

AN OLD BUFFALO DRIVE ON THE PRAIRIE EAST OF ELBOWOODS,  
THE AGENCY OF FT. BERTHOLD INDIAN RESERVATION,  
NORTH DAKOTA

During the time I was camped in the Red-bear neighborhood in August 1924, engaged in ethnological work with the Arikara, I was told of an old buffalo drive about four miles to the north on the scarp of the plain where it was broken by the gorge of a creek. My Arikara informants told me that their understanding was that this drive had been made and used by the Assiniboine long ago, before they ever had horses.

The figure, which is not drawn to scale, and is intended more as a diagram than a map, will give an idea of the plan of the drive and of the nature of the topography.

The location of the buffalo drive is on the high plain on the north side of the Missouri River, about twelve or fifteen miles east of Elbowoods, North Dakota. The plain is here broken by the gorge of a creek which flows from the northeast to southwest and then turns to the south and flows into the Missouri River about four or five miles away. The plain slopes away to the south. The wings of the drive are laid along the scarp, which overlooks the gorge of the creek to the north. The bed of the creek is miry and probably two hundred feet below the level of the plain. The descent from the plain into the creek gorge is rather precipitous, in places by steep gullies cut back into the scarp, and in places drops away over banks eight to fifteen feet in height.

The buffalo drive was made by gathering boulders from the prairie and piling them into cairns at a uniform distance of five paces apart for a distance of about a mile and a half along this scarp, on each side of a gap about two hundred feet wide which opens at the head of a gully leading down into the creek gorge. By the nature of the topography, this gully lies at the point of convergence of the lines of the scarp, on one side trending away to the southeast, on the other to the southwest.

At the farther end of the line of cairns to the southeast, which we may call the right wing of the drive, is a number of tent circles, part of which are indicated in the diagram. This was the camp of the hunting parties, which resorted here periodically for the buffalo slaughter. The boulders were for the

purpose of holding down the bottom of the tent covers. These circles of boulders indicate the location and diameter of the tents. They are uniformly five paces in diameter. This campsite is located at the head of a "coulee" which leads down to the creek where they obtained their water supply at a point about a half mile above the place of slaughter. Thus the people, during the necessary time of detention at the camp preserving the meat and preparing the hides, were assured of a good water supply, uncontaminated by the carrion resulting from the slaughter.

The location of the camp was such, by the nature of the topography, that it not only was convenient to the water supply, but was hidden from view of the herds approaching the drive from the prairie at the south.

At some distance west of the camp site, and at a point on the plain a little to the southeast of the gap in the drive, is a larger circle of boulders, like the tent circles of the camp, but ten paces in diameter. Also there is within the circle, near the west or northwest side, a large boulder. The arrangement would suggest this might have been a larger tent for the holding of ceremonies in preparation for the buffalo drive, and that the larger boulder might have served as an altar.

The left wing of the drive extends in a line of cairns away to the southwest for more than half a mile. The cairns, throughout the extent of both wings, are evenly spaced at a distance of five paces apart. They are heaped up about two feet high. In operation, a man was stationed behind each cairn, lying face downward under a spread buffalo robe. The herd in approaching the creek would be successively veered off all along the line by the man raising his arms and moving the edges of his robe. Thus, the herd was continually moved toward the gap. The cairns served to give some protection to the men behind them in case of a stampede.

As the herd came to the gap, they were frightened and hurried down the steep and uneven descent, stumbling and falling and trampling and crippling each other. Many of those, which finally reached the stream at the bottom, were bogged down and helpless in the mire there. So the slayers were able to come up to them and kill the animals crippled in the descent or mired at the creek.

In photograph number 1 the gully below the gap through which the herds were driven is the second

at the left, just above the dark clump of trees with the white bank in the background. Glimpses of the water may be seen at bends in the stream at right foreground and center background. Photograph number 2 is another view of the same stream.

The account, which the Arikara give of this buffalo drive, is that it was there when they came into the country, and they suppose that it was made by the Assiniboine in time prior to the possession of horses, while the Assiniboine occupied this region during their northward migration after separation from the Dakota.

After the acquisition of horses, which were originally brought into the country at the south by the Spaniards, and which were brought northward through the Plains region, the use of such buffalo drives fell into disuse, for, with the aid of horses, the people were able to pursue the buffalo herds wherever they might be.