

K. M. DALLAS

HORSE POWER



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HORSES IN WAR

THE First World War was also the last horse-powered war and in it the role of Australian mounted forces was one of the most distinctive, decisive, and of a kind which could have emerged only from the Australian conditions. Attention has been focussed, and rightly, upon the Light Horse, but they have been regarded as a continuation of cavalry instead of the forerunners of the motorised infantry of to-day. The part played by draught animals is almost completely forgotten and the histories fail to mention, let alone measure, their role in transport. At all times, whether in desert or in European battlefields, the transport from railhead to the forward dumps was by horse supply columns and for heavy artillery only the large horses could serve. In the forward areas the mule was the main animal whether for carts or as pack animals, because of the steadiness under shell fire. There was a prodigious demand for the light draught horse types and so we should not be surprised to find that in the horse breeding at Hawkesbury and other agricultural colleges the utility for defence purposes was borne in mind. It was axiomatic then, as now, that mobilisation for war could use only the means already existing. We might put it like this: that all the horses used in a three-years' war are born before it begins. In 1900 no one believed that any war would last three years.

In 1885 a Light Horse regiment was formed in New South Wales. At first these were called Lancers and in 1889 another regiment of Mounted Infantry began. The men provided their own horses and horse equipment; the government supplied uniforms and other stores. By 1894 these totalled 744 men while the infantry regiments had 2,585 men. T. A. Coghlan, government statistician, wrote: "The colony is specially adapted for the breeding of saddle and light harness horses and it is doubtful whether these particular breeds of Australian horses are anywhere surpassed. The bush horse is hardy and swift, and capable

of making very long and rapid journeys when fed only on the ordinary herbage of the country; and in times of drought, when the grass and water have become scanty, these animals often perform astonishing feats of endurance." (*Wealth and Progress of New South Wales, 1894, p. 348.*) He estimated that of half a million horses in the colony 153,000 were draught, 133,000 light harness and 212,000 saddle horses.

He also estimated that each year about 100,000 young horses came on the market and that of these 25,000 were suitable for the India and China markets, though export in 1894 had been small. This is an important aspect of the genesis of the waler. From the very beginnings of settlement people here and in India had been aware of the possibilities of horse breeding because India was not a horse-breeding country, except in the remote north-west, and both demand for and wastage of horses was high. Both the West Australian and Van Diemens Land companies had breeding for India in their plans and imported blood stock for this purpose. In 1890 there were in India nine regiments of British and forty of native cavalry which indicates a big market for remounts in itself without taking account of the officers' mounts for infantry and artillery regiments or the strings of polo ponies private and regimental. For Australian breeders this meant a market for a standard type and for this the name "waler" was coined so that for the Light Horse of 1914-18 there was an annual crop of standard animals from this source alone.

After steamers were in use the shortened passage through sheltered waters lowered the costs of the trade and even in the depression year, 1931, ships chartered by the Indian army, with Indian grooms, and fitted with stalls and inclined ramps to lower holds, loaded hundreds of remounts at Newcastle, Brisbane, Rockhampton and Townsville. All unbroken two-year-olds of standard size and colour — bay with black points, with an occasional chestnut — came from the Hunter Valley or the Darling Downs to be shipped and trained for the Indian cavalry. So in 1914, as in 1900, it was simply a diversion of this crop from Indian and civil demand to a military one and the long experience of the Indian service and the Australian pastoral industry fixed the type for use by the Mounted Infantry of the Palestine campaign.

The South African war was the first in which horses played the decisive part from start to finish. The mounted commandos had been raised by the Boers for all the earlier, smaller wars, but in 1899 their whole army consisted of mounted infantry supported by light, mobile guns. Oxen there were indispensable for supply columns and to move any heavy guns. Their way of life had depended on their light ponies for hunting as well as for defence

against the Bantu and also against wild animals. Ponies were trained for their riders to fire from the saddle and to stand until wanted wherever they dismounted. In many such respects Australian bush horses were similarly trained — if the rider fell the horse stopped and waited for him to remount. So the ponies gave the Boers high mobility for attack or retreat; fighting dismounted, the horses were resting, grazing and safe from injury and so able to give full power when called upon, either to withdraw or advance. They were also trained to move silently in stalking game; the advantage in war is obvious and also applied to Australian bushmen whose stock horses are so trained to avoid alarming cattle — or Turks or Bedouin.

