

THE LAST BUFFALO

by J. Mark Shoup

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"I close my eyes, only for a moment, and the moment's gone"

—musical group Kansas, Dust In the Wind

Like dust in the wind, the millions of buffalo that once roamed North America were nearly extinct. Seemingly unending numbers were depleted to only a few by the end of the 1800s.

My mother tells the story of a picnic she, my father, and some friends enjoyed on a smooth Arkansas River sandbar near Pawnee Rock in the late 1960s. The river was vibrant then, and strolling along its banks, my mother spied what appeared to be a bone sticking up from the packed sand. She tried to pull it up, but it wouldn't budge. Curious, she grabbed a stick and began digging, but the more she dug, the longer and wider the "bone" became. By the time she finally wrenched the stubborn object from the sand, the rest of the picnickers had gathered round to witness a most rare find — an intact American bison skull.

I still have this skull, which experts at Kansas University tell me could be 140 to several thousand years old. Without carbon dating, there's no way to tell. One thing is sure; bison have been a fixture of the Kansas landscape for a long time.

By the early 19th century, single herds of "buffalo" numbered in the millions in Kansas and throughout the Great Plains. (Although the bison is not related to the true buffalo of Africa, Asia, and Australia, it is commonly called a buffalo in this country.) Estimates put the total population at 60 to 100 million animals. No other species of ungulate (hoofed animal) is known to have ever existed in such numbers.

Buffalo were the lifeblood of American Plains Indians, and they hunted them for thousands of years using a variety of techniques. Before the advent of the horse, brought to this country by the Spanish in the late 15th century, natives would often approach buffalo in disguise, bow and arrows in hand. Hides of buffalo or wolves were often employed because the huge quadrupeds were afraid of neither. Once in range, several buffalo could be shot before the herd fled. Spears and



Huge herds of buffalo sustained the Plains Indians, providing food, clothing, shelter and tools. At first, white settlers took buffalo for food, but it became disgustingly common for them to kill many animals, taking only the tongues, which were a delicacy.

atlatls were also used to ambush buffalo at water holes and other strategic points. If weapons were in shortage or buffalo were unapproachable, fire was often used to drive large numbers over cliffs, providing the tribe with ample meat for a season. All parts of the animal were eaten or used for clothing, shelter, or tools.

With the arrival of European settlers in the 19th century, buffalo hunting increased. Early trappers killed a few buffalo for

meat, and as settlers streamed to California in the gold rush days, more buffalo were killed along the way. As the first transcontinental railroad made its way through Kansas in the 1860s, buffalo were hunted to feed rail crews. The most famous of these buffalo hunters was William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who was hired by the Kansas-Pacific Railway to provide meat for laborers. He was paid \$500 a month, a huge salary at that time, and is

reported to have killed 4,280 buffalo in 18 months beginning in 1867.

Other notable buffalo hunters included the likes of Wyatt Earp, Pat Garrett, and Wild Bill Hickock. The weapon of choice was often a .45-70 caliber Sharps rifle.

Market hunting also took a toll during this period, when many "hunters" killed buffalo for the eastern meat market, sometimes just taking their hides and tongues, with the car-

cases left to wolves and other scavengers. Salted buffalo tongues brought 25 cents in Kansas and sold for twice that in eastern markets. Hides brought from 50 cents to \$1.25. Both Indians and white men provided buffalo hides for robes in the eastern market, with Indians accounting for about 100,000 hides a year by 1870, in addition to the animals they killed for their own use.

Even this level of slaughter would likely not have devastated the buffalo. By this time, 100,000 hides a year was about all the market could bear because tanning techniques were not sophisticated enough to keep many hides from deteriorating. Hides tanned by processes available at the time produced a soft, spongy leather with limited use. As late as 1870, this magnificent beast's numbers still remained fairly steady, as described in this account by Col. R. I. Dodge, in *Plains of the Great West*:

"The herd in the Arkansas River through which I passed could not have averaged, at best, over 15 or 20 individuals to the acre but was, from my own observation, not less than 25 miles wide, and from reports of hunters and others it was about five days in passing a given point, or not less than 50 miles deep. From the top of Pawnee Rock, I could see from 6 to 10 miles in almost every direction. This whole vast space was covered with buffalo,

