

THE LAST OF THE  
BUFFALO HUNTERS

Philip Henry Godsell

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# THE LAST OF THE BUFFALO HUNTERS

By PHILIP HENRY GODSELL, F.R.G.S.

*Thirty years ago Mr. Godsell embarked from London on the Hudson's Bay Company's ship THE PELICAN to seek adventure among the Indians. For three decades he has lived, traded and traveled with every tribe between Labrador and Alaska, the Great Lakes and the Pacific Coast. In this article he tells about his friends, the Assinaboins, who dwell in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies.—Editorial Note*

The annual gathering of the Assinaboin tribe was under way. Again, as of old, the painted lodges of the tribe arose in the conventional camp circle upon a velvety green meadow fringed with lordly pines and backed by the snow-capped escarpment of Cascade Mountain. From far and near they had come, grizzled old buffalo hunters, bucks, squaws and papooses, by saddle horse, travois and wagon until nearly a thousand of them were camped on the outskirts of Banff, in

the heart of the Canadian Rockies, with their pony herds and camp equipment.

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In the heart of the Canadian Rockies near Banff, the Assinaboin Indians gather for their annual reunion. Aging warriors relive in imagination those spacious days when their tribe was mighty and bisons roamed the plain by the thousands. (*Canadian Pacific Railway*)

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Reclining upon a springy couch of aromatic balsam boughs within the large and commodious lodge of Chief Calf Child, medicine man and mystic of the Northern Assinaboin or Stoney tribe, I listened as he told of raids and buffalo hunts of by-gone days.

"Hi! Hi! *O-ke-mow*, those were great days when *pi-zi*, the buffalo, darkened those plains over which we crossed to come here!" For a moment the old fellow had forgotten his greying locks; he seemed to be living in that carefree past, so near and yet so far away. It was the old, inevitable lament over the passing of the red man's friend—the buffalo. Always you heard it when these old buffalo hunters got together.

"Tonight we eat buffalo ribs and marrow fat," he continued, lifting a coal from the fire and dropping it within the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. "But this time we shall not be killing them with our arrows; we shall be accepting the white man's bounty. They are giving us two of those poor animals they keep imprisoned within wire ropes near the big stone lodge where the rich come to play ... A-eee! when I look at those buffalo there is only sorrow in my heart. Often have I led my ponies to the fort at Beaver Hills (Fort Edmonton) laden down

with the finest pemmican to keep the whites from starving. Always did I consider them my friends. Yet, today, they own the land—everything. Even the wild game are theirs!"

With the gift of a few plugs of black tobacco, and the assurance that the meat of captive buffalo would probably taste the same, I succeeded in bringing a smile to the face of the old chieftain, then strolled out among the lodges to renew acquaintance with sturdy Walking Buffalo, tribal councilor, with Wolf Teeth and Jacob Two-Young-Men, a junior chief and head of the Chinequay Stoneys. The bright sunlight flashed white upon the painted lodges, upon heraldic designs in greens, reds and blacks of buffalo heads, flying eagles and predatory Thunder Birds.

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*Public Archives of Canada*

### CAMP OF THE BUFFALO HUNTERS

In the late seventies when this picture was painted, the Assinaboin Indians were finding it increasingly difficult to secure food, clothing and shelter from the rapidly dwindling buffalo herds. The old horse *travois* has given place to the more efficient Red River cart.

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There was life and movement all about me. Strong-backed squaws were busy with their camp duties: erecting lodges,

scraping skins, hauling water from a crystal creek that splashed down from the mountain, and bringing in huge piles of brush and firewood on their backs. Piled upon tripods of poles beside the smoke-stained tepees was a heterogeneous collection of dried meat, pack-saddles, gaudy rugs, pots, rifles and snow-white buckskin. Mounted riders were continually coming and going always at a gallop, their plaited locks flying in the wind.

I was looking upon the last remnant of a once powerful tribe, a tribe whose history is inextricably linked with the geographical discovery and commercial exploitation of the West. It was the Assinaboin tribe who escorted the first Hudson's Bay man, Henry Kelsey, to the rolling prairies of the West in the summer of 1690. It was this same tribe, allied with the Crees, who came spilling out of the forests to the northward and drove the peerless Blackfeet from the rich buffalo pastures of Manitoba and Saskatchewan with "detonating bows" secured from the white traders of Hudson Bay. But the feature that especially binds the Assinaboins to ourselves is the three centuries of unswerving friendship preserved between themselves and the English—a friendship that did not waver even in the most trying moments.

