Buffalo Bone Picking
By Lawrence Barkwell

By 1832, the buffalo had vanished east of the Mississippi River. By the mid-1800s the railways had reached the western plains and the killing of bison began in earnest. However, the effects of disease on the herds compounded the loss. By the 1870s the bison were gone from the southern plains and eradicated from the northern plains by the 1880s. The loss of the bison from the northern plains coincided with the first herds of Texas cattle making it north to Montana in the early 1880s. The cattle and farming decreased the buffalo pasture. The cattle carried tick fever, brucellosis and rhinotracheitus among other diseases. It was disease that killed most of the bison, just as disease had killed most of the Aboriginal population. Victoria Callihoo, whose family hunted in the Edmonton area, recalled that “before the buffalo disappeared, hundreds of dead ones were seen on the plains. People said they died of black-leg.”

As a result of the demise of the herds, the practice of gathering the bleached bison bones became an economic mainstay of the plains Metis. The horns were also collected, polished and sold to the tourist trade. In the 1880s the price of bones climbed from $3 - $4 a ton to $23 a ton, however, this decreased to $8 per ton by the end of the century.

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Laura Thompson Law’s book *History of Rolette County North Dakota and Yarns of the Pioneers*\(^2\) gives the following description of the quantity of buffalo bones on the North Dakota plain:

When the pioneers came into the state and county [Rolette County], the skeletons of these great animals were an obstacle to breaking and cultivation of the land, the bones having to be removed from the path of the plow. Thousands of bones were gathered by settlers and hauled to market as far back as 1884, to be used for fertilizer and also for the refining of sugar. The Indians [Metis] and the white settlers have been seen hauling bones into Dunseith in Red River carts in the late 80s. Estimates are that possibly two million buffalo carcasses were shipped out of the state, valued at $8.00 a ton.

Buffalo hooves and horns could be made into a principal ingredient of paints and adhesives. A skeleton’s plain bones could be pulverized and mixed with potash, ferrous compounds and nitrates and made into fertilizers capable of stimulating crop growths in the most unpromising soils. The old bones were ground into meal while the fresher ones supplied refineries with calcium phosphate to neutralize cane-juice acid and to decolour sugar. Others went to bone china factories for calcium phosphate ash. The firm bones were used to produce toothbrushes and dice or sent to button factories. Millions of tons of bones were collected. In one year alone, one-half million tons were shipped out of Texas.

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2 Rolla, N.D.: Rolla Centennial Committee, 1989 reprint of the 1953 book; pg. 16.
Buffalo Bones along the Northern Pacific, photo by Charles Spencer Francis, illustration from *Sport Among the Rockies: The Record of a Fishing and Hunting Trip in North-Western Montana*. Troy, NY: 1889: 13. Montana Historical Society PA 945-968

Photo by Frank Jay Hay, North Dakota State Historical Society D-0480. Carts with buffalo bones along the Northern Pacific Line
By 1886 the buffalo bone industry on the Canadian prairies was shifting into high gear. In July 1886, the Saskatchewan Herald of Battleford reported: “Mr. A. Blair has handed over 100 tons of bones at Pense this season already, besides large quantities at Belle Plaine and other points west.”

Since 100 assorted skeletons made a ton of bones, Blair's delivery to Pense represented 10,000 buffalo. One of Moose Jaw's bone dealers was Felix Plante, whose general emporium was appropriately called the Buffalo Store. The Regina Leader reported the “enterprising merchant, Mr. Plante, is doing a large business in buffalo bones, averaging 25 carts daily.”

Sometimes there just weren't enough boxcars to handle the bone harvest, and large stacks accumulated beside the tracks at shipping points. Usually these bones were piled in the shape and size of a boxcar, with skulls forming the outside walls and the smaller bones tossed in the centre.
Saskatchewan 1890, skulls piled by a railway siding in Saskatoon. Photos by H.C. E. Lumsden
Bones shipped east to Detroit 1880

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute