkansas River, but he made no effort to track wild horse expansion over time or to calculate the effect of climate change on their numbers. Yet wet decades and droughts no doubt affected them, and from seed herds—not just on the southern plains but in places like California, the Columbia Plateau, and Wyoming’s Red Desert—wild herds were spreading out across the West.<sup>16</sup>

In the early period before 1825, however, the best hunting grounds for wild horses were clearly still the southern plains and the “mustang prairie” of south Texas—especially the former because it was the part of the West that possessed both wild horses and bison. Like favorite bison ranges, the huge herds of horses concentrated in particular ecoregions produced profound cultural and ecological effects. The southern plains herds drew Indian peoples from all over the West, bringing Utes, Shoshones, Crows, Lakotas, Arapahos, Blackfeet, and many others into the southern prairies. And as wild and Indian horse herds steadily increased over the decades, their numbers cut into the carrying capacity of the plains for bison and other grazers.

*As with bison and beavers* and other furbearers farther north, useful animals in such enormous numbers as found among wild horses filled the

human mind with thoughts of acquisition, wealth, and power—in other words, with thoughts of a potential economy.

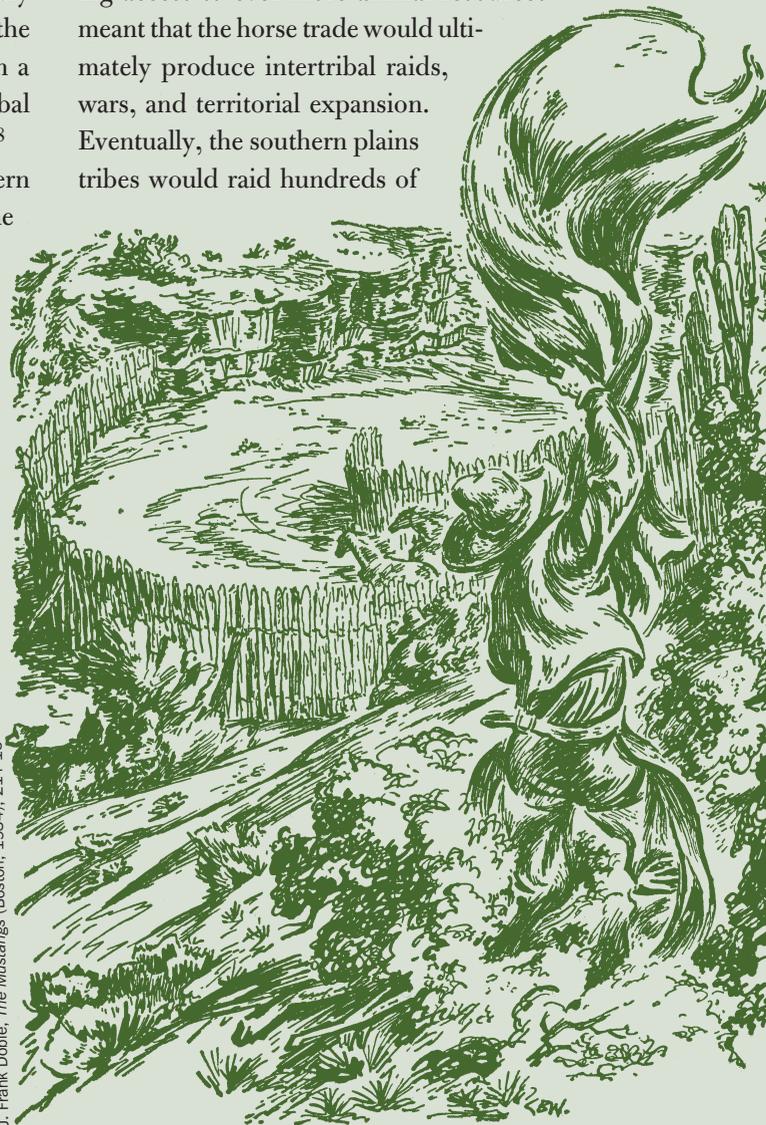
The “great horse funnel” of the early nineteenth century took in tens of thousands of horses from its flared end on the southern plains and channeled them to trade marts like St. Louis, Natchitoches, Natchez, and New Orleans. Its historical origins are found in a simple equation. There was the supply—the horses, begetting generations of wild offspring across the immense, horizontal yellow plains of the Southwest. And there was the demand—the desire for wealth and status on the part of newly emergent Plains people like the Comanches and the desire for revenue on the part of Euramerican colonial officials. There was also the desire for profits on the part of ambitious American traders and the desire for the product (animal-powered energy) by Americans pushing westward between the Appalachians and the Mississippi. The trick, eventually, would be to get the horses from the high plains of the West to the farms of the American frontier. With a couple of exceptions, the details of how it would all work are entirely familiar because it was so similar to the functioning of the fur trade. The big exception, which is the reason not much is known about this particular western economy, is the presence of corporate involvement in the fur trade and its absence in the horse trade.<sup>17</sup>

