

Simeon Tejada
Taos, New Mexico
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Lorin W. Brown
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J. W. B.

HISTORY OF A BUFFALO HUNTER

Don Manuel Jesus Vasquez was born in the settlement of Chamisal, Taos County on the 31st day of January of the year 1856. He himself does not know how he came to live at the home of Don Juan Policarpio Romero of the village of Peñasco but at the age of eight he was herdboy for a flock of goats belonging to Don Juan Policarpio Romero and continued as such until he married Rosario Fresquez of Peñasco.

After he was married he practised carpentry, making coffins for the dead, during the great smallpox plague of the year 1875. There were days in which four or five deaths occurred and Don Manuel could not make coffins enough to supply the demand and there was no other carpenter in Peñasco. Some of the dead were placed on poles and dragged to the cemetery by burros.

While the epidemic raged Don Manuel continued making coffins and when it had subsided in Peñasco, Don Juan Policarpio sent him to Ocate, Chacon and Santa Clara, now known as Wagon Mound, to make coffins at those places.

In the year 1877 Don Policarpio sent Don Manuel Jesus Vasquez in company with other men to the plains on a buffalo hunt. He left Peñasco with a Navajo Indian called Juan Jesus Romero, whom Don Policarpio Romero had raised. Alvino Ortega and Jesus Maria Ortega of the settlement of El Llano de San Juan (Plains of Saint John) as well as some thirty other men went with them on the buffalo hunt. They took with them fifteen ox drawn carts, the oxen's horns were tied securely to the yokes with straps of ox-hide. This group of men met in Peñasco on the 15th of November, 1877 before setting out on the hunt. They set the same day for Mora, there they were joined by more men and more carts,

from there they went to Ocate and there also, they were joined by more men and more carts. From this place they traveled as far as the Colorado river which they crossed below what is now the town of Springer in Colfax County. At that time there was not a single house there, or at least they saw none, nor did they see any footprints and there was no trail of any kind. They were traveling towards the state of Oklahoma and reached Chico, also in Colfax County. At this place they camped for a few days in order to rest their oxen. A meeting was called with the object of placing some one of them at the head of the expedition, votes were cast and Don Alvino Ortega of the Llano de San Juan received a majority of votes and was given the title of "Comandante," Commander.

From this time on nothing was done except at the express command of Don Alvino Ortega, he ordered the oxen to be yoked, he gave the order to make camp, to water the animals, he also ordered mounted men to ride ahead as scouts for signs of Indians who might cause them trouble, and to reconnoiter ahead for water for since there was no road over the prairies it was quite possible and dangerous that at any moment they might suddenly come upon a deep canon or swollen stream which they would not be able to cross. These scouts would ride ahead of the caravan, returning to the camp each night.

They passed close to the site of the city of Clayton by way of a spring called El Ojo del Cibolo (Buffalo Spring) and continued across Texas to enter Oklahoma at a point called Punta de Agua (Waterhole). It took them a month to reach buffalo country. At a point called Pilares a buffalo bull was killed which furnished them meat for a few days.

From Pilares the expedition traveled for three or four days more until it reached a river called Rio de las Nutrias (Beaver River). They camped a short ways down the stream and began hunting buffaloes.

The hunt continued until they had killed enough buffaloes to fill fifty carts with the meat. Only the meat which could be cut into large strips was used, that is, the hind quarters the hump . The buffalo fat was saved also.

The hunt was conducted on horseback and lances were the weapons used. The commander would order the men to form a line placing the hunters mounted on the swifter horses at each end so that when they advanced on a herd of buffalo the ends of the line would lead the rest in an encircling movement of the beasts.

When the men were formed in line and before they launched themselves on the buffalo the Commander would ask that they all pray together and ask the Almighty God for strength in the impending hunt. When the Commander was heard to say, "Ave Maria Purissima" (Hail Holy Mary) the line would move forward as one man the end men on their swifter horses outdistancing the rest so as to encircle the herd which was to be attacked.

Some of the men designated as skimmers followed the hunt driving burros before them. These men skinned the fat cows only for the dead animals were so plentiful that they would ignore the bulls and lean cows.

