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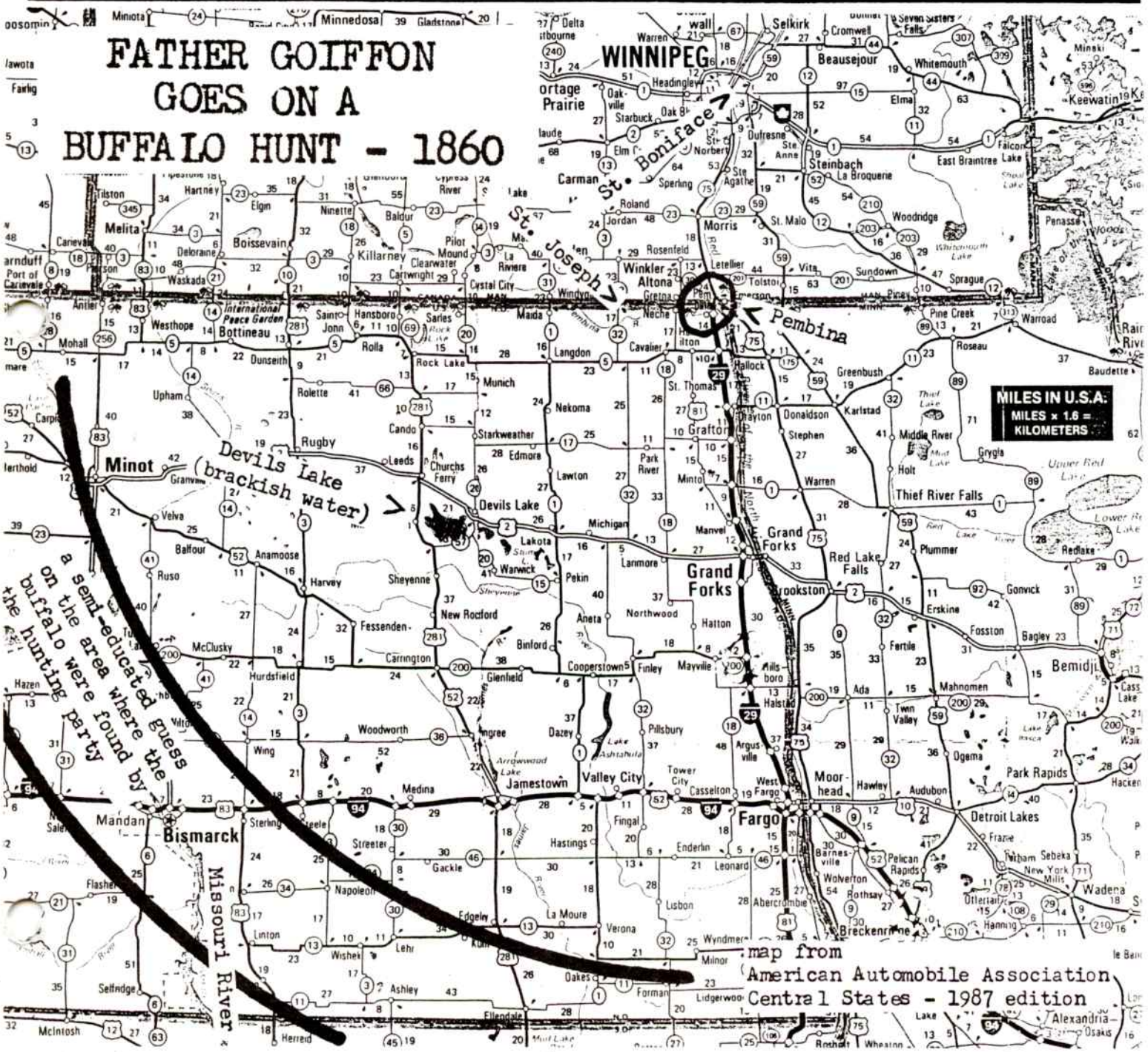
