BUFFALO HUNTERS: The Hunt (November 1866)
By: Bob Fincham

I was scouting ahead of my partner, John Carter, in search of buffalo. We had been traveling along the border between Nebraska Territory and the Dakota Territory for almost a month without spotting a lone bull, let alone any herd.

Each day I scouted and marked a trail, which Carter followed with our freight wagon. We had a team of four mules, and we were in no big hurry. Making a lot of dust as we traveled could be a big problem because we were in Sioux Territory.

Several times we did see small parties of Cheyenne. They caused us little concern since we had been given a special belt by Laughing Wolf, a Cheyenne Dog Soldier. It said we were friends of the Cheyenne. Word had also gotten around that I was his blood brother.

So long as we hunted buffalo for meat and hides, the Cheyenne tolerated us. The Sioux were another matter altogether. Although the Cheyenne and Sioux were allied against the United States Army in Wyoming Territory, that alliance did not always hold in the Nebraska and Dakota Territories. I did not want to try and use the belt Laughing Wolf had given me with the Sioux since they killed buffalo hunters on sight.

As I sat on my horse, scanning the distant horizon, I saw no signs of any activity until Carter came into view off to the east. It was getting late in the day, and I had found a good campsite about a mile south of here, so I waited for Carter to catch up. Today we would set up camp together. Usually, I marked a site along my scouted route and returned to it close to dark, after the site had been set up and a fire started.

When Carter came within spitting distance, he said, “Did you see anything worthwhile today? I be tired of eatin’ antelope and rabbit for the last month.”

“Nary a sign of anything useful,” I replied.

“I would’ve thought that any man who could handle the job of First Sergeant in the Yankee Army and then be called Night Buffalo by the Crow would be able to smell buffalo a hundred miles away.”

Occasionally, Carter liked to point these things out. He would never admit it, but he was jealous that he had been only a private in the Confederate Army. He was upset that the Crows, who gave me the name of Night Buffalo, didn’t acknowledge him in any way. It was ironic, because my being a Negro with a slavery background, was hardly something to be jealous about.

I waited until he stopped the wagon before I said, “I suspect we’ll get plenty of buffalo if we continue moving west. We’re not very far from Fort Laramie in Wyoming Territory. There we can sell the meat to the army and travelers on the Oregon Trail. Hopefully, the Sioux and Cheyenne will be too busy to take much notice of our presence.”

Carter appeared to mull things over in his mind for a minute before saying, “That does make more sense than moving farther north into Dakota Territory. We’ll have buyers close by if’n we go toward the fort. Besides, winter be coming, and the Injuns tend to stay close to their villages during that time of the year.”

“We should make some money this winter,” I said. “We sure didn’t make any in the summer just passed. Summer hides selling for less than a dollar gave hardly enough to pay for
the bullets to get them. Then the heat caused the meat to spoil before we could sell it, except for what we managed to salt or smoke.”

“If’n we hadn’t cut firewood for the steamers on the Missouri,” Carter said, “we wouldn’t have had enough money to buy ammunition and grub. This winter we’ll be getting’ at least three dollars per hide, and the meat will be frozen until we deliver it.”

After scanning the horizon for a minute or two, Carter continued, “You go on ahead and find us a campsite for tonight. If’n we get where the buffalo are settlin’ in for the winter, we’ll have to build a permanent shelter to serve as our base. We can’t be movin’ around when the winter storms hit.”

“I already found a good campsite for tonight about a mile south of here. It is getting late, so we can head there together.” I said.

About a half hour later, we stopped near a small grove of cottonwoods next to a stream. As he unhitched the mules, Carter said, “Y’all picked a good spot to spend the night. I suspects we’ll be here for a while. An early winter storm be comin.”

“How can you tell that. The sun’s been out all day and the weather ain’t been all that cold. Except for some ice and frost in the mornin’.”

“I can feel it in my bones,” Carter replied.

I had learned a lot about Carter during our first summer together and had quickly discovered that his hunches were usually correct. I gathered some extra firewood and rigged a shelter next to the wagon. Then I gave Nightshade some extra oats and secured him along with the mules among the cottonwoods. If it did storm during the night, everyone would be as comfortable as possible.

It started to snow during the night and continued into the next day until about noon. Luckily there was no wind and just a few inches of the white stuff. The water barrel had a layer of ice in it, and the air was quite cold. Since the snow was not very deep and hadn’t drifted, I decided to scout toward the west. We were about sixty miles to the east of Fort Laramie, and I felt confident that we would encounter buffalo at any time.

