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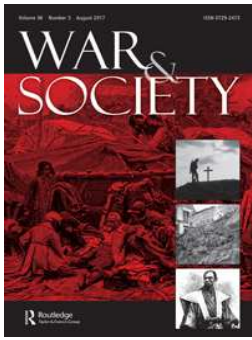
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## The story of Comanche: horsepower, heroism and the conquest of the American West

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# The story of Comanche: horsepower, heroism and the conquest of the American West

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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 was a critical moment in the history of the American West. It also saw the death of one of the region's most famous cavalry horses, Comanche, who succumbed to colic in 1891 aged twenty-nine. Famously billed as 'the only living thing to survive the Battle of the Little Bighorn', this article uses Comanche as a locus around which to examine the history of warhorses in the military culture of the American West, and, more broadly, to point towards a growing scholarship on war and the environment that emphasises the usefulness of such themes as spatiality and inter-species exchange in embellishing our understanding of the experience, impact and cultural memory of war. Not only does Comanche's lifespan (c.1862–1891) usefully coincide with the federal government's final conquest of the West but his equine biography serves as valuable testament to the use of horses in the US military as both practical and symbolic agents of American expansionism.

**KEYWORDS** horses, environmental history, American West, animals, US Cavalry, Indian Wars, heroism, warhorse

In an essay bemoaning the lack of environmental treatments of the American Civil War, Jack Temple Kirby pointed out that: 'Military historians preoccupied with combat on specific landscapes *almost* do environmental history'. While such issues as disease, topography and climatic conditions have long been incorporated into historical analyses of conflict, it is fair to say that a comprehensive scholarship on war and the environment has been rather slower to emerge. Even the new military history, with its

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focus on exploring the impact of war on society, culture and politics, has typically shied away from looking at ecological relations beyond their role as ‘obstacles or advantages’. As such, this article issues forth a call to arms (of sorts) by emphasising three things: (a) the growing and sophisticated dialogue in environmental history that pays heed to the transformative impact of war on ecosystems (and vice versa); (b) the potential of a fruitful dialogue between environmental historians and military historians who have been trudging the same turf and trenches but noticing rather different things; and (c) the particular position of animals in this eco-cultural story. Somewhat surprisingly, the animal has received relatively short shrift in the developing environmental scholarship on warfare and has, more typically, been the subject of polemical or popular writing (thinking about horses in particular, it is hard to avoid the cultural imprint of Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse* and the subsequent play and Spielberg movie). Writ broadly, then, my intention here is to point towards the value of incorporating human and non-human actors (or hybridity, to use the terminology of Brian Drake’s *The Blue, The Gray and the Green* (2015)) within our historical discourses on war, environment and society, and to provide a tentative look at how we might usefully navigate the history of warfare using ideas of biotic encounter, animal biography and inter-species entanglement.<sup>1</sup>

And so to Comanche. A bay horse descended from wild mustangs, he was captured by an army patrol on a round-up exercise in 1868 before being broken and mobilised 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), conferring on him a unique vantage as a (mute) witness to the Indian wars. According to the *Bismarck Tribune*, ‘he was not a great horse, physically talking; he is of medium size, neatly put up, but quite noble looking’. Found wandering and

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written in conjunction with an Autry National Center Fellowship (2012–2013) and was presented as a paper at the ‘War Horses of the World’ conference, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 3 May 2014. Jack Kirby, ‘The American Civil War: An Environmental View,’ National Humanities Center (2001), available online at <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntuselnd/essays/amcwar.htm>; John Whiteclay Chambers, ‘New Military History: Myth or Reality,’ *Journal of Military History*, 55 (1991), 395–406; Brian Allen Drake, ed., *The Blue, The Gray and the Green: Toward An Environmental History of the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 2, 7. Scholarship on environmental history and war has tended to foreground issues of resources, logistics, disease, ecological impact and the symbolic use of ‘nature’. See, for instance: Richard Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds., *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of Warfare* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004); Edmund Russell, *War and Nature: Fighting Humans and Insects with Chemicals from WW1 to Silent Spring* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John McNeill and Corinna Unger, *Environmental Histories of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Charles Closmann, ed., *War and the Environment* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 2009); Chris Pearson, Peter Coates and Tim Cole, *Militarized Landscapes: From Gettysburg to Salisbury Plain* (London: Continuum, 2010); Chris Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). Novelist Jilly Cooper’s *Animals in War* (London: Heinemann, 1983); Juliet Gardener, *The Animals’ War* (London: Portrait, 2006) exemplify the popular writing on animals and war, while Colin Salter, Anthony Nocella and Judy Bentley’s edited collection, *Animals and War: Confronting the Military-Industrial Complex* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014) approaches the issue from a Critical Animal Studies perspective. Animals receive more specific historical scrutiny in Hilda Kean, ‘Greyfriars Bobby and Black Beauty Go to War,’ in *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (London: Reaktion, 1998), 165–79; Ryan Heidger, ed., *Animals and War* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially relevant to this article is Riita-Marja Leinonen’s chapter, ‘Finnish Narratives of the Horse in WW2,’ 123–50.

wounded on the prairie battlefield, Comanche was nursed back to health and paraded in full martial finery. Awarded a symbolic purchase, this formerly unremarkable horse became a conduit to Custer's martyrdom and a way to engage emotionally with the collective memory of trauma. Even his 'after-life' proved a distinguished one. Following a funeral service with full military honours (the second American horse to receive such an accolade was 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.<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, beyond the individual story of Comanche lies a broader 'cross-species' history of human–animal interaction that this article seeks to reflect on. In this it draws from historical work on horses in other places (notably from Africanist Sandra Swart) and as well as Donald Worster's clarion call to consider the 'four-leggeds' as actors in processes of westward expansion. Just as Worster playfully points out that General Custer could more easily be left out of a history of the West than *bison bison*, the same is true for *equus ferus caballus*. Or, as David Gary Shaw notes in his discussion of animal agency and the case of Wellington's horse Copenhagen, 'historical agency is likely always to involve human beings, but there is also space for animals to act with people'. From cavalry mounts 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 utilised by American Indians to oppose it). Just as the 'iron horse' facilitated processes of frontier expansionism, so too did its biological namesake. The mobilisation of the horse as an animate unit of production spoke of an era of changing organisation, mechanisation and systemisation in the post-bellum US military. At the same time, the horse in the Western army was adeptly suited to combat in the trans-Mississippi theatre and represented an important vector through which the military were able to navigate, claim and control space in a period where distance and mobility were significant compromising factors to federal dominance. The horse also harboured an emblematic as well as pragmatic function, most notably in the emerging mythology of the mounted Western hero as exemplified by the likes of George Custer, Bill Cody and Theodore Roosevelt, iconic figures of the frontier period who drew at least some of their masculine swagger from a life in the saddle. A transporter of people and supplies, a carrier of empire, nationalism and science and a performing animal embedded in a

