

A Traditional Bison Harvest

We harvested sixteen bison this year.

Fifteen were pasture-harvested, then transported to Quality Meats in Foley for processing. The sixteenth was harvested, butchered, and quartered on the farm, in a more traditional way.

Lisa, a longtime customer, normally buys a fraction of a bison each fall.

She then picks up the chilled meat and processes it at her home.

This year, she asked if she and her family could harvest a whole bison.

On a late November Saturday, we helped Lisa and her family harvest a bison in some of the old ways.

Darrell and Heidi performed a traditional blessing before the harvest.

Both Darrell and Heidi have pipes, medicine bundles, and native ancestors.

Their pipes are of authentic pipestone, Catlinite from Pipestone, Minnesota.

Their pipes have been purified in a sweat lodge ceremony.

The bison ceremony is a Native American tradition.

We try to have a blessing ceremony each fall.

The Native purpose of the blessing is to praise the bison and thank it for providing food.

For me, it is a time to prepare for the killing and to reflect on the cycle of life.

Stan did our blessing for many years, but his health is failing.

Darrell worked with Stan and in recent years has done the blessing on his own.

This is the first year that Heidi, daughter-in-law to my brother Jim, performed the ceremony.

Jim, along with his children and grandchildren, have helped at every blessing and ceremonial harvest we have had.

Most of the ceremony takes place in the barn.

The barn and the wood stove provide shelter and warmth.

The ceremony starts soon after sun-up.

Some consider this a religious ceremony, I do not. Certainly, it is spiritual.

The ceremony is not scripted.

Each celebrant has a person style and liturgy.



Each uses their medicine bag of unique artifacts.

Photos are not allowed.

Not because of any great need for secrecy but rather based on tradition.

The ceremony involves the ritual burning of sage, sweet grass and kinnikinnick.

Kinnikinnick is made of willow bark, dogwood bark, selected leaves, and native tobacco.

The sage is collected from our farm.

The sweet grass comes from Dakota.

By the end of the ceremony, the barn is filled with smoke from smoldering sage, sweet-grass, and kinnikinnick.

Along with the woodstove, a wonderful blend of scents, really.

Everyone gets the opportunity to smoke the pipe and join in the purification.

The setting, as intended, is ideal for reflection on the circle of life.

Immediately after the ceremony, we went to the south pasture where the bison herd spends winter.

I have restored native prairie plants to that part of the farm.

The bison and I like the idea of them hanging out there until spring.

The selected bison was killed, bled, and transported back to the farm for butchering.

The harvest went exactly as planned.

The animal died instantly without stress, anxiety, or pain.

Lisa and her family participated fully in the skinning and butchering.

They did the bulk of the work.

We provided

critical know-how and assistance as needed.

In the accompanying photo, Lisa's friend Lee is splitting the bison spine with a handsaw.

I have done many animals with a handsaw but in recent years, an electric saw has been a great help.

Lisa and Lee preferred the more basic, manual technique.





In this photo, Lisa is skinning the bison using manual pressure only. The manual technique works well on small game and even deer. A bison hide is a lot thicker and tougher, but Lisa and her family made it work surprising well on this bison.

We normally use knives of course. Several years ago, an archaeologist friend loaned me a stone skinning tool. That fist shaped stone tool, with one sharpened edge, was amazingly effective as a skinning device. I have seen identical stone tools at other ancient sites in Minnesota.

Lisa and her family took the bison meat, head, hide, hooves, and organs home. Nothing except the main stomach and intestines were left. The coyotes are recycling those.

Sometimes people are too far removed and they forget. But life is a circle. We are all in it. My daughters, Sarah and Shannon both sent this photo to me.

Not sure which took it.

Ben is on the far right.

Lisa's gloved hand is steadying the carcass from the left.

An anonymous old farmer is in the background.

Notice the bison carcass is exceptionally clean and well done.

When the job was finished, Gail and helpers provided a wonderful brunch cooked on the wood stove.

What a life. Tom