

Friedrich von Holstein's Hunting Trips, 1865-1866

RALPH H. PICKETT

I. INTRODUCTION

BUFFALO-HUNTING expeditions into the Republican and Smoky Hill valleys in Kansas were made in late 1865 and again in late 1866 by a Prussian diplomat on leave. His account, given in letters to a cousin in Germany, related in considerable detail the events of the journeys, complete with considerable danger from Indians. His comments upon the country and the settlers show rather vividly what these were like in the eyes of a well-educated, somewhat supercilious young European.

This man was Friedrich von Holstein. He lived from 1837 to 1909, and was in the Prussian and imperial German diplomatic services from 1860 to 1906.¹ He was hard-working, full of attention to detail, lonely, haughty, and taciturn. After his death he and his policies became the subject of much controversy and considerable study. His papers have been published in various editions from 1931 until recently.²

The hunting trips of 1865-1866 were described by him in five letters to his cousin, Ida von Stülpnagel, and her husband, Alfred, which were published in his book, *Lebensbekenntnis in Briefen an eine Frau*, edited by Helmuth Rogge. The pertinent parts of their texts are given below in translation. The first two describe the expedition of 1865; the second two that of 1866. In each pair there is much repetition, but the second letter in each pair contains many additional comments. The last one is, in effect, Holstein's final farewell to the American Great Plains.

Perusal of newspapers of 1865-1867, and of other material in the Kansas State Historical Society has been made. Their rather meager indications regarding Holstein's hunting trips are given in footnotes.

RALPH HALL PICKETT, native of Mitchell county, received his A. M. and Ph. D. degrees from the University of Pennsylvania, and is now associate professor of history at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut.

1. Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher, eds., *The Holstein Papers* (Cambridge: University Press, 1955), v. 1, pp. x-xvi.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xxvi.

II. THE LETTERS

LEAVENWORTH, KANSAS

November 15, 1865

DEAR IDA:

. . . Yesterday we, my Belgian companion and I, returned from an 8-week tour in the prairies. My wish of many years to shoot a buffalo has been fulfilled. In the second half of September we left from here, with a 4-span baggage wagon, 4 riding horses, a guide, a freight-man, a Negro cook and a white bird-dog, also nine guns.

We were very lucky. For besides having encountered endless herds of buffalo, we had an opportunity to be present at a peace-conference between the United States and the most important Indian tribes.³ There I saw some of the most famous Western hunters, whose names I had read long before I thought I would ever go to America;⁴ also Indian chiefs whose faces few whites had seen except in battle;⁵ furthermore a number of desperadoes of every caliber.

The old trappers pleased me by their quiet, prudent manner. According to all that I saw and heard of these men, whose lives are a series of adventures, they put into their work not so much their courage as their foresight and calmness; evidence that he who wishes to survive must not often play his last trump. A young lieutenant would consider the use of prudence by an old hunter compromising, but, as I had some minor chances to observe, coolness is required of these men in difficult situations.

The Indians are beggars in appearance, character and practice; that is, they rob and steal by preference. A big chief in a shabby black coat and felt hat makes a deceptive impression, which is removed when one learns that he probably scalped the former owner. Some Comanche and Cayupa [*sic*] chiefs had the effrontery to come into the white camp on captured American horses and saddles—both marked with the U. S. brand—before the nose of the colonel who had lost them recently in an unfavorable fight and

3. "Diary of Samuel A. Kingman at the Indian Treaty in 1865," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, v. 1 (1931-1932), p. 448. Kingman left on October 19, 1865. He says that his German friends van Horn and Holstein were also leaving on that day. "Van Horn" must actually have been van Havre. This appears to be the only reference by name to Friedrich von Holstein in the Kansas Historical Society material. His attendance at the Indian conference was evidently after his hunting journey. The conference was the one on the Little Arkansas river at which a treaty with the Cheyennes and Arapahoes was signed on October 14.—Junction City Union, November 18, 1865. Kingman was chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court, 1866-1876, and the first president of the Kansas State Historical Society.—"Diary of Kingman," pp. 442, 443.