So it was not a case of 50,000 Boers against 30,000 British regulars but of a few thousand mounted infantry multiplied by a mobility factor as well as a factor for skill with firearms and in living off the country. With light, quick-firing guns, also horse-borne, their fire power was out of all proportion greater than their numbers. When the Australian governments offered to send contingents the cabled reply was: "Unmounted men preferred." After Pretoria was taken and the generals thought the war was won, the commando phase began. We can take up the tale with Kipling: "Then were the judgments loosened, then was your shame revealed; At the hands of a little people, few but apt in the field", and they "fawned on the Younger Nations for the men who could shoot and ride".

Kipling, like all licensed poets, gets it half-right, but that is something. His Mounted Infantry (British) "Atop of a sore-backed Argentine, with a thirst that you couldn't buy" (his or the horse's?) raises the point that sore backs were the result of inefficiency. The Tasmanian contingent found the Argentine remnants "unbroken and unbreakable" and so useless. When their Tasmanian horses had been killed in action, they mounted themselves with captured Boer ponies. It was the ability to steal horses (and disguise them so that former owners could not identify them) that gave military effectiveness as great as that from being able to shoot and ride. So the British yeomanry man thanked the Colonials who had "learned us how to camp and cook an' steal a horse and scout". Kipling sang the tribulations of the British troops who had been given "three days to learn equitation" before becoming Mounted Infantry and who, after months of service, "don't hold on by the mane no more, nor lose our stirrups — much".

Kipling asserted that the lesson had been learned:

"We have spent two hundred million pounds to prove the fact
once more

That horses are quicker than men afoot, since two and two makes four,
And horses have four legs, and men have two legs, and two into four goes twice,
And nothing over except our lesson — and very cheap at the price."

Yet in 1916 the mounted yeomanry used in defence of the Suez Canal still had much to learn while infantry regiments were sent on desert marches with full packs with disastrous results.

If poets were logical Kipling could have seen that you can't apply "in a country nine by seven" the lessons learned by the Irregulars where they had seen "their 'elios winkin' like fun, Three sides of a ninety mile square", or where they had "ridden their 'unger an' thirst six thousand raw mile on the hoof". In passing, note the Cockney humour of that nickname for the hard-mouthed, ill-mannered brutes on which they were mounted. Then contrast it with the comradeship between the Australian (or Boer) and his horse and you can see why the lesson could not be learned in "civvy street" where the donkey on the common was the only quadruped they could hope to own.

At the other extreme the resentment of the British high command to the superiority of the colonials is revealed by the shameful execution, by a firing squad, of two of them who were only guilty of excess of zeal in hunting down the scallawags of the Boer commandos. Breaker Morant and Lieutenant Handcock died a shameful death to serve a mean political end and vent the spite of the high command.

So it was in Australia and New Zealand that the lesson of the worth of mounted infantry was learned and applied; the force that rushed the stiff defences of Beersheba owed much to the leaven of men who had seen it done in South Africa.

The term "Light Horse" derives from the Light Cavalry with the stress upon mobility rather than on the shock tactics which were supposed to be the role of the Heavy Brigades. So Light Horse became the official and popular term though "Mounted Infantry" was always a more accurate description. The horses were the infantry carriers and in moving the regiments into and out of actions they carried loads that were anything but light. In this connection we might notice the common belief that the armoured knights of former times must have used horses like our draught horses because light horses could not have sustained the weight of man and metal. This is at best half true. That our draught horses have been bred from the heavy type used in battle by the armoured men is clearly true but it was not the capacity to carry weight that mattered — it was the impact of the heavier horse that told. They could achieve

