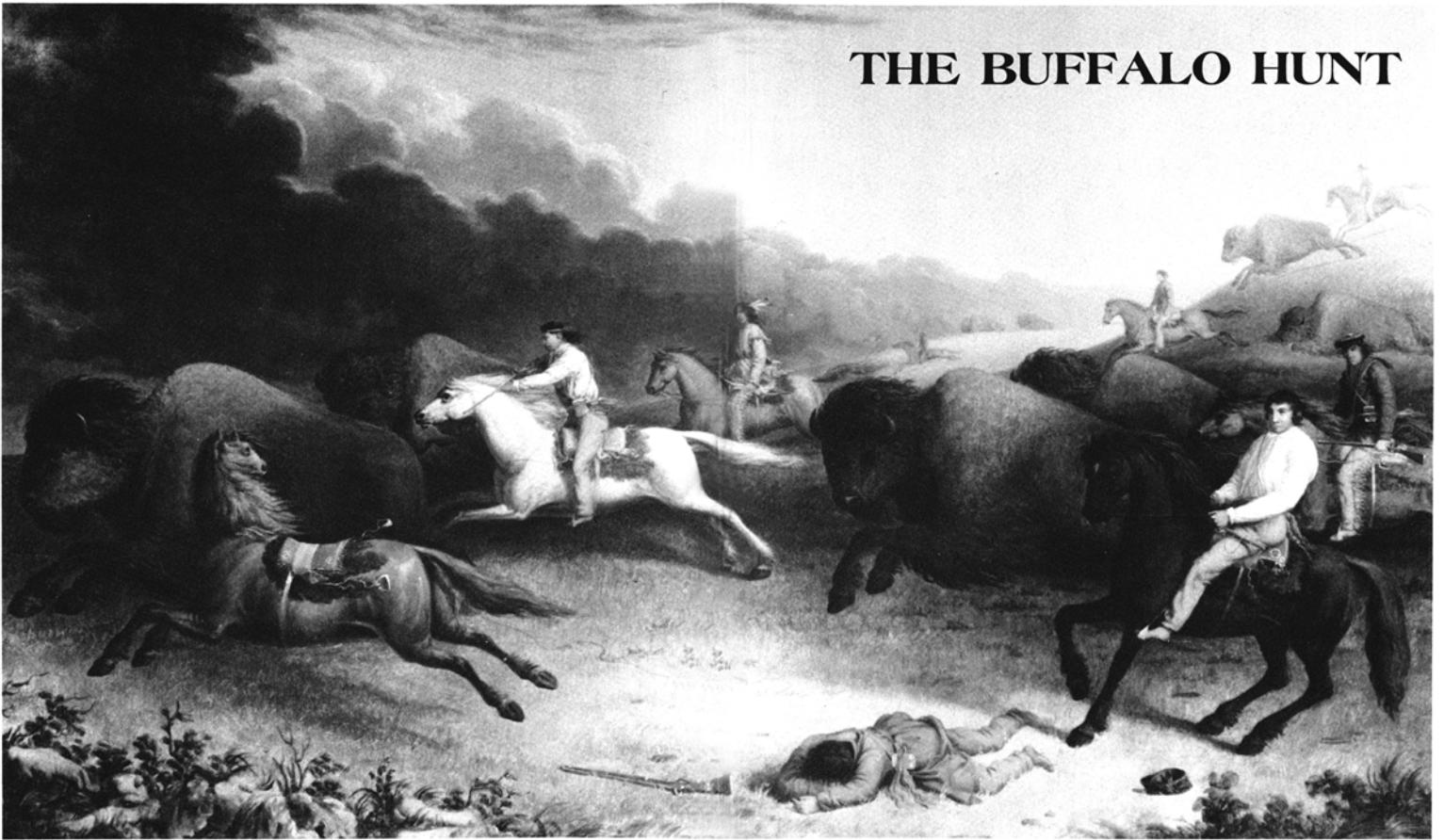


THE BUFFALO HUNT



THE RED RIVER BUFFALO HUNT

The largest buffalo hunts ever carried out were organized by the Metis and originated from the Red River settlement during the first half of the nineteenth century. The traditional Metis buffalo hunt was more than a hunting exercise. The hunt provided the Metis with a means of income and also furnished them with most of their essential needs. In addition, the highly organized, militaristic nature of the hunt was a decisive factor in the Metis' ability to quickly and successfully organize provisional governments in times of need.

DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATION OF THE HUNT

With the encroachment of civilization and heavier hunting of the herds, the buffalo gradually moved farther away from the Red River area. This necessitated travelling longer distances, usually in a southwesterly direction, to hunt the animals. Often this led the hunters into Dakota or Blackfoot territory. These Indian nations took offense to the Metis buffalo hunters encroaching on their territory and often retaliated. Around 1820, the size of the hunting parties increased. Larger hunts were necessary for two reasons. First, a larger hunting party offered greater protection. Second, the hunting party, to be efficient and productive, had to move in a concentrated attack on the buffalo herds.

