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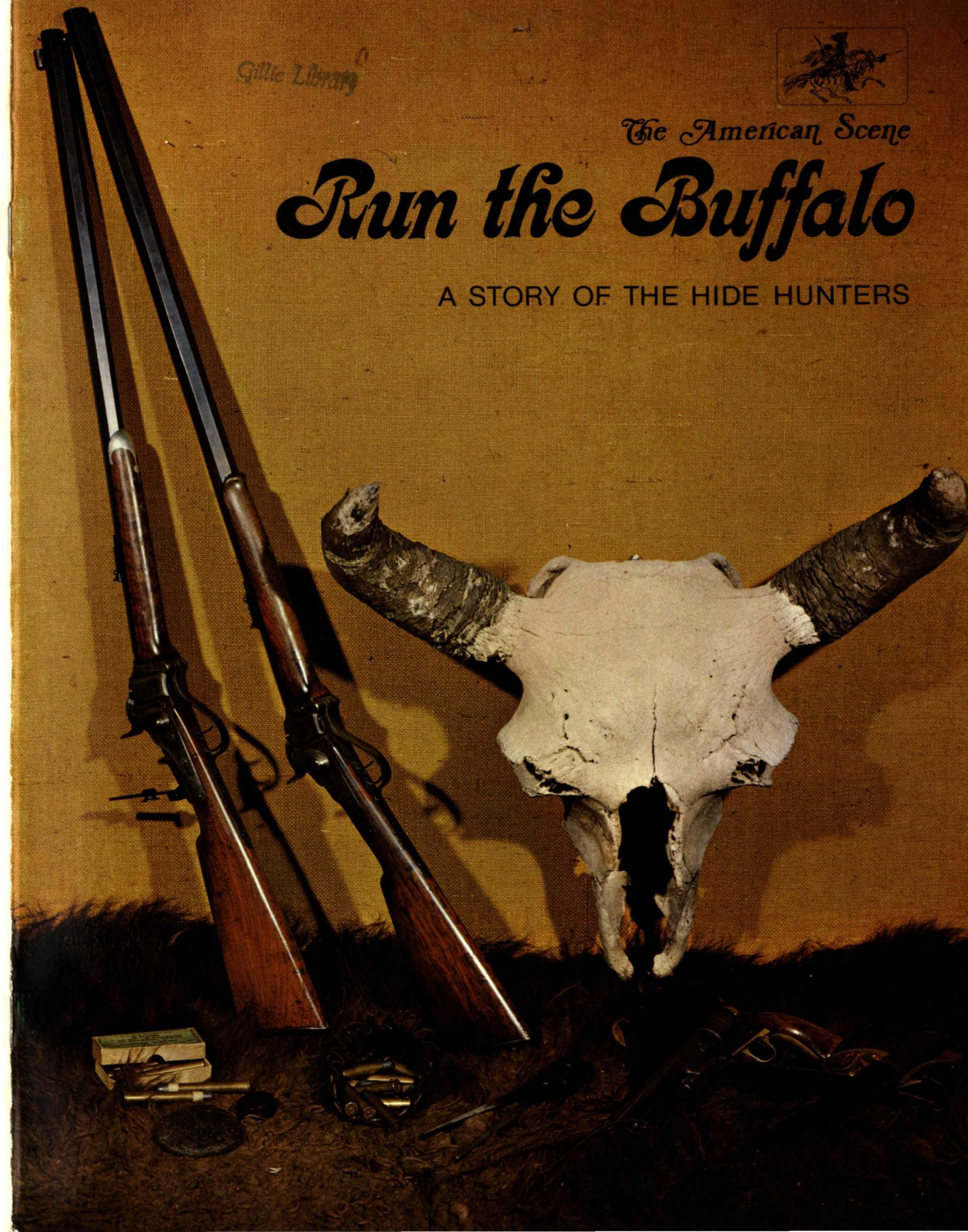
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The American Scene