A fundamental characteristic of the American fur trade, regardless of geography, was the role Indian people played as procurers of the resource. With the creation of trapping brigades by the Hudson's Bay Company, and the American Rocky Mountain Fur Company's reliance on free trappers and the rendezvous system, the fur trade eventually produced a group of nonnative company employees who acted as procurers of furs. But Indians began as, and remained, major players in the nineteenth-century fur trade system. In good part that was because the Euramerican stage of the fur trade was based on a preexisting native economy involving intertribal exchange of animal pelts and related trade items.<sup>18</sup>

Precisely the same pattern evolved in the western horse trade. Virtually from the start, horses became such revolutionary cultural agents, and so important to tribal ethnogenesis in the postcontact age, that barter exchanges of the animals became a central feature of western Indian life. Annual trade fairs in places like the Black Hills and at fixed villages like those of the Mandan-Hidatsas on the Missouri funneled horses in huge numbers from the Southwest to the northern plains. Even middleman groups emerged. The horse trade, for example, contributed to the segmentation of the previously agricultural Cheyennes into two geographic divisions, northern and southern, when the southern bands became central players in distributing horses northward up the plains.<sup>19</sup>

The various bands of the Comanches, another people newly drawn to the eighteenth-century southern plains because of horses, quite literally reconceived themselves in the context of horses and trade. They raided other tribes and Spanish colonists both for more horses and for captive children, training the latter as herders in an economy that became more pastoral by the decade. The Cheyennes and Comanches not only became famous catchers of wild horses, but like the Nez Perce, they became horse breeders, selecting animals for conformation, speed, and markings. From the heart of the southern plains, they marketed their animals northward to horse-poor northern plains tribes and westward to New Mexicans via trade fairs in places like Pecos, Picuris, and Taos—and eventually eastward to the Americans.<sup>20</sup>

