

BUFFALO HUNTING ON THE TEXAS PLAINS.

BY G. O. SHIELDS,

Author of "Rustlings in the Rockies," etc.



HE "Texas boom" was at its height in 1876, and there was a grand rush of emigrants of all nationalities and conditions of people to the then New Eldorado.

Thousands of men rushed down there to make money. Many of them had not the remotest idea how this was to be done, but from the glowing stories afloat regarding the resources of that wonderful country, they felt sure it could be done in some way. The little town of Ft. Worth was then on the frontier—that is, it was one of the most westerly towns having railroad communication, and was therefore one of the important outfitting points for parties going into the wilds. A great many were going further west, on all kinds and classes of expeditions, some in search of minerals, some in search of choice lands, some to hunt the large game which was then abundant.

The village consisted of a public square, around and fronting on which were a row of cheap, one-story, log and frame buildings, most of which were occupied as saloons and gambling houses. But there were a few respectable general stores, half a dozen so-called hotels, shops, etc. The town was full to overflowing with gamblers, rustlers, hunters, cowboys, Mexican rancheros, northern sight-seers, adventurers, commercial travelers, and many other trades and varieties of men.

All day and all night could be heard the call of the *croupier* at the gambling table as he announced the numbers and combinations that the wheel or cards produced in the course of the manipulations to which his deft fingers subjected them.

Hot words often came from fortunate and unfortunate gamblers, and the short, sharp report of the six-shooter, the shouts of combatants, the groans of wounded or dying men, the clatter of heavy boots or

spurs on the feet of stampeded spectators were sounds that, nearly every night, greeted the ears of the populace.

Mob law reigned supreme, and there was little effort on the part of the village authorities to punish offenders. Sometimes Judge Lynch's court was convened on short notice, and some one who had committed an unusually flagrant violation of the "law of honor" and had killed a man without due provocation, was hurriedly tried and strung up to the nearest tree.

One evening in the month of November the excitement was varied by the arrival of a "bull-train" of ten wagons loaded with buffalo skins. They drove to the warehouse of the largest trader in the place to unload and were quickly surrounded by a crowd of eager inquirers who sought for news from the front.

Some inquired as to the nature of the country, some as to the progress of settlements, some as to friends who were at the front, and many as to the buffalo herd from which the five thousand skins brought in by this train had been taken.

"The main herd," said the wagon boss "is two hundred miles west on the head waters of the Brazos River."

"How large a herd is it?"

"Nobody knows that, for none of 'em has took time to ride to the west end of it."

"Are there man hunters there?" inquired a young St. Louis lawyer.

"Wall, you'd reckon," said the boss. "Tha's 'bout a hundred and fifty white hunters and more'n a thousand red-skins."

"When do you start back?"

"To-morrow mornin', if I can keep my bull punchers from gettin' full of pizen till that time."

The crowd gradually scattered, while a little knot of the more respectable element repaired to the hotel to discuss the question of organizing a hunting party to go to the buffalo range. In an hour they agreed to go, the time for the start being

* What is known on the frontier as a "bull-train" is a number of ponderous wagons, drawn by from six to ten yoke of oxen each, used for hauling heavy freight across the plains.

fixed for the morning of the second day following.

And then the busy notes of preparation were heard throughout the town. But few of the men who decided to go were prepared for such a trip, and it was necessary for most of them to buy or hire complete outfits. Horses were the first and most important requisites. The corral (the frontier livery stable) was first visited, and spirited bidding was indulged in for the choicest animals. The stock here was soon exhausted, and the demand was not yet supplied. Then all the horses and ponies standing tied to the railing around the public square were inspected, and any that were for sale were tested. Word having been circulated that a hunting party was outfitting, a large number of ponies were brought in from neighboring camps and ranches. The party was soon creditably mounted, though their numbers had increased to double that originally planned.

Next teams must be employed. A number of these were also found and five were engaged, their owners agreeing to work for seven dollars a day and food.

Guns and ammunition were also in demand and enough were offered to arm a regiment. A number of hunters had recently come in from the front and were selling off their outfits. Every store and hotel had from one to half a dozen guns in pawn and one dealer had a number of new ones. Anything in the shape of a rifle could be had. Old Kentucky muzzle-loaders, "five feet long in the barrel;" condemned army carbines of Spencers, Sharps and other patterns; Springfield muskets; Henry and Winchester rifles; and a few of the old reliable Sharps "buffalo guns" of 45 and 50 calibre and using 100 to 120 grains of powder. These latter were taken at good figures by the more knowing ones, and the best of the others selected by the less intellectual buyers until all were fairly well armed.

Then a guide was needed, and a Chicago newspaper correspondent who was to be a member of the expedition was deputed to employ one. As usual in frontier towns, there were plenty of them, each one of whom, in his own estimation, was the best in the whole country. Each claimed to know every foot of the ground in question, to be able to speak the language of every Indian tribe on the frontier, to be a crack shot and intrepid horseman,

afraid of nothing, and ready for any undertaking, no matter how hazardous.

Inquiry among the more reliable citizens of the town as to who was best suited for the uses of the present enterprise resulted in the choice of a rather quiet and attractive looking young man bearing the euphonious pseudonym of "Red River Frank." He was clad in the conventional buckskin suit, and his long glossy black hair hung in heavy curls down to his shoulders. He was six feet two inches in height, straight as an arrow, and had a deep, clear gray eye, rode a good sized spirited mustang, and sat in his saddle like a life-trained trooper.

At the time appointed for the departure, the party, which had now swelled to thirty-two men all told, assembled in the public square. The wagons were loaded with the tents, bedding, food and other necessary provisions for the trip, which, it was arranged, should occupy about six weeks. At ten o'clock the party rode out of town on the road leading west, taking with them the hearty good wishes of the assembled throng. They crossed a narrow belt of timber and emerged upon a stretch of gently undulating prairie, which was densely covered with a luxuriant growth of gramma grass, and over which they traveled at a lively gate until after sundown before again reaching timber and water. Then they camped on a small creek where food, fuel and good water were abundant. The tents were pitched, supper prepared and eaten, and then the party assembled around a large camp fire.

The lawyer arose, and requesting the attention of the men, said, that, as they were going on a long journey into a wild country, which was infested with hostile Indians and lawless white men, where it might be necessary to defend themselves and their property by force of arms, it was thought best to effect a permanent and binding organization, which would insure unity of action throughout the trip, and especially in the event of any such trouble as he had intimated might arise. He, therefore, nominated as chief executive officer of the expedition, Captain W. H. Enders, who, he said, had done good and faithful service during the late war, who, since the war, had traveled extensively in the West, and who was now engaged in cattle raising in Kansas. Several men seconded the nomination, and Captain Enders was unanimously chosen by acclamation.



RED RIVER FRANK.

He arose and thanked his friends, modestly and gracefully, for this mark of their esteem and confidence, stating that he had no desire to exercise any arbitrary or unnecessary authority over them, but should only order them in so far as safety and success in their undertaking seemed necessary. He asked that all who were willing to stand by him and obey his orders to this extent should so pledge themselves by rising to their feet. The entire party arose. Then their leader thanked them again, and their informal deliberation ended.

The Captain detailed four men to act as a guard over the camp and stock during the night, each watching two hours and then calling up the one, who was to relieve him, and this precaution was followed up throughout the expedition.

The men were tired from their long ride, and sought the comfort of their blankets at an early hour. As they had a ten days' journey before them to reach the buffalo range, it was agreed that they should start early each morning, and the camp fires were, therefore, lit at four o'clock every morning.

The journey was uneventful for several days. The road upon which the party had first traveled bearing off to the southwest, and the course of our party being due west, they left it. "Red River Frank" now sustained his good reputation as a guide by selecting with excellent skill and judgment the best portion of the country to travel in, avoiding the numerous swamps and sandy plains, finding safe and easy fords across the streams, and selecting good camp sites for each night.

They were now in a country where deer and turkeys were abundant, and their tables were bountifully supplied with fresh meat. They camped on the night of November 12th in a clump of tall cottonwood trees that skirted a small creek. Just at dusk a great rush of wings was heard in the air, and, looking in the direction from whence the sound came, a large flock of wild turkeys was seen sailing directly toward their camp, and, a moment later, they lit in the trees amongst which our party was camped. Instantly every rifle was brought forth, and the whole camp was ablaze with burning powder. The smoke floated up amongst the dazed and panic-stricken birds, who fluttered wildly and aimlessly from tree to tree, knocking their wings against each other and the dead limbs, and creating a most frightful noise.

The hunters scattered and tongues of flame shot up from every quarter. Volley after volley was fired. The roar of the rifles interspersed with the "thud" and "crash" of falling birds, the shouts of the excited throng, the neighing of the terrified beasts, the barking of dogs, turned the quiet camp of a few moments ago into a veritable pandemonium. The slaughter went on for, perhaps, twenty minutes, when the more humane became ashamed of themselves and quit. Finally they prevailed upon their friends to desist and the dead game was gathered up. Sixty-three of these noble birds had met their death, and the survivors were allowed to sit quietly and watch the camp fires till morning, when they sailed away toward the east.

In the afternoon of that day, Frank and the journalist were riding in advance of the column across a level, monotonous stretch of country, where there was little to attract attention or excite remark. They had already become warm friends and talked confidentially on many subjects, but Frank had said nothing of his past history, yet his strange demeanor at times had excited in the mind of the journalist an anxiety, to know what had moved this refined, generous, scholarly young man to adopt a life so uncivilized as the one he was living.

"Frank," he finally said, "I have no wish to question you upon a subject that you may not wish to speak upon, yet I have observed many traits in you that are not found in other men of your calling. I am of the opinion that you have been

bred in a very different sphere of life from this in which you now live. If you have no objection, I should like to know what motive prompted you to adopt such a life as this.

He bit his lip and hesitated. Finally, after some moments, he said:

"Well, I'll tell you how it came about, and I'll make the story brief. It is similar to that of many another scout, in general, but different in detail, perhaps, from any of them. I was born and bred in an Eastern city, and was being educated for the ministry. My father failed in business and I was compelled to leave school. He gathered what little was left of his shattered fortune and with his family emigrated to the far West. There he engaged in farming on what was then the frontier, but before we had been there six months we were awakened at daylight by the yells of savage Indians, and, looking out, beheld them all around us. They were Comanches.

"Our house was burned. My father was tomahawked and scalped before our eyes, and my mother, my sister (who was older than I) and myself were carried into captivity. I was fortunate enough to escape. I returned and organized a pursuing party, but our efforts were fruitless, and a few months later I learned from a half-breed, that death had relieved the sufferings of my mother and sister. That was twenty years ago. I was fifteen years old then, and from that day to this I have been on the trail of that tribe. I boast of nothing, but each year I feel better and better satisfied with my work. I hope that, in time, I may feel content to return East and engage in some lawful and more congenial pursuit."

At that instant a deer bounded up out of the tall grass a hundred yards ahead and went prancing away to the left. Frank caught his rifle from the sling at his saddle bow, and without stopping his horse sent a bullet through its head.

Early the next morning the hunters came upon fresh buffalo signs, and, in the afternoon, a few stragglers were seen. One was killed in the evening, and on the creek where they camped that night, fresh Indian camp signs were found. A small herd of buffalo came to the creek to drink, a mile below, just after sundown, and various facts indicated that they were very near the main herd. All through the next day they were in sight of small bands and several hunting



"INSTANTLY EVERY RIFLE WAS BROUGHT TO BEAR."

parties were sighted, some white and some red. The feed was getting scarce, owing to its having been eaten down by the game, and at two o'clock the party camped on Willow Creek, a small tributary of the Brazos River. The main herd was yet about ten miles away, but they could not consistently go any nearer for a permanent camp, and decided to make it here. Two white hunters visited them in the evening, and told them that a party of ten Comanches were camped on Turtle Creek seven miles further west. At this intelligence Frank's face darkened and his eye gleamed, but he said nothing. Soon after dark, however, he was missing, and did not turn up again till near noon the next day. He had a different horse from the one he rode away; not so good a one, it is true, and there were two bullet holes in his coat. He was reticent and uncommunicative as to where he had been, but wore a very pleased expression on his countenance, and was occasionally seen to smile when not talking with any one.

The majority of the hunters mounted and rode south-west early in the morning.

Seven men in one party sighted a herd of buffaloes numbering about two hundred, and dismounting, when within a mile, cached their horses in a coulee, and began a cautious advance.

They found a deep and crooked ravine into which they crawled, and in which they were able to approach within about four hundred yards of the nearest animals. A gentle breeze blew from the game toward the hunters, and taking advantage of the most favorable point, they crawled up the steep bank to where they could command a good view of the game. The "tenderfeet" in the party were in favor of firing a volley, but an old hunter who had led them, advised them to fire singly, and at intervals of a minute or two; this plan being much less likely to frighten the game. He cautioned them to take very careful aim to make every shot count, and to wound as few animals as possible. One slightly wounded animal, he said, would create more uneasiness among the herd than ten dead or fatally wounded ones.

Several of this party were good marksmen, and had good strong-shooting, long

range rifles. Though they shot heavy charges, yet the wind in their favor, at this long distance, the animals would scarcely hear the reports. The leader advised them to shoot only at animals broad side, and gave them careful directions as to elevation and where to aim. Evans opened the fire with a sixteen-pound 50-calibre Sharp's. Immediately after the report the emphatic "thud" of the bullet came back and a large cow was seen to drop on her knees, get up again, stagger away a few rods and lie down.

