

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 3: "A Cheyenne Odyssey"

The Buffalo Harvest

In this posthumous memoir, Frank Meyer recounts the widespread slaughter of the American bison---commonly referred to as the buffalo---in the early 1870s. Mayer describes the "still-hunt" method of buffalo hunting in which hunters positioned at a distance shot and killed entire herds by targeting the female cow leader.

Methods

Early hunters used to run the buffalo down on horseback, following the example of the Indian, who always hunted that way. It was fun. But it wasn't profitable. Then some unnamed genius discovered the professional way to harvest the buffalo....He probably made his discovery by accident. His discovery was simply this: if you wounded the leader, didn't kill her outright, the rest of her herd, whether it was three or thirty, would gather around her and stupidly "mill" -- which means poke her with their horns, strike at her with their hooves, and just generally lose their heads when they smelled her blood. When they were milling they didn't think of anything else. Buffalo, as I have indicated, were not notorious for their ability to think clearly on any subject. Now they were completely bewildered.

And all you had to do, as a runner, was pick them off one by one, making sure you made a dropping kill at every shot, until you wiped out the entire herd. Then you went to another and repeated the process. Do you see anything sporting about that? It was sheer murder. Yet that is the way we did it, we brave and glorious runners, who swaggered into frontier shipping towns and made boardwalks ring with the sound of our leather heels and the tinkle of our spurs.

Buffalo Runners

Buffalo running as a business got started around 1870; I got into it in 1872, when the rampage was at its height. The whole Western country went buffalo-wild. It was like a gold rush or a uranium rush. Men left jobs, businesses, wives and children, and future prospects to get into buffalo running. They sold whatever they had and put the money into outfits, wagons, camp equipment, rifles and ammunition. I needn't talk. I did it myself. And why not? There were uncounted millions of the beasts -- hundreds of millions, we forced ourselves to believe. Their hides were worth \$2 to \$3 each, which was a lot of money in 1872. And all we had to do was take these hides from their wearers. It was a harvest. We were the harvesters.

Source: Mayer, Frank w. and Charles B. Roth, *The Buffalo Harvest*, Sage Books, 1958.

<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/resources/archives/five/buffalo.htm>

