CONFLICTING WORLDS

New Dimensions of the American Civil War

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War Horses

Equine Perspectives on the Confederacy

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IN 1974 THE IDEA that animals might have a history was considered so absurd that it was openly mocked in scholarly journals.[1] Now, less than fifty years later, the field of animal history has not only arrived, it has "triumphed."[2] The canon is much too large to summarize in such limited space, but a few of the broader trends warrant mention. For example, many of the classics in animal history examine humanity's relationship with domestic animals in different times and places.[3] More recently, though, a growing number of scholars have also studied wild animals, insects, and even sponges.[4] Meanwhile, just as the topics have grown more diverse, so too have the methods. Perhaps most notably, numerous historians have embraced an "evolutionary" turn. Michael Pollan first examined the evolutionary implications of plant domestication in *Botany of Desire*, and others have since applied the same method of analysis to animals.[5] Edmund Russell has called for an entirely new field to study humanity's profound influence on the evolutionary trajectory of other species and the ramifications of this human-induced evolution on society and culture.[6] Several scholars have already answered the call.[7]

As one might expect, numerous historians have examined the role that animals played in the Civil War. Horses have proven an especially popular topic,

which is understandable given their integral place in the war effort.[8] Some of the earliest studies amounted to little more than glowing hagiographies of various cavalrymen, though Charles Ramsdell's excellent study of the Confederate horse supply is an exception.[9] More recently, Gene Armistead has provided an exhaustive description of Civil War horses and mules, but his straightforward analysis makes no effort to engage with recent scholarship in animal studies. By comparison, Ann Norton Greene embraces the evolutionary perspective in her work on Civil War horses and thus belongs on the vanguard of animal history, but her analysis is limited to northern horses exclusively.[10]

A brief examination of the history of horses in the South during the Civil War, while neither exhaustive nor authoritative, nevertheless illustrates that animal history has value precisely by allowing us to reexamine familiar topics from a new perspective. Horses were present for every major event in the war, but their experiences were anything but uniform. Shifting winds of fortune placed them in a variety of different categories during the conflict, each with its own life-or-death implications. One might think that the short timeframe would preclude any meaningful engagement with evolutionary history, and that is certainly true in a sense; after all, there were no speciation events during the Civil War. Even so, there is still much we can learn from the evolutionary perspective. Horses had already coevolved with people for thousands of years by the 1860s, and they were entangled in many of the same ecological relationships. As a result, studying horses necessarily sheds light on the people with whom they engaged.

LUXURY IMPORT

It was obvious from the start that the fledgling Confederate States of America would face significant challenges during the Civil War, but one area where white southerners presumed to hold an advantage was horses. Most of the horses in the northern states were draft animals that were used to pull carriages, but there were not enough miles of improved roadways to warrant a large number of carriages in the South. Instead, white southerners were more likely to ride their horses in the saddle, which better prepared them for military service as mounted cavalry. In 1866, Union soldier Samuel Ringwalt admitted that the horses of the northern states had proved "sadly deficient" for mounted warfare, and he bemoaned "the lamentable inefficiency of our cavalry in the early days of the war."[11]

Historians generally agree, ascribing an early advantage to the southern mounted arm. As Ted Steinberg writes, "it was no secret that the Confederate troops retained a significant edge during the early years of the war in terms of horsemanship, a benefit bestowed on them at least in part by climate, specifically the mild winters that allowed them to spend nearly the entire year outside practicing their skills while their adversaries kept warm by the fire."[12] Greene makes a similar point. "Many northerners subscribed to a romantic image of southerners as cavaliers riding the finest pure-blooded horses. If horses were military hardware and horsemanship was military software, many Americans believed that the Confederates were cutting-edge."[13]

Southern soldiers may have had more experience in the saddle, but from a strictly numerical standpoint, the Union possessed an undeniable equine advantage. When we include those slave states that never seceded among the Union tally, the northern states had access to a far greater number of horses. Whereas the Union states contained more than 3,170,000 horses on the eve of war, the future Confederacy contained just 1,740,000. Granted, it is true that the southern states contained an absolute numerical advantage when it came to mules. In 1860 the future Confederacy contained more than 800,000 mules, over 70 percent of the nation's total. Yet this surplus was hardly enough to overcome the South's relative dearth of horses. When one combines the number of all equine types, the Union had more than 4,640,000 head, while the future Confederacy contained fewer than 2,570,000.[14]

