

How did you make the buffalo meat last a long time?

The buffalo is a very big animal with lots of meat on it. There was too much meat to eat all at once. And so the pioneers learned from the Indians how to dry the meat and keep it for a long time. The way to dry it was called "jerking."

First the meat was cut into strips about one inch thick. Then the strips were heated over a very low fire for several hours. Another way to dry the meat was to put it out in the sun. It would take about two days to dry.

Usually the pioneers could not stop and wait two days while the meat dried. So they would tie strings on the outside of the wagon from the front to the back and hang the strips of meat over the strings. It looked like fringes hanging down. The meat would dry while you kept on traveling West.



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Then came the big feast. Buffalo and antelope meat, sage hens (a little bit like chicken), and jackrabbits. And, of course, potatoes and beans and rice and a special treat of pickles if someone had brought them on the trip. For dessert there were different kinds of cakes and chocolate.

Everybody ate so much they thought they would never eat again. It was a day you would remember for a long, long time.





HUNTING

The prairies were known to be rich in game, and the overlanders counted on being able to hunt for food. They were well prepared: Each adult male was expected to



Above: The cartridges in this belt were used by buffalo-hunters with breech-loading rifles.

have at least one rifle and a revolver. Additional supplies included shotguns, bullet molds, lead, gunpowder, and assorted knives. The guidebooks



Above: A buffalo-hunter's kit, with a warm jacket, cartridge bag, and saddle.

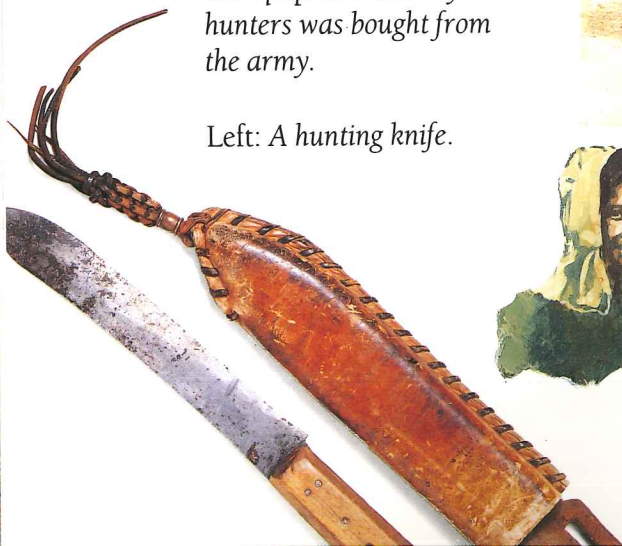
Right: A professional buffalo-hunter at work. Much of the equipment used by hunters was bought from the army.



Left: A hunting knife.

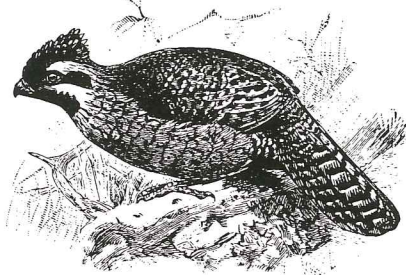


"The valley of the Platte is dotted all over with the skeletons of buffalo. Such waste of creatures that God has made for man seems wicked, but every emigrant seems to wish to signalize himself by killing one." Mrs. Larkin's Diary



The buffalo, which could be up to ten feet long, and weigh as much as a ton, would simply stand there with a dazed expression and then drop to the ground, stone dead. More adventurous hunters might ride into the flank of a stampeding herd, single out one buffalo, and aim for the spine in hopes of felling it with a single shot.

Right: A hunting pouch, a horn powder flask, and two guns. The top one is a shotgun used for small game, and the bottom one is a muzzle-loading rifle for heavier game such as antelope. Below them is a powder keg.



Above: An American pheasant.

Below: Shooting equipment: a powder flask, bullet mold, and gun lock. To make round musket balls for his rifle, Matt Belknap pours lead into the mold through the hole at the top and waits for it to solidify before opening it up again.



Travelers like the Larkins particularly prized the meat of buffalo cows, the bulls being regarded as too tough and stringy. The hump would be roasted, the tongue braised, and the marrow bones baked in the coals of the campfire. Meat that was not eaten fresh would be preserved by the traditional Indian technique of jerking. Cut into thin strips, it would hang over a smokey fire for half a day or dangle from the back of the wagon to cure. If there was time, the hide would be cured, so that eventually a pile of robes might lie alongside the family's store of blankets.

