

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY-PUEBLO

Pemmican

What made it so vital?

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Pemmican is a food that has contributed greatly to history, exploration and expansion. The very presence of pemmican has caused conflict throughout history but its influence on expansion cannot be denied. The Hudson's Bay Trading Company is still in business today but instead of being known as a trading post it is now a department store and known as the Hudson's Bay Company. Pemmican is a Native American food that was probably one of the most influential foods in the history of exploration and expansion. Pemmican allowed people to carry meat that did not spoil into areas where there was no food available, where they did not have time to prepare food, it allowed people to travel into unexplored lands and it allowed people to travel faster because they did not have to stop to procure or cook food. Today pemmican is probably one of the least known of all foods. "The term Pemmican is derived from pimii, the Cree-Chippewa word for fat"¹ Pemmican was such an important food and trading good during the nineteenth century that there is documentation of it causing at least two major wars. Pemmican was the backbone of both the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company. Pemmican eventually caused a war between the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company that lasted seven years, 1814-1821. Pemmican is one of the most controversial foods in history; it influenced expansion, kept companies solvent, caused wars, and influenced the birth of the Métis Nation. Because of the necessity and demand for pemmican the history of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company, the North West Trading Company, the first pemmican war and the Métis nation were all interwoven together.

¹ Amy, "Pemmican." *Native American Encyclopedia* (March 8, 2013) <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/pemmican/> (accessed October 5, 2014).

Pemmican is a high-energy food that is mostly protein and it is a food that once made is easy and fast to consume. Pemmican is easy to transport and can be stored for a long time, years even, without spoiling. Pemmican was such a valuable commodity in the nineteenth century that it was also known as the “bread of the wilderness”.

Pemmican was used the same by white men and Indian alike. It has been said that, “Like the Indian, it was also the white man’s travel ration, his emergency diet, his cache of highly-concentrated food to be hoarded and stored in warehouses and on the trail for the return trip and to be used when all other food supplies were exhausted.”² Pemmican was a food that everyone in the wilderness consumed and was one of the main trading goods used during the nineteenth century.

Pemmican was useful all year round and temperature did not really influence stored pemmican to spoil. In the Native American’s culture “pemmican was from the start a hot-weather military ration and that the fur trade began its use in summer in the late 1700s.”³ The Native American warriors used the pemmican when they needed to travel fast and far without time to hunt or cook. People also used pemmican during times of famine or in times when food was scarce. Pemmican was made out of almost any kind of meat. The most common meats used to produce pemmican were salmon, buffalo, elk, moose, caribou, fish, and venison.

To make pemmican the first step is to cut the meat from the carcass. Then as much fat as possible needs to be trimmed off of the meat in order to make the meat as lean as possible. After the fat is trimmed and only lean meat is left, the lean meat is cut into very thin slices, the thinner the better. The thinly cut lean meat is then set out to dry;

² E.F. Binkerd, O.E. Kolari, and C. Tracy, "Pemmican," *Maricopa Trails* (Publication Services Inc. 1977), 6.

³ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 340.

in the past the sun and the wind were the most common method used to dry the thinly sliced meat. If the weather was rainy or if the meat needed to be dried faster because of invasion, camp moving etc. the meat could be hung over a fire. The smoke that was emitted by the fire would dry the meat and at the same time add a smoky flavor to the meat. As a side note, the dry lean meat that was the result of this procedure is what we call jerky.

Once the thinly sliced meat was completely dry it was then ground into a powder. Grinding the dried meat into powder was accomplished in a variety of ways, some ground it with a small amount at a time using a mortar and pestle, others put a tanned hide on the ground to collect the powdered meat that was produced when a large rock was used for a base and then the person turning the meat into powder used another rock as a hammer to smash the meat. There were a variety of other ways to turn the thinly sliced dried meat into powder, which way the person that was preparing the pemmican chose to utilize did not matter as long as the end result was powdered meat. The powdered meat that was derived from these various procedures was referred to or known as pounded meat.

The next step in making pemmican was to produce a bag that would be able to hold the finished pemmican. The pemmican storage bags that were made and used during the nineteenth century were about the size of a modern standard pillowcase. The bags were usually made from the hide of the animal that the meat used to produce the pemmican was procured from. The inside of the hide was scraped and processed. The hair was usually left on the outside of the hide. Once the hide was dry, soft and supple it was then sewn into the shape of a pillowcase. The bottom and both sides of the bag

were sewn shut but at this point the top was still unsown. The French referred to the pemmican storage bag as “the best-known rawhide container, termed a parfleche, was folded, often painted with designs, and used primarily for storing and transporting dried meat or pemmican” and the Americans term for the pemmican storage bag was saddlebags.⁴

The pounded powdered meat was then fluffed and placed into the parfleche, the parfleche was lightly filled with the pounded meat. Lightly placing the pounded meat was an extremely important step in the process because if it was packed into the bag too tightly the next step would fail.

