

FIRST DRAFT

Migration to Southern Plains by Comanches shrouded in mystery

The common perception of Comanche Indians was shaped by Hollywood films such as "The Searchers" or by books like "Empire of the Summer Moon."

In these stories, the Comanches are portrayed as swaggering, sometimes brutal warriors, but masterful horsemen and women who were the scourge of the Southern Plains. And it's true they dominated Oklahoma and Texas, eastern Colorado,



BOB SILBERNAGEL

western Kansas and eastern New Mexico until late in the 19th century.

Yet, just two centuries earlier, the people who became known as Comanches were foot-bound bison hunters believed to be closely aligned with — or even a part of — the Eastern Shoshone then living in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming.

Exactly how and why they migrated to the Southern Plains, how they acquired horses and became one of the fiercest groups of light cavalry in the world remain mysteries that archaeologists, anthropologists and historians are trying to unravel.

The popular images of 19th century Comanches are partially correct, although recent research points to a much more sophisticated Comanche culture than people just galloping around, stealing horses, killing pioneers, taking hostages and hunting buffalo.

"For a century, roughly from 1750 to 1850, the Comanches were the dominant people of the Southwest," wrote Oxford historian Pekka Hämäläinen in his 2009 book "The Comanche Empire."

They used theft, kidnapping and trade with both Euro-American settlers and other Indian groups to improve their status and consolidate power, he said.

"The Comanche empire was powered by violence, but like most viable empires, it was first and foremost an economic construction," he added.

They traded and stole horses and hostages, guns, slaves and bison hides across a Native-controlled economic region that — in combination with their allies from other Indian tribes — ranged from southern Alberta to northern Mexico.

The first European written reference to a people called Comanches came in 1706 by Spanish military leader Juan de Ulibarri. When he visited a Spanish mission near Taos, he was told by mission officials that they expected to be attacked by "infidel enemies" who were from "the Ute and Comanche tribe."

That attack didn't materialize, but others had already occurred in Apache farmlands northwest of Taos, and more would take place in coming decades. Sometimes the Comanches and Utes worked as allies. Sometimes they were enemies. Still, along with the Shoshones, they shared a linguistic history.

"The Comanche speak a Central Numic language only moderately differentiated from Eastern (Wind River) Shoshone," wrote anthropologist Cody Newton. "The linguistic evidence leaves no doubt that the two groups are closely related." Utes speak a similar Numic language.

Comanche oral histories from the 19th and early 20th centuries tell of various reasons for their split with the Shoshones. Some say specific events created animosity between the two groups; others simply relate that splinter groups headed southeast in search of horses and better bison hunting.

Newton suggests two potential routes for the Comanche migration: A pathway through the Western Slope he called



"Comanche Feats of Horsemanship" was painted by George Catlin in 1834 or 1835, after he visited Comanches in the company of U.S. Army dragoons.

the mountain hunter-gatherer route. The primary route, he maintains, was along Colorado's Front Range, the bison-hunter route. Each may have been used at different times by small bands.

Access to horses seems to be at the heart of the movement, although horses didn't become widely available to Natives until after the Pueblo Revolt in New Mexico in 1680. When that occurred, several bands of Ute Indians in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico were poised to obtain horses and likely helped the Comanches acquire equines.

"The Comanches probably receive(d) their first horses from their Ute cousins, whose proximity to liberated Spanish herds during the Pueblo Revolt era led them to be key middlemen in the early horse trade," wrote the authors of "Comanche New Mexico: The Eighteenth Century." The Utes also collaborated with Comanches to raid Spanish and Pueblo communities in northern New Mexico in the early 1700s.

Drought and disease may have played roles in the Comanche migration. "In the Comanche case, the sixteenth century megadrought (across the West) could have resulted in their southward movement," wrote Newton.

They may have moved into areas that, because of the drought, had become "devoid of other groups."