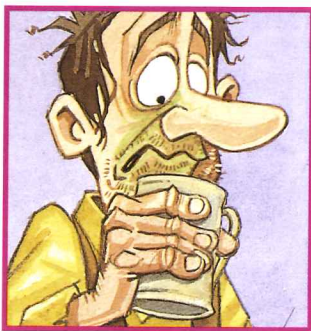
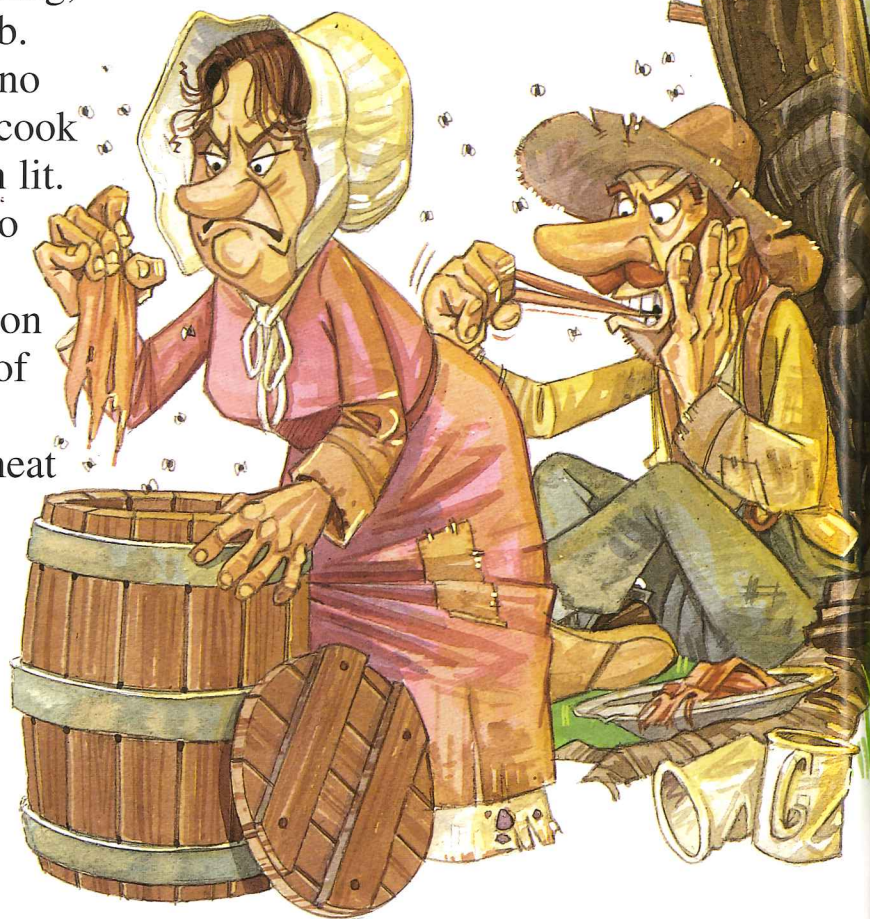
Early overlanders like the Larkins tried to use as much of the buffalo as possible, just as the Indians did. But as overland travel became more common, this changed. The earliest overlanders reported seeing the plains black with buffalo and they lived in fear of a deadly stampede.

Within a few decades, however, as more and more overlanders killed for "sport" rather than for needed food, and commercial hunters killed for the hides, the once-vast herds were nearly exterminated. By then overlanders had other food sources, but the Indians had lost their traditional hunting forever.

Mealtimes - Feeling Queasy?

The women do the cooking, and it is a thankless job. There is no tap water, no tables, and nothing to cook on until a fire has been lit. Flying insects drop into

the cooking pot. You and your family are fed up with rancid bacon and homemade bread that is full of sand. If you are lucky and kill a buffalo, you'll have more fresh meat than you can cope with. Then you should do as the Indians do. Cut the leftover meat into strips and dry it out. Packed into a barrel, the dry meat (called jerky) will keep for a long time, and you can boil it later.



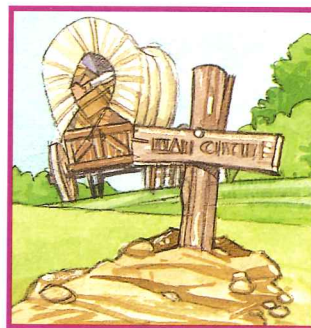
THIRSTY? After traveling in the Sun all day, you won't mind drinking muddy river water. That odd flavor is probably buffalo urine.



WELLS. Dig a well to reach underground water. You will pass lots of wells dug by previous pioneers.



GERMS! Well water might taste better, but the wells contain germs from other wagoners. Watch for an upset stomach!



DISEASE. Cholera, a deadly fever, can be caught from infected water. You will pass lots of graves of cholera victims.



Urgh! This water's full of wigglers!

Handy Hint

If you can't find firewood, collect dry buffalo dung and burn that.

HUNGRY? What could be worse than eating nothing but dried meat, beans, and boiled flour? How about eating them after they've spoiled! The only thing worse is not having anything left to eat at all.

Stale coffee

Moldy flour

Damp sugar

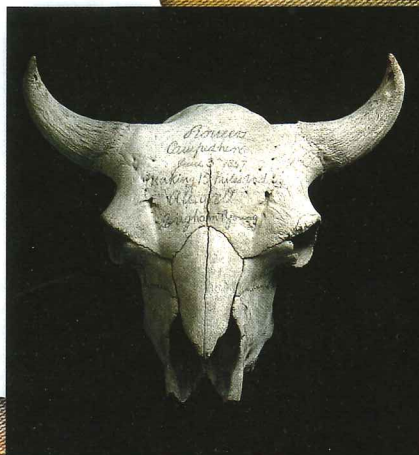
Bacon, full of maggots

William Marshall - May 3, 1852

We saw buffalo today, thousands of them as far as the eye could see. The wagon master stopped the train. A party of men went off to hunt the buffalo. Tom joined them. I told him to be careful to stay out of the line of fire! All morning we heard shots, but the men came back with only three buffalo. We all set about carving them up. I felt bad leaving the carcasses, but there's no time to dry the skin! We'll dry the meat and use it later in stews.

Sarah Marshall - May 4, 1852

A herd of buffalo stampeded by. It was a sight I will never forget. We had to wait for over two hours for all of them to pass! They are gigantic. I got out my pencils and sketched them. Tom bragged about how he helped shoot one of the buffalo. Henry wants to keep one for a pet. Mama laughed and said no. Henry wrote a note on one of the buffalo skulls to leave beside the Trail. Others had done the same.



Harriet Marshall - May 5, 1852

I cooked buffalo meat for the first time last night. It is like deer meat but tastes gamier. But what a welcome change after days of bacon and bread. We saw many dead buffalo along the Trail. They are magnificent creatures. I feel sorry that we must kill them.