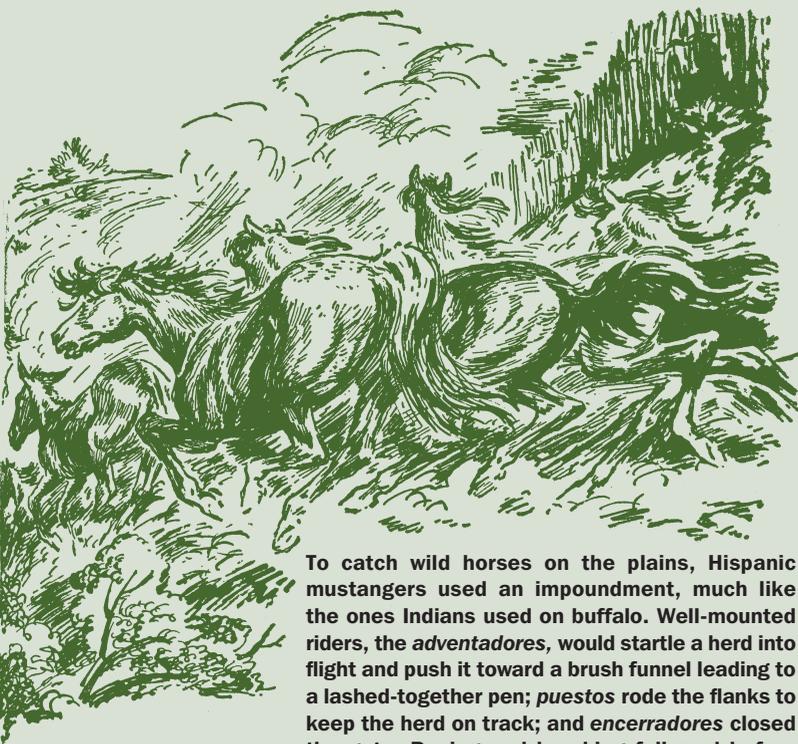
No one duped these native peoples into the market economy. Indeed, to a significant degree, they *created* the western horse trade, built their own internal status systems around it, and for a century used it to manipulate the geopolitical designs of competing Euramericans anxious for profits and alliances with them. Of course, for native people, the nineteenth-century western market economy came with many decided downsides. As with the fur trade, acquiring access to ever more animal resources meant that the horse trade would ultimately produce intertribal raids, wars, and territorial expansion. Eventually, the southern plains tribes would raid hundreds of



J. Frank Dobie, *The Mustangs* (Boston, 1934), 214-15

miles southward, liberating new supplies of horses from Mexican ranches. And because northern winters were so hard on horses, raids for replenishment of tribal stock rippled from north to south every spring. As was always the case, when American traders entered these kinds of situations things could get dicey.<sup>21</sup>

One result was that, soon after American horse traders like Philip Nolan entered the economy, initially procuring their horses from native peoples by a trade carefully regulated and managed by the headmen of Indian bands, a point came when Americans took the same step the fur men had: with millions of wild horses running free on the plains, they turned to procuring the resource themselves. Just who originated the technique for catching wild horses in trade-sufficient numbers is difficult to ascertain. It may well have begun as an Iberian or North African equine art. By the time Americans entered the horse economy, many different peoples on the southern plains seem to have mastered it. The Wichita Indians taught Anthony Glass how to build pens and run wild



**To catch wild horses on the plains, Hispanic mustangers used an impoundment, much like the ones Indians used on buffalo. Well-mounted riders, the *aventadores*, would startle a herd into flight and push it toward a brush funnel leading to a lashed-together pen; *puestos* rode the flanks to keep the herd on track; and *encerradores* closed the gate. Roping and breaking followed before the horses went to market.**

horses; Nolan and others appear to have learned such skills from the French and Spanish settlers of western Louisiana towns like Bayou Pierre and Natchitoches. Indeed, while George Catlin, the artist, provides us with accounts of southern plains Indians capturing individual horses, the best descriptions we have of trade-volume mustanging strategies come from a third group involved in the horse trade: the Hispanic residents of Texas.<sup>22</sup>

As the wild horse herds of the southern plains had

grown into the hundreds of thousands across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and private horse hunters began to capture more and more of them to drive to Louisiana and Missouri to supply the emerging American market—Spain acted to declare the animals *mesteños*, or the king’s property. In a move that neither the United States nor Canada ever effected with bison, Spain proclaimed the vast wild herds of horses national property (*Real Camara y Fisco de Su Magesta*), subject to government regulation. This interesting development was part of the famous Bourbon Reforms, designed to strengthen the economies of Spain’s colonies. The edict of 1778 required Spanish officials of the northern provinces (*Provincias Internas*) to place a tax of six reales on every wild horse captured from Spanish domains, thus creating the famous “Mustang Fund.” Since captured wild horses were worth only three reales at the time, the initial tax was something of a miscalculation. In 1779, officials reduced the tax to two reales—a mere 67 percent rate. Spain required a license for citizens, plus a passport for noncitizens, who sought to catch or trade for its horses. Without the license or the passport, the trade was illegal and contraband.<sup>23</sup>