Each year there were two main hunts. The spring or summer hunt was usually the larger of the two. It began about June 15 and lasted until the early part of August. The fall hunt began sometime during August and lasted through to October or early November and its main purpose was to gather fresh meat for the winter, rather than pemmican. Entire communities, including men, women and children, took part in each hunt. Each hunting party was also accompanied by a Priest who performed mass daily for the camp. Distance covered each day by these large, mobile communities averaged about 20 miles.

Red River Settlement
Paul Kane Oil Painting



Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.

Buffalo Bulls Fighting
Paul Kane Oil Painting

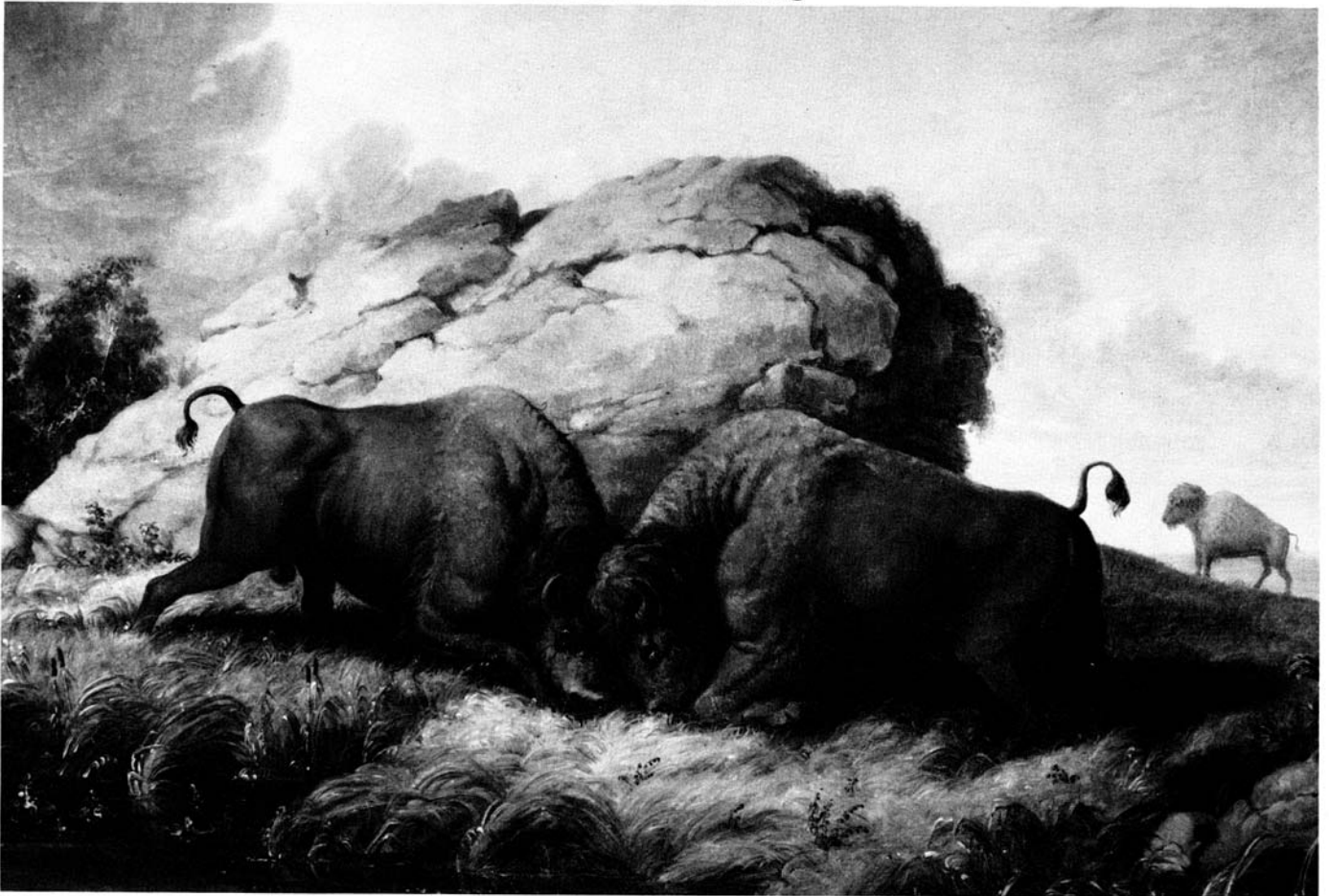


Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.

