Buffalo Served Pioneers

Great Prairie Beast Provided
Many Necessities[2]

By S. H. Jones

The value of that majestic animal of the early plains, the buffalo, can never be estimated. He was a king in his own right before the coming of the white man. He served the Indian for centuries with but little fear for the extermination of his kind, for the Indian killed sparingly, taking only what he needed for food, leather and robes, and avoiding the stampeding of the herds.

With the white man the situation was different. He needed food not only for himself but for his neighbors in regions to the east of the buffalo country. He needed money—and the hides sold well. He was adventuresome—otherwise he would not have been here. His nature called for excitement--and buffalo hunting answered the call.

The herds were stampeded repeatedly. Thousands upon thousands of robes were gathered and shipped to the east. The country was fast becoming populous and there was an ever-increasing demand for meat. The buffalo was a menace to the expansion of agriculture and had to go.

He went as far as he could, his ranks dwindling as he fled, until now, a little more than half a century later, his kind is to be found only in zoos, except for a few herds being protected in the northwest.

The buffalo has been a martyr to civilization, along with the red man, and is worthy of a place in this or any similar account of the great middlewest. It is the purpose of this account, therefore, to present the buffalo as he really was, as pictured by the few who remain to describe him, and to tell something of the manner in which he was hunted in and near Rice county.

Long before the advent of the white man the Indian had named the little stream which flows through the county from northwest to southeast. The pioneer found him calling it "Cow creek" and since the Indian named things simply, it meant only that the stream was the recognized place for hunting the buffalo cow.

In the works of Dr. Coues, author of a volume on the expedition of General Pike, is the following notation:

"They came to the old Kaw trail. It passed through Diamond Valley in Morris county, on its way across Marion county, and I have seen the Kaw Indians follow it as late as 1872-'73, trekking along single file, their ponies dragging the tepee poles, and loaded down with buffalo hams, with the patient squaws riding on top, coming back from their hunting grounds on Cow creek and further west."

The buffalo was not the smartest animal in the world. In fact he was quite like his modern cousin, the domestic cow. He possessed a certain amount of inherent intelligence and animal instinct, but not enough to enable him to cope with the hunter.

Herds came in the early spring, most of them going north, and returned south in the fall. They were most plentiful in Rice county in June and July, although many were to be found here throughout the year.

Buffalo paths were a familiar sight to the plainsman. These might be several miles in length but they always led to water. They were the result of a buffalo habit of walking single file—or in several single files—as the herd decided it was time to take a drink.

In every normal herd of buffaloes there was one individual who was

"ruler of the roost." A sturdy and handsome bull, he won his right to dictatorship through contest and conquest. The other bulls were welcome to stay, so long as they bowed to his superiority, but in case they exhibited rebellion they were challenged to a duel. The leader and the adventuresome one would battle to death unless the latter refused to accept the challenge, when he promptly left the herd to take his place among those of similar misfortune—all bulls—who wandered about by themselves. If the battle was started it was usually finished with the weaker of the two being gored to death. Then, if the leader had managed to retain his dignified rank, he exercised his rights until some other ambitious male became bold to the point of disputing them.

Most early accounts of buffalo herds indicate that, although the animals moved in tremendous, almost innumerable, herds they were actually highly organized into smaller groups, as the one shown above.

The animals presented a different appearance in each of the two main seasons. In winter they were well covered with hair, but in the warmth of summer they shed that part of it behind the shoulders and looked from a distance not unlike lions.

In ridding themselves of the hair they wallowed in the earth, or, if timber happened to be handy, rubbed themselves against the trees. Many buffalo wallows are still to be seen for when they were once formed they gathered and held moisture and were used repeatedly until quite deep.

The calves were meek and interesting. They were of a peculiar, tawny color unlike the deeper colored adults. Plainsmen frequently captured those old enough to have passed the "weanling" stage, and brought

them up in captivity or until they became burdensome.

The "main herd" was so vast that it covered hundreds of square miles, with the animals grazing as thickly as cattle. At least there are several authentic reports to this effect. Travelers frequently passed through them mile after mile without seeing more than an acre or two of ground not being occupied by them. A pioneer of this county once rode from Cow creek to Ft. Zarah, approximately 25 miles, with just such an experience over the entire distance.

In hunting the buffalo it was necessary, first of all, to be somewhat of a marksman. The best "shot" was at his heart and this was reached by directing the bullet at an imaginary circle the size of a man's hat, immediately behind the shoulder. To fire directly into his shaggy head would have meant being branded as the greenest sort of novice. The matted hair and thick skull would permit little other than an aggravation to the buffalo thus struck.

There were three kinds of weapons suitable for buffalo hunting. One was the short carbine rifle for hunting from horseback. Then there were the Spencer .56 calibre, and the needle gun for still hunting, or hunting on foot.

But more important than the weapon, in hunting from horseback as was the common practice, was the pony. It was almost impossible to split a herd and to bring down the animal that might appeal to the fancy. Instead, a smart pony would follow alongside the running buffaloes, cut one out from along the edge and permit the hunter, riding with reins free and both hands for his gun, to bring it down.

