

BUFFALO ECONOMY

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Buffalo Economy Report

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The buffalo was the ethos of the Plains Indian culture. Their entire way of life was centered on this one creature that could provide them with sustenance and creative mythologies. Their livelihood was completely focused and dependent upon the buffalo while these nomadic clans moved across the plains during prehistoric times. Their buffalo-based culture might go back thousands of years. No one knows the exact time of the emergence of the Plains Indians.

During their prehistoric times, life was difficult. The horse had not yet been introduced to the Great Plains. Equestrians were to come later. Therefore, a necessary seasonal migration was dependent upon the dog. The Blackfoot refer to this period as the “dog days”. There were no other animals to help transfer the cargo from one location to another. The dog was the “locomotive” which transferred the camps. “Each family was responsible for the movement of its own baggage. Its largest and heaviest possession was the tipi, a conical lodge with a foundation of stout poles over which was stretched a cover of buffalo hides. The size of this Indian home was limited by the weight that its’ owner’s wolf-like dogs could haul. A strong dog could drag a load of about seventy-five pounds on the A-shaped, wooden travois. A lodge cover made from six or eight buffalo cow skins was a good load for one of these dogs”.¹

The dogs were also used to help in the buffalo hunt, especially the surround. By “cutting out” members of the buffalo herd, the Indians would often succeed in grouping them together, then, finally closing in on them. As the dog barked and kept them bunched together, the hunters would let their arrows fly until several buffalo were killed and the herd disbursed. The Indians used other

methods during their hunts. The buffalo drive was an ingenious tactic used to drive them into a corral. Once there, they could not escape because the Indians had lain cross poles covered with ice and buffalo dung in front of the entry to the corral. It was too slippery for the buffalo to climb back up the hills. The sacred song of the beaver bundle owner and his sacred stone worked! The hunt was successful.

No meat on inner organs was wasted. The hunters ate many of the choice pieces of liver, etc. right on the spot, while butchering the beast. Special pieces were given to the bundle owner and the successful hunter received the hide and ribs.

The importance of the buffalo cannot be overly stressed. The following statement emphasizes the value of the buffalo both physically and metaphysically: "If God was the creator and overseer of life, if the morning star, moon and Mother Earth combined their talents to give birth and hope to the Indian, if the Sun was the dispatcher of wisdom and warmth, then the buffalo was the tangible and immediate proof of them all, for out of the buffalo came almost everything necessary to daily life – including his religious use as an intermediary through which the Great Spirit could be addressed; and by which the Spirit often spoke to them. In short, the buffalo was life to the Plains Indians until White man's goods and ways first eliminated and then replaced the animal". 2

With the "heavens" providing the very essence of life, the buffalo was also a solid foundational platform for myth and spirituality. What else could the Indians

ask for? The dog had been loyal and hardworking, but a new four-legged animal was about to enter the picture – the horse.

The horse was the impetus that ended the slower “dog days” and fueled the emergence of a fiery new Plains Indian culture that was now ablaze with a new energy! The Indian’s adaptation to the horse opened up a new era for the Plains Indians. No other six words could be more explicable in identifying a culture than the title of Thomas E. Mails’ book, “The Mystic Warriors of the Plains”.³

Introduced in the 1600’s, by the Spaniards, the horse flourished and multiplied on the Great Plains. Each Plains Indian culture quickly adapted to the horse. This tremendous asset to the Indians was the key to their new hunting methods and military machine. There is an account of the Piegan Indians first contact with the horse. “About the year 1730, as nearly as can be determined from the recollections of an aged Indian who confided to David Thompson nearly six decades later, the Shoshones surprised their traditional Piegan enemies with a strange new weapon – big footed animals on which they rode swift as a deer.”

