

10SHORTGRASS.DOC

The Mertzson-based Nicholson's Meat Company sells buffalo hamburger meat along with wide choices of other products, like rib-eyes and smoked hams and sausages. The couple running the place must work three eight-hour shifts per day, especially during hunting season. Redcaps give the custom butchering a big play.

Over the San Angelo, one of the big chains offers fancy packages of bison steaks in the variety meat section at \$8.50 a pound. Most unwise to risk lingering too long examining an item in the meat section in the busy store. All city people are very, very short of time and void of patience with stalled grocery carts blocking long lanes of traffic, in particular graybeards double-parked, bending over trying to read an upside down price tag.

The buffalo hamburger at Mertzson is five bucks a pound from an outfit in South Dakota. No way to compare values between the Mertzson plant and the Angelo grocery store prices. Water and plastic packaging weights vary from city to city and from store to store.

Just the statement "water product" or "20 percent water content" brings up my guard on a ham. At the old ranch, the smokehouse stood 200 yards from a water line. The big need to add water came after eating the home-cured

meat, to slake our thirst from the salt on a hot afternoon in a sheep corral.

The first buffalo meat in modern times for sale close by came from a deep-freeze on a ranch on the eastern edge of the shortgrass country. The herder butchered a couple of old bulls every year without bothering USDA meat inspectors over such a small matter as selling a thousand or so pounds of meat from a big chest-type freezer off his back porch.

The buffalo ranch bordered the way to Austin from the 09 Divide. Five of my children lived in Austin at the time. All five loved such ranch fare as winter-cured deer meat and grass-fed beef cut in thick chunks and cooked rare on grills, in ovens, or on forked sticks over fireplace ashes.

Switching the crew over to buffalo from potted meat sandwiches took only the time needed to thaw the first packages in hot Austin kitchens. The then-young wives and girlfriends of the unwed, (a revolving parade profiling University coeds), were slow to convert to what, unknown to us all, was wild bull meat.

First symptoms of the after-effects of eating buffalo hit on the way back from Austin on a side trip to look at an offering of Angus bulls. The last night in the city, one of my sons simmered a pot of buffalo stew long enough for

red wine and vegetables to burst into tantalizing bubbles, emitting a fog flavored in rosemary and garlic.

Somewhere on the east side of town, he bought hour-old corn tortillas from a clay hearth and sweet white onions from the Mexican lady's flower beds. To this day, our free-style record for eating buffalo stew using corn tortillas for dippers reigns statewide, if not to the outer reaches of the bison plains in South Dakota.

The black bulls stood in a show-type pen, sanded, as I remember the layout. The cool fall season made the bulls alert. The short size and long age of the oxen restricted their appeal for running on my country. Yet, the strangest thing struck me while walking around the pen. No surprise my sinus striking in such a weed-infested environment, but instead of sniffing, I snorted. Snorted in a deep, menacing blast, stilling the entire herd of 10 or 15 bulls.

My host continued his spiel, scoring fabulous sires and dams with fantastic records of Angus heritage going back to the year kilts became stylish for bagpipers to wear in Scotland. As bad as I wanted to leave, I kept sidling across the pen, using far too much space to reach the gate.

I don't know how long the feeling lasted, but I remember taking walks and drifting off course in shifting wind changes. Foolish behavior...no, strange behavior, like

climbing over gates instead of opening them, or breaking into a run on foot the morning the weaned calves broke loose.

News on eating buffalo bulls from Austin came slow. In those days, the sports around the Capitol might be wearing buffalo hides and having rubdowns in hyena fat without making the third page of the campus newspaper, much less parents' being notified. After helping raise eight kids, the best rule was to relegate discussion of behavior – omissions, additions, and habits good and bad – to “let’s talk later.”

The important change now means eating the buffalo meat cut with equal parts of ground beef to avoid the risk of the meat being from old bulls. It took awhile to find the right proportions. It’s an awful temptation to mainline a big patty and forget the consequences.