4. Among the United States commissioners were James Steele, Kit Carson, and Col. William W. Bent.—*Ibid.*, pp. 445, 446.

5. Cheyenne chief Black Kettle was there and spoke eloquently of his people's sufferings.—*Ibid.*, p. 446.

whose hands really trembled with rage.⁶ Nothing could be done because safe-conduct had been granted. I do not blame the Indians; the part of the white population which comes into contact with them is trash and treats them miserably, also cheating and shooting among themselves wherever they go. I asked an Indian trader whether he had ever shot at people. "Well," he said, "I figure that is an improper question that can't be answered." He probably had unpleasant memories. Still in justice it must be said that there are exceptions to the rule. Our guide—pilot they say here—when I offered to sell a horse for less than its value refused, and the freight man did not want a tip because he said *he had had fun enough in the trip* [English in the original].

Probably I would have experienced more if I, true to my fundamentals, had travelled alone. My companion was rather lazy, slow, quiet and unenterprising as long as he was not excited. When excited he lost his head and tripled each danger by his fury. On his first buffalo-hunt he cocked his revolver too soon, against the guide's advice. His horse, not accustomed to buffalo, reared, he flew against the saddle-horn, the revolver went off and the bullet went into the horse's neck. I saw the smoke, then horse and rider disappeared in the grass. When I came up they both lay motionless, van Havre with chin up, a model for the "dead warrior." After a while he came to and asked to be bled, but we refused. We put him on my horse, and Steele⁷ rode back with him to camp, while I slowly led the wounded horse behind. I walked for a long time and was going right through a prairie-dog town, when I heard just ahead a rattling like that of a child's rattle. In a moment I saw a rattlesnake ready to spring, the first that I had heard rattle. It did not have time to spring; I shot it with Havre's revolver which I carried in my hand. As I had high boots, it could in no case have hurt me much. There are about as many snakes and more rattlesnakes here than in Brazil,⁸ but this was the first time I had seen one ready for action. I did not see the other people until evening. Van Havre was feverish and talked of wanting to shoot himself because he feared being demented. The next night we were all soaked, like dirty linen, and I believe the soaking gave him a good cooling-off. After a few days he was quite well. Some weeks later when lighting a cigar he let a spark fall on his hunting-vest, in

6. Junction City Union, August 4, 1866, has an account of atrocities committed near the mouth of White Rock creek, Republic county, by a band of about 100 Cheyennes and Sioux who had fine mules and American horses and many of whom had complete U. S. cavalry uniforms.

7. Presumably the James Steele at the Indian conference. See footnote 4.

8. Holstein served in Rio de Janeiro, 1863-1864.—Rich and Fisher, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. xi.

which he carried 26 cartridges. We noticed it first when after some time the smoke rose. He suddenly began to tear frantically at his coat. "*Qu'avez-vous?*" I asked—I thought it was the effect of the fall upon his brain. "*Otez-moi ça, je vais sauter!*" he cried, just as I saw the smoke. Tearing the things off him, then running 20 steps aside, we did both with the speed of greased lightning, as they say here. The fire went out in the damp grass. The paper of two cartridges was half burned through. Thus my traveling companion was usually a very good fellow but stubborn as a mule. He is by origin an only child and has less practical experience than some others of this class whom I know. I dreaded it every time I went out on an enterprise with him.

I had no special adventures, when we travelled here in September, except that our train ran off the track. But this happens often here.

My letter begins to grow long, so I close. I go now to New York and Washington and would like to stay a long time yet in this country which, without pleasing me very much, most highly interests me. . . .

Fritz⁹

EBBIT HOUSE

WASHINGTON

November 20, 1865

. . . I want to tell you that our return trip from Leavenworth through St. Louis, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore passed off without special adventure. But beyond St. Louis I had a frightful scare. I sat with closed eyes in my corner, when I suddenly felt a shock. Instantly everyone in the car was on his feet, about 30-40 persons. No cry, no word, but each ran and shoved for his life, we also; my fat friend ran with the swiftness of a squirrel. The train stopped remarkably quickly and thereby a terrible thing was averted; for the car ahead was already off the tracks and the grade was about 15 feet high. While the passengers looked at the broken track, we two hurried, made wise by experience, to the nearest farm and asked for lunch. Some old clients were there before us but we had enough. The long procession of those who came too late watched us with long faces. In St. Louis van Havre, who kept the travel-money, found that after paying the bill at the hotel we had only a half-dollar left with which to reach Chicago. The omnibus was before the door and there was no time

