

St. Cloud Democrat
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Stories of a Hunters Life

The correspondent of the St. Paul Press, with the Gen. Sully's expedition writes some interesting letters from one of which we copy the following sketched of frontier reminiscences.

Horse Stealing Achievement of the Cut-Heads

The summer buffalo hunt of 1856 will probably be remembered by the Half-breed plain hunters as the most unlucky in loss of stock which they ever experienced at the hands of the Sioux. Cows were found in great numbers on the plain between the Goose and Shayenne rivers, and after two or three successful "runs" the hunting brigade moved to the timbered branches of the first mentioned stream to make pemmican, locating their camp on the bluff over looking the junction of the south and middle forks.

Matowakan (Medicine Bear) a leading warrior of the Cut-head band of Yanctonais with thirty or forty braves, had been watching the Half-breed hunters for several days designing to steal their horses when the camp should be pitched in some locality suitable for carrying out their purpose successfully. The camp at Goose Forks was admirably calculated for making the attempt and the Sioux were not slow to seize the opportunity.

The Half-breeds drove out their animals to graze early one morning about a half a mile from the corral of carts, their usual vigilance somewhat relaxed from the fact that no signs of enemies had been discovered since the hunt had opened. Matowakan with his braves who had ridden along under the bluff to the very edge of the encampment unobserved now dashed forward between the herd and the camp, and with waving blankets and hideous yells, succeeded in stampeding two hundred and forty horses and thirty-six oxen, to the plains, all of which they eventually secured. One hunter only saved his stock which had been turned out with the herd. Baptiste Moran (Jean Baptiste Morin), a quiet half-breed, of little pretensions, and whose previous history as a plain hunter, was remarkable for nothing more than furnishing a good list of slaughtered buffalos, was one of the first to observe this audacious attempt of the Sioux. His best runner was tied to one of his carts: it was a mare, and his other animals were much attached to her. He determined to save his horses; it was the work of the moment only, to strap on his Indian saddle and to mount and taking a circuitous course, avoiding the Sioux, at a head long pace dashed through the herd, passing close to his own animals, which recognizing the animal he rode, followed, and moving rapidly around the other flank, Moran conducted the most of his ponies safely back to camp.

This daring feat gained him great credit among the hunters of the Plain, and on several occasions since he has shown that it is deserved. In this affair several were killed on both sides. Matowakan, the leader of the foray, was himself, badly wounded, and laid within range of the half-breed guns until night, when he was removed by the Sioux, but recovered to give the half-breeds continual annoyance.

The drift of the Sioux arguments in abandoning their claim to those great wastes called the "Disputed Territory" is much like establishing an ownership in all the herds of emigrating bison, and as will be seen by the following talk with a Yanctonai:

The Great Spirit favored the Sioux,

more than all the rest of his red children.

Our party had been hunting some time over the disputed lands, and our camps gave undisputed evidence of the havoc we had made among the buffalos, when we met a war party of the Prairie Sioux. Through the head man of the party, an old brave named Wakanhdikokipapi, (he who Trembles at the Lighting) a personal demand was made of us to pay them for the buffalos we had killed; of course we demurred and wished to know what better right they had to them than we.

“These lands are ours” said he “and every animal upon it is ours, the Great Spirit put them upon it for us; you have killed our cattle, we may likewise kill yours.” “Do you not,” we returned, “Sometimes wander starving over these plains when not one buffalo can be found? Where are they? Have not the droves moved into the Cree, the Crow and Assinaboine countries are those nations not then feasting on cow meat while you are glad to get even prairie turnips to feed upon? Whose cattle are they then?”

“Ours,” he fiercely answered, fairly foaming with rage, “the Great Spirit gave them to us not our enemies.”

“No,” said we, “they are yours no more than the ducks and geese, which you do not claim. Do the buffalo not move like the wild fowl, as the Great Spirit has ordered; that every people may be supplied with meat? He made them for all his children, so we believe, and when we are hungered we kill them.” The old man, however was not to be silenced so easily, but a few plugs of tobacco, put in at the proper season, was more convincing, and closed the “talk.”

About Hunters and Hunting

Upon the plain about Des Moines and Little Sioux Rivers were first observed, on this march, old traces of the buffalo. – Between Sioux City and Fort Pierre, the “signs” were quite recent, and a day or two from the latter place the heads and bones of buffalo not long killed, fresher traveled paths, and the “Bois de Vache,” or buffalo chips, assured us that we were at last in a region frequented at times by that animal, and which we were likely to see most any day.

