

The Fall of the American Buffalo

At the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark embarked on their epic expedition through the American West, beyond the Mississippi River, across the Great Plains, and over the Rocky Mountains to reach the Pacific Ocean in November 1805. Their reports of breathtaking natural beauty and abundant natural resources spurred a wave of Manifest Destiny that would captivate Americans to push westward over the next century. In 1920, historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that “The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people,” and that “This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion Westward...furnishes the forces dominating American character” (Turner 38). As defined by historians Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, the history of the American frontier is “a tale of conquest, but also one of survival, persistence, and the merging of peoples and cultures that gave birth and continuing life to America” (Hine 10). However, the romantic idea of the West held by many Americans was complicated by the presence of the Plains Indians, tribes such as the Sioux, Comanche, Pawnee, and Cheyenne who subsisted on hunting large herds of buffalo. To these tribes, the hunting of buffalo was not simply a source of food and other resources, but a central part of their mythology and spirituality (Rinella 15). At the end of the nineteenth century, a movement known as the “Ghost Dance” began to spread among the remaining Natives, now mostly relocated onto reservations. Initiated by the Paiute prophetess Wovoka, the movement inspired images of the restoration of the buffalo herds to the Great Plains, and along with it the restoration of the great nomadic culture of the Plains Indians (Rinella 16). This was due to the fact that over the previous century, perhaps the most numerous

mammal to ever exist on the face of the earth (modern estimates approximate as many as forty million from northern Canada to present-day Mexico) had been reduced to only 2,200 animals located only in Canada and Montana (Rinella 10-12). Today, the only remaining free-roaming bison herd in America is located in Yellowstone National Park, with 3,000 animals. Another 195,000 are raised on commercial ranches for their meat, hides, and skulls (Durgan 2). The mass slaughter of the American bison during the nineteenth century was brought about by three central factors: the development of a commodities market for buffalo meat, robes, hides, and bones, the completion of a Transcontinental Railroad system that accelerated transportation to the West, and the incentive to deliberately starve Native Americans into cooperation with the U.S. government.

Much of the destruction of the bison population during the 1800s was the direct result of economic motives for trading parts of the animal in both domestic and international markets. Before 1870, this market was driven by trade in buffalo meat and “robes” between the Native American hunters of the Great Plains and Eastern merchants (Rinella 166-167). Native American hunters could supply 200,000 buffalo robes each year by killing the animals in the winter when they had the most fur. The robes, essentially cured buffalo hides without the hair removed, became popular in eastern commercial centers such as Montreal and New York and were used in making mattresses, blankets, coats, and padding in carriages and sleighs (Rinella 166). To supply their own population, Native Americans used a wide variety of techniques, the most notable being simply riding into or alongside a herd of buffalo while firing arrows and bullets, killing only a small minority of animals out of the large herd (Rinella 165). However, some groups, such as the Metis people of the Great Lakes Region (who share both indigenous and European ancestry), developed forms of mass slaughter that could produce as many as “one million pounds

of dried meat and buffalo robes” that they would then trade to Whites (Rinella 166). One such method was the famed “buffalo jump,” where Natives would chase massive herds of buffalo over a cliff formation to kill them in large quantities (Rinella 158). In his paper “Buffalo Hunt: International Trade and the Virtual Extinction of the North American Bison,” M. Scott Taylor argues that the “slaughter on the plains” was not motivated solely by American economic interests, but by overseas markets. He believes this was due to an innovation in British and German tanneries around 1870 that developed a method of turning buffalo hides into leather (Taylor 7). This discovery provoked a strong demand in Europe for buffalo leather, the elastic and pliable nature of which was perfectly suited for footwear (as several European countries wanted to refit their armies with a “tougher and thicker” sole leather) and industrial belting, which was in high demand in British factories (Taylor 8). Coupled with the Panic of 1873, this new market for so-called “flint hides” drove thousands of buffalo hunters onto the Great Plains (Rinella 168). These hunters would typically travel in “outfits” along with skinners, where various strategic and cunning tactics resulted in the average shooting of thirty or forty bison per day (Rinella 172). The hide hunters, who usually followed the continually growing system of railroads, travelled further north and further south (from Dodge City, Kansas, the flint hide capital) until the last remaining large herd of buffalo was killed in the Black Hills of South Dakota in 1883 (Rinella 178). However, right about this time, a new market opened for buffalo bones, which littered the plains after the hide hunts. When burned to ash, buffalo bones were ideal for adding “translucency and whiteness” to American porcelain and neutralizing acids in wine and vinegar. And when crushed into a finely ground powder called “bone meal,” they could be used in fertilizers that could be sold to farmers and homesteaders arriving on the plains