9. Friedrich von Holstein, *Lebensbekenntnis in Briefen an eine Frau*, ed. by Helmuth Rogge (Berlin, 1902), pp. 50-52.

to get money from the bank. I learned of the situation only when I urged van Havre to explain the cause of his despondency. We lived a full 24 hours on cigars and tried to sleep as much as possible, *for qui dort, dine*.

Of American cities there is nothing to say, except that all those I have seen up to now have straight streets with soldier-like similar houses. The northern lakes, which I saw except for Lake Superior, are monotonous. Ocean-like, with flat shores, stirred up in a storm like the sea. Where civilization is already rather old, the country is scarcely distinguishable from central Europe; it looks familiar. The newly cultivated regions with their magnificent cornfields, in which there are tree-stumps, their more than modest log-houses and miserable-looking settlers, have their special character. The fever, which is found wherever trees are decaying or the earth is freshly turned, forms the melancholy side of life in the log-houses. The climate has nothing to do with that, although in swamps the malady is naturally worst. Everywhere in the country miserable faces stare at one. But the people know nothing else and quietly endure it. The only really healthy-looking class of people in the West are the caravan-men and oxen-drivers, who as navigators of the wilderness carry on the traffic between the outposts of civilization and Mexico or California.

The primeval forest is completely different from that of South America. It looks like a fine forest of ours, except that the trees lying dry and dead are still there. The number of these is perhaps a fifth of all the trees. We saw these only on the return-trip, when the foliage had fallen.

The prairie, of which I wrote before, is dreary in its uniformity. The whole day one is surrounded by more or less high earth-swells and one is lucky if toward evening one comes to a creek with a thin fringe of woods. A night quarter without wood, with north wind, sleet and snow, in pitched tents, finally sleep from exhaustion and awakening in a duck-pond—these are among the things I do not wish to experience again. But the monotony is increased, if one has to travel through stretches where a prairie-fire has colored all far and wide with soot. We travelled almost three days behind a fire. The Mississippi and Missouri are dirty, perhaps much like the Elbe, the Missouri with many sand-banks, where there are flocks of wild geese. The bank-areas with forest relieve the scene somewhat. . . .¹⁰

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-56.

ROYAL LEGATION
WASHINGTON
January 3, 1867

MY DEAR LITTLE IZE:

. . . Once during the past year Europe almost saw me again: that was in August when the transoceanic telegraph brought the news of the French Rhine-demand.¹¹ My place on the Hamburg ship was already reserved, when the peaceful relinquishment by the French suddenly astonished the world.

In order to shoot at something, I therefore went again to the prairies. Two Englishmen and a Frenchman joined me. We had seven men, two wagons, and also our riding-horses.¹²

We could make only a short trip since my companions did not have much time, and we camped out only slightly over a month. However, the hunting was good. We saw large herds of elk—giant deer—, numerous beaver-colonies and of course buffalo. Buffalo hunting on horseback is surely the most exciting hunting that I know of, especially when one comes upon an old bull ready to fight. Thanks to our good horses we had no accidents. But also I, as leader of the expedition, had many worries about the Indians; and the Sioux were already openly at war. The Arapahoes and Cheyennes intended to break out.¹³ Each night three men were on guard three hours at a time—uncomfortable with the frost and north wind. No light or fire after dark, in order not to give the Indians creeping about a point toward which to turn. The

11. This, one of the first messages transmitted by the new cable, is reported in the *New York Herald*, August 13, 1866.

12. The *Junction City Union*, August 25, 1866, reported that "a couple of young English lords" had been in St. Joseph, Mo., several days preparing for a hunting expedition, and had started out that morning for the Republican valley and the Smoky Hill route. They were well equipped, with fine saddle horses, dogs and "the most approved firearms." They planned to return in November, then go to Texas and on to the Pacific coast. It is probable that this was the Holstein party.

