

Skin and Bones: The Decimation of the Plains Buffalo

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In the 16th century, North America (Turtle Island) was home to 25 to 30 million buffalo roaming freely on the Great Plains, but only a few hundred remained by the end of the late 19th century. The aim of this paper is to investigate the historic perspectives and evidence to answer the question "what happened to the buffalo?" Academic debates have surrounded this question since the 19th century; while blame has been assigned to different parties, nobody has taken full credit for the ecocide. I will examine different perspectives and contributors to the decline of the buffalo and discuss why nothing was done to salvage the great herds. Indigenous people of the plains hunted buffalo for subsistence long before any European had stepped foot in North America. After European contact, ecological changes, species pressure, and disease created tension between the buffalo herds and threatened their survival. However, the dramatic decrease of the buffalo population is ultimately attributed to human agency. Unofficial military policy, sport-hunting, and a capitalistic hunger for resources brought the once plentiful herds to near extinction in just a few decades. Both the American and Canadian governments encouraged the decimation of the buffalo as a solution to the "Indian problem," as Indigenous people were thought to be more malleable without their main source of subsistence. Fundamentally, the means by which the buffalo were slowly eradicated from the Great Plains had a profound influence on the lives of Indigenous peoples and offers an insight into Indigenous-Settler relations during the 19th century.

There is often conflation between the terms 'bison' and 'buffalo.' In North America, the accurate scientific genus term is *Bison bison*. For the purposes of this paper however, the term 'buffalo' will be utilized rather than 'bison' due to the prominence of 'buffalo' in the available literature and its dominance in oral tradition. The majority of texts on the decline in plains buffalo numbers are American sources since the Canadian government was newly created in 1867 and did not possess the manpower to effect vast environmental change. The literature on buffalo in the 19th century is split between two primary camps: the preservationists who were interested in 'saving' the buffalo from extinction, and frontier historians.¹ Both groups however "analyzed the near-extinction and preservation of the species from the perspective of dynamic Euroamericans who shaped a passive nature and overwhelmed culturally static Indians. Both interpretations also saw the near-extinction of the bison as the inevitable triumph of Euroamerican society."² The belief that Indigenous people were more 'primitive' than Europeans was used to justify colonialism and the treatment that Indigenous people received on part of the newcomers. The rationale was that, if Europeans were inherently superior to Indigenous people and the notion of Manifest Destiny was true, the slaughter of the buffalo and by extension the destruction of Indigenous ways of life was somehow acceptable in Western consciousness.

Environmental factors may have initiated the decline in the buffalo, even before Euroamericans waged war on the sacred animals. Signs of drought pushed the carrying capacity of the land, putting

¹ Andrew Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

² Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 5.

pressure on the species and increasing the presence of pests like grasshoppers.³ According to dendrochronological evidence, the second quarter of the 19th century showed increased rain followed by an extensive drought which would have restricted the subsistence resources of the buffalo.⁴ It is possible that diseases such as anthrax, tuberculosis and brucellosis spread rapidly between the herds and there is evidence that these diseases caused a decline in buffalo populations due to spontaneous abortion.⁵ To assume that environmental changes had no effect on the buffalo population is also to assume that they lived in an unchanging world. Most environmental historians understand nature as possessing its own agency and is inherently prone to unpredictable changes in climate.⁶

The decline of the buffalo influenced directly by human agency began long before the height of the buffalo slaughter in the 1870s. During the fur trade in Canada, there was a heightened demand for buffalo robe coats and pemmican (a mixture of pounded meat, berries and fat that could be stored and taken with fur traders into the bush). As in other places in Canada, once plentiful buffalo, thought to have an eternal supply, were hunted in large numbers to satisfy consumer demands. Indigenous peoples increased in number on the plains and utilized more efficient hunting techniques brought by Europeans.⁷ Suddenly, Indigenous people not only hunted for their own people, but they also supplied the newcomers with food and robes to help them survive the harsh winters.⁸ We cannot assume that Indigenous people lived in a harmonious relationship with all animals, at all times, either – to do so is to imagine these interactions as static, unchanging and romanticized. However, even though hunting of the buffalo during the fur trade increased, leading to a slight population decline, the vast majority of buffalo were killed in the decades following the American Civil War.