Enforcing this law proved impossible for a small Spanish population in an enormous setting. Yet, given how lucrative the mustang trade was, Spain needed to be able to enforce it. In the first six years of the tax, by January 1787, mustangers had paid taxes on seventeen thousand captured wild horses, some of which became colonial remounts but most of which appear to have ended up east of the Mississippi River, carrying American farmers and merchants and serving as mounts for southeastern Indians like the Chickasaws. As one San Antonio official put the matter in 1785: “The number of mustangs in all these environs is so countless that if anyone were capable of taming them and caring for them, he could acquire a supply sufficient to furnish an army. But this multitude is causing us such grave damage that it is often necessary to shoot them.”<sup>24</sup>

Catching wild horses in this kind of volume required the same understanding of the animals’ natural history that trapping did. It also required

“[W]hoever furnishes Indians the Best & Most Satisfactory Trade can always Control their Politicks.”

organization and carefully honed skills. Like trapping, it became a kind of wilderness art form, with its own material culture and its own internal terminology, but one that differed from trapping by aiming at *live* animal capture. Fortunately, a French scientist named Jean-Louis Berlandier left an account that describes the process by which mustangers captured wild horses in volume in the 1820s. What Berlandier recounts shows similarities to Indian techniques for impounding bison and pronghorns—and, in some particulars, even to the bison jump. But wild horse capture had clearly developed some nuances all its own.

Once mustangers were on the plains, among the herds and stallion bands, the first step was understanding the landscape sufficiently to know how to site what Berlandier called the *corrale*. “These are immense enclosures situated close to some pond,” he wrote. Commonly they were built of mesquite posts lashed together with rawhide and were large enough that once inside, a herd could be swept into a circling, milling confusion in its center. “The entrance,” Berlandier says, “is placed in such a way that it forms a long corridor, and at the end there is a kind of exit.” That corridor often consisted of brush wings that fanned out a half mile or more from the capture pen itself, usually oriented toward the south so that prevailing southwesterly winds would envelop an approaching herd in its own dust cloud, blinding it.<sup>25</sup>

To start the action, Berlandier relates, mustangers divided themselves into three groups, each group having a different role to play. After locating a likely herd, one group of well-mounted riders, the *aventadores*, had the task of startling the herd into flight and pushing it toward the brush funnel leading to the pen. Once the herd was in motion and a direction established, the animals would find themselves squeezed into a flight path by a second group of mustangers, the *puestos*, who were the most skilled riders and whose role consisted “of conducting that dreadful mass of living beings by riding full gallop along the flanks and gathering there, in the midst of suffocating dust, the

partial herds which sometimes unite at the sound of the terror of a large herd.” Finally, at the moment of truth, as the white-eyed, terrified horses were sweeping at breakneck speed into the trap, a third group of mustangers, the *encerradores*, were charged with closing the gate, sometimes dashing in to open it for an instant to allow stallions and older horses to escape.

What followed were scenes of such emotional impact that mustangers had a specialized vocabulary to describe them. Captured wild horses “squeal[ed] terribly and rage[d] like lions.” They also died. Hispanic horse-catching jargon was rife with the language of death—horses died from *sentimiento* (brokenheartedness) or from *despecho* (nervous rage). Then there was the term *hediondo* (stinking), which designated a corral ruined for further use by the aftereffects of having been jammed with panicked and dying animals.<sup>26</sup>

Berlandier’s description continues: “When these animals find themselves enclosed, the first to enter fruitlessly search for exits and those in the rear . . . trample over the first. It is rare that in one of these chases a large part of the horses thus trapped do not kill one another in their efforts to escape. . . . It has happened that the *mesteñeros* have trapped at one swoop more than one thousand horses, of which not a fifth remained.”