<sup>2</sup> *Bismarck Tribune*, 10 May 1878.

culture of frontier mythmaking, the story of Comanche thus speaks to an important (and, indeed, overlooked) history of warhorses in the American West.<sup>3</sup>

## Plains Indians and the horse

A history of the Western warhorse — what Swart theorises as ‘horsetory’ — 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. The arrival of *Sunka Wikan* — ‘the sacred dog’ — influenced indigenous life in formative ways: a keen demonstration of how animal capital exerted a powerful imprint on political, social, economic and environmental dynamics. Enabling fast and effective combat, transportation and hunting, the horse profoundly changed the nature of indigenous subsistence as well as impacting on ecological relations and spatial sensibilities. It was, according to Western historian Elliott West, a transformative agent that provided ‘a heady feeling of suddenly widening potential’. The mobility delivered by the horse led to expanding possibilities for trade while hunting and gathering practices were transformed by the harnessing of its biotic energy. As territories were shaped and power relations established, this horse culture had a revolutionary effect on social lives and geopolitical networks. Engaged in four days of prayer to decide whether to trade horses with the Comanche, one of the Cheyenne priests imparted a message from tribal deity Maheo that paid heed to the far-reaching consequences of embracing an equestrian-based culture: ‘If you have horses everything will be changed for you forever. You will have to move around a lot to find pasture for your horses. You will have to give up

<sup>3</sup> See Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010) and ‘Horses in the South African War, c1899–1902,’ *Society and Animals*, 18 (2010), 348–66; Donald Worster, ‘Other People, Others Lives,’ in *An Unsettled Country: Changing Landscapes of the American West* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 55–90; ‘David Gary Shaw, ‘The Torturer’s Horse: Agency and Animals in History,’ *History and Theory*, 52 (December 2013), 146. Juliet Clutton-Brock’s *A History of the Horse and Donkey in Human Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) provides an instructive general survey. Comanche has been the subject of a number of popular histories, see Anthony Amaral, *Comanche: The Horse that Survived the Custer Massacre* (Los Angeles, CA: Westernlore Press, 1961); David Appel, *Comanche: The Story of America’s Most Heroic Horse* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1951); Barron Brown, *Comanche: The Sole Survivor of All the Forces in Custer’s Last Stand* (Kansas City, MO: Burton Publishing Co., 1935); David Dallas, *Comanche Lives Again* (Manhattan, KS: Centennial, 1954); David Dary, *Comanche* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1976); Margaret Leighton, *Comanche of the Seventh* (New York: Ariel Books, 1957); Edward Luce, *Keogh, Comanche and Custer* (St. Louis, MO: J. S. Swift, 1939); Robert Mengel, *Comanche: Silent Horse on a Silent Field* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1968). Broader academic treatments of horses in the American West include Frank Dobie, *The Mustangs* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 1952); John Ewers, *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1955); Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *His Very Silence Speaks: Comanche – The Horse That Survived Custer’s Last Stand* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Press, 1989); Robert West Howard, *The Horse in America* (Chicago, IL: Follett Publishing Co., 1965); Frank Rose, *The Indian and the Horse* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955); Deanne Stillman, *Mustang: The Saga of the Wild Horse in the American West* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) and J. Edward de Steiguer, *Wild Horses of the West* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011). James Ottevaere, *American Military Horsemanship* (n.p., 2005); Gregory Unwin, *The US Cavalry* (Norman, OK: Red River Books, 2003); Emmitt Essin, *Shavetails and Bell Sharps: The History of the U.S. Army Mule* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Arnold Watson, ‘The Mule: The Worker That “Can’t Get No Respect”,’ *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 112 (2008), 34–50; Roman Jarymowycz, *Cavalry From Hoof to Track* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008) offer perspectives on the use of equines in the US Cavalry.

gardening[,] live by hunting and gathering, like the Comanches. And you will have to come out of you[r] earth houses and live in tents ... You will have to have fights with other tribes, who will want your pasture land or the places where you hunt. You will have to have real soldiers, who can protect the people. Think, before you decide'.<sup>4</sup>

The Cheyenne, in common with most of the other tribes that jostled for territory on the plains by the early nineteenth century, readily incorporated horses into their cycles of subsistence. Many had previously observed practices of resource diversification, but now, with the bison herds rendered more accessible, they adopted a year-round hunting culture that centred almost exclusively on the iconic herbivore of the plains. Whereas ancestors had run the herds on foot, using fire and flags to guide them into enclosures and ravines or over cliffs, the speed and efficiency of a mounted pursuit fundamentally changed the territorial and ecological dynamics of bison hunting, as environmental historians Drew Isenberg and Dan Flores have illuminated. Unsurprisingly given its usefulness, indigenous groups became expert at the selective breeding of horses — 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. Period testimony from fur trader Alexander Henry ably illustrates the synchronous relationship that had developed between horse and rider as well as their commanding presence on the prairie: 'we did not advance far before we met a small party of Schians [Cheyennes] on horseback. They were young men sent to meet us. They all gave us a friendly shake of the hand. Their horses were most beautiful, spirited beasts; some were masked in a very singular manner, to imitate the head of buffalo, red deer, or cabbrie [pronghorn antelope] with horns, the mouth and nostrils — even the eyes — trimmed with red cloth. This ornamentation gave them a very fierce appearance'.<sup>5</sup>

The ability of the horse to carry its rider across terrain quickly and effectively changed the ways in which indigenous communities related to the worlds they inhabited. The consequences of this were social as well as spatial. As Shepard Krech III has noted, the rise of equestrianism across the plains encouraged a culture of individualism, private property acquisition and market economics. Horses enabled this process by literally increasing 'the carrying capacity' of the tribe as well as serving as objects of capital themselves. Such aspects inevitably fed into the military theatre, where equine animals became valuable tools, commodities and trophies. The value of a horse was such that Plains Indians entered into raids or battles with the specific aim of acquiring equine prizes (some even went into battle on foot, expressly with the intention of returning on horseback). On one level, the stealing of animals from the enemy represented a pragmatic manoeuvre that facilitated a useful command over space. As one commentator noted of the Apaches in the south-west, raiding parties were 'voracious' in their efforts to seize cattle and horses from settlers, the former of which were relished as food and the latter prized for their tactical value, because 'as a result of the Spanish inhabitants

<sup>4</sup> Swart, *Riding High*, 197; Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 54; Cheyenne priest cited in Colin Calloway, *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 307.

