

The Bison Hunt

The Métis were quintessential bison hunters who hunted with military precision. However, early Métis bison hunting parties were not highly organized. They were small extended families who hunted for their own subsistence. It was not until 1816 that the hunts became more organized, due to increased demand for meat, pemmican, and hides.

Between the 1820s and '40s the number of Métis participants in the hunts gradually rose. For instance, in 1820, there were 540 Métis on the hunt; 1840 saw 1,210 hunters, and 1860, 2,690. During a hunt in 1840, 1,630 men, women and children managed 1,210 carts, and more than 400 horses, and 500 dogs. While on the hunt, the women and children dried meat and made pemmican. Priests often accompanied the Métis on the hunts; they performed mass before the flag was raised to start the day's hunt.

In the 1820s-50s, the First Nations and the Métis often fought for control of bison-hunting areas. The Métis' increased presence on the bison-hunting grounds of present-day North Dakota, Manitoba and Saskatchewan put them in conflict with the Dakota (Sioux) and the Siksika (Blackfoot) who also relied on the bison for survival. For instance, in June 1851, the Métis and the Dakota fought a battle at Grand Coteau over the rich bison-hunting grounds of what is now North Dakota.

The bison hunts of the early and mid-nineteenth century influenced the Métis' military organization. The hunt was organized in groups of ten

men (or "*dizaines*") with a captain of the hunt elected to command each unit. Out of the ten elected captains, an overall leader, the "Chief of the Hunt" was selected. Gabriel Dumont was Chief of the Hunt from the 1860s until its end in the mid-1870s. The captains then picked ten soldiers who assisted them with order and discipline. Discipline was carried out according to the "Laws of the Hunt". Due to increased participation in the hunt, these rules were necessary to preserve bison stock and for group survival.

Each day, ten guides were also appointed to guide the camp. The day's guide was also in charge of the camp flag. When hoisted in the morning, the flag signalled the raising of the camp, and within thirty minutes the camp was on the march. If anyone was sick or if any animals strayed, notice was sent to the guide, who then halted the camp until it was ready to resume again. The flag did not lower from the time that it was raised until it was time to set up camp in the evening. When the flag was raised, the guide was in charge of the hunt and when it was lowered, the captains and their soldiers were in charge. At the end of the day, the captains and Elders met to discuss how the hunt went and would plan for the following day.

The 1840 Bison Hunt

During the first day of the hunt, June 15, 1840, the Métis hunters and their families travelled thirty-two kilometres. Their day began at 6:00 a.m. and included short breaks to rest the animals, and stopped at 6:00 p.m. After that, the Métis travelled an average of twenty-four kilometres a day. The captains and soldiers arranged Red River carts in a defensive circle, set up camp, and posted sentries to watch for the Dakota while they were on contested bison-hunting grounds.

About four hundred Métis hunters saw their first herds in American territory after nineteen days of travelling. They then waited for the order to begin the hunt. Using a spyglass to observe the bison and the ground, Captain Wilkie issued the orders. At 8:00 a.m. they started out, first at a slow trot, then to a gallop, and then to full speed. The bison were about 2.4 kilometres away, and when the Métis were within four or five hundred yards (352 to 457 metres), the bison started running. A moment later, the Métis were in the midst of the herd. Before they fired on the bison, the Métis hunters held shot in their mouths, poured gunpowder into their guns, and spat the ball into the muzzle before compacting the gunpowder by pounding the butt of their guns on their saddles. All this action occurred while the hunters were on a full gallop! By the end of the day 1,375 bison had been killed. The best hunters had between ten to twelve, while others killed two or three.

The bison carcasses were then quickly processed. The hunters skinned the bison until the women arrived with the Red River carts. The work was

then taken over by the women who prepared pemmican, dried meat, and cleaned the hides. The hunt lasted two months and two days, and on August 17, 1840, the expedition returned to Red River, with five hundred tons of dried meat and pemmican.

The Many Uses of the Bison

To start the butchering process, the buffalo was propped up on its knees and belly. The hide was then split down the back and removed. The butchering produced sixteen cuts, which were:

1. *Dépouilles* – the flesh along the ribs from the shoulder to the rump
2. *Filets* – the sinewy muscle, which connects the shoulder blades to the haunches
3. *Bricoles* – the bands of fat descending from the shoulder to the lower neck
4. *Petits filets du cou* – the small sinewy muscles found near the filets' extremities
5. *Dessus de croupe* – the parts immediately above the flanks
6. *Épaules* – the shoulders
7. *Dessous d'épaules* – the layers of flesh between the ribs and shoulders
8. *Pis* – the fatty layer from under the belly and up the flanks, including the bladder
9. *Ventre* – the muscular band of flesh supporting the intestines extending under the belly from the ribs on one side to the other
10. *Panse* – the stomach which was considered something of a delicacy
11. *Grosse bosse* – the hump; a delicious morsel composed of a number of thin bones arising from the thoracic vertebrae
12. *Gras or Suif* – suet from the interior of the carcass
13. *Plats-côtes* – cutlets
14. *Brochet* – meat covering the stomach
15. *Croupe* – rump
16. *Langue* – tongue

In addition to providing cuts of meat, the Métis used bison for other purposes. The bones were broken for marrow, and were used for frying. Once the bison were butchered, the Métis brought the meat back in carts, and then they sliced it into slabs or strips, hung it to dry for two to three days, and then rolled it up or made pemmican with it. They used tanned

hides and sinew to make rope, thread, clothing, bedding, cart tents, and tipi covers. Whatever remained was left for the wolves and coyotes.

The Near Extinction of the Plains Bison

In the late nineteenth century the Plains Buffalo or Bison (*Bison bison bison*) as it is more properly known, was almost exterminated. From a range that originally reached from the present-day Northwest Territories down to the Gulf of Mexico and reaching deep into the modern American Midwest, the animals were over-hunted to the point that they only existed in tiny isolated pockets. By 1864, for example, at least one million bison had already been slaughtered. The prairie landscape was littered with first rotting carcasses, and then with vast heaps of sun-bleached bones. Regina, the capital of Saskatchewan, was originally nicknamed "Pile O' Bones" because of the large deposit of bison bones on the site. The end result of this slaughter was the destruction of the subsistence economy of all Prairie Aboriginal nations, including that of the Métis.

Why did the slaughter occur? There were several reasons for this human-made near extinction.

1. The interior of North America was opening up to farming and ranching settlement. The roaming bison were detrimental to homesteading and ranching and competed with cattle for increasingly sparse prairie grass. As more cereal agriculture crops were planted, natural prairie grasses – the bison's main source of food disappeared.

2. The construction of railways cut through the bison's grazing lands. The trains also brought sport hunters who shot thousands of bison from moving trains. The trains also provided the means to ship bison hides, which were used to make industrial machine belts in central Canada and the eastern United States, outside of the region.
3. Massive over-hunting – for food, robes and hides – by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal hunters also took its toll.
4. American government policy – bison were systematically hunted in order to take away Native-American's food supplies. This action was undertaken to make Native Americans live on reservations.

References:

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