# Run the Buffalo

A STORY OF THE HIDE HUNTERS





## The American Scene

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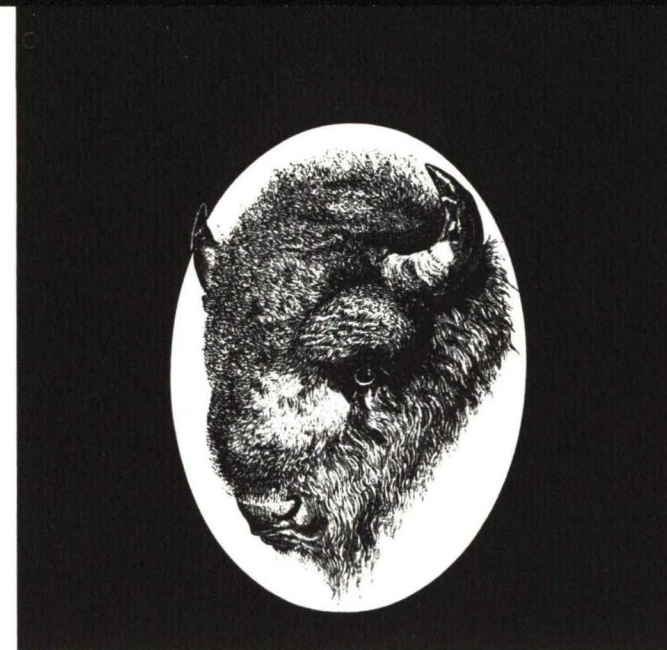
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# Run the Buffalo

## A STORY OF THE HIDE HUNTERS

"There were millions of buffalo and they didn't belong to anyone. After you killed them, what they brought was yours. They were walking gold pieces. I was young. I liked to hunt. I could shoot. I needed adventure and here it was. Wouldn't you have done the same thing if you had been in my place?"

In these words the late Frank H. Mayer of Fairplay, Colorado, last of the "buffalo runners" or professional hide hunters, condensed the reasons that led men, in just twelve years, 1871-83, to slaughter the enormous herds of buffalo that just a few short years before had numbered into the millions and to almost wipe out the species. All this was for the animal's hide, which was worth an average of \$2.50 during this period. It seems man's greed has always been at war with wild things and the wilderness itself, either unable or unwilling to co-exist. But while it was to man's discredit that the buffalo came to the brink of total annihilation it is also to man's credit that any remain.

Written by Paul A. Rossi, director of the Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art.

Illustrations for this article taken from the art and photograph files of the institute and the private collection of Paul Rossi.



With buffalo so closely associated with frontier life, it was common to have numerous incidents arise from this association. An example were these orders issued at Ft. Riley, Kansas:

"Members of the command will, when shooting at buffaloes on the parade ground, be careful not to fire in the direction of the commanding officers quarters."

Student officers will discontinue the practice of roping and riding buffaloes."

