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The Origins, Organization and Role of the Bison Hunt in the Red River Valley

Peter Walker

Throughout the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth, the Canadian Northwest was progressively opened up by traders in search of furs — and better furs. The length of journey that could be undertaken, however, was governed to a certain extent by the amount of provisions that could be carried in the canoes or obtained in trade en route.

In 1778, Peter Pond, a trader and explorer from New England, journeyed north on a journey of identification, and came into contact with the Chipewyan Indians, from whom he learned the secrets of pemican (often 1930:387, footnote). Pemmican is made from meat that has been dried and beaver and then mixed with berries and tallow (or fat). This produces a long-lasting food that is transported food, well suited to the needs of the fur traders. When caches of tallow could be stocked, making it possible for the canoe to travel well into the interior without the worry of food procurement (Valley 1956:38).

Pemmican and pemican made sandy, easy to carry, and was used by the Athabaskan Indians. Meat was an important staple in the diet of the Athabaskan. The bison (or buffalo) meat was the prime staple of the Athabaskan diet. Buffalo were plentiful on the plains and prairies and were within easy reach of the fur-trading posts at Red River and along the Saskatchewan. In a letter to Lord Selkirk in 1811, Miller Macdonell says that there could be no apprehension of any want of buffalo meat — “from the vast abundance of the country” (Bourne 1931:368).

Much of the following information on fur trading posts and forts is taken from Kenneth Voelchel’s “Historic Parks and Trading Posts, 1930.” There were many forts built around the area of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. The earliest were probably those of La Verendrye and his sons. These include Fort Rouge and Fort Nauvoo, built in 1784, and Fort La Reine in 1786. The first English fort to be built on the Red River was Pembina’s Fort, Metis Creek, 1774. The main function of these forts and other early forts was to collect the furs from the fur traders. MacLeod and Norton have these comments to say on the Red River area:

Lower Red River had never been a rich fur region, and its course from south to north had made it of much use to the westward-moving traders. The Upper Red River, curving as it did from north to east, with the wooded Duck and Riding Mountains to the north and the buffalo plains and the timbered plains of Turtle Mountain to the south, drained a country rich in furs. But all the Red River country was now an inferior fur district. Its fur-bearers had been drained from the 1860’s when the French traders established themselves on Lake Superior and the English on Hudson Bay. Twice its beaver had been cleaned out, once by the French under La Verendrye and once by the first North West Traders in the 1770’s and 1780’s (MacLeod & Norton 1963:12).

So it would seem that by 1750 the importance of the area as a fur-bearing region had declined somewhat. Despite this, many new posts were being built all through the region from about 1750 on, as a glance through Voelchel’s list will show. At Pembina, for example, the Hudson’s Bay Company built a post in 1769, the North West Company built posts in 1792 and 1801, and the X.Y. Company built there in 1801. The North West Company’s Fort on the Assiniboine, the chief post for trading with the Mandan, dates from 1784. By 1794 the Hudson’s Bay Company had built Brandon House. In June, 1795, John Stuart, the master of Brandon House, wrote in his journal that there were at least forty men at different North West Company posts along the Assiniboine (SHE, VAM, 899/11, 1-44). Referring to the North West Company fort of Montana, he said, “The horses roamed around it; the fort was on a high bank of the river, overlooking the Assiniboine country” (Voelchel 1931:119).

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that it was as much for the trade in pemican as in fur that these and many other posts were established along the Red and Assiniboine rivers:

... as the country declined in importance as a fur region, it became more and more necessary to the trade as a source of provisions. It was the buffalo that replaced the old forests that made the Red River country significant to the fur traders. (MacLeod & Norton 1963:13).

At first, buffalo meat was traded from the local Indians, but by 1800 the half-breeds’ westing of the men of the fur trade and Indian women, commonly known as the Metis, had begun to move into the Red River area, seeking a livelihood. Many of the traders took Indian wives and raised large families. Not all of these people could find work in the fur trade, so many of them moved to the prairies to hunt or, less frequently, to farm. In time these Metis became the hunters for the trade.

