

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Six

The Vanishing Buffalo

LESSON IDEA

To learn how the Indian was defeated, utterly and humiliatingly, not in open battle but by private slaughter of his source for food and shelter: the buffalo.

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HUGE AND SHAGGY, with high shoulders, matted manes, and tough, thick hides, the buffalo of the Great Plains were majestic creatures. There were perhaps as many as sixty million in western America at one time, congregating in herds of one or two million during the autumn, then fragmenting into small units for winter grazing, spring calving, and summer mating. Each herd was commanded and disciplined by a lead bull who had gained his position, and kept it, by fighting off all contenders.

These herds were a nation of nomads, powerful and well ordered. Even the wolves kept their distance. But not so the Indians, who knew the value of a buffalo hide on a freezing winter day, and the importance of the ton of meat that could be brought down with a few well-aimed arrows.

It was a relatively easy matter for Indian hunters on horseback to move in on a herd of milling buffalo and cut down a few of the young cows. Even without horses, skilled hunters could outwit the buffalo by maneuvering them toward a cliff and stampeding them into a suicidal leap. No amount of bellowing or braking action by the beasts reaching the edge first could stop such a stampede, as the lead animals were pushed over by those behind them. "Then those that had done the pushing," says

James Michener in *Centennial*, "were hurled over by those behind. Thus the great herd committed suicide, animals weighing almost a ton crashing down on those heaped up below, breaking necks and legs and backbones, and all marked by billows of dust and pitiful bellowing."

While hundreds of buffalo might be killed in such a skilled maneuver, only the tender young cows would be completely butchered. Tongues might be taken from others for ceremonial purposes, or perhaps just the softer cuts around the hump. Some portions of stronger-flavored meat from older animals were always needed to flavor pemmican, a winter ration that was made from buffalo intestines. With such huge herds roaming the plains, the Indians were not worried about the great beasts ever becoming extinct.

On a hunt, the Indians butchered their game where it fell. If they had horses, they loaded the pack animals with the meat, hanging it "like thick red blankets between the fresh hides, with the marrow bones tied on top," according to Mari Sandoz, author of *Crazy Horse*. If they had no horses, they packed the meat on a travois, an A-shaped wooden carrying frame (pulled by dogs or women), which dragged in the dust. Back in camp, the women cut the freshly butchered meat into thin, flat strips and hung it on drying racks to be cured by the sun and wind.

Why was such "curing" necessary? What would have happened to the Indians' meat supply if it had not been cured? [Discuss, if you wish, some of the

problems of food preservation and decay, including the importance of refrigeration and canning.]

After the hunt, says Sandoz, "much of the space around the lodges was covered by skins stretched, flesh side up, on the ground, the women scraping them, shaving them thin, and rubbing them with tallow and brains and other soft parts mixed together. When they were dry they were stacked in piles in the lodges for the traders, if any of them ever came."

But more important, these thick hides were used as blankets; beds, and sleeping robes, and to make tepees. Without buffalo hides, the Plains Indians froze in winter; without the meat, they starved. Their lives depended on the annual hunts.

IN THE SUMMER of 1873, however, buffalo hunting became a white man's sport, much to the despair of the Indian nations. The transcontinental railroad was partially responsible. Its shining rails and iron horses brought new travelers to the Plains — curious Easterners and European aristocrats who were seeking new thrills and investment opportunities in the West. From Austria, Russia, England, and France came dukes, counts, and earls with entourages of servants and chefs. They outfitted special trains with all the luxurious comforts of home and traveled across the prairie as hunting parties, shooting whatever came within range of their coach windows. Milling buffalo herds made a perfect target for these sophisticated sharpshooters, who considered it an amusing and fascinating sport. If fifty tons of choice meat or seventy-five carcasses and hides were left to rot on the searing prairie, what concern was it of those who dined on caviar and crepe suzettes?

Despite the anguished pleas of the Indians, whose livelihood was being destroyed, neither the Army nor the United States government made any attempt to stop these railroad hunting parties. Can you guess why? [*Discuss the differing attitudes of Americans on the "Indian problem," as told in last week's lesson. Consider what effect the buffalo slaughter would have on the lives of the Indian tribes.*]

Other parties of buffalo hunters fanned out over the Plains in 1873 with a more serious purpose in mind: namely, cashing in on the profitable business of selling buffalo hides. Like beaver hats in the days

of the early trappers, buffalo robes had become fashionable in the eastern markets; and hunters were quick to take advantage of the new craze.

Disregarding both treaties and boundaries, the buffalo men invaded Indian territory in summer and winter alike, accompanied by skinners skilled in dressing carcasses, wagons and drivers to haul the hides, and cooks. Usually they were armed with high-powered Sharps buffalo guns, which were monstrous weapons of tremendous accuracy and force. Approaching the herd downwind, the hunters mounted their guns on tripods and aimed for the lead buffalo. The trick was to shoot the leader, not in the heart but in the lungs. A buffalo bull with two bullets in the heart could run a hundred yards, throwing the herd into panic by his movement as well as his bellowing. But a hit in the lungs dropped the bull instantly and silently to the ground. The other buffalo would gather in quiet confusion, sniffing the fallen leader and standing still as though waiting for a decision. As Michener describes it: "During this time, which might last as long as forty minutes, the hunters had the herd at their mercy. A stand, it was called, and the trick was to pick off the waiting animals with a clean shot, lodged between the horn and the ear so as to produce immediate death, a swift sinking to the ground without even a muted bellow of pain. Despite the noise of the rifles, which somehow the buffalo never learned to heed, the animals remained unaware of the danger."

HUNTERS COMPETED with each other for the record number they could kill in a stand — even if the skinners could not dress all the fallen carcasses. Michener cites the following records for one-day kills: "Charles Rath 107, Doc Zahl 120, Orlando A. Bond 293. Witnesses saw Tom Nixon kill 120 in forty minutes, but in doing so he ruined the barrel of his Sharps. Jim Cato, the famous buffalo hunter

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The lives of many of the great Indian warriors and chiefs make interesting reading, and we recommend *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man Of The Oglalas* by Mari Sandoz, now available in paperback for \$1.95, and *Sitting Bull* by Stanley Vestal, available at most public libraries.

