

Bison Hunting

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Bison hunting was an activity pursued by the 19th century Métis which dominated their cultural consciousness for many decades. It was an integral part and central focus of their culture, economy and lifeway. Even after Métis people had begun farming or entered into commercial ventures, bison hunting remained an important pursuit until the late 19th century when the herds all but disappeared.

Following the bison required a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle because the herds moved from pasture to pasture depending on the season. Different species of grasses matured at different rates in different regions, and as the herds finished grazing in one area they would move to the area where the feed was coming into the desired state of maturity. In late fall and winter the herds would move to the parkland or river valleys which afforded trees and hills for shelter. Grazing in the spring and summer depleted the open plains of grass; therefore it was important for the bison to find areas with abundant grass to help them build up a store of fat to make it through the winter when food was scarce. It was an opportune coincidence, then, that the parklands were rich in grasses that matured later than on the plains.

Large scale bison hunting occurred in the summer and fall and often took families hundreds, if not thousands, of miles before returning to their small-scale farms. Because of this, crops might not be harvested. The bison hunt was seen as a much more important activity than farming, however, for many Metis families while, for others, farming was a complementary activity to bison hunting. In fact, a family might not return to their original community

for several seasons or years because of the duration of the bison hunt and the distance they travelled.

The bison hunting camps involved many people. In the highly organized hunts, which provided pemmican for the settlements and trading companies, several hundred people would take part. One such camp, noted by Father Belcourt in the fall of 1825, included 60 lodges near a river. There were 300 horses and more than 100 oxen which were employed in transporting firewood, spare axles, lodge poles, drying frames and hide stretchers and the spoils of the hunt. After day break the hunters would be up and, if one were in their midst, the missionary recite the Act of Contrition to them as bison hunting was very dangerous, before they departed on the hunt.

The Métis had a specific means of dispatching bison when entered in the hunt, which was called "running the herd". Once the herd was located by scouts the Métis would slowly ride toward the bison who would remain calm if approached quietly, herding them together. At a signal they would charge, causing a stampede. The hunters would ride through the herd, selecting and shooting prime bison cows, those who had a good store of fat. This would be done back and forth through the herd until enough animals were slaughtered. A danger in the hunt was stray bullets. In the fury of the slaughter sometimes hunters would get hit by another's bullet. Also, if there was a herd of bulls, riders might get unhorsed and trampled or gored to death.

The hunters reloaded their muzzle-loading guns as they charged through the herd. Holding the lead shot in their mouths, they would pour powder into their guns while they were riding at full gallop from a buffalo horn powder horn, spit a ball into the muzzle and pound the gun butt on the saddle to compact the powder. Once they selected a fat cow, they would ride up

beside it, try to shoot it in the heart, and repeat the gun-loading exercise again.

Not all hunts were conducted in this fashion, however. If a herd was particularly unruly and dangerous and it would be unwise to ride through their midst, an alternate method of dispatching them was used. The hunters would drive the bison toward a cliff and, unable to stop their headlong plight, would stampede over to their death.

Sons were taught how to ride and hunt by their fathers. The fathers would ride along side the son's horse and whip it to keep it running at top speed. If the boy showed any cowardice or fright, he too might be whipped! In any event, the Métis learned how to be very effective horse-riding bison hunters.

When the hunt observed by Father Belcourt in 1845 was completed, which lasted about half an hour per day a total of 628 bison were brought down in four days. After butchering and processing, a total of 213 carts were loaded. At the end of two months (departure to arrival) over 1700 cows were killed. Excluding the cost of the expedition and the wages of the hired men, the 55 hunters earned 1500 pounds of sterling, according to Father Belcourt.

To butcher a bison, the hunter would prop the animal up on its knees with its rear legs spread so the animal is laying on its belly. The hide is slit down the back and removed. Butchering produces 16 cuts which are, in the order of removal:

1. *Depouilles* - the flesh along the ribs from the shoulder to the rump.
2. *Filets* - the sinewy muscle which connects the shoulder blades to the haunches.
3. *Bricoles* - the bands of fat descending from the shoulder to the underpart of the neck.