Ecological conditions help explain this remarkable imbalance. High-nutrient pasture grasses were scarce and hard to grow across large swaths of the South. Instead, many white southerners found it more cost effective to import horses and mules from breeding operations in Tennessee and Kentucky, where there was ample forage and range. Cumulative statistics are difficult to come by, but even snapshot testimonies bear witness to the large volume of equine traffic that crossed the Appalachian Mountains from west to east before the construction of railroads. In 1831 more than 4,000 horses left Kentucky via the Cumberland Gap, ultimately destined for Virginia and North Carolina.[15] Thousands of additional horses followed the exact same route every year throughout the 1830s.[16] Meanwhile, traders bound for markets in South Carolina and Georgia traveled along the French Broad River. In 1839 James Silk Buckingham estimated that 10,000 horses and mules traveled this route into South Carolina every year.[17] In 1843 the state-sponsored agricultural survey of South Carolina acknowledged that

"Kentucky supplies the most of our horses and mules."[18] These animals eventually served as farm equipment, modes of transportation, ornaments of prestige, instruments of sporting leisure, and near-constant companions.

INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

The South's longstanding reliance on horses from the Ohio River valley left the southern states vulnerable when the Civil War broke out, though their looming crisis was not immediately apparent. During the first year of war, Confederate quartermasters could still procure horses from Virginia and North Carolina, relatively close to the front.[19] Mules were also conscripted into service, but their smaller size proved a disadvantage. According to contemporary sources, a six-mule team was only equivalent in strength to a four-horse team.[20] Meanwhile, the Confederate government mandated that a mounted volunteer provide his own horse. According to Ramsdell, "this provision, adopted partly in the interest of economy and partly in the belief that the men would furnish better mounts than the government and that they would take better care of their own property, was later the cause of much difficulty in procuring remounts for the cavalry in Virginia."[21]

It did not take either side long to realize that horses conveyed extraordinary military advantages. Accordingly, soldiers on both sides increasingly aimed for their enemies' horses, which contributed to an enormous number of equine casualties. "There was constant attrition of army horses in the never-ending skirmishes and campaigning that defined much of the Civil War military action," Greene writes.[22] And since horses do not just disappear when they die, their carcasses became a seemingly ubiquitous symbol of war. In September 1862 J. J. McDaniel described the horrendous aftermath of one battle in northern Virginia: "The stench was dreadful from the dead horses and men."[23] While some of the Confederacy's equines were being killed, others were being captured. Tennessee, which contained the second-highest population of horses in the Confederacy after Texas, had fallen by the summer of 1862.[24]

Not surprisingly, white southerners began to worry about how long their supply would hold out. "The Army of Northern Virginia initially enjoyed a better supply of horses, but as early as June 1862 the quartermaster general warned that lack of animals and forage meant that his department could not sustain any increase in artillery strength," Spencer Jones writes.[25] Quartermaster

agents from the eastern and western theaters found themselves in competition for Georgia's supply of horses.[26] To help the situation, Confederate forces conducted raids in Union territory. One such raid in October 1862 netted more than five hundred horses, but that would not offset losses.[27] Officials struggled to produce viable ideas. In late 1862 Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin suggested rounding up herds in Texas to send to Virginia, but nothing ever came of the idea.[28]

Making matters worse, horses required enormous amounts of forage to survive. By the winter of 1862–63, the lands surrounding the Army of Northern Virginia had been exhausted.[29] By February 1863, fodder was so scarce that General Robert E. Lee was compelled to scatter his army. "Artillery horses were sent as far away as was safe—some towards the James and others to the lower Rappahannock; part of the cavalry was moved to Page County in the Shenandoah Valley," Ramsdell writes.[30] On April 25, 1863, Lee drafted a letter to Brigadier General William N. Pendleton in which he openly worried about the availability of replacements: "The destruction of horses in the army is so great that I fear it will be impossible to supply our wants. There are not enough in the country."[31] Edmund Ruffin, who was not only one of the South's most learned agriculturalists but also one of its most zealous patriots, voiced similar concerns that spring:

> It seems to me that our country & cause are now, for the first time during the war, in great peril of defeat—& not from the enemy's arms, but from the scarcity & high prices of provisions, & the impossibility of the government feeding the horses of the army, which is even much more difficult than to feed & support the men. In the cavalry brigade to which my grandson belongs, the horses have rarely had any feed but corn for some months—& are generally without any hay or other long provender, & for weeks together. Horses cannot live on grain alone, even if plentifully supplied with it. As might be expected, the horses are reduced very low in flesh & strength, & many are dying, & more failing entirely. I do not know but infer that this brigade is not worse supplied than all others of our cavalry in eastern Virginia. And if so, the cavalry and the wagon & artillery teams cannot be capable of performing hard or even immoderate service.[32]

A decisive victory at Chancellorsville (May 1863) improved Confederate morale and boosted Lee's confidence, but it did little to bolster the army's dwindling supply of equids. All of these facts compelled Lee and the Army of Northern

Virginia to charge northward into Pennsylvania's Cumberland Valley. The general hoped that invading the Union would weaken its resolve, of course, but there were other, more pragmatic, reasons behind his offensive. Three years of intense warfare had left the landscape of northern Virginia utterly denuded, whereas Pennsylvania's fertile countryside had scarcely been touched. Charging northward, therefore, promised bountiful forage for human and horse alike. It also afforded the southern army an opportunity to loot the Union's agricultural riches. "Exactly how many head the Confederates took is impossible to know," Mark Fiege writes, adding that "the total surely was in the tens of thousands."[33] The Confederate and Union armies clashed at Gettysburg on July 1, beginning three days of intense combat. All told, more than three thousand horses died during the battle. "Lying for days in the warm, moist air, the remains—an estimated six million pounds, or three thousand tons—fed a disgusting orgy of decomposition," Fiege writes.[34]

PORTENTS OF GLOOM

After Gettysburg, both sides were forced to abandon their broken-down animals, and it was not uncommon to find abandoned horses in the armies' wake.[35] Scarcely a month after Gettysburg, Union bugler Oliver Wilcox Norton reported that horses were being discarded with staggering frequency. "Every day since we returned to Virginia, every day we have marched, Battery D, Fifth United States, has turned out to die from four to ten horses."[36] In many cases the desperate farmers of northern Virginia were only too happy to reclaim these equine rejects in hopes of rehabilitating them. If indeed these animals actually recuperated, however, they were invariably reconscripted. "When such a brute got to be pretty lively once more, unless he was concealed, he would soon fall into service again in one of the armies, and possibly another gasping skeleton left in his place," John D. Billings recalled.[37] More often, however, weary horses simply fell by the wayside. "Everywhere we march there is a dead horse or mule on the road every bad place we come to, and often there are three or four. I tell you hot weather and heavy guns use up artillery horses," Norton wrote.[38]

The destruction of southern horses had grown impossible to ignore and, for many white southerners, difficult to stomach. Ruffin knew that they had only themselves to blame for the Confederacy's dearth of horses. In August 1863 he wrote:

The waste & destruction of horses in our cavalry service are enormous—& enough to destroy the efficiency of that branch of the army, as well as to increase both public and private expenses beyond all calculation for new supplies of horses. It was one part of our general bad system of southern economy to raise very few horses, & to buy nearly all, & all our mules, from the western states. A change of this general system of buying to rearing animals, cannot be changed, even under favorable circumstances for obtaining breeders, &c. in less than three years—& the war, & the dangers of every farmer's stock made the circumstances very unfavorable for a change. Therefore there has been little increase in the breeding of horses & mules—the supply by purchases from abroad totally cut off—the waste, by want of food & great hardships & abuse, in our army, made us destructive—as can be conceived—& the raids & robberies of the enemy, in addition, have stripped much of the country of the before diminished & insufficient stock of horses & mules for agricultural labors. This alone is a very serious subject for gloomy anticipations.[39]

The dwindling number of horses necessarily shaped Confederate strategy. On August 24, 1863, Lee wrote to Confederate president Jefferson Davis: "Nothing prevents my advancing now but the fear of killing our artillery horses." He explained that the animals were already half-starved and that Virginia's denuded landscape offered little reprieve. Some days the horses subsisted on little more than a pound of corn; other days they subsisted on none. "Everything is being done by me that can be to recruit the horses," the general assured Davis, but "you can judge of our prospects."[40]

Lee's already dampened optimism was even more muted by the time he wrote Lieutenant General James Longstreet on January 16, 1864. "You know how exhausted the country is between here and the Potomac; there is nothing for man or horse," he lamented. "After you get into Kentucky, I suppose provisions can be obtained. But if saddles, etc. could be procured in time, where can the horses be? They cannot be obtained in this section of country, and, as far as my information extends, not in the Confederacy."[41] That month Lee was compelled to disband three regiments of cavalry for lack of forage.[42]

