

# General Sheridan Hunts the Buffalo

by

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To relieve the monotony of inactivity the Commanding General, much to the pleasure of a number of the officers of the staff and garrison at Fort Hays, proposed a "genuine" buffalo hunt. The diversion was also in part out of compliment to Captain Merryman, of the U.S. revenue cutter M'Culloch, then on a visit to headquarters. A bright day in October was fixed for the sport. Accordingly at an early hour the horses were sent to the railroad and put on the cars. Leaving Hays City we ran up the track, a distance of thirty miles. Here, by means of a gangplank, the horses were led out of the cars and saddled by the orderlies. Leaving the guard the General had brought with him to protect the train, we mounted and "lit out," as rapid locomotion is called in that locality. Each person wore a brace of pistols for close work, and carried a breech-loading rifle to use at greater distance.

After a lively gallop of several miles, passing within the cordon of watchful sentinels, always found on the outskirts, we struck a herd numbering several thousand animals. Our approach had already been signalled and the herd was moving off at a rapid pace. There was no time to lose. Each one of the party singled out his animal, and putting spurs to his horse dashed after, striving to get abreast his game at a distance of a few paces, in order to deliver his fire. The General led off in the charge followed by Merryman, who, accustomed to salt water navigation, swayed from side to side. He, however, maintained a vigorous hold upon the pommel of the saddle, bounded into the air and returned emphatically, but not always gracefully, into his saddle with every leap of his horse. The General, after considerable manoeuvring, managed to separate a fine cow from her companions. The chase was quite spirited for several hundred yards, but a well directed shot under the shoulder, which very summarily suspended the powers of locomotion on the part of the buffalo, put a termination to the race. Several of the party soon became busily engaged on their own account in the exciting sport. One young bull, of irate temper, finding himself selected as a target, undertook to show fight and turned upon his pursuer. For some minutes the characters were reversed, and, judging from appearances, it might have been supposed that the

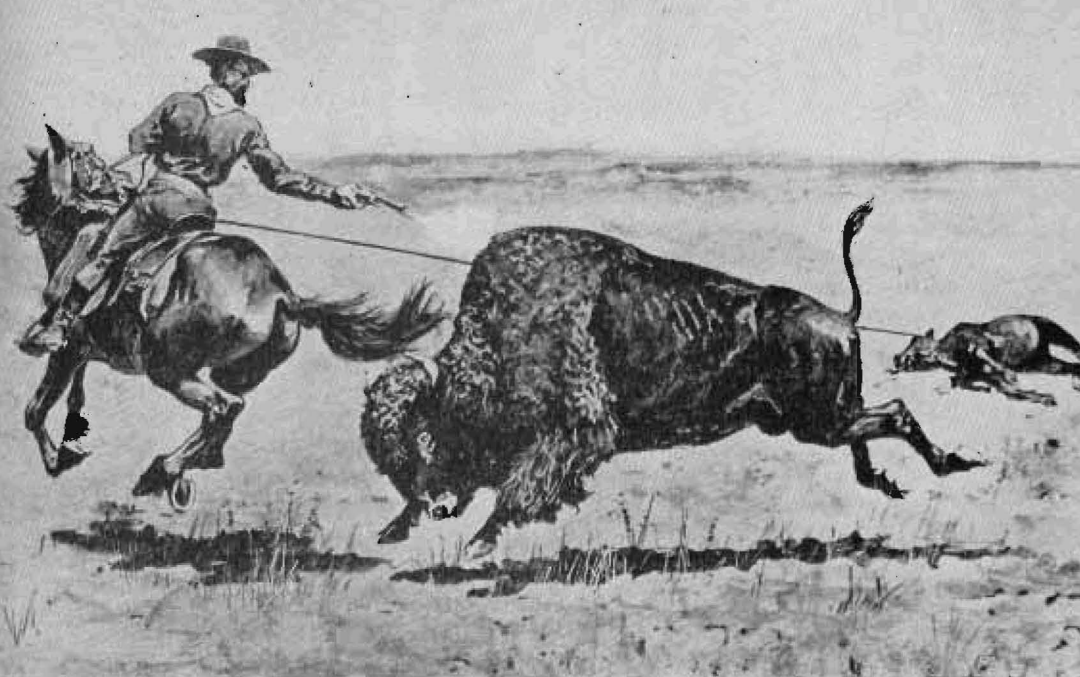
buffalo was the hunter. In the course of an hour five animals were killed. Most of the horses, however, were perfectly "green," and consequently no use whatever, except to follow, giving the rider an opportunity to witness the sport without participating in it.