4. *Petits filets du cou* - the small sinewy muscles found near the extremities of the filets.
5. *Dessus de croupe* - the parts immediately above the flanks.
6. *Epaules* - the shoulders
7. *Dessous d'épaule* - the layers of flesh between the ribs and shoulders.
8. *Pis* - the fatty layer from under to belly and up the flanks, including the bladder.
9. *Ventre* - the muscular band of flesh supporting the intestines extending under the belly from the ribs on one side to the other.
10. *Panse* - the stomach and considered something of a delicacy
11. *Grosse bosse* - the hump, composed of a number of thin bones arising from the thoracic vertebrae; a delicious morsel.
12. *Gras* or *Suif* - suet from the interior of the carcass
13. *Plats-cotes* - cutlets
14. *Brochet* - meat covering the stomach
15. *Croupe* - rump
16. *Langue* - tongue.

The bones would be broken to get at the marrow which was commonly used for frying as well as being a rich energy source. Whatever was leftover of the carcass was left for the wolves.

It has been noted elsewhere that the women were also involved in butchering the dead animals. Once butchered, the meat was carried back to the camp in Red River carts. The meat was then sliced into slabs or strips and hung to dry in the sun which took about two or three days. It was dried on horizontal rows of wooden sticks or poles supported by tripods. Once dry the meat was baled (rolled up) for later consumption or was made into pemmican. Depending on the group choice cuts of meat such as the tongue were kept and

presented to a favoured missionary, such as Father Lestanc from Willowbunch, Saskatchewan.

Normally there were two hunts a year. The first began in June and its purpose was to supply enough meat and hides to repay the debts that the Métis accumulated over the winter to the HBCo. The second began in the fall for the purpose of securing food for the winter. The hunts served both economic and social purposes. The gathering of several family groups for the early (pre-commercial) hunts and then several hundred people for the commercial hunts. They provided an opportunity for people who might not get together regularly to renew acquaintances, interact, and enjoy each other's company.

While the large bison hunts took place in the summer and fall, hunting continued through the winter. The hunters, having provided supplies for their families, would set out in their winter wagons equipped with food and equipment through the snow. The people would be heading for wooded areas which would, hopefully, have attracted herds of bison. If animals are present, the hunters would approach the herd on horseback, slowly at first and then in a rushed charge, shooting at the scattering bison. When all are killed that could be, carcasses were loaded onto sleighs for the trip home.

The families who adapted to a lifestyle where they stayed on the prairie over the winter were called *hivernants* or 'winterers'. Winter shelters were established in regions where there was enough wood to construct a temporary cabin and heat it, water for cooking and drinking, grass for the horses and one or two herds of bison nearby to supply meat and hides. In Saskatchewan, wintering camps were established in the Touchwood Hills, at Wood Mountain and in the Cypress Hills, areas which met all these requirements. In general,

winter camp locations commonly occur along the edge of the parkland and in locations favourable to the organization of spring hunts.

Initial hivernant wintering camps were quite small, made up of several families. As the bison herds became more and more decimated, however, the necessity of having to spend the winter in these camps increased and so did their size. A relatively early camp, described in 1858, near Lac St. Ann, Alberta was composed of about 200 people living in forty tipis made from bison skins. However, given dependable resources, a winter village could include fifty to one hundred families each, up to a maximum of 2,000 people. Sometimes a priest would camp with these groups for the winter, performing marriages, baptisms, catechisms, visiting the sick and dealing with the dead and dying.

Pemmican

Pemmican is a form of preserved bison meat which lasted for long periods of time. It was made by drying and pounding the meat with rocks and sticks until shredded. This was combined with hot fat and sometimes berries and packaged in hide bags for transport. The filled sacks were known as *taureaux* (meaning 'bulls') of pemmican. Depending on what was added to the pemmican the term changed. For instance, sacks treated with the fat from udder was called *taureaux fins* (fine bulls) and sacks treated with berries or fruit was known as *taureaux a grains* (berry bulls). Each bag weighed 90 to 100 pounds. It took, according to experienced hunters, eight to ten cows to make up one cart load of pemmican and dried meat.