ORGANIZATION OF CAMP

The Metis led a fiercely independent lifestyle for the most part, except when engaged in the business of the hunt. Although they might leave the settlement in a disorderly fashion, once they rendezvoused at a prearranged place and the hunt began, the group was ruled in a strict military fashion. Military discipline over the group was maintained in order to be able to instantly organize against an attack or in the event a buffalo herd was sighted. Both instances required an immediate, co-ordinated reaction by the entire camp, which might total as many as 1600 people in all.

Once all carts were assembled at the meeting place, a council was formed, then a chief and staff officers were selected. Selection of the leaders was done on a consensus basis and the persons most suited to the jobs were selected by group consent. In addition to the chief of the hunt, who oversaw all operations, captains, soldiers and guides were selected.

The guides were charged with overseeing the operations of the camp while it was on the move. The responsibility was done on a rotating basis and each guide served for one day. A flag was used to signal moving and halting of the camp. Once the flag was raised, the camp had one half hour in which to prepare for the day's march. The flag was flown during the day while travelling and was taken down in the evening, which was the signal for encampment. As long as the flag was flying, the guide whose turn it was to serve for the day, was in charge and it was his duty to guide the camp. Once the camp flag was lowered, the captains and soldiers took control of the camp. It was their duty to organize the camp for the night and they ordered each cart into its proper place.

The layout of the camp was circular for maximum protection and could occupy as much space as an entire town. Carts were placed side by side with shafts pointed outward. The tents were placed within the circle of carts, in rows at one end. During times of danger the animals were also kept within the circle, at the opposite end from the tents. When no danger was imminent, the animals were allowed to graze outside the circle of carts.

Metis Encampment
Paul Kane Oil Painting.

