



## Comanche Empire

Historians debate whether the Comanche Empire was truly an empire. Maybe that's because Comanche society didn't have some of the features of most empires. Maybe it was because scholars have historically been blind to the idea of empires created by indigenous Americans. So what exactly counts as an empire? Like the Mongol Empire, the Comanche Empire was formed by nomadic pastoralists. Using horses to trade, hunt, raid, and fight, the Comanche Empire became a formidable force that supported a robust trading network.



**00:01**

*1800s map of North America includes Spain, the United States, France, Great Britain, and Russia; Comancheria is shown on the map at the meeting points of France and Spain*

ROBERT KEITH COLLINS: This is a map of North America around 1800. According to some historians, this map is a fiction. Why? Because it leaves out what has been described as the Comanche Empire. The Comanche were an indigenous nation and they exerted a lot of power in the center of the continent. They had a massive economic influence in the land described as Comancheria, controlling border markets and long-distance trade.

**00:44**

*Robert Keith Collins, PhD, San Francisco State University*

But was the Comanche Empire actually an empire? It did have some imperial characteristics, like power over a large territory, hierarchies between the core and periphery, areas where resources were extracted, cultural domination, and assimilation of multiple ethnic groups. But it didn't have other ingredients common to empires, like firm geographical boundaries, a central political authority, a unifying belief system, or a large subjugated population. And they didn't build huge monuments.

**01:24**

The thing is, these ideas about what makes something an empire are loaded with assumptions. Our own checklists can underestimate the diversity and innovation of human societies—including those that don't build their empires in stone. It may sound like a contradiction, but empires can be built by people on the move. Historically, there are plenty of examples. From the plains of Central Asia, to the West African Sahel, and in North America, pastoral and nomadic people have indeed built empires.

**02:04**

*Two Mongolian drawings of warriors on horseback*

One of the most well-known was the Mongol Empire, created by pastoralists in the 14th century. And just like the Mongol Empire, the Comanche Empire was made up of nomadic, independent bands.

*Drawing of a Comanche rider carrying a long spear*

Today, one thing most people know about the Comanche is that they could ride horses better than anyone. Known as Numunuu or "The People" in their language, the Comanche changed from hunters, gatherers, and small farmers to masters of horse husbandry and bison hunting between 1600 and 1725. It was their advanced horsemanship that earned the Comanche the nickname "Horse Lords of the Plains."

*Colorful artwork depicts several Comanche riders*

**02:52**

This story also tells us how community, trade networks, and economics enabled this great nation to dominate the Southern Plains in the land that became the United States. Yes, the Comanche were great horse riders, but there is so much more to understand about their history. Their society can challenge our perception of what makes an empire, and overturn some of our ingrained misunderstandings about indigenous Americans of the Southern Plains.

So, the Comanche lived in this area, though most maps don't give you a sense of their presence. Their community wasn't always in the Southern Plains. According to a Comanche medicine woman named Sanapia, there was a large indigenous community that lived in what is now Wyoming, and they ultimately split into two groups: the Comanche and Shoshoni. The Comanche migrated south and east and set up new communities. What did Comanche communities look like?

**04:00**

*Drawing of what appears to be an official meeting of Comanche people*

Communities around the world are organized in different ways. Often, the primary social organization is kinship, and for the Comanche, family and identity followed the line of the father, which is called patrilineal kinship. In many empires, patrilineal kinship meant a centralized political authority, like a king or an emperor. But the Comanche didn't have one single leader.

**04:31**

*A painting shows Comanche warriors on horseback battling with bears*

There's some debate about how centralized the political organization of the Comanche was. They did have captive populations, and they subjugated people who were not quite members of the center. But the center itself seemed pretty spread out. That's because there were many independent Comanche bands, and the Comanche had many leaders who were democratically chosen. Together, these leaders made decisions about hunting, trade, warfare, and alliances. With leadership so spread out, the Comanche's many independent bands could cover vast, diverse areas of the southern Midwest. These areas were largely dominated by what looked like seas of grass. These tall grasses were leveled seasonally by bison. Valley streams were lined with trees. This fruitful environment provided the early Comanche with many diverse foods they could hunt and gather.

**05:37**

*Painting that depicts two Comanche men on horseback, hunting bison with long spear-throwers*

Each Comanche band had its own way of life, and the bands eventually had names to represent their uniqueness, such as the "root eaters," the "buffalo eaters," and even the "loud talkers." They hunted bison and elk using the bow and arrow as well as a kind of spear-thrower called the atlatl. These meaty meals were supplemented with fruits and vegetables they either grew on small farms or got from trading with other societies. Over time, their communities grew, and they expanded into new territories to look for more resources.