sufficient speed for a hundred yards; Cromwell's heavy cavalry approached at the trot, stopped, fired their pistols at short range, and then charged home, relying on mass to scatter their opponents and bear them down. The heavy horse was a projectile as the "Chocolate Soldier" reminds us. As for weight, the waters carried an all-up weight of man and equipment, ammunition, feed, entrenching tools, of about 250 pounds, which far outweighed the armour and lance of the knights. Moreover, they carried this for days on end, on short rations and little or no water, through sand dune desert, with sustained bursts of speed into and out of desperate encounters; many of them survived three years' campaigning. Any horseman knows that for that sort of work the pony type will leave the bigger, more powerful horse for dead. Witness here, too, the performance of the Boer ponies of the guerilla phase of the South African war. So the horses of our mounted infantry were bred from a type proved for weight-carrying and endurance on short rations over dry and hard country, with bursts of strenuous action in heading and wheeling mobs of wild cattle. The men who used them were not only able to shoot and ride; they knew the capacity of those horses and knew when and for how long they could ask of them a little more than a fair thing; most important of all they knew how to keep horses fit and in good fettle, even under adverse conditions. The practice of the domestic virtues is the whole art of war — the clean rifle doesn't jam, the clean man gets only clean wounds — and these men practised in war the domestic arts of keeping horses, and themselves, fit for any emergency, without any need for the tender mercies of "sarn majors". Of course not all of the Light Horse were from the bush, but it was a volunteer force to which came men who from experience or attitude were willing and able to learn from those who were.

Of this we cannot find a better assessment than in C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment*. He was at once the first and ablest and the most intimately informed of the analysts of the character of the war and of the men in it. In 1922 he wrote, from frequent and continuous observation, of the difference in the behaviour of the stunted lads from Lancashire mills or the "under-sized and under-witted" boys from slums and farms from that of the Dominion troops — "men startlingly taller, stronger, handsomer, prouder, firmer in nerve, better schooled, more boldly interested in life, quicker to take means to an end and to parry and counter any new blow of circumstance, men who had learned already to look at our men with the half-curious, half-pitying look of a higher, happier caste at a lower". He wrote of the British troops in battle bearing "in their riddled flesh the sins of their several fathers, pastors and masters" and suffering heavier casualties

because the "brain of our army did not know how to use what its muscle had won".

So when he saw, time after time, the Australian line achieve its objective and throw back a protective flank to the British line which had not, he saw it as no fault of men or indeed of officers. "Our men," he wrote, "could only draw on such funds of nerve and physique, knowledge and skill, as we had put in the bank for them." Kipling had given stern warning of this twenty years before Montague made this post mortem and explained why little bundles of dried bones hung on the German wire because the Regular officers at Staff College had been taught that work of any kind was "bad form".

So, too, those Light Horsemen used what we had put in the bank for them. It was a commonplace of military history that the Australian Army Corps, in France in 1918, under Australian command, worked out a form of offensive action against entrenched positions which became a model for the tactics of others. Similarly, and earlier, the tactics of the Sinai and Palestine campaigns were the logical outcome of the growth, under an Australian environment, of distinctive types of horses and horsemen. They were horsemen first, then soldiers. The range of action necessary to seize the oases, islands in a sea of sand, was matched with the known capacity of men and horses to cover certain distances with precision, even at night and silently, and to sustain a patrol for a definite time on the food carried in their nosebags. Officers had to know and respect these limits and this was the only theatre of war in which officers never lost the respect and confidence of the men.

This phase ended when the armies reached the grass lands of Palestine. Here the Mounted Infantry met the redoubtable Turkish cavalry and opposed to them their novel tactics. After two bloody reverses of the Regulars in attempts to capture Gaza by conventional tactics the third assault was planned but the mobile forces were set the task of turning the defences by taking Beersheba, thirty miles inland, and moving north-west from there to cut off the supplies of the Gaza armies. The outcome of that battle was an inevitable result of what had been put in the bank for those men and horses. Ion Idriess, in *The Desert Column*, describes the part his regiment and squadron played on that day and how he, detailed for observation duty, had a grandstand view of the famous charge which brought instant success to the day's work. The operation involved first moving the mounted troops and artillery to striking distance at wells south-east of the town, then moving up by night to attack the hills commanding the road from Beersheba to Hebron and Jerusalem and other hills to the west of the town. Two Light Horse regiments were in

reserve, resting off-saddled during most of the day, about four miles south-east.

The town itself was defended by a system of redoubts and trenches manned by Turkish infantry. By late afternoon only the outlying hill positions had been taken by mixed forces of Australians, British Yeomanry and New Zealanders — all mounted infantry or artillery. To break off at evening meant going back thirty miles for water and giving up the positions won. At 3 p.m. General Chauvel ordered the 4th and 12th Light Horse to prepare to rush the town. What seemed to an observer a desperate throw had been in the general's mind all day, as he had earlier urged on the high command the sense of using the Light Horse in such a role.

So in the evening light a line of horsemen appeared moving out from the low hilly ground on to the plain, forming line and increasing speed from trot to gallop as it headed straight for the entrenched lines. All artillery opened on them and, as the range rapidly closed, machine guns and rifles also. Then out of the dust and evening half light came a second and then a third line, all in formation at five yard intervals, galloping on the town. Idriss noted with elation that the artillery could not keep the range, so rapid was the approach, and riflemen could not lower their sights. The horses raced, hard held, across the plain and leaped the trenches into the cover of the dead ground behind; then the men dismounted and closed with the defenders from the rear. It was all over in five minutes. The taking of Beersheba, on the day planned, led to the destruction of that army and was the turning point of the whole Palestine campaign and even of the whole war.

Tactically it meant that ever after any such position would be rushed so the moral effect on all Turkish infantry must have been tremendous. Nor was it the last cavalry charge, for it was not really a cavalry operation; it belongs as much to the paratroop tactics of the next war in that men armed for close combat were dropped inside the defence perimeter. Tactically it was more like a commando raid or a parachute drop, achieving its effect by the sudden uncovering of the defenders' position. Something like it had nearly happened at Gaza but there the Light Horse were ordered to withdraw at evening when the town was half won.

Such shock tactics did not call for cavalry as such but for troops trained for quick dismounting and seizing strong points or following up the tactical advantage of surprise. The defenders who five minutes before were firing from cover at an exposed enemy had just seen something they would never forget — mounted men in full charge crouching low over the flying manes

of their horses and leaping over the trenches to dismount and attack in practised hand to hand combat.

Every man knew the issue — take Beersheba and the water or make a thirty mile night retreat to save the horses — so there was no hesitation in taking what to conventional soldiers looked like a desperate chance. The horses also knew it. Had they been turned loose they would have stampeded to the wells so once set on they needed no urging. Horses and cattle are aware of the presence of water, especially after a long night and day without drinking. They were bred from a land where instinct had been well developed and had travelled much in one where it had been sharpened by experience so that from the general down all knew the horses would not be stopped or turned by shell bursts in front or behind them. Only their riders could have checked or stopped them and once started there was the certainty the attack would be pressed home. It was a "Sydney or the Bush" decision, not for wine, women or loot, but water—and "damn the bloody Turks who try to deny us a fair go at it".

So, after sweating it out during the day, with reports of the successes against the outlying defences, came the order to saddle and mount and form up, then forward through the rough ground into the open, then trot, as the Turkish guns opened up. With shouts to each other, "Good luck Jack. Here we go"; and to the horses, "Come on, you awkward bastard, get on with it"; they broke into a canter through the obstacles and then in the clearer plain a gallop in line from which there was no turning back but which differed from previous hot actions only in the scale on which it was launched.

This was the turning point. From then on the mounted infantry operated in country where feed and water were plentiful and the mobility multiplied the effectiveness of men and arms. The use of motor lorries for the infantry played a part but right to Damascus it was these terrible horsemen with "kangaroo feathers" in their hats who formed the spearhead of the advance. Horses and men had the qualities which made such tactics succeed and the vindication of them under, for the first time, an Australian command, is a more decisive mark of a national independence than the landing at Anzac Cove. Davison's *Wells of Beersheba* and Idriss' *Desert Column* give us the details of the picture as the most spectacular and decisive use of horses in warfare. Its significance has been obscured by the few mechanical devices then being used — the armoured cars of the desert fringe and the motor trucks for infantry and the first tanks (a few were used at Gaza with deplorable results). The revolutionary use of mobile infantry was the important aspect.

It was not only the light horses that did the work. Davison mentions the medium draughts that powered the light artillery at Beersheba as they did in all theatres of that war; there were also the ammunition trucks and other army transport, the signals equipment, the medical and ambulance and the petrol supplies to the few aircraft then used in forward areas. It is almost impossible to find any mention of these yet it is obvious that the great bulk of supplies depended on animals. A few photographs show them, the common half-draught stamp of Australian farms. Yet even on Gallipoli, where the Light Horse Regiments were sent without their horses, there were at the time of evacuation 14,587 animals (many mules) and 2,000 vehicles. If animals were used in such numbers even in that restricted theatre and rugged terrain we may judge their importance in others. Cyril Pearl's *Anzac Newsmag* gives such detail and also the only photographs I have found of Army Service wagons and their draught horses.

