

The Story of Comanche: Horsepower, heroism and the conquest of the American West

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Abstract: Marked by the Census Bureau's closure of the frontier; the symbolic end of American Indian resistance at Wounded Knee and powerful articulations on the 'winning of the West' from Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody, the early 1890s marked a critical moment in the history of the American West. It also saw the death of one of the region's most famous horses, Comanche, who succumbed to colic in 1891 aged 29. This paper uses Comanche as a locus around which to examine the history of warhorses in the military culture of the American West. Not only does his lifespan (c.1862-1891) usefully coincide with the critical years of westward conquest, but his equine biography also serves as testament to the multiple uses of horses in the US military.

Introduction

A bay horse descended from wild mustangs, Comanche was captured by an army patrol on a round-up exercise in 1868 before being broken and mobilized for military service. A 'four-legged' soldier of the Seventh Cavalry, Comanche took part in the Indian Wars, became a favourite of Captain Myles Keogh and earned widespread renown as the only 'living survivor' of the Battle of the Little Bighorn (1876). Following removal from the battlefield, he was nursed back to health and paraded in full martial finery. Even his 'after-life' proved a distinguished one. Following a funeral service with full military honours (only the second American horse to receive such an accolade, the other being Black Jack, the 'riderless horse' that participated in the funeral procession of JFK), Comanche was stuffed and presented at the 1893 Columbia Exposition. He is now installed (recently refurbished and looking pretty good for his advanced years) at the Kansas Natural History Museum: a potent and enduring relic of the equine frontier.

Significantly, beyond the individual story of Comanche lies a broader 'cross-species' history of human-animal interaction that this paper seeks to document. From cavalry chargers and beasts of burden to symbols of masculine heroism and objects of sentiment, the horse played a vital role in the western army. On a fundamental level, equine animals represented organic pieces of military technology that were bred, traded (not to mention stolen), trained and deployed in the service of westward conquest (as well as utilized by American Indians to oppose it). Just as the 'iron horse' facilitated processes of westward expansion, so too did its biological namesake play a vital role. The mobilization of the horse as an animate unit of production spoke of an era of changing organization, mechanization and systemization in the US military. At the same time, the horse in the western army was adeptly suited to frontier conflict. It also harboured symbolic as well as pragmatic functions, most notably in the emerging mythology of the mounted western hero as exemplified by the likes of George Custer, Bill Cody and Theodore Roosevelt. A transporter of people and supplies, a carrier of empire, nationalism and science and a performing animal embedded in a culture of frontier mythmaking, the story of Comanche speaks to an important (and, indeed, overlooked) history of warhorses in the American West.

Plains Indians and the Horse

A history of the western warhorse has to start not with the US army but with the American Indian. Plains tribes, including the Comanche after which our eponymous equine hero was named, acquired horses from Spanish traders in the seventeenth century to become legendary mounted riders, hunters and warriors. *Sunka Wikan* – 'the sacred dog' -transformed indigenous life in formative ways, a keen demonstration of how animal capital exerted a powerful imprint on political, social, economic and environmental dynamics. The horse enabled fast and mobile warfare and hunting that profoundly altered the nature of combat and subsistence while in cultural life it was celebrated in art, song and story. Images from a ledger book (so called for the paper it was sketched on) drawn by

Kiowa artist Half Moon offered a vibrant snapshot of plains life and the integral role played by horses therein.¹ Pictographs illustrated a mounted warrior in full regalia, with horse and rider both wearing the same 'armour' (a practice also borrowed from the Spanish) as well as an incident of mule stealing. Unsurprisingly given the usefulness of the horse, equine ownership swiftly emerged as a marker of military, economic and social power.

In the martial ecology of the plains, tribes became expert at the selective breeding of horses for best purpose – notably the Comanche and the distinctive appaloosa horse – and developed keen abilities in identifying and selecting the highest calibre mounts. Buffalo runners were especially prized. The value of a horse was such that Plains Indians entered into raids or battles with the specific aim of acquiring equine prizes from their enemies. The Cheyenne and the Comanche considered the capture of horses an intensely heroic act while the Crow celebrated not only the taking of horses but their taking under particularly dangerous circumstances. Recognised as a valuable utility animal, horse care and maintenance proved essential. George Grinnell in his studies of the Pawnee and the Cheyenne noted how horses were only ridden for purpose and given training runs of up to three miles from camp, brought back, washed in the stream and rubbed down with sagebrush to keep them in 'pink condition.'² In an attempt to preserve the vigour of their favoured warhorses, indigenous warriors rode to the site of battles on ponies (or even mules). On the field itself, most tribes adopted a strategy very different to the bravado of a cavalry charge in preferring to dismount and enter the fray on foot (often hoping to return riding the steeds of vanquished foe). Those that did adopt the charge, however, showed unparalleled skills of horsemanship. The Comanche proved adept at swirling around in a mass, moving into range, picking off their enemies only to move beyond reach. Riding bareback and at breakneck speed, mounted warriors dodged enemy fire by hugging the flanks of their steeds and shooting (with bow and rifle) on the ride – contravening the tactical conventions of mounted warfare in a fashion that confounded and enthralled the US Cavalry in equal measure. According to an old saying in Texas, the 'white man' would ride a horse until he was played out, the Mexican will take him and ride another day until he was tired and the Comanche would take over and ride to where he was going.

A reflection of its unbridled utility, *Equus* was given great symbolic importance in the martial ecology of the plains. Ceremonies and rituals evoked good hunting, longevity and swiftness in battle. George Grinnell related a ceremony performed by the Cheyenne that involved a shaman spitting on the horse's forehead with a blend of medicine and spreading the concoction over the mane and withers. After a number of days without being ridden, the medicine man rubbed off the ointment to leave a horse with extra stamina. Animals used in action were dressed with colourful adornments to cultivate good fortune and invite the protection of powerful warrior spirits such as the Thunderbird. Horses wore elaborately decorated saddles, bridles and masks while their bodies were painted in bright colours (according to one commentator this marked them as a predator) and marked with the signs of protective deities and icons to denote speed and power (notably the zigzag). The horse played a role in the development of heroic codes and was duly incorporated into the folkloric canon of the warrior. For the Cheyenne, it represented an extension of the warring hero and so was painted with the same designs as appeared on his war shirt. A rectangle painted on the flank meant the animal and rider had led a war party, a short horizontal line denoted the counting of coup, a hand print on the right hip showed the horse had returned its rider from a dangerous infraction and a hoof referred to a successful horse raid. Notable fighters sometimes assumed an equine identity – Crazy Horse being the most famous – while stories and artwork ably communicated the status of the horse in indigenous warrior tradition. One need only take a look at the famous drawing on muslin of the Little Big Horn from White Swan, a Crow scout working for the Seventh Cavalry, to see the centrality of the horse in the military practise and cultural imagination of the Plains Indian.³