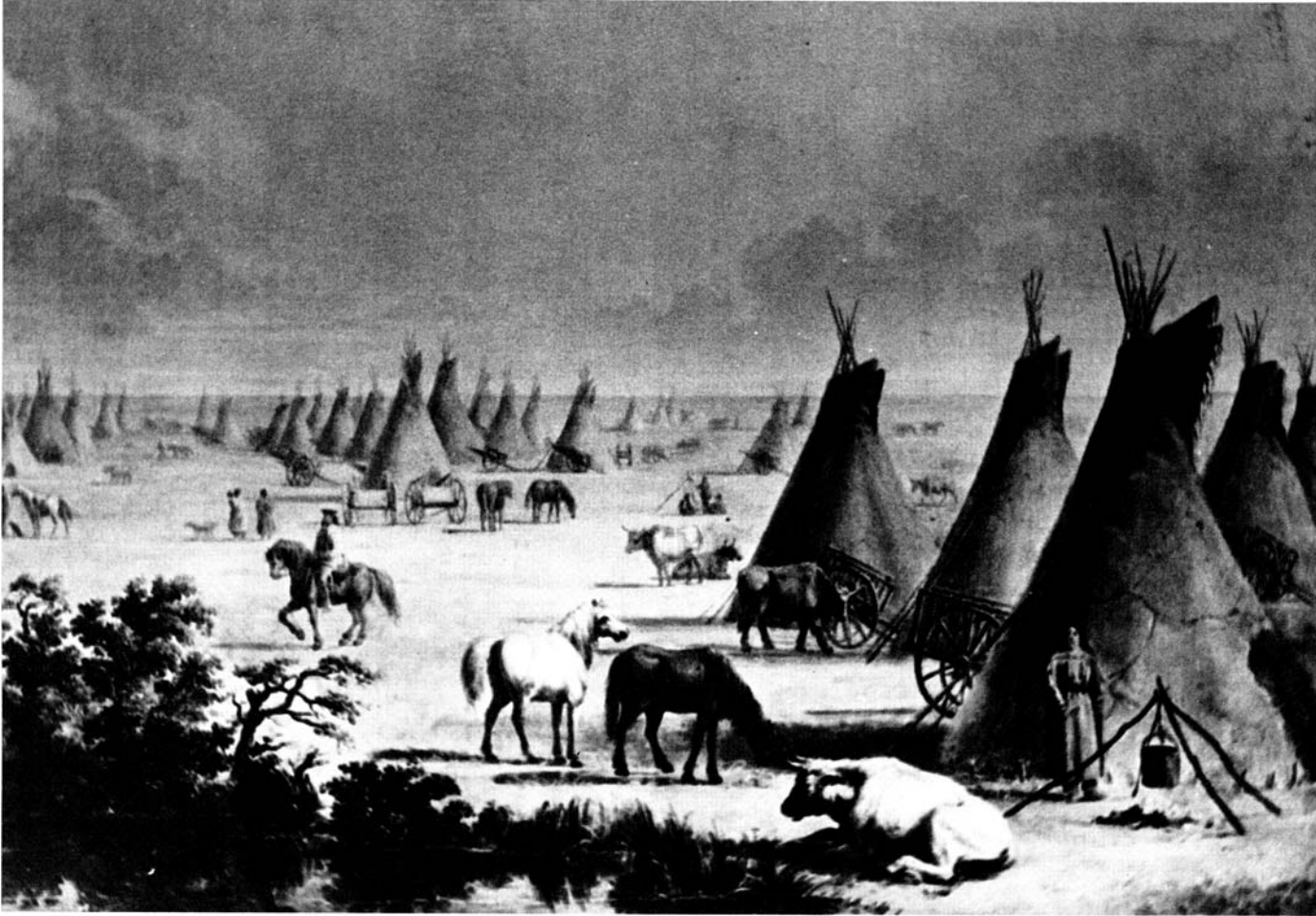
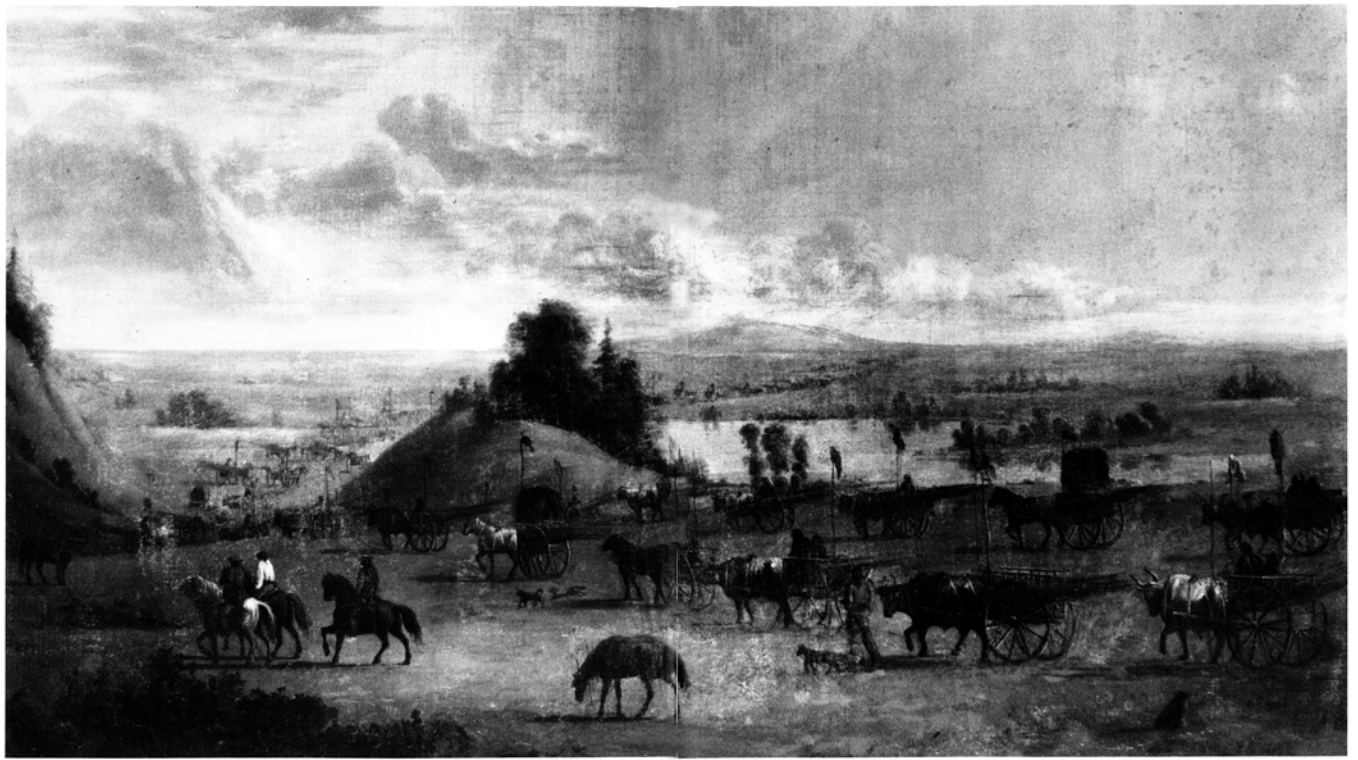


Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.

Paul Kane Oil Painting

Metis Travelling

Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.



Metis Camp Near Fort Garry
Paul Kane Sketch



Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.

