The Buffalo Hunters: (September 1867) The White Buffalo
By Bob Fincham

The new freight wagon moved quickly along the nearly empty street in the heart of Independence, Missouri. Fully loaded with an assortment of supplies, the team of six mules pulled it past the saloons and shops that were opening for business on this mild September day. The driver, John Carter, felt exposed sitting in his seat, especially since he was the only one moving along the street. The wagon trains of summer were long gone, and the city was quiet. Carter, formerly a member of a Texas regiment during the recent Civil War, was in a good mood. The supplies were for a winter of living on the plains and hunting buffalo. His saddle horse followed the wagon.

James Washington, a former First Sergeant in the 13th Colored Regiment of the Union Army, rode beside the wagon on Night Shade, his black stallion. He made an especially imposing figure with his piercing eyes and bristling weaponry.

The two men did not attract much interest among the few people who were up and about on this morning, but their loaded wagon and the black thoroughbred horse ridden by a Negro created a bit of stir among certain people.

Three men stood a short distance inside an alleyway off the main street, watching them go by. The shortest of the three was a man named Conner. A scar that went across his left eye disappeared into a thick, black beard. He wore two pistols and carried a small, sharp knife in a sheath strapped to his wrist that he kept hidden with a long-sleeved, woolen shirt.

The other two men, Sam and Jake, also carried an assortment of weapons and had what one might call “dead eyes.” There was no sign of empathy or warmth in those eyes, just an emptiness that caused other men to look away when they crossed their paths.

“Pickens ‘round here been mighty slim for some time now,” Sam said, as he pulled a small critter out of his scraggly beard and crushed it between his fingers. “Them two, however, present us with some possibilities.”

“Maybe we should pay them a visit when they get out of town,” Jake commented.

Conner grabbed Jake by the throat and said, “I’ll decide what we’re gonna do. You two messed up that last immigrant wagon we went after. That farmer killed my brother because you didn’t follow my directions.”

“We didn’t know he had a loaded shotgun under his wagon’s seat. He paid for it when we killed him and his family,” Jake managed to gurgle as Conner tightened his grip.

“C’mon Conner. It weren’t nobody’s fault. We did get some gold, and your brother is a hero for fighting off the Indians that attacked those migrants,” Sam said.

Releasing his grip on Jake’s throat, Conner said, “I want to own that fine black horse. It’s too fine an animal for any nigger.”

“They’re buffalo hunters, and that wagon has all sorts of valuable supplies,” Sam said.

Conner spat a gob of tobacco juice and said, “You two go get Ray and Ben. I’ll meet up with you west of town at the split rock. We are goin’ huntin’ buffalo hunters.”

The activity of the three men was not unnoticed by Washington. Their interest in the wagon was clear, and it was not overlooked by Carter either.

“It looks like we’ll be having some company once we leave the city,” Washington said.
Carter nodded and said, “I wonder if they’d be stupid enough to use the same ambush site as that bunch from last year?”

“Most of their kind aren’t known for being smart. I suspect that is about where we’ll meet them. If I remember right, it’s called Bear Rock.”

“Maybe we need to be cautious and visit a friend of mine near the edge of town before leavin’ town,” Carter said. “I’m sure he won’t mind watchin’ our wagon for a little while.”

An hour later, Carter and Washington passed the city limits along the main road. They were riding their saddle horses, and it would take them two hours to reach Bear Rock. It was about a mile past a large, split boulder that had tumbled down off a nearby ridge. It was part of a boulder field with the narrowed road passing through its center. They would check it out as well before they risked the wagon.

Conner and his four men had arrived at the split rock and were making plans as Carter and Washington were leaving Independence. The men dismounted, and Conner gave them some orders, “I used to ride with Ben Samson until he and most of the gang got themselves killed. We always used Bear Rock as our ambush site. Now, it’s too well known.”

“I never heard of it,” Ray commented as he checked the action on his pistol.

Ignoring Ray’s comment, Conner continued, “Most of that gang was kilt there, so we ain’t usin’ it anymore. I always liked this spot better, anyways. So git your horses undercover and pick yourselves some good hidin’ spots where you can watch the road.”

As the men moved to their places, Conner shouted, “I’ll shoot first.”

With a few grunts of acknowledgment, the men hunkered down among the loose rocks and bushes along the road. As they waited, each man thought about how he would spend his share of the loot.