Back in pre-European days, before intruding palefaces had commenced to revolutionize aboriginal life with muskets, rum and gunpowder, a million and a quarter copper-skinned aborigines roamed the six million square miles of forest, mountain, stream and prairie that make up the continent of North America. Yet, with all this elbow room, the scattered bands of red men could not live in peace. Kindred tribes fought for the very love of fighting, imbued with that



predatory spirit which is by no means foreign to civilized nations. Frequently whole tribes would be disrupted and dispersed over some trivial domestic quarrel such as the shooting of a dog or the abduction of a comely squaw.

During the epoch preceding the arrival of Europeans, a warlike race, exceeding forty thousand in number and called by their Algonquin enemies the *Nadowe-es-iv*—a name which French-Canadians subsequently corrupted into Sioux—was emerging from the forests of Minnesota upon the plains. Nomad hunters of buffalo, they were constantly in motion. The horse had not yet put in an appearance and the difficulties of transportation prevented them from acquiring much in the way of material possessions. Women and dogs were the burden carriers, as they still are among the roving Athabascans to the northward. The exigencies of travel necessitated economy in movable property; even the lodges were very small, and movements circumscribed in range.

Then came the horse, the "divine dog," as the Indians called it. In 1540 Hernando Cortes landed in Mexico, bringing the first horses. Twenty-one years later Francisco Vasquez Coronado rode northward across the Rio Grande, exploring the unknown West as far as Kansas, with two hundred and sixty mounted men. From these expeditions came the wild horses, which were to completely revolutionize the West and give to it that picturesqueness it would otherwise have lacked.

The acquisition of these "divine dogs" broadened all fields of aboriginal activity. Soon the Sioux were brought into open conflict with tribes known to them heretofore only by tradition. With improved transportation facilities their lodges

became larger, their possessions more extensive, and their spirit more aggressive and intolerant. It was during this period of transition that the Assinaboins and the parent body of Sioux ceased to see eye to eye and separated, the former sweeping northward to the deep pine forests of the Lake Nipigon and Lake of the Woods region. That the separation had occurred prior to 1640, when the first mention of the Sioux is made in the writing of the Jesuits, is obvious, since in the "Relation" of that year separate mention is made of the Assinaboins.

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*Canadian Pacific Railway*

### CHIEF CALF CHILD

Medicine man and mystic, Chief Totanka Chinka, or Calf Child, was visited by the Great Spirit while in a trance and given a mandate to drive the white man from the plains and bring back the buffalo. Previously he had concluded a treaty of peace with the Great Mother (Queen Victoria). The medal on his breast was given to him on that occasion.

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But the Assinaboins were not satisfied to remain a woodland tribe, living principally on fish. Those mighty herds of buffalo that rolled almost ceaselessly across the prairies to the westward acted as a magnet to them, as they did to other forest tribes. Thus the Assinaboins emerged upon the grassy plains of Manitoba and met the vanguard of the Cree migration sweeping down from the dismal muskegs of Hudson Bay. They did not fight, as might have been expected. Instead, they joined forces and formed an enduring alliance in order to present a united front against the war-like Blackfeet whom they found already arrayed against them; determined, it seemed, to keep for themselves the lush buffalo pastures that rolled westward towards the mountains.

The appearance, late in the seventeenth century, of the palisaded forts of the Hudson's Bay Company upon the western shores of Hudson Bay proved propitious to the plans of Crees and Assinaboins alike—a fact that the astute Radisson had not overlooked when, in 1682, he established York Factory at the mouth of the Hayes River, a river that drained from Lake Winnipeg and afforded an excellent highway for canoes. Securing muskets and powder from the English the allied tribes thus gained control over the waterways leading to the English forts and quickly proved to the astonished Blackfeet the overwhelming superiority of firearms over flint-tipped spears, stone mauls and bows and arrows. Remorselessly, yet not without savage opposition, they drove the Blackfeet westward.

Gathering to the number of fifteen hundred or more each summer upon the low, willow-fringed shores of the Dirty Water Lake (Lake Winnipeg) the Assinaboins and their Cree

allies erected their skin tepees, lean-to huts and birchbark wigwams until they extended for miles against the somber background of dark green pines. Here braves hunted deer and moose, jerked the meat, stored it in bales or parfleche bags, and made preparations for their eight hundred mile journey to York Factory, along the route that was to become the future highway for fur traders and Red River settlers alike.

To the vociferous barking of scores of wolfish curs, and the shrill farewell cries of squaws, five hundred yellow birchbarks, each manned by a pair of dusky paddlers, swept out upon the tossing waters. Raising aloft their painted paddles the crews emitted sonorous whoops, while behind them the very forests seemed to belch forth flame and smoke as the older warriors saluted them with repeated discharges of their flintlocks. Thus did the annual trading expedition depart from Lake Winnipeg with their packs of prime beaver pelts to exchange them with the English of Hudson Bay for still more arms and ammunition with which to carry on their war against the hated Blackfeet.