The Frontier Army and the Equine Ecology of the Fort

The horse exerted a critical impact on the practical and symbolic operations of the US Army in the West. As such, we might see the organization of the frontier army in terms of an equine hierarchy that stretched from mule to charger, a faunal ranking order in which different representatives of the genus performed distinct jobs and on which were conferred particular identities. On a basic level, horses served the needs of transportation: either carrying men or equipment and allowing ground to be covered fast. The ubiquitous pack animal was the mule – maligned for its stubbornness and proclivity to bray loudly and in an unrefined way. It was, put simply, the literal workhorse of the frontier military machine. A prime candidate for an animal agent ignored in history under James Hribal's terms of class and species marginalization, the mule was one of the rank and file: often a 'hidden' actor in the dramatic telling of the equine frontier (Hribal 207: 101-111). John Finerty, journalist for the *Chicago Times* who volunteered to cover the expedition of Generals Crook and Terry to the Yellowstone in 1876 (Crook checked first that he could ride), labelled mules as 'unattractive animals, awkward... and vilely discordant. I consider that the average mule is obstinate, and even morose, in manner, and filthy, not to say immodest, in habit' (Finerty 1890: 64-5). They were, though, as Finerty acknowledged, blessed with some 'fine points also.' 'Handy with his feet' and a generalist eater, the mule proved invaluable in the hostile reaches of the western deserts. Atop the equine ecology, meanwhile, were the cavalry mounts, sometimes mixed breed mustang or Kentucky thoroughbreds, associated with particular officers and, accordingly, given names and equivalent heroic status that marked them (in the estimation of Libbie Custer, wife of the famous General) as 'half-human' (Custer, 1961: 96). Used as operational warhorses, these animals played a key role in logistics and gesture politics on the battlefield in the shape of military manoeuvres, scouting missions and the all-important cavalry charge. According to Finerty, the Battle of the Rosebud (June 1876) clearly signalled the function and the flamboyance of the cavalry mount: 'Out of the dust of the tumult, at this distance of time, I remember how well our troops kept their formation, and how gallantly they sat their horses as they galloped fiercely up the rough ascent' (Finerty: 125).

The expansion of the United States into the western theatre during the middle years of the nineteenth century saw a massive expansion of numbers across equine ranks. In 1845, the army bill for forage stood at \$99,794.20, a figure which increased thirteen-fold to \$1,287,327.91 in 1850-1 – a signal of the increased military presence in the West associated with westward expansion and fed by the establishment of new army posts in Texas, California, New Mexico and Oregon. Subsequent years, especially the 1865-1890 period, saw commitment to horsepower increase with the deployment of the Plains Cavalry to remedy the 'Indian problem.' The scale of the equestrian economy under arms in the West during these years was impressive: the number of martial equines as of June 30, 1868, consisted of 9,433 cavalry horses, 749 artillery horses, 17,866 mules and 1,808 officers' mounts (Dobark 1998: 23). In turn, the growth of the frontier army created a series of important logistical issues: how to obtain the necessary horses and mules in the first place; how to transport them to where they needed to be; and how to train and maintain them at (often isolated) outposts. Horses were typically procured from the east, but increasingly the government sought remounts from traders and stock-raisers in the West. So crucial was the issue of horse supply that Percival Lowe, author of *Five Years a Dragoon, '49 to '54* (1906) and head of transportation for the working party that established Fort Riley in 1853 advised that the army should establish breeding stations in the trans-Mississippi region. This would ensure a steady stream of equine recruits as well as providing a 'showground' of fine specimens that would indicate to traders and stock raisers the 'kind' of horses the military wanted. Commenting on army procurement requirements at Fort Leavenworth, Lowe noted exacting standards from the commanding officer as to the specific qualities of a dragoon mount: 'Two or three times at evening stables the Major pointed out to Mr Calvert the kind of horses he wanted, the models that suited him best, all to be sorrels of good color – chestnut or red sorrels would do, but no light colored ones, no white noses – white feet not absolutely barred, but unless exceptionally sound would be rejected. Sound feet, flat, sinewy legs, sound hocks and

knees, arms and quarters well muscled, short, sinewy back, high withers, rangy neck, bony head, bold eye – no “hog eyes” – five years old, fifteen to sixteen hands, preferably fifteen and a half, all natural trotters and well broken to saddle’ (Lowe 1965: 118-9). Lowe himself was no stranger to the rigours of the martial equine economy – running 600 pack trains from the North Platte where the army wintered spare mules and driving them to Fort Leavenworth in the spring of 1857-8 in the service of the Utah Campaign, no small feat in an era before the railroad and faced with myriad threats from inclement weather to rustlers or Indian raiding parties.

Comanche joined the army payroll as a result of this growing horse-trading network. A bay horse of fifteen hands with a white star on his forehead, he roamed the southwestern plains, an area known as the ‘Great Horse Desert,’ from birth (c.1862) until his capture six years later as part of a wild horse roundup. The ‘mustangers’ (as the equine traders were known) caught wild horses, gelded them and then presented them for procurement. Comanche was purchased as part of an army consignment from a horse dealer in St Louis on 3 April 1868 for the sum of \$90. According to Edward Luce, one of the many writers who have celebrated Comanche in latter years, this internment augured good fortune for the horse: ‘no longer would Comanche range the plains of Texas and Oklahoma, nor would he stand hunchbacked in the river bottoms and the cottonwood trees seeking protection from snow blizzards. Those days were gone forever. He was a cavalry mount now. He would have corn, oats, and the best of hay for his fodder, not the hard straw-grass and brush roots he previously had to scrub and dig for. No more would he have to rub and scrape against a tree to get cockleburs out of his rough, shaggy coat – his master and rider would do that for him’ (Luce 1939: 7). Luce’s testimonial presented a somewhat rosy view of military life (aside from the assumptions of understanding equine cognitive preferences) but his artistic license did contain some salient reflection on the benefits of a cavalry career in terms of livery and livelihood, veterinary care and welfare.

