

SOME REMINISCENCES OF PIONEER DAYS IN NEBRASKA.

(Translated from an article written in Bohemian for the Bohemian Almanach Pionýr, by Joseph P. Sedivy, Verdigre, Nebr).
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I do not know, dear reader, how you will like what I have to say about pioneer days in Nebraska, but I think it will interest many - the young people because they will see how much has changed in comparatively a short time, and the old folks because they remember similar episodes.

It is really too bad that more of these pioneer reminiscences did not find their way into print, for that time will never return, and the pioneers are leaving this world one by one and soon there will be none left. I came to Niobrara as a boy of fourteen with my parents, the settlement then being just founded. My father kept a diary, from which I can get much material, and I have published some of it, but I cannot use it altogether because some of the people whom it concerns are still living. I was the eldest of the children and took great interest in all that happened to our family. I am not an educated writer, but I keep to the truth and describe all as well as I can. I begin my reminiscences with an account of the killing of the last buffalo that appeared in our settlement, and how I was a witness of the murder of "Black Horse".

THE LAST BUFFALO.

Toward the end of February 1870, after a hard winter, the weather became warmer and the snowdrifts, ^{made} ~~formed~~ by the northwestern wind in the hills and ravines that border the valleys of the Missouri and Niobrara rivers on the south and west, began to melt, forming in places ^{along the whole} ~~the hills~~ width of the valley where ~~the hills~~ ^{along with} Bazile Creek to the Niobrara River, were burned over in the fall by a prairie fire from

north to south for many miles. In the Niobrara valley, under the slough, some grass was protected by a heavy rain. There had been plenty of game before the fire, but now it had gone to the southwest.

There were about twelve white settlers in the Niobrara Valley and all that afforded them a livelihood was trading with the Ponca and Santee Indians. Some of the settlers farmed a little and in the winter they cut wood, which they sold in summer to steamships going up the Missouri. In the winter of 1870 the storekeeper H. Westermann invited about a dozen Ponca Indians to cut wood for him at the mouth of the Niobrara River, about there where now is the Northwestern bridge. They all came from their agency and settled in tents with their families. They brought their ponies, which grazed on the green bark of the cottonwood.

These Indian woodcutters, just as did the whole Ponca tribe, received aid from the government, consisting of beef, flour, salt and other provisions, in limited quantities, for they had a supply of dried buffalo meat and corn, and there was plenty of dry fuel in the vicinity, so they often had dances at night in their camp. Their tom-tom was heard far after midnight, and their racket rent the air and was heard in the town. They kept up their connections with the Indian village on the other ^{side} of the river, Ni-re-ta (Stinking Water), about three miles distant, where their fellow-tribesmen lived. They also did business at the agency, but preferred to trade with the store-keepers of Niobrara.

At that time there were two stores in Niobrara, low, cotton-wood log houses, covered with earth and grass. The traders used to exchange with the redmen various trinkets, coffee, sugar, tobacco, bacon, colored calico, blankets etc. for furs and money, and on the quiet sold ^{them} ~~they~~ whiskey for a high price. When the Indian woodcutters had

a pile of wood cut, the trader had to measure it and pay them before they would proceed further.

One morning in February 1870 H. Westermann returned from such an expedition and informed the settlers that the Indians ^{had} discovered an old, immense buffalo, a bull, and had decided, in accordance with a custom inherited from their fathers, to let the women kill him with knives, in order to show their prowess. It is a natural law that old buffalo bulls, whose days as leaders of the herd are numbered and who are supplanted by younger rivals, leave the herd and lead a solitary life, the life of an exiled and degraded monarch. This happens after one grand, last fight with the younger bulls, and results usually in many wounds, so that the animal, suffering that way and with mange, is cross, but in case ^{such} a bull it irritated, he calls forth the remaining fragments of his strength and fights anew. Sometimes such an animal wandered a hundred miles from its former herd and fell a victim to the wolves or foxes, being spent. The meat and hide of such a bull is unfit for use, both being very tough. The Indians considered it a dishonor for a red warrior to fell an animal so weak and miserable, so they let the women have their try at him. And so it happened that the Ponca Indians of the wood ^{cutter's} camp prepared a novel sight. They invited their wives and some others from the village Ni-re-ta to form a large half-circle in the mouth of the ravine, which is now found east of the brick public school in Niobrara. The buffalo was in the ravine. The women were all armed with long knives, which they always wore in their belts. Some of the warriors and boys were present, even Wa-hu-tan-ga (Big Gun), the medicine man. His face was horribly painted with yellow and green paints and being withered and wrinkled, seemed to leer. He had large hoops of copper wire in his ears, and

on his head a cap with the horns of a mountain goat. A blue, dirty blanket was thrown over his shoulders, on his neck was a necklace of claws, teeth, and bones, alternating with glass beads and tubes. From his waist hang a bag containing medicines and charms. His trousers or leggings were of wild cat fur, and the large moccasins of buffalo hide.