One kilogram (2.2 pounds) of pemmican had the equivalent food value of four kilograms (≈ 9 pounds) of fresh meat. Because less food was required to sustain people, pemmican made an excellent food source for people who

were involved in long distance movements such as trading, hunting and trapping and freighting where they could not afford to carry large amounts of cargo. Pemmican could be eaten raw or boiled to make a soup and, while tasteless, was an indispensable food source and a basis for the development of the west. It could also be broken into pieces, mixed with flour and fried. *Rubaboo*, a pemmican recipe, called for the preserved meat to be boiled with potatoes and/or onions.

Hide Work

Bison hides were tanned and made into clothing, bedding, and tent or tipi hides. Those which were used for robes and jackets often had the thick hair left on for protection against the elements. Hides were prepared by women who stretched and dried them on racks and then scraped the inner side with a sharpened bone to remove the fatty material. If the women did not have racks at their disposal, they would lay the hides on the ground and stake them in place with pegs. The hair was then removed with a sharp tool.

Some of the prepared hides were treated with a mixture of ashes and brains. This product was known as *shaganappi* and was used to make harnesses for oxen and horses because of its impermeable nature. Because of its stiffness, shaganappi could not be used for clothing until it had been worked by kneading smoking. Bison hides were a sought-after commodity for American machinery as well as for use as robes and clothing. Bison tongues were desired for preparation in fancy American restaurants and in 1845 a hunting expedition returned with 1,220.

Organized Provisioning Hunts and Hunt Rules

Prior to 1816 the bison hunts were relatively small scale, the activity of small family groups. After this, due to the increased demand for meat,

pemmican, and hides the hunts became larger and more complex. The Métis established an elaborate and democratic means by which to control the bison hunt. One of the reasons why the Métis were such successful bison hunters was because of their ability to maintain discipline when the situation required.

Ten captains were elected for the hunt, one of which was named the hunt leader. Each of these ten captains then picked ten soldiers to assist in discipline and order. Discipline was swift and severe and based on nineteenth century Métis law, known as "The Law of the Prairie". This code of laws was recorded in 1840 and consists of several regulations. These are:

1. No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath Day.
2. No party is to fork off or lag or go before (to hunt bison) without permission.
3. No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.
4. Every captain, with his men, in turn to patrol camp and keep guard.
5. For the first trespass against these laws, the offender is to have his saddle and bridle cut up.
6. For the second offence, his coat is to be taken off his back and be cut up.
7. For the third offence, the offender is to be flogged.
8. Any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier is to call out his or her name three times, adding the word "thief" each time.

These rules were not often broken, and were valued as legitimate and necessary for group survival. These rules were meant not only to ensure group survival, but to help preserve the bison stock so that it would not be over-exploited. Soon these rules became a necessity due to an increasing number of people joining the hunt to provision the posts. In 1820 there were 540 men, women and children involved; by 1840 the number increased to 1210 and by 1860 to 2690.

These hunting parties grew to the point where they split into two communities by 1840 in the Red River valley. One continued hunting in the south while the other was derived from the families who settled at Whitehorse

Plain under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant. They hunted to the west in the region between the Saskatchewan Rivers. Prior to the hunt the two groups sometimes met in the Pembina Hills in southern Manitoba where they democratically organized themselves.

The decimation of the bison occurred due to the increased use of rifles in hunting the animals, the large trade in bison hides, and pemmican provisioning for the trade posts. And, as settlers moved into the west, they too aided in the demise of the herds. The construction of the railway also was a major contributor in this destruction as the railroad became the primary means of hauling furs to the eastern markets. Sometimes bison were herded into corrals and slaughtered. By 1864, the climax year for bison killing, at least one million animals were slaughtered.

Due to this incredible decimation and the migration of bison into more distant and isolated pockets, many people had to choose between farming and the hunt. Several groups turned to fishing as a main source of food and communities such as St. Laurent and Grand Marais in Manitoba were oriented around fishing and farming or fishing and trapping.