Fort Leavenworth represented a key site in the horse economy of the frontier army. It was the home of the First Dragoon regiment and presided over in its early years by Stephen Kearney, career soldier who had seen service in the 1812 War and was the author of *The Cavalry Manual* (1840), a handbook for mounted soldiers that emphasised the gentle voice in horse training. As westward expansion proceeded apace, Leavenworth (along with a string of other forts, posts and camps that numbered more than 130 by 1874) serviced the protection of explorers, surveyors, settlers and travellers and emerged as a key staging post in the Indian Wars. Equine considerations developed accordingly (the First and Second Cavalry were founded in 1855 with specifically western mandates) while the requirements of remounting, acclimation and distribution dominated activity at the fort for, arguably, the remainder of the century. It was at Leavenworth that Comanche and forty other mustangs disembarked from the railroad to be tried out. They were duly branded with the letters ‘US’ on their left shoulder, with a regiment number and ‘C’ denoting cavalry on their left thigh and corralled for inspection. Major Joel Elliott regarded them as a fine lot.

Arriving at Leavenworth in spring 1868 to secure replacement animals for those lost during operations over the winter, Lieutenant Tom Custer (the brother of the General) spied Comanche along with his consignment and requisitioned them for the Seventh Cavalry. At another western outpost, Fort Hays, Kansas (established in 1866), Comanche began his training as an equine recruit. The regimen here (and indeed at other stations) was rigorous but fair, based on the remit of ‘adjusting this fine lot of horses so as to make the best use of them.’ Tenderfoot animals were placed with old-timers to learn new tricks. Acclimatisation meant getting accustomed to the military day with its seventeen calls from 5:50am to sundown; saddle and livery accoutrements; tolerance of drums, bugles and weapons fire and, of course, drill and bridle training. After each drill, the horses were watered and fed with corn: equine welfare remained a paramount consideration. As Lowe pointed out, horses could expect kind treatment from their instructors and any officer contravening the humane code was admonished sternly: ‘It was an ironclad rule that every man must be gentle with his horse. Abusing a horse was the unpardonable sin. Peevishness, kicking,

jerking, swearing at, the unnecessary spurring or violence of any kind would not be permitted to go unpunished, and non-commissioned officers were sure to report any infraction of the rule. Everything must be done for the comfort of the horse' (Lowe: 119).

Cavalry practice was as much about training the men as the horses. Mounted drill took place every day with sabre and pistol exercises, as much to instruct humans as their charges. Every recruit was given a copy of *Saddling and Bridling as Taught in the Seventh Cavalry* by Brevet Major General Gibbs and published the same year as Comanche entered service. A glance at period testimonials suggest a cross-species accord in which new recruits, two and four legged got used to one another and the military life. A. F. Mulford recalled bareback riding at camp with the Seventh near Bismarck, a practice manoeuvre 'to give you confidence in your ability to ride' as well as mounted training on the drill ground with hard targets for troops to 'see how many bullets they can put through the tack man' (Mulford 1878: 92). Lowe recalled the sometimes hilarious occasions where mounted troops headed for the watering hole after drill 'in outrageous disorder' and one day when he was a new recruit when his steed 'Murat' bolted at drill and provoked one Irish officer to write a song about it (Lowe: 76). With human and horses seen as raw materials to be necessarily conditioned to military ways, it was no surprise that the new men were sometimes called 'shavetails' after the fashion of the mules whose tails were shaved to make it easier to grab them. In time, meanwhile, the training needs of the equine martial economy led to a dedicated Cavalry School at Fort Riley, opened in 1893 as a 'school of instruction for drill and practice for cavalry and light artillery' where officers received instruction in hippology, horseshoeing and farriery, equitation and horse training, minor tactics, drill regulations and topography.

An operational fort with its full complement of equine functionaries needed a lot of fodder. The story of warhorse in the West is thus dominated by grain and grass. Animal feed was typically purchased at the nearest available markets while hay was procured by the farmed labour of troops near the posts (although if garrisons were newly established, under threat or on the march, local contractors were used). Such was the issue of raising fodder that General Dodge in 1865 sent mowing machines to the outposts in his department (where the cost of hay was \$20 to \$50 per ton by contract) in order to reduce the man hours used in troops toiling the nearby fields. The equine (and, indeed, broader subsistence) needs of an army station meant that early settlers saw military presence as both security device and veritable cash cow. Local farmers were delighted, for example, when the cavalry arrived at Fort Riley in 1853 (Dobark: 10). Elsewhere too, the requirements of food, forage, firewood and livery requirements led to the emergence of a buoyant frontier capitalism fuelled by the needs of army presence. John Bratt, working out of Fort Kearney as a freighter contracted to the government in 1866, toiled as a hay cutter in Goose Creek, a few miles away, with lucrative results. Selling for as much as \$126 per ton, Bratt made good money from the mule and cattle teams that came to the site from the fort on a daily basis to retrieve wood, logs and loose hay. It was the 'most exciting time' he ever experienced but a dangerous occupation, not least in the fact that local Indians saw a salient and easy way to attack military presence by burning fields, stealing camp equipment or ambushing contractors. Bratt remembered a 'constant state of siege.' In one particular incident, two workers played poker in their tent blissfully unaware of Indians stealing their horses, leaving 'the two mountaineers... angry and swearing' and having to walk to the fort to raise the alarm (Bratt 1921: 84-92).

The horse was, in the martial ecology of the West, what environmental historian Richard White has called 'an animal of enterprise' (White 1994: 256). *Equus* serviced the utility needs of the military in diverse ways. It also emerged as a key participant in the leisure economy of the western army. At Fort Riley, the officers integrated horses into the recreational life of the outpost. As reported by the *Junction City Union* of 19 March 1887, the Seventh Cavalry had constructed a half mile race track at the fort to stage competitive meets between stationed officers and local equestrians. One such event, held in May that year, pitted Lieutenant W.J. 'Slicker Bill' Nicholson in a horse race against local man,

Moses Waters. Nicolson prevailed. Horse talk dominated conversation at the fort, not least in the clubhouse that hosted race meets, polo matches and social events.⁴ As one officer recalled: 'Post life was then, as it is now, like life in a small town, and talk was largely of horses' (Pride 1926: 320-5). The *Republican* of 13 July 1900 applauded the camaraderie of equine events: 'for it arouses a healthy rivalry between the various organizations and furnishes a class of sport that is good for anyone to see.'⁵ With officers keen to play the game, local horse breeders also made a steal selling polo ponies at \$10-\$20 each.

