

Métis Laws of the Hunt

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"The most positive, perhaps, of the recognized laws regulating the camp of rendezvous is that forbidding the departure of any one from its limits after having once entered it. This is to guard against covering the plains with straggling bands of hunters whose presence would inevitably drive the buffalo from their usual range. By reason of this self imposed law, no one attempts to leave the main body until all the hunters have arrived, an event which generally occurs within a week from the first formation of the camp. During that period the time is passed much in the fashion above described, and, as a consequence of so continuous a series of dissipations, all are eager to break camp and start upon the long journey. The day previous to that appointed for departure, however, is set apart for the election of the officers of the hunt, and the transaction of such other business as the exigencies of the time suggest.

By this date the hunters are supposed to be all in, and prepared as well as they ever will be for departure. The encampment has swollen almost beyond available limits, and become dissipated and unruly to a degree. From two thousand to twenty five hundred carts line the banks; three thousand animals graze within sight upon the prairie; one thousand men, with their following of women and children, find shelter under carts, and in the tents and tepees of the encampment; the smoke of the campfires almost obscures the sun; and the Babel of sounds arising from the laughing, neighing, barking multitude, resembles the rush of many waters.

Immediately after breakfast of the day previous to that appointed for departure from the rendezvous, all the males of the camp repair to a point a short distance off upon the prairie, where gathered in a huge circle, they proceed to the election of officers for the coming hunt. The votes are given first for a chief, who shall see that all laws are enforced, and shall have the power of settling all disputes. To this office is almost invariably elected an old hunter, prominent both on account of experience and executive ability and for whose comparatively exemplary life all entertain respect. The second ballot elects twelve counselors who, with the chief, make the laws, decide the direction of travel, and advise the executive in all matters of doubtful propriety. These persons, being necessarily men of experience, are chosen also from the elderly men of the camp, or those who have followed plain hunting for many years. The third ballot is cast for the election of four captains, each of whom will command a certain number of men, called soldiers, who become the police of the hunt, mounting guard against Indians, arranging the shape of the camp, an outer circle

formed of carts, inside of which the tents and animals are placed, keeping watch over private property, arresting offenders, etc. These four men must be of a determined mould, and are chosen from the middle aged hunters whose courage and vigilance are approved. Lastly, four guides are elected, who are to lead the train in the direction indicated by the chief and counselors. This position, involving a thorough knowledge of the country, is always filled from the ranks of the older hunters, whose many years of service have rendered them acquainted with every foot of the territory to be traversed. With this last office the election terminates.

Before the crowd disperses, the chief and counselors have framed a code of laws which is to govern the multitude during the period covered by the hunt. This code varies a little, perhaps, in phraseology from year to year, but is generally of the following substance:

1. No running of buffalo is permitted on the Sabbath day.
2. No member of the hunt to lag behind, go before, or fork off from the main body, unless by special permission of the chief.
3. No person or party to run buffalo before the general order is given, in which the entire hunt may participate.
4. Every captain, with his men, to patrol the camp in tum, in order that a continual watch may be kept.

Penalties.

1. For the first offence, the saddle and bridle of the offender to be cut up.
2. The offender to have his coat cut up.
3. The offender to be publicly flogged.

Any penalty is foregone, however, if the guilty party pay a stipulated sum in money, meat, or robes, for each offence. In case of theft the perpetrator is to be taken to the middle of the camp, his name called aloud thrice, the word "thief" being added.

The election having furnished the hunt with the requisite officers, and a code of laws providing for all the necessities and emergencies incident to its nomadic life, the huge encampment begins at once to feel their salutary effect. By eventide the soldiers are selected from the numbers of the young men, and a relief patrols the camp, for the laws are enforced from the moment of their enactment. The effect is perceptible in the lessened confusion, the cessation of public drinking and gambling, and a general air of order and routine. The dissipation of the past week is replaced by attention to the details of the coming journey. Everything is made ready for an early departure on the morrow. The chief and his counselors assemble in the centre of the camp and discuss the most advisable route to pursue; the council being open to outsiders having suggestions to offer. The captains of the guard pass through the camp in all directions, issuing orders as to the disposition of animals, carts, and baggage, in such manner as to afford the best facilities for easy and rapid loading. Play day is over, and the real business of the hunt begins. After the lapse of a night which, in its quietude, forms a violent contrast with the seven or more preceding it, the camp of rendezvous is broken up, and the caravan begins to move."