



# Travels Through the Horse Culture

BY EMIL HER MANY HORSES



“The Horse Nation continues to inspire, and Native artists continue to celebrate the horse in our songs, our stories and our works of art.”

**T**hese words opened the exhibition *A Song for the Horse Nation* at the National Museum of the American Indian's George Gustav Heye Center in New York City in November 2009. As I have worked on an expanded version of the exhibit for the Mall Museum in D.C. this October, I've had the opportunity to experience the direct inspiration of the Horse Nation throughout Indian Country.

## OSAGE

I think of the horse-stealing songs sung at the annual P'n-Lon-Schka or ceremonial dance of the Osage. These songs tell of raiding enemy horses. Sometimes the songs are also called trot songs; the beat of the drum and the style

of dance to the songs emulate a trotting horse. It's truly a beautiful sight watching a dance floor filled with men, women and children dressed in their colorful regalia dancing to the rhythm of the trot songs. I can only imagine how a warrior felt sitting on the back of a raided enemy horse as he paraded through camp. What a sense of pride and honor he must have felt. These songs transport you back to another time.

The Osage people have another tradition in which a horse plays a prominent role. The ceremony is called “Paying for the Drum.” It is held when a young man has been selected to fill the role of the drum keeper for one of the three Osage districts. It is the young man's role to care for the drum which is es-



PHOTOS BY EMIL HER MANY HORSES



Above, descendants of the horses reintroduced to the Western Hemisphere by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The New Mexico Horse Project of Carlos Lopopolo is locating these horses by genetic testing and bringing them to his sanctuary to live in wild herds.

Left, the Osage “Paying for the Drum” procession. The new Drum Keeper presents a horse and Pendleton blanket to last year’s holder of the office. Osage women in their Wedding Coats walk behind the horse.



The Nimiipuu (Nez Perce) are restoring their historic Appaloosa herds through a breeding program using as a foundation the Akhal-Teke horse from Turkmenistan, possibly the oldest extant domesticated breed. The off-spring combine Appaloosa markings with the silken sheen of the Akhal-Teke coat.



PHOTO BY EMIL THER WAWY HORSES

sential to singing the necessary songs for the four days of the I'n-Lon-Schka dance. The newly selected drum keeper and his family will have a year to prepare to pay for the honor of his position. The drum keeper will also select a new committee to sponsor the dance, and they host the other two Osage district committees.

At the end of the year, the new drum keeper and his family must pay before the dance can begin. The drum keeper and his new committee are led to the dance harbor by the camp crier, followed by men carrying the drum. A horse is led in the procession, followed by women in wedding clothes and the rest of the committee and his family. A striped Pendleton blanket will be draped over the back of the horse, and both will be given as gifts to the former drum keeper. The wed-

ding clothes represent the military coats given to Osage leaders who in turn gave the coats to their daughters to be worn in Osage weddings. Today, the Wedding Coats are also given away in honor of the new drum keeper. It is a great honor to be selected to serve as a drum keeper for one of the three districts.

## NEW MEXICAN HORSE PROJECT

Since the reintroduction of the horse to the Americas by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage, horses spread and eventually became an important asset to Native peoples. The horse that returned with Columbus in 1495 was a changed animal from the horse that became extinct in the Western Hemisphere around 10,000 years ago.

Carlos Lopopolo is now working to preserve the Spanish Mustang by finding horses of the old Spanish descent through the New Mexican Horse project. His vision is to identify Spanish traits through genetic testing of the wild horse herds in the U.S. Once these horses are identified, he brings them to his horse sanctuary in New Mexico. At the sanctuary he lets the horses live and breed as they would in the wild. It is his hope to introduce these horses in all National Parks as indigenous animals. The Wild Horse Preserve is dedicated to Carlos' late wife, Cindy Rogers Lopopolo, and others who fell victim to cancer.

While visiting the Preserve I was able to take a group tour. We made every effort not to disturb the horse herds, but we were fortunate to see a new foal that had just been born in the wild.

## YOUNG HORSEMEN PROJECT

One cannot talk about the horse culture of the Plateau and Plains without talking about the beautiful Appaloosa horses of the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce). In 1806, while traveling among the Nimiipuu, Meriwether Lewis described their horses as having large spots of white, irregularly scattered and intermixed with brown.

In 1994 the Nimiipuu began the Young Horsemen's Program to teach its youth about tribal history as well as about breeding and caring for the horse. The Nimiipuu program uses as its foundation stock four types of mares, Arabian/Appaloosa, Thoroughbred/Appaloosa, Quarterhorse/Appaloosa and Appaloosa/Appaloosa. To breed with the mares the Nimiipuu chose the Akhal-Teke horse from Turkmenistan, which some think is the most ancient domesticated horse breed still extant. The crossbreeding has produced a horse with the traditional spots of the Appaloosa, but when the sunlight strikes the horse, it gives the coat a silky sheen. Some believe this project will destroy the Appaloosa horse, but the Nez Perce have a long history of breeding horses, and I believe the Appaloosa will long be part of their cultural identity.