And what of Comanche? He became a favourite of Captain Miles Keogh, who (in the customary fashion of cavalry officers) repaid the government to the tune of their purchase requisition and served as favoured mount on campaigns out of Fort Hays and, after 1873, Fort Lincoln, when the Seventh was posted there. A horse whose service marked the glory years of the Plains Cavalry (1865-1890) and who took part in scouting missions, boundary surveys, emigrant protection and military engagements, Comanche stood as a marker of equine presence in the pacification of the frontier. Unlike the thousands of remounts known only by number, this famous bay of the Seventh got a name that paid heed to his western breeding and his army service. Nomenclature itself told a story: making of Comanche a genuine frontier article in a lexicon of equine titles that saw officers name their steeds with familial, fraternal, 'pet-names', favour an exotic bent, reference physical or character attributes or pay homage to (as in the case of Comanche) historical moments of multi-species biography. Tethered at the farriers in the autumn of 1868 to have an arrowhead removed from his hindquarters – the result of a ruckus with Comanche Indians on the Cimarron River that September – the horse reputedly 'yelled' like a Comanche and his *nom de plume* was created.

Comanche on the March: War Horse and the Indian Wars

On 2 July 1874, Private Theodore Ewert described the Frontier Army on the march, roused by bugle calls of 'The General', 'Boots & Saddles', 'To Horse' and 'Advance':

The companies wheeled by fours into line of march, the officers dashing up and down the column with an air of importance, the men cheerful and full of chatter, and as we cast our eyes for the last time on Fort Lincoln up the valley, we saw the ladies of our command waving their scarfs and handkerchiefs in sad farewell, and just as we left the last ridge that overlooked the valley the men gave three hearty cheers (Frost 1976: 8).

Headed for the Black Hills, led by General George Armstrong Custer and his favourite steed 'Vic', the procession of Indian scouts, a battery of three Gatling guns and a cannon, an infantry battalion, and 110 wagons, flanked by the ten companies of the Seventh Cavalry, faced out on a 1200-mile trek over sixty days to plot opportunities for prospecting, science and potential sites for army posts. Also with the corps were a lot of horses, the two-mile train that snaked out of the fort in a symbolic display of martial power marked by its equine presence. From cavalry mounts at the front to the mule pack train at the rear, the horse proved a vital part of the machinery of the frontier army on the move. In fact, the full extent of the martial equine economy was most evident on the trail, so much so that its daily routines seemed to be governed by what I call 'horse time.' Napoleon famously said that an army marched on its stomach. The experience of the frontier army showed – in actual fact – that stomach was invariably an equine one.

The testimony of cavalry officers ably reveals 'horse time' in action. Fred Tobey, member of the L Troop of the Seventh Cavalry, left St Louis in July 1876 for the frontier and the Yellowstone Expedition. His diary talked of the importance of food and rations (for both men and horses), while the movement of the cavalry train was dictated by horsepower and the constraints of equine sustenance: the troop waited when the animals needed to graze, rest or take on water. Without forage, the train was hobbled and had to wait for the pack train of supplies (which was pulled by mules) to arrive. Meanwhile, the realities of campaigning across challenging terrain limited the miles covered each day. In chilly

conditions, the troop dismounted to walk with the horses every hour to 'keep them from freezing.'⁶ Edward S. Godfrey, second lieutenant in the Seventh, described in similar fashion the mechanics of the cavalry on the move. The horse remained at the very centre of activity and organization. On an average day, Custer rode ahead with the advance guard, selecting camping spots, two columns trailed behind, followed by the rear guard with the wagons, packs animals and beef herd. One troop marched up to half a mile ahead of the train and then dismounted to allow the horses extra grazing time. Each troop horse carried its rider, alongside 80-90 pounds of equipment and a hundred rounds of ammunition. Six mule wagons towed up to a massive 5,000 pounds of kit each and when they laboured or their packs fell the entire unit was slowed down. In total, the wagon train contained 150 vehicles, including thirty days forage and rations. The combined efforts of horsepower dragged the train between ten and forty miles a day, depending on 'the difficulties or obstacles encountered, by wood, water and grass, and by the distance in advance where such advantages were likely to be found' (Godfrey 1921: 7-8). Keen attention was placed on the welfare of the animals, as Godfrey noted, when the cavalry train stopped on a hot day, the horses unsaddled and men rubbed their backs until dry then turned them out to water and graze under control of the stable guard (consisting of one non commissioned officer and several privates). An hour after sunset when camp had been struck and the horses corralled to graze, the officers remounted and took their equine charges to watering holes before tying them nearer to the camp and feeding and grooming them. At the end of the day, horses were picketed outside the officer tents for security. Interestingly, as Godfrey noted, the 'horse time' of the American Indian was also noted, not least in the way in which the cavalry inspected pony droppings at abandoned camps to see how long ago their inhabitants had left (Godfrey: 16).