Exhausted by their efforts to escape, surviving horses were roped one by one. “After some hours of ill treatment,” Berlandier concludes, “these *mesteñeros* have the ability to render them half-tame a short while after depriving them of their liberty.”<sup>27</sup>

*The rhythmic creaking* of saddle leather, the rustling and tinkling of swaying packs of trade goods, and the snick of hooves on the cobbled plains surface must have ceased for a few moments on the southern plains in early August 1808. After a five-week outward journey, Anthony Glass and his party of ten traders, driving sixteen packhorses that carried more than two thousand dollars in goods and a riding remuda of thirty-two animals, had finally come in sight of the thatched-roof village complex on the Red River. Inhabited by peoples the American horse traders and their government knew as the “Panis,” this complex was the equivalent of the Mandan-Hidatsa

towns on the Missouri. The trio of villages was occupied by people who called themselves Taovayas and Iscanis; today they are known, collectively, as the Wichitas. In 1808, their acknowledged headman was Awahakei, or Great Bear. And he had been expecting these Americans.<sup>28</sup>

Whether they built corrals and ran wild horses, or traded for them from the southern plains tribes, American horse traders like Philip Nolan had preceded the Louisiana Purchase in getting Americans into the horse trade economy. But in the aftermath of Jefferson's failed 1806 Grand Expedition, horse traders like Anthony Glass—who rode down into the Wichita villages this August morning wearing the uniform of a U.S. military captain, his party of a dozen men traveling under an American flag—became private but overt agents of Jeffersonian geopolitical designs on the West. In the northern Rockies, of course, the trading posts and trapping parties of the American, Missouri, and Rocky Mountain fur companies consciously advanced U.S. claims for territory and tribal alliances in sharp competition with the posts and brigades of the Northwest and Hudson's Bay companies, agents of the British empire. On the southern plains and in the Southwest, however, it was itinerant horse traders like Glass to whom the task of advancing America's empire fell. Indeed, in the decades following the Jefferson administration's clash with Spain over territory and boundaries, a whole series of American horse-trading expeditions worked as a kind of economic-diplomatic wedge to assert the interests of the new republic against a Spanish empire distracted and overwhelmed by colonial revolutions across the Americas.

How successful the strategy was of allowing private economic interests to advance state geopolitical design is open to question (although one could argue it has remained a fundamental of American foreign policy for two centuries now). On the southern plains between 1806 and 1821, it may have worked fairly well. In the aftermath of the events of that summer of 1806, with a Spanish army turning back an official American exploring expedition, and the ensuing escalation that, in the fall, would put an American force of twelve hundred troops eyeball to eyeball with a Spanish army of seven hundred, Spain seemed to blink. In 1807, it instructed frontier officials in its northern provinces to avoid any more "noisy disturbances" involving the

Americans and to direct their efforts in stemming the contraband horse trade toward participating tribes rather than American traders. Hence, when Jefferson's Indian agent, Dr. John Sibley of Natchitoches, authorized and helped plan the Glass expedition, the captain's coat and American flag (which Glass was to present to Awahakei to fly over the villages) reflected a Jeffersonian's musings about how to turn the horse trade to state advantage. As Sibley would remark, sagely, "[W]hoever furnishes Indians the Best & Most Satisfactory Trade can always Control their Politicks."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, profit, more than statecraft, motivated American horse traders, and that required no official sanction. In addition to Nolan, Glass had been preceded in the West by several other American horse-trading parties. Little is known about them now, but in 1794–95, for instance, a twenty-seven-year-old Philadelphia gunsmith named John Calvert spent fourteen months pursuing horses with the Wichitas and Comanches before a Spanish patrol snagged him. Calvert was followed in 1804–5 by a very active plains trader named John Davis and a Corsican carpenter, Alexandro Dauni. They were followed in turn by John House, one of Philip Nolan's mustangers, who successfully drove a herd back from the plains in 1805. Then there were trading parties led by Francisco Roquier in 1805 and John Cashily in 1806, who ingeniously planned to tell Spanish officials that the horses they were driving eastward were intended to help them bring their families west as new Spanish immigrants.<sup>30</sup>