The curiosity was great at the onset to see one of these huge creature, but the introduction into buffalo country was so gradual, that but little surprise was manifested when some one in the ranks pointed out a dark object in the distance, and asserted it to be a buffalo. Everyone accepted it, and were prepared and ready to believe that every dark object along the horizon was a buffalo. We often pasted to the windward of solitary bushes, to which the lively imagination of those who had never been on the plains before gave life and animation. Many lone willow was seen to move and gallop about, and when someone anxious to get a shot at the noble game, would approach the object, it was most invariably from the windward quarter. A few months in the buffalo country will convince those inexperienced Nimrods, that the buffalo can smell as well as see, which is a fact very necessary to understand in order to turn out a successful hunter;” which reminds me of a little story.” At the risk of “boring” the readers of the *Press*, I will relate the –

Hunting Exploit of Wamiduta

Something like twenty years ago the people of Waanatan’s and Wabdenica’s village on the Lac Traverse had moved up to the wintering grounds on “Grizzly Bear” and “Bone Hillock” creeks in the buffalo country, and the drifting snow hurled by the biting winds of January enclosed deserted cabins and filled silent streets.

In Waanatan's village situated on the bluffs overlooking the lake – a pleasant site for summer residence, but most bleak and forbidding in winter – being exposed to the full force of the northwest blasts- the curling smoke from one tepee alone indicated the presence of man. It was that of Wanmiduta or Scarlet Eagle, notorious among his people as a lazy man. Wanmiduta raised corn enough in the summer season to partially subsist himself and family, which, with dried buffalo meat given him by relatives, and the skill of his wife in fishing, he managed to live through the severe winter months, until the warmer days or spring brought the ducks and geese to more northern latitudes. He rarely accompanied the villagers to the hunting grounds either of the Hutata, toward the Mississippi, or northward to the Buffalo Country. He owned neither dogs nor horses to transport his camp fixtures, and was too lazy or proud to assist his wife in packing.

One cold morning Wanmiduta pushed aside the old robe which served as a door to his tepee, and looked toward the lake where a sight greeted his astonished vision which would have aroused the dormant energies of the laziest Indian of the "Seven Council fires." A large band of buffaloes had worked down along the lake shore, and were quietly grazing on a peninsula that jutted well out into the lake.

A belt of flags and rushes lined the extreme point about which the drifting snow had gathered; beyond the rush, bordering all was glare ice; the quick eye of the Sisitunwan took all this in at a glance and his plan was formed on the instant. Calling his wife, and descending the table land by a ravine, which led them unobserved, close to the herd, he directed the woman to remain quiet here, until he could gain a point on the peninsula to the leeward of them, where he could conceal himself, when the woman was to run to the windward of the herd and frighten them, the probability being that the buffalos would run in the opposite direction down the peninsula, and deceived by the high flags and deep drifts, would plunge through and reach the ice beyond, where many, slipping and falling upon the ice, unable to raise or regain their footing, would become an easy prey. This was successful beyond his most sanguine expectations. Startled by the sight and loud hallooming of the woman the buffalos dashed through the drifts, and the hidden Sisitunwan now exposing himself and running toward the field of glare ice, where the foremost, pressed and struggling ineffectually to raise, tending to increase the terror of the fleeing animals. Wanmiduta and his wife hurried up and unsheathing their knives, hamstringed great numbers of the now helpless creatures. – Truly fortune had come to his door. For weeks he and his woman were engaged in killing, skinning and cutting up the buffalos. Of the skins was made robes, and leather for lodges, and moccasins; and meat dried and packed at leisure.

The smell of blood attracted thither great numbers of wolves and foxes, and the lucky hunter constructed "deadfalls" about the refuse carcasses, and trapped many of them; and when the Sioux returned in the spring, to occupy their old cabins and planting grounds, it was to find Wanmiduta the richest Indian of the tribe. He sold his robes and furs to the traders, and exchanged his meat and moccasin leather for horses with the Lower Sioux, and eventually took to himself two more wives and thereafter followed the buffalo hunters to the Plains regular, and up to the late massacre was still pointed out as the "Rich Indian of Ptansinte."

I must now relate how a white man hunted buffalo under similar circumstances; this paper would be incomplete without the story of:

Anderson and the Bulls

Buffalos are fully aware of the slippery character of ice, and will avoid it if seen, if any other direction is open to escape. The winter of 1857-58 the writer hunted at Devils Lake, in company with two others who were somewhat in experienced in hunting huge game.

