

## **The Buffalo Hunt**

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The Métis of the prairies, like their Aboriginal ancestors, lived entirely from the buffalo. The buffalo provided all that was needed to survive. Every part of this great animal was used. Buffalo hides were made into clothing, as well as shelter. Hair was used for halters, headdresses, ornaments, pillows, ropes and saddle pads. The Bladder was used for such things as drill pouches, sinew pouches, and small medicine bags. Bones made arrowheads, awls, knives, scrapers, shovels, splints, war clubs, spoons, ladles and masks. With the horns, they made powder horn, and the muscles were used for arrows, bows and sinew. The tail was used as a fly swatter or whips and brooms. Teeth were used as ornaments and necklaces, while the fat was used for soap. Hooves were used for spoons, ladles and glue; brains, fat, and liver were used for tanning. They used the beard for ornamentation of apparel and weapons. The first and second chamber of the stomach was used to heal frostbite, and the third and fourth chambers were used for water containers and cooking vessels. The tongue of course was a gourmet treat and the dung was used as fuel.

One could see why these animals were so important to both the Métis and the Aboriginals.

Hunting these huge animals in their enormous herds required a carefully planned strategy and rigid discipline, thus a miniature government was formed before the hunt began. This elected government had complete control over all aspects of the hunt once it began. The Captain of the hunt was first to be elected, based on his proven ability as a hunter, a person of compassion and honesty. This was usually an Elder. Next, Lieutenants were elected, one for every ten hunters in a party. These elected officials determined the time, place, and direction of the attack on the herds. They were also responsible for the protection of the hunting party from enemies such as the Sioux and Blackfeet. Furthermore, they were responsible for the division of the spoils of the hunt among all the people, including the aged and sick.

A public crier was elected. His duties were to broadcast the rules, orders, and recommendations of the council to the people. The rules of the hunt were standard and universally understood. Although they were never written out, these "Laws of the Prairie and Hunting" were an institutionalized part of Métis life. These laws defined the crimes and laid out standard punishment for those crimes. These laws contained such orders as "No person or party to run buffalo before the general order was given," or "Every lieutenant with his men, patrol the camp and keep guard." Although crimes such as theft were exceedingly rare, at times they did occur. The Laws of the prairies dictated that "any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, is to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier is to call out his name three times, adding the word thief each time."

The buffalo hunt was a magnificent spectacle to behold, and when the buffalo were sighted, the crier rode through the camp mobilizing the hunters. The captains and lieutenants barked

their commands as the hunting party moved out towards the herd. Mortally wounded animals plunged into the dust as horses and riders and thousands of buffalo streamed over and around them. When the signal was given to stop, the hunters returned to their kills, which were already being processed by the women and children. Few people today realize the magnitude of the buffalo hunts of the past and the need to include everyone.

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