<sup>5</sup> See Dan Flores, 'Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800–1850,' *Journal of American History*, 78.2 (1991), 465–85; Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the American Bison, An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Alexander Henry and David Thompson, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest* ed. Elliott Coues (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897), I: 377.

being forced to go on foot, they are able without resistance to obtain possessions of the province'. At the same time, the horse-raid was marked with special symbolic purchase. The Cheyenne and the Comanche considered the capture of horses an intensely heroic act, while the Crow and the Cree celebrated not only the taking of horses but their taking under particularly dangerous circumstances. As Frank Roe remarked, the horse was not just a 'cavalry arm' to enable expeditious movement but an animal surrounded with a special aura: 'not only the means of war; it was also the end'.<sup>6</sup>

Recognised as a carrier of military, economic and social power, the proper care and maintenance of horses for warfare proved essential. George Grinnell in his studies of the Pawnee and the Cheyenne observed how animals 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'. In an attempt to preserve the vigour of their favoured steeds, indigenous warriors rode to the site of battles on ponies (or even mules). On the field itself, most tribes preferred to dismount and enter the fray on foot (often hoping to return riding horses belonging to vanquished foe). Those that did adopt the mounted charge showed unparalleled skills of horsemanship, substantiating in full what David Shaw called the dynamic calibration or 'unity' between horse and rider in war. The Comanche swirled in a mass of hooves and hollers, moved into range, then picked off their enemies only to move beyond reach. Riding bareback and at breakneck speed, warriors dodged enemy fire by hugging the flanks of their steeds and shooting (with bow and rifle) on the ride. Circling and weaving, flowing over the contours of the land before dissolving into the sweeping grasslands in all directions, such horse-bound antics ably illuminated the flexible spatial dynamics of equestrian combat as well as contravening the tactical conventions of warfare in a fashion that confounded and enthralled the US Cavalry in equal measure.<sup>7</sup>

The integral role played by *equus* in the martial ecology of the plains was reflected in indigenous art, story and song. Ceremonies and rituals evoking good hunting, longevity and swiftness in battle were marked by equine presence. 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 for the fight. Animal combatants 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 bridles and masks, while their bodies were painted in bright colours (according to one commentator this marked them as a predator) and daubed with the signs of protective deities and icons to denote speed and power (notably the zigzag). Also significant was the importance of the horse in the development of heroic codes and 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 reflection of

<sup>6</sup> Shepard Krech III, *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 136; M. Hackett, '1926–37: Historical documents relating to New Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, and approaches thereto' (Washington, DC, n.d.), 111. Held in 'Apache research material: Horses,' Ms.7/ALC.3.35; Hodge Collection, Southwest Museum of the American Indian, Autry National Center, Los Angeles (hereafter cited as SWM); Frank Gilbert Roe, *The Indian and the Horse* (Norman, OK: University of Nebraska Press, 1955), 227.

<sup>7</sup> 'Field Notes,' Ms5/33; George Grinnell Collection, SWM; Shaw, 'The Torturer's Horse,' 161–3.



what N. Scott Momaday calls the ‘centaur spirit’ and a signal of the snaking contours of inter-species encounter, identity and space in the West. In the case of the painted warhorse, the animal itself could even be ‘read’ as a testimonial landscape of conflict — 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. Also worth mentioning was the fact that notable fighters sported an equine identity — Crazy Horse being the most famous — while stories and artwork evocatively captured the status of the horse in indigenous warrior tradition. A ledger book drawn by Kiowa artist Half Moon offered a vibrant image of a mounted warrior in full regalia, with horse and rider both wearing the same ‘armour’ (a practice also borrowed from the Spanish), while the published oratory of Lakota warrior Black Elk resonated with equine visions, the ritual performance of war and the metaphorical binds connecting various human and non-humans across an animate landscape of memory. One need only take a look at the famous drawing on muslin of the Little Bighorn by White Swan, a Crow scout working for the Seventh Cavalry, to see the centrality of the horse in the military practice and cultural imagination of the Plains Indian.<sup>8</sup>

## 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, ably substantiating the importance of ‘horsepower’ as a governing dictum and paying heed to Swart’s depiction of horses in the South African War (1899–1902) as ‘mobile, breathing armaments’. On a basic level, horses served the needs of transportation: either carrying men or equipment and allowing ground to be covered fast. Such attributes had far-reaching importance in the context of westward conquest, where horses became vital agents in the supply, communication and maintenance of army outposts, and, through deployment in military campaigns, in wresting control of the region’s resources from the indigene. As such, the horse was a carrier of empire and a pragmatic device by which the federal government was able to assume command over an expansive, unpredictable and sometimes unyielding, space. More provocatively, we might even view the organisation of the frontier army (both infantry and cavalry units) in terms of an equine hierarchy that stretched from mule to cavalry mount, a faunal ranking order in which different representatives of the genus performed distinct jobs and on which were conferred particular identities.<sup>9</sup>

At the base of this pyramid of horsepower was the mule — maligned for its stubbornness and proclivity to bray loudly, and typically used as a pack animal. It was, put simply,

<sup>8</sup> Field Notes,’ George Grinnell Collection; Momaday quoted in Elliott West, ‘The Impact of Horse Culture,’ *History Now*, 28 (June 2011), 1; Castle McLaughlin, ed., *A Lakota War Book from the Little Bighorn: The Pictographic Autobiography of Half Moon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Zo-Tom, ‘The Life of the Red-Man, Illustrated by a Kiowa Brave’ (1877), SWM; Howling Wolf, ‘Scenes from Indian Life’ (1877), SWM; John G. Neihart, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972 [1932]).