Almost in the middle of the uproar over Jefferson's attempts to explore the Red River, Dr. Sibley licensed yet another horse-trading party, this one led by John Lewis and William Alexander and guided by Nolan's sign language expert, Joseph Talapoon. Lewis and Alexander seem to have been the Jefferson administration's first experiment with traders as official government emissaries: they also took U.S. flags to the western Indians, and in Sibley's name they invited the tribes of the southern plains to a grand council in Natchitoches in 1807. In June 1807, three of this party (the rest were still on the plains, running horses) arrived in Louisiana driving a herd of mustangs. Did they pay the Spanish tax on their horses? Of course not. As Sibley noted, a few years earlier Spanish records had shown 1,187

horses officially *leaving* for Louisiana, but somehow more than 7,300 horses had managed to *arrive* there. Helpless to stem the tide, one Spanish official estimated the number of the king's horses herded into the United States during the early nineteenth century at a thousand a month, which gives some idea of the volume of the economy.<sup>31</sup>

The paucity of surviving information on so many of the horse traders both before and after Anthony Glass permits some focus on him. In apparent contrast to many of his contemporaries in the economy, Glass was literate. Remarkably, Sibley had persuaded him to keep a journal, which he did—sporadically—during his ten months in the West. This document not only gives us a sense of the early horse trade but leaves an impression of Glass himself as a sort of John Colter of the southern plains.

Glass was more solidly middle-class than most American horse traders. He and a brother were merchants in the river town of Natchez, the terminus of the famous wilderness trail of the same name that funneled western horses into Kentucky and Tennessee. In 1808, he was about thirty-five and a recent widower. Either legitimately, or perhaps as an explanatory ruse in case Spanish officials captured him, the year before he had inquired about emigrating to New Spain. How much experience he had with horses, Indians, or the West is difficult to determine, but there is little doubt he viewed his 1808–9 trading expedition as high adventure.

If Glass's experiences were typical, the horse trade of the early West was at least as much adventure as entrepreneurial enterprise. Judging from the speech he made before the assembled peoples of the Wichita villages in August 1808, the United States was convinced these western tribes were already *economic* allies of the Americans, despite the conflicting territorial claims with Spain over the southern boundary of the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson was their "Great Father," Glass told them, and as for him: "I have come a long Journey to see you & have brought with me some goods to exchange with you and your brothers—the Hietans [Comanches], for Horses if you will trade with us on fair and Equal terms."<sup>32</sup>

Establishing those terms took some effort and caused some arguments, but within a few days Glass was assembling his herd—twenty horses one day, thirteen the next, eleven a few days later, and

apparently at that rate for week after week. There were also losses. Osage raiders, whom the Wichitas reported had driven off five hundred of their horses shortly before Glass arrived, took twenty-nine of his best horses late that August. A month later, during a second Osage raid on the Wichita horse herds, Glass was chagrined to find that "one of them was riding a remarkable Paint Horse that used to be my own riding Horse, which was stolen with those on the 22d of August."<sup>33</sup>

After two months of daily trade negotiations with the Wichitas, Glass's party—accompanied by a large Indian contingent—headed deeper into the plains in search of Comanche bands with whom to trade. While trade was his main goal, Glass clearly had yet another objective. The Wichitas had told him about a remarkable object far out on the plains, a large metallic mass they and the Comanches regarded as a powerful mystery. Glass cajoled the Indians into taking him to the site, and after "observing considerable ceremony," they finally led the Americans to the place where the metal was. Glass was as mystified as anyone else, but what he was seeing, in fact, was a sixteen-hundred-pound iron-nickel meteorite, a major healing shrine for southern plains Indians. Fancying it a giant nugget of platinum, some of the members of Glass's party would return two years later and contrive to haul and float it back to civilization.<sup>34</sup>