Another locus of horse labour on the trail was hunting. Gathering wild game represented a valuable source of food for the army when rations ran low. Men talked eagerly about suppers of buffalo and venison as vastly preferable to army bacon and hard tack. There was also a strong sporting tradition among the officers. 'Buck fever' proved a frequent affliction. Libbie Custer recalled the excitement of game seen near camp, and one officer so paralyzed by the sight of wild turkeys 'he became incapable of leading, to say nothing of firing his gun: he could do nothing but lie down, great strong man as he was, overcome with excitement' (Custer 1898: 33). Custer and his officers took time to hunt on the trail and rewarded their mounts with hard tack treats. Journeying across the prairie on favourite horses 'Vic' and 'Dandy,' Custer played pathfinder, commander and hunter hero with flourish. On one occasion, the over zealous general put a bullet through the brain of his horse by mistake, leaving him marooned a few miles from the column in 'Indian country.' Custer's experience might suggest the idea of recreational hunting in a military theatre as foolhardy, but sporting pursuits actually served as useful exercise for horse and rider given its training, patrol and mapping aspects. Custer remarked there was 'nothing so nearly resembling a cavalry charge as a buffalo chase' (Custer 1874: 47). Hunting also fended off tendencies to boredom and listlessness. Custer saw bison hunting as a route to 'break the monotony and give horses and men exercise' (Custer 1867). It also serviced the performative politics of the cavalry in an affectation for mounted heroics, masculine bonding and the symbolic claiming of ownership over space and animals. Described ebulliently by period witnesses were the sporting 'thoroughbreds' who the army hosted for hunting pursuits including eastern elites and foreign dignitaries. One outfit led by General Fitzhugh in 1870 boasted two companies as escort (some 300 men), as well as ice-houses to store game and wine, waiters in evening dress and French cooks. William Cody, employed as a hunting guide, recalled the revelry of the camp and the empty bottles strewn on the plains where the party had camped 'for years afterward' (Cody 1894: 137-9). According to army wife Katherine Fougera, the hunt brought 'a glamor to army life that nothing ever quite equaled' (Fougera 1942: 78).

When the frontier army entered the fray, meanwhile, the horse was a critical actor. In combat with Plains Indians, officers spoke of thundering pursuit, mounted engagements, strategic movements and equestrian codes. Fully cognisant of the importance of the horse

in indigenous life, the Cavalry took 400 ponies and mules from Cheyenne Dog Soldiers at the Battle of the Summit Springs (1869) and Custer had officers kill 800 horses belonging to the Cheyenne at Washita (1868). Of particular note in the horse culture of the western army was the preference of Custer to 'colour code' his companies by their horses. As he noted in *My Life on the Plains*, 'After everything in the way of reorganization and refitting which might be considered as actually necessary had been ordered, another step, bordering on the ornamental perhaps although in itself useful, was taken. This was what is termed in the cavalry "coloring the horses," which does not imply, as might be inferred from the expression, that we actually changed the color of our horses, but merely classified or arranged them throughout the different squadrons and troops according to the color' (Custer: 141). This 'uniformity of appearance' made it easy to identify troops from a distance, and not only for the Cavalry but also for their enemies. According to Indian accounts, the grey horses of Company E were the most obvious to spot in the melee of battle.

Military action certainly provoked a keen attachment between horse and rider, a sense of co-veterans in conflict, of symbiosis and shared gaze. Accordingly, some officers were sharply critical of Custer's plan to 'colour' the horses as it separated rider from favoured steed. Captain Albert Barnitz expressed consternation that his well-trained old chestnuts would be sent off to a different regiment and warned of desertions in the ranks (Utley 1977: 204-5). Horses earned plaudits for their tenacity of spirit, stirring service and endearing personal quirks. Western writer Owen Wister described the horse as 'his foster brother, his ally, his playfellow' (Wister 1895: xxvi). Comanche came in for applause as a veritable warhorse. 'He could work harder and keep in good flesh on less feed than any other horse in the regiment. He was equally good in the Indian Territory in Kentucky and in the cold regions of the Northwest. He had an easy, fast gait; could carry a man on a hard, all-day march and be fresh all the time' one observer commented.⁷ An altercation on the Saline River, Kansas in 1870 saw him shot in the right leg and lame for several weeks. Captain Edward Luce duly reported how he 'came through like an old soldier' (Luce: 44). Percival Lowe, Sergeant with the dragoons in the late 1840s and early 1850s and based mostly at Fort Leavenworth tallied up some 3,000 miles on his horse 'Chubb' during a summer campaign escorting wagon trains between forts: 'An officer said to me when talking of this campaign, 'Well, you did not have any mounted drill for some time after that!'" (Lowe: 119). Old horses were typically turned over to the Quartermaster to be auctioned and when Lowe's mount sold off to a Missouri farmer for \$50 the officer 'requested him to see that the horse was well cared for, which he promised to do, told me where he lived, and invited me to see him, which I did two years later, dined with him and told him and his wife the horse's history.' Lowe's replacement horse, a deep chestnut of sixteen hands called Bruce, in turn became 'my special pet; every soldier's horse ought to be' (Lowe: 75-6). As Lowe pointed out, the issue came down to one of trust: 'good men and horses having faith in each other will follow the right kind of leader to victory or annihilation without a murmur' (Lowe: 137-8). For some, even the humble mule earned adoration – General Crook famously became very attached to his mule Apache, who he preferred to ride for his surefooted stance and stamina, while teamsters took to decorating the bridles of their mules with fox or coyote tails to mark them apart.

Animal capital fuelled the military conquest of the plains, rendering *Equus* a highly prized commodity as well as loyal aide. Certainly, some would argue that the accord between cavalryman and mount was not always as rosy as Hollywood movies or nostalgic testimonials would have us believe (Peter Thompson, cavalryman with C Company, noted that his compatriots saw their steeds typically as 'restless brutes' (Magnussen 1974: 189)) but as a working animal, the value of the horse was unequivocal. As Colonel Clarence Clendenen noted: 'Often in fact, a horse was more important than a man. It was usually possible to recruit another man; it was often impossible to replace a lost horse' (Brown 1935: xii). Dependent on horsepower, issues of supply and maintenance proved decisive aspects of the military experience in the West. Mindful of the deleterious impacts of equine mortality during Civil War campaigns, Lincoln had authorized the appointment of a

veterinary surgeon (ranked at Sergeant-Major and paid \$75 a month) for each cavalry regiment (1861), a complement that was doubled with the creation of the Seventh to Eleventh regiments in 1866. Army veterinary provision may have improved but the demands of the western theatre comprehensively challenged the limits of care. Threats to equine wellbeing on the march were myriad, ranging from horse stealing and enemy combat to stampedes and accidents. Dr John Honsinger, appointed to the Seventh as veterinarian in 1869 was killed during a Sioux ambush in October 1873. Cavalrymen famously found horses from the Seventh on raids of Indian villages after 1876, while stealing seemed to be widespread in some segments of settler culture (a horse named 'Custer' was traced to a Canadian Mountie who bought him from a trader in 1879). According at least to Gen. O. E. Babcock who reported in 1866: 'I found all through the territories, where I inspected, a great many animals, horses and mules, with the brand "US".'⁸ Known as the 'terror of terror on the plains', a stampede raised the prospect of a whirling mass of equine hysteria that caught up horses and mules, wagons and men. On one occasion, careening animals from the Seventh (probably spooked by Indians or wolves) gathered together in a 'mad rush of destruction' that saw 600 horses and mules either escape or be killed (Lowe: 131).

