

## THE BUFFALO HUNT OF THE PLAINS CREE

As told by: Joy Asham

My role was not to come until later, for now, the young men of the community were doing their thing. The closest translation to what they were called is "Warrior" although making war was not their calling. The Warriors were men of special honour: their job was to ensure that the core values of the group were met in all aspects of daily life. They were responsible for monitoring the behaviour of others and taking steps, when needed, to pass on lessons of survival and respect. Today they were off to seek the Buffalo, it was time for the Hunt.

The most prestigious and dangerous position in the settlement was held by the Poundmaker. He was the head of the Hunt and was responsible for its success or failure. He was technician, teacher, leader and was full of Courage. Once a herd's location was identified his work began in earnest. He observed the weather, the wind and determined how much and how fast the Buffalo needed to be turned to bring them to the Pound.

Everyone participated in the building of the Pound and the Drive Lines that would lead Brother Bison to it. The Pound was round, constructed of the heaviest materials found on the Plains: rocks, wood and rubble built to a height to contain the beasts. Two openings were left in the circle: one for the Buffalo to be led into the structure and a smaller one directly opposite. The latter would be closed with a loose wood frame, over which Buffalo flint hides were placed. A flint hide is one that has not been tanned, it makes a crinkly sound when brushed against, a sound that the short-sighted bison was attracted to but did not like. Because of their bad eyesight, Brother Buffalo might still approach the hide, thinking it was another Buffalo, but then the rustling would turn them away. This opening was placed so that once the herd was captured, the Creator could enter and take His pick.

From the other side, the opening was actually the end of Drive Lines. These lines often extended out up to 25 miles, wherever the herd lurked on the prairie. The Drive Lines were constructed out of various materials which formed a funnel shape between them, the largest opening being nearest the Buffalo, the small one leading into the Pound. Nearest the Pound the construction was strongest: often these, too, were made with stone and wood and earth. Then the further out these funnel arms extended, the less heavily constructed they were but along the way they were personned with older and younger people, waiting on signal from the Poundmaker to set afire small piles of grasses. The smoke would turn the herd.

This is why it was so important for the Poundmaker to accurately know the wind and weather. He needed to know in what direction the smoke would range and

how this would turn the Buffalo. His job was just beginning. He would prepare himself. He gave thanks to the Creator for the opportunity to help feed his village, he cleansed himself with smudging of Sacred Grasses, and he also donned a flint Buffalo hide.

Taking rattle and drum and song into the herd, the Poundmaker joined the Buffalo. He looked kind of special: he had two heads (his own and the one from the hide) and strange rustling skin. The other buffalo would be drawn to him, yet keep their distance. And he would charm them. He would dance and rustle and lead until all the herd would follow him, deep into the Drive Lines on the way to the pound.

Every once in a while there might be a stray. To stop this Brother, the Poundmaker would signal to a drive line helper and grasses would begin to smudge the air and turn the Buffalo back in the right direction. Bit by bit the drive lines closed behind the animals and they entered into the pound.

The drive line opening would then be closed and the Buffalo fell captive. They would not be killed as yet, as the Warriors had more work to do. They counted the animals and accounted for their size and figured out the resources each would supply. Around the fire that night they would determine the distribution of the beasts: who was sick and old and needed the extra richness of organ meats? Who had to feed the most people? Who needed Buffalo robes for clothes or for their lodge? They determined all these things so that the Hunt would take care of all needs and that the meat harvest would be fair.

There was only one person who was not considered in the division of the beasts. That was the Poundmaker. It was Honour enough for him to have led a successful hunt. He did not do it for personal gain.

In the morning the herd would be counted again. The Old Ones tell me that the count was always missing one or two, as the Creator had entered through the Flint Hide opening and taken His share. This presented no real problem, in fact was a further sign of success and the Warriors had taken this into consideration when they had determined the portioning out of the buffalo resources.

Then the killing would begin. Even after the coming of the Winchester, buffalo in pounds were seldom killed with bullets. One didn't particularly want a stampede of a zillion tons of meat running through the Pound. The lance and the arrow and sometimes the knife were used to put them down as speedily as possible, wishing them no harm or pain. Prayers of thanks would be given at this time: thanks to the Creator for the opportunity for the village to endure another year, and profound gratitude to the Great Buffalo herd. You have given to us life, it has cost you yours, but be sure that we will use it all, not waste and we Honour you for this great sacrifice.

The Poundmaker and the Warriors were almost done. It is my turn. Myself and the rest of the women take care of the butchering. We skin, butcher, cut up and haul the beasts to the distribution area. The families come and claim their share, again with much thanksgiving. The Warriors oversee this and ensure that everyone gets what they need.

What of the Poundmaker? He has led an Honourable and successful hunt but how will he live? And then they come from their lodges, all of them. They bring him the steaks and roasts and the cuts of meat that they know he loves and needs. They express their Gratitude and Respect for him in this way, knowing that in the greatest Humility he would never ask.

I somehow think that this must have been a very good system: the workers determining the boss's salary. Meeqwetch,

As told by the Plains Cree Elders, Echo Valley, Saskatchewan (circa 1972)  
to Joy Asham

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