I had gone about ten miles when I spotted a small buffalo herd off to the south. The wind was in my face, and they had been slowly moving so they did not sense my presence. Circling wide to the east, just out of their view, I rode for about a half mile before topping a rise. That was when I spotted the main herd and smaller scatterings or groups of the hairy beasts in every direction. I had found our winter hunting grounds.

The day was getting late, so I headed back to camp. We would be plenty busy tomorrow. Moving closer to the herds and setting up our winter quarters would take several days. I had spotted a spring about three miles from the buffalo with some cottonwoods nearby. It would make a decent spot. The land was uneven with low hills and gullies and would shelter us.

I arrived back at camp just as Carter was preparing a supper of bacon and beans. Even though we had the same thing night after night, the smell and sound of the sizzling bacon made my mouth water.

As I unsaddled Nightshade and turned him loose to graze, Carter said, “Y’all find anything intrestin’ out there? You do look a bit pleased with yourself.”

“Not much.” I replied, setting my saddle and blanket next to the wagon. “Just a thousand or so buffalo about ten miles east of here.”
I thought he’d get excited, but all he said was, “Any Injun sign around them?”

“Nope. They ain’t bein’ real active and just been grazin’ in the region. They should be there for some time if no other buffalo hunters disturb them,” I said as I started filling a plate with some of the bacon and beans Carter had made.

Carter grabbed a plate for himself and said, “Let’s eat up and get ready to move out right at sunup. We have to find a place to set up for the winter before we start killin’ buffalo.”

“I found a good place just a few miles from the main herd. We can start settin’ up tomorrow.”

As we settled down to eat, Carter said, “It’ll take us a couple of days to set up the base camp. By then, the cold will be settlin’ in and help preserve the hides and meat. We’ll kill some for ourselves right away. We be needin’ the hides for our winter shelter and can stockpile the meat for our use. Wolves shouldn’t be much of a problem for a few months, ‘til they start gettin’ their winter hunger. Injuns will be stayin’ close to home.”

As we settled in for the night, we were almost too excited to sleep. Soon we will start doing what we had planned for nearly six months.

It was cold in the morning, possibly due to the light, but also steady, north wind that had come up during the night. We double-checked our equipment and broke camp at sunrise. By the time the sun had climbed halfway up into the sky we were approaching the place I had marked for our winter camp.

We set up a temporary camp and got our axes and shovels out of the wagon. First, we constructed a dugout about ten feet wide by fifteen feet long in the side of a gently sloping bank. In another week or two, the ground would freeze, and the digging would be a chore. Then we cut some of the cottonwoods growing nearby and laid the logs about every three feet across the top of the dugout, which was about six feet deep at the rear. We made an earthen fireplace and rudimentary chimney and gathered dead branches and logs from the cottonwoods for firewood.

We needed three days to complete the dugout. We planned to use buffalo hides for the roof and the door. We needed to do some hunting.

I had purchased myself a Sharp’s breechloading rifle during the summer from a buffalo hunter who was giving up and heading to California. The Sioux had killed his partners and badly wounded him as he escaped. His rifle had a broken stock, and I was able to get it for a minimal amount of money. I redid the stock and practiced with it to the point where I could hit a man-sized object at a thousand yards.

My Henry stayed in its case. I would use it if Indians or outlaws attacked us. The Sharps was my hunting rifle.

Carter rode one of the mules, and I rode Nightshade as we headed out to locate the buffalo. The land was gently rolling with scattered gullies and ravines. It would be perfect for hunting buffalo. I had checked on the herds a few times as we constructed our camp. They had not moved very far at all.

There was no wind on this first day, and as we crept to the top of a rise, we saw the main herd of a thousand or more buffalo grazing on the prairie grass. Smaller groups were all over the horizon as far as we could see. Carter pointed to a small herd of about ten animals that was some distance from the others. It was also closest to our camp.
“Let’s go for that bunch,” he said. “We should be able to take them without disturbing the others. Since there ain’t no wind, we should have a good hunt.”

We went back to our mounts and rode to a point about a quarter mile from the group. Then we crawled to an observation point about three hundred yards away. Now we had to decide the best method to use to kill most, if not all of them.

