

## **Historical Background Knowledge**

(Teacher Created Resources)

Bison have been hunted for thousands of years. Explorers who first came to the Americas hunted these large animals. American Indians hunted bison and used part of the animal for their survival. Bison hides were used as coverings for shelters, blankets, rugs, and clothing. The meat of the bison was dried and used for food. Each part of the bison played a part in the survival of American Indians living in the Plains region of the United States.

In the 1800s more and more settlers began traveling west. Some of these were for traders. They had to travel between trading outposts and needed food for the journey. American Indians began trading with fur traders and provided them with pemmican, which is dried bison meat. This meat jerky allowed traders to have good food that wouldn't spoil on their journey.

Settlers in the West also began trading with American Indians for bison hides to use as blankets. This led to the American Indians to hunt the bison for more than just their own needs. They also hunted to get hides to trade with settlers. Eventually the settlers learned to hunt their own bison. They set up trading companies that hunted bison in large numbers. The industry greatly expanded after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. During construction, the railroad companies were able to get bison hides to the East Coast much easier. This led to a huge increase in the killing of bison. Additionally, the herd was separated by the railroad line into a northern and southern herd.

Between 1874 and 1878, the southern herd neared extinction due to over hunting. In the North, the herd was killed so quickly that in 1882, as many as 200,000 hides were shipped out, while in 1884, only one railcar load was shipped.

Hunting bison was very hard work, and only the most skilled and tough men could do it. It is not known how many bison hunters there were at this time, but it is estimated there were over 5,000 working in 1882 in the northern plains alone. These hunters usually worked groups of four. Two of the men were hunters and the other two were usually cooks and skinners. They traveled with a wagon and were gone for about three months in search of bison. All of the hunters' supplies had to be carried in their wagon. While bison were large and could be very dangerous, they did not naturally sense danger from people until it was too late. This made the decimation of the bison occur more quickly.

When the bison were killed, the skinners used their wagons to help skin the bison. The hides were taken back to camp where they were prepared for several days. Buyers would then come to the camp and pay the hunters for the hides. Usually, the men received about \$2.00 per hide. The buyers then shipped the hides to the East Coast using the Transcontinental Railroad where they were sold as blankets and rugs.