<sup>9</sup> Swart, *Riding High*, 203–4. For introductions to the US Army in the West, see: Robert Wooster, *The American Military Frontiers: The United States Army in the West, 1783–1900* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2009) and *The Military and United States Indian Policy* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Robert Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue; the United States Army and the Indian, 1848–1865* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) and *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

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 marginalisation, the mule was one of the rank and file: often a 'hidden' actor in the dramatic telling of the equine frontier. 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'. 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 more inaccessible and arid parts of the West. Of particular significance was the Army Pack Train Service, authorised by General Crook in 1867 and regarded by celebrator J. A. Breckons as 'one of the most important though least heard of adjuncts of the United States Army'. Headed up by Colonel Thomas Moore and based in Camp Carlin near Cheyenne, the service provided 'rapid response' supply trains for military units across the West. Comprising of nine men, forty-seven or forty-eight pack mules and a 'bell' horse (which served as pack leader and carried no freight), Moore boasted that his teams could be deployed where needed with only six hours notice. In the 'middling ranks' were the horses used for transit and freight in the infantry regiments, while atop the equine ecology were those animals ridden under the colours of the US Cavalry. These mounts were sometimes mixed breed mustangs or Kentucky thoroughbreds, associated with particular officers and, accordingly, given names and equivalent heroic status that marked them (in the estimation of Libbie Custer) as 'half-human'. Used as operational warhorses, the cavalry horse played a key role in logistics and gesture politics on the battlefield in the shape of military manoeuvres, scouting missions and combatant engagements. Interestingly, however, the 'thundering charge' of the Hollywood western was an embellishment of cinematography (a notable exception being Colonel Edwin V. 'Bull' Sumner of the First Cavalry's charge on the Cheyenne in 1857). Typically, the usual practice of the US Cavalry in the West was to use horses for the long march, reconnoitre and approach, but once on the field to fight dismounted, with one trooper left behind to tend the horses for three of his comrades (this revision to traditional cavalry practice based on tactical mobility was first used by General Phil Sheridan against the Confederates in the Civil War). Finerty's description of the disastrous Battle of the Rosebud (June 1876) clearly signalled the function and the flamboyance of the cavalry mount and its fundamental utility as a carrier across space rather than a 'weaponised' animal embedded in the final charge: '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 ... We got that line of heights and were immediately dismounted and formed in open order as skirmishers along the rocky crest'.<sup>10</sup>

The expansion of the United States into the Western theatre during the middle years of the nineteenth century saw a massive expansion in equine ranks. In 1845, the army

<sup>10</sup> Jason Hribal, 'Animals, Agency and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below,' *Human Ecology Review*, 14.1 (2007), 101–111; John F. Finerty, *War-path and Bivouac: The Conquest of the Sioux* (Chicago, IL: Donohue & Henneberry, 1890), 63–4, 125; J. A. Breckons, 'The Army Pack Train Service,' *Recreation*, 6.5 (May 1897), 426–8; Elizabeth Custer, *Boots and Saddles* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961 [1884]), 96.

bill for forage stood at \$99,794.20, a figure which increased thirteen-fold to \$1,287,327.91 in 1850–1851 — 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 the commitment to horsepower increase with the deployment of the cavalry to the plains in order 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. If the symbiotic relationship between the American Indian and the bison mandated (at least to some army and federal officials) a ‘planned war’ on the animal, the horse was deployed in a rather different capacity, its status as animal ally and ability to advance command over Western topography rendering it of considerable strategic importance. In turn, the growth of the frontier army created a series of important spatial and 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. Writing in 1833, Colonel H. C. Brish had nothing but praise for the Western mustang, an animal unparalleled for its ‘strength, action and wind’ and in his estimation ‘superior to any others on the face of the earth for cavalry purposes’, while Major General W. H. Carter viewed the Western horses, fed on grass rather than grain and acclimatised to the landscape, as ‘gamier, hardier, and the more enduring animal’. An indication of the importance of grass versus grain-feeding regimens, many of the army’s notable Western campaigns, including the Great Sioux War, were inaugurated in the winter so as to obfuscate the advantage gained by the Plains Indians and their grass-fed horses during warmer months. Meanwhile, 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 (established in the 1820s as a frontier outpost), 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 colour — chestnut or red sorrels would do, but no light coloured 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’. Anecdotal evidence from General Howard during the Nez Perce campaign (where horses were scared by gunfire and caused significant logistical problems when they refused to ford rivers) only served to confirm the importance of securing and training robust equine stock. 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 1857–1858 in the service of the Utah Campaign, no small feat in an era before the railroad and faced with myriad threats from inclement weather, Indian parties and (especially from) Mormon raiders.<sup>11</sup>

Comanche joined the army payroll as a result of this growing horse-trading network that effectively connected the arid horse trails of the south-west to a string of livestock markets, federal supply depots and forts. A bay horse of fifteen hands with a white star on his forehead, he roamed an area known as the ‘Great Horse Desert of Texas’ 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 free-roaming horses in a somewhat brutal process known as ‘creasing’ (shooting a bullet into the animal’s neck, causing temporary paralysis), drove them north along the Kickapoo Trace to St Louis, where they were corralled, castrated and advertised for sale at market. 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 later years, this procurement 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’s testimonial presented a somewhat rosy view of military life (aside from the assumptions of understanding equine cognitive preferences) but his artistic licence did contain some salient reflection on the benefits of a cavalry career in terms of livery and livelihood, veterinary care and welfare.<sup>12</sup>

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 W. Kearny, 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 vital staging post in the Indian Wars. Equine considerations developed accordingly as the army sought to assert federal dominance over territory, arbitrate between warring parties and pacify American Indian resistance. In the early part of the century, the government had been reluctant to fund cavalry units due to their expense, but in 1832 provided for the creation of a Battalion of Mounted Rangers with a specific remit of patrolling white settlement on the plains. 1833 saw the Mounted Rangers become a regiment of dragoons, with another dragoon regiment added three years later and

<sup>11</sup> Dan Flores, *American Serengeti: The Last Big Animals of the Great Plains* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 120; Colonel H. C. Brish, ‘On the Wild Horses of the Southwest,’ *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* V (1833–1834), 463–4; Major General W. H. Carter, ‘Story of the Horse,’ *National Geographic*, XLIV (1923), 524; Percival Lowe, *Five Years a Dragoon, '49 to '54, and other Adventures on the Great Plains* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 118–9; William A. Dobak, *Fort Riley and its Neighbors: Military Money and Economic Growth, 1853–1895* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Luce, 7.

a regiment of Mounted Riflemen in 1846. When the First and Second Cavalry were founded in 1855 it cemented two things, first, the importance of the West in developing the machinery of federal government and secondly, the invaluable role played by horses in navigating and effectively managing an expansive terrain in which competing interests grappled for territory and resources (grass, water, minerals, fur-bearing animals). As contemporary commentator Alfred Brackett put it, the cavalry ‘furnished safety to settlers’ and opened the highways of the West through a combined force of ‘reliable men and sound horses’. A critical hub in a disparate military network that relied (among other things) on horsepower to control the West and its strategic resources — in the words of frontier historian Elliott West a ‘contested plains’ subject to ‘new lifeways and routes to power’ — the requirements of remounting, acclimatisation and distribution dominated activity at Fort Leavenworth for the remainder of the century. It was here that Comanche and forty other mustangs disembarked from the railroad to be ‘thoroughly tried before being received’. 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 ‘choice lot’.<sup>13</sup>

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 accouterments; 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’.<sup>14</sup>

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. Recruits were given copies of *Saddling and Bridling as Taught in the Seventh Cavalry* by Brevet Major General Alfred 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 acquainted with one another and with 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

<sup>13</sup> Albert G. Brackett, ‘Our Cavalry: Its Duties, Hardships, and Necessities, at Our Frontier Posts,’ *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 4 (1883): 383–91; West, *Contested Plains*, xxii; Lowe, 119; Luce, 6–10.