Ruffin, who may have possessed more agricultural acumen than anyone else in the South, was similarly dispirited. "Our cavalry is almost worthless for fighting, because of the broken-down condition of a large proportion of the horses, & the inability to replace them from any surplus stock of the country, & the

impossibility of providing half enough provender," he wrote in his diary on May 27, 1864.[43] One month later he recorded the failure of Confederate cavalry to pursue some Federal raiders, commenting: "This is regularly the case in all raids of the enemy. They, by stealing fresh horses, & other facilities, are able to keep better mounted, & their horses better fed, & cannot often be overtaken, or matched in battle, by our cavalry, on half-starved & failing horses."[44]

On July 5, 1864, Lee wrote to Davis with what was probably his most forthright assessment of southern horses to date:

> Mr. President, The subject of recruiting and keeping up our cavalry force, has occupied much of my thoughts, especially since the opening of the present campaign. The enemy is numerically superior to us in this arm, and possesses greater facilities for recruiting his horses and keeping them in serviceable condition. In the several engagements that have taken place between the cavalry of the two armies, I think great loss has been inflicted upon him, but it has been attended with a diminution of our force which we were less able to bear. Could I sweep his cavalry from the field, or preserve a fair proportion between its numbers and our own, I should feel that our present situation was in a measure secure. But in view of the disparity that exists, and the difficulty of increasing or even maintaining our force, I cannot but entertain serious apprehensions about the safety of our southern communications. Should we be unable to preserve them, I need not point out the consequences.

Lee was so confounded that he actually suggested procuring horses from Texas and swimming them across unobserved points along the Mississippi River. Other than that far-fetched idea, the general was at a loss. "I hope your Excellency will be able to devise some means of obtaining an increase of our supply of horses, and recruiting our cavalry, as upon that in a great measure I believe, depends the issue of the campaign in Virginia."[45]

HARBINGERS OF DOOM

By comparison, the Union army had access to far more horses, and this influenced their prosecution of the war in significant ways. Beginning in 1864, impatient Union forces adopted an increasingly unforgiving strategy. Toward that end, late in the summer of 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses Grant placed an army of more than 50,000 soldiers under the direction of Major General Philip Sheridan

and charged them with conquering the Shenandoah Valley.[46] After a slow start, the campaign began routing Confederate forces with increasing consistency. They famously spared nothing that might be used by the Confederate army, especially domestic animals. One southern farmer recalled Sheridan's army marching through the Valley, "horses were taken and carried away, whether needed by the army or not."[47] By late October, Union forces had effectively conquered the Shenandoah. During the course of a few short months, Sheridan's troops had appropriated more than four thousand horses and mules from the Valley's farmers.[48]

Sheridan's march through the Shenandoah was a preamble to Major General William Sherman's more famous march through the heart of Georgia. Sherman's forces entered the northwestern corner of the state in May 1864 and had conquered Atlanta by September. While occupying that city, Sherman prepared a custom map of Georgia. Using information from the 1860 agricultural census, he scribbled how many animals and crops he expected to find in each of the counties that lay between his forces and the Atlantic Ocean.[49] He then decided to abandon the troublesome supply lines linking him to the Tennessee Valley and to instead live off the land. To accomplish this task, he famously directed his forces to "forage liberally."[50]

Technically speaking, "foraging" was the process whereby soldiers appropriated what they needed to survive from the local population. Sherman showed little sympathy for Georgia's homefront population, who were not yet privy to the horrors of war. "They don't know what war means," he wrote.[51] Indeed, the strategy was designed to destroy the South's agricultural foundations.[52] This proved successful, and Union soldiers loved it. "This is probably the most gigantic pleasure excursion ever planned," one man wrote, adding that foraging troops were "finding lots of horses and mules."[53] George Sharland reported much the same. "It is invariably the case that in traveling through the enemy's country, all classes of foragers make it their ruling object to be always on the alert for horses and mules, which they find in large numbers, in going through such a country as Georgia."[54] When foragers found worn-out horses they deemed unfit for stealing, it was policy to kill those animals. "This is a very unpleasant duty for those upon whom it falls, but like many other disagreeable duties, it is a necessity and must be done," one soldier reasoned, "the object being to cripple the enemy in every possible resource." He added, "should we leave the cripples and worn out stock, they would endeavor to recuperate them for future use." As a result, soldiers sometimes killed hundreds of horses in a single day.[55]

