

Henry Hind here again. 1860. As I said, I was sent to assess prairie soils. But I found the immensity of the land and the ruggedness of the people, to be highly distracting. In particular, I found prairie buffalo too interesting to ignore. While we Easterners talk about opening up the west for immigration, Metis hunters remain focused on hunting buffalo, working the prairie in a most intensive way. The idea that the prairie must be opened, seems peculiar to me now.

Red River Metis hunters know two great herds of buffalo. These herds and others further south, have circled the prairies for millennia, and are reluctant to deviate.

One herd circles between the Dakotas and Assiniboine River. The other circles further west, coming north as far as Saskatchewan River. We asked hunters how they find a herd on this vast expanse. We're advised to lay an ear into a badger hole and thereby know if they're moving anywhere within 20 miles. So great is the mass of rumbling hooves.

The Eastern herd moves from Turtle Mountain towards Devil's Lake and then on to the Red River. They circle west to the Missouri River and turn north in June to graze their way to the Souris and begin the circle again, choosing savannas with good grass; avoiding areas that have been recently burnt. They then settle between Turtle Mountain and Souris River for the winter.

Have you curled up beneath a buffalo robe? If you have, it was beneath a thick-haired robe, harvested in winter. There's high demand for winter hides out east, popular as sleigh blankets. Metis hunters have taken advantage by initiating a winter hunt. They set up temporary villages with log shelters wherever they find the buffalo,

at the base of Turtle Mountain, or around Whitewater Marsh or beside Chain Lakes.

The odd thing about buffalo is that when a stealthy hunter approaches by using snowshoes and a buffalo cloak, and manages to shoot one, a group of buffalo will surround the dead one, creating an opportunity to kill two, three or even four.

As in summer hunts, the meat is prepared for pemmican. But the carts that head back to Fort Garry in Spring, loaded with winter hides, carry the most valuable load of all.

You may wonder why these winter villages are not returned to every year. True, the buffalo don't settle in the same place every winter, but even if they did, the Dakota's habit is to burn buildings abandoned in the Spring.

There's a battle raging over the remaining buffalo. The air is tense with it. And yet, farmers are on their way. The march of history is a thunderous force. I'll keep my ear to a badger hole for sure! But I'll be close to home as I do.

Winter Hunt is based on a story in Vantage Points 1.

See ya' later!

David Neufeld