The felling of a buffalo so hunted was usually by the "uncoupling" process. That is, the animal was struck along the backbone about midway down the body. This dropped them through a sort of paralysis, but seldom caused their immediate death.

In "still" hunting, more caution was necessary. It was impossible to come within range unless they were approached against the wind, for they were able to scent a man a good distance away. Walking to within a quarter of a mile or so, the "still" hunter would drop to his knees and crawl the remaining distance to good range. It was peculiar of the buffalo that he would pay little attention to a man "down on all fours" when the sight of him walking upright would usually start a stampede. Hunters were able to account for this only through the theory that they were mistaken for coyotes or other of the smaller prairie animals. Consequently the crawling hunter could bring down many animals before they finally realized what was taking place, and bolted.

These methods, while not followed strictly, were the customary procedure. The manner of hunting might be varied, or the "shot" slightly different to suit the individual whim. It was possible, for example, to reach

the heart through a front shot, but this was not advisable because of the abundance of hair about the fore part of the body.

Thirty or forty buffaloes a day constituted a good kill. In commercial hunting there were usually several in a party. Some would be designated killers while others followed up, skinning the animals and caring for the hides.

When the first pioneers reached the county there was little reason to kill the buffaloes except for food or sport, since there was not a suitable market for the hides. In the early '70's the condition was changed and hides brought from $2.25 to $3 each depending upon size and quality.

The hides were cured by staking them, hair side down, flat upon the prairie. At a certain stage they were folded and creased from nose to tail by walking along the fold. Then they were piled like cord wood to await removal by wagon to the railroad.

Such meat as the hunters needed was easily handled. It was "jerked" —hung out in the open air and sunlight to cure. There were no flies in those early days, and consequently no "blowing" as would be certain to occur now. The hams and loins were the choice parts, although the white man agreed, in a measure, with the Indians, who regarded the tongue as the real delicacy, and the unquestionable property of the killer, though all the other parts might be gathered in by companions.

Several years ago in the "Country Gentleman" a writer said of the buffalo and his habits:

"At the approach of winter the herds of buffaloes moved southward from 200 to 400 miles. On this long march the herd moved sometimes in detached herds, sometimes in a huge army with a front of fifty miles. All along the way of the march north small bands would leave the main herd, and remain behind on some attractive grazing ground. Naturally none of the buffaloes migrated back and forth all the way from the Rio Grande to Great Slave, at least not in a single season. The herds that wintered in Texas and New Mexico summered in Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Wyoming. The winter herds of Wyoming and Colorado passed the summer in Montana, and the winter herds of Montana went to Saskatchewan for a summer outing.

"Among the various range grasses the buffalo seemed to prefer the gama, buffalo, beard, bunch and blue stem grasses. Occasionally they ate sagebrush and other weeds, but apparently never the loco weed. In a pinch, however, there were few grasses or edible forage which the buffalo refused.

"In 1870 a buffalo was worth about five dollars: robe, $2.50; tongue, 25¢; hindquarters, $2; bones, horns, and hoofs, 25¢. And yet buffalo hunters found it profitable to kill them for these small values. Various commercial firms saw values in the buffaloes. The firm of Boskowitz of

New York City from 1876 to 1884 bought 177,142 buffalo robes for $709,000. Even as late as 1888 good buffalo robes, tanned by the Indians, were to be had in New York for $15 each.

"A gruesome evidence of the buffalo slaughter is seen in some of the statistics of traffic in the products of the ill-fated animal. For example, the Santa Fe railroad carried east in 1872, 1,135,000 pounds of buffalo bones. In 1873, 2,743,100 pounds and 6,914,950 pounds in 1874. Buffalo meat was then worth only two or three cents a pound. Not a thousandth part of it was saved from the millions of buffalo killed for their hides."

In the days after the buffalo had been driven from this section of the plains and the revenue from hides was being obtained only by those adventuresome hunters who could go miles in search of them, the settlers derived considerable cash from the collection and sale of the bones. These were strewn everywhere about the prairie where, bleaching in the sun, stripped of every fragment of flesh by coyotes and other "gleaners" of the animal and bird kingdoms, they presented a grotesque sight.

Bones netted around $8 a ton, and it was no trouble for a man with a team and wagon to gather two to three tons a day. They were hauled to Peace, or Sterling, and shipped to eastern manufacturers of fertilizer.

Thus, in a few short years, the prairie land of Rice county was cleared of debris and the last reminder of the wholesale killing of the buffalo was removed.

Another contribution of the buffalo to the settler was in the fuel provided by "buffalo chips." To us of the later generation the use of the offal of beasts for heat and cooking may seem ridiculous, but it was to the pioneer a blessing. There was little money with which to buy coal if it were available. There was little timber along the streams. But everywhere upon the prairie, attesting the inestimable millions of buffaloes that had roamed thereon, were the "buffalo chips," and these, after years of drying in the sun were not only sufficiently inflammable to make a blaze, but of substance which would hold its heat much the same as coke. In more than one instance the buffalo's contribution solved a vital problem, and continued to be a saving aid for many years after the great herds has passed beyond.