As long as the buffalo came in close to the Red River Settlement, individuals could hunt independently. As the herds were driven further away it became necessary for the hunt to take on the form of a group activity. In 1820, the first organized buffalo-hunting expedition on a grand scale was made ... in which 340 carts proceeded to the range” (Bourne 1931:365). From the time of this first big hunt of 1820 until about 1875, buffalo hunts were organized from the Red River Settlement virtually yearly, in June and September:

... the proceeds of the first are always sold off to supply their wants in clothing and other
necessities for the year, but the second furnishes their winter stock of food (Ross 1856:98).

The organization of the hunt developed along quite rigid lines, following the same procedure year after year. As a rule the hunters came from the three main centers of Pembina, St. Boniface and White Horse Plain (Macleod & Morton 1963:109). A point of rendezvous was arranged often to the west of Pembina, and all the hunters, with their families and their carts, made their way to a base camp set up there (Robinson 1879:14). So many people came that it was often a matter of days before everyone was assembled. In the June hunt of 1840 a total of 1500 people took part (Ross 1856:211).

In order to govern and regulate the hunt a series of officers were elected by the men of the camp. The first to be elected was the hunt chief, whose role was to see that the laws of the hunt were enforced and to settle all disputes. Ten or twelve councillors were elected, "... who, with the chief, make the laws, decide the direction of travel, and advise the executive in all matters of doubtful propriety" (Robinson 1879:149). Four captains were chosen, each to command a number of 'soldiers' who were to be the police of the hunt (Robinson 1879:169).

Before the hunt moved off from its base camp, these elected officers held a council to lay down the laws of the hunt. The laws or rules may have varied slightly from year to year, but the gist was usually the same. The rules for the June hunt of 1840 were as follows:

1. No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath day.
2. No party to fork off, lag behind, or go before, without permission.
3. No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.
4. Every captain with his men, in turn, to patrol the camp, and keep guard.
5. For the first trespass against these laws, the offender to have his saddle and bridle cut up.
6. For the second offence, the boot to be taken off the offender’s back, and he be cut up.
7. For the third offence, the offender to be flogged.
8. Any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinecure, to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the colonel to call out his or her name three times, adding the word "Thief" each time (Ross 1856:205).

These rules were designed to keep the people in order and especially to discourage individuals from disturbing the buffalo herds at the cost of the main hunt.

When all the formalities had been disposed of, the camp broke up and the great caravan of carts and horses set off in search of the herds of buffalo. In 1840 the buffalo were sighted after a journey of two hundred and fifty miles, nineteen days after leaving the settlement (Ross 1856:259). The following day, four hundred hunters lined up, waiting for the signal to start. When the signal was given the men rushed into the herd, shooting buffalos right and left. On this one day at least 1275 buffalos were killed (Ross 1856:237).

Once the hunt was underway, the riders kept moving, leading his gun as he went. Muzzle-loading smooth-bore guns were used and each rider stopped his shot in his mouth (Robinson 1879:184). After the run, the riders went back to identify the animals that each had shot. "Thus is accomplished by means of marked bullets, the locality in which the buffalo lies - for which the hunter always keeps a sharp lookout - and the spot where the bullet entered" (Robinson 1879:162).

The hunt would attempt to follow the herd, killing animals until all carts were fully loaded with meat, at which time the hunt would end and the caravan would head for home. In 1840 the people returned to the settlement in mid-August. The hunt had taken two months and two days (Ross 1855:272).

This was the description of the organization of the Red River hunt. What of the origin of this organization? In the book, "The Hon. Grant of Grouard's" Macleod and Morton state that Grant was most often the chief or captain of the hunt (1963:110). They go on to add that Grant in fact designed the whole format of the hunt.

The regularity of the procedure in the annual election of captain and council, the laws governing the hunt, the strict discipline of the march and the run, all these bear the impress of a single personality and a directing mind. That mind must have been Grant's. No one else among his people had the education, the experience, and the prestige to know how to shape Indian custom and tradition into a coherent and intelligent mode of government and management. In particular, no one else could have been acceptable from the first to the parties from St. Boniface and Pembina as well as to the hunters of White Horse Plain (Macleod & Morton 1963:113).