Though no official commands were put forward by the American or Canadian governments to encourage the slaughter of the buffalo, there is extensive evidence suggesting that mass hunting was encouraged to clear the plains, of both the buffalo and Indigenous people. Generals William T. Sherman and Philip Sheridan played integral roles in the eradication of the buffalo and both held the view that people should "Kill every buffalo you can! Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone."⁹ The governments on both sides of the Medicine Line had determined that there was an 'Indian problem:' Indigenous people that were viewed as standing in the way of progress and civilization had to be eradicated. Government officials knew that many of the plains nations depended heavily on the buffalo to provide all items necessary to remain independent without much involvement of the State. Missionary John McDougall wrote about the Blackfeet in 1865 that "without the buffalo they would be helpless, and yet the whole nation did not own one. To look at them and to hear them, one would feel as if they were the most independent of all men; yet the fact was they were the most dependent among men."¹⁰ Government

³ William Doback, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo, 1821-1881," in *Canadian Environmental History: Essential Readings*, ed. David Freeland Duke (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 242.

⁴ Doback, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo," 243.

⁵ Doback, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo," 243.

⁶ Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 11.

⁷ Colin Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996), 122.

⁸ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 122.

⁹ David Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1994): 328.

¹⁰ Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 66.

officials understood that the most efficient way of solving their 'Indian problem' was to eradicate Indigenous peoples' primary subsistence source. Colonel Nelson A. Miles writes that, "this might seem like cruelty and wasteful extravagance but the buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress, and the decree had gone forth that they must both give way" – both the buffalo and the Indigenous people stood in the way of the plains truly opening up.¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Dodge recalled an interaction he had with a "high ranking officer" in the 1870s who said:

There's no two ways about it, either the buffalo or the Indian must go. Only when the Indian becomes absolutely dependent on us for his every need, will we be able to handle him. He's too independent with the buffalo. But if we kill the buffalo we conquer the Indian. It seems a more humane thing to kill the buffalo than the Indian, so the buffalo must go.¹²

The involvement of the American military in the eradication of the buffalo came in several forms. President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, and in 1869 the Transcontinental Railroad was completed. The creation of the railway played an integral role in the extermination of the buffalo (and of the Indigenous people who relied on the buffalo) due to the increased access it allowed, the transportation of goods, and the splitting of the great herd into Northern and Southern herds.¹³ The railway hired hunters to kill buffalo in large numbers to feed tracklayers, such as the famous William "Buffalo Bill" Cody who was hired in 1867.¹⁴ During his time working for the Union Pacific Railway, Cody was credited with killing 4,280 buffalo in less than eighteen months and was bestowed the nickname of "Buffalo Bill" which stuck with him for the rest of his career.¹⁵ There are accounts of hunters boarding the trains and firing at will from the locomotive at the great herds, though some military personnel like Lieutenant Colonel Albert Brackett devalued this form of hunting and compared it to hunting cattle.¹⁶

In 1868 General Sheridan encouraged 'sportsmen' of England and America to participate in a 'Grand Buffalo hunt' to wipe out the buffalo and the 'Indians' in a single sweep.¹⁷ The military organized buffalo hunts for high ranking visitors when they visited America. For example, a hunt took place in January 1872 for the Grand Duke Alexis third son of the Czar of Russia, and within five days the hunting party had slaughtered hundreds of buffalo.¹⁸ Often times, these hunters (nicknamed 'pot-hunters') took only the tongues and humps from the buffalo and left the rest of the carcass to decompose. In 1870, General John Pope requested twelve dozen buffalo tongues and sent Lieutenant Colonel Richard Dodge with a squad of marksmen to fulfill the order.¹⁹ It is said that "in three days they returned with a wagon filled with more tongues than were ordered. To kill over 144 buffalo, animals that could weigh over 2000

¹¹ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 333.

¹² Smits, "The Frontier Army," 332.

¹³ Valerius Geist, *Buffalo Nation: History and Legend of the North American Bison*, (Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 1996), 97.

¹⁴ Geist, *Buffalo Nation*, 81.

¹⁵ Geist, *Buffalo Nation*, 81.

¹⁶ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 326.

¹⁷ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 316.

¹⁸ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 316.