The western landscape tested the mettle of man and horse alike in the shape of poor grazing, alkali streams, steep ravines and muddy rivers, snow and freezing rain. In this theatre, the greatest constraint on the healthy exercise of 'horse time' on the march was exhaustion and starvation. Comanche acquitted himself well – E A Garlington – Brigadier General of the Seventh: 'The horse *Comanche*, was a substantial and hardy animal well suited to the cavalry service of that day; a good walker and feeder; could live on what the plains afforded when grain was no longer available' (Brown: 31) – but many of his equine compatriots fared less well. On the Washita Campaign in the winter of 1869, David Spotts of the Nineteenth Kansas Volunteer Infantry offered a litany of equine threats on the trail. Camped at Nescatunga Creek, he and comrades dug into a sand bed for protection from freezing conditions and covered the horses in grass and saddle blankets. 'Had the horses not been blanketed well, and sheltered by the trees, some would have frozen to death' he noted. Some horses belonging to the regiment had bolted and two officers were sent off to find them – leaving a number of men without mounts and forced to walk or ride in the wagons. As more snow fell and rations ran low, troops were forced to eat bison jerky and horses graze on cottonwood trees. As consequence, Spotts noted now 'some of the horses are getting pretty weak and we have to go slow and stop often until the snow is gone and the feed is uncovered' (Spotts 1928: 54-70). The troop took to drilling on foot, which Spotts felt was done 'to keep us occupied and that we may learn more the duties of a soldier' while men trailed the mule teams hoping to pick up spilt corn to use for food. Ailing animals were duly killed: 'Whenever a mule or horse is too weak to travel he is left behind and before the rear guard leaves camp they are killed and any other property is burned. Wagons, saddles or harness are put in the fire so that there will be nothing the Indians can make use of.' (Spotts: 149).

During the campaigns of 1876, the average mount in the Plains Cavalry carried its rider more than 2,000 miles. Travelling across desolate and potentially hostile terrain, the issue of rations loomed large. Custer pressed hard and fast to rout the Indian and when forage and hard tack ran out (and the mule teams sent to the Black Hills to fetch supplies didn't return) conditions became desperate. Men walked to preserve the stamina of their mounts and when animals could walk no more, despatched them with a bullet. Finerty recorded how:

Our horses played out by the score, and between two and three hundred dismounted cavalrymen were marching in the rear of the wonderful infantry battalion. Every little while the report of a pistol or carbine would announce that a soldier had shot his horse, rather than leave it behind, with a chance of being picked up by straggling Indians. Some of the poor beasts fell dead from the effects of fatigue and want of proper forage, but a majority simply lay down and refused to budge an inch further.

Soldiers resorted to skinning their dead mounts and eating horse steak (an accompaniment to the roasted cacti they had resorted to but which had left many with dysentery). Lieutenant Lawson balked at the idea, proclaiming 'I'd sooner think of eating my brother!' but soon enough joined his comrades on what became known as 'horse rations.' As Finerty pointed out, 'hunger is a great sauce, and Lieutenant Lawson dined on horse steak, like the rest of us, before many days' (Finerty: 246-8). Lack of sustenance compromised the equine abilities of the train and also raised the spectre of insubordination. Officers conjured with the idea that Custer might be murdered and the General himself ordered the slaughter of company horses (amounting to some six hundred during the campaign) in order to maintain troop discipline. In the midst of this, Finerty managed to inject some black humour into proceedings, writing in his diary of the culinary experimentation of the trail thus: 'As I sampled all kinds of equine meat on the trip, I will give my opinion of that style of diet in brief: Cavalry horse, younger than preceding and not too emaciated, produces meat which resembles very bad beef; Indian pony, adult, has the flavor, and appearance of the flesh of elk; Indian pony, colt, tastes like antelope or young mountain sheep; mule meat, fat and rank, is a combination of all the foregoing, with poke thrown in' (Finerty 270). By the time the Seventh Cavalry reached the Little Bighorn in June 1876 they had been operating on half forage for six weeks: not a good grounding for battle.

Horsemanship and Heroics: Centaurs and Equine Celebrities

In his book *Horse, Foot and Dragoons: Sketches of Army Life at Home and Abroad* (1888), Rufus Zogbaum offered an impression of the Frontier Army at close of day resonant with equine presence: men lounging with cigars and their horses 'munching their evening allowance of grain,' other tethered to ropes 'while the soldiers are busied grooming them under the watchful eye of the sergeants. Huge mess-chests, bags of grain, cooking utensils black with the smoke of many a fire, lay about and some of the men are engaged in arranging the saddles and equipments.' The 'horse time' marked by the cavalry was starkly evident. The next day, trumpets brought all to attention, horses and mules 'neighing and stamping, awaiting the coming meal' as men breakfasted on antelope, beef, trout and coffee. At the sound of another bugle, the amassed contingent moved out:

Like one man they rise into their saddles and sit motionless. Still another signal, and like a machine started by some invisible power the column moves, one cannot help but admire the soldierly ease and grace with which they sit in their saddles, ranks well aligned, shoulders squared, heads erect, eyes to the front, their harness and equipments shining in the sunlight, not a buckle or strap out of place, carbines clean, and swinging at their sides ready for immediate use, brass-shelled cartridges peeping from the well-filled prairie belts, horses and riders moving with the quiet and orderly precision that long training and constant habits of discipline alone can create. And the horses! Did you ever see better mounts? See that troop of sorrels that is just now passing! They have been in the field for weeks, and have passed through stream and canon, over plain and desert, through thick alkali dust and sticky mud, yet how their coats glisten, and how proudly they arch their necks and champ their bits, moving along at a rapid walk, guided by the firm pressure of the practiced hands of their well-drilled riders!..., do not men and horses look ready for instant work, and work, too, of the most serious kind? (Zogbaum 1888: 105-119).

Zogbaum's vibrant account of mounted choreography spoke of a cavalry train both organic and mechanical, projecting American might into the wilderness and marching, with impeccable timing, to the same tune.