The next ingredient added to the meat was suet. Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia defines suet as “the hard fat about the kidneys and loins in beef and mutton that yields tallow and that in prepared form is used in some pharmaceutical ointments.”⁵ To make pemmican the suet was heated until it turned into a liquid. Liquid suet was then poured into the parfleche bag over the top of the powdered meat. The suet was poured into the parfleche so that it went everywhere inside the bag and covered all of the pounded meat. Pemmican is made up of approximately fifty percent suet and fifty percent pounded meat or in other words suet and pounded meat are added in equal measures. Other variations in this step of the production of pemmican are mixing barely liquid fat and pounded meat in a bowl until it is well blended and then stuffing it by the handful into the parfleche until the parfleche is completely full and tightly packed. An additional method was adding pounded meat to the parfleche and then adding liquid suet, then

⁴ Wendell H. Oswalt and Sharlotte Neeely, *This Land was Theirs: A Study of Native Americans Sixth Edition* (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998), 184.

⁵“Suet,” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suet> (accessed December 06, 2014).

pounded meat and then liquid suet, essentially layering it until the bag was full.

Whichever way was chosen to complete this step did not really matter as long as the parfleche was completely full. The next step once the bag was from top to bottom full was to sew the top of the bag completely shut.

Once the parfleche was filled with the freshly made pemmican it was sewn shut all the way around. Tallow was then rubbed along all of the seams in the parfleche. The tallow was administered in order to help ensure the bag was air tight. Making sure that the bag was air tight helped to keep moisture out of the bag. Keeping moisture out of the bag was an important part of storing pemmican because moisture caused the pemmican mixture to mold.

The bag was then laid flat and evened out. This was usually accomplished by having the person who made the pemmican stomp on the bag until the parfleche was completely even and flat. Once the parfleche was filled, and flattened the sides of the parfleche were about six or seven inches tall and weighed approximately ninety pounds.⁶

When pemmican was made correctly it was a very time consuming process. Producing pemmican also took a vast amount of meat. It has been estimated that two buffalo were needed to support a family and their dogs in the time that it took the family to prepare ninety pounds of pemmican, which is known as one piece. It also took a considerable amount of meat to manufacture one piece of pemmican. It took approximately one buffalo that weighed about a half ton or 1000 pounds to produce one quality piece of pemmican.

⁶ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Not by Bread Alone* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946), 185-187.

Knowing the amount of meat needed and the amount of time it took to prepare pemmican might cause people to wonder why the people bothered doing it? The actuality that “a pound and a half of pemmican a day could easily sustain a laborer”⁷ and the fact that pemmican was easy to store and easy to transport helps answer that question. The statement that “It is so nourishing that a hundred pounds would feed four men for a month”⁸ was also a major incentive for making or procuring pemmican. During the time that pemmican was used there was no refrigeration and in the areas that it was used there were no local markets to pick supplies up at. If a person wanted to eat meat they had to hunt and the leftover meat had to be stored in a way that fit a nomadic lifestyle.

During the nineteenth century over half of the animals killed during a hunting season were turned into pemmican. The pemmican produced during this era was used for either personal use or was set aside to be used as a trading good. During this era pemmican was one of the primary trading goods that people everywhere wanted and needed. Fur traders and Indians that produced pemmican had to get the majority of their yearly supply of pemmican during the hunting season that occurred during the summer months. Pemmican made it possible for meat to be stored and saved until meat or money was needed. Turning the meat into pemmican also saved the meat that the fur traders procured from the animals that they were harvesting furs from spoiling or going to waste. The fur traders wanted hides and pemmican made it possible to get an

⁷ Charles L. Cutler, *Tracks that Speak: The Legacy of Native American Words in North American Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 100.

⁸ Dorothy Nafus Morrison, *The Eagle and the Fort: The Story of John McLoughlin* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1996), 25.

extra use and more money out of the animals that they harvested during the hunting season too.

The main types of pemmican are summer, winter, plain, berry and fine. Summer pemmican was made in the summer. The meat was dried and smoked and then pounded into a powder. Summer pemmican was the hardiest of all the types of pemmican and was able to be stored for the longest amount of time. In the summer meat was easier to dry completely and it was also easier to completely cut the fat off or trim the meat because your hands did not get cold and the meat stayed supple in the summer.

