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Horsepower in the Civil War: Uses, Suffering, and Personal Relationships

“A dog may be man's best friend...but the horse wrote history.” “The history of mankind is carried on the back of a horse.” Both of those sayings are from unknown authors, but the statements embrace the substantial impact that horses have had on America to this day. Horses have been a major part of American history, whether their use was for transportation, companionship, war, recreational riding, or farming. When someone mentions America, the bald eagle and the American flag automatically come mind, but the often unrecognized and overlooked hero in American history is the horse. One of the most beautiful things to behold and experience is a horse running freely through a field. The ground trembling with every magnificent step of a creature so powerful yet so gentle, weighing over a thousand pounds, ever so gracefully puts down. The soft look in their eyes that seem to pierce merrily through the human soul, bringing awareness to every hope, dream, and fear. The horse has truly earned its place in American history and the hearts of people, young and old.

People see the horse as an American icon because of the beauty, hope, grace, power, and freedom that they exhibited in war. However, some people believe that history cannot take into account the value of horses in war because of the fact that they could not express their feeling. Many historians agree with Descartes's principle that, “because they cannot express

consciousness, animals must, perforce, have no consciousness.”¹ However, Gervase Phillips, renowned historical author of equine science of the Civil War, in his article “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” disproves the belief of many historians by explaining how the reevaluation of horses in the Civil War, through equine science and records, shows how “animal soldiers” can enrich military history.² Although horses cannot verbally communicate their thoughts, through the study of their body language, such as their ear direction, tail movement, overall stance, position of their head and legs, and their eyes people can determine whether they are fearful, happy, hurt, scared, or alert.³

Most Civil War soldiers were very literate and left diaries and journals of their experiences in the war; horses obviously could not. However, many soldiers wrote specifically about their own horse’s bravery and experiences during war, giving them an actual voice in the war. History has been significantly enriched by the accounts of slaves and poor, illiterate soldiers as opposed to only hearing voices of the socially elite,⁴ so the study of horses and other animals can only enrich the history of wars, especially the Civil War. Horses played an irreplaceable role in the Civil War, not only because they provided unlimited benefits in battle and transportation, but because through their enormous sufferings and the personal attachments that they shared with their soldiers, they directly influenced the outcome of the war.

One of the principal wars that involved the use of horses, also had one of the greatest effects on shaping America: the Civil War. Horses were used in various aspects in the war. In the book, *Traveler and Company: The Horses of Gettysburg*, Blake A. Magner, an expert on the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War, explores the various uses for horses, as well as several

¹ Gervase Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” *War in History*, (2013): 160.

² *Ibid.*, 161.

³ Cherry Hill, *How to Think Like a Horse*, (Storey Publishing, 2006), 108.

⁴ Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” 161.

firsthand accounts by soldiers and citizens affected by the Civil War of bold soldiers and their faithful horses. He confirms that horses served bravely as cavalry mounts; carried unit staff; pulled the caissons, which were two wheel carts that carried artillery ammunition, pulled limbers, which were two wheel carts that were used to transport pieces of artillery; and pulled supply wagons. On average, it took six horses to pull a limber, and six horses to pull caissons, which normally carried three ammunition chests. Each six-horse team consisted of three soldiers who served as drivers. Normally, a battery had nearly fourteen, six-horse teams which, in addition to the limber and caissons, consisted of a battery wagon, two forage wagons, and ambulances. Magner explains that during the Civil War, there were mainly two types of ambulances. One was the extremely unpopular two-wheeled wagon because it would bounce and rock, causing immense pain to an already brutally injured soldier. The other type of ambulance was a more widely used and accepted four-wheeled version which was pulled with two horses.

Horses were not the only equine species used during the war. Army wagons were pulled with mules, normally consisting of six for each wagon. Mules were generally not used as riding mounts or used to pull the ambulances because they were more stubborn and slightly more skittish than horses.⁵ Mules were used to pull heavy artillery and supplies because they were more prone to pulling heavy weight than horses due to their sturdier build.

The Civil War was the most deadly battle in American history, not only for humans, but for horses as well. Throughout the nation's history, approximately one million, two hundred sixty-four thousand American soldiers have died in wars. Of that alarmingly large number, almost half, six hundred twenty thousand of those deaths, were from the Civil War. During the

⁵ Blake A. Magner, *Traveler and Company: The Horses of Gettysburg* (Gettysburg: Farnsworth House Military Impressions, 1995), 1-3.

Civil War, the Battle of Gettysburg was the most deadly, with fifty-one thousand casualties.⁶

What is even more alarming is the number of horses that died in the Civil War. Over the course of the Civil War, it is estimated that over one million, two hundred thousand horses and mules died during active service.⁷ Gettysburg was also one of the most deadly battles for horses.