<sup>14</sup> Lowe, 119.

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’. 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. 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 shorn to make it easier to grab them. In time, meanwhile, the training needs of the equine martial economy led to a more formalised focus on specialist instruction. The first training provision for mounted units had been established in 1838 as the Cavalry School of Practice at the Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and, in the post-bellum period, was strongly focused on equipping cavalry for the Indian Wars. By the 1880s, though, the emphasis was placed on training *in* the West as well as for it. In 1881, a School of Application for Infantry and Cavalry was opened at Fort Leavenworth, where academy recruits put their theoretical knowledge to test in the field. Later that decade Congress authorised funds for the creation of a dedicated Light Artillery School at Fort Riley, which opened in 1893 as a ‘school of instruction for drill and practice for cavalry and light artillery’ providing training in hippology, horseshoeing and farriery, equitation and horse training, minor tactics, drill regulations and topographical orienteering.<sup>15</sup>

An operational fort with its full complement of equine functionaries needed a lot of fodder. While writing a history from ‘the horse’s mouth’ (as Erica Fudge and other scholars of the ‘animal turn’ have pointed out) might be intensely problematic, the task of historical accounting *for* the horse’s mouth presents another case entirely. In short, grain and grass dominate the story of warhorse in the West, placing the story of the horse within a broader environmental entanglement between four, two- and no-legged biotic agents as well as substantiating the importance of spatiality in the story of the federal conquest of the trans-Mississippi region. As West points out in *The Contested Plains* (1998), horses were transformative agents that ‘triggered fresh imaginings and set loose quests for power’. These animate bodies, however, required effective provisioning if they were to work at their full potential. Evidenced by purchase ledgers and requisition books, 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–\$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 the military presence as both security device and veritable cash cow. Farmers were delighted, for example, when the cavalry arrived at Fort Riley in 1853. 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 Kearny 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 hay for as much as \$126 per ton, Bratt made good money from the mule and cattle teams that

<sup>15</sup> Lowe, 76, 7; A. F. Mulford, *Fighting Indians in the 7th United States Cavalry* (Corning, NY: Paul Lindsley Mulford, 1878), 92.

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.<sup>16</sup>

A critical actor in the martial ecology of the West, what environmental historian Richard White has called ‘an animal of enterprise’, *equus* serviced the utility needs of the military in diverse ways. Beyond that, the horse emerged as a key participant in the leisure economy of the Western army and played a crucial performative role in the emerging cult of the mounted soldier hero. 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. Nicholson prevailed. Horse talk dominated conversation at the fort, not least in the clubhouse that hosted race meets, polo matches and social events. As one officer recalled: ‘Post life was then, as it is now, like life in a small town, and talk was largely of horses’. The *Republican* of 13 July 1900 applauded the camaraderie of equine events: ‘for it arouses a healthy rivalry between the various organisations and furnishes a class of sport that is good for anyone to see’. With officers keen to play the game, local horse breeders also made a steal selling polo ponies at \$10-\$20 each.<sup>17</sup>

And what of Comanche? He became a favourite of Captain Myles 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 Abraham Lincoln, when the Seventh was posted there. A horse whose service marked the glory years of the Cavalry on the plains (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

<sup>16</sup> See Erica Fudge, ‘A left-handed blow: writing the history of animals’ in Nigel Rothfels, ed., *Representing Animals* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 6; West, *Contested Plains*, xiii; *Army and Navy Journal*, 4 December 1880; Dobak, 10; John Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday* (Lincoln, NE: The University Publishing Co., 1921), 84–92.

<sup>17</sup> Richard White, ‘Animals and Enterprise,’ in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. by Clyde A. Milner, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 256; *Junction City Union*, 19 March 1887; *Republican*, 13 July 1900; W. F. Pride, *The History of Fort Riley* (Fort Riley, KS: n.p., 1926), 320–5.

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.<sup>18</sup>

### 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.

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 officer’s mounts at the front to the mule pack train at the rear, the horse proved a vital part of the practical machinery of the so-called ‘plains cavalry’ 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’. Dictated by equine carrying and walking capacity, military engagements with Western space were critically shaped by animal actors.<sup>19</sup>

The testimony of cavalry officers ably reveals this ‘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’. 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 organisation, its biological needs determining the way in which the military body was able to negotiate physical space. 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, pack 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 eighty–ninety pounds of equipment and a hundred rounds of ammunition. Six mule wagons towed up to a

<sup>18</sup> The story is recounted in various places, for instance, Stillman, *Mustang*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Frost and John Carroll, eds., *Private Theodore Ewert's Diary of the Black Hills Expedition of 1874* (NJ: CRI Books, 1976), 8.



massive 5000 lb 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'. Keen attention was placed on provisioning and welfare. When the train stopped at noon, it was the custom for horse and rider to share hard tack and petulant steeds took to pawing the ground if their protests for food went unanswered. Meanwhile, at day's end, the camp was struck and horses put out to graze under control of the stable guard. In hot weather, they were unsaddled and the men rubbed their backs until dry. An hour before sunset, stable call was sounded and the men fetched their own horses, took them to watering holes before returning to camp, where they were tied, fed and groomed. Only then did the men eat. Interestingly, as Godfrey observed, 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.<sup>20</sup>

Another focus 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 paralysed 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 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'. Hunting also fended off tendencies to boredom and listlessness. As the General saw it, bison hunting was a way to 'break the monotony and give horses and men exercise'. 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 Phil Sheridan and including eastern businessmen and journalists in September 1871 boasted two companies as escort (some 300 men), as well as 'travelling 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'.

<sup>20</sup> Fred Tobey, 'Scraps from the Yellowstone Expedition of 1876,' *Diary of Fred Tobey*: Mss. HM63327, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA; Edward S. Godfrey, *General George A Custer and the Battle of the Little Big Horn* (New York: The Century Co., 1921), 7–8, 16.

