

# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Six

## The Vanishing Buffalo

### LESSON IDEA

To learn how the Indian was defeated, utterly and humiliatingly, not in open battle but by private slaughter of his source for food and shelter: the buffalo.

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**H**UGE AND SHAGGY, with high shoulders, matted manes, and tough, thick hides, the buffalo of the Great Plains were majestic creatures. There were perhaps as many as sixty million in western America at one time, congregating in herds of one or two million during the autumn, then fragmenting into small units for winter grazing, spring calving, and summer mating. Each herd was commanded and disciplined by a lead bull who had gained his position, and kept it, by fighting off all contenders.

These herds were a nation of nomads, powerful and well ordered. Even the wolves kept their distance. But not so the Indians, who knew the value of a buffalo hide on a freezing winter day, and the importance of the ton of meat that could be brought down with a few well-aimed arrows.

It was a relatively easy matter for Indian hunters on horseback to move in on a herd of milling buffalo and cut down a few of the young cows. Even without horses, skilled hunters could outwit the buffalo by maneuvering them toward a cliff and stampeding them into a suicidal leap. No amount of bellowing or braking action by the beasts reaching the edge first could stop such a stampede, as the lead animals were pushed over by those behind them. "Then those that had done the pushing," says

James Michener in *Centennial*, "were hurled over by those behind. Thus the great herd committed suicide, animals weighing almost a ton crashing down on those heaped up below, breaking necks and legs and backbones, and all marked by billows of dust and pitiful bellowing."

While hundreds of buffalo might be killed in such a skilled maneuver, only the tender young cows would be completely butchered. Tongues might be taken from others for ceremonial purposes, or perhaps just the softer cuts around the hump. Some portions of stronger-flavored meat from older animals were always needed to flavor pemmican, a winter ration that was made from buffalo intestines. With such huge herds roaming the plains, the Indians were not worried about the great beasts ever becoming extinct.

On a hunt, the Indians butchered their game where it fell. If they had horses, they loaded the pack animals with the meat, hanging it "like thick red blankets between the fresh hides, with the marrow bones tied on top," according to Mari Sandoz, author of *Crazy Horse*. If they had no horses, they packed the meat on a travois, an A-shaped wooden carrying frame (pulled by dogs or women), which dragged in the dust. Back in camp, the women cut the freshly butchered meat into thin, flat strips and hung it on drying racks to be cured by the sun and wind.

Why was such "curing" necessary? What would have happened to the Indians' meat supply if it had not been cured? [Discuss, if you wish, some of the