Three weeks after their departure the frowning stockades of York Factory arose before their gaze and cannons boomed out a thunderous welcome. The factor regaled them with ship's biscuit, salt pork and watered rum, then the calumet was drawn from its sacred wrappings of otter fur and scarlet cloth, lighted, pointed to the four cardinal points and the zenith and passed from mouth to mouth with ponderous solemnity. Finally the business of bartering took place.

As a special mark of esteem the chief would receive the gift of a scarlet military coat, resplendent with gold braid and

epaulettes, and perhaps a beaver hat. Thus gorgeously arrayed, oblivious to the fact that his lower limbs were naked save for paint, and that a breechclout formed hardly a fitting adjunct to a military uniform, the sachem would strut like a peacock before his assembled tribesmen.

Although they were located in the Jesuit Relation of 1658 in the vicinity of Lake Alimibeg (Nipigon), and on De L'Isle's map of 1703 around Rainy Lake, by the beginning of the nineteenth century the Assinaboins already overran the plains, being estimated by Alexander Henry at two thousand fighting men, or approximately ten thousand people.

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### IN FULL REGALIA

Today the Indian loves a colorfully caparisoned horse as much as ever, and the black and white pinto is still his favorite. Some of the Assinaboins' horses are said to be descended from those brought by the conqueror Cortes to Mexico in 1540.

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Divorced from their woodland culture their whole lives now revolved around the buffalo. The meat provided food, the brain was used for tanning, the hides were manufactured into robes or were divested of their hair, tanned and made into tepee covers, clothing, moccasins, parfleche trunks and shields. The sinews were converted into thread, the hoofs provided glue, while even the stomach was used for cooking

food in. It was from their method of cooking food in a green hide sunk in a hole in the ground, and by dropping red-hot stones into the water to bring it to a boil, that the Assinaboins derived their name of Assinibwat, or Stone Boilers, to be known later as Stoneys.

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*Public Archives of Canada*

#### EVILS OF CIVILIZATION

George Catlin, a wandering artist who spent eight years among the Assinaboins a century ago, here depicts the effects of civilization upon the red men. On the left is Wi-jun-jon, chief of the Assinaboins, before he left for Washington to interview the President. On the right he is shown after his return, the inevitable flask of whiskey in his pocket.

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George Catlin, a wandering artist who spent eight years among the Assinaboins a century ago, here depicts the effects of civilization upon the red men. On the left is Wi-jun-jon, chief of the Assinaboins, before he left for Washington to interview the President. On the right he is shown after his return, the inevitable flask of whiskey in his pocket. (*Public Archives of Canada*)

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The buffalo hunt was by no means a haphazard affair. The direction of the wind, the topography of the country, the cover for approach, all had to be carefully taken into consideration by those in charge. While scouts were sent out to locate the herd, the entire band remained under the control of the Dog Soldiers, or camp police, whose duty it was to restrain the hot-headed youths from dashing forward prematurely and thus stampeding the herd. The corrective methods were drastic, a brutal drubbing from the cutting quirts of the Dog Soldiers.

At last the expected sign was given. Flailing arms brought rawhide quirts across the flanks of the ponies with reports like rifle shots. In a scattering of clods of earth and clouds of dust, to the accompaniment of thudding hoofs and the odor of sweating horseflesh, the naked hunters would surge like a tidal wave across the intervening ridges and swoop down upon their prey. The slaughter over, the squaws would descend upon the field of carnage with their sharp buffalo knives, identifying the carcasses of the buffalo slain by their lords and masters by the markings on the arrow shafts. In a remarkably short time the deft slashes from their knives would reduce the mountains of flesh to gleaming bones and piles of raw, red meat. There would follow days and nights of feasting upon roasted ribs and marrow fat, upon tender

tongues and humps, while the joyous throbbing of the tom-toms would continue interminably within the lodges.

The meat that could not immediately be consumed was cut into flakes and jerked on racks in the sun, and the grease preserved by melting it and pouring it into skin bladders. Shredded into small particles the coarsest meat was packed into rawhide bags, melted grease was added, and sometimes berries, and thus, in the familiar form of pemmican, it would keep indefinitely—a concentrated, nutritious and easily transported food.