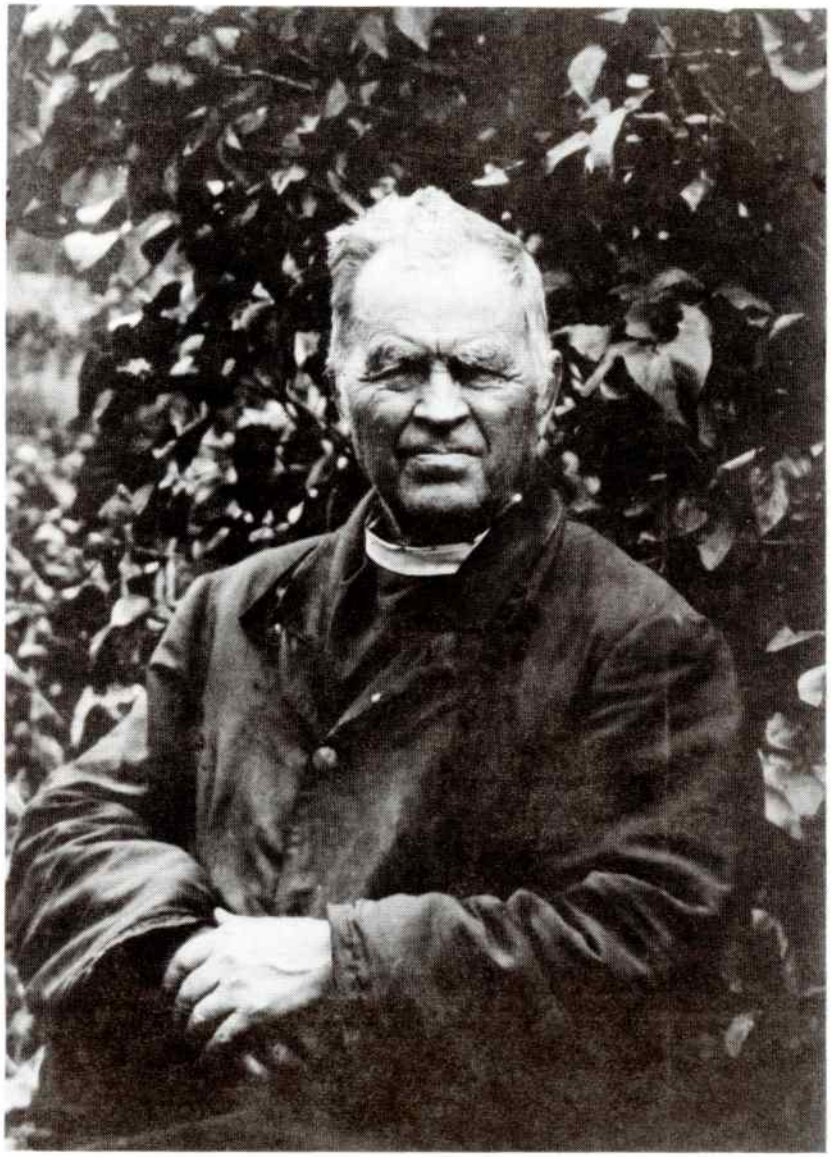
FATHER GOIFFON GOES ON A BUFFALO HUNT - 1860





Father Goiffon

A NORTH DAKOTA BUFFALO HUNT, JUNE 186[illegible]

by: Father Joseph Goiffon

EDITORS NOTE: In previous issues of Chez Nous we have reprinted portions of the recollections of Father Goiffon, a French priest in the diocese of St. Paul whose career began in 1857. His earliest years in the priesthood were at Pembina and St. Joseph (Walhalla) near where present day Manitoba, North Dakota and Minnesota meet.

In the following story, written perhaps about 1900 when Father Goiffon was parish priest in Centerville MN (no suburban St. Paul), he recounts in his own words a buffalo hunt as well as his perceptions of relations between the Metis, Sioux, Chippeways, Canadiens and Americans. The words are exactly as written by Father Goiffon. (His references to Indians as "savages" is regrettable but acceptable in the context of the times.) Read on, and enjoy his story of North Dakota in the summer of 1860.

Before the white took possession of the northwest, the buffalo, the elk, the deer, the does, the castor (beaver), the hare, the rabbit, the wild cat, etc. were very plentiful. Game of all kinds was abundant; the lakes were full of large fish. The savages had but to leave their loges to bring back an abundance of whatever they desired in food. They wasted nothing, taking only what was necessary, and conserving the rest for their children.

What would seem incredible to future generations, even in 1820, 30, 35, 40, as I have often been told, and again related the other day by the old priest, Joseph

Bellanger, of New Canada, Ramsey County, of the time, when as pilot of rafts he descended the river from Stillwater to St. Louis, was that the ducks, the geese, the busard (buzzard), etc. were so thick in the waters of the Mississippi, that when on account of bad weather, they were obliged to stop for the night, they could not sleep because of all the noise made by the game.

What about the buffalo? I have heard many times, by those who traveled at that time, 1820, 30, 40, in the North West, to buy furs from the savages, that the buffalo were so numerous that they often traveled 3 days among them, as one would pass through a forest. The buffalo had not yet been hunted, and they let the travelers pass without paying any attention to them.

Father Bellanger, who 66 or 68 years ago, traveled for an English company, in that country, told me again, just the other day, that the buffalo were so plentiful that often in their migration, they would block the road. They were obliged to unhitch and remain there sometimes half a day to leave the animals pass, marching single file, in rows of 4, 5, and 6. These animals used to travel in herds from one place to another, and became so numerous that it was soon necessary to hunt them.

The English Hudson Bay Company and that of the North-West Company, in order to make their fortunes, engaged as many Canadiens as they could, sending them to all parts of the English territory to buy from the savages, all the pelts possible. The results were that they began to kill as many as possible merely for the hides and tongues of these poor animals. The Americans, advancing from the east, and pushing back the poor savages, did likewise.

The young Canadiens who roamed through Manitoba, having served their time, of engagement, found themselves in a vast country, where one could so easily find a living without working by marrying a young Indian woman who was strong and robust, sweet of disposition and did all the work, leaving to their husband, only the trouble of hunting and bringing back to the lodges the game they had killed. Of these two strong races were born numerous children, who became the best travelers and the most skillful hunters of the world. They called them the Metis.

Those who came from the Red River or "Mimitoba" were nearly all Metis Cree or "Montanais". They were civilized and evangelized early by the good Mgr. Provencher. Having become generous and capable of defending themselves against the Sioux, and seeing that they could not only sell the hides of the animals they killed, but also the meat by drying it, they organized buffalo hunts, one which began the 9th or 10th of June and lasted two and a half months, and the second in September and lasted until the cold weather. All of them, men, women and children repaired with all their possessions to the great prairie to cure the meat. That was their harvest. The proceeds of the first hunt, which sometimes amounted to 80 to 100 louis for each family, were often returned to the company of the Hudson Bay, when they returned from the hunt, for tobacco, tea and provisions. The proceeds from the second hunt, when the meat could not all be dried, was different; part of the meat was dried and sold and the rest was preserved for their winter. I will be able to tell you of the manner in which the hunt was conducted and how the meat was prepared when I tell about the hunt at which I, myself, assisted. Let us come back to the Metis; having at their head the Rev. Father Belcourt, they left the English territory and came to establish themselves beyond the English line and on the American side, in order to have a freer commerce (because being on the English line they could only sell their meat to English companies). It was these people who formed my two parishes of Pimbina and St. Joseph in North Dakota. The Metis of St. Joseph of Pimbina and those of St. Boniface, on the Red River as well as the Crees and the Chippewas, their grandparents had always been in open warfare with all the Sioux nations. Up to then it was which could surprise and kill and scalp the other; it is to say, which could remove the other's hair and leave the skull bare. In my time at St. Joseph, still lived an old woman, Gengras, to whom the Sioux had taken off nearly all the skin and the hair on her head.

Some years previous when all our Metis with their families, the Chippewas were making the summer hunt, one morning, after having released their cattle and horses to feed,

and while preparing the breakfast, having no suspicion of danger, the Sioux, in great numbers hidden in the rear, came from behind, drove before them, scaring them by their cries, all the animals of the Metis. That year the poor Metis were obliged to return home as best they could, having lost all. Though our Metis were much better soldiers than the Sioux, and in battle, ten Metis could easily kill one hundred Sioux, who could not, as the Metis, load and fire their guns without holding onto their horses, going like mad, they always had to fear a surprise. On the other side, the Sioux feared the Metis, and with the intention of making peace with them, during the winter of 1860, all the Sioux nations sent us word that they wished to see us on the prairie to make peace with us.

I was happy amongst my good people and I thought but of passing another year with them, when, in the spring of 1860 I received a letter from the good Father Ravoux, ordering me again to St. Paul. He no doubt thought I would lose myself, alone on these great prairies. He was misinformed. I had for my guide, Mgr. Tache whom I went to see from time to time. And who was kind enough to return my visits. I replied to the grand Vicar Ravoux, that, in the circumstances where I found myself, it was almost impossible to go to St. Paul in the spring; that my parishioners were to meet all the Sioux nations in their hunt on the great prairie; that we had reason to fear a massacre and that I did not feel justified in abandoning my people in their hour of peril.

And besides, I had a very large number of Metis children of 14, 16, 18 years who had not yet made their first Communion, who did not know anything, and that I could instruct on the prairie during the two months of the hunt. I could not get them to catechism, except on the prairie, because their parents had no fixed habitation and remained at St. Joseph but eight or ten days to prepare for the grand hunt with the others, and would then winter, somewhere or other, 100 or 200 miles from the village.

I added that with his permission, I would remain with my people during the summer, and that after the hunt, I would make my visit to him. The grand Vicar replied that my reasons were good and permitting me to remain and delay my visit until after I return from the prairie.

In the beginning of June, the grass having grown enough to nourish the animals, the aspect of the village was changed. The shops which had been closed all winter re-opened, new ones opened everywhere, everyone started to work, some repaired the "charettes", and others made new ones, while others made harnesses and some repaired them, etc.

On June the 9th, the English Metis of St. Boniface arrived at St. Joseph for the rendez-vous. All was in readiness. The next day the men hitched to their carts, one by one, their oxen and their poorest horses, the runners were not in harness; they were reserved for the use of the cavaliers and of the hunters who chased the buffalo. The women threw, in a small valise, their baggage and the wealth of their homes, loaded it in their charettes, they then go into the shed to get the old piece of buffalo hide, which is to be used as it was at home for their bed; all is thrown on the same wagon. The mother takes her place with her children, the cavaliers mount their horses and all leave together, men, women and children and nobody remains to guard the village.

Your servant who loves them too well to abandon them, follows riding in a cart.

Only those who have seen an army in movement can form but a small idea of the curious aspect, one might say, marvelous, presented by three or four little villages advancing leisurely with all of it's inhabitants, on 1500 or 2000 carts, all covered differently, some with an old buffalo hide of one color, and another of another color and still more with cotton goods. One cart drawn by an ox and another by a horse, with harness made with raw buffalo hide, marching not in single file, which would make it too long, but in 5,6,7,8,9, or 10 rows on that beautiful road of the prairie, which ordinarily is not less than 10 or 20 miles wide. We marched thus for five or six hours from six thirty in the morning until eleven or eleven thirty according to the distance to the places where we were to have dinner and feed and water our animals. Arriving on the shore of the river, or on that of a lake of soft water, (as great many of the

lakes of that prairie are salt water, the same as the ocean), the guide gives a signal to stop; then it is no longer in eight or ten rows that we march, but twenty, thirty, or forty, each one trying to find the best place. In five minutes all is unhitched and installed, the animals feeding on the prairie and the cooks preparing the tea. After two hours on a signal from the guide, all the animals are in harness, and there we are marching again until seven or seven-thirty.

