

A DAY IN THE LIFE

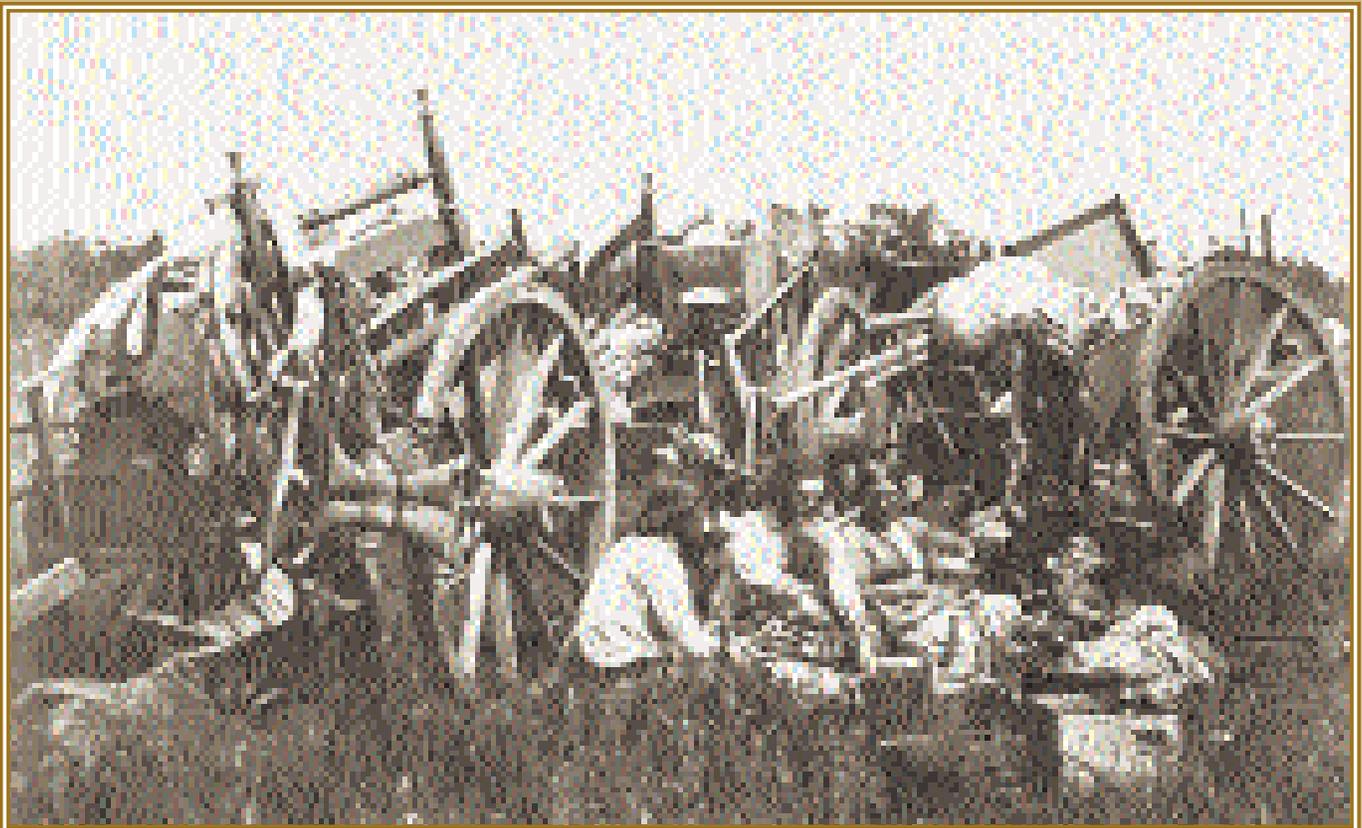
The Gens Libres

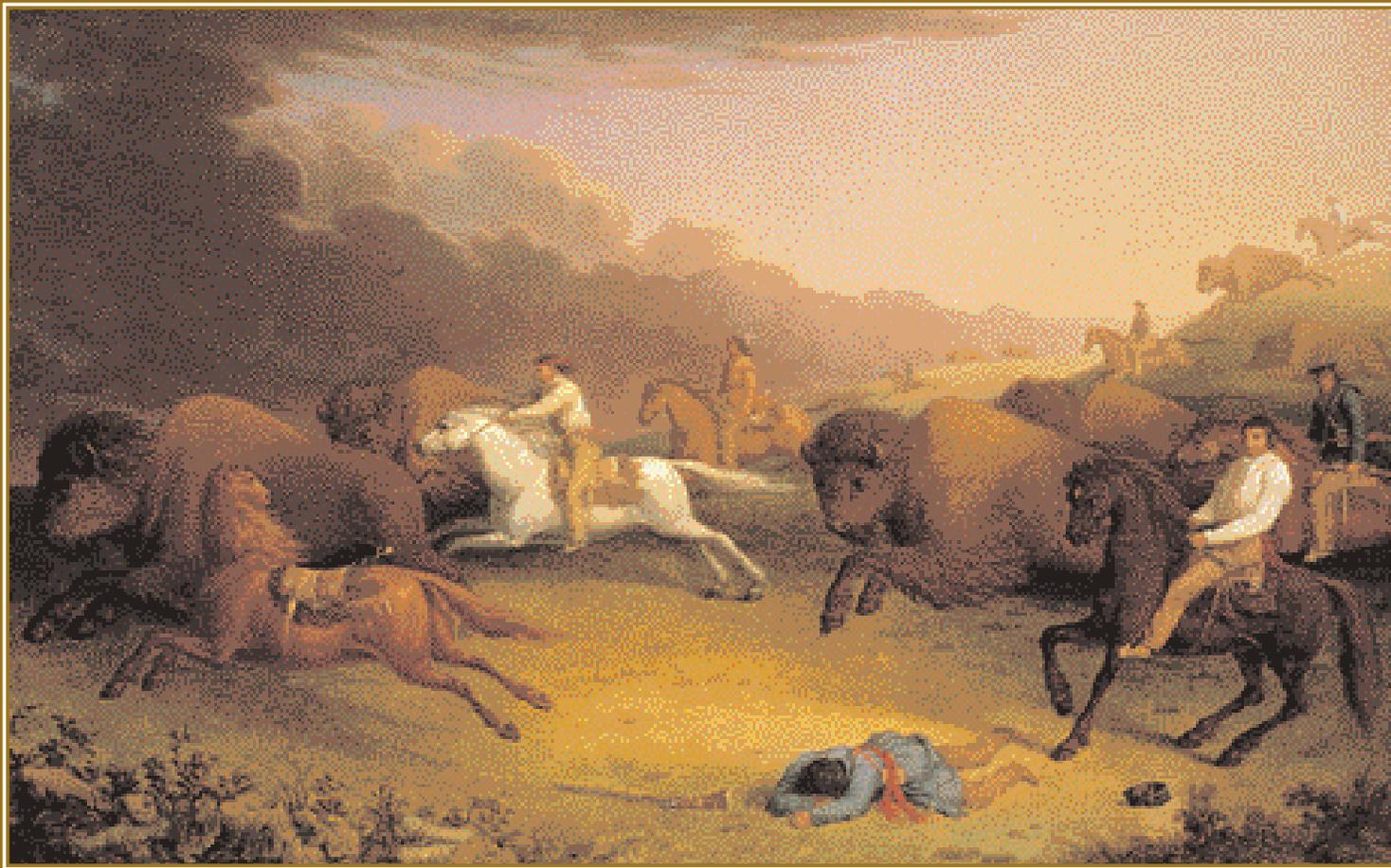
ON THE UPPER REACHES of the Sheyenne River, the pastel dawn outlined a flat horizon, a geometric line parting the elements of grass and sky. On July 4, 1850, the gray light picked out the camp of the *gens libres*—the freemen—lying on a grassy plateau above the wooded river course. They were the people of the country, the *bois brûlé* descendants of European fur traders and their Indian wives. “What a gipsy-like class they are,” wrote a Hudson’s Bay Company man. “They cordially detest all the laws and restraints of civilized life, believing all men were born to be free.”¹