Discontented with their inability to trade for horses from the Comanche bands they found, in mid-October Glass's party divided their goods. Several of the experienced horse traders among them headed off in search of particular Comanche trading partners from previous trips, but Glass continued southward, camping with increasingly larger numbers of Comanche bands from the north and west. He reported his disappointment: "trade dull[,] the Indians are unwilling to part with their best Horses." They were, however, willing to part him from his, stealing twenty-three one night in late December, and smaller numbers later on.<sup>35</sup>

During the dead of winter 1809, with snow six inches deep on the plains, Glass finally attempted the mustanger's ultimate art—catching wild horses himself. Wild ones by this point "were seen by the thousands," and Glass, two remaining companions, and the Indians traveling with them built a strong pen and spent many days attempting to corral the wild

Scores of unknown and undocumented American mustangers traversed the plains, capturing, trading, and encouraging such a general theft of horses across the West that one source estimates ten thousand were stolen from Spanish ranches in a single year. Artist Frederic Remington visited and wrote of the hacienda San Jose de Bavicora, right, built about two hundred miles southwest of El Paso by Jesuits in 1770. In 1840, Apaches killed the priests and ran off the cattle and horses.



Frederic Remington, "An Outpost of Civilization," *Harper's Monthly*, 88 (December 1893), 76

herds around them. But "the Buffalo were so plenty and so in the way we succeeded badly in several attempts."<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately—one suspects quite by design—Glass remained vague on the number of horses he ultimately drove back from the plains in May 1809, but the sense is of a herd of many hundreds of animals, including many of those that would fetch as much as \$100 to \$150. It is difficult to say just how typical his experience was. But in an economy for which so few other day-by-day accounts exist, Anthony Glass's journal provides quite a remarkable look at an early-nineteenth-century western experience. He allows us to imagine a history where one had barely been imaginable before.

It would be a full decade later, when Spain and the United States finally agreed on the Red and Arkansas rivers as the official boundary between them (in the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819), before another American horse trader would leave us an account rivaling Glass's. In the interim, scores—very likely hundreds—of unknown and undocumented American mustangers traversed the plains, running wild horses, trading for horses from the Indians, and encouraging such a general theft of horses across the West that one source estimates ten thousand were stolen from Spanish ranches in a single year.<sup>37</sup>

References exist for a few of these traders. Ezra McCall and George Schamp (who had been

with Glass) were back on the plains in 1810. The Osages plundered Alexander MacFarland and John Lemons's mustanging party in 1812. Auguste Pierre Chouteau, Jules DeMun, and Joseph Filibert opened up a significant horse trade with the Comanches and Arapahos between 1815 and 1817. Caiaphas Ham and David Burnet became modestly famous horse traders in the same years, and so did Jacob Fowler (who left us a journal written in phonics) and Hugh Glenn. When Mexico finally achieved its independence from Spain and moved to open up its markets to the United States, the man who opened the Santa Fe Trail—William Becknell—could do so because he, too, was an old plains horse trader.<sup>38</sup>

What made these southern plains horse trade expeditions shadowy and northern plains fur trade activities well known was actually a simple difference. Since the horse trade featured live, not dead, animals, horses became their own transportation to markets. There was no need, as in the fur trade, for corporate investment in freight wagons, steamboats, or shipping. That difference not only created a documentary disparity for later historical writers but also affected the comparative fiduciary risk involved at the time.

Consider, for instance, one more example from the early western horse trade, that of Thomas James of St. Louis, who gives us a final, fine-grained look at the mustanger's West before Mexico's revolution changed the ground. James, intriguingly, was both a

**The wild horse trade in the West did not evaporate after the Mexican Revolution of 1821. If anything, as horses spread farther north and west, trading expanded geographically and perhaps in volume. And today, descendants of these horses, like this leopard-spotted stallion and his band photographed in November 2001 in the Red Desert of southwest Wyoming, still roam pockets of the West.**

mountain man *and* a mustanger. He had first gone west by ascending the Missouri to the Three Forks in 1809–10, but he did not make his first trip onto the southern plains until 1821. It was then that he rode from Fort Smith to the salt plains of present-day Oklahoma before he was confronted by Comanches under Spanish orders not to allow Americans to approach Santa Fe. Eyeing those splendid Comanche horse herds appreciatively, Thomas James got a sense of the possibilities.<sup>39</sup>

