

December 1858. Winter's settling in with a vengeance. So, it's good to be comfortably back home in Toronto. I recently returned from an arduous, though exhilarating, journey to Turtle Mountain and Souris Valley. My report to the Government is in the mail. I'm Henry Hind. I was sent to determine if prairie soils are suitable for farming.

The Hudson's Bay Co has long insisted that Northwest Territory is too harsh and its people too independent to accept agriculture. But there's pressure from Britain, the USA and Canada. More room, they say. We need room for immigrant farmers. Good land in Upper and Lower Canada is taken and becoming very expensive.

So, we go west, and what a west it is. I'm the geologist. I had a photographer and 16 Indigenous and French-Canadian working guides on our expedition.

It's important, in my profession, to ask, 'What is the dominant economy and how does the soil support that economy?' On the Prairies? It's, Buffalo. Humans, predators and even the grasses, depend on this animal. The Dakota, the Metis and more distant Nations, across the length and breadth of the Great Plains, hunt this grand animal, and have uses for every part of its body. The hunter and the hunted have become spiritually, physically intertwined. We're witnessing, though, the end of its existence on the plains.

In the Turtle Mountain, Souris Valley region the dominant hunters are currently the Metis. And what a sight they are as they take down a good number in one day. The men are excellent horsemen and marksmen. Imagine, riding, full gallop within a tornado of stampeding buffalo, your knees steering your horse, filling your musket on the run, your mouth full of shot and your horn with gunpowder, firing, reloading and firing again, perhaps 20 times in one run. It's a highly skilled, daring and disciplined affair.

The women stand ready with knives and oxcarts. An animal is eviscerated, skinned and quartered quickly, expertly and hauled back to

camp. Specialty parts are eaten the same day. But mostly meat is cut into strips, hung to dry and made into pemmican, the mainstay of people on the move.

Buffalo have been hunted for millennia on these plains. The rich soils and fast-growing grasses of the prairie were created by bison, passing, as they do, in great waves, fertilizing while eating. These days Indigenous Nations are now enticed to hunt meat and hides for distant markets, but it's a more insidious force that threatens the Buffalo. As seen already in the USA, pressure from settlers, sanctioned sport hunters and governments intent on extractive expansion will take this mighty animal down.

Rarely has an established economy seen such a drastic transition. Yes, the soils will support farming. But at tremendous cost to the life the prairies have witnessed for thousands of years.

Buffalo Hunt is based on stories in Vantage Points 2. David Neufeld