Their camp was the size of a traveling town, holding 620 hunters, 650 women, 360 children, 542 dogs, 1,058 horses, and 586 oxen. The walls of the town (for they were in the territory of their enemies, the Dakota) were formed by 1,210 two-wheeled carts, or *charettes*, parked side by side in a huge circle with their wooden shafts pointing out. Inside the circle, the peoples’ tents of buffalo hide and canvas were pitched at one end; at the other, the horses were corralled. A buffalo runner fetched from \$100 to \$300, so no one took a chance on his horse straying or getting stolen.²

They had set out from the village of Pembina on the Red River on June 21, having gathered there from scattered settlements on both sides of the international boundary in order to follow the chase. Some of them were second- and third-generation buffalo hunters, for brigades had been assembling twice a year—June and September—since about 1820. At Pembina they had elected officers and decided on the rules of the hunt. There were 10 captains—each with 10 soldiers under him—to act as policemen, prevent parties from straying off, and keep order in the

Family of *gens libres* preparing a meal in camp, 1858





Canadian artist Paul Kane's oil painting, *Half Breeds Running Buffalo*, about 1846

camp. The captains took turns acting as guide or chief of the expedition, one per day.³

At the first light, a horn roused the sleepers. The homemade flag of the *gens libres* nation went up, and soon all the camp was astir—the women striking the tents, the men harnessing the oxen and horses. They did not pause for breakfast, and there was little to eat, anyway. They had been searching for buffalo in vain but had great hopes this day, since the evening before the scouts had spotted fresh dung. They had all fallen asleep to the eerie music of wolves—always a sure sign that buffalo were near.

Within half an hour, the train was in motion. It was a creaking, snakelike procession, five or six miles long. The women drove the carts, perched atop heaps of baggage, dressed in calico or bright tartan plaid. Wild, wolfish dogs ran in and out among the vehicles, and troops of loose horses pranced alongside. The men, mounted on their showiest steeds, were mostly dressed in blue *capotes*, or hooded coats, generously studded with shiny brass buttons. Their pants were of corduroy or moleskin, their shirts of checked flannel, and on their heads were jaunty Scotch caps. Their tasseled red sashes were a kind of ethnic

badge, as were their brightly beaded or quill-worked moccasins. The people themselves were of all colors, from “the ruddy cheek and blue eyes of the fair-haired Gael” to the bronzed skin and “long masses of straight black hair” inherited from Indian ancestors. Their hubbub of shouts and banter combined French, Gaelic, English, Cree, Ojibwe, and their own evolving language, “a provincial jargon of French and Indian mixed up together,” known today as *mitchif*.⁴

Shortly before noon, just as the leader was sounding the horn, the signal for stragglers to catch up, a rider appeared, galloping down the

near side of a ridge. Everyone knew what it meant: buffalo were near. Quickly, the hunters rushed to saddle up their buffalo runners. The horses knew what was in the wind and stood shivering with excitement, snuffing the air. By the time the messenger arrived, 400 huntsmen were mounted and ready to ride at the captain's word.⁵

They rode as far as the ridge, then paused while the captain crept forward to survey the herd with his spyglass. Seeing that the buffalo were headed toward rocky ground riddled with prairie-dog holes, he ordered a group to circle around and head them off toward level prairie. The main body of hunters waited behind the ridge, watching as the massive, bearded bulls who led the herd drew closer to the outriders, the animals' poor eyesight preventing them from sensing danger until they smelled the horses; then, they turned in their tracks. At that moment, the hunters erupted over the ridge in full pursuit.