(Rinella 178-179). A famous photograph taken in Detroit, Michigan, shows a giant pile of thousands of buffalo bones (known as “Boneville”) collected for economic purposes that demonstrates the severity of the “slaughter on the plains.” The demand for these three major commodities - meat, hides, and bones - was perhaps the greatest cause of the slaughter of buffalo during the nineteenth century. Thousands of Americans who ventured to the frontier found success and prosperity through hunting buffalo, their migration contributing to the disappearance of the American frontier, as Turner thought was reflected in the Census of 1890 (Rinella 180). However, another major development of the 19th century would facilitate this migration: the Transcontinental Railroad.

In 1862, Congress passed the Pacific Railroad Acts which promoted the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad from Council Bluffs, Iowa, to San Francisco Bay. Entrepreneur George Francis Train declared that “The great Pacific Railway has commenced... Immigration will soon pour into these valleys. Ten millions of emigrants will settle in this golden land in twenty years... This is the grandest enterprise under god!” (King 2). After the First Transcontinental Railroad was completed in 1869, a series of other routes expanded and further joined the two coasts, fostering a sense of interconnectedness the American continent had never seen before. However, for all the glory that the railroads gave the American people, they would forever change the condition of the American West. In the wake of the railroads, the millions of bison that had wandered the plains for 10,000 years would be divided and driven to near extinction (King 2). As railroads began to expand dramatically across the West around the mid-nineteenth century, many engineers followed the great buffalo trails when laying down tracks, destroying their traditional migratory routes. Previously, pioneers moving westward had

followed the trails as they would lead them to freshwater springs, through mountain passes, and, hopefully, to the buffalo themselves, which they could kill for meat (Rinella 150). By the time that the Union and Central Pacific joined at Promontory Point in 1869, the American bison had been effectively divided into a northern and a southern herd. And furthermore, cheap transportation had arrived to the Great Plains, bringing “guns and people” into the heart of buffalo country (Rinella 167). Massive parties of hunters began to arrive in the plains by train, and unlike the flint hide hunters, most of these “rail hunters” killed for sport. As the railroad companies began to recognize this trend, they started advertising “hunting by rail,” hoping that trains would run into a bison herd alongside the tracks (King 4). An 1867 article from the New York magazine *Harper's Weekly* describes this process: “Nearly every railroad train... on the Kansas Pacific Railroad has its race with these herds of buffalo... The train is slowed to a rate of speed about equal to that of the herd; the passengers get out fire-arms which are provided for the defense of the train against the Indians, and open from the windows and platforms of the cars a fire that resembles a brisk skirmish” (“Buffalo Hunting”). The account later describes the aftermath of the “hunt”: “The buffaloes which have been killed are secured, and the choice parts placed in the baggage-car, which is at one crowded by passengers, each of whom feels convinced and is ready to assert that his was the shot that brought down the game” (“Buffalo Hunting”). This report demonstrates that as a symbol of the American western fantasy, the buffalo were in-demand not only for their commodities but also as a game animal, so much so that the act of killing a buffalo generated its own market. Furthermore, the railroad companies often hired professional hunters to kill as many as entire herds of buffalo in accordance with the following concerns: the presence of local Plains tribes in areas where the railroads wanted to expand, and

the tendency of buffalo to both take shelter in mountain tunnels through which the railroad traveled, and also to cross the tracks in large herds, thereby damaging the rails themselves (Rinella 168). By slaughtering herds of buffalo, these professional hunters (which included famous names like Buffalo Bill Cody) could force Native tribes to migrate to other areas and could prevent the trains from being delayed (sometimes as much as several days) by buffalo activity on the rails (Rinella 168-169). The completion of the First Transcontinental Railroad and those that followed marked a new era for the United States of America, but also marked the end of an era for the American frontier. As the buffalo range was split again and again, the railroads began to close in on the animals, eventually killing off all of the great herds that had once roamed the plains. Although many of the buffalo were killed for economic incentives or for sport, the railroads also carried another culprit for mass bison slaughter: the American military.