They would pack the buffalo meat into camp where they would cut it into convenient sized strips after which they would slice it very thin and hang it up to dry on poles. The "cecina" or jerked meat was prepared in the following manner; long strips were cut from the carcasses, for this, men expert at the job were selected. After the meat had cooled it was spread on hides and tramped on until it was drained of blood and then as we have already stated the cecinas were hung on poles to dry in the sun. After it had dried they would stack it up like cordwood, each pile containing enough meat to load three or four carts.

As soon as the Commander thought that sufficient meat had been prepared to fill all of the ox-carts he would give orders to cease killing buffaloes. He then would assign three or four carts to each pile of meat and he himself would divide the meat according to the different kinds, larger pieces, meat from the hump and the tallow,- the smaller pieces were anybodies property in any quantity desired.

In loading the meat the same method was used as in loading fodder, some would load the meat on the cart while the owner of the cart would trample it down so as to get as much of a load on the cart as he possibly could and all that the oxen would be able to haul home.

After the carts were loaded a party of ten plains Indians of the Kiowa tribe suddenly rode into camp. The Indians asked for something to eat and their request was complied with, after they had eaten some of the party thought it would be a good idea to kill the Indians arguing that they were only ten in number and could be safely dispatched whereas if they were allowed to leave they might apprise others of their tribe and return in larger numbers to kill the members of the hunting party and steal the meat. Don Manuel Jesus Vasques opposed this plan,- the Indians were ordered out of camp. They retired a short distance but followed the homeward bound caravan for a long distance. The following morning on orders of the Commander the long trek home was begun in earnest.

At the crossing of the Nutrias river the ox-cart belonging to the only American in the party, became stuck in midstream. This American lived in Ocate. After all the rest of the ox-carts had safely crossed the river, all of the party helped in extricating the American's cart from the river and onto dry land. The actual hunting of the buffaloes lasted one month, the trip to and from the hunting grounds required a month's travel each so that the whole trip lasted three months. It took

three months of that winter for the entire trip.

This expedition was free of any dispute or fight of any kind, whatever Don Manuel ordered was executed and the whole expedition got along very agreeably.

When Don Manuel Jesus Vasquez returned to Peñasco preparations were being made for another expedition to the country of the Comanches and Cayguas (Kiowas) towards Kansas. Don Manuel Jesus Vasquez went on this trip also. The object of this trip was the buying of horses from the Apaches (?) and Kiowas. On this trip burros loaded with bread were taken along. The bread was a certain kind of bread called Comanche bread. This bread was made of wheat flour but without yeast so that the bread was as hard or harder than a rock, and was traded to the Indians for horses. The Indians were Kiowas and Comanches. A "trinca" of bread was given for each horse. A "trinca" was half a sack of bread or in other words a sack of bread for a pair of horses. At this time the Indians already were receiving some aid from the government and they would feed those who went to trade with them, they had plenty of coffee and sugar. Twenty men went on this trading expedition and they brought fifteen horses back to Peñasco with them.

The most of the men who went on this expedition worked for wages, small wages however, no one of them ever made more than 50¢ a day. Yet Don Juan Policarpio Romero never paid Don Manuel Jesus Vasquez a single cent for his labors, as shepherd for his flock of goats nor for the making of coffins, nor for his services as a buffalo hunter or horse trader with the Indians, but he did keep Don Manuel and his family. While his patron lived Don Manuel never held one single penny in his hand.

Don Manuel Jesus Vasques who is alive today at the age of 83 says that he never recollects having seen the inside of a school house, but that his patron taught him how to sign his name. Don Juan Policarpio left or designated Don Manuel as one of his heirs and the sons of Don Juan Policarpio Romero gave him four goats and asked him to sign a paper which attested that he had received his share of the inheritance, - and he not knowing how to read signed. The Probate Judge at Taos called him before him and asked Don Manuel if he was content and satisfied and upon his answering that he was, he signed the paper or document.

Fin

My informant is the same Don Manuel Jesus Vasques who is 83 years old.

Peñasco N.M.