



Our Buffalo Hunts

By

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I was thirteen years old when I first joined in a buffalo hunt. We left Lac Ste. Anne after the leaves were out on the poplar trees and our small fields and gardens were seeded or planted. Before making the journey, there would be a meeting among the leading men as to the exact day of leaving. After this was decided on all the families who wanted to join the hunt would prepare for the trip. Our main transportation, the Red River cart, would be overhauled. These vehicles at that time did not have any metal in their construction. Large wooden pegs were used where bolts would be used now, while small pegs answered for screws or nails. Cart har-

ness was made of hides from the buffalo.

I always used to accompany my mother on these trips. She was a medicine woman who set broken bones and knew how to use medicinal herbs. The riders who chased the buffalo were often thrown, sometimes by the bulls charging the riders' horses or by the horses getting their feet in badger holes.

We usually took three carts along. We had no axle grease and tallow was used instead to lubricate the wooden axles. The carts were very squeaky and they could be heard from a long way off.

We, from Lac Ste. Anne, would be first to start as we were the furthest north. The Metis of the St. Albert settlement would join us on the way. Usually, there

Mrs. Callihoo is one of the oldest oldtimers in the Lac Ste. Anne district and was recently chosen to open the new museum there. An article by Mrs. Callihoo on the Iroquois in Alberta was carried in our Spring 1959 number. Both were written in 1948.



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would be about one hundred families going on the hunt. All streams were forded as there were no bridges. The Saskatchewan River was the largest and most dangerous and it was a relief after it was crossed. We used to cross at a good ford about where the High Level Bridge is now. About a day's travel south from Saskatchewan River we usually found the herd. Riders, young men they were, would scout on ahead to see we did not run into any enemies. There were no police—no law. We always had a leader in our caravan and his orders were respected. He always had a flag flying on the top of his cart. He led his people ahead and we followed him.

When the herd was startled it was just a dark solid moving mass. We, of those days, never could believe the buffalo would ever be killed off, for there were thousands and thousands. We took firewood and poles for tipis and for tripods, on which we hung our thin sliced slab meat to dry in the sun. We had no matches, but got fire from flint and birch punk. It seems no one was anxious to start their morning fire, as we would wait and see if any smoke would come out of the tipis, and when smoke was seen then there was a rush to get a flame or coal to start one's own fire.

The riders of the chase all had guns, single barrel flint locks—some muzzle-loaders with caps. Bows and arrows were used before my time but the Crees and Blackfeet still used them then. Powder horns and ball bags were slung on each shoulder. At close range the guns would kill the animal. Some riders rode bareback while others had home-made saddles. They were almost flat and were stuffed with the hair of the buffalo. They were beaded on the corners and stirrups were of dry rawhide. When the kill was over, the women would go out to help bring the meat in, and then the slicing of meat began. We girls would then keep a little smoke going all day to keep the flies away from the meat. The meat would be hung on rails that rested on two tripods at each end.

Often we would run short of wood. Then a pony would be hitched to a cart and we would go out on the plain and pick chips (buffalo dung). On a warm day this was very dry and burned

readily. Only old ones were used for fuel. The buffalo was a very useful animal, for we ate the meat, we used its hide for robes, ropes, shelter for our lodges, foot wear, clothes and bags. The meat was cooked and sun-dried and also made into pemmican. We always camped close to water. We set our tipis in a large circle outside the cart circle. A few of the fastest horses were kept in this enclosure and the others were herded all night by a night herder, for horse thieving was a very common occurrence. A fast horse was the best possession. A hunter on a fast horse would kill more buffalo than others with less speedy ponies. There was no money; no one knew what it was.

We made pemmican out on the plains, as the dried meat was too bulky to take home. A large green hide would be hung on six posts, three on each side, so the hide would form a U-shape. When it was dry the slabs of meat would be dumped in the U-shaped hide and two men on each end would then pound the dry meat into a pulp. Then sun-dried saskatoons would be mixed and grease would be poured on and stirred to make an even mixture. When this was done it would be packed in robes, sewn with sinew all around, the hair part outside to keep the pemmican in good condition regardless of the weather. These bags were heavy and it usually took two men to load one on a cart. Hides would be put on top of the loads. Nothing would be wasted from the buffalo but the bones, hoofs and horns. The fall hunt, the last before winter, which would start after haying, was the most important one, for we had to get enough dried meat and pemmican to last all winter. At this time, the buffalo would be fat and calves grown up. Calves were not killed as no one cared for veal anyway.

The homeward journey was slow, but who cared? The nice sunny days in the fall, Indian summer, made travelling rather fascinating. Occasionally we would run into bad weather, but we were accustomed to it and did not mind as long as we had plenty of the best and most nourishing food I ever ate. In all I made four trips to the plains hunting the buffalo. Each time was further away toward south.