Immediately following his success in the Civil War, the newly appointed Lieutenant General of the United States Army, William Tecumseh Sherman, led the Military Division of the Mississippi in protecting the construction of the First Transcontinental Railroad. This included, according to an 1867 letter Sherman wrote to Commanding General Ulysses S. Grant, stopping “thieving, ragged Indians” from restricting the progress of the railroad (King 2). Sherman’s legendary tactics of “scorched-earth” warfare, used in his March in the Sea, would be the defining strategy in forcing the Native Americans into submission to the U.S. government. And part of this, as written to Sherman by General Phillip Sheridan, was “making them poor by the destruction of their stock [the buffalo], and then settling them on the lands allotted to them” (Phippen 4). A significant part of the mass slaughter of the American bison was a deliberate act on the part of the U.S. government, who saw destroying the Plains Indians’s main source of food

as a way to force them into reliance on the United States and relocate them onto reservations. In 1868, when negotiating the Treaty of Fort Laramie with the Lakota, Sherman was “utterly opposed to the clause” that the Natives would be permitted to continue their buffalo hunt north of the Platte River in Nebraska. He reportedly told Sheridan “I think it would be wise to invite all the sportsmen of England and America [to Nebraska] this fall for a Grand Buffalo hunt, and make one grand sweep of them all” (Phippen 3). He knew that “as long as the Sioux hunted buffalo, they’d never surrender to life with a plow,” as the adoption of an agricultural lifestyle was one of the goals in relocating the Natives onto reservations (Phippen 3). Sherman and Sheridan were both conscious that they had far less men than would be necessary to try and slaughter the buffalo and starve the Natives, not to mention the massive amount of time it would take to make that attempt. But lucky for them, the floods of flint hide hunters and tourists began to arrive in the Plains around this time, and the military saw a rare opportunity to cooperate with the private sector to exterminate the Natives’s main source of food and nomadic way of life (Phippen 4). Allegedly, when the Texas legislature (under pressure from conservationists) tried to pass a bill protecting the buffalo species from commercial and recreational hunters, Sheridan said the following: “These men have done more in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question, than the entire regular army has done in the last forty years... Send them powder and lead... let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated” (King 4). By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the buffalo population was completely destroyed, and virtually all Native American tribes were pushed onto reservations. Sherman’s strategy of total war had succeeded, largely in part to the work of private hunters directly supported by the U.S. military. Interestingly, later in his life Sheridan would be openly

critical of the treatment of Natives on the reservations that he had devoted so much time into moving them onto. In 1878, he looked back on the war: “We took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this that they made war. Could anyone expect less?” (King 5).

Today, there are about 200,000 bison in the United States. The majority of these animals are located on ranches, raised to produce meat, leather, and bonemeal. Only one group bison in America roam freely like their ancestors: the 3,000-head herd in Yellowstone National Park (Durgan 2). During the especially harsh winter of 1996-1997, more than 1,000 bison were shot by Montana state officials when trying to migrate into lower elevations outside the park, causing a public outcry and igniting a debate over the Yellowstone herd that has ensued ever since (Seelye 2). Members of the Buffalo Field Campaign, founded by activists Michael Mease and Rosalie Little Thunder immediately after the incident, continue to patrol the southern Yellowstone border, hoping to chase stray bison back into the park before they come into contact with state officials, who work for the Montana Department of Livestock (Seelye 2). The DOL works on behalf of cattle ranchers, who claim that the bison carry a disease called brucellosis that, if transmitted to their cattle, could decimate their herds and drive them out of business. Although bison can definitely carry the disease, there have been no confirmed transmissions of brucellosis from bison to cattle, whereas confirmed transmissions from elk to cattle have resulted in dramatic livestock losses in Idaho (Seelye 1). In a striking move, a coalition of 52 Native American tribes offered to move excess bison from Yellowstone onto their reservations, promising to quarantine them for 18 months to eradicate the disease. The Montana government

has apparently dismissed this request with no clear explanation (Seelye 2). This clash is only the most recent development of a centuries-long conflict between the United States and the North American bison. In 2016, when President Barack Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act and the bison was adopted as the national mammal of the United States, many activists and conservationists looked to the future of the bison with hope (Phippen 2). And in November 2019, at the annual meeting of the American Bison League (founded in 1905 by conservationists such as William Hornaday and Theodore Roosevelt), an organization now consisting of conservationists, politicians, Indigenous leaders, and ranchers came forward with the bold vision of bringing the North American Bison back into the wild (“Bison on the Edge”). There is hope for the future of the bison, and perhaps there is a chance that we will see the “Thunder of the Plains” reintroduced to their natural habitat, where they belong.

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