The *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, October 3, 1866, stated that Prince Nicholas, the Czar's nephew, was in town and would go via the Pacific railroad and Smoky Hill route to Colorado and California, desiring to hunt buffalo.

13. In late 1866 there were numerous hostile encounters of whites with Indians in western Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming. In early August a settler's wife was ravished by Cheyennes and Sioux on White Rock creek in Jewell or Republican county. During the following weeks Mormon emigrants were attacked 90 miles west of Fort Laramie, Wyo., and on the Republican and Solomon rivers in Kansas seven settlers were killed and several women molested. Preparations for defense were being made by Kansas state militia and Federal cavalry. Two employees of the stagecoach company were murdered 100 miles west of Fort Ellsworth, on the Smoky Hill route, supposedly by Apaches. There were attacks in Nebraska and Wyoming on the route to Montana. Three hundred Cheyennes were reported near Julesburg, Colo.; they had stolen livestock and an attack by them upon a wagon train had been repulsed by cavalry. The road west from Fort Kearny was described as "a graveyard."—*Junction City Union*, August 14, 1866; *New York Times*, September 6, 7, 11, October 6, 10, 24, 26, November 25, December 8, 9, 22, 28, 1866, and January 4, 1867; *New York Herald*, October 10, 1866; *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, November 1, 25, 1866.

Eastern newspapers were inclined to regard the reports as exaggerated, to blame the whites, and to emphasize efforts by Federal authorities to make peace with the marauding tribes.—*New York Times*, November 20, 25, December 4, 5, 13, 1866. Stress was placed upon railroad projects in Kansas and upon the importance of trade with the western settlements.—*Ibid.*, November 20, 24, 29, December 2, 1866.

two tents, ours and one for our men, were pitched close together, within a double barricade of chests. Of course each slept with rifle and revolver beside him. With these precautionary measures I followed the advice of the hunters, of whom one especially, given to me by General Sherman, was the ideal of a *pilot of the desert* [English in the original].

The first indication of the nearness of Indians we received from the prairie-fires, which, first visible on the far southern horizon by a glow at night, gradually came nearer and finally passed by us, burning the grass for many miles.¹⁴ The purpose was to chase away the buffalo and force us to turn back for lack of food. But we had food enough for some days. In the blackened melancholy country through which we had to go for some days, there was only very rarely a miserable rattlesnake, welcome target-practice. When we were past the burned area, we came at once to buffalo, but at the same time to signs of Indians, gradually becoming more frequent. One day a surprised buffalo herd came by two's and three's past our camp without noticing us, evidence that they had just been stirred up; two of our people stated that they had seen a row of riders come over a hill and then disappear, upon seeing the camp.

I did not see them. But I also many times saw single riders, and once three, who watched us from afar when we were riding on the hunt by two's or three's—sometimes only their heads were seen over the hills—and then they would disappear. One day at dusk in a gloomy little wooded area on the edge of a stream we found the remains of a fire, where an unlucky captured soldier was burned at the stake. The four half-burned stakes [*Marterpfähle*] at first attracted the attention of the guide; then we recognized the bones, strewn about by wolves, as human bones, and finally we found in the bushes the uniform-coat, from which the polished buttons had been cut, and a pair of torn trousers. One of my companions took the skull along to have Mass read for it. A doctor to whom he later showed it declared it to be undoubtedly the skull of a white man, probably a German.¹⁵

14. In late 1866 there were serious prairie fires in Kansas and Nebraska, extending into farm land in Dickinson county, Kan., and near Fremont, Neb.—*Leavenworth Daily Conserative*, December 1, 2, 1866.

15. In November, 1865, there was a fracas with Cheyenne Indians on the Smoky Hill route near Downer's Springs, in which a white man was captured and later burned to death in a slow fire.—*New York Times*, December 3, 4 and 18, 1865. The location of Downer's Springs was southwest of present Wakececy; possibly the remains of this victim were those found by Holstein. The *New York Times*, September 11, 1866, printed a report from Central City, Colo., dated July 23, of an Indian fight somewhere on the Smoky Hill route, after which a captive had been burned alive by a slow buffalo chip fire. This would seem to be rather too far west for the bones to be found by Holstein, though there is no indication of how far he went in this direction, except that his party "camped out slightly over a month."

