

FORT Garry  
and the  
Red River  
Settlement



## ARTIST as BUFFALO HUNTER

### *Paul Kane and the Red River Half-breeds*

TEN YEARS after the American painter George Catlin made his long-remembered visit to the Pipestone Quarry of western Minnesota in 1836, a Canadian artist, Paul Kane, set out for the Far West. Like Catlin, Kane was attracted by the Indians—their costumes, their customs, and the scenery of the “almost unknown country” in which they lived.

A native of Ireland who had spent his youth in Toronto, Kane became interested in the Indians during his boyhood in that frontier Canadian community, which was known as York when his family settled there about 1818. He received some training in drawing from a teacher in the local grammar school, and later he was able to spend four years studying art in Europe. His desire to portray Indians was first satisfied in 1845, when he journeyed westward to Sault Ste. Marie, Mackinac, and Green

Bay. The next spring he set out on a far more extensive journey, which was to occupy over two years and take him westward to Fort Vancouver on the Pacific.<sup>1</sup>

In May, 1846, Kane traveled from Toronto via the Great Lakes to Fort William, followed the Kaministiquia River route inland to the border waters, paused to view and sketch spectacular Kakabeka Falls, and went via Rainy Lake, Lake of the Woods, and the Winnipeg and Red rivers to the Red River Settlement and Fort Garry, the Hudson's Bay Company post on the present site of Winnipeg. The artist arrived a few days after the local half-breeds had departed for a buffalo hunt. “As I was very anxious to witness buffalo hunting,” writes Kane, “I procured a guide, a cart for my tent, &c., and a saddle-horse for myself and started after one of the bands.” The adventures which followed provided the artist with material which he eventually recorded not only in pictures, but in colorful narratives.

The primitive folk of the Red River country whose strenuous life he shared for

<sup>1</sup> For information about the artist's life, see Lawrence J. Burpee's introduction to Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America*, xi-xxxvii (Toronto, 1925). Kane's book was originally published in London in 1859.

a few June days were a unique group. In them Kane saw "a race, who, keeping themselves distinct from both Indians and whites, form a tribe of themselves; and although they have adopted some of the customs and manners of the French voyageurs, are much more attached to the wild and savage manners of the Red man."<sup>2</sup> These "descendants of the white men in the Hudson's Bay Company's employment and the native Indian women" proved to be "a very hardy race of men, capable of enduring the greatest hardships and fatigues," but "neglecting their land for the more exciting pleasures of the chase."