THE BUFFALO HUNT

Once the buffalo were sighted, the chief ordered the hunters to take up their positions, in readiness for the run on the herd. Alexander Ross, a Scottish resident of the Red River colony from 1823 to his death in 1856, gave an eyewitness account of a summer buffalo hunt which took place in 1840. In the following passage he describes the overwhelming sight of hundreds of mounted horsemen, positioned and ready to charge the herd:

Our array in the field must have been a grand and imposing one to those who had never seen the like before. No less than 400 huntsmen, all mounted, and anxiously waiting for the word, "Start!" took up their position in a line at one end of the camp, while Captain Wilkie, with his spy-glass at his eye, surveyed the buffalo, examined the ground, and issued his orders. At 8 o'clock the whole cavalcade broke ground, and made for the buffalo; first at a slow trot, then at a gallop, and lastly at full speed....

Those who have seen a squadron of horse dash into battle, may imagine the scene....The earth seemed to tremble when the horses started; but when the (buffalo) fled, it was like the shock of an earthquake....!

A well-trained horse, or "buffalo runner" as they were known, was invaluable to the Metis hunter. Ross went on to explain how a skilled rider and horse, together, had a decisive advantage over those who were less skilled:

The moment the animals take to flight, the best runners dart forward in advance. At this moment a good horse is invaluable to his owner; for out of four hundred on this occasion, not above fifty got the first chance of the fat cows. A good horse and experienced rider will select and kill from ten to twelve animals at one heat, while inferior horses are contented with two or three...

The rider of a good horse seldom fires till within three or four yards of his object, and never misses; and, what is admirable in point of training, the moment the shot is fired his steed springs on one side

to avoid stumbling over the animal; whereas an awkward and shy horse will not approach within ten or fifteen yards, consequently the rider has often to fire at random, and not unfrequently misses; many of them, however, will fire at double that distance, and make sure of every shot. The mouth is always full of balls; they load and fire at the gallop....²

One can imagine the skill required to load a shotgun, while mounted on horseback at a full gallop, in the midst of hundreds of stampeding buffalo. J.J. Hargrave, another resident of the Red River colony, gave further eyewitness testimony to the skill of these buffalo hunters:

The hunters enter the herd with their mouths full of bullets. A handful of gunpowder is let fall from their "powder horns," a bullet is dropped from the mouth into the muzzle, a tap with the butt end of the firelock on the saddle causes the salivated bullet to adhere to the powder during the second necessary to depress the barrel, when the discharge is instantly effected without bringing the gun to the shoulder.³

Metis Pad Saddle



Photo courtesy Lower Fort Garry Collection.

