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CONTENTS:

Excavations at the Burns Site (EaLi-1) near Stonewall, Manitoba	1
The North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company Forts: 1810-1830	26
Preliminary Report on Archaeological Excavations in Bonnycastle Park, 1981 . . .	46
The Origins, Organization and Role of the Bison Hunt in the Red River Valley . .	62
Corrigendum	69

THE ORIGINS, ORGANIZATION AND ROLE OF THE BISON HUNT
IN THE RED RIVER VALLEY

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Throughout the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth, the Canadian Northwest was progressively opened up by traders in search of more - and better - furs. The length of journey that could be undertaken, however, was governed to a certain extent by the amount of provisions that could be carried in the canoes or obtained in trade en route.

In 1778, Peter Pond, a trader and explorer from New England, journeyed north as far as Lake Athabaska. Here he came into contact with the Chipewyan Indians, from whom he learned the secrets of pemmican (Innis 1930:87, footnote). Pemmican is made from meat that has been dried and beaten and then mixed with berries and tallow or fat. This produces a non-perishable and easily transported food, well suited to the needs of the fur traders. Now chains of caches could be stocked, making it possible for the canoes to travel well into the interior without the worry of food procurement (Kelsey 1956:38).

Presumably, the Athabaskan Indians used mainly moose or caribou meat when they made pemmican, but the bison (or buffalo) meat of the plains proved to be an excellent substitute. Buffalo were plentiful on the plains and prairies and were within easy reach of the fur-trading posts at Red River and along the Saskatchewan. In a letter to Lord Selkirk in 1811, Miles Macdonell says that there "could be no apprehension of any want of Buffalo meat from the vast abundance of the country ..." (Roe 1951:368).

Much of the following information on fur trading posts and forts is taken from Ernest Voorhis' Historic Forts and Trading Posts, 1930. There were many forts built around the area of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. The earliest were probably those of La Verendrye and his sons. These include Fort Rouge and Fort Maurepas, built in 1734, and Fort La Reine in 1738. The first English fort to be built on the Red River was Frobisher's Fort, Netley Creek, 1774. The main function of these and other early forts was undoubtedly the collection of furs. MacLeod and Morton have these comments to say on the Red River region:

Lower Red River had never been a rich fur region, and its course from south to north had not made it of much use to the westward-pressing traders. But Upper Red River, curving as it did from north to east, with the wooded Duck and Riding Mountains to the north and the buffalo plains and the timbered plateau of Turtle Mountain to the south, drained a country rich in furs. But all the Red River country was now an inferior fur district. Its fur-bearers had been trapped since the 1680's when the French traders established themselves on Lake Superior and

the English on Hudson Bay. Twice its beaver had been cleaned out, once by the French under La Verendrye and once by the first North West Traders in the 1770's and 1780's (MacLeod & Morton 1963:12).

So it would seem that by 1790 the importance of the area as a fur-bearing region had declined somewhat. Despite this, many new posts were being built all through the region from about 1790 on, as a glance through Voorhis' list will show. At Pembina, for example, the Hudson's Bay Company built a post in 1793, the North West Company built posts in 1797 and 1801, and the X.Y. Company built there in 1801. The North West Company's Pine Fort on the Assiniboine, the chief post for trading with the Mandan, dates from 1784. By 1794 the Hudson's Bay Company had built Brandon House. In June, 1794, John Sutherland, the master of Brandon house, wrote in his journal that there were at least forty men at different North West Company posts along the Assiniboine (HBCA, PAM, B199/a/1 fo.2d). Referring to the North West Company fort of Montagne a la Bosse, Daniel Harmon remarked that the fort was on a high bank of the river, overlooking good buffalo country (Voorhis 1930:119).

It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that it was as much for the trade in pemmican as in furs that these and many other posts were established along the Red and Assiniboine rivers:

... as the country declined in importance as a fur region, it became more and more necessary to the trade as a source of provisions. It was its buffalo plains rather than its fur forests that made the Red River country significant to the fur traders (MacLeod & Morton 1963:13).

At first, buffalo meat was traded from the local Indians, but by 1800 the halfbreed offspring of the men of the fur trade and Indian women, commonly known as the Metis, had begun to move into the Red River area, seeking a livelihood. Many of the traders took Indian wives and raised large families. Not all of these people could find work in the fur trade, so many of them moved to the prairie to hunt or, less frequently, to farm. In time these Metis became the hunters for the trade.