In his bony hand he held a sort of large rattle, ornamented with bright colored rags.

The dogs, so ^{often} guests at Indian gatherings, were all tied to the tents today. Everyone came afoot, only a few of the old warriors came on horses, for they were to drive the buffalo into the ravine.

Some Indians stood on the hills as guards. All was in place, the spectators were sitting at the foot of the hills. The south wind blew and the sky was clear, although the weather was quite cold.

The nearest guard on the right announced, by imitating the barking of a prairie ~~wolf~~ ^{wolf} and waving both hands from the head to the feet, that the buffalo is nearing the mouth of the ravine and that the battle will begin. The air was immediately filled with barking and howling of wolves, made by the Indians, and those on the horses forced the buffalo to leave the ravine and enter the valley. He appeared in a plum thicket bordering on the left side, partly filled with snowdrifts.

The immense, thin animal was bare on its side, that is without fur, and his chest was covered with foam, which fell to the ground. His right hip was covered with a bad sore. He came, limping on his left back leg, and began to paw the brushwood, growling terribly. The wind was coming from the opposite side, so he did not realize that the women were near, prepared to attack him. Being already irritated by the Indians who drove him out, he turned around and with head bent nearly to the ground made for one of them. This was the signal for the

attack. The women, screeching, appeared from their hiding places, with sharp knives in their hands, and fell on the enraged beast, but missed their aim. The buffalo now turned quickly to the women and threw the nearest one into the brush as lightly as if ^{she} ~~the~~ were a doll. A woman from the left tried to strike the bull in the neck, but again missed her goal, for an old bull has very tough and thick hide, and so ^{she} ~~she~~ only wounded him lightly. ~~He~~ ^{she} had broken the handle of her knife, which angered her greatly, and so she grabbed the knife of the woman standing nearest her and like mad attacked the bull again, which had been fending off the blows of the others. He had run on a piece of ice, and here the woman got him. She came at him from the opposite side and drove the knife into his breast. The bull was already bleeding from several wounds.

While the women were thus occupied, the spectators had formed a circle around the ^{combatants} ~~combats~~ and cheered the women on with a devilish din. The medicine man screeched like mad, rattled his rattle and ran around in a circle. The woman who had given the bull his death blow was covered with blood, and in her excitement slipped and fell on the ice. It seemed that death awaited her, for the wounded monarch of the prairies, fuming with pain, his mouth filled with bloody, thick foam, intended to sell his life dearly. He gathered his strength, bellowed and tried to attack the fainting woman, but fell to the ground. His blood colored the ice and snow and the women carried ^{off} ~~of~~ their friend.

So perished the last buffalo that was seen in the settlement, which was to grow later into a big Bohemian neighborhood. After a time prairie wolves gnawed off the meat and we boys later brought the skull to town, where it lay for some time at S. L. Paxton's, until Dr. Shelly took it back with him to Vermont.

"BLACK HORSE".

Before I begin to describe the episode which I witnessed, I must say something about my good friend, long since dead, Antoine La Ravier. He was a Frenchman, born in St. Louis, Missouri, and lived ^{among} ~~along~~ the Ponca Indians from the fifties for sixteen years.

He was in the main a good man and I esteemed him because he once saved my life. Unfortunately, he drank whiskey heavily and when drunk was like a wild man, much feared by the Indians, with whom he tried to get up fights. He died a terrible death. Once when drunk he tried to entice the sweetheart of an Indian who shot him. Wounded and unable to defend himself, he was chopped to death by an old Indian woman.

One day in August 1874 Antoine and I sat after dinner in the shade of the trees back of Wm. Lamont's cabin. I was working for Lamont. Antoine was ^{smoking} ~~smoking~~ a small pipe and relating various interesting anecdotes. Suddenly appeared a group of ten Ponca Indians on horses. Some went into the cabin to trade, for Lamont ~~traded~~ traded with Indians and some stayed outside. In those days they ^{wore} ~~were~~ their own costumes. The summer outfit of a chief consisted of a dirty colored ~~short~~, trousers trimmed with fringe, fastened to the waist with a linen belt, and a small apron. Some wore no trousers nor shirt, only the apron. Their hair was braided, the braid hanging from the top of the head, an eagle feather was stuck therein, and in their ears and on their wrists were brass rings.