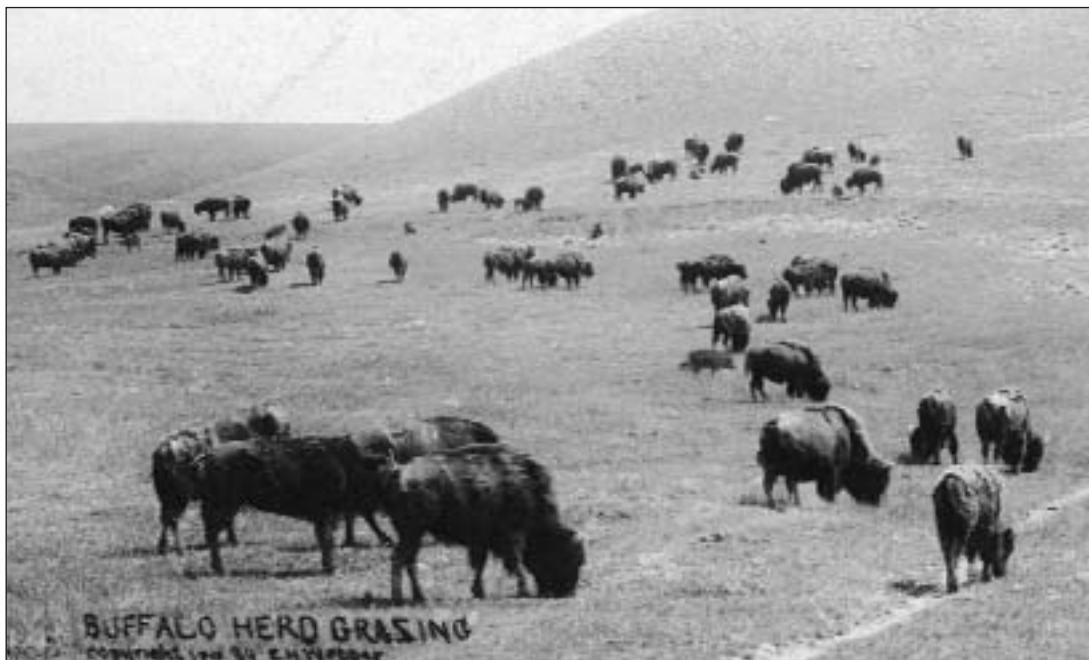
looking at a distance like one compact mass, the visual angle not permitting the ground to be seen. I have seen such a sight a great number of times, but never on so large a scale. If the advancing multitude had been at all points 50 miles in length (as it was known to have been in some places, at least) by 25 miles in width, and still averaged 15 head to the acre, it would have contained the enormous number of 12 million head."

A new tanning process imported from Germany would soon wipe such scenes from the landscape with terrifying, unprecedented speed. This process was adopted in Kansas, and high-quality hides quickly made it to New York. A single hide would bring a week's worth of wages to the average working man, and new hunters streamed into Kansas to take

advantage of the bonanza. With luck, a hunter could make as much as \$50 a day, a fabulous sum.

By 1871, one buyer in Kansas City offered to buy all the hides he could get. The new tanning method also preserved hides in summer, so year-round slaughter began. Hunters, drivers, cooks, and helpers streamed into the plains, and by the winter of 1872, some 20,000 men were involved in the buffalo hide market. While many were unprepared for the rigors of plains life, others were quite successful and refined their hunting methods.

In three years from 1872-1874, white hunters killed an estimated 5 million buffalo in Kansas, and Plains Indians added another 1.2 million for the eastern market. About 6.3 million were killed during this period, and all the large Kansas



There are written records of a herd of a buffalo seen near Pawnee Rock that was estimated at 25 miles wide and more than 50 miles deep. If accurately estimated, the herd could have contained 12 million animals.

herds had been wiped out or driven north, where the hunters soon followed.

