

Issuba— “Like a Deer” *Part Two*

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

In the past, Choctaw stickball players had worn the tails of panther or deer in order to emulate the speed and agility of those animals in the game.

Now, some Choctaw stickball players began to wear collars made of horse hair. When a Choctaw man died, his horse was killed, roasted, and eaten by the people attending his funeral.

This was a sign of the connection between a man and his horse, and done in the belief that the horse would accompany him into the next life.

The horse made traditional life easier for Choctaw people in a number of ways, but it was a two-edged sword.

Hunting parties now brought teams of horses on the owachitto, or great fall hunt. A man would still follow the ancient tradition of stalking deer on foot, but once he had killed one, instead of field dressing it for transport, he simply returned to hunting camp, and pointed in the direction of the kill to his wife or female relative.

She would head to the spot with horses and transport the kill back to camp (Cushman 1899:180).

When they were ready to break camp and head back home, the horses would be loaded with 50-pound packs of deer jerky on each side and one on top. A deer rawhide would be placed on top to protect the cargo from rain (Cushman 1899:235).

A train of pack horses could transport the jerky and hides of many deer. This coincided with the escalation of the deer hide trade.

By the 1770s, Choctaw hunters had depleted the deer population in present day Mississippi.

When they had moved by foot or canoe, Choctaw hunters usually traveled 100 miles or less to hunt. With the horse, there was not necessarily an upper limit.

By the 1790s, Choctaw hunting parties were traveling with trains of pack horses across the Mississippi River (Rousseau 1793, in Kinaird and Kinaird 1980:353) and into present day east Texas and Southeastern Oklahoma.

The encroachment on the homelands of other tribes, including the Caddo, Osage, Wichita, and Tonkawa by Choctaw hunters led to conflicts.

In 1790, an epidemic killed a significant part of the Choctaw horse herd. Young Choctaw men, eager to prove their bravery and replenish the herd stole the horses of enemies.

In the 1786 Treaty of Hopewell, the United States acknowledged the right of the Choctaw government to punish American families that were squatting on Choctaw lands.

With the deer hunted out, Choctaw warriors killed and butchered squatters' cattle, which they realized were damaging the cane brakes and other important plant communities. They also stole their horses as a way of protecting Choctaw borders, without resorting to killing Euro-Americans.

In 1805, the Treaty of Mount Dexter effectively ended Choctaw horse raids on American squatters.



The photos on this page are from the Jesse Nelson Locke collection to approximately 1910. The individuals are either Locke family members or their working hands. The Locke family cared for and bred over 700 of the Choctaw horses from the late 1800s to the 1940s.

For more than a century, horses had been an economic means to an end, now they became an economic end in and of themselves (Carson 1995:504). In other words, the horses themselves came to have value.

During this period, most Choctaw parents reportedly gifted their newborn children a mare and a foal, a cow and a calf, a sow and pigs. By the time a child was old enough to leave home, he or she was already supplied with stock (Cushman 1899:228). Through such forward looking practices, by the 1820s, the tribe had grown its horse herd to 15,000 head (Carson 1995:506).

With Choctaw horse raids prohibited, some squatters and other Euro-Americans now began to steal Choctaw horses.

Others simply waited with contraband on the edges of Choctaw territory, to trade alcohol for horses. In 1823, the Chiefs, realizing the negative impact that this trade had on their communities, created the Choctaw Lighthorsemen (Carson 1995:503). One of the firsts tasks given to these mounted law officers was stopping the horse/alcohol trade.

The Choctaw people were eventually forced to give up the sacred homeland, and many were forced to relocate to Indian Territory on what came to be called the Trail of Tears.

At this point, the Choctaw horse herd was worth an estimated \$500,000. One government agent

suggested that a barge be created for the sole purpose of transporting the Choctaw horse herd to Indian Territory.

It was never done.

Families were left to transport their horses as best they could. Through poor planning, exposure to the elements, and murder, an estimated 1,500 to 4,000 Choctaw people died on the Trail of Tears. An estimated 2,000 Choctaw horses were lost due to drowning and theft (Carson 1995:507).

Once in Oklahoma, the Choctaw Nation rebuilt its economy. An important part of this economy still included cattle ranching, and horses continued to be an integral tool for these ranchers.

Horses were also used as draft animals on some Choctaw homesteads. They would furrow the ground, plant the corn hills, and then plow out the middles between the rows later (Edwards 1932:411). “Chahe” had been the Choctaw word for an ancient type of hoe made from a deer shoulder blade or a mussel shell that was used to prepare the ground for planting.

The term “Isuba Ichahe”, meaning “Horses’ Hoe,” became a word for the plow.

The Choctaw horse herds were again decimated through two Union invasions during the Civil War, and through thefts from robbers in the aftermath.

Some Choctaw families, both in Oklahoma and Mississippi, held onto their horses.

More recently, through the efforts of Bryant Rickman and others, steps are being made to conserve this rare and special breed (Locke-Bray 2010).

Today's, Choctaw pony is a pure breed of Spanish mustang, descended from the old Choctaw herds, found in places like the Blackjack Mountains of Pasmataha County.

To the best of our knowledge, these horses are the same type that Choctaw ancestors faced so long ago on the battlefield against DeSoto, they are the same horses that extended the distance for the Choctaw winter hunt, and they are the same horses that carried some Choctaw people across the Trail of Tears.

For centuries now, we have walked our paths together.

The story of the Choctaw horse began in Issuba—"Like a Deer" Part One in the November 2016 issue of the Biskinik.



From the Jesse Nelson Locke collection: pictured is Allece Locke on a Choctaw pony in the 1920s.