This view seems at the heart to be extremely ethnocentric. Before the White Man, and therefore by extension the Metis, ever set foot on the plains, the Indians of that region hunted with great discipline "... preserving (the buffalo) for the use of the tribe at large, instead of allowing one or two uncontrollable individuals to siphon them at their pleasure" (Ross 1851:375).
The Ojibwa Indians were governed by a tribal council. Each year the council would decide the time of the communal hunt and who would lead it. They also appointed 'soldiers' to police it (Oliver 1962:42). Among the Mandan, the leader of the hunt was selected in council and his appointment expired at the end of the hunt (Oliver 1964:42). It seems, too, that the idea of some kind of law enforcement was well known. "All true Plain tribes except one...had police societies" (Oliver 1962:49).

Practically all plains tribes hunted buffalo. Throughout most of the year hunting was carried out by small bands or single families. In the case of most plains people, however, many bands, or even the whole tribe, came together in the summer, when a communal hunt took place.

Many people were together in one place, and there were people who owed allegiance to different bands. There were important ceremonies to be performed. And, above all, there was the communal buffalo hunt to be undertaken. Order was necessary in the tribal encampment, to prevent disputes. Strict discipline was necessary on the hunt, because individual hunting was inefficient. (A single hunter who jumped the gun might get a few buffalo for himself, but he would alone and scatter the herd in such a way that communal hunting techniques were not effective.) It was at this time that the police societies always functioned. Over and over again the point is made that the most important job the police societies had was in policing the communal hunts (Oliver 1962:62).

It seems that most of the plains held only one communal hunt each year, while the Sioux of the Red River Settlement held two. But even this has an Indian precedent. "The farming tribes carried out hunts in summer after the spring planting and another hunt in late fall into winter after the harvest" (Arthur 1957:47).

All this suggests that Gough's Grant did not design the organization of the buffalo hunt. However, he may well have possessed the knowledge of the design on to the Metis. Grant was born and trained in Port Treatnante, Saskatchewan (MacLeod & Morton 1963:22). Port Treatnante, later called Port Alexandra, was situated close to the Assiniboine River in section 27, township 32, range 3 west (Toschik 1920:32). As a boy living in this area, he would most certainly have come into contact with Assiniboine and Plains Cree Indians, both of whom were buffalo hunters. Grant would undoubtedly have been aware of the hunting techniques of these people; knowledge that he could put to good use later at Red River.

There is one final place of evidence to suggest that the buffalo hunt had traditional Indian origins. When they started out for the hunt from their homes in St. Boniface, White Horse Plains and Pembina, the Metis followed certain old, well-established trails. In the fall of 1902 Alexander Henry the Younger built Fort Pembina on the ancient Indian trail that led from Pembina to Calf Mountain, "the common route by which the Assiniboine Indians pass over the mountains to hunt bear and buffalo on the E. side" (Coxes 1857:119). La Verendrye followed an established trail in 1738 when he visited the Mandan. It seems that this trail also went via Calf Mountain. MacLeod and Morton mention a trail called the "Passage" that headed south west from a point eleven miles west of the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (1963:110). This trail is also called the Headingley Trail, and is well marked on the township diagrams of the areas through which it passes. To name a specific one, on the Plan of Township 3 Range 6 West of First Meridian, surveyed by J.J. Bouchette in 1872, the "Highway from Headingley to West Boundary of Province" is marked. Since this pre-dates any settlement in this area, the highway would most likely be a cart trail. More to the point, it closely follows the route of an older trail marked on the map as "Hunters Trail". The point where the trail runs off the map to the south-west is just three miles from Calf Mountain.

It would seem, then, that the hunting trails followed by the Metis were old, established Indian trails. Further, they seem to converge on the area of Calf Mountain, possibly the place of encampment before the start of the hunt.

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The following is a corrected version of Table 4 in "Lithic Analysis of Artifacts Recovered from KMg-2, The Childe Lake Site, Duck Mountain Provincial Park, Manitoba", by Michael Zwyna, Manitoba Archaeological Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 33-51:

### TABLE 4
Distribution of Artifacts Analyzed in this Report
According to Classification Section
(KMg-2-1, -2, -3, -4, -5) n=324

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<th>-3</th>
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