At the Nez Perce National Historical Park Visitors Center in Spalding, Idaho, I had the great fortune to learn the proper function of a painted parfleche horse ornament located in our collection. I had originally selected this object to be included in the exhibition but I was unsuccessful in determining how the object should or could be worn on the horse. At the museum this ornament is displayed with saddle and crupper intact. The painted parfleche is worn beneath the saddle and is quite beautiful once you see its proper use.

## HORSE ART AND HORSE MEDICINE

Beaded and painted horse regalia are some of the most beautiful items created by Native artists. I approached Jackie Bread, a Pikuni (Blackfeet) artist and asked if she would be willing to create a pair of painted parfleches in the Pikuni (Blackfeet) tradition. I had given her an image of what I had in mind.

Initially, Bread said she would but later reported that she was uncomfortable with the



Jackie Bread (b. 1960), a Pikuni (Blackfeet) artist, beaded these saddle bags especially for the *Song for the Horse Nation* exhibit. Pikuni flat cases, 2009, Montana. Seed beads, tanned hide, rawhide and wool. (26/7250).

PHOTO BY ERNEST AMOROSO

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PHOTO BY ERNEST AMOROSO

Bryan Akipa (b. 1957), Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota wood-carver and musician, revived the tradition of the horse stick after seeing the famous 19th century carving of No Two Horns (Hunkpapa Lakota) in a museum visit. Akipa's horse staff honors his uncle Master Sgt. Woodrow Wilson Keeble, awarded the Medal of Honor for valor in the Korean War.

Dakota horse staff, 2008, South Dakota. Wood, horsehair, imitation feather, ribbon and paint. (26/7158).

assignment. What I had requested resembled parfleches which were used for horse medicine. Individuals who had been given this medicine could treat horses as well as human beings. Bread felt she didn't have the right to produce the parfleches.

I was aware of her beadwork skills and I knew whatever she created would be amazing. I told her to feel free to create what she was comfortable with. She went on to produce two beautiful beaded bags worn behind the saddle. She used fresh smoked hide for the long fringe, which I could detect before I even opened the package.

## BRYAN AKIPA AND THE HORSE STICK

In the exhibition we have a very famous horse stick made by No Two Horns, a Hunkpapa Lakota from the Standing Rock reservation. It is believed that he created this stick to honor his favorite horse, which had been killed at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. The horse stick shows six wound marks with blood gushing

from each wound. No Two Horns reproduced this horse stick several times.

I knew there were contemporary examples of horse sticks. One was made by Bryan Akipa from the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota, who was inspired by seeing the No-Two-Horns stick in a museum in 1985. At the time, he said, "There were no horse staffs anywhere (except in museums), and most people did not know what it was."

I asked Akipa why he created his horse stick. He said that he made the stick to commemorate his uncle Master Sergeant Woodrow Wilson Keeble, U.S. Army. Keeble's Dakota name is Mato Sapa or Black Bear, and he is one of three full-blooded Indians to receive the Medal of Honor. Akipa, a Northern Traditional Dancer, carried this horse stick with him as he danced at powwows. Elders from his community approached him and asked why he was carrying the stick.

"I had a giveaway, put on a meal, and told the story to the people," Akipa told me. "My uncle knocked out three machinegun bunkers single-handedly. Approaching the third

machine gun bunker he was hit by many grenades." His uncle thought he was about to die, but a spirit of a man on horseback came and encouraged him. Although Keeble's story has been displayed in many places (including the Hall of Heroes at the Pentagon), said Akipa, "it is always written in the military format and never includes the part where he saw a horse and rider on the battlefield.

"The story I grew up hearing always included his vision of a horse and rider. The horse was painted. The designs were painted circles around the eyes, lightning bolt on the forehead, lightning bolts on the front and hind quarters, handprints under the lightning bolts and rings painted around the legs. The rider was a decorated old warrior with a double trailing war-bonnet holding a great lance. The horse and rider appeared to him larger than life.

"My aunt with all her oral-history knowledge has said the warrior on the horse was most likely my uncle's great-grandfather Anawang Mani, also a great warrior."

After Akipa told this story, the elders decided he had the right to carry the horse stick.

During the annual Crow Fair in Montana, participants hold a daily parade through the campground, displaying the elaborately beaded regalia that decorate their horses from head to tail.



PHOTO BY EMIL HER MANY HORSES

## CROW FAIR

I cannot talk about horses without talking about the Crow from Montana. At their annual Fair held the third week in August, the Crow people gather to compete along with other tribes in horse races, rodeo and dance competitions. The campground is lined with beautiful white canvas tipis, and so the Fair is known as “the Tipi Capital of the World.” One of the most colorful events is the daily parade through the camp. Men, women and children participate, but it is the women who have the most elaborate regalia. The women dress in their finest outfits, and their horses are decorated with beadwork from head to tail. The long hours spend on beading their regalia pay off at this one event. The Crow people have succeed in keeping their horse culture alive with their distinctive style of beadwork horse regalia. ✿

Emil Her Many Horses, a member of the History and Culture Research Unit at the National Museum of the American Indian, is curator of the *Song for the Horse Nation* exhibit, which opens at the Mall Museum in Washington, D.C. from Oct. 29, 2011 to Jan. 7, 2013.