As long as the buffalo came in close to the Red River Settlement, individuals could hunt independently. As the herds were driven further away it became necessary for the hunt to take on the form of a group activity. "In 1820, the first organized buffalo-hunting expedition on a grand scale was made in which 540 carts proceeded to the range" (Roe 1951:368). From the time of this first big hunt of 1820 until about 1875, buffalo hunts were organized from the Red River Settlement twice yearly, in June and September:

... the proceeds of the first are always sold off to supply their wants in clothing and other

necessaries for the year, but the second furnishes their winter stock of food (Ross 1856:98).

The organization of the hunt developed along quite rigid lines, following the same procedure year after year. As a rule the hunters came from the three main centres of Pembina, St. Boniface and White Horse Plain (MacLeod & Morton 1963:109). A point of rendezvous was arranged often to the west of Pembina, and all the hunters, with their families and their carts, made their way to a base camp set up there (Robinson 1879:141). So many people came that it was often a matter of days before everyone was assembled. In the June hunt of 1840 a total of 1630 people took part (Ross 1856:245).

In order to govern and regulate the hunt a series of officers were elected by the men of the camp. The first to be elected was the hunt chief, whose role was to see that the laws of the hunt were enforced and to settle all disputes. Then ten or twelve councilors were elected, "... who, with the chief, make the laws, decide the direction of travel, and advise the executive in all matters of doubtful propriety" (Robinson 1879:149). Four captains were chosen, each to command a number of 'soldiers' who were to be the police of the hunt (Robinson 1879:149).

Before the hunt moved off from its base camp, these elected officers held a council to lay down the laws of the hunt. The laws or rules may have varied slightly from year to year, but the gist was usually the same. The rules for the June hunt of 1840 were as follows:

1. No buffalo to be run on the Sabbath-day.
2. No party to fork off, lag behind, or go before, without permission.
3. No person or party to run buffalo before the general order.
4. Every captain with his men, in turn, to patrol the camp, and keep guard.
5. For the first trespass against these laws, the offender to have his saddle and bridle cut up.
6. For the second offence, the coat to be taken off the offender's back, and be cut up.
7. For the third offence, the offender to be flogged.
8. Any person convicted of theft, even to the value of a sinew, to be brought to the middle of the camp, and the crier to call out his or her name three times, adding the word "Thief" each time (Ross 1856:249).

These laws were designed to keep the people in order and especially to discourage individuals from disturbing the buffalo herds at the cost of the main hunt.

When all the formalities had been disposed of, the camp broke up and the great caravan of carts and horsemen set off in search of the herds of buffalo. In 1840 the buffalo were sighted after a journey of two hundred and fifty miles, nineteen days after leaving the settlement (Ross 1856:255). The following day, four hundred huntsmen lined up, waiting for the signal to start. When the signal was given the men rushed into the herd, shooting buffalo right and left. On this one day at least 1375 buffalo were killed (Ross 1856:257).

Once the hunt was underway, the rider kept moving, loading his gun as he went. Muzzle-loading smooth-bore guns were used and each rider stored his shot in his mouth (Robinson 1879:161). After the run, the riders went back to identify the animals that each had shot. "This is accomplished by means of marked bullets, the locality in which the buffalo lies - for which the hunter always keeps a sharp lookout - and the spot where the bullet entered" (Robinson 1879:162).

The hunt would attempt to follow the herd, killing animals until all carts were fully loaded with meat, at which time the hunt would end and the caravan would head for home. In 1840 the people returned to the settlement in mid-August. The hunt had taken two months and two days (Ross 1856:272).

This, then, has been a description of the organization of the Red River hunt. What of the origins of this organization? In the book, Cuthbert Grant of Grantown, MacLeod and Morton state that Grant was most often the chief or captain of the hunt (1963:110). They go on to add that Grant in fact designed the whole format of the hunt.

The regularity of the procedure in the annual election of captain and council, the laws governing the hunt, the stern discipline of the march and the run, all these bear the impress of a single personality and a directing mind. That mind must have been Grant's. No one else among his people had the education, the experience, or the prestige to know how to shape Indian custom and tradition into a coherent and intelligent mode of government and manoeuvre. In particular, no one else could have been acceptable from the first to the parties from St. Boniface and Pembina as well as to the hunters of White Horse Plain (MacLeod & Morton 1963:113).

This view seems at the least to be extremely ethnocentric. Before the White Man, and therefore by extension the Metis, ever set foot on the plains, the Indians of that region hunted with great discipline "... preserving (the buffalo) for the use of the tribe at large, instead of allowing one or two ungovernable individualists to stampede them at their pleasure" (Roe 1951:375).