Winter pemmican was made in the winter and it was not as hardy as the summer pemmican. This can be explained by the fact that in the colder weather it was harder to completely dry out the meat. In the winter at times it was too cold to take the proper amount of time needed to completely cut the fat off of the meat. The moisture left in the meat and the fat that was left attached to it were turned into powder and made into pemmican. Fat contains moisture and turning the meat with fat on it into powder sometimes caused the pemmican to spoil because it would contain too much moisture. Winter pemmican was used first and was not stored as long as other types of pemmican. Winter pemmican was usually the first type of pemmican that a trader traded off or consumed.

Berry pemmican was usually made in the summer and added different types of berries: blueberries, chokeberries, or cranberries were added to the pemmican mixture.

“Blueberries, cherries and/ or chokeberries were used exclusively in ceremonial pemmican.”⁹

Fine pemmican was the rarest of all the various types of pemmican and was usually utilized in Native American ceremonies. It was not just the Native Americans that used pemmican in ceremonies the “Priests in early North Dakota actually used pemmican as the host in communion when bread was lacking.”¹⁰ Fine pemmican was made from the best cuts of meat and was ground into an extremely fine powder. Fine pemmican took longer to prepare than other types of pemmican. Since it was to be utilized in ceremonies the person making it took extra care to ensure that it was made correctly and in a manner that would earn honor for their family and would please the gods.

Sometimes berries, sugar, citrus juices, chocolate and nuts were added to the pemmican. This was done in an attempt to add flavor and also as a way to prevent medical problems such as scurvy. It is commonly believed by historians that prior to the Anglo invasion the Native Americans kept their fruit in a bag separate from the pemmican and that they added the fruit to the pemmican as they consumed it. Due to the diet and preference of the Anglos berries, sugar, citrus juices, chocolate and nuts were added to the actual pemmican and stored in the same bag, doing this shortened the amount of time that a piece of pemmican could be stored. Explorers at times added citrus juices and berries to the pemmican and stored it all in one bag mixed together; this was done as a medical prevention. One of the major medical issues for explorers

⁹ Ken Albala ed, *Food Cultures of the World Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 235.

¹⁰ Charles L. Cutler, *Tracks that Speak: The Legacy of Native American Words in North American Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 101.

during this era was scurvy. Scurvy was a major medical concern and problem for the explorers of the nineteenth century even though it is easily prevented by consuming fruits. So when the explorers were going to be traveling in an area where fruits and other foods were not available they added the citrus juice to the pemmican in an attempt to ward scurvy and other illnesses off. Men of the era “suffered and died from scurvy: a disease which results from the lack of Vitamin C. Men who live on pemmican have no scurvy. It is unequalled for compactness, lightness, wholesomeness, palatability and sustaining power.”¹¹

Rubbiboo was a common food that the trappers used pemmican to make. Rubbiboo was made by putting some pemmican and some fat into a pot over a fire then they added pepper, salt, and boiled mashed potatoes.¹² The Rubbiboo was then eaten while it was hot. Richeau is composed of the same ingredients as rubbiboo but richeau is prepared slightly different. In richeau the mixture of ingredients was fried instead of boiled.¹³ There are several other recipes for pemmican, some of which are Rocky Mountain Pemmican, Honey Nut Pemmican, New England Pemmican, Zuni Candy, Ray’s Pemmican, Herter’s Atomic Age Pemmican and Chili Con Carne, and Sourdough’s Pemmican.¹⁴ “It could be argued that the American version of mincemeat pie developed from pemmican, since most of the recipes call for ground meat (venison or beef), fat, and fruits.”¹⁵

¹¹ *Forest Preserve District of Cook County Illinois Nature Bulletins*, (February 18, 1967)

<http://www.newton.dep.anl.gov/natbltn/200-299/nb257.htm> (accessed October 10, 2014).

¹² Charles L. Cutler, *Tracks that Speak: The Legacy of Native American Words in North American Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 101.

¹³ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Not by Bread Alone* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946), 235.

¹⁴ A.D. Livingston, *Jerky: Make Your Own Delicious Jerky and Jerky Dishes Using Beef, Venison, Fish or Fowl* (Guilford: The Lyons Press, 2001), 111-119.

¹⁵ Livingston, 135.

Once pemmican was made, as long as it was made correctly, it had a very long shelf life. There are documented records of pemmican in storage lasting over thirty years. The majority of the pieces of pemmican were only kept about five years. Winter pemmican was consumed or traded first and was not usually considered long term storable because it was more prone to spoiling.