Sometimes also solitary horses were seen in the darkness, apparently without riders, moving about at some distance around the camp, while our horses, which were fastened by pickets near the tents, pressed with pointed ears close to the tents—a sure sign that something human was connected with those horses—probably an Indian thief or spy.

Once when the sentinel awakened me, I observed such an occurrence for more than half an hour while lying on my stomach, until the animal went away shortly before daybreak. In daylight we saw by the unshod hoofprint that it had been an Indian horse, while a second one waited nearby in a ravine.

Nevertheless I can report no attack with a war-cry obligato, and it might seem that a large part of the precautions were unnecessary, if the contrary had not been proved. One night, when it was my turn to watch, my predecessor stated that he had heard shooting in the far distance. Several weeks later we learned that on that very night a group of 15 white hunters had been attacked by Indians some miles from our camp. Some had come to harm, and the others, abandoning their baggage, had fled into the wilderness.¹⁶ Meanwhile the report went through all the American papers that our party had been partly captured and partly scalped.

On our return-journey we found a multitude of solitary farms abandoned for fear of the Indians; wild turkeys by the hundreds were present in their lonely cornfields. When, after we had encountered nothing but empty log-houses for three days, we finally again saw human beings, we were overwhelmed with questions. The people wanted to know what the Indians were doing, told us of that unlucky expedition and also that we ourselves had been scalped, which we in all modesty denied. Therefore all the papers reported our unexpected return.¹⁷

That such an expedition as ours has very great fascination cannot

16. "Some two or three English Lords . . . have been stepping at Fort Riley for a few days past."—*Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, October 10, 1866. Three days later, "a party of English Lords, Dukes, Barons, Squires, or whatever they may be called, have made a start for the buffalo country." They were "about as green in this western frontier as many of us would doubtless be in old England."—*Junction City Union*, October 13, 1866. Four days later the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, reprinted this report, enriching it with some comments of its own. It would seem to be this party that late in October was attacked at the head of Salt creek, a tributary of the Solomon. Fourteen of the party of 18 were captured, robbed, and then released.—*Ibid.*, November 1, 1866, citing the *Junction City Union*. "H. B. M.'s subjects . . . on a buffalo hunt have been gobbled by the Indians," commented the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, November 3, 1866.

17. "That party of English Lords and Barons who have been out on a buffalo hunt, returned yesterday. They went from here to Ellsworth, and from there across the country to the Republican. They killed several buffalo, and saw but three or four Indians. They had a good time, so good, in fact, that they propose going back again upon another trip."—*Junction City Union*, quoted in the *Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, November 9, 1866. Holstein exaggerated the stir made in the papers by his party's supposed destruction.

be put in question. The continual watchfulness prevents boredom, and even standing guard in bright moonlight, when the beavers work and the wolves howl, is highly romantic, and one stands there with the Wallenstein-like feeling that "here a man is still worth something." But the merriment of the Karlstein partridge-hunt festival is not present. Apart from the various possibilities of which we think, there is present in the wilderness itself a deep seriousness from which no one escapes. Our little Frenchman, otherwise merry as an ape, soon became as quiet as the others. But I understand very well why civilization is given up. The farmers who serve as outposts of civilization on the furthest frontier are alone sufficient to arouse a prejudice against civilization. A dirtier race of swindlers and horse-thieves is beyond any power of imagination.

But now you will have had enough of this subject. On the return trip nothing especially happened to me except that at one place a sovereign citizen, who has unfortunately remained unidentified, had laid a board across the rails. To give the matter a romantic side, I told myself that the man was perhaps a rival of the engineer or fireman for some beauty; only such heroic acts have their shady side for the rest of mankind. Fortunately we were almost an hour behind schedule and so the train coming toward us went off the rails instead of ours. Since signal-men in this country are rare, we first learned of the accident when our locomotive almost struck the overturned one with its nose. Pretty night scene with torch-light. . . .¹⁸

ROYAL LEGATION
WASHINGTON
May 4, 1867

DEAR LITTLE IZE:

Last year during the summer I saw the civilized parts of the United States and in the fall I again went to the prairies as leader of a hunting-expedition. We came into the territory of the Sioux, who had already gone to war; but I have no special hair-raising adventure to report. We were on guard day and night, were alarmed twice but never attacked. Indian bands and solitary riders, whom we often saw in the distance, and many minor incidents—for example, the discovery of the remains of a fire with the bones, gnawed by wolves, of a soldier burned at the stake—prevented the time from passing slowly. Another small band of hunters—we totalled 11—was attacked quite close to us and dispersed.