Some of the horses had saddles, Indian saddles, which always seemed very uncomfortable to me. Some of the Indians had guns, for in those days these were seldom laid aside. They greeted us with their customary "How!". Those that stayed outside stood in the shade of a shed.

Antoine emptied his pipe got up and said. "I am going to see how they get on". He went over to the Indians by the shed and I began to

read the Boston Investigator, of which Lamont was a subscriber. Presently Antoine came to me and inquired, if I had noticed that "Black Horse" (Shanga-sabe) was one of the number. That was the name of a stalwart warrior, wrapped in a blue blanket. On his left cheek was a large scar, now healed, stretching across the forehead ^{and} and eye, the lower lid of which was disfigured. He had come with the others, unarmed. I replied that I had noticed him, for he was a stranger to me. I knew nearly all the Indians living in the Indian village Ni-re-ta, and many from the agency, but I ^{had} never seen this one.

Antoine sat down, filled his pipe and began to relate the following: "On the summer of 1867 about a third of the Ponca Indians left their reservations, and as was their annual custom, took themselves over the wide prairies of Nebraska and Kansas, to join some friendly tribe, and all together then partook of a big ^{buffalo} hunt. One of the hunters was a young, brave, excellent marksman, "Black Horse", a Ponca Indian. He was much esteemed by his tribe, and was invited to all the councils and trials. He was a sort of sub-chief. His father died in battle with the Sioux Indians when "Black Horse" was sixteen. He had but an old mother, for whom he cared tenderly. He had not taken to himself a wife but gave all his love and care to his old mother and to hunting.

He had joined the hunt ^{accompanied} by his mother, taking along his tent. He had picked out three of his best horses, for the way was long and required several days' time, besides that the hunt itself required a ^{fleet} fleet and strong horse.

The company travelled several days and reached the country of the friendly Pawnee tribe without mishap, where it was greeted with merry-making, dancing, eating and contests lasting three days. Then both

tribes set out to the west. They intended to bring home as much dried buffalo meat and hides as possible. When they had travelled several days, the scouts announced that they had seen a large herd grazing near. Several attacks were prepared, from various directions, and "Black Horse" was one of the first on the scene. He was just preparing to shoot when his horse stumbled because his front foot had caught ⁱⁿ a prairie-dog hole. The rider was thrown and fell with his head on the jagged end of a large stone. There the women found him, bleeding, when they were on their way to cut up the buffalo meat. They quickly took him to the camp and with the aid of his mother and the medicine man nursed him.

When he had improved somewhat, he was taken back to the Ponca reservation. His wound healed, but his mind became affected and he became insane. He was never violent, if he became excited, he ran to some quiet spot along the river and talked to himself, sometimes very loudly. The Indians watched over him and kept him under guard, but he managed to get away now and then, and at such times would not return willingly, they had to use force.

Thus he was for several years and his condition seemed to grow worse. His old mother died. Later Major H. C. Stone, the agent at the Santee Reservation, heard about him, and being a physician, he asked that "Black Horse" be taken to that reservation, to see if medical aid could not help him. But after a careful investigation he said "Black Horse" can will never be any better.

That afternoon when I saw him in Lamont's yard, he was returning from the above mention medical inspection. The Indians finished trading and left for their village.

About two weeks after this my employer said I could go home Saturday evening, to spend Sunday with my parents, two miles and a half away. Monday morning I was to be at my post again. Such occasions were great holidays for me and I went home with great joy. Sunday morning I awoke early, breakfasted and with gun in hand went out to get our pony Satan. I forded the Verdigre Creek, followed the rough road above the river until I came to a narrow valley, heavily timbered, to which ran several long and deep ravines, covered with oaks, elms, basswoods and cedars. In those days there was much game there, large and small, and wild turkeys. On the prairie above the ravines often appeared large droves of ^{antelope} ~~antelopes~~ and prairie deer, and flocks of prairie chickens.

I rode through the valley until I came to the mouth of one of the ravines, where I tied Satan in a cedar grove. I saw fresh tracks of wild turkeys in the mud, leading toward the river. I crept along carefully, reached the bank, but saw no turkeys. The woods ^{were} ~~was~~ sparser here, there were many cottonwoods and the ground around them was covered with high grass. There was an island in the river, covered with willows and young cottonwoods, about five feet high. The Niobrara river changes its current frequently, so the current ran on both sides of the island.

