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[Buffalo Hunt](#)

With the westward expansion of the fur trade in the late 1700s and the beginning settlement of the New World, many changes occurred. The fur bearing animal population in the eastern territory had been sharply reduced and the market demand of furs in Europe had dropped dramatically. It was during this time that the horse was introduced on the prairies: causing a dramatic change in the lifestyle for the Indian and Métis peoples. The horse opened up the possibility of following the buffalo and increasing hunting territories. Hunters no longer needed to herd the buffalo into pounds and enclosures or run them over cliffs. The hunters could now chase the herd and shoot from horseback and increase the number of animals they could harvest. Dogs and cariolles gave way to horses and Red River carts as the means of transporting larger quantities of goods.

The Métis Nation became a dominant force on the plains during the late 1700s and way into the 1800s. They were a highly organized body of people. They enacted laws, rules and regulations around the buffalo hunt which later became the "Laws of the Prairie" and the beginning of law enforcement in the area, subsequently adopted by the North West Mounted Police. The initiation of these laws brought the Métis Nation the solidifying process of self-government.

The hunt involved organizing hundreds of men, women, children, Red River carts and horses for the westward journeys extending hundreds of miles to where the buffalo grazed. On the return trip, tons of processed buffalo meat and hides had to be transported. The buffalo hunts provided the Métis with an impressive organizational structure and by 1820 was a permanent feature of life for all individuals on or near the Red River and other Métis communities.

There were usually two organized hunts each year: one in the Spring and one in the Autumn. The buffalo hunts of this time were carried out through almost militaristic precision and the combined force of a Métis hunt was larger than any other force of its time.

After the first day of travel through the dust raised by 1,240 carts and 1,630 Métis; camp was made. The first organizational meeting for the hunt would be held and a President would be selected. A number of captains were nominated by the President and the people jointly. The captains then proceeded to appoint their own

policemen, the number assigned to each not exceeding ten. Their duty was to see that the Laws of the Hunt were strictly carried out. Guides were responsible for the camp flag that remained raised until it was time to settle for the night. At the end of the day the captains took charge. At night the carts were placed in the form of a circle with the horses and cattle inside the ring. It was the duty of the captains and their policemen to see that this was rightly done. The Métis buffalo hunters camped in tipis. The difference between a Métis tipi and their Indian cousins was a lack of decoration. All camping orders were given by a flag signal. Each guide had his turn of one day. When the buffalo were spotted, all the hunters were drawn up in line, the President, captains, and police being a few yards in advance. No one would proceed until the President gave the signal, waiting for the buffalo to be in the best location possible. A priest sometimes went with the hunt and mass would be celebrated on the open prairies.

The Métis fiercely guarded their customary rights to hunt and trade freely throughout the Prairies. Besides being an important food-gathering activity and a commercial endeavour, the hunt was a social occasion that brought together families who saw each other only a few times a year. Every Spring and Autumn, as many as 1,600 people would gather at Pembina, on the Red River, to elect a provisional government. Mounted scouting parties maintained order within the temporary community, enforcing compliance with the strict Laws of the Hunt and providing protection from attacks by rival groups, such as the Dakotas.

The hunting technique used by the Métis differed considerably from that of their Indian ancestors. Instead of driving bison off cliffs or into pounds and enclosures, they used horses and firearms. Creating a stampede, the hunters ran their horses into the herd and selected the animals they wanted to kill, firing point-blank at full gallop. An experienced hunter on a well-trained horse could down ten to twelve bisons in a two-hour run. Buffalo hunting expanded across the Prairies in the 1840s.

The 1840 hunt (begun in early June), covered 250 miles in nineteen days before the first buffalo were spotted. The party included 620 men, 650 women, 360 children, 586 oxen, 655 cart horses, and 403 'buffalo runners' (fast horses). In other words, more than one-third of the Red River settlement packed up their belongings and set off on a dangerous expedition that would last for months. By the time the hunt ended on August 17th, it had captured over a million pounds of meat and hides—all of which had to be transported back to the Red River settlements.

The meat fed Métis families, white colonists and fur traders. Once back at the Red River, the Métis returned to their individual river lots to take up other activities, including: trapping, hunting, transporting goods for the fur companies, gardening, farming, fishing, harvesting wild rice, building carts, making clothing, collecting lime, limestone, maple sugar, salt and seneca root.

The Plains Indians also hunted the buffalo and as the herds declined, conflict erupted between the Indians and Métis. In the mid-1840s and in 1859 the Métis successfully fought the Sioux for control of the hunt in what is today North Dakota. The Sioux retaliated by setting prairie fires which drove the buffalo away and kept the Métis out. Eventually the Métis and the Sioux concluded these problems with a peace treaty.

Red River hunters recognized two grand divisions of buffalo, those of the Grand Coteau and Red River, and those of the Saskatchewan . Other ranges of immense herds existed beyond the Missouri towards the south, as far as Texas and Mexico .

