

## **Wyatt Earp - The Buffalo Hunter**

### **F. Robert Jacobs, Indiana University**

The legend of Wyatt Earp lives on largely based on his exploits as a gunfighter and Marshall of the frontier West in the 1880s. The classic tales of the shootout at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone or his sawed-off shotgun duel with Curly Bill are possibly the most celebrated gunfights of frontier history and cannot fail to stir the reader's imagination. Wyatt lived to be over 80 years old, long enough to recount his story to Stuart Lake for the book Wyatt Earp: Frontier Marshall<sup>1</sup> (published by Pocket Books).

Apparently, Wyatt was quite a financial success long before he became a marshal. He learned how to hunt and shoot buffalo when only 15 years old. By the time he was 20, the Kansas City and Caldwell buffalo hunters knew him as one of the best in the west. His methods for hunting buffalo were very different from the established practices of the time.

Outside the marshal's office in Caldwell, veteran hunters would meet to compare the season's hunt. Success was measured solely by animals killed and cash received for the hides and meat. Wyatt realized that what was important was the gain after expenditures for horses, wagons, supplies, and skinners' wages were considered. Any hunter could boast of the money in his pockets at the end of a season, but few could say accurately how much was gain.

### **The Ways of the Veteran Hunters**

The buffalo hunter of 1871 set out for the range with five four-horse wagons, with one driver, the stock tender, camp watchman, and cook; and four others to skin the kill. The hunter provided horses, wagons, and supplies for several months. Money received for hides and meat would be divided into two equal parts; one went to the hunter and from his share, he paid all expenses. The second was again split into as many shares as there were drivers, skinners and helpers with each getting a share as his seasonal wage. It was believed that no really top-notch buffalo hunter would stoop to skinning the animals he shot. Each person in the party had a specific assigned job, and none would do something below their level of dignity.

The weapon of choice at the time was the Sharps "Fifty" rifle. These rifles, which all right-minded buffalo hunters carried, weighed more than twenty pounds. The gun shot a slug of lead two inches in length, a half-inch in diameter, weighing approximately an eighth of a pound. The Sharps was the best weapon obtainable for long-range shooting, but notable among its drawbacks were the cost of ammunition and the fact that the rifle's accuracy was seriously affected by continued rapid fire. To prevent

---

<sup>1</sup> Parts of this case are from Chapter 5, "The Buffalo Range."

damaging the rifle, the wise user, ran a water-soaked rag through the barrel after every second or third shot and let the metal cool.

Wyatt recounted that "early white hunters had followed the Indian practice of shooting buffalo from the back of a horse galloping full tilt at the edge of a stampeding herd. In skin hunting this did not pay. Shooting from horseback could not be as accurate as from a stand, and the animals killed during a run would be strung for miles across the prairie, making a lot of travel for the skinners, with the added certainty that many hides would be missed. Also, every buffalo left alive would be stampeded clear out of the country in a day's hunt, and the killers would have to move camp or wait for another herd.

"In stories about Buffalo Bill Cody and other Western characters who went into the circus business, I've read of a single horseman holding a bunch of buffalo stock-still by riding around and around them for hours and shooting as he rode. That was an impossibility. Two minutes after the horseman started his riding and shooting, there would not have been a buffalo within rifle range. Buffalo would stampede instantly at the sight or smell of a man on horseback; they would ignore a man on foot, or eye him in curiosity. That was why hide hunters shoot from a stand.

Wyatt goes on to recount the methods of current hunters. "A Hunter would drag his Sharps to a rise of ground giving a good view of the herd, pick a bunch of animals, set his rest-sticks<sup>2</sup> and start shooting. He aimed to hit an animal on the edge of the bunch, the leader if possible, just back of the foreleg and about one third of the way up the body. If the slug went true, the animal would drop in his tracks or stagger a few steps and fall. Strangely enough, the buffalo paid no attention to the report of the rifle and very little, if any, to one that fell.

"A first-class hunter would kill with almost every shot, and if he was good, he could drop game until some buffalo still on his feet chanced to sniff closely at one that had fallen. Then it was up to the hunter to drop the sniffer before he could spread his excitement over the smell of blood. If he could do this, the slaughter might continue, but eventually the blood scent became so strong that several animals noticed it. They would bellow and paw, their frenzy would spread to the bunches nearby, and suddenly the whole herd was off on a wild run. The hunter could kill no more until he found conditions suitable for another stand.

"Where large parties of hunters were working the plains by such methods in fairly close quarters, the periodical scarcity of buffalo was a certainty. With the best of luck, a single hunter might kill one hundred buffalo in a day, from several stands. That would be all that four skinners could handle. I found that the average bunch would stampede by the time thirty or forty had been killed. Only the best of hunters could average 50 kills a day, thirty to forty was more common.

---

<sup>2</sup>A shooting rest was two sticks tied together, X-fashion, set in the ground to support the rifle while the marksman aimed and fired.