Within a year, only the bones of this magnificent creature were scattered across the Kansas plains. Even these would quickly disappear. Industrious plainsmen gathered the bones in huge piles and hauled them to railway stations, where they were shipped east to fertilizer manufacturers. These bone collectors made \$8 to \$12 a ton. As early as 1872, 1.1 million pounds of bones were shipped on the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad. The following year, 2.7 million pounds were shipped, and in 1874, nearly 7 million pounds of buf-

falo bones were sold and shipped east. But this was only the beginning of a short-lived industry. In 1885, one company shipped 200 million pounds of buffalo bones from Montana.

Less than 20 years after the new tanning process had been invented, a single buffalo bone was a rarity on the plains of Kansas. The buffalo were dust in the wind.

The last wild Kansas buffalo was reportedly killed in April of 1887 in Cheyenne County. According to St. Francis historian Tobe Zwegardt, a group of local men on horseback spotted a lone bull on a hill near the banks of Cherry Creek, just a quarter mile from an old encampment where

Indian survivors of the Sand Creek Massacre had taken refuge in 1864.

One of the men wounded the buffalo, and it ran down the creek bank and over a hill, where local rancher S. A. Ferguson felled it with one shot. The great animal crashed to the ground in a cloud of dust and buffalo grass. A natural history phenomenon had been decimated in the blink of an eye, and along with it, the culture of the Great Plains Indians.

In the Great Plains overall, the mighty “plains oxen” — once boasting the greatest herds of wild ungulates on earth — had been reduced to a mere 635 in the wild. Add to that number



When a new tanning process was implemented in the mid-1800s, buffalo hunters began hunting year-round, and buyers bought all the buffalo hides they could get. Between 1872 and 1874, more than 6 million Kansas buffalo were killed for profit.



By 1875, bleached buffalo bones were nearly all that was left, and they were also collected and sold for \$8 to \$12 per ton. In 1874 alone, 7 million pounds of bones were shipped east to fertilizer manufacturers.

those under government protection in Yellowstone National Park and those in captivity, and the number of buffalo remaining in North America in 1889 was 1,091.

In 1849, historian and explorer Francis Parkman wrote the following:

“The buffalo supplies the Indians with the necessities of life; with habitations, food, clothing, beds and fuel, strings for their bows, glue, thread, cordage, trail ropes for their horses, covering for their saddles, vessels to hold water, boats to cross streams, and the means of purchasing all they want from the traders. When the buffalo are extinct, they too must dwindle away.”

The Plains Indian’s relationship with buffalo was more than utilitarian, however.

These nomadic people followed buffalo herds throughout the winter. They knew every aspect of their behavior and natural history. In fact, they were so connected to the buffalo that they believed the animal was a gift from God, and much of their religious beliefs and rituals revolved around the buffalo.

What the Europeans dubbed a “medicine man” was the equivalent of priest and doctor to the Plains Indians. These “holy men” sought visions, which often came in the form of a buffalo. They believed that they could communicate with God through the buffalo by praying to living buffalo or by using ritualistic buffalo parts, frequently a skull. Medicine pouches often included parts of the buffalo. Thus, these great

beasts gave the people of the plains spiritual sustenance as well as physical strength.

It was a symbiotic relationship, as well. After generations of studying and depending upon the buffalo, the Indians understood that buffalo were attracted to new-growth grasslands. To create this new growth, some tribes periodically burnt the prairie, attracting herds of buffalo in the process, a technique used by modern cattle ranchers to this day.

According to the National Bison Association, there are approximately 350,000 buffalo in North America today, most of which are found on private ranches. (Buffalo meat is low in fat and considered by many to rival beef in flavor, and the market for privately-grown buffalo meat is growing.) About 150,000 are managed on public lands. Yellowstone National Park boasts the only genetically-pure wild buffalo — ancestors of the great herds that once roamed North America.

The demise of the American bison changed life for the Indians of the Great Plains forever. Uneducated and not adapted to the white man’s way of living — from farming and ranching to banking and commerce — most had little choice but to relocate to reservations.

The old ways, however, are gone but not forgotten, pounding through the clouds of memory on the hooves of a once-magnificent beast. Only an occasional bone may pop through the sands of time, a reminder of what once was. ♡