When Washington and Carter reached a spot in the road where they could see a jumble of large boulders at the base of a long ridge, they stopped and rode off to the side.

“That pile of boulders looks like a good spot for an ambush. The trail narrows down quite a bit, and it has a lot of hiding places,” Carter said.

Washington studied the area with a pair of field glasses for a minute before saying, “Bear Rock is another mile along the road and was a known ambush site. Maybe these fellas are a bit smarter than we thought and are tryin’ to trick us.”

“Maybe we’re worried about nothing, but we ain’t in any big hurry,” Carter said.

“So, let’s check it out,” Washington said.

“You take your Sharps and move up along that ridge. I’ll loop around to the north and come in from that direction,” Carter said.

“There ain’t a lot of cover, but they’ll be watchin’ the road, and we should be able to sneak up on them if they’re there.”

Before they split off in opposite directions, Carter added, “There is a local freight wagon coming along a few miles behind us. That might provide a good distraction if we see anything.”

Washington quietly moved onto the ridge and looked down onto the boulders. He was able to watch Carter approaching from the north and the freight wagon kicking up dust to the east. He had dismounted and was lying on a large rock with his Sharps and a pocketful of ammunition.
Washington saw three men in different locations on his side of the road. They had no idea he was watching them. He also detected motion in two places on the other side of the road. There were five outlaws in hiding. He could kill two of them with the Sharps before they could react, but then the others would be warned and get away before he could get down to them.

As he was deciding on the best way to act, Carter approached the rocks on his side of the road. At the same time, the freight wagon was in sight and getting close to the ambush site.

As the five outlaws watched the wagon, Carter appeared behind one of them and buried his tomahawk in the man’s skull.

The man’s rifle fell between several rocks with a clatter, and his partner turned toward Carter. Leaving his tomahawk stuck in the man’s skull, Carter pulled his pistol, and the two men started shooting at each other.

Conner jumped up, wanting to see who had fired against his instructions. Washington put a .50 caliber slug into the middle of his back, throwing him out into the road. The other two outlaws shot at Carter, not realizing that Washington was shooting from 500 yards behind and above them.

His second shot killed one of the men as he was moving to flank Carter. A third shot killed the third outlaw as he turned to look at the ridge top. Meanwhile, Carter and the last outlaw kept firing at each other. The outlaw did not realize he was alone and began to curse the others for not helping him kill this guy. He was so angry that he emptied his pistol at Carter and made a break for his horse.

Carter lost sight of him as the outlaw worked his way through a cluster of large rocks and boulders. Washington fired a quick shot at him but missed. Carter saw where Washington had fired and moved toward the west. Both men arrived at the horses together. The outlaw shot at Carter, but the hammer fell on an empty chamber. He reached back to throw his pistol as Carter discovered his gun was also empty.

The outlaw pulled out a long, thin knife and lunged toward Carter, who had reached for his tomahawk. That was when Carter remembered it was still buried in an outlaw’s skull. Stepping to one side, which caused the man to stumble past, Carter pulled his Bowie knife from its sheath and dived at him. The outlaw was spinning around as he tried to regain his balance. His eyes went wide as Carter buried his Bowie in his belly and slashed across his abdomen. Without a whimper, he fell to the ground in a pool of blood that quickly soaked into the sand.

Meanwhile, the freight wagon’s driver had whipped his mules into a run. He sped along the defile through the boulders. The driver ran his wagon and mules right over Conner’s body as it lay in the center of the road. If there had been any life left in his body, it was gone. He kept on going and was out of sight by the time Carter walked out onto the road with his horse.

Washington joined him a half-hour later with Night Shade. By then, Carter had rounded up the outlaw’s horses and guns. “I think my friend would appreciate the horses and guns for watch’n our wagon,” Carter said.

“Sounds fair to me. Then we can get away from this city and onto the plains where we must only worry about the Sioux and Cheyenne,” Washington said.

“There might be a few Arapaho, Crow, or Arikara around as well,” Carter said.
After spending the night with Carter’s friend, the partners were back on the road with their wagon. They soon passed Split Rock, and the only signs of the ambush were the circling vultures and the smell of death in the area.

Two weeks later, they were camped outside of Fort Kearny, next to a group of trappers. Most of them were on their way west into the mountains. They were all sitting around a large campfire drinking whiskey from jugs and swapping stories about trapping and buffalo hunting.

