

CHAPTER 4



Borderlands, Cultural Exchanges, and New Native Societies

Borderlands history came into being as an effort to see the world anew. In a sense, it shows us how to squint, how to deflect the blinding light of empires and nations as embodiments of history in order to see what lies hidden behind them. Borderlands history looks at how ordinary peoples have defied, negotiated, and eluded the attempts of larger entities to control their lives and how they have carved out distinct social spaces amidst empires and nations—or across imperial or national boundaries. Borderlands history is therefore inherently concerned with the intimate and culturally specific dimensions of human interactions. It tends to look at history through a local lens, focusing on the actions and experiences of individuals and small groups, fringe peoples at the edges of empires, nations, and cultures.

Yet borderlands history is not just about face-to-face relationships and local dynamics. Because in borderlands central powers exert limited control over human interactions, borderlands often become sites for unexpected alliances, political innovation, and cultural reinvention, the repercussions of which can reverberate far and wide. Examples of borderlands spawning far-reaching historical changes abound. The momentous shift in New Spain's Indian policy in the 1760s and 1770s towards the "French model" of conciliation, exchange, and gifting has often been seen as the result of the ambitious reforms emanating from the Royal Palace in Madrid, but the policy shift was pioneered and tested by innovative frontier officials in New Mexico and elsewhere a generation before the crown institutionalized it. The Seven Years' War (1754–63) began at the contested borderlands of the Ohio Valley, where the French, British, and Indians had vied for power for generations, and from there it spread over three continents, becoming the first global war. Borderland conflicts could become international conflicts, but the pacification of borderlands could be equally consequential. When peace brought diverse peoples into closer contact through trade, diplomacy, and intermarriage, it created propitious conditions for viruses to jump hosts and trigger epidemics that could devastate previously unexposed native societies across vast distances. And borderlands also influenced the birth of other borderlands. When people moved to new locations, they carried with them their accumulated knowledge of intercultural

dialogue, and when they encountered new peoples in new environments, they tried to apply the practices that had worked before. North American borderlands were rarely created afresh; they were built on prior experiences and expectations.

In early America, hard colonial frontiers often softened into porous borderlands of cross-cultural exchange and accommodation where imperial authority was sometimes eclipsed by indigenous power. Yet throughout North America colonial outposts profoundly transformed native societies by introducing new diseases, technologies, markets, and ideas. This chapter examines the various ways in which European contact reshaped native cultures, focusing on technological and biological exchanges (especially horses and firearms) and intermarriage. But the chapter also turns the lens around by asking how the new native societies influenced colonial outposts.

DOCUMENTS

The first document is a traditional Cheyenne story of the moment when foreign traders first brought horses to Cheyenne villages. Deeply impressed by the animals, Cheyennes asked Maheo, All-Father Creator, for horses of their own. Maheo granted their wish but also warned that their lives would be changed forever. Maheo's warning reveals some of the complexities of horse adoption and offers clues about how Cheyennes came to regard their choice. In the second document, Saukamappee, an elderly Cree Indian living among the Piegan Blackfoot Indians, relates the Blackfeet's first encounter with horses, guns, and smallpox around 1730. The account, recorded in 1787 by fur trader David Thompson, illuminates how Indians reacted to new technology and diseases and how their prior experience with dogs may have facilitated the adoption of horses. The account also suggests how the introduction of horses and guns changed native warfare.

Documents 3 and 4 illuminate the changes in Native American power relations that came with the rise of equestrianism. In Document 3, the Marqués de Rubí, a Spanish officer who toured New Spain's northern provinces in 1766–68, recommends a new Indian policy for the Texas and New Mexico borderlands. For decades, Spain had maintained an on-and-off alliance with the various Apache groups of the southern Plains against the expanding Comanche Indians, but Rubí advocated an alliance with the Comanches and possible extermination of the Apaches. His rationale for the policy change reveals how Spaniards tried to protect the borderlands and sheds light on Spanish attitudes toward Indians and alliances with Indians. The next document reveals what happened when two expanding frontiers of European technology intersected. While native trade networks shuffled horses northward across the Great Plains, other indigenous channels moved guns southward from Canadian trading posts in the plains-woodlands borderlands. The two technological frontiers converged in the upper Missouri Valley in the late eighteenth century, plunging the region into wars over trading privileges. Some native groups were marginalized, while others came to dominate multiple trade channels and won secure access to both guns and horses. Charles McKenzie, a Canadian fur trader in the service of the North West Company, visited the upper Missouri River in 1805. In Document 4, McKenzie