Invited to return the next summer to trade for horses, James did, and the result was a three-year expedition (1822–24) financed with \$5,500 in goods. Ascending the various forks of the Canadian River, James's party of twenty-three finally met the Wichitas under their headman, Alsarea, and the trading commenced. Four yards of British wool blankets and two yards of calico, along with a knife, a mirror, flint, and tobacco, were the going rate for a well-broken horse, and James quickly bought seventeen

that he knew would fetch one hundred dollars apiece back in the settlements. Eventually, the Wichitas introduced James to the Comanches, a Yamparika band under Big Star, and James got his first taste of horse trading Comanche style: they were perfectly willing to trade their best horses since they had every intention of stealing them back. According to James, despite the frustrations, the life of a nineteenth-century horse trader on the southern plains held a real allure. He was smitten: “I began to be reconciled to a savage life and enamored with the simplicity of nature. Here were no debts, no Sheriffs, no Marshals; no hypocrisy or false friendships.”<sup>40</sup>

Once he had assembled a drove of 323 high-quality animals, James departed for the settlements, but not before Alsarea made a present of his own fine warhorse, Checoba, and urged James to return

the next year to the headwaters of the Red, where the Wichitas grazed sixteen thousand ponies. That would have been the horse trader’s promise of the Golden Fleece, but James never returned. Pushing his herd eastward, he lost all but seventy-one to stampedes and what must have been a biblical attack of horseflies. More attrition followed as he penetrated the woodlands. It is difficult to know how typical James’s tribulations were, but when he finally reached St. Louis, he had just five horses left. That happened to be precisely the number he had started with.<sup>41</sup>

James’s account, published under the title *Three Years among the Indians and Mexicans*, may not be entirely reliable. But if it is, his and Glass’s accounts

may help explain the lack of corporate interest in the horse trade. At least up until 1821, the trapping and trading of wild horses in volume on the Spanish border was a very risky business. Although Philip Nolan and his backers possibly made as much as forty thousand to sixty thousand dollars from a seven-thousand-dollar trade goods investment in 1797–98, the figures for other early traders look a lot less impressive. And Nolan’s speculative profits do not take into account the work, fatigue, and risk factors in a dangerous wildlands vocation.<sup>42</sup>

*The wild horse trade* in the West did not evaporate after Mexico’s revolution in 1821. If anything, as horses spread farther north and west, trading expanded geographically and perhaps even in volume. In the 1830s, Bent’s Fort in Colorado based at least some of its economy on the horse trade of the southern plains tribes. And adventuresome Americans’ interest in California in the 1830s had much to do with stories of the horse herds ranging across those golden, rolling hills. But whenever they rode, these later and more widespread mustangers would have based their artfulness on the West’s horse economy of the period from 1775 to 1825.

The reason literary men like Catlin and Audubon missed the full dimensions of the early western horse trade was that it was an example of what we might call a “concealed economy,” which emerged where different empires—in this case a fading Spanish one and a vibrant, emergent American one—touched at their edges. In it, shadowy freelancers, Comanche and Wichita traders, Hispanic entrepreneurs, and Thomas Jefferson all ended up dealing with one another, at least indirectly, during the fluid time of our emerging national empire in the West.

---

**Dan Flores** holds the A. B. Hammond Chair at the University of Montana, Missoula, where he specializes in the environmental and cultural history of the American West. He is the author of eight books, most recently *The Natural West: Environmental History in the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains* (2002). His next book, *Visions of the Big Sky: Painting and Photography in the Northern Rocky Mountain West*, will be published in 2009 by the University of Oklahoma Press. He would like to thank the university’s Hammond Fund for research and travel assistance.