4. The next one hundred years would be known as the Golden Era of the Plains Indians.

With the horse, their new form of transportation, the Plains Indians could easily follow and make use of the Buffalo Economy. “A horse packing two hundred pounds on its back or hauling three hundred pounds on the travois could move four times the load of a heavily burdened dog twice as far in a day’s march. So, animal for animal, the horse was eight times more efficient than the dog as a

burden bearer. The application of horsepower to camp movement thus enabled the Blackfeet to accumulate more property and to move it faster and farther as well.”⁵ In order to understand just how important the buffalo was to all Plains Indian societies, I have included a chart, which lists the uses of the buffalo.⁶

HIDE

Buckskin:

Moccasin tops, cradles, winter robes, begging, breechcloths, shirts, leggings, belts, dresses, pipe bags, pouches, paint bags, quivers, tipi covers, gun cases, lance covers, gun cases, lance covers, coup flag covers, dolls

Rawhide:

Containers: clothing, headdresses, food, medicine bags, shields, buckets, moccasin soles, rattles, drums, drumsticks, splints, cinches, ropes, thongs, saddles, stirrups, knife cases, bull boats quirts, armbands, lance cases, horse masks, horse forehead ornaments, bullet pouches, belts

HAIR

Headdresses, saddle pad filler, pillows, ropes, ornaments, halters, medicine balls

HORNS

Cups, fire carrier, powderhorn, spoons, ladles, headdresses, signals, toys

TAIL

Medicine switch, fly brush, lodge exterior decorations, whips

SKIN OF HIND LEG

Moccasins or boots (preshaped)

HOOF & FEET

Glue, rattles

MEAT

(Every part eaten), pemmican (converted), hump ribs – immed., jerky (converted), inner parts eaten on the spot

SKULL

Ceremonies, sun dance, prayer

BRAINS

Hide preparation

TONGUE

Best part of meat

BEARD

Ornamentation of apparel & weapons

BLADDER

Sinew pouches, quill pouches, small medicine bags

MUSCLES

Sinew: bows, thread, arrows, cinches, glue

SCROTUM

Rattles

PAUNCH

Lining used for buckets, cups, basins, dishes

BONES

Knives, arrowheads (ribs), shovels, splints, winter sleds, arrow straighteners, saddle trees, war clubs, scrapers (ribs), quirts, awls, paint brushes (hipbones), game dice

WHOLE ANIMAL

Totem, clan symbol, white buffalo sacred, adult yellow rare – prized

BUFFALO CHIPS

Fuel, signals, ceremonial smoking

FOUR-CHAMBERED STOMACH

First stomach contents: frostbite, skin diseases

Liner: container for carrying and storing water, cooking vessel

The above tabulate is clearly a blueprint of the importance of the buffalo to the Plains Indian economy. This animal was all encompassing for the Plains Indians culture.

CONCLUSION: SYNTHESIS OF IDEAS

In conclusion, the dog and horse were both important animals to the Plains Indian cultures. However, by size alone, the dog could carry or drag only a limited amount of cargo. There was simply no comparison between the two when it came to moving camp. They did serve similar purposes but the introduction of the horse accelerated and advanced a great culture, which was already in place. Without the dog, the Plain Indians would have been restricted to a Paleolithic hunting and gathering culture – on foot alone.

Not only did the horse provide a means by which to move larger and heavier burdens but the horse also catapulted the Plains Indian into a new golden era. They became the unrivaled equestrians in the world.

The United States Government knew that the only way to fully conquer the Plains Indians was to exterminate the buffalo. They did!

“That was a sacrament violation. You can see in many of the early nineteenth-century paintings by George Catlin of the Great Western Plains in his day literally hundred of thousands of buffalo all over the place. And then, through the next half century, the frontiersmen, equipped with repeating rifles, shot down whole herds, taking only the skins to sell and leaving the bodies there to rot. This was a sacrilege.” 7

With the eradication of the buffalo, the phlegmatic United States Government proceeded to extirpate the Plains Indian cultures. The excoriation of the Plains Indians continues to this day. This destruction would not have happened without Eurocentric doctrinarianism. However, the effete American Indians refuse to be desiccated and their will and spirit is now being rejuvenated!

REFERENCE LIST

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- 4 Ewers, John C. (1958). *The Blackfeet – Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (p. 21) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press
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