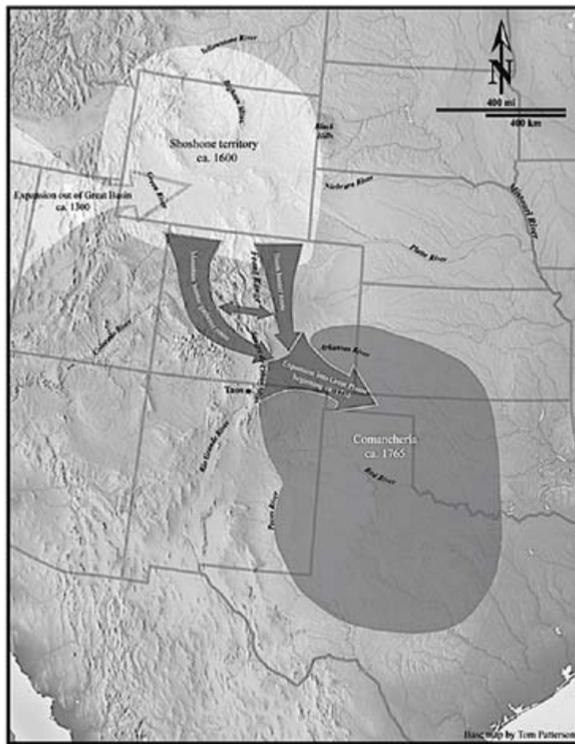
Additionally, although other tribes occupied parts of what would become Comancheria — the vast territory later dominated by Comanches — many of these people were devastated by smallpox and other European diseases that struck in the 17th century.

Comanche groups, clinging to mountain hideouts along Colorado's Front Range, the Rio Grande Valley and on the Western Slope, were poised to move into these territories, especially once they obtained horses.

The four authors of "Comanche New Mexico: Eighteenth Century," led by Severin Fowles of Barnard College in New York, have conducted archaeological exploration of the Rio Grande Gorge north of Taos, New Mexico. There they have found early Apache, Ute and Comanche rock art.

The Comanche art, which is scratched rather than pecked and is barely visible, had been largely overlooked until recently.

One site, called Vista Verde, is centrally located within the gorge and may have been used by "combined forces of Ute and Comanche raiders during the early eighteenth century."



SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL FROM CODY NEWTON
Possible routes the Comanches may have used in migrating from the Colorado-Wyoming border to the Southern Plains.

Although Europeans and Americans constantly viewed groups like the Comanches and Utes as large nations under centralized leadership, the Indians didn't see themselves that way.

For the Utes, Comanches and many other Natives, small bands built around family ties were the most important group connections.

So, while there were bands of Comanches staying in Rio Grande Gorge early in the 18th century, others were likely moving farther eastward onto the Southern Plains. Some were documented in Texas by the 1740s.

Even then, Comanches hadn't abandoned the Colorado-Wyoming area entirely. In 1776, when Spanish friars Dominguez and Escalante traveled north from Santa Fe, they were warned by Ute Indians they met near Grand Mesa of possible attacks from Comanches if they ventured north of the Colorado River. No such attacks occurred. It's not clear whether some Comanche bands remained permanently in the region or visited from Comancheria.

The rock art at Vista Verde shows Comanches on horses covered in leather armor — something the Comanches only used very early in the 18th century. The armor was discontinued once guns were

introduced into the region and bullets could pierce the armor. No guns are depicted in the Comanche rock art at Vista Verde. The drawings at Vista Verde Site "point to the presence of a highly developed military culture at an early date," Fowles and his associates wrote. "The images were probably created during the first half of the eighteenth century, only a generation or two after the Comanches had acquired the horse."

Even then, the Comanches were beginning to demonstrate the equestrian militarization that would allow them to dominate the Southern Plains for the next 150 years.

There is a strong likelihood that some of those Comanches moved through western Colorado and worked with their linguistic cousins, the Utes, to do so.

Sources: "The Comanche Empire," by Pekka Hämäläinen; "Comanche Movement Prior to Eighteenth Century Spanish Documentation," by Cody Newton, in *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 56, No. 217, 2011; "Comanche New Mexico, The Eighteenth Century," by Severin Fowles, Jimmy Arterberry, Lindsay Montgomery and Heather Atherton, included in *The Colonial Period in the American Southwest*, 2017.

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