**06:22**

*Text: Horse Lords of the Plains  
Two photos of mustangs*

By 1725, Comanche expansion brought them into contact with many of their neighbors. And it was through these neighbors that they would first meet the animal that would eventually define the image of the Comanche—the mustang. They were already excellent horse riders, but the mustang was quite an upgrade. If you think the car that borrowed its name is cool, you should see the one with legs instead of wheels. The mustang quickly became important to the Comanche and was soon the main focus of trade. The Comanche even raided neighboring communities to get more horses. One neighboring indigenous group called the Comanche "Numunuu Komat," which means "those who like to fight" or "enemy." And the word "Komat" is where the term Comanche comes from.

**07:17**

*Painting of a Comanche boy hunting buffalo on horseback with a bow and arrow*

Why were horses worth the fight? Well, before the Comanche had horses, their hunting territories and trade networks were limited to a day's walk. On horseback, a Comanche rider could seem to "ride the wind," covering vast areas of the Southern Plains. Even young children took advantage. This new mode of transportation allowed a young Comanche boy, who grew up shooting at birds with a bow and arrow for practice, to become a highly skilled Bowman on horseback, deadly to the buffalo he hunted, and the enemies he confronted. Horse riding brought the Comanche into contact with other indigenous groups, like the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Kiowa, whose livelihoods also revolved around bison hunting.



**08:12**

*Animated map shows the Comanche territory expanding out, thanks to the trade networks made possible by horses*

The Comanche also interacted with European settlers, and not always in a friendly way. Spanish settlers viewed the Comanche as a constant problem and they used military force to fend them off. But the Comanche also helped the Spanish, because they created a barrier between them and other settlers like the French and the English. Despite some hostilities, the Comanche created and exploited a robust trade network, that included indigenous groups as well as European settlers. Again, horses were the new technology that made these trade pathways work.

**08:57**

*A photo of a Comanche person on horseback*

Stories and artwork about the Comanche usually paint them as raiders. It's true that raiding supplemented the daily needs of their people, but the Comanche's production and distribution of goods involved other methods. Thanks to their hunting skills, they continued to trade prized buffalo and elk hides with the French for guns. The perfection of Comanche horse husbandry made the mustang highly prized by other nations. American and European demand for swift Comanche mustangs created a thriving trade market in the animal that most shaped the Wild West. In exchange for horses, the Comanche received glass beads, iron kettles, guns, wool, and German silver, which is still worn by Southern Straight Dancers today at pow wows. The Comanche traded according to their aims and values.

**09:58**

*A photograph showing the Comanche and Kiowa peoples*

Many Comanche bands made treaties with tribes, such as the Wichita, as long as those tribes reported good relations with the French traders. By 1790, the Comanche had acquired enough guns and ammunition from the French to make the Spanish pretty nervous. These weapons, plus their unequalled ability on horseback, provoked a ferocious response by the Spanish. Even the powerful Comanche realized they needed more numbers to hold their ground, so they formed an alliance with the Kiowa. By 1840, this alliance grew even further to create an empire that posed a formidable threat to Spanish and American settlers. To this day, the alliance between the Comanche and the Kiowa has never been broken.

**10:53**

Some historians classify the Comanche society as an empire partially because it expanded, facilitated trade and had a broad cultural influence. It had a core and a periphery, and it exploited resources on its borderlands. These are all qualities of an empire, right? Well, others say that's not the case because of the many ways it differs from most empires.

**11:22**

Whatever you call it, this was a highly complex society with a great deal of political, cultural, and economic influence. It's clear that community organization, networks of communication and trade, and the economic life created by the Comanche enabled them to become the Horse Lords of the Plains. This history debunks the idea that pastoralists and hunters-gatherers can't form complex societies.

**11:54**

*An old, stereotype-based movie: The movie is called "Comanche!" and has the subtitle: "The saga of the*

And while we're debunking ideas, some stories, especially in movies, sell us the false image of the Comanche as savages. This narrow stereotype serves the idea that indigenous people need to be civilized by the colonial powers invading their home. It has been an enduring misrepresentation that has always plagued the Comanche and shaped the views of many who attempted to understand their lives.

*one Indian nation that  
killed more white men  
than any other tribe in  
history”*

As we take time to learn about their lives and how their resilience and self-determination created a highly influential commonwealth, this cartoon notion of the savage can be replaced with their true legacy.