Metis Buffalo Hunter

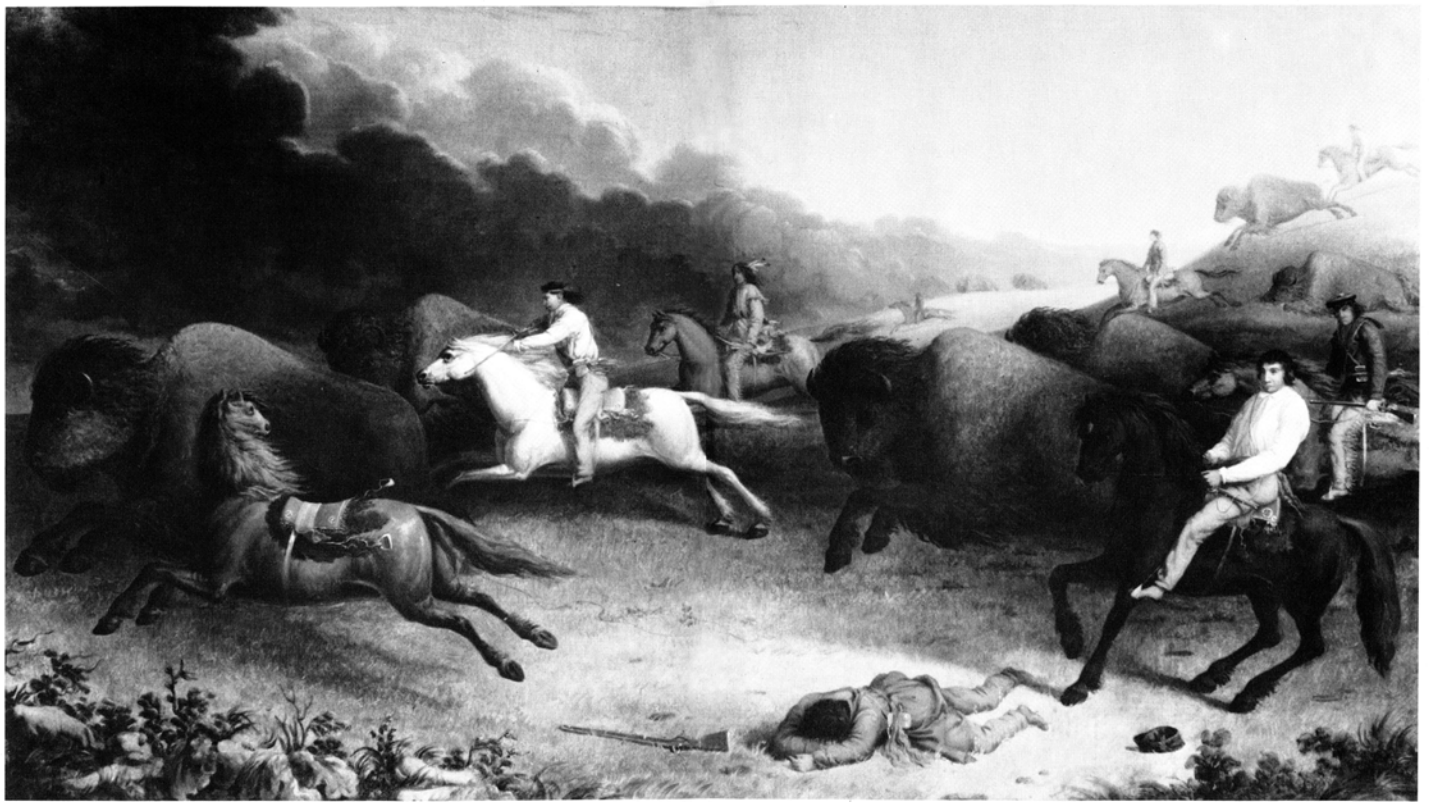


Photo credit: Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature.

Paul Kane Oil Painting

Metis Running the Buffalo

Photo courtesy Royal Ontario Museum.



By the very nature of the hunt, some accidents were inevitable. Alexander Ross tells of one such run on the herd:

...but much depends on the nature of the ground. On this occasion the surface was rocky, riders were at one moment all sprawling on the ground; one horse, gored by a bull, was killed on the spot, two more disabled by the fall. One rider broke his shoulder-blade; another burst his gun, and lost three of his fingers by the accident; and a third was struck on the knee by an exhausted bull. These accidents will not be thought over numerous, considering the result; for in the evening no less than 1,375 tongues were brought into camp.⁴

Abbe Dugas gave an account of another incident, which took place in the early nineteenth century. Madame Lagimodiere, the maternal grandmother of Louis Riel, was involved in a near fatal accident when her horse, a trained buffalo runner, caught sight of a herd of buffalo and gave chase:

As soon as her horse caught sight of the buffalo, without a thought of his burden he took the bit in his teeth and galloped after the herd. Embarrassed by the two bags which hung, one on each side of the horse, in one of which was her child, the poor woman expected every moment that she would be thrown to the ground. She commended herself to God, and clung with all her strength to the horse's mane. She did not know how long her mad career continued—she knew only that it was horribly long. When her husband, by wheeling and cutting across her horse's path, succeeded in stopping his flight, she was on the point of succumbing. This was about three o'clock in the afternoon. They pitched their tent on a rising piece of ground near some trees, and there, some hours after that furious race, Madame Lagimo(d)iere gave birth to her second child, whom they nicknamed Laprairie, because he was born in the middle of the prairie.⁵

Once the run on the herd was completed, the buffalo hunters were faced with the task of finding and identifying their own animals. Alexander Ross, in his narrative was at loss to explain the hunter's uncanny ability to pick out his own animal:

...the most perplexing, perhaps, is that of finding out and identifying the animals he kills during a race. Imagine four hundred horsemen entering at full speed a herd of some thousands of buffalo, all in rapid motion. Riders in clouds of dust and volumes of smoke, which darken the air, crossing and re-crossing each other in every direction; shots on the right, on the left, behind, before, here, there, two, three, a dozen at a time, everywhere in close succession, at the same moment, Horses stumbling, riders falling, dead and wounded animals tumbling here and there, one over the other; and this zig-zag and bewildering melee continued for an hour or more together in wild confusion; and yet, from practice, so keen is the eye, so correct the judgment of the hunter, and so discriminating his memory, that after getting to the end of the race, he can not only tell the number of animals he had shot down, but the position in which each lies—on the right or on the left side—the spot where the shot hit, and the direction of the ball; and also retrace his way, step by step, through the whole race, and recognize every animal he had the fortune to kill, without the least hesitation or difficulty. To divine how this is accomplished bewilders the imagination.⁶

While it was customary for some hunters to mark their animals by dropping a glove, or some other article, for the majority it was not necessary.

Once the run was over, and each hunter had located his own animals, they skinned each one and butchered the carcass. At this point the women of the hunting party took over. It was their role to complete the laborious task of preparing the meat and skins.