There is something majestic and formidable in the appearance of a buffalo. It is therefore not surprising that but few horses will readily approach sufficiently near to enable the hunter to make a close shot. Some horses rebel, notwithstanding every effort to allay their alarm. Others, by a proper course of training, carry their riders, without any direction, into just the position desirable. Such an animal is a treasure in the esteem of a plainsman. He talks about his "buffalo horse" with more pride than he would of himself, had he accomplished a feat so wonderful. It was interesting to watch the movements of the trained horse. He approached the buffalo rapidly but cautiously. His eyes were steadily fixed upon the animal and watched every motion. Should the buffalo expedite his pace, the horse did likewise, regulating his increased rate of speed so as to get alongside without unnecessarily alarming the animal. As the horse came abreast, the buffalo naturally swayed his course away to the right or left. This was the dangerous part of the chase. Should the buffalo after moving away, the horse following, turn suddenly, a collision would be almost certain. This the horse seemed to know so perfectly that he changed direction on a long turn. After firing, should the animal fall, the horse kept up his speed, described a circle bringing him back to the carcass of the dead or wounded buffalo.

Timid horses and awkward riders run great risks of their lives by not knowing how to avoid any hostile demonstrations on the part of the buffalo. The latter has the advantage, and by not keeping a close watch, fatal results are sure to occur. An old hunter, mounted on a "buffalo horse," in every sense of the term, dashing fearlessly across the plain in pursuit of this truly magnificent game, presents a picture the very culmination of manly sport.

During our own attempts to make a fair show of knowledge of the subject, there were several very narrow escapes as regarded personal safety. Two of our party being in pursuit of the same animal, there was quite a competition as to who would get the first shot. The rider in the rear, in the excitement had his pistol go off out of time. The ball passed within a very few inches of the front rider's head. Both were alarmed, and the race terminated by the one apologizing, and the other feeling around to see whether he had been hurt.

While our own sport was going on, two Mexicans with us, were to be seen in the very midst of the herd following up the younger animals. Each rider had his lariat, holding the coil in one hand and with the other swinging the loop above his head in order to get the proper momentum.



A copy of a Frederick Remington picture, the above shows something of the spirit of the enraged mother pursuing the hunter who has roped her calf.

It was short work. At the first attempt, each man had his noose over the head of a fine yearling. The horses gradually slackened their gait, while the terrified buffaloes made every effort to escape. One of the lariats, unfortunately, parted and off went the animal with it dangling at his heels. The other calf was secured and sent to the train.

After several hours occupied in the exciting amusement of the chase, we returned to the cars. The horses, much blown, were unsaddled and put aboard. A party of soldiers were sent out to bring in the meat.

On our homeward journey a fine herd of antelopes was discovered ahead, close to the track. By a little skillful calculation of time, distance, and velocity, the engineer brought us within three hundred yards. A perfect fusillade was opened out of the car windows, during which one of the beautiful little animals was seen to fall. The train stopped and the "meat" was brought in. This terminated the day's sport. At nine o'clock in the evening we reached Fort Hays.

I may, in this connection, make a few passing notes upon the resorts and habits of the American bison or buffalo, as he is popularly designated. With the savage nomad, he constitutes the actual and aboriginal occupant of the plains. The movements of the immense herds of buffaloes regulate the locations of the savage tribes. They constitute the commissariat of the Indian, and govern frequently his ability for war or control his desire for peace. Prior to the opening of the country to the settler, the buffalo roamed over the entire territory from the Missouri river to the Rocky mountains,

and from the plains of western Texas to the head-waters of the Missouri in the north. To-day the buffalo is rarely seen south of the Red river, or within two hundred miles of the Missouri, at Kansas City. In numbers he is evidently rapidly diminishing, though the countless herds found during the summer along the railroads, would seem to indicate that the race is far from running out.