According to army wife Katherine Fougera, the hunt brought ‘a glamor to army life that nothing ever quite equaled’.<sup>21</sup>

When the frontier army entered the fray, meanwhile, the horse was a critical actor. In combat with Plains Indians, officers spoke of thundering pursuits 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). Such actions paid heed to the ‘total war’ tactics practiced in the Civil War theatre, the ambush strategies of American Indian bands, *and* the importance of mobility as an important and understood component of the spatial dynamics of frontier combat. Perhaps the most famous round-up of indigenous equine resources was during the Red River War (1874–1875), where Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie of the Fourth Cavalry ordered the slaughter of 400 horses belonging to Kiowa, Comanche and Cheyenne combatants as well as the seizure of another 400 to replace their tired mounts. Also of note in the spatial thinking 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 reorganisation 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 ‘colouring the horses’, which does not imply, as might be inferred from the expression, that we actually changed the colour of our horses, but merely classified or arranged them throughout the different squadrons and troops according to the colour’. This ‘uniformity of appearance’ made it easy to identify troops from a distance and make strategic decisions: an ingenious technique that provided an overview of the battleground based on the movements of animal actors and their distinctive aesthetic identities. Such intelligence, in fact, was not lost on Custer’s enemies. According to Indian accounts, the grey horses of Company E were the most obvious to spot in the melee of battle.<sup>22</sup>

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 his 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. Particular horses earned plaudits for their tenacity of spirit, distinguished service records and endearing personal quirks. Western writer Owen Wister described the horse as ‘his foster brother, his ally, his playfellow’, while Comanche himself was singled out as a dependable and resilient co-combatant. ‘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. 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

<sup>21</sup> George Armstrong Custer, *My Life on the Plains* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1874), 47; George Armstrong Custer, ‘On the Plains,’ 12 October 1867; William Cody, ‘Famous Hunting Parties of the Plains,’ *The Cosmopolitan*, XVII.2 (June 1894), 137–9; Elizabeth Custer, *Following the Guidon* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1898), 33, 208; Katherine Gibson Fougera, *With Custer’s Cavalry* (Caxton, ID: n.p., 1942), 78.

<sup>22</sup> Custer, *My Life*, 141.

he ‘came through like an old soldier’. 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, a time on the saddle which created a special bond based on space travelled and shared moments of encounter. As Lowe put it: ‘An officer said to me when talking of this campaign, “Well, you did not have any mounted drill for some time after that!”’ Old horses were typically turned over to the Quartermaster to be auctioned and when Lowe’s mount was 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’. 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’. For some, even the humble mule came in for particular 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.<sup>23</sup>

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’) 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’. Dependent on horsepower and what Shaw calls the ‘superior war legs’ provided by equine animals, questions of supply care and maintenance proved decisive aspects of the military experience in the West. According to Brigadier General Raymond A. Kelsner, the cavalry was the ‘birthplace of military veterinary medicine’. Congressional legislation from 1792 had provided for a farrier to tend to the needs of each of the four troops of light dragoons, while ten farriers were appointed to the two cavalry units established in 1833 and 1836, respectively. At the start of the Civil War, a veterinary sergeant was appointed to each of the three battalions in a cavalry regiment on a salary of \$17 a month. By March 1863, with the deleterious impacts of equine mortality starkly evident, regimental veterinarians were appointed for each regiment at the rank of sergeant-major and paid \$75 a month. Enhanced provision came with the expansion of the regular army to 10 cavalry regiments in 1866 and, most notably, in the General Orders of 1879 mandating that all surgeons

<sup>23</sup> Robert Utley, *Life in Custer’s Cavalry: Diaries and Letters of Albert and Jennie Barnitz* (Colorado, AZ: The Old Army Press, 1977), 204–5; Owen Wister, *Red Man and White* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1895), xxvi; 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; Luce, 44; Lowe, 119, 75–6, 137–8.

hold qualifications from reputable colleges and be properly recognised as holding the rank of sergeant-major.<sup>24</sup>

The demands of military action in the western theatre mandated the increased use of cavalry and, accordingly, raised the profile and significance of the veterinary profession. Those working on the ground, meanwhile, encountered an environment that comprehensively challenged the limits of effective 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 Cavalry as veterinarian in 1869 and described as an accomplished professional and ardent horse-lover, 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). A matter of some concern, Gen. O. E. Babcock reported in 1866: 'I found all through the territories, where I inspected, a great many animals, horses and mules, with the brand "US"'. 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.<sup>25</sup>

The Western landscape tested the mettle of man and horse alike in the shape of poor grazing, alkaline streams, steep ravines and muddy rivers, snow and freezing rain. In terms of spatial dynamics, the greatest constraint on the healthy exercise of 'horse time' on the march was exhaustion and starvation. Equine command over territory was inevitably limited by biological constraints. Comanche acquitted himself well in this regard according to 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'. Many of his equine compatriots, however, fared rather less well. On the Washita Campaign in the winter of 1869, David Spotts of the Nineteenth Kansas Volunteer Infantry catalogued multifarious 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 to graze on cottonwood trees. As consequence, Spotts remarked that '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'. The troop took to drilling on foot, which

<sup>24</sup> Daniel O. Magnussen, ed., *Peter Thompson's Narrative of the Little Bighorn Campaign 1876* (Glendale, CA: Arthur Clark, 1974), 189; Brown, xii; Shaw, 'The Torturer's Horse,' 162; *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; Brigadier General Raymond A. Kelsler, *The United States Army Veterinary Service in World War Two*, 'Chapter 1: The Evolution of Military Veterinary Medicine,' available online at <https://history.amedd.army.mil/booksdocs/wwii/vetservicewwii/chapter1.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> *New York Tribune*, 8 September 1873; Lowe, 131.

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’.<sup>26</sup>

Soldier testimony resounded with reference to hours in the saddle, inter-species fraternity and the playing out of a collective ‘horse time’ across frontier space. Taking stock of this ‘equine gaze’ in the Indian Wars is complicated by various factors, not least, as Shaw points out in his analysis of the Napoleonic era warhorse, the thorny problem of judging impact and intent, but we can surmise that horses were certainly present and, more pertinently, that they played pivotal roles in the military theatre by virtue of the culture of mobility they carried with them. In specific terms, equine impact might be logged chronometrically by looking at the miles trudged in service during the Indian Wars. By way of example, Crook and Terry’s campaigns from February to December 1876 each racked up more than 2,000 miles. Also worth mention was the catastrophic impact of declining horse health on the effective workings of the frontier military machine (both infantry and cavalry). The stopping of ‘horse time’ in Crook’s infamous ‘Mud March’ (also known as the ‘Horsemeat March’) of summer 1876 was a case in point, resulting in marooned troops (who were also cold and hungry), plummeting morale and possible insurgency. Vividly recounted in *War-path and Bivouac*, journalist John Finerty paid heed both to the value of equine animals as animate pieces of military technology as well as presenting an illustration of equine rebelliousness and animal agency:

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.

