

# **Issuba— “Like a Deer”**

## ***Part One***

In this two part series, Iti Fabvssa examines the relationship between the Choctaw people and the horse.

Looking at this story from one angle, and you can see that the horse has brought change to Choctaw traditional culture and helped European colonial powers to undermine Choctaw sovereignty.

Looking at the same story from a different angle, and you can see that the horse has helped Choctaw people to maintain a unique way of life and to bolster tribal sovereignty in the face of great challenges.

Scholars have noted that perhaps more than anything else, the relationship between the Choctaw people and the horse illustrates the long standing ability of Choctaw people to adapt to the changing circumstances around us (Carson 1995).

This story begins a very long time ago. One of the earliest recognizable ancestors of the modern horse, called “Eohippus,” lived in present day North America and Europe, 50 million years ago, not long after the extinction of the dinosaurs. Eohippus was about the size of a dog, and lived in tropical forests.

Over the next 45 million years, the horse slowly developed its current size and adapted to living in the grasslands of North America and Europe.

By the end of the last Ice Age, these horses were joined by humans, the earliest known ancestors of today’s Native Americans.

The only evidence we have of the interaction between the two is on rare occasions people hunted and ate the horses.

About 12,000 years ago, the Ice Age was ending. The horse disappeared in North America, either as a result of climate change, human hunting pressure, or both.

Five hundred generations of Native American societies developed on this land in the absence of the horse.

The horse continued on in Europe. There, it was also hunted, but about 6,000 years ago, communities living in present day Ukraine had domesticated the animal.

Forever after, the horse would be an important part of human life in Europe and Asia.

To the best of current knowledge, the first contact between the Choctaw ancestors and the horse in roughly 12,000 years, occurred in October 1540.

Hernando DeSoto and an army of Spanish Conquistadors entered Choctaw Country bringing with them a number of pure Spanish mustangs, a relatively small, but tough breed of horse.

By the time DeSoto reached Choctaw Country, his army had been cutting a swath of destruction through the southeastern United States for more than a year.

When he reached the land of Choctaw-speakers, he proceeded to put Chief Tvskalusa (meaning “Black Warrior”), in chains, demanding Native people to act as slaves for the Spanish (Rangel 1993:291 [ca. 1540]).

Tvshkalusa told them that the Conquistadors’ lusts would be fulfilled if they would take him to the town of Mabilla. The chief was a tall man, and the Spanish had difficulty finding a horse big enough that the imprisoned leader’s feet did not drag as they took him to Mabilla (Garcilaso 1993:329 [1596]).

The Battle of Mabilla is a full story in itself. After entering the town, the Spanish cut off a Native man’s arm.

The warriors in the town responded by driving the Spanish outside of their walls and chasing the Conquistadors away from the village across a flat plain.

It appeared that the Choctaw ancestors were going to easily rout the Spanish army. However, they had never experienced the speed and power of the horse.

The mounted Spanish suddenly wheeled their horses back around and charged the warriors, who were now away from the protection of the village walls.

Many were unable to escape and were run through with lances. The horse was the day’s equivalent of the battle tank, and behind their calvary, the Spanish re-entered the town.

The fight was violent. The Spanish suffered 700 arrow wounds, DeSoto himself was wounded in such a way that he had to fight while standing in his saddle.

The Choctaw ancestors killed and wounded a number of Spanish horses that day. But with their surviving horses, the Spanish succeeded in killing every Native person in the town. It is difficult to think

of a more brutal or tragic reunion with the horse.

In the 1690s, Choctaw people began to acquire mustang horses of their own from the Caddo tribe located to the west (Mitchell 2015:85).

The Caddo had obtained these horses through trade with Plains Indian tribes who had acquired them at Spanish settlements in the Southwest (Bartram 1791:216; Du Pratz 1757:67).

The Choctaws subsequently gave the Spanish mustang to the Muskogee tribe to the east.

From the beginning, Choctaw people called these horses “issuba,” from “issi holba,” meaning “like a deer.”

Economically, the deer was by far the most important animal for the Choctaw people, who also maintained important spiritual connections with the animal. Calling the horse “like a deer,” was really saying something.

Today, we often see images of feathered Native Americans chasing buffalo on horseback, and of the lone Native American rider, sitting on top of a horse at the end of the trail, with his head down in defeat.

These stereotypes do not capture the true relationship between the Choctaw people and the horse.

At first, Choctaw people, like their ancestors 12,000 years earlier, sometimes used their horses for food (Adair 1775:133).

However, the ability of horses to make travel more efficient would soon far outweigh their value as food animals.

Choctaw society and culture would change in order to incorporate them.

In the early 1700s, Choctaw boys pastured herds of horses in prairie edges some distance from the villages and watch them to keep them from being stolen.

Choctaw house fields now had to have fences built around them to keep out wandering horses.

By the mid 1700s, the older foot paths within Choctaw Nation had been altered to accommodate horses (Galloway 2006:184,194), perhaps something akin to the creation of our modern interstate system.

Horses came to have their name on the Choctaw landscape, at places like Issuba Oka Ailli “Cane Break Where the Horse Drowned.” The Choctaw name for the Big Dipper Constellation “Fichik Issuba,” had once meant “Stars that are Like a Deer.” Now, it simply means “Star Horse.”

*The story of the Choctaw horse will continue in Issuba–“Like a Deer” Part Two in the December 2016 issue of the Biskinik.*



Photo by Ronni Pierce

A herd of issuba run through a grassy field. The name “issuba” came from “issi holba,” meaning “like a deer.” The relationship between the Choctaw people and the horse illustrates the long standing ability of the Choctaws to adapt to changing circumstances.