Carter and Washington joined them, helping drain their third jug. Washington was especially interested in the trapping stories because, when he initially came west, it was what he had planned to do. He had picked up a considerable amount of information about trapping techniques since he arrived in the west and was always looking for more. Someday he would get a chance to practice some of them.

One of the trappers, Caleb Brown, decided he had to return home to Missouri. He had left his family on their farm to come west. He expected to make a fortune trapping, but it had not worked out that way.

Washington had some cash left from his share of the freight money he earned the past summer. It was in a bank in Independence. Caleb sold him his traps for a bank draft, and Washington packed them in their wagon. If he and Carter wanted to get out of the buffalo business, it gave them a doable option.

The following morning the trappers pulled out at sunrise, and Carter chided Washington for his purchase.

“I ain’t sure what I was thinkin’ last night. Trappin’ sounded like a good thing to do if we ever stopped huntin’ buffalo,” Washington said.

“What’s done is done. Let’s keep them traps packed away and get movin’,” Carter said.

“You ever do any trappin’?” Washington asked.

“I done a little and never liked it much. One small pelt can sometimes fetch more than five buffalo hides, but they are not so easy to come by, especially since martin and fox ain’t so common anymore.”

“Maybe you can show me how to set some of those traps sometime. Those fellas were explainin’ things to me, but we all had a bit too much to drink, and I don’t remember much.”

“I’ll show you a few things until we get busy with buffalo.”

“It’s best to have somethin’ to fall back on if’n the buffalo give out,” Washington said, as he mounted Night Shade.

October found them near the site of last year’s shelter. They camped next to it and planned to scout the area before deciding whether to use it for a second season.

“I think we gotta explore at least ten miles in every direction for buffalo sign. If we don’t find any, we can shift farther north and a bit to the west,” Carter said between mouthfuls of rabbit stew.

Washington replied, “We’ve been talkin’ about this for the last hundred miles and already decided that’s what we’ll do. Tomorrow you can go west and circle to the north. I’ll go east and do the same. We’ll meet up somewhere to the north and plan our next move.”

“Keep your eyes open for Sioux or Cheyenne. They are probably looking for the herds themselves. They always stock up on meat before the winter sets in,” Carter said as he reached
for his Henry rifle. Then he continued, “I’ll leave my Sharps here since I won’t be doin’ any long-range shootin’ tomorrow.”

Early the next morning, they secured the mules in a makeshift corral and rode off to explore the region. Washington rode east through most of the morning and saw no sign of buffalo. As he turned north and then northwest, he rode through empty plains. He did pass a vast boneyard where a herd was killed a year or more ago. Hopefully, when he met up with Carter, there’d be some good news.

It was midafternoon when Washington heard a single shot. It was some distance to the west and sounded like Carter’s Henry. Since they were trying not to draw any attention to themselves, it meant that Carter must be in trouble.

Moving as fast as possible without kicking up a lot of dust, Washington rode Night Shade toward the sound of the shot. They quickly passed through some rolling hills near where he figured it originated.

Stopping near the base of one of the hills, Washington took out his Sharps and walked up the slope. Near the top, he lay down and crawled the rest of the way. From the crest, he looked out over a vast plain with a buffalo herd way in the distance. Closer in, about four hundred yards away, he saw what appeared to be three Sioux standing near a body on the ground. One of the Sioux was holding a scalp in the air while the other two held the reins of four ponies and Carter’s horse.

Without a second’s hesitation, Washington aimed and fired his Sharps. The warrior holding the scalp flew off his feet as the .50 caliber slug tore through his chest and blew away a section of his backbone, leaving a sizeable crater in his back.

He then shot a second warrior off his pony as the other two mounted to try and escape. His aim wasn’t as accurate, and he merely blew the man’s shoulder away. The third warrior hugged his pony’s neck and quickly rode off into the distance as Washington returned to Night Shade and rode out onto the plain. Since he did not have much hope of hitting the one riding away, he put another slug into the wounded Sioux, who was staggering around after falling off his pony.

He didn’t have much hope that Carter was still alive, but he hurried to the spot anyway. Along the way, he passed a dead warrior lying in the grass. That must have been the result of Carter’s shot. The four Sioux must have rushed him from behind the same hill used by Washington. He only had a chance to get off the single gunshot before they were on him.