¹⁹ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 320.

pounds each, solely for their tongues, which weighed an average of two pounds apiece, was justifiable to those frontier soldiers who considered the herds expendable."²⁰ On another occasion in 1871 several prestigious businessmen visited Fort McPherson and the party killed over six hundred buffalo within a few days, utilizing .50 calibre shots, taking the tongues and choice cuts while leaving the rest to rot.²¹ John Palliser, whose memory is kept alive by places like the Palliser Hotel and who is credited with assisting in the opening up of the West for settlement, also engaged in extensive buffalo hunts in 1847 and '48 in Montana.²² There is some evidence that the Canadian North West Mounted Police also participated in these grand Buffalo Hunts, though there is not extensive literature on this topic. There are also accounts of the American military encouraging their soldiers to go out and hunt buffalo as target practice, en masse, because it "broke the monotony of the daily routines of the campaign or post, [and] provided good exercise for the men and horses."²³ The military, though not 'legally' involved in the beginning stages of the slaughter of the buffalo did have a significant role to play in encouraging sportsmen and other military personnel to indulge in mass hunts.

Though subsistence and sportsmen hunting damaged the herds, the real spike in the decimation of the buffalo did not occur until 1871 with the discovery of a new tanning practice to turn buffalo hides into useful leather. Buffalo leather was "in demand for the belting needed for the machinery of an expanding industrial complex" in both Europe and America.²⁴ With the presence of the railway, thousands of people made their way to the Great Plains to slaughter and skin buffalo for their hides, every hide worth between \$1 and \$3.²⁵ For every person assigned to shoot, two people were required to skin the animals. It is said that "the smell of death seemed to hang in the air on the 'firing range'".²⁶ Between 1872 and 1874 it is estimated that close to three million buffalo were slaughtered in Kansas alone. When they disappeared the hunters turned south towards Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico.²⁷ Luther Standing Bear, who grew up in a traditional Lakota way of life, recalls "I saw the bodies of hundreds of dead buffalo lying about, just wasting, and the odor was terrible" and that "we saw bale after bale of buffalo skins, all packed, ready for market. These people were taking away the source of the clothing and lodges that had been provided for us by our Creator, and they were letting our food lie on the plains to rot. They were to receive money for all this, while the Indians were to receive only abuse."²⁸ The buffalo who had been in slow decline for years were suddenly being killed in the thousands with their corpses left to rot on the plains. The number of hides sold to the I.G. Baker Company located at Fort MacLeod in the years 1874-1879 show the peak and decline of the availability of the buffalo. In 1874 the company marketed 250,000 hides while in 1877 they marketed only 30,000; in 1878 there were 12,797 hides and by 1879

²⁰ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 320.

²¹ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 316.

²² Grant MacEwan, *Buffalo: Sacred and Sacrificed*, (Edmonton: Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, 1995), 41.

²³ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 319.

²⁴ Tom McHugh, *The Time of the Buffalo*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1972), 253.

²⁵ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 326.

²⁶ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 59.

²⁷ Scott Taylor, "Buffalo Hunt: International Trade and the Virtual Extinction of the North American Bison," *The American Economic Review* 101, no.7 (2011): 3171.

²⁸ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 125.

the number had fallen to 5,764 hides.²⁹ It is evident that the American military under command of General Sheridan encouraged and enabled hide hunters to annihilate the buffalo to solve the 'Indian problem', though there has never been any military records endorsing the mass slaughter.³⁰ The southern herd was destroyed in the early 1870s and the northern herd disappeared between 1876 and 1883.³¹ Kiowas Elder, Old Lady Horse, remembered that:

The white men hired hunters to do nothing but kill the buffalo. Up and down the plains those men ranged, shooting sometimes as many as a hundred buffalo a day. Behind them came the skinners with their wagons. They piled the hides and bones into the wagons until they were full, and then took their loads to the new railroad stations that were being built, to be shipped east to the market. Sometimes there would be a pile of bones as high as a man, stretching a mile along the railroad track.³²



Figure 1 Buffalo Bones ready for loading on Canadian Pacific Railway Boxcar, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan³³

An aging Cree man is credited with saying that, "they took our land, they plundered our soil; they would have killed the last beaver if they could have found it; they destroyed the buffalo that was our food and took everything they could sell. They left only the bones, but wait and see what comes next; as soon

²⁹ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 63.

³⁰ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 334.

³¹ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 123.

³² Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 129.