The buffalo is migratory in his habits and subject to two influences in his movements, the seasons, and the abundance or scarcity of pasturage. The migrations of the herds appear to be simultaneous. I have seen herd after herd stretching over a distance of eighty miles, all tending in the same direction. During the early spring months they are generally to be found in the regions south of the Canadian, as far as the Red. Here the winters are short and the grass shoots early. As the pasturage makes its appearance towards the north, the herds follow, moving across the Cimmaron, the Arkansas, the Smoky Hill, and Republican, and beyond the Platte. Cases frequently occur where small herds becoming detached from the main bodies, and particularly the old bulls and cows unable to travel, remain north of the Platte, and manage to eke out an existence through the coldest winters. Other small herds are found in different localities far south during the summer. These exceptions, to the general rule of their habits, are always the result of causes, such as inability to follow the main herd, or being detached and driven back.

In all his habits the buffalo displays an instinctive sense of organization and discipline which alone could accomplish the wise provisions of nature in subsisting such enormous masses of animal life. Not only does the great herd, as a mass, preserve a remarkable concert of action "on the move," but it is subdivided into smaller herds, which seem to be composed of animals having peculiar affinities. These small herds have each their leader, always a fine young or middle-aged bull, whose fighting qualities had won for him the ascendancy over all other male competitors. In the black mass presented by the great herd a space, sometimes as limited as a hundred yards, can always be detected between the sub-divisions. Each herd always preserves its relative position to the others, and, in case of alarm, takes flight in a single mass. It also preserves the same relation in galloping to water.

As a precaution against surprise, each herd has its videttes, through which the alarm is given upon the appearance of danger. Approaching a herd, groups of buffaloes in fours and fives are first seen. These, taking the alarm, gallop towards the common centre. The ever-watchful and suspicious young males immediately on the outer edge of the herd receive the movements of the videttes as warnings. They sniff the air, and with piercing vision scan the plain. If the cause of alarm be discovered, the herd-leader, heading the way, sets out, followed by the cows and calves,

while the males form a sort of rear guard and flankers. For the sake of protection, the females and the young occupy the centre of the herd. By a wise instinct, the young are thus secured from the ravenous wolf, and the natural timidity of the cow is guarded against sudden or unnecessary alarm.

The evening is the usual time for the herds to set out for water. When moving for this purpose, they may be seen in single-file, following their leaders, traveling at an ambling gait. Frequently they travel eight or ten miles to the nearest stream or pond. The passage of buffalo in this way over the same ground soon marks out a well-beaten track, resembling a foot-path, and known to hunters as the "buffalo trail." On the banks of the streams running through the buffalo country these trails may be seen converging from all direction, some faintly marked, while some are worn



Printed above is a copy of a sketch by Felix Dorley which was published originally in **Graham's Magazine**. The date is unknown. The Indian, perhaps essentially wiser than the white man, killed only as he had need.

eight and ten inches in depth. These trails not only follow the most direct course to a given point, but always lead to water or a water-course. The traveler on the plains is frequently obliged to take to the trail of the buffalo in order to reach water. In many places the "buffalo wallow" furnishes a supply of stagnant water which, though extremely unpalatable, has often saved life. The buffalo wallow is a circular, dish-shaped, hole in the earth, about twelve feet in diameter and a foot deep at its greatest con-

cavity. During the warm season, immense clouds of dust are to be seen rising over a herd quietly grazing. Like other animals of his species, the buffalo frequently amuses himself by wallowing in the fine sand or plowing up the earth with his horns. The surface once broken, the place becomes a common resort, until the wallow assumes the shape above described. In the wet season, the rain fills up the wallow, and, unless consumed, standing water is to be found there far into summer.

Among the young buffalo bulls there seems to be a remarkable aspiration to secure the leadership of the herd. This question of rank is annually settled by a test of strength. Certain ambitious males set themselves up as competitors. The first opportunity that offers is accepted. The contests are stubborn and severe—frequently fatal. If the old leader gets the upper hand, he is doubly a hero, and his claims to pre-eminence are greater than ever. Next in rank to the herd-leader are a number of young buffalo, courtiers and gallants, who have free range of the herd so long as they do not come in contact with the leader, or trespass upon his privileges. Between the young and the old males there is an inveterate hostility. As the young grow in ability to cope with the fathers of the herd, a regular conflict takes place. If it terminates in favor of the former, the old buffaloes are unceremoniously driven out. Thus banished from their associations when strong and active, the old animals form a sort of hermit order on the outskirts of the herds, where they constitute the outer guard. These competitive encounters are constantly taking place. As one generation of males succeeds another, those driven out can never return, but live an exiled existence until age, the hunter's bullet, disease, or the ravenous wolf, finishes their days.

