

# Life Was Not So Cozy for Horses in Straits Area Years Ago

Today, it's snowing, thick full flakes are falling, but the sun plays peek-a-boo with leaden gray clouds. Our horses stand in their corrals without their blankets.

We've been having a cat and mouse game with the weather these past few weeks. The horses, which have grown warm, dense coats for the winter, don't seem to need an extra layer, at least until the cold winds blow, the rains fall relentlessly, or the daytime temperatures hover in the low 20s. Very soon it will be time to go to the loft and bring the "rugs" down.

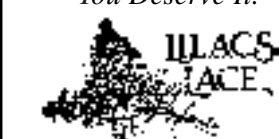
Our barn is more than 100 years old. It has been "modernized" and tightened. Stalls are clean and roomy. The hay is good, the grain is fresh, and the water is pure. Even with being ridden during the days, lunged, or learning how to pull, these horses have a nice and easy life. They have their hooves picked, tails and mane cleaned, and forelocks and coats brushed on a regular schedule. Their teeth are floated and their feet are trimmed, shod, or reset in a timely manner. In many ways, they're the larger version of household pet dogs, except they live outside during the day and sleep in the barn at night. They even get treats.

Life was not so cozy for the first horses brought to the



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## HORSE TALES

by Candice C. Dunnigan



An evening jaunt during winter.

Straits of Mackinac 300 years ago. The winters were harsh. The few horses here worked and worked hard year-around. There were few real barns. Rickety lean-tos and makeshift sheds were the stables of the day. Three hundred years ago, people living in the Straits during the wintertime were preoccupied with two things, keeping warm and having enough to eat. Horses, too. The water for the animals was cold. There were no frost-free waterers. Buckets and water troughs were made of wood, and the water in them froze deep and hard.

In those days, horses in the Straits wore no high-tech, windproof, waterproof, or breathable blankets. They were lucky if they had the semblance of a canvas tarp to be put over them. But that wasn't likely; any canvas would go first as protection for provisions. There was no veterinarian in the northern wilderness. Conditions on the mainland

were really not better than on Mackinac Island.

Hay was in short supply, but little is known of the quality of the forage. We do know that it was not baled, for no balers had been invented. Most of it had to be cut by hand and stored, mostly loose, in the barn. Grains like oats and barley were given in first order to people. And it was dear. Grain was often moldy, infested by mice and rats, and of substandard nutritional value to humans and equines.

The majority of residents on Mackinac at that time were the soldiers and officers garrisoned at Fort Mackinac. Getting enough wood was a major project. The storehousing of enough firewood was never ending and keeping up with the demand for firewood was a constant concern until other fuel sources, such as coal and heating oil, were introduced to the Island. Even then, horses were employed to haul these fuels on Mackinac. With the advance of electric power as heat, the dependency of horses to do such work in the winter declined, but not in "the good old days."

January 6, 1765, Michilimackinac – Captain Wm. Howard to Col. John Bradstreet: "I have three horses constantly employed for the King's service, they were drawing in timber till the snow fell. Horses are also hauling firewood. (Was obliged to have it landed a mile from the Fort on account of the wind. The men have

used sledges to move the firewood in the winter (timber is three miles off)."

Forty-four years later on Mackinac Island in 1809, Lewis Howard, stationed on Mackinac as the Captain of the Artillery (and later post commandant) wrote to the Honorable Wm. Eustis, Secretary of War: "As respects the keeping of three horses at this Post; I am pretty well assured. From the experience of last winter, that even this number are insufficient, unless they were able and stout: Mr. O. Bannon had a pair of borrowed oxen, which were fed from the public fodder and I am informed that he found sufficient employment for them and the horses. The price of corn, I am informed, has been as high as \$2.50 (a bushel). The hay I have had cut by the men at a Prairie (possibly Cheboygan), about 15 miles from this place.

"Three old horses were on hand when I took command (in August last) were (two of them particularly) so nearly worn out when I found it necessary to order the purchase of a stout Canadian horse, which will serve the public well for 10 to 12 years and costs but \$55. And with this addition I found that not an hour could be lost, except when the weather made it impossible to turn out. The last of the three (old) horses has been lately lost, by a wound he received from a stake in the woods, which cut an artery and he died very soon after. As you probably have not

been informed of the uses for which so many creatures may be required, I will take the liberty of stating that in the first place, the wood for the Garrison use is drawn from two to three miles over a very hilly and rocky road, which requires that three carts should be nearly a load for one horse, the allowance of wood cannot be limited in this severe climate, when the men get but one blanket and must keep a little fire at all times to prevent freezing."

It is interesting to note that on January 13, in 1811, Lewis Howard dies on Mackinac Island from injuries sustained in a sleighing accident with a horse.

In the 1820s, missionaries and their families were established on a year-around basis and quite engaged in living here. Speculation is that the number of horses might have reached 20 or so. The largest number of equines belonged to the government. There are records of several tons of hay being harvested on the Island for the winter of 1821, as well as a letter dating from 1821 that talks of the "five public horses" at the post (Fort Mackinac). In midsummer of 1820 Samuel Lasely, in his report to the officers at Drummond Island, attests that he has hauled "two carioles" (light passenger sleighs) to Mackinac Island.

In a letter by Amanda Ferry, the wife of the Reverend William Ferry, who was living at the Mission House on Mission Point, wrote to Hannah White in December of 1823:

"Last Sabbath I rode to church in a 'carryall' for the first time. It differs little from our sleigh."

Six years later, Amanda Ferry writes on December 12:

"As I mentioned, the weather during the last part of October and November was boisterous and severely cold. We had at that time only sledging (akin to current Mackinac winter working drays on runners) until yesterday (when) a light snowfall has enabled the carioles to glide along merrily."

But, on a more somber note November 13, 1827, Amanda Ferry again writes to Hannah White and she mentions the hardship of winter and the early horses.

"There is a shortage of flour on the Island, not a barrel to be bought, and it is nothing for these Canadians; French to live entirely on fish for several months, as well as their hogs, dogs, and horses."

Attention please for all our horses working on Mackinac this winter. Remember, no matter how long a winter season it seems, it is much sweeter and shorter these days by comparison. Merry Christmas to our Island horses both near and far, and all of those who care for them and love them.

*Candice Dunnigan is an active member of the American Equestrian Association, the Waterloo Hunt, and the Mackinac Island Horsemen's Association. Seasonally she resides at Donnybrook and Easterly Cottage.*

**JM**

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