HORSES
A LITTLE BIG HISTORY

BIG HISTORY PROJECT
HORSES

GALLOPING THROUGH TIME

By Peter Stark, adapted by Newsela
First hunted and later tamed, the horse helped humans travel and communicate better, speeding up the rate of change on Earth.
The speed of things

Today, our messages travel close to the speed of light. But for early humans, messages could only travel as fast as a person could walk or run.

When humans first tamed the horse, it revolutionized both transportation and communication. Humans could now travel farther and carry much more with them. Horseback riders carrying messages increased collective learning.

What made horses so fast? How did their speed help humans? And how did humans come to choose the horse for transportation? To answer these questions, we must first look at how the horse evolved.

The evolution of the horse

The horse’s early ancestors lived in the tropical rain forests of North America about 55 million years ago. These dog-sized leaf-eating mammals were called Hyracotherium. After the dinosaurs went extinct, mammals began to spread.

Some ancestors of the horse went extinct. But some of these early horses changed in response to predators, competitors, and a changing environment. They grew larger. Their legs grew longer and more powerful. Feet with a large center toe evolved into a hoof. These changes helped the early horse speed across open spaces and hard ground.

Eventually, the rain forests of North America dried up and the Rocky Mountains arose. Huge grassy plains appeared alongside the mountains. Early horses adapted to better eat the prairie grass. They needed stronger jaws and bigger teeth.
The *Hyracotherium*, an ancestor to the horse, lived during the Eocene epoch.

Moving to distant lands

These early horses crossed over the Bering Land Bridge from the Americas to Asia. They eventually spread to Europe. Curiously, they suddenly vanished from the Americas about 10,000 years ago. Their disappearance could have been caused by the changing climate at the end of the last ice age. Or perhaps human hunters arriving from Asia wiped them out. Humans hunted the animal for meat long before they used it for transportation.

While horses disappeared in the Americas, foragers in Europe and Asia continued to hunt horses. Perhaps humans admired them. Cave paintings by early humans in Lascaux, France, from over 17,000 years ago beautifully display horses. Later human societies named constellations of stars after the horse.

Hunters began to follow horse herds. While the horse was still a “wild animal,” humans and horses grew closer. Humans could attract horses by providing food. They found that they could milk female horses for drinking.

The first evidence of domesticated horses comes from 5000 BCE. Horses bones from Kazakhstan show knife marks. These horses were probably raised for meat and milk.

Horses and riders

At some point, humans began to see horses as more than simply food. Perhaps an adventurous young herder climbed atop a horse and had the ride of his life. We don’t know if humans rode horses first or used them to pull carts first. These developments happened before writing was invented. We depend on archaeological evidence to help us understand what happened.

Drawings from 4,000 years ago in the Middle East show horses pulling chariots. The earliest evidence of humans riding horses is 5,000-year-old fossils of worn-down horse teeth. These fossils show that a riding bit was placed in the animal’s mouth. It’s possible that humans rode horses without bits long before that, but no physical evidence remains.
Humans now had the ability to ride horses and to raise them for food. Horse-centered cultures grew in places like the steppes of Central Asia. Horses could cover huge distances at great speed. Roads were built to move horses and chariots more quickly along trade routes. Horse-mounted messengers on the Persian Empire’s Royal Road in the fifth century BCE could carry a message 1,700 miles in seven days. It took 90 days by foot.

Coming home

Humans also figured out how to use horses in war. The chariot was a fearsome weapon. The invention of the saddle and stirrup made horse-mounted warfare much more effective. Warriors could use their hands to throw spears, slash with swords, or fire arrows. The Mongols conquered much of Asia in the thirteenth century. They were famous for their horse-mounted archers. When the stirrup arrived in Europe, it allowed European warriors to ride wearing armor.

The horse-loving Spaniards reintroduced the horse to North America. They brought horses on their first expeditions to Mexico shortly after Columbus’s voyages. Some horses quickly got free of the Spanish conquistadors and bred in the wild.

Native Americans quickly saw the utility of the horse. The Plains Indians became experts at horse riding. Plains Indian children who were too young to talk could comfortably ride their own small horses.

All the while, humans bred horses selectively for characteristics like maneuverability, speed, gentleness, and strength. More than 300 breeds exist today. This reflects the many ways horses have served humans.

In other parts of the world, humans raised other animals to carry themselves or their loads. Elephants were used in India and Thailand. Camels were domesticated in North Africa and parts of Asia. Plains Native Americans used dogs to pull sleds before horses were reintroduced to North America.
An unburdened future

When the steam engine was invented, it replaced the horse in many places. Railroads, steamboats, and the automobile quickly took over. The number of workhorses dropped sharply. Still, these new machines were measured in “horsepower.”

Eventually, horses were no longer needed for carrying messages. Electronic communication and new forms of transportation were faster. Telegraphs and railroads replaced the Pony Express, which once carried letters across the American West. The radio, telephone, television, and the Internet made communication even faster.

Today, the horse continues to be used for transport and farming in some regions. But it is mostly ridden for fun or kept as a pet in the industrialized world.

Humans and horses have had a relationship for thousands of years. Horses perhaps understand humans in ways we don’t even know. Recent scientific studies have shown that autistic children are soothed by riding and grooming horses.

In the past, the horse carried heavy loads and transported messages over long distances. Perhaps in the future the horse may have a more complex and important relationship with humans.
COLLISION
The K-T impact near the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico 65 MYA wipes out the dinosaurs, triggering the rise of mammals.

EVOLUTION
A leaf-eating, dog-size mammal named *Hyracotherium* lives in North America 55 MYA and eventually evolves into the horse.

CONTEMPLATION
Human foragers hunt the horse for meat and revere it, depicting the animal in cave paintings.

DOMESTICATION
Agriculture recasts the horse as a versatile work animal, providing a major energy boost to human societies.

CONNECTION
The horse, now a major player in communication, transportation, and warfare, is reintroduced to the Americas by Spanish conquistadors.

ACCELERATION
Inventions like the steam engine and the telegraph make the horse nearly obsolete for transportation and communication, but mechanical power is measured in “horsepower.”

A LITTLE BIG HISTORY OF HORSES
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