Carter studied them for a moment and said, “That one off by itself be the leader of this herd. It appears to be a young bull, and the others are all cows with a few young animals. I’ll kill him first. When I do, the herd will scatter and then come back together. When they come back together, they’ll start to go in one direction as a group. You fire in front of them. They’ll change direction, and then I’ll do the same thing. We’ll do that until they become confused and stop moving. If we get a stand, they’ll all stay put until we shoot every one of them.”

I had heard all of this many times. Since it was my first big hunt, Carter wanted to be sure I remembered. I replied, “No problem on my end.”

My words were hardly out when Carter’s Sharps fired, and the leader dropped to the ground. The herd animals panicked slightly and scattered, each animal running just a few feet. They quickly became confused and bunched up. As they started to drift in one direction, I fired in front of them, just over their heads. They stopped and changed course as a group. Carter fired in the same way, and they moved in another direction. My second shot stopped them, and they became confused. They milled around a bit and then just stood still as if they had no idea what to do. Their leader was down, and the sound of the bullets was new to them. The noise of the rifle shots was distant and did not affect the herd.

Carter fired and a second buffalo dropped. I shot a third, and the animals just stood still. They did not react. We managed to kill all ten members of this small herd without disturbing any other groups or the main herd.

Carter left to get the wagon while I went to work with my skinning knife. These animals were all young, and the heaviest one was less than a thousand pounds. I had several of them skinned by the time Carter drove up with the wagon. As we removed each hide, it was spread out on the ground, fur side down, to dry. These hides weighed up to a hundred pounds when green, dropping to less than thirty pounds when dry. We worked until dark to skin and cut up the animals.

We rolled up the green hides and placed them in the wagon for transport back to camp. When they were secured, we collected meat from each animal. We left most of the meat on each carcass. We just took prime cuts. The tongues provided the choicest meat, and we took them all. Afterward, we cut meat from the humps and strips from the tenderloins. Finally, large chunks of meat were cut from the hindquarters and stored for selling at Fort Laramie.

When we returned to the camp, we settled in for the night and enjoyed a dinner of buffalo tongue cooked in buffalo fat. Carter had filled several small tubs with fat from the dead animals. Their bodies had large amounts of it. It had a pleasant taste when used for cooking, and Carter assured me that it made excellent soup for winter on the plains.

The next morning, we used several of the green hides to cover the roof of our hut, and the skin from the bull became our door for the winter. They would all dry when we heated the dugout. The other hides we unrolled and spread out for drying.
It was midmorning when we went back to the herds. I had spotted another small group of buffaloes that we should be able to take in the same way. More massive herds almost always stampeded when the shooting started. The smaller groups were much easier to trick into a stand.

We repeated what we had done the day before. This time there were almost twenty animals in the herd, and several of them were old bulls. It was dark until we had them all skinned, and the hides packed onto the wagon. The butchering would have to wait until tomorrow. We did remove the tongues and made some more tubs of fat as we did the skinning.

After another night of gluttony and a night of restful sleep, we returned to the site. One of the animals had been fed upon by what appeared to be a wolf pack. The others were untouched by any scavengers. Although the buffaloes had frozen on their surface, we were able to butcher the animals and fill the wagon with meat.

When we returned to camp, Carter said, “We have several tons of prime meat with lots more for the taking. Let’s take this load to Fort Laramie and find out what the market is like this time of the year. We can leave the hides stacked where they are. Wolves won’t come by here what with the smell of humans and the meat we left on the prairie for them. The meat we have for ourselves is mostly frozen and in the hut’s storage area where they can’t get at it.”

“I’d like to see this fort and scout along the trail to make sure it be safe. We can be there and back in a few days.” I said.

“We can also buy a few more things with the money from the meat. Later, when it snows, we will have less chance of goin’ anywhere.” Carter said.

The next morning, we left for Fort Laramie. The wagon was heavily loaded, but it was a sturdy freight wagon pulled by four mules. We wouldn’t have a problem, although it would take longer to get there than it would to return. Fort Laramie was roughly sixty miles to the southeast, and we would be gone nearly a full week. I carried the Henry Rifle and placed my Sharps under the seat of the wagon next to Carter’s.

The nights were bitter cold, and the days were tolerable when the sun shone. After four days of travel, we arrived at the fort and discovered that the Indian activity had kept other hunters away from the region. The army bought all the meat we had and agreed to purchase any more meat we could deliver through spring. We could have gotten a better price from the immigrant trains, but they were all done until next summer.

