

Buffalo Bone Picking

By Lawrence Barkwell



Metis buffalo bone pickers at Minnewaukan, Dakota Territory, May 24, 1886 (Montana Historical Society #H-1707). The pickers carried heavy ball-peen type hammers to break the skeletons, the femurs, pelvic and shoulder bones, which were too heavy to fling into a cart or wagon. Also the big hammers were used to knock jointed bones apart, the knee, hips and shoulders, and to break vertebrae into manageable sections.

By 1832, the buffalo had vanished east of the Mississippi River. By the mid-1800s the railways had reached the western plains and the killing of bison began in earnest. However, the effects of disease on the herds compounded the loss. By the 1870s the bison were gone from the southern plains and eradicated from the northern plains by the 1880s. The loss of the bison from the northern plains coincided with the first herds of Texas cattle making it north to Montana in the early 1880s. The cattle and farming decreased the buffalo pasture. The cattle carried tick fever, brucellosis and rhinotracheitis among other diseases. It was disease that killed most of the bison, just as disease had killed most of the Aboriginal population. Victoria Callihoo, whose family hunted in the Edmonton area, recalled that “before the buffalo disappeared, hundreds of dead ones were seen on the plains. People said they died of black-leg.”¹

As a result of the demise of the herds, the practice of gathering the bleached bison bones became an economic mainstay of the plains Metis. The horns were also collected, polished and sold to the tourist trade. In the 1880s the price of bones climbed from \$3 - \$4 a ton to \$23 a ton, however, this decreased to \$8 per ton by the end of the century.

¹ Cited in Marty Foster, *We Know Who We Are: Metis Identity in a Montana Community*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006: 55.

Laura Thompson Law's book *History of Rolette County North Dakota and Yarns of the Pioneers*² gives the following description of the quantity of buffalo bones on the North Dakota plain:

When the pioneers came into the state and county [Rolette County], the skeletons of these great animals were an obstacle to breaking and cultivation of the land, the bones having to be removed from the path of the plow. Thousands of bones were gathered by settlers and hauled to market as far back as 1884, to be used for fertilizer and also for the refining of sugar. The Indians [Metis] and the white settlers have been seen hauling bones into Dunseith in Red River carts in the late 80s. Estimates are that possibly two million buffalo carcasses were shipped out of the state, valued at \$8.00 a ton.

Buffalo hooves and horns could be made into a principal ingredient of paints and adhesives. A skeleton's plain bones could be pulverized and mixed with potash, ferrous compounds and nitrates and made into fertilizers capable of stimulating crop growths in the most unpromising soils. The old bones were ground into meal while the fresher ones supplied refineries with calcium phosphate to neutralize cane-juice acid and to decolour sugar. Others went to bone china factories for calcium phosphate ash. The firm bones were used to produce toothbrushes and dice or sent to button factories. Millions of tons of bones were collected. In one year alone, one-half million tons were shipped out of Texas.

Bone Business Is A Big Bust

When Fort Browning was operating in 1868 one of the buildings was used to store bones. The real trade in buffalo bones did not begin until 1884, when the Michigan Carbon Works was paying \$7 a ton. By 1885 the price had risen to \$12 a ton by rail and \$18 by boat. Most of the early trade was along the Yellowstone, because that was where the first railroad was. As early as 1884 Charles Aubrey was paying \$4 a ton for bones piled along

the Missouri, between Rocky Point and Fort Buford. At this time bone picking began on a large scale along the Milk River. The Coulson Steamship was the first to pick up bones on the Missouri. Then the Benton Transportation Company entered into the trade. However the captains were reluctant to stop and pick up the bone piles and most were left. In 1887 Charles Sivyver replaced Aubrey in an effort to stimulate the trade. Sivyver

encouraged the Metis-Cree of the Milk River Valley to stack the bones along the right of way of the rapidly approaching St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway (Great Northern). Sivyver, however, unexpectedly sold out and left the country. The heaps of bone laid untouched until 1892 at which time Glasgow residents built their own craft to float the bones down river to markets. By the end of 1892 the bone trade was all over.

Article from:

Stella Breilmeier (Ed.). *Thunderstorms and Tumbleweeds 1887-1987 East Blaine County*
Blaine County Centennial Book Committee, 1989: 25.

² Rolla, N.D.: Rolla Centennial Committee, 1989 reprint of the 1953 book; pg. 16.



Buffalo Bones along the Northern Pacific, photo by Charles Spencer Francis, illustration from *Sport Among the Rockies: The Record of a Fishing and Hunting Trip in North-Western Montana*. Troy, NY: 1889: 13. Montana Historical Society PA 945-968



Photo by Frank Jay Hay, North Dakota State Historical Society D-0480. Carts with buffalo bones along the Northern Pacific Line



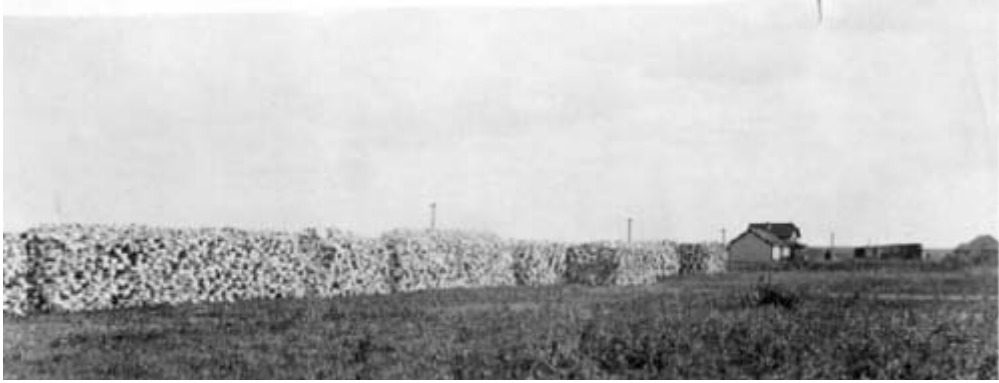
Saskatchewan 1890, skulls piled by a railway siding in Saskatoon.
Photos by H.C. E. Lumsden

By 1886 the buffalo bone industry on the Canadian prairies was shifting into high gear. In July 1886, the Saskatchewan Herald of Battleford reported: “Mr. A. Blair has handed over 100 tons of bones at Pense this season already, besides large quantities at Belle Plaine and other points west.”

Since 100 assorted skeletons made a ton of bones, Blair's delivery to Pense represented 10,000 buffalo. One of Moose Jaw's bone dealers was Felix Plante, whose general emporium was appropriately called the Buffalo Store. The Regina Leader reported the “enterprising merchant, Mr. Plante, is doing a large business in buffalo bones, averaging 25 carts daily.”

Sometimes there just weren't enough boxcars to handle the bone harvest, and large stacks accumulated beside the tracks at shipping points. Usually these bones were piled in the shape and size of a boxcar, with skulls forming the outside walls and the smaller bones tossed in the centre.





Saskatchewan 1890, skulls piled by a railway siding in Saskatoon. Photos by H.C. E. Lumsden





Bones shipped east to Detroit 1880



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