The females display, most remarkably, the attachments of maternity. In one instance, I remember, our party shot and badly wounded a fine calf about six months old. As the calf fell, the mother turned and looked upon it with an expression of absolute grief. Her offspring made repeated efforts to rise, but without avail. The mother, in perfect despair, ran around her young, uttering low moans. As we approached, the mother's nature was entirely changed. She stamped upon the ground as if to warn us to "keep off." Although she made no direct attack, she manifested a disposition to defend her young, which was only exceeded by the shouts and firing, which seemed to terrify her. To put the calf out of its suffering and relieve the distress of the mother, and insure our own safety, both animals were dispatched.

Always in the vicinity of the buffalo herd the hunter encounters that beautiful little animal, the antelope. Shy and timid, with an acute scent and far-reaching vision, it is difficult of approach. An old animal is killed now and then by a long-range rifle. Like other timid animals, the antelope has a remarkable development of that too-often fatal instinct, curiosity.

By taking advantage of this failing, the experienced hunter succeeds in taking the game. The usual means resorted to is "still hunting." A red flannel flag, fastened to a short stick, is posted in a conspicuous place. The hunter then secretes himself and waits for an opportunity. This is always a slow process; but, with a proper degree of patience, if anywhere in the vicinity of antelopes so that the flag can be seen, he is sure "to bring a haul."

The wolves and the coyotes are the inveterate enemies of the antelope, and continually waylay its path. The fleetness of the animal, however, is its complete protection until weakened by age, or probably, it has been crippled. In times of danger, if possible, the antelope takes refuge within the lines of the nearest herd of buffaloes. Its excessive fright at these times often causes whole herds of the mighty beasts to take to their heels as if a battalion of hunters were on their tracks.

Probably one of the most perfect pictures of desertion and despair is the aged and enfeebled buffalo. Driven first from the herd as if it were a mortal offense to live beyond a certain period of summers, or his inability to follow its movements, he is left alone to wander feebly about, without companions, and an object of patient, sometimes decidedly impatient, watchfulness on the part of the wolf. When the buffalo has arrived at such an advanced age, he will be found near a constant stream where grass grows in abundance. Isolated, shy in his movements, and alarmed at the slightest indications of danger, he seems to lose his customary boldness, and becomes an easily terrified and suspicious animal. He loses his vigorous appearance, and literally becomes worn down and decrepit. The timidity of age grows upon him, and the solemn stillness and solitude which surrounds him is calculated to increase rather than diminish this instinctive terror. Few of these superannuated specimens come to a natural end. The starving wolf and his diminutive companion the coyote, are ready to take advantage of the first favorable opportunity of hastening the demise of the object of their solicitude and observation. Under the goading impulse of hunger, the wolf does not hesitate to attack any buffalo who may have strayed from the herd. As if tired of waiting for the natural course of expiring fires of nature, his wolfship, with a few comrades, begins a regular series of battles until his victim is overpowered.

On one occasion while present with a small detachment of scouts, we suddenly drew to the summit of a "divide." In the valley below an old buffalo, and a pack of seven large gray wolves, were evidently in the act of engaging in a mortal fray. The old buffalo, as if realizing his situation, stood with his head down and confronting the wolves. At times he threw his head up and down, dropped out his blackened tongue, and constantly uttered a low hoarse roar. We determined to witness the conflict, which was evidently at hand. We halted and lariatd our animals. The buffalo.

so much engrossed in his own safety, failed to discover our presence, though not more than several hundred yards off. The wolves saw us. This only sharpened their appetite, and seemed to hasten their desire to secure the feast which they had before them. The wolves were seated upon their haunches and formed a sort of semi-circle in front of the buffalo. They resembled so many wise men in council. The buffalo stood a few paces off, very careful to keep his mopy head towards his starving tormentors, and his hindquarters in an opposite direction, free from any demonstration in the rear. By way of response to the fierce guttural effusions of the buffalo, the wolves at times set up a mournful chorus. No sooner did the wolves see us than they slyly deployed for action. Finding his rear thus in danger, the buffalo made a dive at the nearest wolf, tumbling him over and over. During this movement, however, the rest of the pack pounced upon the hind legs of the buffalo, snarling and snapping, and tearing at his hams. The object, evidently, was to hamstring their antagonist. These attacks in the rear diverted the attention of the buffalo from the hapless victim of his first charge. The animal turned to attack in the opposite direction, but his tormentors were once more at his vulnerable point.