Some who participated in the northern hunts preferred to stay out on the Prairie in winter camps: these men and their families were known as hiverants. Roughly thirty such settlements have been found in Alberta , Saskatchewan and Montana . Their small villages consisted of about forty or fifty rough hewn, flat sod roofed cabins. These villages became more settled year round after the rebellion in Manitoba and the dispersal of the Métis there.

Among their many other names, the Métis were also known as the "Buffalo Hunters" . During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Métis Nation established themselves as the processors and suppliers of Pemmican to the new world. The nation's gross national product from this source was larger than either fledgling nation of Canada or the United States.

Although the Métis sustained themselves in a variety of ways (such as fishing, trapping for furs, practicing small-scale agriculture and working as wage labourers for the Hudson's Bay Company) they were first and foremost buffalo hunters. The buffalo herds were their major source of subsistence and trade goods. Every summer, and again in the fall, hundreds of Métis families with their Red River carts, horses, oxen and dogs set out for the buffalo plains of North Dakota. These buffalo hunting expeditions were carefully organized and became the foundation of Métis government. A leader of the hunt was selected, scouts were chosen and rules were arranged before the expedition ever set forth.

The great size of these hunting expeditions has drawn comment. Alexander Ross, a resident of the Red River settlement, writing in 1856, felt that the camp of the 1840 hunt covered an area equal to that of a modern city. This particular expedition contained 620 men, 650 women, 360 children and 1,210 Red River carts. This hunt was by no means the largest Red River hunt ever assembled.

The North American Plains buffalo was a creature ideally suited to the central grassland areas of North America. They wandered in huge herds (estimated in the millions) north-south or east-west. Their range of territory was anywhere the grass grew. The buffalo was considered a very sacred animal by all Aboriginal people of the Plains. The buffalo was their main source of food, clothing, household articles, and in the case of the Métis, their livelihood.

All parts of the animal were used and many parts had many uses:

Rawhide

Containers, Shields, Buckets, Moccasin, Soles, Drums, Splints, Mortars, Cinches, Ropes, Sheaths, Saddles, Blankets, Stirrups, Bull Boats, Masks, Parfleche, Ornaments, Lariats, Straps, Caps, Quirts, Snowshoes,

Shroud

Buckskin

Cradles, Moccasin, Tops, Winter, Robes, Bedding, Shirts, Belts, Leggings, Dresses, Bags, Quivers, Tipi, Covers, Tipi, Liners, Bridles, Backrests, Tapestries, Sweatlodge

Hair

Headdresses, Pad, Fillers, Pillows, Ropes, Ornaments, Hair, Pieces, Halters, Bracelets, Medicine, Balls, Moccasin, Lining, Doll, Stuffing, Amulets, Bridle, Decorations

Bones

Fleshing, Tools, Pipes, Knives, Arrowheads, Shovels, Splints, Sleds, Saddle, Trees, War, Clubs, Scrapers, Quirts, Awls, Paintbrushes, Game, Dice, Tableware

Horns

Arrow, Points, Cups, Fire, Carrier, Powderhorn, Spoons, Ladles, Headdresses, Toys

Paunch and Stomach Linings

Meat, Wrappings, Buckets, Cups, Basins, Canteen, Bowls, Containers

Tail

Medicine, Switch, Fly, brush, Decorations, Whips, Toys, Jewellery

Fat

Tallow, Soap, Hair, Grease, Cosmetics, Cooking, Medicines

Skull

Masks, Medicine, Prayers, Rituals, Sun, dance, Decoration

Muscles

Glue, Thread, Arrow, ties, Cinches, Bow, strings

Hooves, Feet, Dewclaws

Glue, Rattles, Decorations, Rituals, Spoons

Beard

Ornamentation, Toys, Doll, Decoration, Rituals, Masks

Food

Pemmican, Sausages, Jerky, Blood, pudding, Soup

Bladder

Pouches, Bags, Medicine

Chips

Fuel, Diaper, Powder

Teeth

Ornamentation

Tongue

Comb, Choice, Food

Brain and Liver

Hide, Preparation, Tanning

Scrotum

Rattles, Containers

Tendons

Sewing, Bow, Strings

Paints

Blood, (Red/brown), Gall, (Yellow), Stomach, Contents

Hind Leg Skin

Preshaped moccasin

No wonder Aboriginal people thought this animal was sacred and little wonder their lives were impacted and almost destroyed by the decline and eventual extermination of the Plains Buffalo.

Métis people were very familiar with the way of the New World and how to capitalize on the needs of the people. They had been brought up and created through the fur trade.

The Métis had forged and changed the very presence of the companies entering this arena and had opened their own trading company in the 1700s (The NorthWest Company). It's not surprising that the Métis dominated in the Pemmican trade in the late 1700s and into the 1800s: beginning with their organization of the buffalo hunt and institution of Laws of the Prairies.

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