All told, over 150,000 horses were sent to war from Australia — not all for Australian forces; many horses and mules for Australian forces were doubtless obtained from foreign parts.

We might note in conclusion that the war of movement based on horses was to make the Middle East safe for the oil companies and that control of the twice-promised land, where bones of those horses are bleaching still, was as much a part of the political as it was of the military operations.

POSTSCRIPT

IS this also a post mortem? Or is it rather like the case of the Irish farmer, protesting at delay in the services of the government vet., who said: "It's no good if I've got to wait till my cow dies before I can get a post mortem."

The draught horse is almost extinct. In some districts there is talk of a life-size statue of one as a memorial. Should we not rather dream of a research farm which includes a working force of farm horses to perpetuate the ways of working and the breed too. There are folk museums preserving implements and harness which is all to the good, but what is better is a farm which is also a museum of animals and methods.

The horse is passing away rapidly in other services too. Even stock horses are being replaced by motor bikes and land rovers. The Tasmanian Statistician already considers the total of horses not worth recording — in spite of the increase in pony clubs and race horses.

This is a personal account — one person's memories of our life of forty to sixty years ago. Many will say: "It wasn't that way in our district." No doubt; but this effort came from a conviction that even one person's recollections, coloured by the years between, might at some future time be of value and also of some interest to others who recall those days.

Such an account can tell only the visual and audible things; the sense of smell and touch cannot be put in words. The reek of stables, blended of many ingredients, is a personal memory purely; would modern kids believe we revelled in carting out old dung heaps to tip on the fields, riding on the tip tray and being tipped off with the load, buried to the neck in the damp, rotten muck? It was great fun. You cannot know the smell of horse rugs unless you have slept often on the earthen floor of a bush hut, before a dying fire, wrapped in their coarse friendliness. To

make a catalogue of smells would be foolish. The Australian troopers in South Africa did not tell us of "the smell of the wattle by Lichtenberg, riding in, in the rain." A foreigner called Kipling gave us that one.

It is the same with feelings. Fingers still recall the bridle reins between them, feet remember the pressure on stirrups taking our weight as the mare rose to the jump across that fallen tree; we all knew once, at least, the iron shod hoof of a draught horse on our toes and how we hobbled home and took off the boot to find the nail of the big toe was missing. These too intimate memories are uncommunicable and are not news.

Nor is this any sentimental journey. Many farmers who lived through the transition to tractors will say: "I was glad to see the last of them." Those who still work them are quite clear-eyed about their preference. They have weighed the facts of the case and made a rational, not a sentimental, choice. How long this will persist depends on many circumstances.

The important discovery of this survey was that the power horses were the product of man's needs, something bred and handled and made to meet a given set of circumstances all bearing upon the increased world demand for food grains and animal fodder. Thus it was necessary to sketch the mechanism of farming with implements and machines of iron. More powerful animals were bred to apply strength and speed through the heavy leather and tough chains of mild steel. Thus there was a horse-powered revolution just as vast and important as the steam-powered one. Everyone knows about the second; few have noticed the first; yet both were complementary. To-day the steam locomotive is in the museum and the power horse almost extinct.

Horses of power, speed and skill were a part of our growth as a people. In the first World War over 150,000 horses went overseas with our armies. None returned — well, a few specials only. Draught horses, as well as the light horses which took part in rodeo events, delighted crowds at places like the Maitland Royal Show. Will we live to see cattle drafting at rodeos with motor bikes? In past times it was not unknown for work horses to appear on the race course. Some may recall how Kybas, an aged grey gelding, came from a baker's cart to win the Grand National Steeple (at Deloraine, not Aintree).

The myth persists that we are a nation of horse lovers. This is shown by the fact that tens of thousands spend the day at Flemington round the "boozer" and the bookies' stands. You may find teenagers who think that Phar Lap may be an Asian politician and that a Queensland blue heeler is some brand of hippie. When we were kids we knew Carbine as one of the

greats before we knew the origin of his name. The old timers of our district will tell you that Joe Chamberlain was a famous sire of draught horses. That he was named from a famous statesman is irrelevant.