The best and lightest of the skins taken during the hunt were laid aside by the squaws to be manufactured into tepee covers. These were pegged out upon the grass, flesh side up, and three or four squaws removed the superfluous flesh and tissue with sharp stones. The skin was turned over, the hair removed by scraping with an elkhorn tool and the underskin removed. After a mixture of brains and liver had been spread over the surface the skins were folded into bundles and left for four or five days. Then they were laced taut over a framework of stout poles, washed thoroughly, then cleaned and rubbed with sandstone until quite soft. Finally they were pulled backwards and forwards over a taut line of braided sinew until they had taken on a soft white tan.

The last procedure in making a tepee cover was to spread the skins upon the ground, cut them to fit, sew them with sinew thread and shape them into the form of the semicircular cover. Smoke flaps and loops were added, while upon the surface was depicted in a variety of bright colors the

accomplishments, history and guardian "medicine" of the master of the lodge.

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*Canadian Pacific Railway*

#### WOLF TEETH

Kaquitts, or Wolf Teeth, one of the younger Assinaboin braves, is seen here in the traditional beaded buckskin and eagle feathers. Originally these elaborate war bonnets were confined to the plains tribes. When the horse was introduced, these bonnets were often lengthened to reach to the feet.

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A special place in the camp circle was reserved for each lodge, thus preserving the political and social divisions and presenting a living picture of tribal organization and responsibilities, while the position of the ceremonial tents with symbolic paintings recalled the religious rites by which the many parts were united in a compact whole. Contact was maintained by an official camp crier who announced in a loud voice matters of import, the approach of buffalo or enemies, and the projected movement of the camp.

The outstanding event of the year, which usually followed the buffalo hunt, was the Sun Dance. Like all the prairie tribes, while ostensibly believing in a Master of Life, the Assinaboins were actually sun worshippers. It is also interesting to recall that, in common with our Polar Eskimos, they have, or rather had, a belief in the transmigration of souls. After death the spirit went to a great river which had to be crossed on the way to the sand hills where it encountered a fierce red buffalo bull who would frequently drive it back and force it to enter the body of a new-born child.

For months before the great sun festival took place it was the leading topic of conversation around the lodge fires. To the Indian the Sun Dance gathering meant, not the self-torture associated with it by the whites, but the renewing of family and tribal ties, being very much to the pagan redskin what Christmas is to the Caucasian race.

From far and near they would assemble with their squaws, papooses and countless dogs; their baggage hauled upon scores and scores of *travois* by shaggy Indian ponies. Soon

hundreds of painted and ornamented tepees would encircle a large, open grass-covered prairie in the center of which arose the skeleton of the Sun Dance lodge awaiting its completion and the sacred center pole.

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CALF CHILD PREPARES HIS HORSE

*Philip H. Godsell*

In his gala costume of buckskin tanned soft as snow and adorned with many-colored beads Chief Calf Child prepares the last details of the elaborate decorations on his "war pony." In imagination he will live again in a past which is irrevocably lost to the Assinaboins. Today the population of the Assinaboins on the reservation near Banff is approximately seven hundred. Perhaps eighteen hundred more are scattered in other parts of Canada and the northwest of the United States.

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Let us, for a moment, transport ourselves in imagination to the heart of one of these prairie gatherings of the past, on the first day of the Sun Dance late in June. As the sun rises towards the zenith the camp becomes tense with suppressed excitement. A pandemonium of wild whoops and the staccato explosion of muskets cleaves the silence of the prairie. Over the ridge comes a surging tide of bronzed humanity and painted horseflesh; a wave of painted, tossing, swaying figures, leaping horses, fluttering eagle feathers and jingling hawk bells. Through the village they sweep, hauling behind them a tall bare cottonwood tree denuded of its branches—the sacred center pole.

His head adorned with ermine cap and buffalo horns, his body daubed with ochre and vermilion, the medicine man gives the signal for the erection of the sacred pole, while a score of Indians throw up bowers of evergreens in which to house the dancers.

The young braves who have decided to demonstrate their courage present themselves to the master of ceremonies. First each Indian smears paint upon his arms and face; then, with a sharp knife, he makes an incision through each breast, first lifting the loose skin with his fingers. Bone skewers are inserted, and to these are attached rawhide lines depending from the top of the sacred center pole. As the drums boom out, mingling with the querulous song of the singers, the young men commence their dance, gazing steadily at the sun, jerking and straining meanwhile upon the thongs in order to break loose the flesh and free themselves, blowing into little bone whistles decorated with quills and ermine skins which they carry twixt their lips.

Not a sign of the agony they are enduring appears upon their painted faces, though the sweat of anguish glistens upon their bodies. When at last the ligaments are wrenched apart and they stagger, half-fainting, from the enclosure, it is sufficient reward to see the admiring looks of relatives and to catch the flashing glances from sloe-eyed belles who flock around calling all to witness the strong-heartedness of their brothers or their sweethearts.