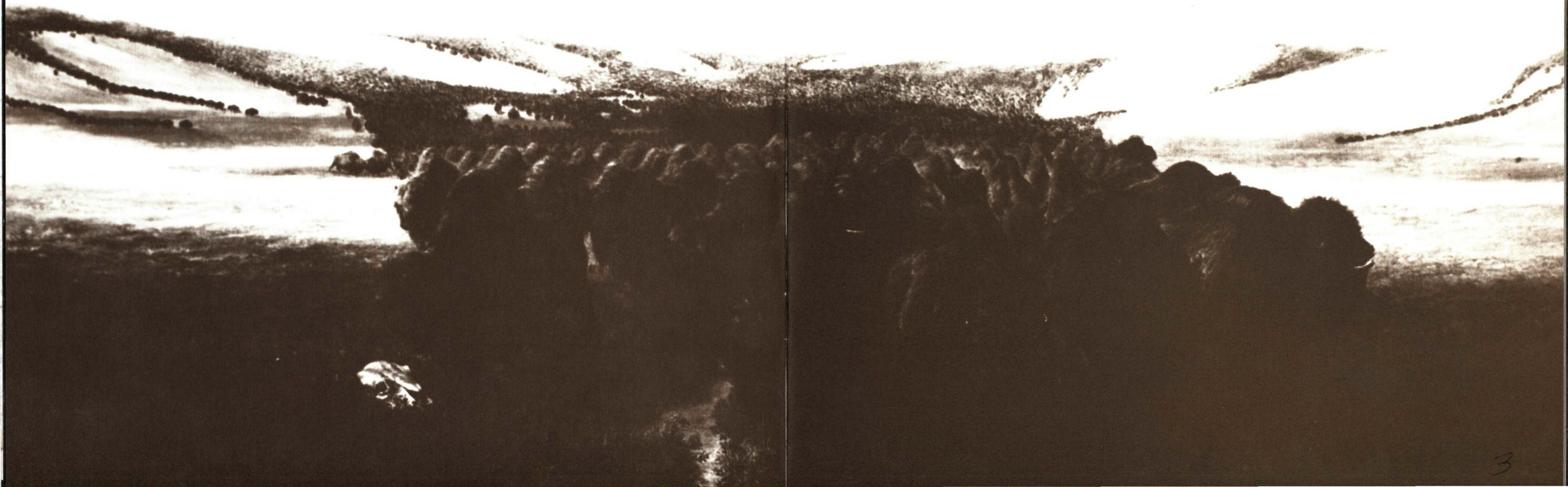
The Great Plains marked the edge of the wilderness in the 1860's. This was a vast, flat or rolling country, rising gradually to the Rockies, stretching north to the woodlands of the Saskatchewan River and south almost to the Rio Grande. It was laced with valleys along the rivers where there were trees. Up on the bluffs and high plains were miles of grassland. In the eastern portion lay the high grass lands, other regions were short grass country. Buffalo grass and grama, grey-green with rainfall, was brown and dormant in time of drought. This was a country of panoramic proportions: sky, clouds, and grass at times comparable to the sea, rippling grass like swelling waves. Here also were antelope, coyotes, wolves, deer, elk, bear, and numerous other small animals, birds, and reptiles.

In the summer it was a land of wild storms, rain, lightning, and hail. In winter there were biting savage winds, driven snow, and severe cold. It was also the land of the "chinook," the miracle snow-eating wind from the north. This was a land of wild rivers, flash floods, and calm serene beauty. A country where spring had to be heard as well as seen and smelled. One could hear the booming of prairie chickens on their courting grounds and the calls of fast-flying waterfowl signaling the return of thousands of migrating birds calling in the growing season, see fresh rains that brought a profusion of wild flowers and smells. Spring was a time for the grass to "green up." This was buffalo country, criss-crossed with countless buffalo trails and dotted by wallowing places.

In unbelievable numbers the buffalo once ranged as far east as Pennsylvania and Georgia but were extirpated from those regions by 1860. The buffalo was America's only native species of cattle. Early observers described them as "oxen" or "cows." Their behavior was strictly bovine in nature. Undisturbed, they moved slowly, cropping grass, whisking tails to ward off flies. Having eaten their fill, they would lie down and chew their cud. Scientifically this animal, the largest North American land mammal, was and is a bison. Buffalo belong to the African and Asian species of cattle. However, early American settlers named them "buffalo," and buffalo they remain.



"Herd on the Move," oil by William Jacob Hays, Gilcrease Collection.







A mature bull at six years old would stand up to six feet tall at the shoulder and weigh 1,800 to 2,000 pounds. Cows were generally somewhat smaller. The buffalo's coat was heavy around the head, forelegs, and shoulders while the fur of the hindquarters was thinner. In the early summer, coats were a dark brown but were bleached out to a dull brown on the back by the next spring. An albino was occasionally born. Approximately one in 4,000,000, the albino was considered great medicine by the Plains Indians.