Such were the conditions on this trail that 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 initially 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’. Following on with satirical bent, Finerty delivered his own verdict on the culinary delights of equine meat: ‘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’.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Brown, 31; David L. Spotts, *Campaigning With Custer and the 19th Kansas Volunteer Cavalry on the Washita Campaign*, ed., E A Brininstool (Los Angeles, CA: Wetzel Publishing, 1928), 54–70, 149.

<sup>27</sup> Finerty, 246–8, 270.

## Horsemanship and heroics: human centaurs and equine celebrity at the Little Bighorn

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 equipment’. 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? ... Do not men and horses look ready for instant work, and work, too, of the most serious kind?

Zogbaum’s vibrant account of mounted choreography spoke of a cavalry train both organic and mechanical, an inter-species collective carrying American might into the wilderness and marching, with impeccable timing, to the same tune.<sup>28</sup>

Part of a frontier army *of* and *in* motion, horses were instrumental in the final federal conquest of the West: their trots, grazing stops and mounted advances both figurative and literal markers of the halting but relentless campaign to strip indigenous communities of the capacity to resist white dominance. Meanwhile, the relationship between horse and rider emerged as a foundational part of the folkloric canon of the soldier hero that made its mark on the imagined landscape of frontier mythology under construction in the late 1800s. Equestrian skill marked Buffalo Bill Cody as a ‘knight of the plains’ and ‘American centaur’, while George Armstrong 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

<sup>28</sup> Rufus F. Zogbaum, *Horse, Foot and Dragoons: Sketches of Army Life at Home and Abroad* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1888), 105–19.

to the slow movement of the march'. An intuitive connection (and command over) the horse marked Custer as both natural and noble, a perfect character combination to tame the West. One of Custer's mounts, Dandy, had been picked out from a roster of 500 horses obtained by the army in winter 1868–1869. 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 personality of his rider. Renowned for his stamina, exhausting bouncing stride and determination to ride at the front of the column, Dandy proved an ideal companion animal to the ostentatious general.<sup>29</sup>

When the Boy General and his men embarked on the Sioux campaign in May 1876, however, signs of faltering 'horse time' were apparent. Appointed as Honsinger's replacement that April, veterinarian Dr. Charles A. Stein inspected the equine ranks and immediately signed off 10 as unserviceable, joining the 39 taken out of service earlier that month. Journeying from Fort Abraham Lincoln into Montana Territory and up the Rosebud River, Custer's companies covered between 600 and 700 miles in six weeks, ranging between 12 and 30 miles a day across difficult terrain and on half rations. With little time or 'safe' places for grazing as well as problems with alkaline streams, there were few rest stops and an ever-increasing impetus to push on (notably as a result of intelligence from Crow scouts who sighted a Lakota camp from the Crow's Nest lookout). After a punishing advance up the divide to the Little Bighorn Valley, Custer divided the Seventh into three battalions and made for an attack. One period witness remembered how a 'comrade' from one of Custer's companies had talked of how his horse was 'played out', while Peter Thompson of Troop C described equine recruits as 'poor and gaunt' from an extended time in the field. Elwood Nye, writing for the *Veterinary Bulletin* in 1941, went as far to suggest that the poor condition of Custer's horses was instrumental in his defeat. This may be a bold claim — John S. Gray contends that such failings were not the General's but 'the century's', while Custerologists might struggle to elevate equine causality above geographical dynamics, strategic errors of judgement, unanticipated enemy action, and the late arrival of reinforcements from Reno and Benteen as governing factors — but it does serve to illuminate the role of non-human animals as important agents in understanding the spatial dynamics of nineteenth-century warfare. Horse signs were to be found across the Little Bighorn site — from the dust thrown up by cavalry hooves that alerted Lakota lookouts to the presence of Reno's column to the equine mounts shot on Last Stand Hill and used as cover by Custer's doomed band. Also significant is the fact that debates about Custer's 'horse abuse' in the twentieth century became, as Elizabeth Atwood notes, 'one more pawn used in the ongoing dispute between people who regard Custer as a villain and those who view him as a hero'.<sup>30</sup>

Equally critical in the biographical history, or 'horsetory', of Comanche is what happened *after* 25 June 1876. 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'.

<sup>29</sup> Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, 106–8.

<sup>30</sup> E. A. Brininstool, *A Trooper with Custer* (Columbus, OH: The Hunter-Trader-Trapper, 1925), 26; Jesse Brown and A. M. Willard, *The Black Hills Trails* (Rapid City, SD: Rapid City Journal Co, 1924), 148; Elwood Nye, 'Marching with Custer,' *Veterinary Bulletin*, 35 (April 1941), 114–15; John S. Gray, 'Veterinary Science on Custer's Last Campaign,' *Kansas History*, 43.3 (1977), 249–263; Atwood, *His Very Silence Speaks*, 69.

Placement on this hallowed prairie — a sacrificial space of conflict and trauma — secured for him a posthumous reading that escaped most horses under service in the West. If Custer represented the most famous two-legged actor at the Battle of the Little Bighorn then Comanche was certainly his four-legged equivalent. Many, in fact, assumed that he was Custer's steed so dazzling was his heroic status. That mystery surrounded his survival added to his allure, as one period account put it: 'how the old war-horse escaped no one can tell'. Meanwhile, in the retelling of the Last Stand, there was a glaring misnomer — the epithet 'the only living thing to survive the Battle of the Little Bighorn', discounted Lakota and Cheyenne 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 did not see service, was retired from the army and placed with Custer's father.<sup>31</sup>

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 15 miles across the bloody plains to a steamer, settled into a specially made stall and floated the 950 miles downstream to Bismarck. Captain Grant Marsh noted that Comanche was held in 'tender interest and affection ... by every man on board'. A signal of his growing fame and hallowed status as a carrier of collective mourning, claimants for 'saving' Comanche were myriad. At Fort Abraham Lincoln, Comanche was placed under the care of farrier John Rivers, and after he was formally retired from duty, blacksmith Gustave Korn (who replaced the fallen Keogh as his de facto 'owner'). Under the care of veterinarian Charles Stein, the horse began 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 Peter Wey, one of the men who took care of the horse in his latter years, 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'. 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

<sup>31</sup> 'Comanche' from *The Animal World: A Monthly Advocate of Humanity*, 118.X (1 July 1879), Keogh family papers and photographs, 1856–1894, 89.218, Box 1, folder 13: Newsclippings, Autry National Center.



