

The Plains Indians and the Bison

The buffalo was the department store of the Plains Indian. The flesh was food, the blood drink, skins furnished wigwams, robes made blankets and beds, dressed hides supplied moccasins and clothing, hair was twisted into ropes, rawhide bound tools to handles, green hides made pots for cooking over buffalo-chip fires, hides from bull's necks made shields that would turn arrows, ribs were runners for dog-drawn sleds, small bones were awls and needles, from hooves came glue for feathering arrows, from sinews came thread and bow- strings, from horns came bows, cups and spoons, and even from gall stones a "medicine" paint was made. When the millions of buffalo that roamed the prairies were exterminated the Plains Tribes were starved into submission. A few herds saved the buffalo from extinction and there are now more than 22,000 in North American game preserves.-Historical marker on US-50 at Garden City , Finney County

At least nine tribes of Plains Indians, such as the Sioux-and Comanche, were nomads who depended almost entirely upon the buffalo, but they killed no more than what they could use -- usually less. To several other tribes, like the Pawnee and Kansas, who lived in villages and grew corn, tobacco and other crops, the buffalo was less essential. That was even more true of the eastern "woodland" Indians.

The typical Plains tribes attempted little agriculture and made no pottery. Their culture, including their religion and mythology, was based wholly upon the bison which furnished them with food, clothing, weapons, tools, utensils and shelter. Their teepee was a conical framework of long slender poles covered with dressed buffalo hides. They used every part of the animal. Its flesh was their chief food, supplemented by berries, edible roots, and by corn obtained from other tribes. The tongue was a delicacy and the liver was eaten raw. The surplus meat was dried into "jerky" to be eaten in emergencies or pulverized and mixed with tallow, marrow and berries to make pemmican. The brains were used in preparing skins for robes, moccasins, leggings, shirts, parfleches (items made from skins) and bags. Buffalo hides were stretched over the frames of saddles, shields, and the tub-like "bullboats" for crossing rivers. Spoons and other articles were made from the horns which, with the hoofs, also furnished glue. Small bones were used for needles and awls; larger ones for weapons; shoulder blades for hoes. Buffalo droppings or "chips " were the principal fuel on those treeless plains.

The wholesale slaughter of the bison began after the Civil War, at first for their meat -- of which only the tongue, hump and hindquarters were used. During the 70's and early 80's, millions were killed for their hides alone, and the carcasses left to rot. As the railroads penetrated the West, they advertised cheap excursions for "sportsmen" who liked to see how many buffalo they could kill in one day. Eventually the bones, which in many areas covered the plains as far as one could see, were gathered by nesters (homesteaders), and a strange wild breed of men called "bonepickers", shipped East, and used for fertilizer or to

make charcoal for refining sugar. Then there was nothing left of the buffalo but a memory. In 1900 there were only about 800 left alive.

The Indians bitterly resented this destruction which meant the end of their way of life. There were years of terrible massacres and bloody warfare, especially with the Comanche and the Sioux. Their ultimate defeat was hastened by the extermination of the buffalo, urged and aided by Gen. Phil Sheridan and the U. S. Army.