As Sherman's forces drew closer to their destination, Savannah, some of the soldiers tried to calculate just how much they had foraged. "We were talking over last night what this army had cost the Confederacy since the 4th of October last," Charles Wright Wills wrote in his diary on December 6, 1864, before finally estimating that Sherman's men had captured or killed some 15,000 horses and mules.[56] Ten days later, with his army perched on the outskirts of Savannah, the general also attempted to tally the damages:

> As for our mules and horses, we left Atlanta with about two thousand five hundred (2,500) wagons, many of which were drawn by mules which had not recovered from the Chattanooga starvation; all of which were replaced, the poor mules shot, and our transportation is now in superb condition. I have no doubt the State of Georgia has lost by our operations fifteen thousand (15,000) first-rate mules. As to horses, Kilpatrick collected all his remounts, and it looks to me, in riding along our columns, as though every officer has three or four led horses, and each regiment seems to be followed by at least fifty (50) Negroes and foot-sore soldiers, riding on horses and mules. The custom was for each brigade to send out daily a foraging party of about fifty (50) men on foot, who invariably returned mounted.

So many horses had been stolen, he continued, that "great numbers of these were shot by my orders, because of the disorganizing effect on our infantry of having too many idlers mounted."[57]

Although Sherman's "March to the Sea" remains one of the most famous campaigns of the Civil War, his campaign through the Carolinas was no less important. Sherman directed his forces north out of Savannah in January 1865, scarcely a month after they had arrived. They continued foraging through the Carolinas, with attendant consequences for local horses. On February 2 Dexter Horton wrote in his diary: "Up at daylight and went aforaging. Found a drove of nine (horses), very wild. Had a hard race in getting them or six of them. Pretty near played our horses out."[58] Later that month Oscar Lawrence Jackson noted that the Union army had appropriated a huge number of horses while passing through South Carolina. "We are gathering immense herds of horses and mules," he wrote.[59] By March 7, Jackson wrote that South Carolina's horses "have been entirely cleaned out."[60] By March 22, the army had reached the Neuse River near Goldsboro, North Carolina, where "lots of mules and horses (were) captured."[61]

As Sherman tore through the Carolinas, Grant chased Lee across Virginia. By the spring of 1865, Grant had more horses than his opponent had soldiers.[62] In March 1865 Lee wrote to Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge that "unless the men and animals can be subsisted, the army cannot be kept together, and our present lines must be abandoned."[63] Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant on April 9, and General Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the armies of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida to Sherman later that same month. The conditions of surrender allowed the ex-Confederate soldiers to retain their horses. Rather than some grand gesture of respect, however, the decision was instead intended to stabilize the social and domestic spheres of the South. According to agricultural censuses conducted immediately before and immediately after the war, the southern states lost more than a third of their horses during the Civil War. In some places losses were even more acute. Virginia's horse population decreased by 40 percent, while Georgia's horse population shrank by 45 percent.[64]

CONCLUSION

In many ways the equine version of the Civil War mirrors the human version. After all, horses were present for every major event. They were the tip of the spear during Major General George Pickett's ill-fated charge up Cemetery Ridge, and they later bore silent witness at Appomattox Court House. But their presence in the historical record also yields previously unexpected lessons. Consider, for example, that the end of the conflict was not the end of the story. Most of the war horses retired back to their homesteads, but some took up residency in the southern wilds. More than twenty years after the end of the Confederacy, bands of feral (free-ranging) horses roamed the marshy wilds of western Tennessee. Locals explained that these animals had survived the carnage of the Fort Pillow massacre, having persisted in the wilderness for more than two decades thereafter. When news of these feral equines was published in the papers, several local hunting parties set out to find the animals, kill them, and eat them.[65]

Animal history provides a new perspective on familiar topics.[66] This can tell us about the animals themselves, of course, but it can also tell us about their human partners. Serving as both a lens and a mirror, equines offer new ways of thinking about the Civil War, the historical enterprise, and humanity's relationship with the rest of nature.[67]

NOTES

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53. Welch, "Forage Liberally," 93–94.

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55. Sharland, *Knapsack Notes*, 25.

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III

Interaction with Wildlife during THE Civil War