

The Buffalo

by

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The pioneers of Kansas, particularly a number who settled on the frontier—along the upper valleys of the Smoky Hill, Republican, Solomon and Saline rivers—practically owed their lives to the existence of the buffalo. For years in the '60's a goodly portion of the meat consumed by those early settlers was cut from the carcass of the noble, shaggy animal which so long existed as monarch of the plains. Thousands of people who at an early day went overland to Utah, Oregon and California drew their supply of meat from the buffalo. Where this life-preserver was found, it was known that, by following their paths, near by water would be found. The principal article of fuel found on the frontier for cooking the meat of the buffalo was the dried excrement of the animal, known in early Kansas and Nebraska parlance as "buffalo-chips." The buffalo was one of the noblest of all animals. It seemed indispensable. It furnished man with an abundance of the most wholesome meat; the hide was made into shoes and garments worn during the day, and it made a comfortable bed and supplied warm covering in or out of doors at night.

The building of the Pacific railroad was made possible at so early a day simply because the buffalo existed. From the mighty herds the vast army of railroad builders drew their daily supply of fresh meat, and thousands of the animals were annually slaughtered for food while pushing to completion, in the '60's, the great transcontinental line. For a few years in the '70's the railways did an enormous business carrying East train loads of hides and buffalo bones, these for a number of years being the principal articles of commerce gathered from the plains. For years the great West resembled a vast charnel-house. Losing their crops, the pioneer settlers gathered up the bleached bones that covered the land, and they were shipped to the carbon works in the East, from the sale of which enough was realized to enable them to pull through another season

The buffalo, in color, is brown, but the shade varies as the seasons advance. It was in every respect a peculiar animal, unlike any other. It was impossible, before its extermination, to turn a herd from its course. After a few years of cruel, relentless war upon the shaggy animals, the few that remained became extremely wild. A characteristic of the animal is that it never trots, but walks or gallops, and it usually travels against the wind. Its sense of smell is so keen that it can scent a foe two miles distant to the windward.

The last herd of buffalo I ever saw in the wild, native state was in the fall of 1870. It was along the Kansas Pacific railroad, near the head waters of the Smoky Hill river. The railroad had just been built, and the animals seemed terribly frightened at the cars. In their mad race westward along the railroad, they actually kept up with the passenger-train, which was moving along from fifteen to eighteen miles an hour. The race became exciting, and all the passengers--many of whom had never before seen a buffalo--held their breath in suspense. It was noticed that the animals never changed their course, but kept steadily coming nearer the train, apparently determined to cross the track at a curve a short distance beyond. Not caring for a collision which might possibly derail the train, the engineer gave up the race and whistled "down brakes," stopping with-



This picture from Frank Leslie's **Illustrated Newspaper**, June 3, 1871, illustrates the reality of both the railroad's "problem" with the thundering herds and the excited excursion trains, as described in accompanying articles.

in a few rods of the animals to let them cross. A parting salute was given by some of the passengers, who emptied the chambers of their six-shooters among the beasts, but which they did not appear to mind any more than a blast from a toy pop-gun

The best meat we used to get on the frontier in the early days was buffalo. The markets at Atchison, Leavenworth, Topeka and a number of other Kansas towns, as early as 1857 and for some years following, were often supplied with buffalo meat, brought in from central Kansas. No beef, it was said, could excel, even if it could equal, that of the buffalo;

especially the hump upon the shoulders, which was invariably spoken of as a "choice morsel." Rich, juicy buffalo steaks and superb roasts were as common in the '60's on the plains as were other fresh meats in the best of well-regulated city markets.

The tongues, when boiled, were exceedingly rich and tender, and were eagerly sought after—almost invariably bringing good prices Thousands of the tongues were dried and shipped east to the New York and Boston markets, where they were in great demand, and brought big prices.