While he was not an animal of great intelligence, the buffalo was ideally suited to his environment. The huge congregations were generally gatherings of small groups. The buffalo was a wanderer, going where the grass was good. Rainfall being unpredictable on the plains, a good grazing area in one season might not be so the next season. Contrary to popular belief, buffalo did not migrate in winter but would move to more favorable grazing land. In April the animals shed their winter coats, exposing almost bare hide to millions of insects. For relief they would find a marshy location and wallow. A location such as this might be used year after year by countless animals until it became a permanent feature of the land.

A good horse could overtake a buffalo in a short run but often would be left behind by the buffalo's rolling run at approximately thirty miles an hour over uneven terrain. Like all cattle, buffalo liked rubbing posts. They would use trees, boulders, and later, telegraph poles. This was a constant problem for telegraph linemen. The rutting season, or "running season," was in July and August. Then the animals would congregate and the normally calm bulls bellowed challenges to adversaries. The fights of the bulls normally amounted to a lot of ground pawing, shoving, butting, and bellowing, but seldom resulted in death.

Occasionally twin calves were born but generally each cow would have only one calf. When they were a few hours old, these hearty cinnamon-colored calves could run and follow

their mothers. The calves would stay with their mothers for about a year. Nature seemed to maintain a balance with those born each spring replacing the number lost during the previous year. Neither natural causes nor Indian hunting seemed to appreciably reduce the size of the herds. This unnoticed yearly cycle continued to contribute to a way of life which was in harmony with the character of the plains.

"The first day the Great Spirit planted by the waters, the great way tree whose boughs reached into the heavens, by way of which all creatures were sent down upon the land, and lastly a Kiowa man and woman who walked about the creation, but in the evening they returned to the great way tree, and there they met the buffalo, and the Great Spirit came down and said: 'Here are the buffalo. They will be your food, your life, but in the day you shall see them disappear from the face of the land, then know that the end of the Kiowa is near'. And the sun set."

This legend of the Kiowas' receiving the buffalo is but one of many held by the Plains tribes. The tradition materialized among them that buffalo were produced in countless numbers in a country under the ground and that each spring they swarmed out of cave-like exits, a gift of the Great Spirit to his children.