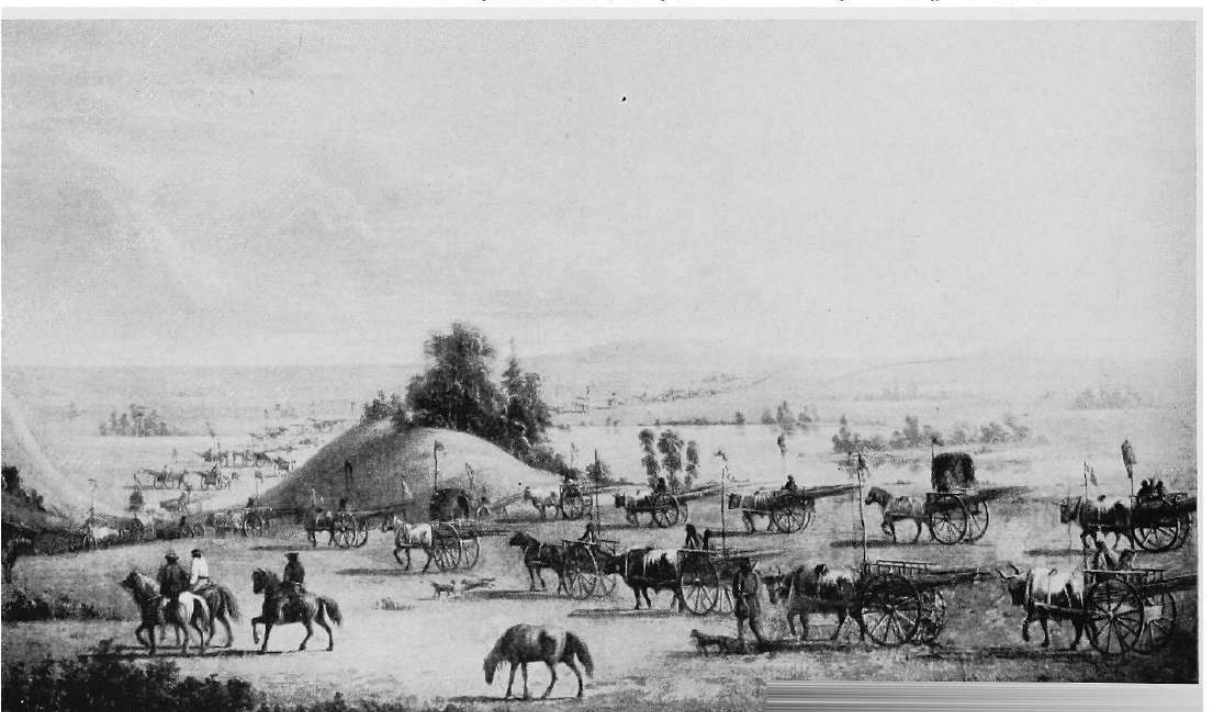
The artist was interested chiefly in the half-breeds' buffalo hunts, which, he notes, "are conducted by the whole tribe and take place twice a year—about the middle of June and October." On those occasions, "the tribe is divided into three bands, each taking a separate route for the purpose of falling in with the herds of buffaloes. These bands are each accompanied by about five hundred carts, drawn by either an ox or a horse. Their cart is a curious looking vehicle, made by themselves with their axes, and fastened together with wooden pins and leather strings—nails not being procurable. The tire of the wheel is made of buffalo hide and put on wet. When it be-

comes dry it shrinks and is so tight that it never falls off, and lasts as long as the cart holds together." During their hunting excursions, the half-breeds lived like nomads in "lodges formed of dressed buffalo skins," like Indian tepees, which could be carried easily in their crude carts.

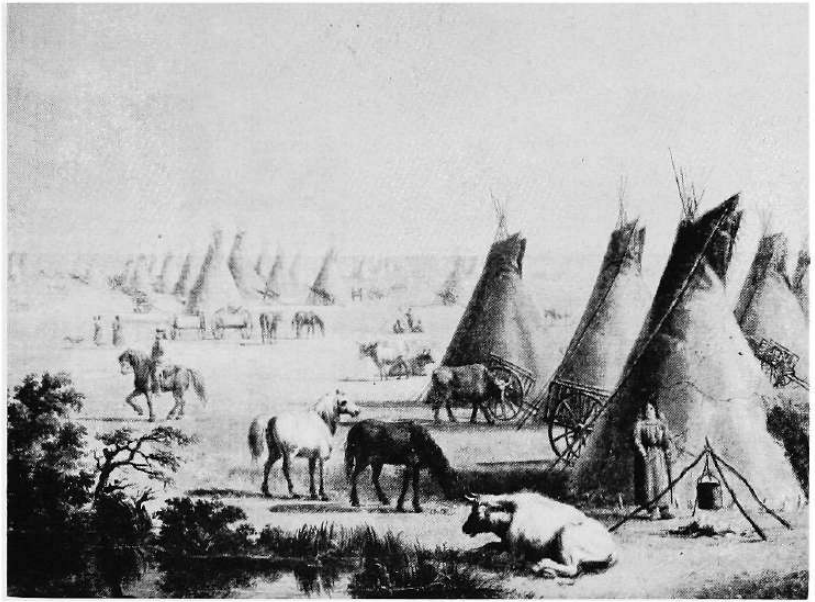
Three days after leaving Fort Garry, Kane joined a band of about "two hundred hunters, besides women and children" who welcomed him "with the greatest cordiality." The meeting took place near the international boundary on the Pembina River, where Kane "found the band cutting poles which they are obliged to carry with them to dry the meat on, as after leaving this no more timbered land is met with until the three bands meet together again at the Turtle mountain, where the meat they have taken and dried on the route is made into *pimmikon* [pemmican]. This process is conducted in the following man-