The relationship between horse and rider emerged as a critical part of the folkloric canon of the soldier hero. The horse – importantly – played a vital role in this drama. Equestrian skill marked Cody as a 'knight of the plains' and 'American centaur' while Custer's heroic mantle was invariably a mounted one. Libbie Custer described her husband

in customarily gushing prose as the soldier hero exemplar in perfect synchronicity with his steed: 'Horse and man seemed one when the general vaulted into the saddle. His body was so lightly poised and so full of swinging, undulating motion, it almost seemed that the wind moved him as it blew over the plain. Yet every nerve was alert and like finely tempered steel, for the muscles and sinews that seemed so pliable were equal to the curbing of the most fiery animal... With his own horses he needed neither spur nor whip. They were such friends of his, and his voice seemed so attuned to their natures... By the merest inclination on the general's part, they either sped on the wings of the wind or adapted their spirited steps to the slow movement of the march.' An intuitive connection (and command over) the horse marked Custer as both natural and noble. One of Custer's mounts, Dandy, had been picked out from a roster of 500 horses obtained by the army in winter 1868-9. Named for 'his spirited manner' and known, according to Libbie, for his 'proud little peacock airs he never forgot except when he slept' the character of the horse was adeptly reflected the character of his rider (Custer: 106-8). Known for his stamina, an exhausting bouncing stride and determination to ride at the front of the column, Dandy proved a perfect foil to the ostentatious general.

If Custer represented the most famous two-legged actor at the Battle of the Little Bighorn then Comanche was his four-legged equivalent. Many, in fact, assumed that he was Custer's steed so dazzling was his heroic status. When the Boy General and his men made their final cavalry charge on 25 June 1876, mystery surrounded their last movements. There was no doubt that the exhaustion felt by horse and man contributed to the rout, as did the foolhardy command decisions of Custer and the adept horsemanship of the Lakota and the Cheyenne led by Crazy Horse. When other regiments arrived at the battlefield two days later they found forty-two cavalymen of the Seventh and thirty-nine horses fallen on Last Stand Hill. Nearby, in a cottonwood grove on the Little Bighorn River was Comanche, weak and severely injured, a four-legged veteran standing alone as 'lone survivor.' Mystery surrounded his survival, as one period account put it: 'how the old war-horse escaped no one can tell.'⁹ Meanwhile, in the retelling of the Last Stand, there was a further misnomer – the epithet 'the only living thing to survive the Battle of the Little Bighorn,' discounted Lakota and Cheyenne enemy combatants and their horses as well as the remnants of Reno and Benteen's regiments fighting nearby. As for Custer's horses, Vic was reputedly spotted in an Indian encampment in later years while Dandy, who had been with the pack train and didn't see service, was retired from the army and placed with Custer's father.

Comanche's ascent into equine superstardom began with one officer recommending a bullet through his brain. Others, though, took pity on the horse, tended to his wounds with zinc and made him a reviving mash with Hennessy brandy. He was led fifteen miles across the bloody plains to a steamer, settled into a specially made stall and floated the 950 miles downstream to Bismarck. A signal of his growing fame and hallowed status as a carrier of collective mourning, claimants for 'saving' Comanche were myriad. At Fort Lincoln, Comanche was placed under the care of blacksmith Gustave Korn (who replaced the fallen Keogh as his de facto 'owner') and veterinarian Dr Charles Stein (who had joined the Seventh in July 1875) to begin a lengthy rehabilitation (including a specially designed belly sling in his stables as the animal could not stand). Eighteen months later he had recovered (albeit with an enduring taste for whiskey mash) to become a beloved mascot of the fort and Second Commanding Officer (in Keogh's absence). Fawned over by officers and visitors, Comanche enjoyed beer and sugar lumps and was reputedly at his happiest chumping his way through flowerbeds, wallowing in mud and rifling through rubbish bins. General Orders No.7 proclaimed by Colonel Samuel Sturgis in April 1878 mandated his special care. Valorised as a decorated veteran of the battlefield and regarded as a sacrosanct body, he was not to be ridden and allowed free rein at the post. Major Wey noted 'the first time that I saw "Comanche" I was on stable guard at old Fort Meade, Dakota, Terr. He was roaming around loose and was annoying our horses on the picket line when I tried to chase him away by picking up a small pebble and throwing it at him, and was cautioned by the corporal of the guard not to molest him in any way as it was a court-martial offence to

either strike or ride him.’¹⁰ Every June 25, Keogh’s famous mount was draped in a mourning shroud, dressed with stirrups facing backwards to celebrate the fallen and paraded as a fitting symbol of the tragedy of the Last Stand. He was, as the General Orders stated, a symbol of bloody tragedy, his battle scars able to communicate the pathos of that day more eruditely than any oral testimony. The only ordinances of their kind issued by the US Army, General Orders No.7 reflected a community, both local and national, coming to terms with the gallant catastrophe of the Little Bighorn and investing in the animal a special quality as mute witness. As Sturgis’ commanding note put it: ‘his very silence speaks in terms more eloquent than words of the desperate struggle against overwhelming odds’ (Luce: 68).

Comanche died in 1891 and was buried with full military honours but that was not the end of his legend. Instead, officers arranged for his body to be taxidermied by renowned practitioner Lewis Lindsey Dyche at the Kansas Natural History Museum, but having not paid the \$400 fee, Comanche remained on display in Kansas where he swiftly became a symbol of valour and martial sacrifice. He was transported to the Columbia Exposition in Chicago (1893) for display in the Kansas building. Although billed as an ‘old war horse’ by *The Report of the Kansas Board of the World’s Fair Managers* he stood in the Kansas building next to other taxidermy mounts from Dyche.¹¹ Across town, arguably in Comanche’s spiritual home in terms of cultural imprint, Buffalo Bill Cody wowed audiences with his equestrian skills in a triumphal ‘Wild west show’ that presented westward expansion in all its sabre-rattling and patriotic grandeur and featured Custer’s old rival, Sitting Bull. Back in the Kansas Natural History Museum, the plaque in front of Comanche’s permanent exhibit paraphrased Sturgis’ Orders in commemorating the ‘desperate struggle against overwhelming numbers of the hopeless conflict and of the heroic manner in which all went down on that fateful day’ (Dallas 1976: 13). Particular attention was lavished on the idea that within Comanche’s consciousness was locked the true story of the battle. The Seventh Cavalry was marked by ‘horse time’ and now its story appeared to be bound up in equine memory and given eternal life in the form of a taxidermy creation. As Lieutenant Henry Nowlan reputedly said as he spied Comanche roaming the battlefield site, ‘He still lives!’ (Godfrey: 38).