We loaded the wagon with forage for the mules and oats for Nightshade as well as all kinds of supplies for ourselves. After we secured it in a stable outside the fort, we went to a saloon for some drinks. It was getting dark, and we wanted a bit of relaxation before settling in for the night. The saloon also served food, and we figured that someone else’s cooking might be tasty for a change.

I was mildly surprised to see other customers sitting at one of the tables. Three rough-looking men were sharing a bottle of whiskey. They were quiet when we entered and gave us a hard stare for a few seconds before turning back to their drinking and a game of poker with a crumpled deck of cards.

Leaning my Henry against the bar, and opening my coat, I half-turned to keep an eye on those three while Carter ordered some drinks. The bartender gave him a bottle with two glasses, which we took to a table located next to a solid wall. We sat with our backs to that wall and
watched the activities in the room. I laid the Henry on top of the table. There was a cartridge in the chamber.

The room had six tables and a bar that could handle maybe six men on a good day. There was a double door for entry and a single exit behind the bar for a storage room and a rear entrance. Two of the walls had single windows for summer ventilation that were presently covered by oilcloths. The ceiling was low, and the only decoration in the place was a cracked mirror behind the bar and a few scattered bottles of a dark-colored liquid on a shelf in front of it.

We had hardly settled back to enjoy the whiskey when one of the three men seated opposite us got up and took a paper out of his pocket. He unfolded it and walked over to us.

He spat on the floor and rested his right hand on his pistol as he dropped the paper on the table in front of us. Then he said, “I be lookin’ for a big nigger what be ridin’ a fancy black horse. He be wanted for questionin’ in Alabama about some killin’. I be thinkin’ that you all be that nigger. This here paper says you be worth five hundrert dollars dead or alive.”

Carter picked up the paper and said, “We been huntin’ buffalo in Indian Territory for several years now. Why you be thinkin’ my partner be the man you lookin’ for?”

The man replied, “Y’all do stink like buff’lo hunters.” He made several exaggerated sniffs with his nose and continued. “But I seen that black horse y’all be ridin’. Besides, all niggers look the same, and one will be as good as another for this reward.”

With that, he reached for his gun, and the other two kicked their chairs away as they stood, also reaching for their weapons. Before any of them cleared leather, I shot the nearest one in the belly with my Colt. I had been sitting with it cocked and aimed from under the table. The look of surprise on his face disappeared when I quickly put a second bullet into his chest that threw him backward onto the floor.

Carter had been more exposed and had to draw his pistol while ducking under the table. He was a bit slow, and one of the bounty hunters fired and missed as Carter hit the floor. He did not get off a second shot as the bartender blew him away with his scattergun. It was a nasty looking thing that he kept handy just under the bar.

The third man swung his pistol toward the bartender as I shot him in the side, through both lungs. As he fell, he fired his gun into the floor.

The noise brought the local sheriff into the saloon. He talked to the bartender and then came over to us. He ignored the three dead men as he sat down next to me and said, “Why were these three bounty hunters interested in you?”

“They were lookin’ for some Negro who caused some trouble in Alabama. They thought one was as good as another and wanted to take me back slung over a horse.” I replied.

Carter then added, “We been together for several years now. He ain’t never been to Alabama.”

Turning to the bartender, the sheriff said, “Who started the shootin’, Mack?”

“Them three dead men drew first. One said he didn’t care if the Negro was innocent or not.”

Picking the paper off the table, the sheriff glanced at it and said, “This paper is useless. These three remind me of escaped-slave hunters who used to come into Missouri makin’ all kinds of trouble before the war. I hate to see the town pay to put them in the ground. I ‘spect their guns and horses will pay the expenses.”
Then he yelled over to the bartender, “Mack, I’ll send the doc over to gather them up and get them buried. I’ll use some of the money from their things to pay for damages.”

Turning back to us, he said, “You two are free to continue with your business.”

With that, he crumpled the paper and dropped it on one of the dead men.

Carter looked at me after the sheriff left and said, “You might want to get yourself another horse. You do stand out on the one you got. Besides, I ain’t sure he can take a winter out on the plains.”

I said, “He looks fancy. He’s got a strong heart and great stamina. The winter ain’t gonna bother him, and I doubt anyone else will be comin’ this far north lookin’ for some poor nigger.”

“I think you be right about that. These three was an accident.”