Adding to the sorrow of so many horse dying in war, many of them suffered immensely all throughout the war before their death. Horse behavior expert Cherry Hill writes in her book *How to Think Like a Horse*, that horses can carry twenty percent of their body weight, meaning that a horse weighing one thousand, two hundred pounds could safely carry two hundred and forty pounds.⁸ Many of the horses in the Civil War were overloaded with weight, which caused sore backs, swollen withers, and saddle sores. Horses often had to carry not only the weight of his rider, but “the weight of his dress, arms, accouterments, ammunition, saddlery, water, and rations”⁹ which alone was a surplus of one hundred pounds. Notable historian, Jean F. Blashfield portrays the various roles of the Cavalry played during the war in her book, *Horse Soldiers: Cavalry in the Civil War*. She horrifically notes that more horses died from gunshot wounds than soldiers “because they made larger targets.”¹⁰ Many horses did die in battle but countless died of diseases such as hoof-rot, which is bacterial infection caused by moist ground conditions, grease-heel, which is a disease that affects a horse's corneal band causing sores, distemper, equine influenza, and glanders, which was “characterized by swelling of the jaw and a persistent discharge from the nostrils, the incidence of which reached epizootic proportions in late 1864.”¹¹

⁶ Civil War Trust, Civil War Facts, Accessed on November 20, 2013, <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/faq/>.

⁷ Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” 167.

⁸ Hill, *How to Think Like a Horse*, 50.

⁹ Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” 177.

¹⁰ Jean F. Blashfield, *Horse Soldiers: Cavalry in the Civil War*, (New York: Cahners Business Information Inc., 1998), 23.

¹¹ Phillips, “Writing Horses into American Civil War History,” 179.

The horses that died on the battle field quickly were considered lucky because they did not have to suffer and ultimately die from starvation or disease.

In Philips's article, "Writing Horse in American Civil War History," he states that numerous regiments of the Federal Army destroyed three horses to everyman, and it took the threat, and often completion, of severe punishment in order for them to better care for their horses.¹² As if that number was not bad enough, during the year of 1863, the Federal troops "were actually 'using up' six horses per annum."¹³ Because many of the Northern soldiers were not accustomed to being around horses, they were not aware of the many aspects and tasks that it takes to keep a horse healthy, such as grooming, hoof care, feeding, and watering of a horse. Many horse deaths and suffering was developed from simple ignorance and lack of horse sense. For example, someone who had not been around horses would not know that letting an overheated horse drink excessive amounts of water, eat dangerous amounts of grain, or exposure to a rapid change in diet could cause colic, which is a potentially fatal abdominal pain that can cause a horses intestines to literally twist.

In another article by Phillips's, "Warhorses of the U.S. Civil War," he argues "that the dependence on often weary, sickly, horses on both sides in the war, and the failure to manage their use and welfare had a significant impact on the development, and final outcome of, the struggle between North and South."¹⁴ He explains that because the Northern Cavalry did not possess knowledge of horses they had killed up to ten times more horses than the Confederate Army did for them.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 167.

¹³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁴ Gervase Philips, "Warhorses of the U.S. Civil War," *History Today* 55, no. 12 (205,) 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

Horses were being killed or left for dead in alarmingly substantial numbers, often on farms or in cities; civilians were left to dispose of them. Many of the brave but unfortunate horses that were still alive after battle were put down with a bullet through their skulls, dragged into piles, and burned after the soldiers, who had so bravely given their lives, were buried. Other civilians, like Mrs. Leister whose farm was the home of a deadly battle, sold the horse's bones for fifty cents per one hundred pounds of bones. In Magner's book, he tells of an account between Civil War soldier, J.T. Trowbridge and Mrs. Leister where Mrs. Leister states that seventeen dead horses were on her land, which ruined her only fresh water supply. The only reimbursement she got was three hundred and seventy-five dollars because she sold the horses' bones.¹⁶ Because they had to let the horses rot in order to sale the bones for money, the air was poisoned with a nauseating odor that citizens became acclimated to, but "some visitors coming from a pure atmosphere into this, were poisoned, and went home and died."¹⁷ The war came at horrendous cost for not only soldiers, but civilians and horses as well.

The Northern Cavalry were also inexperienced riders and blamed their horses for unwanted actions such as rearing, bolting, or bucking, which caused them to lack the strong emotional ties that most Confederate Cavalry men exhibited with their horses. A bad or inexperienced rider can cause even the most calm, well-trained horse to turn into an unruly mount. Good riders can "communicate their wishes clearly through 'aids' (the use of legs, hands, seat, posture, and voice)," but "horses were now confronted by new Northern Cavalrymen who were agitated and unpredictable, who rolled clumsily about in the saddle, and whose wishes were largely incomprehensible."¹⁸ The fact that the horses didn't know what the soldiers wanted due

¹⁶ Magner, *Traveler and Company: The Horses of Gettysburg*, 41-42.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁸ Phillips, "Writing Horses into American Civil War History," 171.

to the soldiers' lack of communication aids caused confusion for the horses, which made them act uncharacteristically unruly.

