

# Buffalo Harvest

by Frank Mayer & Charles Roth (1958)

Charles Roth first interviewed Frank Mayer in 1932. Frank was born in 1850 in LA & died in 1954 in CO. After the civil war was over young men were broke & looking for adventure. The wild frontier was waiting with walking gold (bison hides at \$3 each). The northern herds were in ND, SD, MT & WY. The southern herds were in NE, KS, OK & CO. Bison couldn't be domesticated or fenced in. They have poor eye sight, hearing & smell; and they are not too smart.

The army would give free ammunition to buffalo hunters. An Army officer said: "Either the buffalo or the Indians must go. Only when the Indian becomes absolutely dependent on us for his every need, will we be able to handle him." He's too independent with the buffalo. But if we kill the buffalo, we conquer the Indians. It seems a more humane thing to kill the buffalo than the Indian, so the buffalo must go."

He worked for other hunting teams for a few years before going out on his own. He thought he would make more money than he actually did. It cost \$650 for the big wagon with 12 mules to haul hides; and \$400 for the small wagon with 6 mules for a camp wagon. \$400 for a good buffalo horse (he trained his to lie down while he was shooting so they wouldn't be seen by the Indians & buffalo). His rifle was \$125.

Some liked the Remington .44-70 rifle, but he liked the Smart .40-90-450 with a 30"-20x scope. That was 44/1000 diameter hole bored into the barrel with 90 grains of powder & 450 grain plug. It weighed 12#. Later, his favorite was the Smart "Old Reliable" (.45-120-550) weighed 16#. Only 2000 of them were made & he paid \$238 in 1875. He would buy English powder because it required less cleaning of the gun. It cost more, but was worth it. He used 1-part tin (hardness to penetrate) & 16 parts lead (soft to mushroom out).

If the lead cow is injured the others gather around her, then they can be dropped one at a time. A shot in the neck from 300-400 yds would kill them. It seems inhumane to use the wrong bullet or hit the wrong area and it was a waste of ammo. Factory ammo cost 25 cents each with paper cartridges, but his hand made cost half that (with stretched antelope his cartridges).

He only shot as many bison as his skinners could do that day. The 150# wet skins would be pegged out on the ground to dry in the sun. The 30# dry hides would be rolled up in groups of ten for market. The wagon would haul 6000-9000 pounds at a time. If they didn't dry right, they would go bad.

He would shoot the buffalo in the early morning; the skinners would work all day on them. Then he would scout out for tomorrow. The early years were easier, but then it got harder to find the bison.

Bison migrated north to avoid the summer heat & south to avoid the winter cold. And he followed them along nine rivers & their streams (Brazos, Red, Cimarron, Canadian, Arkansas, Solomon, Republic, Platte & Niobrara).

The prairie is honey-combed with prairie dog holes which is extremely dangerous for a running horse. He was dozing in the saddle when he was caught in a stampede, but his horse was able to get him out to safety. The 2<sup>nd</sup> time he heard thunder on a cloudless day. Realizing a stampede was coming directly for his camp they opened fire at a single point 400 yds out diverting the bison around them. They fired 48 shots in 5 minutes, killing 37 (including 5 silks). One in 1000 hides are so soft they feel like silk & sell for \$30 each.

His profits in 1872 were \$2900; '73 = \$3100; '74 = \$3124. By then he was selling meat as well, but it was already getting harder. In '72 one hide out of 3 kills would reach market; '73 = 1:2; '74 = 1:1.25. Two million buffalo were killed a year in '72 & '73. But by '74 it dropped to half a million.

Indians realized the importance of the buffalo and attacked often, but their arrows were no match for white man's rifles. Charley Jones (ex buffalo hunter) roped bison claws and took them to his ranch to save from extinction.

At first the market only wanted the hides, but as pioneers moved west there was more need for meat. Wolves thrived on the dead carcasses. Then new hunters poisoned the carcasses, skinned them & sold the hides for \$1 each. Then men came for the bones to be ground up into fertilizer.

Frank moved to CO, married & hunted for miners & did well. He lived to be 104.