How many recall a time when hordes of sparrows infested our towns and nested in the timbered eaves? The sparrow was an immigrant and a scavenger who came with the horses and declined with them. There was much else of that organic way of life that was thus linked; the market gardens of our towns flourished on the dung from their stables. The basic organism was the horse himself who was four years agrowing to maturity and had a prime working life of some ten years. Now our power units are extruded from assembly lines.

So much else of our ways changed insensibly as the horse numbers fell. Small groups survived here and there — in 1948 at Broken Hill the last horse haulage ended; until 1966 a few were used in the Hercules Mine at Rosebery; there are still a few farms where all work is done by horsepower.

May we hope that the breed will be preserved as a living thing, with subsidies if necessary? We subsidise the preservation of old houses and furniture. We could subsidise an organic entity, a farm unit or several units, where men preserve methods as well as animals. There is no other way of continuing a breed on which our growth as a people depended. The racehorses and pony clubs and quarter horse clubs can look after themselves.

This breed, this form of industry, was one of man's great achievements, though owing nothing to scientists; it came from thousands of anonymous, ordinary men, contriving means to serve the ordinary needs of life.

"Though nothing can bring back the hour

Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower"

— still some samples might be preserved besides a skeleton in a School of Anatomy or Phar Lap's heart. Only through ensuring the succession of the breed on an integrated farm can we hope to perpetuate the functional beauty of this great invention.

INDEX

636.1
D145

- Amundsen in Hobart, 76
- Barge horses, 3
- Bayeux Tapestry, 2
- Beersheba, 93-95
- Breeds and types :—
 - Brabancon, 1
 - Cleveland Bay, 63, 69
 - Clydesdale, 3, 8, 9, 17, 33, 41, 43
 - Coach horses, 69-71
 - Flanders, 3
 - Percheron, 3, 9
 - Shire, 3, 62
 - Suffolk Punch, 3, 78
 - Bullocks, 1, 57-59
 - Names, 26
 - Chains, 4, 35-36, 54
 - Coaches :—
 - Drivers, 66-67
 - Harness, 72
 - Routes, 63, 76
 - Cream separators, 19, 23
 - Fire Brigades, 77
 - Harvesting, 44
 - Hawkers, 65
 - Horses :—
 - Breeding and rearing, 32-34
 - Clipping, 48
 - Coat shedding, colour change, 51
 - Drenching, 55
 - Shoeing, 53-54
 - Training, 34-40
 - Harness, 1, 2, 49-51 (Collar, stirrups, 2)
 - Horsehair, 34
 - Instinctive fears, 52, 60
 - Leaders, 36
 - Shaffers, 37-38
 - Sleeping in stables, 51
 - Horse Statistics :—
 - Bus horses, 14
 - Farm horses, 9, 17, 20, 22
 - In mines, 24, 61, 99
- Russia and Siberia, 22-23, 25
- Railway construction, 19
- Sweden, 23, 54
- Machinery :—
 - In Tasmania, 10-12, 18-19
 - Binder (reaper and binder), 7, 13, 14, 16, 18, 22, 40, 43
 - Chaff cutting, 10-12
 - Chaff cutting by steam, 73
 - Drill, 45
 - Hand reaping, 41
 - Harrows, 45
 - On farms, 4, 5, 7
 - Plough, 2, 6, 12, 16, 28-29, 39-40
 - Reaping machines, 10, 15, 22-24
 - Threshing mill by horses, 4, 11, 17
- Scarifier, horse hoe, 46
- Motor Cars, 73, 75, 87
- Mules, 16, 49
- Persons cited :—
 - Cartledge, Bert, 77
 - Cartledge, Cyril, 59
 - Ford, Jim (wheelwright), 65, 78
 - Henys, 7
 - Lamprey, Arthur, 28
 - Maldment, Ben, 68-69
 - Morant and Handcock, 91
 - Nasif, Lyon, 65
 - O'Donnell, Rev. T. J., 73
 - Oliver, Alex, 51
 - Tallow, Charles, 69-71
 - Walters, Harry, 74-75
- Railway construction, 11, 19
- Road transport, 11, 12, 35-39
- South African War, 89, 90, 92
- Threshing by steam power, 47-48
- Tractors, 15, 21-22
- United States, 14, 16, 23-25
- Watermills, 10
- Wheat growing, 7, 10, 14, 21, 23-25

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