**Wyatt Earp's Buffalo Hunting Method**

The first flaw which Wyatt Earp saw was that the average hunter outfitted in expectation of killing one hundred buffalo a day, and selling each animal's hide and meat for two to five dollars, depending upon size and quality. In place of five wagons and twenty-odd horses, Wyatt purchased one wagon, four sound animals for harness and one to ride. He engaged an experienced skinner in a straight profit-sharing scheme. Wyatt was to finance the hunt; the skinner would drive and cook; and, greatly to the disgust of older hands, Wyatt was to assist in skinning and butchering. At the end of the hunt, Wyatt was to keep the team and wagon, deduct all other expenses from the gross receipts, and share any net equally with his skinner.

In contrast to the use of the Sharps rifle, Wyatt killed buffalo with a shotgun. Wyatt was well acquainted with the buffalo's idiosyncrasy of stampeding at the sight or scent of a man on horseback, but generally ignoring one on foot. He intended to make use of this in reaching shotgun range of the herds. He purchased a breech-loading gun, with apparatus for reloading shells, and this, with a supply of powder, lead, and caps, was to constitute his hunting arsenal. He loaded a single one-and-one-half-ounce slug to the shell. He knew that at any range under one hundred yards he could score as accurately with his shotgun as any rifleman.

Wyatt described his approach: "My system for hunting buffalo was to work my way on foot nearer to the herds than the rifle users like to locate. The shorter range of my shotgun made this necessary, but I could fire the piece as rapidly as I wished without harming it. I planned to get within fifty yards of the buffalo before I started shooting, and at that range pick off selected animals. I would shoot until I had downed all the skinner and I could handle that day. I figured to offset the danger of a stampede by finishing my kill before the animals smelled blood and then working the herd away quietly in the direction I wanted it to go. To do this, I would stand up, wave my coat in the air, and shout. The buffalo would probably move away quietly if I got them started before they scented blood. Then the skinner and I would get to work. In practice, my idea worked out exactly as I had calculated it would.

"Some people called my method foolhardy. To me, it was simply a question of whether or not I could outguess a buffalo. The best answer is that there never was a moment during my three seasons as a buffalo hunter when I was in danger from a stampede, nor a day when I hunted that I did not have a profitable kill. My lowest score for a single stand was eighteen buffalo, the highest, twenty-seven. I shot one stand a day, which meant twenty to thirty-five dollars apiece for the skinner and myself every day we worked. That was cash in hand, not hopes.

"No wonder the average buffalo hunter was glad that the code forbade him to skin his kill; skinning was hard, dirty work. My skinner kept out of sight with the wagon until I had finished shooting. Then he came on the job. In skinning a buffalo, we slit down the inside of each leg and along the belly from neck to tail. The legs and a strip along each side of the belly-cut were skinned out and the neck skinned all the way around. The head skin was not taken. We gathered the heavy neck hide into a bunch around which

we looped a short length of rope, and a horse hitched to the other end ripped the hide off. We did it every time this way.

"In camp, we dusted the hides and the ground nearby with poison to keep off flies and bugs, and pegged out the skins, flesh-side up. In the dry prairie air, first curing took but a day or so. The hides were then turned, and, after they had cured so water would not injure them, they were stacked in piles, hair-side up, until we hauled them to a hide buyer's station, or a buyer's wagon came to our camp.

### **Wyatt Earp - The Legend**

The success of Wyatt Earp's venture against cherished customs became legend to the ranks of the buffalo hunters. Time after time on checking tallies, the lone hunter found that, while some had killed greater numbers than he from the given stands, or had larger seasonal totals, his daily count of hides was well above average. Rudimentary arithmetic proved that his profits were much higher.

Wyatt recounts the inevitable demise of the great buffalo herds: "With all the buffalo I saw in the days when they roamed the range, I shall never forget a herd we sighted in the fall of '71. We had seen a few small bunches, but none that I stopped for, as I wanted to make camp as permanent as possible. We had crossed the Medicine Lodge when the plentitude of buffalo sign indicated that we were closing on a sizable herd. I went to a rise possibly three hundred feet above the creek bottom. The sight that greeted me as I topped the hill soon disappeared for all time.

"I stood on the highest point within miles. To the west and south, the prairie rolled in mounds and level stretches pitted with buffalo wallow as far as I could see, twenty or thirty miles. For all that distance the range was packed with grazing buffalo.

"... I signaled my skinner to join me. 'My God!' he said, 'there must be a million.'

"It might give a better idea of the results of buffalo hunting to jump ahead seven years to 1878, when Bill Tilghman, Bat Masterson, and I went buffalo hunting for sport. We traveled due west from Dodge City more than one hundred miles along the Arkansas River, south to the Cimarron, and east to Crooked Creek again, at the height of the best hunting season over what in 1871 had been the greatest buffalo ground in the world. Grass was as plentiful and as succulent as ever, but we never saw a buffalo. The herds were gone, wiped out."

**VISUALLY represent the following. Use only pictures, symbols, graphs, or numbers—no words or bullet points.**

- Use 1 flip chart page to depict the traditional methods and business model
- Use 1 flip chart page to depict Earp's methods and model
- 1 page for comparison, highlighting key differences.