Indians and Horses

It would be difficult to imagine Native Americans without horses. The images we’re familiar with in paintings, photographs, and movies typically show Indians riding across the plains on their great steeds. To most of us, Native Americans and horses go together like fireworks and the Fourth of July. You might be surprised to learn then, that the Indians didn’t always have horses. In fact, they lived in North America for thousands of years before the modern horse arrived. But if Native Americans didn’t always have horses, when did they get them? And perhaps more importantly, in what ways did the arrival of these animals change the lives of Native Americans?

It seems that there is no right answer for the first question, but most of the experts who have studied the arrival of the horse in America put the date sometime around 1600-1650. One thing they do agree upon is that it was the

Continued on next page
Spaniards who first introduced the horse to Native Americans in the plateaus and deserts of the American Southwest. From there the Indians began to trade horses with each other. In very little time, horses were roaming the high deserts and plains of North America.

By the end of the 18th century, tribes east of the Mississippi River also began acquiring horses. But these horses were different from the animals originally introduced by the Spanish. Over time, the Indians had bred horses for the traits they found most useful. Compared to the horses that European traders and settlers brought with them, the Native American horses were stronger, faster, and able to run much further distances without stopping.

This superior breed of horse became an important trade item for the Indians. As European settlers moved westward they brought with them many items that the Native Americans wanted. Horses were traded for everything from clothing and cooking utensils to tools and whiskey. Horses also allowed the Native Americans to offer the Europeans another important trade item, buffalo hides.

Native Americans had hunted buffalo long before horses arrived, but hunting a giant animal like a buffalo on foot could be dangerous and frustrating. Horses made hunting buffalo much easier. This new method helped the tribes obtain place to plant their crops.

One of the problems with this ability to move to new areas was that tribes began to move into the territories of other tribes. Like anybody else, Native Americans are protective of the lands on which they hunt, fish, grow crops and live, so some tribes became hostile when other Indians began trespassing. Guns were useful for hunting, but became very destructive once people started turning them on each other. Once the tribes had guns, the warfare that broke out between them was much deadlier than it had been before horses arrived.

The arrival of the horse meant big changes for Native Americans living in the Western Great Plains and Northwest regions of North America. Horses helped the Indians obtain a better food supply, buffalo hides for warmer clothes, and the ability to move to warmer areas during winter. On the other hand, horse allowed the Indians to obtain some trade items that might cause even bigger changes in the future.

By Glenn Newkirk
Find 9 differences between pictures A and B

A

B

1. Horse's head is a boat. 2. Bushes change places 3. Horse's butt disappears 4. Indian's footprints disappear 5. Artist's signature changes

Answers: 1) Horse's head is a boat 2) Extra leather on Indian's back 3) Strips on Indian's clothing 4) Horse's butt 5) Extra leather on Indian's back
Well, we’ve told you all we know about horses in the West, but we need your help so that we can learn more. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own horse project and send it in to our Prospector Headquarters. We’ll take some of your best work and print it in next month’s magazine. Remember to include your name, where you’re from, and the name of your Prospector chapter. We can’t wait to see what you send in!

**Painted Horses:**
Horses changed the lives of the North American Indians. For the tribes living near the Great Plains, horses meant that they could travel farther to hunt buffalo. Since they believed their horses were important, many tribes treated them with respect and decorated them with painted shapes and patterns. If you had a horse, how would you decorate it? Show us a picture of your new precious pet and the artwork that would cover its body.

**Horse Race:** A horse is fast, but there are other critters in North America who are known for their speed. What if, when horses first came here, there was a race between all of the animals so see who was the fastest? Write a story about Appaloosa originally raised by the Nez Perce Indians. But there are many other famous breeds of horses here in America and throughout the world. Pick an interesting breed and do some research on it. What makes the breed special? What part of the world do these horses come from? Write us up a short report and tell the rest of the Prospectors what you discovered.

Send in your work by December 12th to:

**Prospector Club**
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Idaho State Historical Museum
610 North Julia Davis Drive
Boise, ID 83702

Or email it to us at kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us.