The sound of the horses' hooves was like a volley of artillery, but when the thousand buffalo began to run it was like the shock of an earthquake. Dust rose from the dry ground, darkening the air, and the smell of musk from the bulls was heavy. The grass crackled under their hooves, as if it were on fire. At first, the buffaloes could keep ahead of the horses, but they soon tired, and then the hunters were in the midst of the herd.

They picked out the fat cows first since they had the tenderest meat. Guns went off in volleys. Their flintlock Northwest trade guns fired only one shot at a time. A hunter reloaded at a gallop, drawing the plug of his powder flask with his teeth, pouring in a hasty charge, settling it with a sharp blow against the saddle, spitting a wet bullet from his mouth into the barrel, then holding the gun upright until the moment came to

fire. He trusted his horse to keep clear of the slashing horns and to jump away after a shot to avoid being crushed by the falling body. The muzzle of the gun had to be close enough to graze the monster's shaggy side in order to have any effect.

The melee continued for an hour or more—shots to right and left, horses stumbling, riders falling, dead and wounded animals tumbling over, all in a haze of gunpowder and dust. Then, one after another of the hunters drew rein, dismounted from their drenched horses, and walked back through the heaps of dead buffalo and the puddles of blood, singling out of the hundreds slain the ones that they had shot. They seldom argued or forgot which ones belonged to them.

Over the hill the carts came, driven by the women, and the work of butchering began. Though they *could* use virtually every part of the buffalo, they *did* use very little of most carcasses—sometimes only the tongue and liver, while the rest was left to rot. They took as many skins as the women could reasonably hope to cure. Buffalo hides fetched good prices at faraway St. Paul, but getting them there unspoiled was a challenge.

Abundance reigned in the camp that evening. As the people feasted around their campfires, the fiddle and bagpipe wailed, and old men told stories of buffalo hunts gone by. Before the light died out of the western sky, everyone was wrapped in blankets or robes, the sweet smell of kinnickinnic from their pipes lingering in the air, and the only sound was the exultant howling of the wolves, feasting on the remains of the hunt.⁶

"There is no earthly consideration would make them relinquish the pursuit," wrote one visitor to the land of the *gens libres*, "so fascinating is the sweet air of freedom."⁷ 🌿

—Carolyn Gilman

NOTES

¹ This 1850 story is based on two nearly identical accounts of buffalo hunts from 1840 and 1859: Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State* (1856; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross and Haines, 1957), quote, 242, 252; and Manton Marble, "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Oct. 1860, p. 587–89. Another account, from 1846, appears in Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (1859), reprinted in J. Russell, *Paul Kane's Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 69–72.

² The population figures are for the hunt of 1840; the numbers in 1850 may have been larger. Ross, *Red River Settlement*, 244, 246. For the price of buffalo runners, see Marble, "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's*, Oct. 1860, p. 586.

³ Ross, *Red River Settlement*, 245–50.

⁴ Ross, *Red River Settlement*, 190–91, 200 (quote), 248, 250; Marble, "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's*, Aug. 1860, p. 305, Oct. 1860, p. 588; James Carnegie, Earl of Southesk, *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1875), 44 (quote), 45; "The People of the Red River," *Harper's*, Jan. 1859, p. 169–70 (quote); Charles Hallock, "The Red River Trail," *Harper's*, Apr. 1859, p. 615.

⁵ Here and four paragraphs below, see Marble, "To Red River," *Harper's*, Oct. 1860, p. 588–89; Ross, *Red River Settlement*, 255–57, 261; "People of the Red River," *Harper's*, Jan. 1859, p. 176; William H. Keating, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of St. Peter's River* (London: George B. Whittaker, 1825), 2:27.

⁶ Marble, "To Red River," *Harper's*, Oct. 1860, p. 588.

⁷ Ross, *Red River Settlement*, 243, 260.



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