Pemmican was one of the major trading goods of both the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company. Pemmican also ensured that the employees of both of these companies had the proper amount of food available during times of famine. Pemmican allowed the fur traders to travel further inland in pursuit of new hides and more land for them to settle. Actual currency was rarely used during the nineteenth century. Most transactions that occurred during this era were completed using the barter or trade system. Pemmican comprised over half of the goods traded during the nineteenth century.

Making pemmican was time consuming and the hunters wanted to spend their time hunting so making the pemmican usually fell to the women in camp. Having a woman to assist the fur traders with their work load became a necessity. There were not many Anglo women located in the areas that the fur traders were traveling so taking a Native wife became a common occurrence. During the nineteenth century the fur traders of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company commonly took the Native Indian women (mainly the Cree, Ojibwa and Saukteaux) as their partners. The majority of these relationships resulted in the birth of children. The children of these relationships became what are known today as the Métis Nation. It would be fair to say that the Métis people originated "Nine months after the first White

man set foot in Canada.”¹⁶ So because of the necessity of needing a woman to produce the pemmican the Métis people came to be. Pemmican was one of the main products that the Métis people traded and survived on. “There was such complete reliance upon and annual supply of pemmican that, to a great extent, the fur trading companies encouraged the incipient nationalism of the Métis in order to ensure their friendship and, consequently, a continuing supply of food.”¹⁷ The people of the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company had a tendency to keep the women without marriage while the people of the North West Trading Company usually married the women. Eventually the British interfered and put laws into place to help protect the children that were conceived from these unions. The Métis Nation has managed to survive throughout the years, all of the wars and is located mainly in Manitoba, Canada today.

Pemmican was becoming such an important trading good that in the autumn of 1778 “another argument was that a new post up the Saskatchewan River could obtain provisions from the Buffalo Country, especially pemmican from the Assiniboine Indians.”¹⁸ The Anglos’ used the pemmican on their ships for ocean travel and they used it in their overland travels. As a result of all of the explorers needing and utilizing pemmican it became a highly sought after commodity. In May of 1800, “It had become necessary for the company to extend its own pemmican collection into the heart of this region because the Indians of this area were not willing to bring it north themselves.”¹⁹ The Hudson’s Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company were both

¹⁶ D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, *The Metis: Canada's Forgotten People* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation, 1975), 1.

¹⁷ Sealey and Lussier, 9.

¹⁸ Richard I. Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping 1670-1870* (Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 49.

¹⁹ Ruggles, 63.

expanding and both companies wanted to control the entire trade of pemmican in the areas that they occupied.

The treaty between the British and the Americans at the conclusion of the War of 1812 pushed both the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company further north because in the treaty America was granted control of Lake Erie. This agreement limited the amount of land that the two companies would have to hunt, gather supplies, and trade on. This seemingly small fact was forcing both the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company into a fight over the contents of the Red River area.

The Earl of Selkirk had become a major shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and because of this he received a large land grant in Canada from the British Empire. The Earl of Selkirk wanted to expand the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and wanted to control all of the trade in the area. The Earl of Selkirk then decided to establish a settlement in the Red River area because he wanted the North West Trading Company removed completely out of the area.

By establishing a settlement the Earl of Selkirk planned to use it to push the North West Trading Company out of the area. The Hudson's Bay Trading Company influenced settlement located in the Red River area was officially established in 1811. The Earl of Selkirk offered people land that he had obtained when the British Empire had given him the land grant. To get this land people had to relocate to the Red River area, be farmers and remain for a certain length of time. The Red River area was the main source of pemmican. The Earl of Selkirk's proposed settlement caused much turmoil between the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading

Company because “Pemmican is what fed the springboard for a transcontinental fur trade. For this reason, the Montreal traders took great offense at the Hudson’s Bay Company’s plans to launch an agricultural settlement for impoverished Scots, and retired employees of the HBC, precisely in the center of their pemmican supply area.”²⁰ The Earl of Selkirk even paid for the new settlers to travel to the Red River area and gave them a line of credit with the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company to purchase supplies they needed to become established. The North West Trading Company was against the settlement because “Quite simply the survival of their trade depended upon the failure of Selkirk’s settlement scheme.”²¹ In order to help the settlement fail the North West Trading Company ran newspaper ads warning people about colonizing in the Red River area, some of the ads threatened death, for example one ad read “Even if [the colonists] escape the scalping knife...they will find it impossible to exist in the country.”²²

In the fall of 1813 the Red River area was still mostly uncultivated and the people of the area had to rely on the wildlife and natural occurring foods of the area to provide the majority of their provisions. The Red River area was experiencing a drought and because of this a famine was being created, for that reason supplies of food goods were becoming scarce in the Red River area. On January 8, 1814 Governor MacDonell issued the Pemmican Proclamation. The Pemmican Proclamation banned the movement of any type of food, provisions, or dried meat from the Red River area by

²⁰ J. L. Finlay and D. N. Sprague, *The Structure of Canadian History* (Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 104.

²¹ Finlay and Sprague, 105.

²² Finlay and Sprague, 105.

either land or by water. The Pemmican Proclamation that Governor McDonnell issued reads as follows:

Whereas the welfare of the families at present forming settlement on the Red River, within the said territory, with those on their way to it...as also those who are expected to arrive next autumn, renders it a necessary and indispensable part of my duty to provide for their support. In the yet uncultivated state of the country, the ordinary resources derived from the buffalo and other wild animals hunted within the territory, are not deemed more than adequate for the requisite supply, wherefore it is hereby ordered, that no person trading in furs or provisions within the territory for the Honourable Hudson's Bay Company, the North-West Company, or any individual, or unconnected trader or persons whatever, shall take out any provisions, either flesh, dried meat, grain, or vegetable.²³

This proclamation basically says that because of the families that had settled on the Red River and because of the people expected to move to Red River the provisions such as meat, hide, grain, and fruits could not be removed from the area by anyone. This ban included all trade outside of the area. In a way this is like shutting down the borders on trade and refusing to allow goods to leave the area. They blamed this on the fact that the land was still mostly unplanted and considered wild. They used the excuse of lack of sufficient food to feed the people of the Red River.

The only circumstance that provisions were legally allowed to leave the Red River area was if they were needed by people for the purpose of traveling. If the traveler needed rations they could take them with them from the area with the stipulation that a special license was acquired from the governing body, which was composed primarily of people with connections and strong favoritism towards the Hudson's Bay Trading

²³ Samuel Hull Wilcocke, Simon McGillivray, and Edward Ellice. *A Narrative of the Occurrences in the Indian Countries of North America, since the Connexion of the Right Hon. the Earl of Selkirk with the Hudson's Bay Company, and His Attempt to Establish a Colony on the Red River with a Detailed Account of His Lordship's Military Expedition To, and Subsequent Proceedings at Fort William, in Upper Canada* (London: B. McMillan, 1817), 26–27.

Company. Since pemmican was the primary trading good of the time banning the sale and transport of pemmican crippled the economy of both the North West Trading Company and the Métis Nation. Whoever controlled the pemmican trade controlled the area.

The North West Trading Company took the Pemmican Proclamation of 1814 as an underhanded scheme that the Hudson's Bay Trading Company was enacting in order to put them out of business. This conspiracy theory was supported by the fact that Governor MacDonell was a well-known Hudson's Bay Trading Company man. Hudson's Bay Trading Company wanted control of the North West Trading Company and if they could not get control of it then the Hudson's Bay Trading Company wanted the North West Trading Company to be moved completely out of the district. The Hudson's Bay Trading Company wanted to have a monopoly of trade in all of the areas that they traded but especially in the Red River area. Having competition drove the price of pemmican up and the Earl of Selkirk wanted this to end. By banning the sale of pemmican the North West Trading Company lost their primary trading good which would in turn limit their trading abilities. Limiting their trading abilities would weaken the North West Trading Company and eventually allow the Hudson's Bay Trading Company to step in and take them over which is what the Hudson's Bay Trading Company wished would happen. Little did Governor MacDonell realize that by putting the Pemmican Proclamation of 1814 into effect he was about to start a war between the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company that would persevere for seven years.

There were two sides in the upcoming Pemmican War of 1814-1821. The Earl of Selkirk was the majority share holder of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and at the time and he was the person behind the settlement being established in the Red River area. The settlers and the Hudson's Bay Trading Company would join forces and side together forming one of the factions that would be involved in the upcoming pemmican war. The other faction that would be involved in the upcoming war was made up of the North West Trading Company and the people of the Métis Nation. The majority of the upcoming battles between the two factions in the pemmican war started with the theft of pemmican and ended with pemmican being one of the major negotiating points in the treaties.

On May 29, 1814, Governor MacDonell issued a warrant for John Spencer to go seize approximately six-hundred bags of pemmican from the North West Trading Company. Spencer went and took the pieces of pemmican and proceeded to carry the pieces of pemmican back into the Hudson's Bay Trading Company territory. This incident fueled the flames of irritation that the North West Trading Company and the Métis people were already feeling. Eventually the two sides would come to an agreement of sorts that gave the North West Trading Company back all but approximately two-hundred pieces of pemmican.²⁴

The United States of America also contributed to the Pemmican War of 1814-1821. One of the major ways that the contributed was "In 1815, a law was passed by congress forbidding British traders from operating on American territory but this law of

²⁴ Agnes C. Laut, *The Conquest of the Great Northwest: Being the story of the Adventurers of England known as The Hudson's Bay Company. New pages in the History of the Canadian Northwest and Western States, Volume II* (New York: The Outing Publishing Company, 1908), 146-148.

course was not applicable to Oregon because of undetermined boundaries.”²⁵ This American law was important because the fur traders of both the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company would travel south into America during the summer months. The fur traders of both companies traveled south into America every summer in order to hunt, gather furs and make pemmican. After several months when the fur traders had harvested all that they could transport they would then return north to the Red River area and trade the goods that they had gathered in America. The fur traders and the Métis people gathered most of their trading goods from American land. Without access to American land both the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company would have to fight over the small amount of hunting and trapping territory that was part of the British Empire.

On March 17, 1816 Fort Gibraltar which was one of the North West Trading Company’s biggest forts was attacked and dismantled by approximately thirty of the men employed by the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company. All of the products including the pieces of pemmican and the wood that Fort Gibraltar had been constructed out of were floated downstream to Fort Douglas which was a Hudson’s Bay Trading Company Fort. Anything that was left at Fort Gibraltar was burned. Tearing down Fort Gibraltar and floating it downstream to Fort Douglas took approximately a week and a half for the men to accomplish. The material that the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company men acquired from Fort Gibraltar was used to reinforce Fort Douglas’s fortifications and to build new

²⁵ Clarence A. Vandiver, *The Fur-Trade and Early Western Exploration* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1971), 188-189.

houses inside the gates of Fort Douglas.²⁶ Eventually the British would declare that the attack on Fort Gibraltar was not legal and the North West Trading Company would be granted the right to rebuild Fort Gibraltar but that would not occur until 1817. The attack and following ransack of Fort Gibraltar thoroughly aggravated the Métis people and the North West Trading Company. They saw this as a personal attack and it had them ready to go regain their pemmican, wood, and other trading goods that they felt had been stolen from them.

On June 19, 1816 a group of Métis reclaimed some pemmican from a group of traders that were part of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company. While the Métis people were traveling to sell the pemmican to representatives of the North West Trading Company they came close to Fort Douglas which was the Hudson's Bay Trading Companies Fort that the materials from Fort Gibraltar had been taken to. Governor Semple was inside of Fort Douglas when he spotted the group of Métis people traveling. Governor Semple then gathered a group of twenty five Hudson's Bay Trading Company employees and settlers willing to go with him to ride out and confront the sixty one Métis people. The Métis people outnumbered the Hudson's Bay Company's force 3-1. The Métis were incredible marksmen that hunted for a living while the settlers that Governor Semple brought with him were farmers, so the outcome of the confrontation should have been expected. Governor Semple would have been smarter to just stay inside of Fort Douglas but instead because of his racist beliefs and his innate arrogance he rode out to confront the traveling Métis people.

²⁶ Professor George Bryce, *A History of Manitoba: Its Resources and its People* (Toronto: The Canada History Company, 1906), 79.

During the ensuing event that some call a “battle,” some call it a “massacre” and others call it an “incident,” the Métis people only lost one or two men depending on which source you examine but killed twenty-one of the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company’s people including Governor Semple. After killing the men the Métis people proceeded to mutilate the bodies of their opponents in a very macabre fashion. This “battle” became known as the Battle of Seven Oaks. The Battle of Seven Oaks was the bloodiest and most macabre of all of the battles that would make up the Pemmican War of 1814-1821. The victims’ bodies that the Métis people mutilated were left lying where they fell and were not recovered by anyone in a timely fashion. Leaving the bodies exposed for people to see the horrors that had been inflicted on them caused even more turmoil between the two groups. Today the exact place that the battle occurred cannot be determined but an area that is figured to be in close proximity has been declared a national historic site and a monument has been built on it in remembrance of this battle.²⁷

In December of 1816, the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company’s Green Lake Post was attacked by twenty two people that worked for the North West Trading Company. The men that attacked the Green Lake Post took control of it. After attaining control of the Post, the men of the North West Trading Company proceeded to take all of the materials from the Post that they could use elsewhere, such as the doors, windows, hinges and other building materials. The men from the North West Trading Company sacked and raided the Green Lake Post in the same manner that the Hudson’s Bay Trading Company’s men had previously done at Fort Gibraltar. The North West Trading

²⁷ The information about this battle is covered in a variety of sources included in the bibliography, the information was researched from the various sources and combined in order to present a full picture of the battle.

Company men also took all of the goods contained in the post that were tradable. Some of the goods that the men took included three bags of pemmican, 1500 pounds of meat and eleven and a half packs of furs.²⁸

The constant battles between the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company upset the British Empire. The constant turmoil that was happening between the two factions was extremely disruptive to the British Empire. Settlements could not be established in the areas where battles were being fought therefore the British Empire could not expand or grow because of the actions of the two companies. By 1818 the Hudson's Bay Company had lost 36 lives and 50,000 pounds of pemmican.²⁹

In 1820 the Earl of Selkirk died which helped the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company merge because he was no longer around to oppose the merger. "By 1820 both companies were so near bankruptcy that they had to make peace or dissolve....In March, 1821, the two firms were united under a new charter that barred British competition from all lands where either had been trading."³⁰ The merger between the Hudson's Bay Trading Company and the North West Trading Company took place on March 21, 1821. A common feeling among the population at the time was that the British government created a new monopoly when they issued the official license for the newly merged companies on July 2, 1821. The British lawmakers, the failing economy, their losses and their financial solvency

²⁸"Information," *Maps and Information*, (Green Lake Lodge, Saskatchewan), <http://www.greenlakelodge.ca/page2.html> (accessed December 7, 2014).

²⁹ James K. McDonell and Robert B. Campbell, *Lords of the North* (Ontario: General Store Publishing House, 1997), 49.

³⁰ Dorothy Nafus Morrison, *The Eagle and the Fort: The Story of John McLoughlin* (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 1996), 30.

encouraged the merge of the two companies effectively ending the Pemmican War of 1814-1821.

After the merger of the two companies the newly formed Hudson's Bay Company was "Triumphant in Canada and expelled from American territory by a United States law, the Hudson's Bay Company's history from this time on offers little of interest, except that it has continued to exist."³¹ In 1835 the newly formed Hudson's Bay Company bought the remainder of the land that the heirs of the Earl of Selkirk still retained from original land grant that the British Empire had previously bestowed upon the Earl of Selkirk. The Earl of Selkirk's heirs only retained control of some of the land grant. Some of the land that the British Empire had granted to Lord Selkirk had previously been sold to the settlers of the Red River area. The fact that the newly formed Hudson's Bay Company had to purchase the land from the Earl of Selkirk's heirs is ironic because the British Empire only gave the Earl of Selkirk the land grants because he was the majority share holder of the Hudson's Bay Trading Company. The British Empire meant for the Hudson's Bay Trading Company to have the land in Canada.

Pemmican was more expensive than regular food goods "On the shores of Hudson Bay pemmican was much more expensive than European food...was costly even at the point of origin."³² This shows that pemmican was preferred over the majority of foods available to the people of the nineteenth century too. As far as price "jerky is never quoted at more than half the pemmican rate per pound."³³ The fact that

³¹ Clarence A. Vandiver, *The Fur-Trade and Early Western Exploration* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1971), 210.

³² Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Not by Bread Alone* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1946), 233.

³³ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Fat of the Land* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 197.

jerky was never more than half the price of pemmican shows that there was a demand for pemmican. And since jerky is one of the products used to make pemmican a person that had some time and a little money could have bought the jerky and turned it into pemmican and at least doubled their money. Pemmican was a very valuable commodity during the nineteenth Century. It has been said that during that time “No one would eat jerky if pemmican were available, unless to save the pemmican.”³⁴ This ranks pemmican above jerky as a wanted commodity and puts pemmican into a primary good category.

In 1849 Gail Borden, the founder of Borden condensed milk, began making pemmican biscuits. Gail Borden began a booming business in the pemmican trade with the people traveling and forming the western expansion of America. He proceeded to sell six hundred pounds of pemmican biscuits to the forty-niners traveling west and to Dr. Elisha Kent Kane who was preparing to explore the Arctic. Gail Borden was able to get “the meat biscuit was endorsed by the U.S. Army in 1850.”³⁵ In London at the International Exhibit in 1851 Gail Borden won a ribbon for his pemmican biscuits.³⁶ Gail Borden wanted to expand his business so he tried to get various branches of the United States military to add his pemmican biscuits into what they used for rations, the U.S. Army also quit using his pemmican biscuits. Gail Borden had adversaries that were “clever and scheming individuals who were furnishing the army with bulky supplies saw their business was being undermined by the introduction of this new concentrated product and adopted practices that caused Mr. Borden such financial losses that he

³⁴ Stefansson, 197.