As Washington dismounted close to the Sioux he had killed, he saw Carter’s body lying next to him. He had been shot twice with arrows and scalped.

Washington caught Carter’s horse and placed his friend’s body across its back. Then he scalped the three dead Sioux and reverently placed their scalps with Carter’s into a pouch tied to his saddle.

He knew the Sioux that had run off would be back with others, so he left the ponies to go free and let the dead warriors lay where they had fallen. He rode south to the shelter, where he buried Carter and said words over him. He put the scalps in the grave with him. He would grieve appropriately at a later time.

The wagon was loaded with supplies, making it heavy and slow. Besides, it would leave a broad trail. Washington packed all he could on two mules and Carter’s horse. He hitched the
other four mules to the wagon and chased them off toward the west. He stashed the bulk of the supplies inside the remains of the dugout they had used last winter.

Hoping the Sioux would follow the wagon trail, Washington headed toward the southeast to avoid them. He had traveled several miles when he heard some wolves snarling and yowling at what sounded like a snorting buffalo. They were on the other side of a small hill. Dismounting, he went to the top of it. About fifty yards away, he saw a wolfpack trying to bring down a big buffalo. It appeared to have a broken leg and was hobbling about on the other three trying to keep them away. There was something odd about this buffalo. It looked pale under the dirt and blood that smeared its hide.

As he watched the buffalo fight for its life, he saw that it was a rare, white buffalo. White buffalos were big medicine to the tribes and big money to buffalo hunters. This one would soon be dead, and his hide was about to get torn up by the wolves. Washington quickly shot two of the wolves, and the rest backed off. As he moved down to where they were fighting, the pack started to shift toward him. He shot the leader and fired a few more rounds at the others. That sent them away at a fast run, and they were soon out of sight.

Meanwhile, the buffalo was lying on its side and breathing heavily. He had to finish him off. Then he quickly got his horses and mules and set to work skinning the big bull buffalo. The buffalo must have weighed a ton, and the hide could have hidden a grown horse.

Within an hour, the hide was rolled up and tied onto the back of a mule. Washington had to redistribute some of the supplies, but it was too valuable to leave behind. He figured on cleaning and treating it the next day when he would be clear of the Sioux war party that must be eventually following him.

As he mounted to leave, a party of about twenty Sioux rode into view. They just sat there looking at him. Washington had his Henry ready for trouble but knew it could only end one way. Then he had an idea. Laying the Henry by the rear mule, he untied the buffalo hide and draped it over the mule with the white fur showing. Then he took his Bowie and acted as if he was preparing to slash it.

The Sioux started acting confused, and two of them made like they wanted to come down to him, but the leader stopped them. Signing for them all to stay put, he rode halfway down the hill and indicated he wanted to talk.

Washington traded one mule, and the buffalo hide for a two-hour head start. He had two horses, a mule, and four good rifles: two Henry Repeaters and two Sharps.

They managed to catch him the next day. He had circled to the south and then turned back toward the Black Hills. He figured that they would think he had gone toward the army forts some distance to the east. But they weren’t fooled.

He was on some high ground and had secured a good, protected location. The Sioux made a lot of noise to build up their courage, but then they suddenly rode off toward the north.

A large party of Crow warriors came into view from the west. The Sioux and the Crow Nations didn’t get along very well. The Sioux decided that Washington wasn’t worth a lot of dead braves on that day.

The large Crow hunting party watched the Sioux ride away and just continued traveling east. They were looking for buffalo and did not want to fight with the Sioux. Washington watched them go past while they hardly spared him a glance.

As they disappeared over the horizon, Washington repacked his supplies and moved off toward the west. As he rode across the plains, his mind focused upon the past. He finally had a
chance to let his mind wander. Carter was gone, and he had been a special friend, almost a brother. His heart ached. All he wanted was to go up into the mountains and be alone in the wilderness.

The mule carried some of the traps he had bought from the trapper at Fort Kearny. Those trappers had told him about the Big Horn Mountains, which were about a week’s travel west of the Black Hills. It was late September, and the mountain snows will begin sometime in late October. He figured if he hurried, he could get settled in before the passes became impassable.

Swinging south of the Black Hills, Washington needed two weeks to reach the Big Horns. Several times he had to detour slightly to avoid Sioux or Cheyenne hunting parties. There were no signs of any Crow, although he was entering their territory.