The contest after these opening performances grew lively and exciting. The buffalo evidently fully appreciated the situation, and the wolves were not to be robbed of their meal. The hind-quarters of the buffalo streamed with blood, and the animal showed signs of exhaustion. He did not dare to lie down for that would be fatal. The wolves had three of their number *hors du combat*. The noise of the contest had attracted quite an audience of coyotes, and a few interloper wolves, sitting at a distance, licking their chops, and impatiently awaiting the issue, evidently expecting an invitation to participate in the feast. The buffalo made several efforts at flight, but soon found that was a useless manoeuvre. The battle test had been going on more than an hour, and having no more time to devote to that sort of recreation, a well directed volley laid out several of their wolfish excellencies. The buffalo did not stop to thank us for our timely assistance, but took the first moment of relief to hobble off. The animal was evidently badly injured, and doubtless our interference was merely prolonging the burden of life, now doubly an encumbrance . . . .

The construction of railroads has developed a new and extensive field for pleasure seekers. The facilities of communication now opened with that strange and remote section, the plains, and, at the same time, the opportunity afforded of seeing the buffalo, that animal above all others associated from our earliest years with everything wild and daring, now invites visitors from all parts of the country. From the cities of Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and other less important points during the autumn of 1868, excursions were made up at low rates of fare.



The following announcement of an excursion I found at one of the railroad stations. I give a copy of it as one of the peculiar and progressive innovations made by the railways.

RAILWAY EXCURSION  
and  
BUFFALO HUNT.

An excursion train will leave Leavenworth, at 8 a.m. and Lawrence, at 10 a.m. for

SHERIDAN,

On Tuesday, October 27, 1868, and return on Friday.

This train will stop at the principal stations both going and returning.

Ample time will be had for a grand Buffalo

HUNT ON THE PLAINS.

Buffaloes are so numerous along the road that they are shot from the cars nearly every day. On our last excursion our party killed twenty buffaloes in a hunt of six hours.

All passengers can have refreshments on the cars at reasonable prices.

Tickets of round trip from Leavenworth, \$10.00.

The inducements, at these rates, to any one anxious to visit the plains, and see a live buffalo, and perhaps a "live injun," not so acceptable at that time, were certainly very tempting, as the full expense of the above trip, at the regular rate of fare, would not have been short of seventy dollars. A quarter of a century hence, the buffalo and the Indian will have entirely disappeared from the line of the railways. The few that still survive will have then been driven to the most remote, inaccessible, and uninhabitable sections, if not entirely exterminated.

## NOTES

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1. **State of Kansas: Session Laws, 1955** (Topeka: Ferd Volland, State Printer, June 30, 1955), p. 695.
2. **Lyons Daily News**, August 17, 1946.
3. **The Overland Stage to California** (Topeka: W. Y. Morgan, 1901), pp. 28-31.
4. **Sheridan's Troopers on the Border** (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remesen, & Heffinger, 1870), pp. 65-76.

Editor's note: In cases where it is unfeasible to compare a reprinted text with the original version of a selection used in the *Heritage of Kansas*, such emendations and alterations as seem appropriate are made by the editor. This is necessary only infrequently, and every effort is made to reproduce accurately the author's original text.

Vol. 1, No. 1, *Men Against The Frontier*, February, 1957:

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William Allen White, "The Story of Aqua Pura."

Vol. 1, No. 2, *The Red Man Lives*, May, 1957:

Neil Byer, "The Red Man Lives."  
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Blood."  
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Vol. 1, No. 3, *Buffalo: Lord of the Plains*, August, 1957:

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De B. R. Keim, "General Sheridan Hunts the Buffalo."