³⁵ Sue Ann Gardner, "Gail Borden", Faculty Publications, (UNL Libraries, 1999), Paper 110.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/110>.

³⁶ Charles L. Cutler, *Tracks that Speak: The Legacy of Native American Words in North American Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 101.

came out, of this adventure penniless.”³⁷ Because of all of the underhanded schemes that his adversaries pulled and all of the financial stress Gail Borden gave up on his pemmican biscuit business and focused his attention and his business on his condensed milk.

In the fall of 1870 a man was ordered to go buy pieces of pemmican in order to stock some boats that were preparing to make a trip to the York Factory. At the time pemmican was a scarce commodity and was not readily available. The man was sent to “the only person known to have any pemmican, having ten bags, which he esteemed worth their weight in gold. After some haggling, he sold me six bags at two shillings and six pence a pound payable in cash at Fort Garry.”³⁸ This translates to in today’s value to roughly \$16.3193 per pound. The man was reported to have bought six pieces of pemmican which is equivalent to 600 pounds. The man spent what would be today \$9791.58.³⁹ The fact that the seller demanded cash in a time when cash was not readily available, most deals were done with trade goods, makes it even more astonishing.

In the 1940s the nutritionists and family doctors eventually began to state that pemmican was not a healthy food. People that used pemmican firmly believed in its life sustaining ability and easy consummation, but people that were from the lab environment were starting to give pemmican a bad reputation. The two different sides again had vastly different opinions on the quality of pemmican. In June 1942 “The

³⁷ O. E. Reed, “Gail Borden”, U.C. Davis, <http://drinc.ucdavis.edu/borden.htm> (accessed December 7, 2014).

³⁸ Isaac Cowie, *The Company of Adventurers: A Narrative of Seven Years in the Service of the Hudson's Bay Company during 1867-1874 On the Great Buffalo Plains* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1913), 421.

³⁹ Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Six Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.K. Dollar Amount, 1270 to present," (MeasuringWorth, 2014). www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/.

Quartermaster had heard from old-timers that pemmican was the ideal ration and from up-to-date nutritionists that, as a food, it was scientifically unsound.”⁴⁰ The medical reports, lab reports, technological advanced such as refrigeration, railroads, roads and agriculture productivity all came together to cause the necessity of pemmican to cease to exist. The advance of society was the beginning of the end of pemmican’s popularity and consummation.

In June of 1944 the United States military was contemplating using pemmican as part of their military rations during World War II. At a meeting with the United States Quartermaster Corps where they had called upon noted historian and explorer Dr. Vilhjalmur Stefansson to be an advisor on food he talked about the Pemmican War of 1814-1821. In Dr. Stefansson’s speech he stated that “The Hudson Bay Company had everything in its favor, and true gamblers would normally have bet on it. But the independents had one thing on their side: a better diet, and that turned out to be the decisive factor in the war.”⁴¹ Dr. Vilhjalmur Stefansson also declared and wrote in many of his books that pemmican was “the winning food in that early nineteenth-century struggle.”⁴²

Pemmican is still used today although its use is not widespread or even mentioned very often. The primary purpose of the use of pemmican is still exploration, two of the main types of exploration that use pemmican are those that are exploring the polar regions and those that are climbing the extremely high mountains. Pemmican is

⁴⁰ Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 338.

⁴¹ Stefansson, 339.

⁴² Stefansson, 339.

also used to feed sled dogs during races and during regular travel. Some of the companies producing pemmican products today are Simple Squares, Tanka, Bear Valley, Epic Bar, and Pemmican. The pemmican that is produced today is not the same as pemmican of the nineteenth century though. Today it is made into bars and the meat is not dried as completely nor is the animal fat and the meat taken from the same animal. Pemmican of today is more like jerky of the past except that it does contain berries and various other items in it.

Pemmican has gone from a food that was highly sought after, was the primary trading good used to keep two trading companies afloat, was the primary reason a nation of people came to be and a food that wars were fought over into a food that the majority of people have never heard of. To go from the limelight and center stage to the obscurity of the unknown was a long journey and a well-fought one. Writing books about pemmican had almost come to a complete stop but George Colpitts released a book titled "Pemmican Empire: Food, Trade, and the Last Bison Hunts in the North American Plains, 1790-1882 (Studies in Environment and History) in 2014. Does this mean that pemmican is going to have a come back? It is highly doubted but hopefully it means that pemmican will not fade completely away and that the value it once held in society will not be completely forgotten.

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