Confederate soldiers were more comfortable and accustomed to horses. Many Southern Cavalry men rode their own horses into battle.¹⁹ Horses are social animals and thrive on strong personal attachments to other horses, animals, and people. War could be a very lonely place for both soldiers and for horses, so many soldiers found their greatest allies and friends with their mounts. Because many Confederate soldiers brought their own horses into war, they had already formed intense emotional unity and trust in one another; one of the most well-known Civil War horse-soldier relationships was between a rider and horse who before the war had never met: General Robert E. Lee and Traveler. According to Magner, Traveler was born in West Virginia in 1857 and was known as "Jeff Davis" until he was purchased at age four by Major Thomas L. Brown. Lee took command of Brown's unit and took an instant fondness to his horse. In February of 1862, Lee paid two hundred dollars for the five year old, iron-grey, sixteen hand tall gelding. Traveler had a remarkable conformation and a rapid step. Lee would often describe Traveler by saying, "such a picture would inspire a poet, whose genius could then depict his worth and describe his endurance of toil, hunger, thirst, heat, cold, and the dangers and sufferings which he passed."²⁰ After the war, Traveler remained with Lee, and when "Lee died in 1870, Traveler followed the hearse to his master's final resting place."²¹ A year later at age fourteen, Traveler died. Whether Traveler died from old age or sorrow from losing his best friend, companion, and master, Lee, remains unknown, but one thing is for sure, the bond between horse and rider was unbreakable.

¹⁹ Ibid., 168

²⁰ Magner, *Traveler and Company: The Horses of Gettysburg*, 4-5.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

These horse-soldier bonds were not uncommon, especially in the Confederate Army. In Magner's book, he relays numerous accounts of special bonds between horse and soldier and the strength and bravery that horses exhibited throughout the war. General George G. Meade had four remarkable mounts during the Civil War: Old Baldy, Old Billy, Blackie, and Gertie. However, General Meade and Old Baldy exhibited the greatest bond. Old Baldy served Meade faithfully during the war, until he was struck by a bullet that lodged in his ribs at Weldon Railroad in 1864. Baldy shockingly lived, but Meade decided that Old Baldy, who had been wounded five confirmed times, although it is speculated that he had been wounded up to fourteen times, deserved to be retired after participating in eleven major battles. After the war was over, General Meade still rode and used Baldy until Meade died. Baldy, like Traveler, was a part of his funeral procession and outlived his master by ten years until he was put down due to old age.²²

Magner gives another, more gruesome, account of the bravery and strength that horses possessed during the war through the story by 24th New York Cavalry Captain Henry C. Meyer. Meyer writes about General David McM. Gregg's horse who had been struck by a bullet, after it had grazed the General's leg, in the stomach directly behind his girth. His horse fell and General Meade remounted another horse only to be surprised to see his horse, "running beside him with his nose against the General's legs, his entrails dragging on the ground." Seeing his courageous horse in such pitiful condition, he screamed, "For God's sake, somebody shoot him!"²³ The immense bravery and emotion that his horse exhibited further proves the horses' well-deserved place in American Civil War history. This firsthand account helps convey not only the strong personal relationship between horse and soldier, but the unbearable suffering that horses endured during the Civil War.

²² Ibid., 7.

²³ Ibid., 15-16.

Since the horse played a crucial part in many great, famous generals' lives, there are numerous equestrian statues in America today. There is nothing so patriotic and empowering as a war hero sitting proudly and gracefully astride a beautiful, courageous animal. One of the most prominent equestrian statue sculptors, according to Magner, is Henry Kirke Bush-Brown. He was the artist of the statues of General George E. Meade, John Sedgwick, and John F. Reynolds and their faithful mounts. Bush-Brown was an avid horseman, like his father, and studied equine anatomy in order to create the best possible sculpture. The average cost for statues during that post-Civil War time era was around thirty thousand dollars, but the lasting effect of pride and patriotism was priceless. It was previously thought that the number of feet that the equine statue had on the ground was significant to the outcome of the rider during the battle. Equestrian statues are far more notable and respected than a simple statue of a brave general or valiant soldier standing alone, because they patriotically show the beauty of companionship between horse and rider, which captures the souls of Americans still to this day.

The horse is a brave and powerful creature; the horse is breathtakingly beautiful and a loving companion. Horses have captured the hearts and minds of people young and old because of the power and freedom that they embody. Because of this representation of power and freedom, they are viewed as an iconic symbol of America. Horses helped in various aspects of the Civil War, such as serving as cavalry mounts, transporting supply wagons, and pulling ambulances. As a result of their commitment and contribution to the Civil War, over one million, two hundred thousand horses gave the ultimate sacrifice: their lives.

Horses gave more than their lives, they gave soldiers, such as General Robert E. Lee and General George E. Meade, their trust. Through this trust they formed unbreakable bond, which made war less of a dark and lonely place for both horse and soldier. Their great contribution to

the Civil War proves that horses truly did earn their place in American history, not only because they supplied unlimited benefits in battle and transportation, but because through their enormous sufferings and the personal attachments that they shared with their soldiers, they directly influenced the outcome of the war.

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