Having found a good camping place to pass the night, the guide signals all as it is not like at noon, when we could leave our wagons here and there on the prairie, the night coming on, we must improvise a grand enclosure to impound all the animals. One may be surprised by enemies, and we must make a fort for protection; before we unharness each one must come, in his turn, to place his cart against that of his neighbor with the back of his wagon in to form the big circle or the big enclosure that will hold the animals and serve as a fort in case of attack. The tents and the lodges are set up all around in front of the carts, and the village is constructed. The night closing down, they enclosed all the animals in the fort and after supper, everyone can sleep quietly and all is secure. The next day they let the animals out of the fort so they can eat, then comes breakfast and to give the signal the fort and village are to be undone and the march starts on, as the day before lasting 10 - 12 hours daily, that until somebody discovers a band of buffalo, which, in my time, 1860, had already become rare. All had been killed in 20 or 30 years. They say that, only the men of my two little parishes and some of their friends from St. Boniface alone, in the two big hunts of the summer had killed 40,000 per year, then when came the fall they only killed them merely for the hide and tongue, and sometimes they killed simply for pleasure for the fun of boasting of having killed so many.

The buffalo having been hunted too much, had become suspicious and wandered far, hiding themselves to save their lives. So in 1860, we traveled for 14 days, marching 10 or 12 hours each day seeing nothing. The 15th day, we discovered way off a band of 1000 or 1500. Quickly all the carts were stopped so the buffalo could not see us. Then all the hunters mounted on the best runners they could find carrying a little whip, with a short handle, loaded with shot and two feet long, attached to their right wrist, having nothing to hold themselves on the horses, but two little stirrups, fastened to two little cushions which served as a saddle, a horn of powder hung on their chest, a flint-lock of the old days, carrying five or six balls; keeping a few balls of lead in their mouths, they advanced all together as close as possible to the buffalo. Then perceiving by the movement of the buffalo, that they have been seen, the chief has them all form in line, as close as possible to one another. When all are placed, the chief taps his hands gently, one, two, three, the third tap given, all the hunters, to the number of 600, 700, or 800 start like lightning, all their horses going like mad and fall upon these poor buffalo before they realize their danger. One hears nothing but gun shots. The Metis are such clever hunters that as the Centaurs of ancient time, they seem to form but a single body with their horses who are so well trained that, going like mad, they know how to direct themselves towards the buffalo. Of all whom I know, neither whites nor even Sioux could accomplish what our Metis of the Red River, mounted on their best horses, driven like mad by these little whips loaded with lead, loading their flint-locks firing, killing, charging, firing, killing charging, firing, killing and continuing as long as remain one good animal to kill. That only lasts for four or five minutes, they say that these buffalo only fall when the ball hits in the heart or along side of the ear. What enables the Metis to load the gun so quickly is that holding before him, on his chest, his powder horn, he has but to stoop to let the powder into his gun and to let fall a ball which he holds in his mouth; he uses neither ramrod nor wad.

There are some Metis who in the course of a few minutes, have killed five, six, or seven buffalo. They have extraordinary memory to recognize the animals that they have killed and the place where the game fell, and he also adds, ordinarily to the ball he has put in his gun, several grains of lead to distinguish his victims from those of his neighbors.

All the buffalo killed, and because of the heat, these animals could not keep long without spoiling if they stayed whole. The hunters returned to the camp as quickly as possible, take the carts, butcher their victims, cut them in large pieces and return

to camp and deliver them to the women.

The task of the hunter is ended. They have nothing left to do but to sit on the grass and to smoke their pipes. The work of the women commences. Each one armed with a big hunting knife, very sharp, sits herself along side of a pile of meat and starts to carve it, not in little pieces, as do the cooks, but in long strips, wider or narrower according to the size of the piece. When the meat is cut, each family makes a sort of enclosure with branches and spreads out the meat, hanging it as they would a cloth in the sun. The meat is exposed to the sun, dries and is preserved quite well without being salted.

While the meat is drying, they gather up separately all the fat of the common kind, and they crush the bones of the animals, they boil them in large cauldron to extract the grease of the marrow which is the best grease that one can find, and is carefully set apart.

I do not think, in all the world, a slaughter house could present a more picturesque aspect than this great spread of meat laid on these poles and drying in the sun. When all the grease has been rendered and put aside, the meat dried enough to be taken up, they pile them up, fold them, and tie them in a bundle of 80 to 100 pounds and load them on their carts, and if all the carts are not sufficiently loaded, they break camp, as before, and march until they find another band of buffalo. The new band of buffalo discovered, the hunters and the women repeat that which they did the first time. If this band of animals is still not enough to load their carts with meat and grease, they will go again and discover a third band, and a fourth and so on until the carts are not only sufficiently loaded that they may return from the hunt, but so loaded that they cannot carry anymore. Then the guide who knows the prairie, directs the caravan to some place where they can find water and wood, which in these big prairies is rare. Sometimes they travel eight days without finding a branch big enough to make a stick or a handle for a whip. The prairie fires each year destroy all the wood. One only finds little patches of wood on the shores of some lakes or in the ravines of some rivers. If the wood was so rare in these big prairies, how in ordinary times could these 1500 to 2000 hunters, during the two and a half months they hunted, make fire to boil their tea and cook their meat? Providence has forseen this lack of wood. If there was no wood, there was the buffalo, and it was the buffalo that furnished the wood. The cooks, the women and girls went out on the prairie and gathered the dry manure of the buffalo, filled their aprons or their skirts and carried it to the camp where they made a satisfactory fire resembling soft coal or peat, such as we burn in our stoves.

The wagons fully loaded with bails of dried meat, to reduce the volume, they tried to arrive at a place where there was wood and water and remained camped for three of four or five days, they transformed that dried meat into another kind of meat known by the name of "torreau". And this is how it was done: the raw hides of buffalo were soaked in water in order to soften them, others were stretched on the earth in order to serve as a place on which to pound the meat, crush it and pulverize it with branches. The meat was already partly dried, having been slightly roasted, or grilled over a little fire. This is how the grilling was done: they dug in the earth a little ditch about one foot wide and four or five feet long, they made a little fire over which they suspended with the aid of branches, the bails of meat which had already dried in the sun.

When the meat drys, it is grilled and pulverized, the gathered grease is divided, the good to one side the common to the other, in big cauldrons where they were boiled.

It is a great manufacture where everyone has his work. The men and the young fellows prepare the wood and pulverize the dry meat. The women and the girls do the grilling, and make of the soaked hides, sacks. When the sacks were made, the grease sufficiently boiled, the meat sufficiently pulverized, they then poured the hot grease on the pulverized meat and they mix it throughly, just exactly as one would mix lime with sand to make mortar. When all is well mixed, they fill the buffalo sacks with this composition, the sacks being about the size of a 100 pound flour sack. The sacks are then sewed up with the nerves of the buffalo and flattened while warm like a sack of

flour. This meat so prepared hardens and can even without salt be preserved for several years. It then takes the name of torreau. They made two kinds of torreau, the common or coarse torreau, that is made from the pulverized meat and the common grease and the fine torreau which is made of a mixture of pulverized meat and marrow grease, that they obtained by boiling crushed bones. If one can gather some small wild fruits, such as the wild cherries, red or black, or other fruits of the prairie, they mix them with the marrow grease and the pulverized meat, and so obtained the torreau superfine which bring the highest price. This meat, on their return from the hunt, was sold mostly to the big English company of the North-West or the Hudson Bay Company. This was the ordinary food of the travelers who did not know anything about bread or potatoes. Their only food was meat or maybe fish, in certain sections, eaten without salt.

The torreau was eaten at every meal, without ceremony, and as a piece of very dry bread. The first class torreau tasted good enough, but one had to be accustomed to misery to be able, without vomiting, to swallow the common torreau made with it's fat like candle grease, however, one becomes accustomed to anything.

When one is rich enough to afford a stove, and to have water, and especially a little flour, one dissolves the torreau and adding a little flour he would make a sort of mortar that was called "rababou" and then he would have a feast. Oh, the happy time when one could have so little and still be content!

During the time of rest and especially in the evening after a day's work, I assembled my young boys and girls of 11, 18, 20, and 22 years who had not yet had an opportunity to be instructed in their religion. I taught them the catechism, and after much instruction, with patience and explication, I arrived at the end of two and one half months, to prepare if I remember rightly, about 44 for their first Communion which was made naturally on the prairie. All of them were Metis. I had brought with me a Chippeway catechism, but not one of the tribe came to my instructions.

On Sunday, to call my parishioners to Mass, I made a tour of the camp playing, to my best ability, my cornopean. My little lodge, where I arrange an altar the best way I could, and the vault of heaven served as a church, and my people attended Mass with great devotion.

The time of our hunt was about over and provisions made, and not yet having news from the Sioux, with whom up to that time, we had always been at war, and of whom we still had reason to be suspicious, we arrived to the little island of the "Morre"; we learned that all the Sioux nations had met and were waiting for us to make peace. Though the messengers talked of peace, we were not without fear because we did not know these islands and were afraid of being surrounded and massacred, that is why we stopped at quite a distance from there. We left our wagons with the women and children and all our hunters, gun in hand, well munitioned and myself, we advanced with great care, fully deciding to defend ourselves if attacked. Arriving at the Sioux camp, we soon discovered that all our precautions were unnecessary as they were honestly disposed to make peace. The arms were deposed and we shook hands most cordially. We visited their camps and they visited ours and we rejoiced together like old friends who meet after a long separation.

After the first gathering we reassembled in council. All the leading counsellors of both parties gathered in the lodges of each of the grand chiefs of the different Sioux nations. I was present at all the meetings of the chiefs and as I recall each deplored their misfortune and complained of the injustice of the Americans against them. Our grandfathers, said some of them, displaying large copper medals, which had been given them by the old English kings, "our grandfathers have always told us to be faithful to our ancient masters, and to be suspicious of our new neighbors, the Americans. The Americans, the English had told us, measuring their arm, would make you promises as long as your arm and give you nothing; they wished you dead."

I saw clearly from their discourses, that they wanted to make war on the Americans and that it was for the sake of having a refuge in case of defeat, that they wanted to make peace with us; it was precisely during the following year, or 18 months later that

they committed the massacre of Buch Couley. It was in 1860, in the month of August, that we made this peace treaty with the Sioux, which had always been kept with great fidelity. 28

After the peace conference, I was asked to cure one of their grand chiefs who must have been close to one hundred years of age. I found him in his tent, lying on a poor buffalo robe. I gave him as much consolation as I was capable of, and for medicine a good cup of tea to which I had added some. I had brought the cow to the prairie and was now taking her back with some buffalo calves. It appears that my medicine had so pleased him, that on the following day, I was invited by him to a grand dinner. I arrived on horseback accompanied by one of my Metis. The dinner was served, outside the tent, on the grass in an old tin plate containing several pieces of dried meat, and a few wild turnips; it had no salt and was so badly prepared that, in spite of my desire, not to fail in politeness, I could only taste that dish with repugnance. Fortunately, my companion, less hard to please than I, ate nearly all. After the feast, to thank my host, I played on my cornopean one of my very best pieces. Then I mounted my horse and accompanied always by my Metis, I went about through the camps of the savages, playing from time to time some musical airs. I noticed with satisfaction that all the Sioux and their squaws carried themselves well, and that their children were dressed modestly. I saw but one little boy who was naked.