"Good," said the old hunter. "Now, Pete, you go."

Pete fired, and an old bull whisked his tail, walked sullenly away, turned around

a few times and fell dead. Another complimentary remark from the old hunter and then he said,

"Now I guess I'll try one."

He fired, but to his great chagrin did just what he had cautioned the others not to do, broke a fore leg below the knee. This cow commenced to bellow and "buck," and in an instant the whole herd was in commotion.

"Stop her, somebody, stop her or she'll stampede 'em all," he said as he pushed another bullet into his muzzle loader. By this time she had stopped broadside for a moment at the edge of the herd, and the journalist, at the order of the boss, drew a bead on her. The "spat" of the heavy



"IMPALED UPON THE HORNS OF A MONSTER BULL."



"SHE DID SPRING TO HER FEET AND MADE A DASH AT FRANK."

bullet told of a "palpable hit." She no longer felt like running, but was not yet down and it took two more bullets to lay her out. The next shot was a clean miss, so far as it concerned the animal shot at, but it wounded one somewhere in the herd. Then there was more commotion and it was evident the "stand" was at an end.

"Give it to 'em, everybody," the old hunter now said and a fusillade followed that soon put them under full speed. Seven dead were left on the field. These were galloped in short order and the hunters then returned to their horses. They had barely reached them and mounted when they heard strange noises, and looking toward the west beheld a great black surging mass, waving and rolling up across the prairie, half hidden by great clouds of dust which were only occasionally blown away by the brisk autumn wind. It was the great herd of buffalo and they had been stampeded by the Indian hunters. The roar of the hoofs upon the dry earth was like the low and sullen thunder. The vanguard of the herd was yet more than a mile away, but the dark line stretched to right and left almost as far as the eye could reach, and our hunters saw that instant and precipitate flight was necessary in order to save their lives. They specially chose the northward as offering the shortest and best direction by which to escape the coming avalanche,

and sinking the spurs deep into their terror-stricken beasts, they flew with the velocity of an arrow across the wild prairie. A mile was covered in a few seconds, and yet they were not past the herd, which was rapidly closing in upon them.

They turned their horses' heads partly in the direction the buffaloes were going and urging them to their utmost speed finally passed the outer line of the herd just as the leaders passed by. Then having reached a place of safety, they dismounted and throwing their bridle reins over their arms commenced to load and fire into the herd with all possible rapidity, nearly every shot killing or disabling an animal. It took nearly half an hour for the rolling, surging, angry horde to pass the point where our hunters stood, and as the rear guard came in sight there came a new and still more terrible scene in the great tragedy.

More than a hundred Indians were in hot pursuit of the savage beasts. They were mounted on wild and almost ungovernable bronchos who were frothing at the mouth, charging and cavorting amongst the fleeing game. The white foam dropped in flakes and bubbles from all parts of their bodies. Their nostrils were distended, their eyes flashed fire, and they seemed as eager as their wild masters to deal death to their victims. The savage riders seemed beside themselves with mad, ungovernable passion.

Their faces were painted in the most glaring colors, their bright and many colored blankets fluttered in the wind, secured to the saddle only by an end or a corner, their long black hair streaming back like the pennant at the mast head of a ship, and their deep black eyes gleamed like diamonds in a dungeon. Arrow after arrow flew from deep strung bows and sunk to the feathered end in the quivering flesh of the shaggy monsters.

Ponderous spears were hurled with the power and precision of giants and struck down the defenseless victims as a sturdy woodman strikes down the frail sapling in his path.

"Crack!" "crack!" came from rifles, and "ping!" "ping!" from carbines and revolvers. Hundreds of shots were fired by those who carried firearms, and before these murderous weapons the poor bison sank like ripened grain before the reaper's blade.

One young warrior more ardent and fearless than the rest, had forced his high strung steed far into the middle of the solid phalanx, where the horse was finally impaled upon the horns of a monster bull. He and his rider were tossed like sheaves of wheat into the air; then both sank to earth, and were instantly trodden into the dust.

At last the great storm had passed, and our friends watched until it faded away into the distance and disappeared from their view.

Then came the squaws, the boys and the old men, to dispatch the wounded and to skin and cut up the dead. These were strewn all over the prairie, and not a tithe of them were, or could be saved by all the people, white and red, assembled there.

Our hunters returned to camp at sunset, where they met those of their companions who had been out during the afternoon, and over the evening camp fire, each related the thrilling incidents which he had witnessed, or in which he had participated during the day.