The Omaha Indians were governed by a tribal council. Each year the council would decide the time of the communal hunt and who would lead it. They also appointed 'soldiers' to police it (Oliver 1962:42). Among the Mandan, the leader of the hunt was selected in council and his appointment expired at the end of the hunt (Oliver 1962:43). It seems, too, that the idea of some kind of law enforcement was well known. "All true Plains tribes except one...had police societies" (Oliver 1962:49).

Practically all plains tribes hunted buffalo. Throughout most of the year hunting was carried out by small bands or single families. In the case of most plains people, however, many bands, or even the whole tribe, came together in the summer, when a communal hunt took place.

Many people were together in one place, and there were people who owed allegiance to different bands. There were important ceremonies to be organized. And, above all, there was the communal buffalo hunt to be undertaken. Order was necessary in the tribal encampment, to prevent disputes. Strict discipline was necessary on the hunt, because individual hunting was inefficient. (A single hunter who jumped the gun might get a few buffalo for himself, but he would alarm and scatter the herd in such a way that communal hunting techniques were not effective.) It was at this time that the police societies always functioned. Over and over again the point is made that the most important job the police societies had was in policing the communal hunts (Oliver 1962:61).

It seems that most of the Indians of the plains held only one communal hunt each year, while the Metis of the Red River Settlement held two. But even this has an Indian precedent. "The farming tribes carried out hunts in summer after the spring planting and another hunt in late fall into winter after the harvest" (Arthur 1975:97).

All this suggests that Cutbert Grant did not design the organization of the buffalo hunt. However, he may well have passed the knowledge of the design on to the Metis. Grant was born and raised in Fort Tremblante, Saskatchewan (MacLeod & Morton 1963:2). Fort Tremblante, later called Fort Alexandria, was situated close to the Assiniboine River in section 27, township 32, range 3 west (Voorhis 1930:31). As a boy living in this area, he would most certainly have come into contact with Assiniboine and Plains Cree Indians, both of whom were buffalo hunters. Grant would undoubtedly have been aware of the hunting techniques of these people; knowledge that he could put to good use later at Red River.

There is one final piece of evidence to suggest that the buffalo hunt had traditional Indian origins. When they started out for the hunt from their homes in St. Boniface, White Horse Plain and Pembina, the Metis followed certain old, well established trails. In the fall of 1802 Alexander Henry the Younger built Fort Pinancewaywining on an Indian trail that led from Pembina to Calf Mountain, "the common route by which the Assiniboine Indians pass over the mountain to hunt bear and buffalo on the E. side" (Coues 1897:119). La Verendrye followed an established

trail in 1738 when he visited the Mandan. It seems that this trail also went via Calf Mountain. MacLeod and Morton mention a trail called the "Passage" that headed south-west from a point eleven miles west of the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (1963:110). This trail is often called the Headingley Trail, and is well marked on the township diagrams of the areas through which it passes. To name a specific case, on the Plan of Township 3 Range 6 West of First Meridian, surveyed by C.J. Bouchette in 1872, the "Highway from Headingley to West Boundary of Province" is marked. Since this pre-dates any settlement in this area, the highway would most likely be a cart track. More to the point, it closely follows the route of an older trail marked on the map as "Hunter Trail". The point where the trail runs off the map to the south-west is just three miles from Calf Mountain.

It would seem, then, that the hunting trails followed by the Metis were old, established Indian trails. Further, they seem to converge on the area of Calf Mountain, possibly the place of encampment before the start of the hunt.

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CORRIGENDUM

The following is a corrected version of Table 4 in "Lithic Analysis of Artifacts Recovered from EJMg-2, The Childs Lake Site, Duck Mountain Provincial Park, Manitoba", by Michael Zywna, Manitoba Archaeological Quarterly, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 33-51:

TABLE 4

Distribution of Artifacts Analyzed in this Report
According to Classification Section
(EJMg-2-1, -2, -3, -4, -5) n=324

ARTIFACT TYPE	-1		-2		-3		-4		-5	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Core	-	0.0	1	2.4	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0
Core fragment	-	0.0	1	2.4	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0
Decortication flakes	8	3.4	4	9.8	8	20.5	-	0.0	-	0.0
Decortication fragments	6	2.6	12	29.2	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0
Shatter fragments	132	56.8	4	9.8	25	64.1	5	55.6	2	66.6
Percussion flakes	86	37.0	11	26.8	6	15.4	-	0.0	-	0.0
Pressure flakes	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0
Tools	-	0.0	8	19.6	-	0.0	4	44.4	-	0.0
Unidentifiable	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0	-	0.0	1	33.3
TOTALS	232	*	41	*	39	*	9	*	3	99.9

* = 100.0%