These Sioux were rather miserably ignorant rather than wicked. At one of our meetings, they were telling us that they recognized their faults, and they attributed them to the fact that once having had a priest and refusing to listen to his instructions. They added that now they were deprived of one, were unhappy and would like another priest, promising that they would listen to him this time. To prove their desire to do right and their fidelity to keeping their promises, let me relate some traits which occurred some time after they had made peace with us. First, on the second or third of November 1860, during the great snow storm which fell upon the Red River, (and where I myself was frozen)(Ed. Look for this story in the October/November 1992 Chez Nous), a Canadien, who carried the mail between Crowwing, Minnesota and Pimbina, was lost in the prairie, and at the end of 15 days, was exhausted, as well as his horse, reached a Sioux camp where he and his horse received all the care possible. When the horse and his master had both regained their strength, the Canadien begged the Sioux to conduct him to Pimbina, telling them that he was rich and would give them good horses in payment. Two or three Sioux, believing him, started with him to Pimbina. When the Canadien was close enough to Pimbina and able to travel alone, he told his guide that he had deceived him; that he had told them that he was rich to induce them to accompany him, but that it was not true, that he was very poor and could from here get home alone. Anyhow, that he had nothing to give them once he reached home. What would the whites have done if they had thus been cheated? The poor savages were not angry, "you cheated us, they said, and it is not right even if you cannot give us anything, we will take you home, because you, Frenchman, have not the head to be able to travel in these large prairies; you were lost once on the road which you knew, and will be lost again if we let you go alone from here. Then your horse and your papers, both belonging to your grandfather (that is to say the government) would be lost. We will take you home."

Without loss of time, they arrive at Pimbina just at the time when everyone, for the past month, thought all the papers of the office at the fort, together with the man who carried them, had been destroyed either by the fire or the cold. The Sioux were well received by the Metis of Pimbina, and were recompensed. They were accompanied, on their return, by two or three Metis who fared very well all winter and returned, in the spring time, loaded with pelts.

In the same winter of 1861, a man about 35 years of age, accompanied by his nephew of 12 years, being sent far out to find the Sioux, in order to make arrangements for war, (that I believe they meant to make against the Americans), and being surprised by bad weather and obliged to stop at St. Norbert, at the residence of Rev. Father Lestan, had to pass the winter there. The Sioux took such good care of his nephew and conducted himself so well that the Rev. Father told me that he had never been so well served as by this man, and he was thinking of making him an Oblate Father. However, this never

happened because the good savage was killed the following summer while on a mission with which he was charged. 29

The ninth of June, 1861, the eve of their departure for the grand hunt of the summer, the inhabitants of Pimbina and those of St. Boniface, being assembled at St. Joseph and waiting to start in a body, 20 young Sioux braves arrived on horseback at St. Joseph, stating that these were horses that they had picked up in the winter, thinking them lost in the grand prairie; but when the Sioux had come together in the spring, their fathers and their chiefs had asked them where they had found these horses; they replied that it was in the prairie. They told us, "they are the horses of our friends the French. It is the time of their hunt, and they have need of their horses. you are going to take them back at once. So, we have brought them." They added: "there is also a mare that is not here, but whoever owns it need not worry. Not to injure it, we left it in route, because she had had a mare colt; you will find it in a certain place."

The Metis had a habit of wintering here and there in different parts of the woods, leaving their horses free in the woods, not worrying about them. These horses pawed the snow to find beneath it, their food, and when they were fat in the fall, they were found fat in the spring. That explains how the Sioux were able to pick up these horses, without thinking of doing any wrong.

Such conduct deserved recompense, so these young men were received with the greatest cordiality. They deposited their guns in the house of the chief, and all shook hands and smoked the calumet, a sign of friendship. To honor them with a big feast, our people were looking for a fat dog to kill as it was their idea of a feast. When a miserable Canadien, coming from St. Boniface, gave whiskey to the Chippeways, camped some distance from there, told them, "here is your chance to avenge yourselves against your enemies the Sioux, there are only 20 of them who just arrived at St. Joseph. They are now in the house of Chief Wilky. Go and kill them." These were Chippeways, who, only the year before had made peace with the Sioux, not knowing what they were doing, being under the influence of liquor, came into the house where the young Sioux were, who thought only of friendship, were assembled. Then they opened fire on them in the house, killing one or two and rushed out like cowards. The Sioux, so surprised, seized their guns and began firing, killing one of the traitors who had remained near the house thinking to hold the Sioux prisoners and massacre them.

Pictured are a group of Metis in North Dakota in mid-to late 1800's. Photo from North Dakota Historical Society.