The third, and last, night develops into a general celebration. The camp becomes one huge blaze of incandescence, the tepees resembling so many large, colored, cone-shaped Chinese lanterns as the pine faggots crackle within, while the fragrant odor of roasting dog-meat or steaming venison is borne upon the evening air. All visit from lodge to lodge and feast with rare impartiality. Dignified old warriors, bearing the scars of battle or Sun Dance torture, joke amiably with olive-skinned young squaws gay in their white embroidered and beaded buckskin, poking gnarled fingers into the ribs of squirming bits of red humanity who wonder, no doubt, what the fuss is all about.

But a paternal Dominion Government, anxious to eradicate everything that tended to keep the Indian still an Indian, put its foot down thirty years ago on the Sun Dance, the pivot around which both the spiritual and social life of the plains tribes revolved. Now it may be seen annually, but in an emasculated form, among the Assinaboins, the Crees and Blackfeet.

In 1841, after a scourge of smallpox, Sir George Simpson estimated the Assinaboin population at four thousand and

sixty. In the ensuing years there followed that ruthless slaughter of the buffalo to the southward, encouraged by American army officers as the most effective means of bringing the insurgent Sioux, Cheyennes, Kiowas and Arapahoes to their knees. By the late seventies its repercussions were being severely felt upon the Canadian prairies. Starving and angry, Blackfeet, Crees and Assinaboins vainly roamed the plains in search of the buffalo they were convinced were being prevented from coming northward by their enemies to the south.

It needed only the silver and persuasive tongue of Louis Riel, with his specious promises to bring back the buffalo and make the West a land of hunters, to fan these red embers of rebellion into flame. It was a trying time for all in Western Canada. At any moment the restive and untamed Blackfeet might smear the yellow ochre of war upon their faces, sing the war song and drench the West with blood. Yet throughout this difficult transitory period the already partly Christianized Assinaboins, under the friendly guidance of the Reverend John McDougall, remained steadfast in their friendship with the whites. Later, in 1884-85, in contrast to other tribes, who were opposing the laying of the fire-wagon trail across the prairies, the Assinaboins rendered invaluable assistance to the engineers of the Canadian Pacific Railway in helping them to locate passes and survey its now famous right-of-way through the Rocky Mountains.

Among Crees, Sioux, Blackfeet and other tribes alike the desire for the old free life found expression towards the close of the nineteenth century in prophets, ghost dances and bloodshed, while the same feeling took possession of a part of



the Assinaboins not long ago, though in a milder form. Upon the shoulders of my old friend, Chief Calf Child, now deceased, fell the burden of devising some mysterious means of dissipating the hordes of whites who had crowded the Indians from the ranges, and of calling back the buffalo. A mystic himself, Calf Child went into a trance and beheld a vision. From behind a silver cloud appeared the Great Spirit. "You must sleep on a mountain four successive nights," He commanded. "The thunder will roll over your head, and each time you will daub white paint upon your cheeks. Then you will return to your people, heal their diseases and restore the old religion of prayer and burnt offerings and the incense of the medicine pipe, now so fallen into decay through Christian teachings that the Indians have lost both their courage and their earlier power!"

Acting upon these spiritual instructions Calf Child hired drummers, taught them the song the Great Spirit had revealed to him, daubed white paint upon his face and clothes, painted the Thunder Bird upon his blanket as a sign of the source of his mandate, and held a public dance. With his breath alone he appeared to heal the sick brought to him from far and near. His fame spread like a prairie fire. Each patient whom the prophet cured brought him an eagle feather to wear in his war-bonnet when the thunder rolled, and daubed his own cheeks with white paint so that the thunder would pass him by.

Many were wearing similar feathers only a few years ago, thereby acknowledging Calf Child as their spiritual leader. But the buffalo failed to return, or the white race mysteriously to melt away; Chief Calf Child is gone and this last revolt

against Christianity went the way of Sitting Bull's Ghost Dance and similar aboriginal attempts to conjure back the lost freedom of bygone days.

Each year the lofty Cascade Mountain sees the friendly Assinaboins return in diminishing numbers to the scenes of their carefree and unhampered past. And each year, as the fumes of the *lu-cob-bee* curl up from the bowls of their red-stone pipes to mingle with the wood smoke of the tepee fires, aged warriors and buffalo hunters are transported back in imagination to those happy days when the pony herds filled the valleys and the bison roamed the plains.

[The end of *The Last of the Buffalo Hunters* by Philip Henry Godsell]