On the following morning they again started out in several parties of five or six each, and going in various directions. Frank and the journalist started with three others, but soon separated from them to go after a small band which they had sighted about two miles south of camp.

When within a proper distance, they dismounted, picketed their horses in a swale, and stalking to within about a hun-

dred yards opened fire. A young cow dropped at the first shot, to all appearances dead, and the remainder of the band scurried away, one old bull being badly wounded. The hunters started to run to the top of a ridge, over which the game had gone, to get another shot. As they passed the cow the guide called to his companion to lookout for her, as she was only "creased" and liable to get up again and charge them. They had gone but a few rods, when, sure enough, she did spring to her feet, and make a dash at Frank. He turned to shoot her, but his gun missed fire, and as he attempted to throw out the cartridge, the action failed to work, and his gun was, for the moment, disabled. By this time she was almost on him, and as his only means of escape, he sprang into a "wash-out" (a ditch that had been cut by the water, some ten feet deep) the sides of which were perpendicular.

He called loudly for help, but his friend had not seen the charge, and was by this time a hundred yards away. He turned and saw the cow, almost blind with rage, rapidly jumping back and forth across the washout, in a mad effort to get at the guide, but she seemed unwilling to jump down into the wash-out. She was shot through the throat, and the blood flowing from her in torrents had deluged poor Frank until he looked as if he had been of work in a slaughter-house. The journalist ran back, killed the cow, and drew his friend from his sanguinary retreat.

The guide then repaired his gun, and they mounted their horses and pursued the wounded bull. They soon found him, also at bay, and riding up close to him, commenced firing at him with their revolvers. Quick as a flash of lightning he made a frightful charge at the journalist, who, taken by surprise, was unable to avoid the charge. Both horse and rider were dashed to the earth. The horse was so badly injured as to be unable to rise, and as the burly antagonist made another rush at him, the man was enabled to seek safety in flight, and before the bull again turned his attention to the fugitive, the rapid and well directed fire of the scout had brought the bull to the earth.

The horse was fatally injured and had to be shot, so our friends, with one horse between them, had to take turns riding and walking to camp.

This day's killing by the party was large, and supplied all their wants as to

meat, skins and sport. The next few days were devoted to jerking meat, dressing and drying skins, and preparing for the return journey, and in ten days from the date of their arrival on the hunting ground, the teams were all loaded up, camp was broken, and the homeward march was begun, which progressed uneventfully from day to day, and was made in safety in about the same time occupied in going out.

Twice during the hunt the party were alarmed by the discovery of Indians lurking around their camp, late in the night. The guards discovered them in both instances, and fired on them, when they beat a hasty retreat and disappeared in the darkness. It was not known that their object was anything worse than pilfering, and yet there was little doubt, that had they found the party all off guard, and asleep, a massacre would have resulted. But, true to their aboriginal instincts, they did not wish to engage in a fight with so formidable a foe, whom they found ever ready for such an emergency.

Such scenes and such sport as this party enjoyed were common almost anywhere on the great plains west of the Missouri River up to a few years ago. Herds of buffalo extending over a tract of land as large as one of the New England States, and numbering hundreds of thousands of heads, might be found any day in what was then "buffalo country." An army officer told me that, when crossing the plains in 1867 with a company of cavalry, he encountered a herd that it took his troop three days to ride through, marching about thirty miles a day.

"When two of our transcontinental railways were first built it was no uncommon thing for herds of buffalo to delay trains for several hours in crossing the tracks; the animals being packed in so close together that the train could not force a passage through them.

"But, alas, those days are passed forever! This noble creature, provided to feed the human multitude who should people the prairies, is to-day practically extinct; slaughtered and annihilated by that jackal of the plains, that coyote in human shape, the "skin hunter." Hundreds of thousands of these animals were annually killed, their skins sold at from seventy-five cents to a dollar each, and the meat which, when properly taken care of, is equal, if not superior, to the finest domestic beef, was left to rot on the ground.

There are scarcely a hundred buffaloes left on the continent to-day. A very few stragglers are known to be in the Pan Handle of Texas, and a few in the British North-west, but they are being remorselessly pursued by large numbers of hunters, and it is safe to say that a year hence not one will be left in the whole broad west.

A few have been domesticated, and if western cattle men had only taken the matter in hand a few years ago, large numbers of them might now have been contentedly grazing with every herd of cattle and the domestic breeds greatly improved by crossing with these hardier animals, but all except a very few have neglected it, until now it is too late to procure the "wild cattle of the plains" for introduction into the herds of their domestic successors.