18. Rogge, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-61.

I stood watch myself and heard the shooting in the night, without being able to account for the reason. Only several weeks afterward, upon our return to the settlements, did we learn what it was. Meanwhile, however, all the American papers had reported our deaths. According to them I was scalped and my three companions captured, and we were described as noble martyrs; our men were either dead or in flight. All this was because of confusion with the other expedition. Upon our return the telegraph promptly reported our resurrection.¹⁹

Buffalo-hunting on horseback is one of the most exciting sports that exist. A good trained hunting horse is the prime necessity, since earth-cracks and especially dogtowns—settlements of prairie-dogs—make falls rather common. I had no fall because I rode a quite excellent little Comanche pony. The animal is now in Ireland; one of my companions, Lord Southwell,²⁰ liked him and took him along. I shall perhaps see him again as a ladies'-horse.

As a rule the buffalo defends himself only if he is wounded. Only one young bull, perhaps with spirit embittered by disappointment in love, attacked me one day, even before I had fired, when in the hope of disposing of him with a single bullet I had ridden somewhat too near. He turned so suddenly that I admit that I closed my eyes, convinced that he had me. But my pony, "Major," swerved like an eel; I am sure that the beast pulled the hair from his tail.

We had then for 10 minutes a fine fight, in which man and beast were each alternately hunter and game. The powder in my pistol-cartridges was unfortunately so bad that afterward I cut several bullets out of the bull's hide. Usually I stopped the buffalo with 2-3 shots.

Also we had greyhounds along and had a fine wolf-hunt, but the dogs were so badly bitten that later they could not be moved by money or fine words.

For several days we camped in a region where the settlements far and wide had been abandoned for fear of the Indians. Corn stood on the stalk, food for deer, racoons and turkeys. The multitude of the latter cannot be exaggerated; I believe that on one day I saw 200-300.

To my great joy we encountered some fine herds of elk; in short

19. No newspaper with such details has been found. A report printed on November 1, asserted that 14 of a party of 18 had been captured.—*Leavenworth Daily Conservative*, November 1, 1866. See footnote 16.

20. This is the only companion of Holstein on his 1866 trip named by him.

there was no lack of fresh meat.²¹ I have not yet shot any antelopes.

This year you will probably still not see me. It must perhaps go so badly in a war that I cannot hold out here any longer. Otherwise I admit that at thirty years to drill as a recruit excites me no more than 5 years ago. If I have the choice of risks and hardships, I would rather look for grizzly bears in the Rocky Mountains. That is my plan for the autumn, in case the times remain quiet.

Your brother,
the naughty PRITZ [*sic*]²²

STUTTGART

August 22, 1867²³

DEAR ALFRED:

. . . A few days ago I had a letter from the Rocky Mountains, from not far from the California border. The letter was from a famous old hunter to whom I had written about hunting for grizzly bears this fall, before I knew that I would be sitting in Stuttgart today. He wrote that he did not advise it this year, as the Indian war is raging fearfully in the Rocky Mountains as well as in my old hunting grounds and the quest for scalps is too great for comfort.

Shall I confess it? I felt a kind of homesickness, as the breeze of the desert blew toward me from the old trapper's letter. But keep that to yourself. I would not like others also to regard me as a fellow out of his mind. . . .²⁴

21. The reference to elk may indicate that Holstein's party went a considerable distance west.

22. Rogge, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 64.

23. Holstein returned to Europe and to the diplomatic service in June, 1867.—Rich and Fisher, *Holstein Papers*, v. 1, p. xi.

24. Rogge, *op. cit.*, pp. 64, 65.