LAWS OF THE HUNT

The buffalo hunt was run in a strict, military fashion and the laws of the hunt were meticulously adhered to. While on the hunt, the men called themselves soldiers and acted like soldiers. They were, in effect, a para-military force. This annual organization of the hunt was an extremely effective provisional government, of a kind, complete with a military formation. It

existed as long as there was a need for it, and was dissolved when the hunt was completed. The legacy of the buffalo hunt for the Metis was an ability to quickly and successfully organize themselves, as the need arose. Macleod and Morton, in their book, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown*, made mention of this outgrowth of the hunt and wrote: "*In this organization lay the strength which was to make them the decisive element in Red River in the rebellions of 1849 and 1869, under the elder and the younger Riel.*"⁷ The date of 1849 refers to the Sayer trail, where Louis Riel, Sr. helped to organize the Metis to put and end to the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly on trade. The date 1869 refers to, of course, the Red River resistance, when the younger Louis Riel successfully organized a provisional government, and forced Canada into allowing Manitoba to enter confederation as a province, rather than as a territory.

The "Laws of the Hunt" were the basis on which each buffalo hunt operated. The hunt of 1840 had the following laws and they were generally typical of most hunts:

THE LAWS OF THE HUNT

1. *No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath-day.*
2. *No party to fork off, lag behind, or go before, without permission.*
3. *No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.*
4. *Every captain with his men, in turn, to patrol the camp, and keep guard.*
5. *For the first trespass against these laws, the offender to have his saddle and bridle cut up.*
6. *For the second offence, the coat to be taken off the offender's back, and be cut up.*
7. *For the third offence, the offender 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 to call out his or her name three times, adding the word "Thief," at each time.⁸*

It is interesting to note from the laws of the hunt, that the jailing of offenders was not considered as a possibility. It is also interesting to note that the punishment for theft was public disclosure and humiliation, thus ruining the thief's reputation.

The numbers in the hunting parties began to increase around 1820 up until the mid-century mark. Following are statistics for the number of carts involved in buffalo hunts from 1820 to 1840:

1820	540 carts
1825	680 carts
1830	820 carts
1835	970 carts
1840	1,210 carts ⁹

From these figures, it is readily apparent that the size of the hunts increased, until 1840 when one of the largest hunts ever, took place. It is this hunt of 1840 from which we get Alexander Ross' narrative. What is believed to be the last organized buffalo hunt from the Red River settlement, took place in May of 1882.¹⁰ The hunting party, which involved several hundred carts, travelled west of Moose Mountain and it is thought this was the last organized buffalo hunt on record.

ESSENTIAL NEEDS

The buffalo provided the Metis with most of their needs as the various parts of the animal had specific uses. Patrice Fleury, a Metis buffalo hunter who was born in the Red River settlement, said, "*the greatest care was exercised, and no waste was permitted*".¹¹ Tongues and buffalo humps were delicacies and usually eaten at once, or the tongues might be pickled in a brine to preserve them. The buffalo meat that was not eaten fresh was dried and made into pemmican. The animal hides were used for buffalo robe blankets or were made into leather for moccasins, tents or pemmican bags. The thread used for sewing up tents, moccasins and pemmican bags was made from the sinew of the animal. Hides of older animals were cut into quarter inch thongs, called "babiche" or "shaganappi". These leather thongs were wound around the wheels of the Red River carts when wet and dried to an iron hardness to serve as a long-wearing rim. They could also be used to make emergency repairs as needed. The horns of the animals were polished and used for coat hangers, ornaments or powder horns. Patrice Fleury went on to say: "*I have practically accounted for the whole of the animals just to illustrate that no waste occurred and that indiscriminate slaughter was not permissible....*"¹²

Pemmican was an essential food supply which saw the people through the long winter months and such other times when fresh game could not be obtained. To make pemmican, the meat was cut into strips and dried in the sun or over a fire. The dried meat was pounded into a powdery consistency and the fat of the animal was rendered to oil. The oil and dried meat were mixed together and put into large buffalo hide bags and kneaded like dough. When fresh berries were available, they could be added to the mixture to provide variety. Each bag would hold approximately 100 pounds, and each buffalo would yield about one bag of pemmican. Because of its compact nature, pemmican was easily transported and if kept dry and free from mould, would keep virtually for years.

Thus, different parts of the buffalo provided the Metis with most of their daily necessities: food, blankets, leather thongs, thread, clothing, shelter, shoes, and utensils.

Pemmican



Photo credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board.

PEMMICAN, A THRIVING ENTERPRISE

During the nineteenth century, the buffalo hunt was a thriving business for the Metis. The fur trade was still the dominant feature of life in the west and widescale settlement had not yet taken place. Unlike any other available food, pemmican was portable, nourishing and would keep for years. The Metis were the main suppliers of pemmican for the people involved in the fur industry. The pemmican, and to a lesser extent, local crops and fish, maintained the western fur trade and the Red River colony. Without the supply of pemmican, the fur company employees and colonists could not have survived the harsh Canadian climate.