Anderson was looking for otter “sign” along the lake one day when he discovered a small herd of two or three hundred bulls browsing upon a peninsula which was connected by a long narrow neck with the main land. Anderson without noting the direction of the wind, proceeded directly to the narrow neck, observing only the most covered route to approach them; though unseen the buffalos snuffed in the breeze, the presence of the incautious hunter, and the whole herd took instant alarm and rapidly retraced their steps which conducted them to the peninsula, not venturing upon the glare ice which nearly surrounded it.

Anderson was not only surprised by this unexpected movement, but lost his presence of mind altogether, and instead of darting out upon the ice for safety, continued to run along the narrow isthmus toward the mainland, supposing in his fright that the whole herd charging him, and firmly believing that his “race was run” and certain that he would be tossed in mid air from the horns of some infuriated bull. The buffalos brushed along over and about him, and hurried off to the plain, no doubt glad to escape from the dangerous neighborhood of hunters, and Anderson rose from the ground unharmed, no less thankful for his escape, and glancing at the retreating figures of the bulls in the distance vowed he would subsist wholly on badger before he would venture to approach another buffalo.

[I wish to say “Thank you” to Alan R. Woolworth, Historian Emeritus of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul for sending me a photocopy of this newspaper page. I have copied the text just as printed. The only change I made was to correct the spelling of the Dakota words. The words I have underlined will be explained in the glossary. 8/7/2011)

Glossary

Bone Hillock Creek	a western tributary of the James River, whose mouth is located two miles south of Dickey, North Dakota.
Cabins	Waanatan’s village was composed of earthlodges, and possibly cabins.
Cut-head	a sub-band of the Ihanktunwan, Nakota.
Deadfalls	A heavy log or large rock positioned to trap or kill game.
Flags	Plume Reed, Reed Grass <i>Phragmites communis</i> . A tall reed which grows near water.
General Alfred Sully	The 1864 was his second attempt to punish the Dakota for the Minnesota Uprising.
Goose Forks	located near Portland, North Dakota.

Goose River	A western tributary of the Red River whose mouth is located at Caledonia, North Dakota.
Grizzly Bear	Bear Creek, an eastern tributary to the James River located by Oaks, North Dakota.
Hutata	At the edge, referring to the Big Woods of Minnesota.
Matowakan	Commonly called Medicine Bear; his name translates Sacred or Holy Bear. A principal chief of the Cut – Head Yanktonai. He settled on the Ft. Peck Reservation in eastern Montana.
Moran, Baptise ¹	A Métis buffalo hunter. His descendants live at the Turtle Mountain Reservation, North Dakota.
Ptansinte	Otter Tail an alternate name for Lake Traverse.
Seven Council Fires	Oceti Sakowin, the collective name for all seven bands of the Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota Nation.
Sheyenne River	A western tributary of the Red River whose mouth is located north of Fargo, North Dakota.
Sisitunwan	Fish Offal Village, one of the main bands of Dakota.
Wanbdiduta	Scarlet Eagle (Wanbdi = Golden Eagle; Duta = scarlet). A Sisitunwan Dakota.
Wabdenica	The Orphan, one of the principal chiefs of the Sisitunwan, Dakota. The father of Chief Standing Buffalo, he died in 1867.
Waanatan	The Charger, one of the principal chiefs of the Sisitunwan, Dakota 1825-1897. He

¹ Jean Baptiste Morin also known as Baptiste Comtois dit Morin was born in 1834 at St. Boniface, the son of Antoine Morin (b. 1809) and Therese Larocque. He married Nancy Delorme, the daughter of Joseph Delorme and Isabelle Gourneau in 1862 at Pembina. He was killed by the Sioux at St. Joseph's Mountain on July 5, 1874.

settled on the Spirit Lake (Devils Lake) Reservation in North Dakota.

Waanatan's Village

Was located on the west side of Lake Traverse about midway along the lake. Archeologists have so far failed to locate this site.

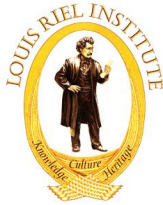
Wakanhdikokipapi

Fears the Lightning. A Titun Lakota.

Yanktonai

The Gaulization of the name for one of the main bands of Nakota, Ihanktonunwan meaning Village at the End.

This article was forwarded to the Louis Riel Institute by Louis Garcia on August 10, 2011. We have added the footnote on Jean Baptiste Morin.



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