

# DENVER ART MUSEUM

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## *Department of Indian Art*

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THE CHASE ON HORSEBACK

*From a painting in the National Museum by George Catlin*

*Leaflet No. 7*

*1930*

3rd Printing, July, 1951

## THE BUFFALO AND THE INDIAN

**HABITAT.** The buffalo, or more properly the American Bison, formerly ranged over North America from near the Atlantic coast to Nevada, from Georgia to the Great Lakes in the east, from the Mississippi Delta to the present Canadian border in the middle west, and from northern Mexico to Great Slave Lake (Canada) in the west. The map accompanying the second book referred to in the bibliography shows the range. The animal existed in this territory in incredible numbers. No exact statement as to its numbers can be made, but there must have been many millions.

The attacks of white men and Indians gradually pushed in the boundaries of the range towards a center located on the plains just east of the Rocky Mountains and running from Texas well up into Canada. The building of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 cut the buffalo into two herds. The northern herd was practically exterminated by 1883 and the southern by 1873. By 1885 less than a thousand animals remained and their extermination seemed inevitable. But public opinion and government regulation stepped in just in time, so that today the animals are steadily increasing. There are probably ten thousand in various zoos and government preserves and several hundred wild animals in the Canadian herd.

**METHODS OF HUNTING.** There were communal hunts in the spring, summer and fall, usually before the planting and after the harvesting of the tobacco crop. In winter small groups who desired robes in their heavy winter state went out on hunting trips. Hunting by individuals was forbidden. Before the coming of horses and firearms the animals were pursued on foot and killed with bow and arrow and lance. The chase was carried on in the following ways: 1. The animals were driven into large corral-like structures by large numbers of beaters and there killed. 2. The prairie grass was fired in a large circle about a group of buffalo, so that it burned in toward them, forcing them into a close mass that was easily attacked by the hunters. 3. The animals were similarly surrounded and forced together by large numbers of men and boys. 4. In winter after a very heavy snow, the buffalo would sink into the drifts so that they were unable to move and fell easy prey to hunters on snowshoes. 5. In the early spring, when the ice in the rivers was about ready to break up, buffalo were enticed into attempting to cross a stream on the ice by burning the dead grass on the opposite side of the stream, thus disclosing the new green grass. Their weight would break the ice into large masses which floated down the stream, each one with several animals carried on it. The Indians would run out over the broken ice to these islands and dispatch the buffalo. 6. Herds were either driven over a cliff or led over by an Indian disguised as a buffalo. Most of the animals thus attacked were killed by the fall. The introduction of the horse in the late 18th and early 19th centuries tended to break up the old tribal cohesion and the communal hunts. The mounted Indians hunted the buffalo either by surrounding a group of them or by riding through a stampeding herd, killing such animals as came near them.

The different tribes hunted in areas which were assigned to them by intertribal treaties. Many dances, games and ceremonial observances were connected with the hunting of the buffalo.

**HIDES** were dressed with the hair on for winter robes, bed clothing, floor rugs and to represent the animal in ceremonies. Dressed hides without hair served for tepee covers, clothing for both sexes (see Leaflet 2 for details of tailoring and sewing) moccasin tops or uppers, quivers, rifle scabbards, saddle trappings, ropes, snowshoe webbing, and bags of all kinds. Medicine bags were made from the hairy skin of the legs, scalp and scrotum. The skin of the head with horns attached was used as a ceremonial dance mask. Undressed or raw hide, without the hair, was used for moccasin soles, knife scabbards, parfleches or flat purses and for boat covers. Shields were made of shrunken hides.

**HOOFS AND HORNS** were cut up and made into ceremonial rattles. They were cleaned, polished and used to hold tobacco, medicines and gunpowder. Sections of horn were scraped thin and shaped into large spoons, ladles and drinking cups. The tips of the horns were cut off to be used as cupping instruments by the native doctors. Whole horns were worn as insignia of office.

**HAIR** was spun and woven into ropes, belts, sacks and personal ornaments.

**MEAT.** The slain animals were skinned and dressed where they fell. The meat was divided up according to tribal regulations. The killer of each animal received the hide, the hump or fat meat on the shoulders, the tongue, the tenderloin and other choice parts. The remainder was divided up among his helpers. By this system poor and disabled persons were sure of food.

The meat was carried to the camp and turned over to the women to be prepared for food. Part of the meat was eaten fresh after stewing, or roasting on a stick held over the coals. The remainder was cut into thin sheets and strips, or sometimes into quite large lumps, dried in the sun and finally smoked. Part of the meat so treated was made into pemmican. The meat was pounded into small bits and mixed with fat. This mixture was heated and poured into a bladder or section of the large intestine. The fat in the mixture served to seal the meat from the air, thus preserving it for long periods. Sometimes wild fruits were added to the mixture.

The finest meat came from the young cows. Each cow was estimated to yield 45 pounds of dried meat and 50 pounds of pemmican. The tongue was considered the choicest bit of the buffalo. It was dried and smoked, or eaten fresh after cooking.

**TALLOW.** The fat of the animal was carefully collected and preserved in large balls or in bags to be used when needed in cooking or the making of pemmican.

**SINEW** was made from the large tendons of the back and legs. The tendons were removed from the body as intact as possible and thoroughly dried. When desired for use they were soaked until free from all natural glue. They were then gently pounded until the fibres were completely separated. The fibres so made were twisted into thread, bowstrings, snowshoe webs and ropes.

**INTESTINES** were cleaned and eaten raw, or baked on hot coals. Sometimes sections of the large intestine were used as waterproof bags to hold pemmican.

**BLADDER.** This was cleaned, dried and made into a pouch for small articles. Often a small beaded disk was sewed to the bottom and a beaded band around the neck. These bladder bags were waterproof and were used principally to carry objects which had to be kept dry.

**BONES** were cracked after boiling and the marrow extracted and kept in bags until needed for food. The bones were shaped into tools and ornaments of all sorts. Awls, chisels or fleshers, tampers for pipes, hoes made from the shoulder blades, pipebone beads and pendants were made in great numbers. The skulls were used ceremonially at dances, especially the Sun Dance. Teeth were strung on necklaces.

**DROPPINGS** or buffalo chips, well dried in the sun, were used very extensively as fuel. They burned with a clear, hot flame and produced an incandescent bed of coals. There was very little smoke, which was of great advantage to the Indians, as fires could be safely made without the smoke betraying them to their enemies.

**MYTHOLOGY.** The spirit or ghost buffalo, the first of all buffalos, was said to have been born in a cave in the north. He was pure white and was the patron of medicine men and doctors, teaching them the healing art, especially as regards wounds. The rare albino animals found occasionally on the plains were greatly revered by the Indians because of their resemblance to the spirit buffalo.

The animal was the totem or fetish of the Buffalo societies which existed among the plains tribes. Members of these societies had personal names indicating movements, postures and actions of the beast, such as Standing Buffalo. The months were designated by the habits of the animal. The buffalo became the symbol of the leader and the type of long life and plenty. Buffalo ceremonies and stories were a constant delight to the people.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas :

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