The hunt was also one more indication of the Metis' ability to combine the ways of their Indian and European ancestors. They learned to hunt buffalo on horseback, a practise known as "running the buffalo", like their Indian kinsmen and they turned the sale of pemmican into a thriving business in the manner of their European forefathers.

THE RED RIVER CART

Another legacy of the buffalo hunt was the vehicle known as the Red River cart. A very special type of vehicle was needed to transport the spoils of the hunt over the many miles of rugged prairie, one well-suited for travel on the plains. It is believed the Red River cart first made its appearance somewhere between 1818-21.¹³ The wheels of the vehicle were five feet high and the spokes angled out from the hub in order to "dish" the wheel, thus greatly improving its stability. Two wooden shafts were attached to the axle, upon which was laid a platform of boards and around this a railing was erected to keep the load in position. The cart was made entirely of wood, so repairs on the prairie could be made easily from materials on hand. No grease was used on the axle hubs, as this would have caused dust to collect and would have soon rendered the vehicle immobile. The result was that the carts made a distinct, mournful, shrieking noise as they rolled over the prairie. One can imagine what hundreds of these carts would sound like.

Red River Cart



Photo credit: Manitoba Public Archives.

GABRIEL DUMONT

We have concentrated mainly on buffalo hunts which originated from the Red River settlement, but a discussion of the hunt would not be complete without mentioning the most legendary Metis buffalo hunter of all. Gabriel Dumont, while living alternately between the Red River settlement and the Saskatchewan district, spent most of his years on the western plains. Eventually Gabriel took up permanent residence in one of the wintering buffalo communities on the South Saskatchewan River. In 1858 he had married Madeleine Wilkie, daughter of the famous buffalo chief, Jean-Baptiste Wilkie, who was captain of the hunt described in great detail by Alexander Ross in the preceding pages. By 1863 Gabriel Dumont was elected leader of the Saskatchewan buffalo hunt and he was the undisputed leader of the Metis buffalo hunters and their families who wintered in the Saskatchewan region. By 1868 many of these temporary, winter communities were becoming more permanent and in 1873 a local Metis government was set up at St. Laurent, near Batoche. A local constitution was formulated, patterned largely after the buffalo hunt laws, with Gabriel being unanimously selected as President of the community. Aside from his natural leadership abilities, Gabriel was also noted for his kindness and generosity. John Kerr, an ex-member of Wolseley's expeditionary force to the Red River settlement, met Dumont while on his first western buffalo hunt. He grew to admire and respect Dumont and was moved to remark:

...I grew to know and respect the redoubtable Gabriel—chief outstanding figure of the plains. To me he was kindness itself. He adopted me into his family, and...invariably addressed me as mon frere....Dumont has been painted in lurid colours as a savage, brutal man. He was anything but that, kindly and generous to a degree....¹⁴

Gabriel Dumont



Photo credit: USJB Bibliotheque Mallet Woonsocket, RI.

CONCLUSION

In the following passage, Ross describes the independent nature of the Metis, and points out what he considers to be their most serious character flaw:

...these people are all politicians, but of a peculiar creed, favouring a barbarous state of society and self-will; for they cordially detest all the laws and restraints of civilized life, believing all men were born to be free. In their own estimation they are all great men, and wonderfully wise....Feeling their own strength, from being constantly armed, and free from control, they despise all others; but above all, they are marvellously tenacious of their own original habits. They cherish freedom as they cherish life....They are all republicans in principle, and a licentious freedom is their besetting sin.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, the Metis, rather than considering their love for a free, independent lifestyle "*their besetting sin*",¹⁶ considered it their most cherished virtue. The life of a buffalo hunter afforded them this lifestyle.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1972), pp. 255-6.
- 2 Ibid., pp. 256-7.
- 3 Joseph James Hargrave, *Red River* (1871; rpt. Altona, Manitoba: Friesen Printers, 1971), p. 170.
- 4 See Ross, p. 257.
- 5 Healey, W.J. *Women of Red River* (Winnipeg: Bulman Bros. Ltd., 1923), p.8.
- 6 See Ross, p. 261-2.
- 7 Margaret Macleod and W.L. Morton, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 113.
- 8 See Ross, p. 249-50.
- 9 See Ross, p. 246.
- 10 John Hawkes, *The Story of Saskatchewan* (Regina: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1924), p. 57.
- 11 Patrice Fleury, Paper presented to the Historical Society at

- Duck Lake, Saskatchewan on February 29, 1924. (Regina: R.C.M.P. Museum), p.1.
- 12 Ibid., p.3.
- 13 E.E. Rich, ed., *Eden Colvile's Letters, 1849-52* (London: The Hudson's Bay Record Society, 1956), p. XXXV.
- 14 Constance Kerr Sissons, *John Kerr* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 87-8.
- 15 See Ross, p. 252.
- 16 Ibid., p. 252.

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