Imagine a stampeding herd of bison thundering across the plains, with hooves pounding, shaggy shoulders lunging, and tails flying. The herd rolls and pitches like an ocean of brown fur. A single animal in the herd might weigh 1,800 pounds or more. Atop each enormous wooly head is a pair of sharp horns.

These mighty beasts, also known as buffalo, once ruled the grasslands of North America. In the years before Europeans came to this continent, they numbered in the millions. They lived in many parts of America, but especially on the plains that stretch westward from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. The wide-open spaces of the Great Plains accommodated vast herds of these magnificent creatures.

To the Europeans who first explored the continent, the Great Plains region seemed a dismal place. Water is scarce, and the climate is harsh. In winter, temperatures often fall below 0°F, while in summer, the heat often rises above 100°F.

For the Sioux and other Plains Indians, the buffalo hunt was the main event of the summer. The bison would provide not only food, but also just about everything else the people needed to live. No part of the animal was wasted. Fur, hides, bones, and horns were used to make clothing, shelter, and tools.

After the people tanned the buffalo hides to make robes, they decorated them with beautiful paintings or patterns made from quills or beads. Often, they took the finest robe of all to the top of a hill and left it as a gift of gratitude to their brother, the buffalo, who had given up his life so that they might live.

To the Sioux, the buffalo was a gift of the Great Spirit. It was the source of their strength. The Plains Indians had learned to live in harmony with their environment, and they honored the gifts that nature provided for them.