Appaloosa horse breed

By David Lewis (Takelma, Chinook, Molalla, Santiam Kalapuya)

The Appaloosa is a horse breed associated historically with the Nez Perce (Niimipu) Tribe. The name may originate from “a Palouse,” which referred to the region where the horses were bred. It is likely that these horses originally came from a variety of Spanish horses—so-called spotted horses—that were traded into the Northwest by the mid to late eighteenth century. The horses were then bred by the Nez Perce. The first documented reports of horses in Oregon are in the journals of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who noted spotted horses similar to the Appaloosa among the Nez Perce Tribe.

The Nez Perce valued the Appaloosa for its intelligent temperament, sure-footedness, endurance, and speed. They required their horses to negotiate the treacherous trails from their winter quarters in the Wallowa Valley of eastern Oregon through the Rocky Mountains to the summer encampments on the Plains. The horses were fast enough to catch a bison and paso fino—that is, smooth-gaited—enough to allow a hunter to fire with accuracy from a full gallop.

The original Nez Perce Appaloosa nearly died out after the Nez Perce War in 1876, when the U.S. military confiscated the Tribe’s herds. A few of the breed survived into the twentieth century, however, and in the 1930s horsemen in eastern Oregon worked to revive it. One of the best-known and respected Appaloosa horse breeders was Sam Fisher (Palouse) (1866-1944) who lived at the Palus village site at the confluence of the Palouse and Snake Rivers. As a modern horse breed, the Appaloosa is distinctive for its mottled skin, visible sclera (the white outer layer of the eye), and vertical-striped hooves.

The Appaloosa is one of the most distinctive and valued American horse breeds in the world. The Nez Perce Tribe and other horse ranchers in the region are continuing to develop the desirable traits that were bred into the original breed in the nineteenth century.

Sources

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