Knowing that wild turkeys were shy and knowing, I was very careful to outwit them.. Suddenly it seemed to me that I heard a noise in the grass and the creaking of twigs. I saw ~~in~~ a sand bar on which were tracks of turkeys and just then heard their ^{sounds} ~~sounds~~, in a wild plum thicket. I crept up to within eighty feet of the thicket and prepared to shoot. I had taken about eight steps I heard the warning voice of the old bird, about forty feet away in the willow thicket. Just then

the turkeys appeared and I got a young male. The second shot brought down another bird that fell into the thicket between the river and the island.

Feeling satisfied with my luck, I quickly re-loaded my gun and put the dead bird in my pouch. I went to look for the other one, but found only some feathers. He was wounded and sped into hiding, as is natural with these birds. Then I went over to the island, which was large and covered with trees, mostly cottonwoods. One part ran out into a rounded point, which was covered with various trees and wild grapes and a thorny brushwood called buffalo berry. The place was hard to get over but afforded fine hiding for game. I crept in and out, but could find nothing, so I took myself to the lower end of the island. Here I came on a large tree, uprooted by the wind, and climbed on it. I could see across the river the hill, on which was the Ponca reservation, and there I saw a row of Indian riders. They rode along a bank down into the valley, towards me. I saw by the way they rode and the glitter of a small mirror, that something unusual was happening. I climbed down and went along the edge until I came to the point in the island. Here I found another big, uprooted tree, slanting over another tree, and so I climbed up, although the slant was quite perpendicular. I reached the place where the fallen tree rested on the upright tree and noted that the distance between me and the Indians was about four hundred feet. The hills in those places were and are yet quite broken by holes and gullies.

I saw that the party rode to another, smaller party of riders and were conversing together. The Indians were armed and were giving signs with the mirror to their comrades in the valley, which made me think they were up to some devilment. A drove of horses belong to the Poncas grazed

near the hills. I knew that the Poncas were entertaining visitors, the Omaha Indians, in whose honor they were giving dances, dinners and contests. That was why they were neglecting their horses.

Both groups held a council. I counted twenty-one Indians. Suddenly those that had got off the horses jumped on again and they all flew along the river to the gullied hills. I felt sure it was a band of thieves, Sioux Indians, who wanted to steal the Ponca's horses in the valley. When the Sioux reached the base of the hills, the tall figure of a red warrior appeared, as if out of the ground. He wore long hair and was covered by a red blanket. In his hand he had a thick club, which he waved over his head. He hollered and made a great noise, which reached my ears.

The riders stopped an instant, then I saw the lightning of their guns and heard the noise of shot, and the proud figure of the warrior fell to the ground. I felt paralyzed. Indeed, I felt as though I had turned to stone upon seeing this cold-blooded murder. I saw that the Sioux tried to get to the fallen man as quickly as possible and the first one scalped him. Then they sped to the grazing horses, but I did not wait to see any more. I had seen enough! I hurried to my horse and on the way home I recollected what friend Antoine had told me about "Black Horse". I felt sure it was he and no other who had become the victim of the Sioux.

I got home as quickly as I could, left my gun, ammunition and the turkey, and after telling mother what I had seen, I went to the Ponca Indian village Ni-re-ta. At the ford I met the Ponca chief Mitchell and several warriors, and told them what had happened. They were much surprised and hurried to the village. I returned home and it came to

me how untrue were many novels and stories about Indians, in which their magnanimity to an unarmed enemy was described. I have not found it so.

The next day I returned to Lamont. From the village could be heard the weeping and lamentations of the women over the murdered Indian. I found out later from Antoine that the Poncas pursued the Sioux and got their horses back. In the ravines near Fort Randall along the Missouri river they had a fight, in which they were victorious and two Sioux were killed. They cut off their feet, hands and scalps as trophies. In a big tent or camp, made of canvas and brushwood, they celebrated for several evenings. Their noise and drumming of the tom-toms could be heard at Lamont's. The commander at Ponca agency heard of their orgies and sent out a company of soldiers, to remove the awful trophies and order the Indians to desist in the future from dancing and celebrating in that manner.

Thus perished and was revenged "Black Horse". The Poncas buried his body on the top of one of the highest hills above the village. We could see his grave for several years from our place, and it vanished from view when it became overgrown with high grass.