<sup>2</sup> Kane read a paper describing the half-breeds and their buffalo hunt before the Canadian Institute on November 13, 1855. It appears under the title "Notes of a Sojourn among the Half-breeds, Hudson Bay Company's Territory, Red River," in the *Canadian Journal of Industry, Science, and Art*, 1:128-138 (New Series—Toronto, 1856). With some revisions, it is incorporated in *Wanderings of an Artist*, 49-66. Passages relating to the hunt here quoted are from the original version.

CART train of Red River half-breeds bound for a buffalo hunt



CAMP of the  
Red River  
buffalo hunters



ner: The thin slices of dried meat are pounded between two stones until the fibres separate. About fifty pounds of this is put into a bag of buffalo skin with about forty pounds of melted fat and mixed together while hot, and sewed up, forming a hard compact mass; each cart brings home ten of these bags, and all that the Half-breeds do not require for themselves is eagerly bought by the [Hudson's Bay] Company for the purpose of sending to the more distant posts where food is scarce. One pound of this is considered equal to four pounds of ordinary meat."

On the morning after Kane joined the hunters, they broke camp and set off for the open plains of Manitoba and the area south of the border that was to become part of Minnesota Territory within three years. The women and children rode in the carts, each of which was "decorated with some flag or other conspicuous emblem on a pole, so that the hunters might recognize their own from a distance." As the cavalcade "wound off in one continuous line extending for miles, accompanied by the hunters on horseback," the artist made a sketch on which he later based the oil painting reproduced herewith.

The half-breeds pushed westward for several days "without meeting any buffalo," although they "saw plenty of indications of their having been in the neighborhood a short time previous." Then, writes Kane, "I was gratified with the sight of a band of about forty buffalo cows in the distance, and our hunters in full chase. . . . They succeeded in killing twenty-five, which were distributed through the camp and proved most welcome to all of us, as our provisions were getting rather short, and I was abundantly tired of pemmikon and dried meat. The fires being lighted with the wood we had brought with us in the carts, the whole party commenced feasting with a voracity which appeared perfectly astonishing to me, until I tried myself and found by experience how much hunting in the plains stimulated the appetite."

For the next few days only single animals or small herds were seen. Eventually, however, the "scouts brought in word of an immense herd of buffalo bulls about two miles in advance of us. They are known in the distance from the cows by their feeding singly and being scattered wider over the plain, whereas the cows keep together for the protection of the calves, which are



*two Assiniboin Indians running a buffalo*

always kept in the centre of the herd." So that he could see the buffaloes feeding before the hunt began, Kane set out with a single half-breed early the next morning in advance of the party. They were able to approach within a quarter of a mile of the herd, which they saw "stretched over the plains far as the eye could reach."

Within an hour, writes Kane, "the hunters came up to us, numbering about one hundred and thirty, and immediate preparations were made for the chase. Every man loaded his gun, looked to his priming, and examined the efficiency of his saddle-girths. The elder men strongly cautioned the less experienced not to shoot each other, a caution by no means unnecessary, as such accidents frequently occur. Each hunter then filled his mouth with balls which he drops into the gun without wadding; by this means loading much quicker, and . . . whilst his horse is at full speed."

The eagerly awaited hunt which followed

is vividly described by the artist. He writes: "Every thing being adjusted, we all walked our horses towards the herd. By the time we had gone about two hundred yards, the herd perceived us and started off in the opposite direction at the top of their speed. We now put our horses to the full gallop, and in twenty minutes were in their midst. There could not have been less than four or five thousand in our immediate vicinity, all bulls, not a single cow amongst them. The scene now became one of intense excitement: the huge bulls thundering over the plains in headlong confusion, whilst the fearless hunters rode recklessly in their midst, keeping up an incessant fire at but a few yards distance from their victims. Upon the fall of each buffalo the successful hunter merely threw some article of his apparel—often carried by him solely for that purpose—to denote his own prey, and then rushed on to another. These marks are scarcely ever dis-

puted, but should a doubt arise as to the ownership, the carcase is equally divided between the claimants.