³³ O.B. Buell, "Buffalo bones ready for loading on Canadian Pacific Railway boxcar, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan," photography (ca. 1887-1889), from The Glenbow Museum, *Archive Photographs*, JPEG files, File number NA-4967-10.

as they find out how to sell them, they'll be back to get the bones too".³⁴ Inevitably, they found a market for the bones. After the vast majority of buffalo were killed and their bodies had been left to rot on the prairies, all that remained was a great expanse of bones. It was discovered that bleached bones could be used in the manufacturing of phosphate fertilizers and in the creation of charcoal filters that were necessary for the refining of sugar.³⁵ The buffalo bone trade began in Canada around 1883, though it took hold in Kansas much earlier, when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was able to offer pick up spots for the bones from several collection points along the tracks.³⁶ Major collection points on the Canadian side were Regina (nicknamed 'Pile of Bones') and Moose Jaw at first, followed by Swift Current, Medicine Hat and Calgary.³⁷ Many Métis and homesteaders participated in the collection of the bones, brought by cart to the collection points to be exchanged for cash – in 1885 in Moose Jaw the price was \$7 per ton.³⁸ Bone gatherers would set fire to the prairie grass in early spring or late summer, leaving the bones clearly visible on the black earth allowing for easier pick up.³⁹ Peak years for the buffalo bone trade were between 1891 and 1892, during this time train freight cars in constant use could not keep up with the demand. Hundreds of thousands of skeletons were piled up on either side of the railway awaiting shipment and the most famous photos of piles of buffalo skulls were taken at the peak of the bone trade. Ultimately the bone trade only lasted around 10 years due to a finite amount of resources (the buffalo were almost extinct by this point) and changing industrial methods for resource extraction required different materials.⁴⁰

The policies put in place to eradicate the buffalo, though never explicitly made legal policy in America or Canada, were ultimately intended to fix the so called 'Indian problem'. Officials knew of the link between Indigenous Nations like the Arapahos, Assiniboines, Atsinas, Blackfoot, Cheyennes, Comanches, Crows, Kiowas and Sioux peoples and a dependency on the buffalo. The ultimate goal for the governments on both sides of the Medicine Line was to force Indigenous people to settle onto reserves and open up the plains for Settlers and agriculture. Indigenous people were to be contained and 'civilized'. General Sherman remarked that "the quickest way to compel the Indians to settle down to civilized life was to send ten regiments of soldiers to the plains, with orders to shoot buffaloes until they became too scarce to support the redskins."⁴¹ In the Canadian context, when the hide hunters were at their peak in the United States, the newly formed government attempted to extinguish Indigenous title and cede land through the implementation of the Numbered Treaties. In Treaty 7 territory, it is often remembered that the last buffalo were seen shortly after the signing of the Treaty on September 22, 1877. Annie Buffalo from the Piikani Blackfoot reserve recounts that "I did not know the buffalo, but I heard the stories from my Elders. They said that the buffalo disappeared shortly after the signing of the treaty... the old people said that the white people took away all the buffalo."⁴² To the government it appeared

³⁴ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 167.

³⁵ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 167.

³⁶ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 167.

³⁷ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 168.

³⁸ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 168.

³⁹ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 171.

⁴⁰ MacEwan, *Buffalo*, 171.

⁴¹ Smits, "The Frontier Army," 318.

⁴² Richard T. Price, "Interviews with Elders," in *The Spirit of the Alberta Indian Treaties*, 3rd ed., ed. Richard T. Price

that starving 'Indians' were also controllable 'Indians:' people came to the reserve to receive rations, but in 1884 a quarter of the Blackfeet died of starvation over the winter.⁴³ According to Crow Elder, Pretty Shield, once the buffalo were gone "sickness came, strange sickness that nobody knew about, when there was no meat".⁴⁴ Sitting Bull is credited with saying that "A cold wind blew across the prairie when the last buffalo fell – a death wind for my people."⁴⁵ Crow chief Plenty Coups stated that "when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anymore."⁴⁶

Fundamentally, the means by which the buffalo were slowly eradicated from the Great Plains profoundly influenced the lives of Indigenous peoples on the land and offers insight into Indigenous-Settler relations during the 19th century. Whether through the means of subsistence hunting, military involvement, sport hunting, or capitalistic ventures, the eradication of the buffalo on the plains was a devastating period in human history. The forced annihilation of 25 to 30 million animals in a few short decades wreaked havoc on Indigenous communities on both sides of the Medicine Line. An investigation into the reasons behind the disappearance of the buffalo from the plains offers a unique insight into the mindset of the American and Canadian governments in their dealings with Indigenous people and ultimately reveals their methodology to solve the 'Indian problem'.

(Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1999), 142.

⁴³ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 123.

⁴⁴ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 131.

⁴⁵ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 123.

⁴⁶ Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground*, 123.

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