describes the dynamics that turned the Mandan and Hidatsa Indian villages into great trading bazaars. His account also illuminates the challenges European fur traders faced when trying to enter into native-controlled exchange networks.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the northern Great Plains emerged as the focal point of the North American fur trade as both British Canadian and U.S. companies extended their operations there. The Hudson's Bay Company, the American Fur Company, and others maintained numerous trading posts along the region's major river valleys, incorporating several native societies into the fur trade. The last two documents—excerpts from the diaries of fur traders Rudolph Friedrich Kurz and Francis Chardon—shed light on cross-cultural accommodations, gender relations, and the roles of native women in the context of the northern plains fur trade. Together, the documents describe how intermarriage between native women and fur traders supported trade relations and how native women became involved in nearly all facets of the fur trade as mediators, cultural transmitters, producers, consumers, and companions. They offer glimpses into the intimate domestic dynamics of fur trade marriages and show how native women carved out personal social places in the male-dominated trading posts. The documents also illuminate how Euro-American traders struggled to understand, navigate, and modify native customs, and they bespeak of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. Chardon's journal also contains references to the devastating 1837–38 smallpox epidemic that spread across the northern plains, killing thousands of Indians and changing the chemistry of Indian-Euro-American relations in the region.

1. Maheo, All-Father Creator, Warns the Cheyennes about Life with Horses

Maheo was the one who made the world and the people and animals and wind and stars. He was the one who brought the light and divided night from day. Maheo, the All Spirit, watched over his people, the Cheyenne, and taught them everything.

One day the Comanches came to see the Cheyennes. The Comanches were riding on horses. "Wah! That is wonderful," said the Cheyennes. "Where do you get them?"

"From the Pueblos," the Comanches said. "They have lots of horses."

"What do you trade for them?" asked the Cheyennes. Their own women made many pretty things, decorated with earth paints and porcupine quills that they dyed with the earth colors and berry juices, but they knew the Comanches did not do that kind of work.

"Trade for them!" said the Comanches, laughing. "We don't trade for them. We just go and take them."

"Don't the Pueblos get angry?" asked the Cheyennes.

"Oh, they don't like it very much, but they're too afraid to go out of their houses to come and get them back."

"We never heard of horses," said one Cheyenne priest. "Perhaps Maheo wouldn't like for us to have them."

"Why don't you ask him?" a Comanche said. "We'll trade with you, if you're too afraid to go and get them."

The Cheyennes knew that was true because the Comanches enjoyed taking great risks. They were gamblers, who were always looking for things to put at stake in their lives or their games.

The Cheyenne priests all gathered in the largest house in the village, which was the medicine lodge, and they sat and smoked and prayed to Maheo, fasting, for four days. At last Maheo took pity on them, and spoke to them through the oldest priest.

"You may have horses," Maheo said. "You may even go with the Comanches and take them. But remember this: If you have horses everything will be changed for you forever."

"You will have to move around a lot to find pasture for your horses. You will have to give up gardening and live by hunting and gathering, like the Comanches. And you will have to come out of your earth houses and live in tents. I will tell your women how to make them, and how to decorate them."

And there will be other changes. You will have to have fights with other tribes, who will want your pasture land or the places where you hunt. You will have to have real soldiers, who can protect the people. Think, before you decide."

The priests sat and smoked and thought another four days. Then the oldest one said, "Maheo, we think we can learn the things you can teach us and our women. We will take the horses, and with your guidance we will learn the new life."

"So be it," said Maheo. "But you must never forget where you came from or who you are. Once a year you must make a lodge in the shape of an earth lodge, and in it you must pray and dance and smoke and sing. It will be your offering of your own flesh and blood in my honor."

All the priests agreed. Then Maheo said, "I will give the power of this dance to the oldest of you, and he can pass it on. But because women are the mothers of life, as I am the father of everything, it must be passed through a woman. On the third night of the dance, the priest must take the wife of a man who is making offering into a special tipi, set aside, and lie with her. Then she will lie with her husband, and the power will be passed through her body to his."

2. Saukamaptee (Cree) Recalls the Arrival of Horses, Guns, and Smallpox to the Northern Plains, 1787

The Peeagans [Piegans] were always the frontier Tribe, and upon whom the Snake [Shoshone] Indians made their attacks, these latter were very numerous,