‘If Only He Could Talk’: Warhorses and the Winning of the West

According to Tom Swearingen of the University of Kansas Natural History Museum, Comanche has had more battles fought over him than he ever participated in as a warhorse of the Plains Cavalry (Lawrence 1989: 23). From historical associations and museums in Montana and South Dakota to the Custer National Battlefield, Yellowstone National Park and Fort Riley, interested parties vied to have him repatriated to a permanent resting place with them: marking the ‘after-life’ of Comanche just as contentious and intriguing as his army career. He remained through the twentieth century, an expert guide to the world of Custer, the Seventh Cavalry, and, more broadly, to westward expansion itself. For the first few decades of his posthumous display he was in the museum entrance, without a glass case and eagerly stroked by reverent onlookers. Some took hairs from his tail as their own souvenirs (meaning that Comanche went through several tails during the course of his ‘after-life’). Visitors saw his scars as marks of honour and traded in the idea of him as a living memento of the day – a reference both to the idea of eternal preservation embedded in the taxidermy concept itself and the cult of authentic witness. As *The Animal World* put it: “‘Not a soul survived to tell the tale,’ is a melancholy fact; but Comanche remains to connect the living with the dead.’¹² Photographs and toys carried forth the legacy of Comanche the romantic warhorse and poetic valedictions were made to his honourable service. A ‘stirring poem’ written out in full (often in press and officer journals) from Colonel John Hay offered stanzas to Custer’s heroic 300 in the fashion of Tennyson’s *Charge of the Light Brigade* illustrated Comanche’s hold over the national psyche:

On the bluff of the Little Big Horn,
At the close of a woeful day, Custer and his three hundred

In death and silence lay

And of all that stood at noon day,
In the fiery, scorpion ring,
Miles Keogh's horse at evening
Was the only living thing.¹³

A medium-sized bay horse descended from wild mustangs and captured by the US Army on a routine patrol had come to bear an illustrious and enduring mantle. As animal artefact, he bore the physical traumas of the Little Bighorn while at the same time earning hallowed status as 'lone survivor.' He trod a line between the wild and the domestic, celebrated as a product of the rough and ready frontier and a finely tuned beast under the subtle steer of the soldier hero. He was named after the Indian and rode with the Cavalry: a product truly of the West in the heady days of nineteenth-century conquest. Comanche symbolised the animal in war (in all its variety) but most definitely was invested with a 'half-human' personality, to quote Libbie Custer. As the twentieth century moved on, his cultural meaning changed. With the Seventh mechanized, Comanche became a noble signifier of a past age of warfare and a source of nostalgia to the old guard. To the Plains Indians, the sobriquet 'lone survivor' was symptomatic of the vantage of American empire, one that neglected to see the indigene as rightful resident of the West (the plaque in front of Comanche's exhibit was changed in 1971 to read 'symbol of conflict'). Refurbishment in 2005 attested to his continuing hold over the national imagination. While not been able to speak in the fashion of 1960s TV sensation Mr Ed, he was certainly a mouthpiece through which generations of American articulated their views on the West. Meanwhile, beyond the equine celebrity of Comanche lie the testimonials of thousands of warhorses on the American frontier, from the cavalry mount to the pack mule. Collectively, their history points to the integral role of 'horse time' in the frontier experience and the fertile terrain to be had from writing the 'four-leggeds' into history. The warhorse influenced the mechanics of westward expansion from transport and logistics to reconnaissance and mounted warfare. Warhorses also roamed the American West in symbolic guise, laden with cultural meanings and canonical carriers of martial mythology. As Sergeant Charles Windolph noted as the Seventh left Fort Abraham Lincoln six weeks before the Battle of the Little Bighorn: 'You felt like you were somebody when you were on a good horse, with a carbine dangling from its small leather ring socket on your McClelland saddle, and a Colt army revolver strapped on your hip; and a hundred rounds of ammunition in your web belt and in your saddle pockets. You were a cavalryman of the Seventh Regiment. You were a part of a proud outfit that had a fighting reputation, and you were ready for a fight or a frolic' (Hunt 1947: 53-4). We can only guess what Comanche might have said of the Seventh. He seemed to like the whiskey, at any rate.

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NOTES

1 See, for example, Zo-Tom, 'The Life of the Red-Man, Illustrated by a Kiowa Brave' (1877) and Howling Wolf, 'Scenes from Indian Life' (1877), Southwest Museum of the American Indian, Autry National Center, Los Angeles.

2 'Field Notes,' Ms5/33: George Grinnell collection, Southwest Museum.

3 Painting by White Swan (Crow artist) of the Battle of Little Big Horn, 1890–1904, Southwest Museum.

4 *Junction City Union*, 19 March 1887.

5 *Republican*, 13 July 1900.

6 Fred Tobey, 'Scraps from the Yellowstone Expedition of 1876,' Diary of Fred Tobey: Mss HM63327, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

7 L. Addison Bone, 'Spur, Pick and Winchester: Early Life and Adventures of John Caleb Lockwood. Cowboy, Gold digger, Indian fighter, c.1924,' 7. Mss Hm65754: Papers of John C. Lockwood, Huntington Library.

8 *House Executive Documents*, No. 20, 39 Cong., 2 Sess., 15; Cf. Gen. J. F. Rusling's inspection, *ibid.*, No. 45, 39 Cong., 2 Sess., 45.

9 'Comanche' from *The Animal World: A Monthly Advocate of Humanity*, 118/X (I July 1879), Keogh family papers and photographs, 1856-1894, 89.218, Box 1, folder 13: Newsclippings, Autry National Center.

10 'Comanche,' Diary of Fred Tobey.

11 *The Report of the Kansas Board of the World's Fair Managers* (Topeka: Hamilton, 1894), 36.

12 'Comanche,' *The Animal World*.

13 John Hay, 'Miles Keogh's Horse' *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1879. Written out in full in the Diary of Fred Tobey.