We finished our drinks as some men showed up and dragged the bodies away. The action had given us a bit of an appetite. We asked Mack, the bartender about his food service. It turned out that he had married a Crow woman and she worked in the back making food.

After eating some stew made up of mystery meat, we went to the stable to spend the night. The next morning, we were up before the sun. We wanted to get an early start and figured on a quick breakfast in the saloon before leaving. When we returned from breakfast, the sun was up, and the stable owner was feeding some horses.

He stopped his work and walked over to us as we prepared to leave. He said, “I heard you fellas had some excitement last night.”

“You could say that,” Carter replied while I just stood quietly and watched. We had paid our bill in advance, so I figured he was angling for somethin’.

“The sheriff told me to sell these three horses for whatever I could get for them. The army might give me five dollars apiece. I’d like to offer them to you two first. Especially since you are kind of responsible for them.”

Of the three, one was a buckskin gelding that showed promise. He was a proper height for me at sixteen hands, about the same as Nightshade. Upon closer examination, I saw that he was well-proportioned with a good, deep girth. The knees looked strong, and the feet were sturdy and wide with a good toe. I mounted him without a saddle and put him through some paces. There was no lameness, and he was comfortable to ride. When the stable owner walked him around the corral, the hind legs tracked in line with the front, and he was well-balanced in all movements.

I offered him six dollars, and he countered with ten. I threw in a bucket of buffalo fat, and we had a deal. The saddle and other tack cost me another three dollars, and I had a second horse. We added some more fodder and oats to the load in the wagon and left Fort Laramie by mid-morning.

I decided to ride on the wagon with Carter for the first few miles. Later, I would scout ahead along the trail. We had no sooner left town than he said, “Do y’all need two horses?”

“There be times you might like to have a horse to ride instead of always drivin’ this here wagon. I figure that buckskin be for both of us. Besides, sometimes I might decide to ride him into town instead of Nightshade.”

Carter just grunted a sort of response and shouted some encouragement at the mules. “Damn things done got lazy after that night in the warm stable,” he said more to himself than anyone else.
Since our return load was much less, we made better time returning to our dugout. We were gone for six days, and everything was as we had left it.

I used more of our buffalo hides and expanded the animal shelter so all six of them could be together out of the winter storms. They were barely workable as it only got above freezing for a brief time each day. But I managed. The shelter would protect the animals along with their feed.

We had several bad storms that winter. The snow drifted deep in the gullies but blew off the raised areas. The buffalo herds I had found were wintering near our location, and we were able to hunt them between the storms. Some days the wind was wrong, and they sensed us before we even saw them. They could smell us over a mile away. Other times we were able to kill a few, and occasionally we would get a stand and kill a whole group.

We were lucky with our trips to Fort Laramie. Carter made three more trips with full loads of meat during the winter. Once he got caught in a blizzard and had to hunker down for two days. I stayed behind to tend the horses and watch our growing stack of hides. The storm extended his trip to almost ten days.

We hadn’t seen any signs of anyone, but we knew that the winter meant prime buffalo hides and that there were others out hunting. If someone stumbled onto our camp, the temptation might be too strong for them to resist. Besides, I was able to scout the herds and plan where we would hunt after he got back. I also shot a few buffalo while he was gone. The buckskin and a travois worked just fine to bring the hides and meat back to camp.

When the winter finally broke, Carter took a last load of meat to Fort Laramie. Then we took the hides off our dugout and stable and stacked them on the wagon with all the other winter hides and headed for Fort Kearney. It would take us a good two weeks or more to get there, but we knew we would get more for them at that post. The roads were still firm as the spring rains were just getting started and frost was still in the ground.

When we got to the fort, we were able to get from one dollar for hides from old bulls to five dollars for the lighter, softer young cowhides. We had over three hundred total in the wagon and made a good profit from our first winter on the plains.

Since summer hides were nearly worthless, Carter and I decided to spend the summer making a little money hauling freight between the forts along the Oregon Trail. Next winter we would hunt buffalo once again. I figured that after a few winters of buffalo hunting, I would move on up into the mountains and do some trapping. We each had a good stake from our first winter together, but I was bothered by the waste that accompanied the business of buffalo hunting. We sold as much of the meat as we could throughout the winter. Still, ten pounds rotted for every pound we sold or used.

We invested in a second freight wagon with a team of mules and went into the freight business during the spring and summer of 1867.