It was the second week of October when Washington stumbled upon an old trapper’s hut high in the Big Horn Mountains. He quickly moved into the shelter and secured his animals in an attached lean-to.

He scouted the area and was able to kill a deer and cut some dried grass from several mountain meadows to add to the ample supply already in the lean-to. Someone must have been planning to spend the winter here but must have changed his mind. He hoped it would be enough to get through the winter with the two sacks of oats he was able to keep. As he prepared for the snows, Washington found several promising sites to place his traps.

The second week of November, it started to snow. It came down for several days, and in several places, it drifted almost five feet high. When it stopped, the days were bright and cold.

Washington used the snowbound days to make a pair of snowshoes for moving over the deeper snows. He had listened carefully when one of the trappers had described his technique for making them. There was a good supply of flexible branches and saplings around the hut that gave him the raw materials he needed. His design worked but had a brief lifespan. Eventually, he would get it figured out and make a pair that would last.

After the snowstorm, his traps were always empty. Wolves were a constant problem. From time to time, he found a trap surrounded by fur and spattered blood.

Occasionally he came across Indian signs, but he never saw anybody. He wouldn’t have minded meeting with a Crow hunter. They were supposed to be friendly to whites, and perhaps he could do a little trading.

As the winter wore on, Washington ate the last of the deer he had killed in the fall. His other supplies should last until spring, but he had to get some meat.

It snowed at least once a week, and the drifts were starting to bury the hut. Washington worked at keeping the front door and access to the lean-to free of snow. The rest of the snow provided insulation, and he ignored it.

One day he ventured too far from his hut while following deer tracks. The animal eluded him, and he spent the night in the forest.

When he returned to the hut, the mules and Carter’s horse had disappeared, and wolf signs were all around the place. He discovered two dead wolves inside the lean-to, trampled to death by Night Shade. He doctored and bandaged some bite marks and scratches on Night Shade’s forelegs. Then he followed the animal tracks downslope from the hut.

The panicked animals had been driven hard by the wolf pack. They had plowed through the deep snow.

After following the tracks for two miles, he came across the partly eaten carcass of one of the mules. A mile farther along, the panicked animals had run off a cliff, and he could see their bodies in the snow at its base. The wolf pack members were scattered around the dead animals,
apparently sleeping with full bellies. It would be some time before they returned to the hut, but Night Shade would always be at risk.

Returning to the hut before nightfall, Washington had about thirty pounds of stringy mule meat in his pack. He hung the meat high in a tree and settled in for the night.

The next morning, he secured the lean-to to keep Night Shade safe from any more wolf attacks. Then he skinned the two dead wolves and stretched their skins by the heat of the fireplace. He’d take care of treating them later.

The wolves returned two weeks later in the daylight while Washington was checking his traps. They must have sensed the presence of the wolf pelts inside the hut. After smashing through the door, they destroyed much of what was inside. The furs and what little mule meat was left were gone.

The wolves had learned to stay clear of Night Shade and only made a weak effort to get into the lean-to. When Washington returned, he first checked on Night Shade and was relieved to find him unharmed. He was not so happy when he saw the inside of the hut.

It was late February, and the wolf pack had kept game away from this part of the mountains for most of the winter. He had been subsisting on the small amount of mule meat he had salvaged two weeks ago. Now he had no food left and needed to find something soon.

The wolf pack had moved farther north after the episode at the hut. Larger animals were scarce, and it was time to hunt elsewhere in their territory. Washington managed to catch a rabbit or two over the next couple of weeks as the snow started to recede in some areas, and the days became longer.

Throughout March, the Indian signs became more frequent, and he was able to find enough small game to survive on the edge of starvation. His trap lines, however, were a complete failure, and he was frustrated.

He was able to take Night Shade along for exercise and company during his day hunts. They traveled in areas where the snow had not drifted. Washington made it a point to check the mountain meadows for any large animals that might be grazing on the exposed grass.

It was on one of these trips that he spotted the body of a deer lying in the center of a small meadow. Indicating to Night Shade that he should wait in the trees at the edge of the opening, Washington cautiously entered the field and approached the dead animal. Little did he know how his life was going to suddenly make a violent, sudden change from what had gone before.

(Continued in the Snow Woman Series)