

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BUFFALO HERDS

By  
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There is no doubt that the introduction of the repeating rifle and the resultant slaughter of the buffalo for their hides alone would have extinguished the herds, eventually--great though their number.

There was another cause, however, for the rapid disappearance of the untold numbers that roamed the prairies and that was--Starvation. I believe I am safe in saying that more buffalo died from this cause than from the greed of man in killing them for what they could get for their hides.

The same cause--the greediness of man--is in force today, exhausting our timber resources by the wasteful carelessness of man and his desire for immediate gain--destruction by fire, followed by drought.

The summer of 1880 was dry--in the autumn, fire raged through the wooded and timber country laying bare large stretches of country, not only of timber but also of grass. The prairie grass dried out early that season. When winter came very little snow fell. The immense herds of buffalo drifted North into the wooded lands, looking for feed--finding little, if any. Hundreds died in the wood lands.

Early in the Spring of 1881--like prodigal sons--they turned homeward to their natural feeding grounds--the prairies, instinct no doubt

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leading them. While this movement was under way--still within the wooded area, many young heifers dropped out and died--too weak to bear their first born calves--naturally, the calves did not survive.

The prairie Indians had the habit of burning the grass in the early Spring--thinking that by doing so the green grass would show up earlier (which it naturally did) and herds of buffalo would be attracted to the burnt off areas. I know that they--the Indians--were fully aware of the fact that the early green grass was not good food as it scoured the animals who ate nothing else. Nature in her wisdom demands a mixture of old grass with the new.

The great herds, struggling to reach fresh pasture--weakened by a winter of near starvation, were greatly reduced in numbers--those that survived and reached the plains hungrily devoured the new grass, which instead of renewing their strength only added to their weakness--with bellies full, they lay down, many never moved again--eating the ground bare of grass withing reach of their tongues. When their tongues could reach no further, they just lay where they were and starved to death.

However, some survived and these moved farther and farther South. The Summer of 1881 was a year of drought. The early green grass soon withered--scorched by the sun. Water was scarce--only mountain streams

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carried this staff of life. When a herd did find water in the small lakes, they would rush in and soon it was just moist mud which became hard and sun-baked within a day or two.

Very few calves survived that Spring. The annual increase was practically wiped out. Little nourishment in the grass--the buffalo too weak to negotiate the steep hills leading down to the mountain streams, they died in thousands.

I recall that the Reverend Dr. Sutherland, Secretary of the Missionary Society, came West to inspect the Missions. He traveled to Helena, Montana-by train and boat- where he was met by my Uncle John, the Reverend John McDougall with team and buckboards. They drove from Helena via the Sweet Grass Hills, crossing Milk River past Fort McLeod--the Elbow(Calgary) to Morley. They reported that they were greatly delayed on their journey because they had to avoid hundreds of buffalo lying--too exhausted to move and blocking their way.

The last herd, not more than 200, that I saw running wild, was near the Elbow on the Saskatchewan River between Carlton and Prince Albert--- that was in 1882. I am convinced that starvation was the actual cause of the disappearance and destruction of the buffalo. At the time of which I write, there were not a sufficient number of people in the Wide

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West, even if they had all hunted with repeating rifles to account for the wiping out of buffalo herds.

Apropos of the disappearance of buffalo, another historical incident comes to mind--not found in any records. Fraser Tims--a fur trader at that time, established at the "Pile of Bones"(Regina), carrying on trade there. He had a stock of some 12,000 buffalo hides, which I believe was the largest number in the possession of any trader--including the Hudson's Bay Company. Tims sold his stock of 12,000 hides to a firm of furriers in Montreal who had a contract to supply the Northwest Mounted Police with winter overcoats. This sale about cleaned up the buffalo hides--there was now no source of supply to replace them. Fraser Tims told me that he had received fifty cents a hide in payment and congratulated himself at having made a good deal.