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'.<sup>32</sup>

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 taxidermised by renowned practitioner Lewis Lindsey Dyche at the Kansas Natural History Museum, but with the officers not having 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 and billed as an 'old war horse' by *The Report of the Kansas Board of the World's Fair Managers*. Across town, Buffalo Bill Cody wowed audiences with his equestrian skills in his 'wild west show' that presented westward expansion in all its saber rattling and patriotic grandeur and featured Custer's old rival, Sitting Bull. Back in the 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'. 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!'<sup>33</sup>

### '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. 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 exhibition). 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 which marked his folkloric identity. As *The Animal World* put it: "Not a soul survived

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Mills Hanson, *The Conquest of the Missouri: Being the Story of the Life and Exploits of Captain Grant Marsh* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1916 [1909]), 295–7; 'Comanche,' Diary of Fred Tobey; Luce, 68.

<sup>33</sup> *The Report of the Kansas Board of the World's Fair Managers* (Topeka, KS: Hamilton, 1894), 36; Dallas, 13; Godfrey, 38.

to tell the tale,” is a melancholy fact; but Comanche remains to connect the living with the dead’.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the walls of the museum reliquary, Comanche’s legacy as romantic warhorse was eagerly embraced by modern popular culture. Colonel John Hay’s ‘stirring poem’ to Custer’s heroic band, written in the style of Tennyson’s *Charge of the Light Brigade* and reprinted in newspapers and officers’ journals, presented a typical example in its poetic valediction to Comanche’s valiant service:

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.

Captivated by the idea of equine biography, books, songs and films promised to ‘tell’ his story while toys enabled latter-day generations to communicate with the mythic landscape of the West through play. David Appel’s 1951 book *Comanche: The Story of America’s Most Heroic Horse* presented a horse’s tale in first-person narrative, weaving Comanche’s story with that of Captain Keogh, a young Lakota brave called White Bull and their shared destiny at the Little Bighorn. Made into a family film entitled *Tonka* in 1958, the Disney production chose to emphasise the relationship between White Bull and Tonka and presented a distinctly anti-Custer line. As film scholar Douglas Brode recalls, parents looked on in horror as their children cheered when the US flag fell to the ground. The film ended with the Lakota warrior becoming an army scout at Fort Lincoln in order to be close to his beloved horse, casting off his uniform after hours to ride the plains with Comanche in an all-American tale of pick-and-mix multiculturalism. Part of the Marx Toys ‘Fort Apache Fighters’ range, the plastic version of Comanche, provided kids in the late 1960s the opportunity to travel with a ‘Movable Cavalry Horse’ who could be placed in ‘101 different positions’, while a more traditional take on the warhorse and his legacy came from Johnny Horton, whose 1960 country song ‘Comanche (The Brave Horse)’ spoke of the ‘lone survivor, wounded and weak...laying at the General’s feet’ to the rhythmic sound of horse hooves and a twanging guitar.<sup>35</sup>

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, his body 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 US Cavalry: a product ‘made’ in the West and a keen agent in processes of nineteenth-century conquest. As such, Comanche paid heed to the broad contours of ‘horse time’ that transformed both indigenous and Euro-American encounters with

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence, 23; Dary, 13–15; ‘Comanche,’ *The Animal World*.

<sup>35</sup> John Hay, ‘Miles Keogh’s Horse’ *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1879. Written out in full in the Diary of Fred Tobey; Appel, *Comanche*; Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 45; Marx Toys, ‘Comanche’ Box, courtesy of the author.

western terrain. In the estimation of Frederic Remington, this aspect, ‘borne of the soil’ and bearing ‘the burden and vicissitudes of all that pall of romance which will cling about the western frontier’, perfectly summed up the broad allure of this most famous horse of the plains. Comanche symbolised the animal in war (in all its variety) but most definitely was invested with a ‘half-human’ personality, to quote Libbie Custer. He was, in that regard, an interesting case study in the eco-cultural entanglement of warfare, or what Paul Sutter describes as a ‘complex causal taxonomy’ governing human and non-human actors. Comanche’s general story related a story of biotic energy, harness and transfer on the frontier and also told of imagined landscapes, celebrity, story and symbolism — of the necessary connect between environmental and social spheres. Meanwhile, as the twentieth century moved on, his cultural meaning changed, reflecting not only shifting ecological relationships between humans and other species but also the cultural memory of nineteenth-century warfare. With the Seventh mechanised, Comanche became a noble signifier of a past age of warfare and a source of nostalgia to the old guard. Others, meanwhile, read his sobriquet as ‘lone survivor’ in a critical frame as symptomatic of an American empire that neglected to see the indigene as rightful resident of the West. A reflection of revisionist thinking, the plaque in front of Comanche’s exhibit was changed in 1971 to read ‘symbol of conflict’, while the 1980 docudrama *Comanche: Treasured Hero of the Seventh Cavalry* abridged the traditional exceptionalist narrative of equine valour to present Comanche as ‘*survivor* of the Battle of the Little Bighorn’. Refurbishment in 2005 attested to his continuing hold over the national imagination and his malleability as a physical and emblematic repository of popular memory. While not able to speak in the fashion of 1960s TV sensation Mr. Ed, Comanche was certainly a mouthpiece through which generations of Americans articulated their views on the ‘winning of the West’ and chewed over the environmental, social and political consequences of Euro-American colonisation. Beyond the equine celebrity of Comanche, meanwhile, lay the testimonials of thousands of warhorses on the American frontier, from the cavalry mount to the pack mule. Taking a fresh look at period reminiscences and memoirs, we find evidence of their capture, training, feeding, welfare, work and leisure regimes as well as sentimental referents of naming and narrative. Horses represented important historical agents with stories to ‘tell’ and not simply a generalised (and overlooked) mass of animal flesh and power. A precursory glance at their military history even points to the integral role of ‘horse time’ as a pacemaker of the frontier military experience and, accordingly, the value of writing the ‘four-leggeds’ into the history of war. The western warhorse influenced the mechanics of expansion from transport and logistics to reconnaissance and mounted warfare, exercising a profound impact on the spatial dynamics of settlement, subsistence and conflict. Warhorses also roamed the American West in symbolic guise, laden with cultural meanings as canonical carriers of martial mythology. Both related the importance of viewing war through the lens of eco-cultural networks and inter-species entanglement. 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 McCellan 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'. We can only guess what Comanche might have said of the Seventh. He seemed to like the whiskey, at any rate.<sup>36</sup>

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Sutter, 'The World With Us: The State of American Environmental History,' *Journal of American History*, 100 (2013), 94–119; Frederic Remington, 'Horses of the Plains,' *Century Magazine*, XXXVII (1888–1889), 338; Frazier and Robert Hunt, *I Fought with Custer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), 53–4.