"The chase continued only about one hour, and extended over an area of from five to six square miles, over which might be seen the dead and dying buffaloes, to the number of five hundred. In the mean time my horse, which had started at a good run, was suddenly confronted by a large bull, that made his appearance from behind a knoll within a few yards of him, and being thus taken by surprise, he sprang to one side and getting his foot into one of the innumerable badger holes with which the plains abound, he fell at once, and I was thrown over his head with such violence that I was completely stunned, but I soon recovered my recollection. Some of the men caught my horse, and I was speedily remounted. . . . I again joined in the pursuit and, coming up with a large bull, I had the satisfaction of bringing him down at the first fire.

"Excited by my success I threw down my cap, and, galloping on, soon put a bullet through another enormous animal. He did

not however fall, but stopped and faced me, pawing the earth, bellowing and glaring savagely at me. The blood was streaming profusely from his mouth, and I thought he would soon drop. The position in which he stood was so fine, that I could not resist the desire of making a sketch. I accordingly dismounted, and had just commenced, when he suddenly made a dash at me. I had hardly time to spring on my horse, and get away from him, leaving my gun and everything else behind. When he came up to where I had been standing, he turned over the articles I had dropped, pawing fiercely as he tossed them about, and then retreated towards the herd. I immediately recovered my gun, and, having reloaded, again pursued him and soon planted another shot in him; and this time he remained on his legs long enough for me to make a sketch."

Kane reports that the "camp was now moved to the field of slaughter for the greater convenience of collecting the meat." Next day the "hunters sighted and chased another large band of bulls, with good success." The encampment and the sur-

*RED River half-breeds attacking a buffalo herd*



rounding plain "now resembled one vast shambles; the women, whose business it is, being all busily employed in cutting the flesh into slices and hanging them in the sun, on racks made of poles tied together." The artist estimated that "the Half-breeds alone destroy thirty thousand" buffaloes annually.

By this time, Kane seems to have had enough of buffalo hunting, and he was anxious to return to Fort Garry. His guide, however, had become seriously ill, and he would consent to accompany the artist only if he could "ride in the cart, and not be expected to attend to the horses or cooking." Kane was forced to agree to this arrangement, since none of the half-breeds would accompany him "from fear of the Sioux, in whose territory we then were, and whom they dreaded." The journey proved to be full of hazards, and it was only after being lost in a swamp that Kane reached the fort. On July 5, he obtained passage on a sloop belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company, bound for the mouth of the Red River and Norway House at the north end of Lake Winnipeg. There on August 14 the

artist set out on his westward trek to the Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

Kane returned to Toronto in the autumn of 1848, carrying with him about four hundred sketches. Of the scores of oil paintings that he based upon them, a hundred were commissioned by George William Allen of Toronto, the generous patron to whom Kane dedicated his *Adventures of an Artist*. Many years later the entire Allen collection was purchased by Sir Edmund Osler and presented to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto.<sup>4</sup> Five of the six pictures here reproduced, depicting the Red River Settlement and the half-breed and Indian hunters of 1846, have been used through the courtesy of that museum. The view of Kakabeka Falls appearing below is in the Coe Collection owned by the Yale University Library. B.L.H.

<sup>3</sup> Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, 67-72.

<sup>4</sup> Burpee, in Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist*, xxiv, xxix. See also p. xxxviii-xlviii for a "Catalogue of Paintings by Paul Kane" in the Royal Ontario Museum. Fifteen of the pictures, largely relating to the Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest areas, are reproduced in color in the August, 1959, issue of *American Heritage* (p. 43, 46-53).

KAKABEKA Falls near Fort William on the Kaministiquia River





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