ately bring the animal into the American Indians' lives. That's because the Spanish kept the valuable creatures for themselves. That changed in 1600, when New Mexico tribes rose up against the Spanish. Many Spaniards were killed in the revolt. Survivors left nearly everything behind, including their horses and the gear required to ride them. And the tribes put it all to use.

“It changed everything,” Shackelford said. “Horses became power. Horses became the way you got more food, the way you got more goods, the way you got guns — you traded horses. And the more horses you had, the more powerful and important you were. And the better you could take care of your family.”

The show, which is on display through Aug. 21, was drawn entirely from the Witte's vast collections. There are more than 250 objects on display, including clothing, tools, weapons and jewelry. One of the pieces that stands out for Shackelford is a Navajo cradle made from an Arbuckles' Coffee crate. He's also partial to a buffalo headdress, which he called “fantastic.”

“It came in the collection in the '90s, but we've never exhibited it,” he said. “I'd forgotten it was there. I was looking for something else and found that.”

It's one of several pieces in the show that have never been displayed before. Others haven't been shown in decades. As the Witte continues to expand — the Maya Family Center, the newest addition, opens in April — there will be more opportunities for meaty exhibits created by its in-house curators, said Marise McDermott, president and CEO of the museum.

“We have a stunning collection,” she said. “And to get it out in the public is so important to us.”

The exhibit brings back "Tasura: A Comanche Remembrance," a gallery theater piece that's an audience fave. Tasura, played by actor Isaac Cardenas, is a fictional character, though the story is rooted in historic fact about the lives of the Comanches. In the piece, the ghost of Tasura talks about his life, including how he and his people cared for their horses.

“It's very moving,” McDermott said.

One of the most haunting sections in the exhibit deals with the Wounded Knee Creek massacre in South Dakota in 1890. A band of Lakota led by Big Foot decided to have a ghost dance to pray to the spirits to bring back the buffalo, make their life more like it had been without all the conflict, and they camped on Wounded Knee Creek and the soldiers were told to get 'em out of there," Shackelford said. “The soldiers went out early, and with Hotchkiss guns, which are basically automatic cannons. When the people lined up to start doing the ghost dance, (the soldiers) went in to arrest them and they pushed them into a group and a gun went off.”

A battle followed. When the smoke cleared, more than 150 Lakota men, women and children were dead, as were 25 soldiers.

The exhibit includes clothing worn by a few of the slain American Indians, including a baby's tiny moccasins. After the items came into the Witte collection, Shackelford met with Oliver Red Cloud, who led the Sioux nation for more than 30 years, to discuss what the museum should do with them.

“And he said, "I want you to keep it and I want you to put it out so that people don't forget about this." So that's what we're doing,” he said. “It's a very tragic story, so we kept it in a room by itself. This is not a 'ha, ha, cowboys and Indians' kind of thing. This is the belongings of a man and a woman and a baby who were all shot down.”

Shackelford hopes that people who come to the exhibit leave with “a better understanding of these cultures, because they're not gone. And I hope (people from) those cultures can come see this material and see what came out of their past.”

dlmartin@express-news.net
Twitter: @DeborahMartinEN