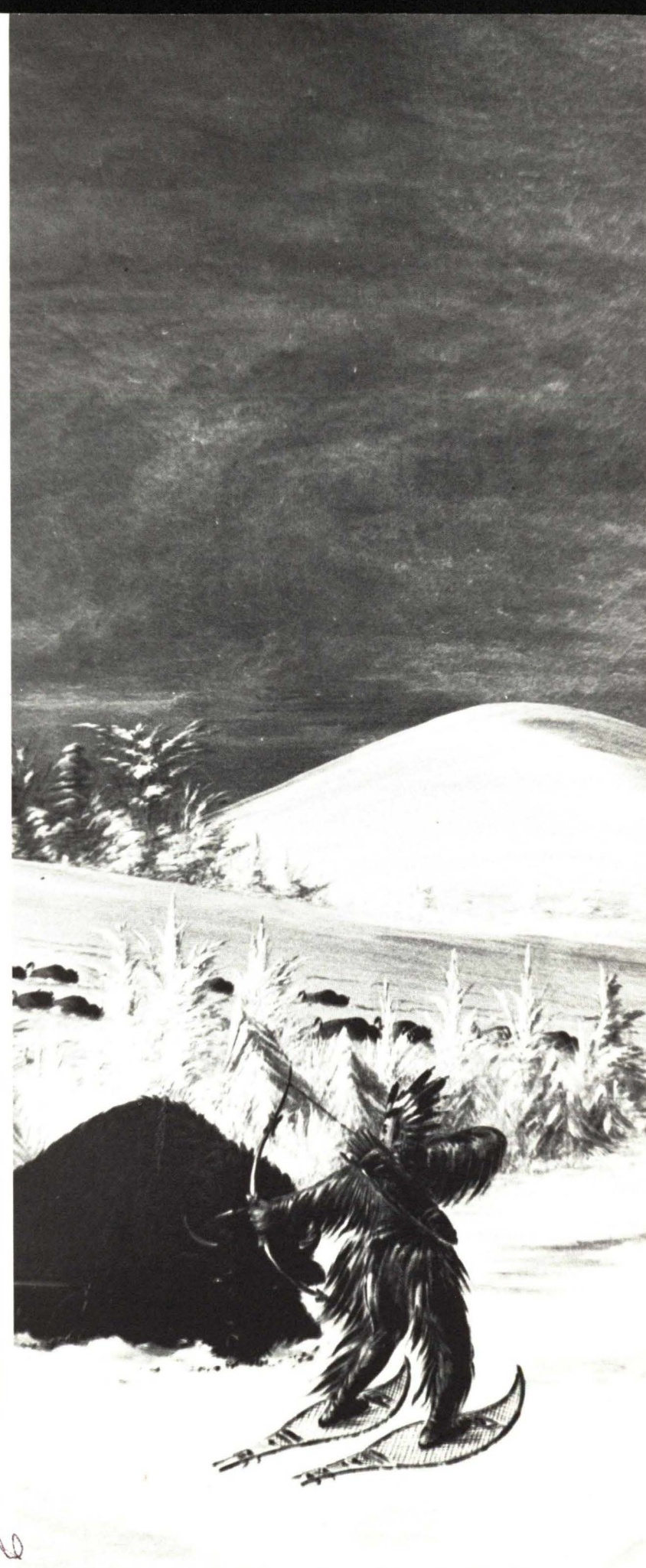
To the Plains Indian the buffalo meant a way of life, a culture, supplying food, clothing, shelter, and many necessities for living. The animal also played an integral part in their religion. Prior to the acquisition of the horse, the Plains Indian used various methods for hunting buffalo. The oldest method involved a large number of hunters stalking the animals, surrounding them and closing in. They would then use bows and spears to kill as many as possible. Another method employed by Indians was the use of an enclosed pen, a part of which was usually formed by a bluff, the other sides were formed by rocks, logs, and brush. Strength was not important as long as the animals could not see through the walls. Overlooking this corral-type enclosure, piles of rocks and clumps of brush

**A mature bison, the largest North American land mammal, would stand six feet tall at the shoulder and weigh 1,800 to 2,000 pounds.**

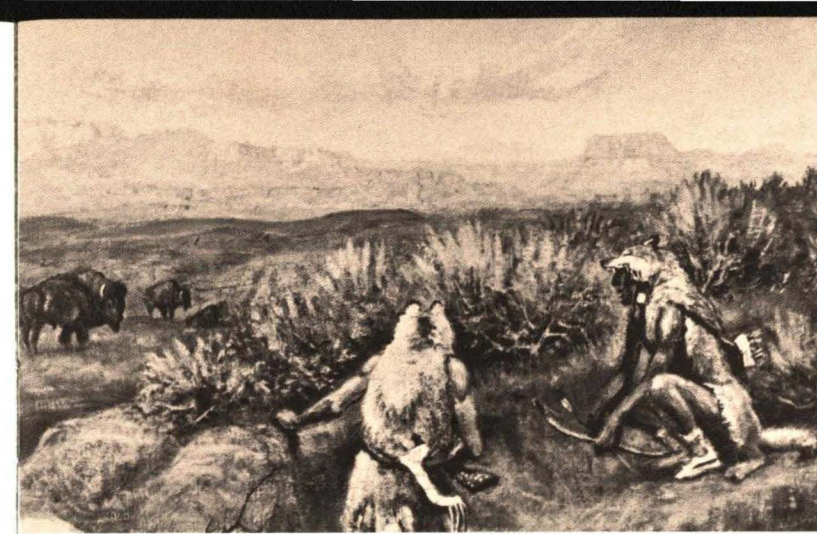




"The Buffalo Horse," bronze by Frederic Remington, Gilcrease Collection



"Hunting Buffalo on Snow Shoes," oil by George Catlin, Gilcrease Collection



"Human Wolves," oil by Olaf Seltzer, Gilcrease Collection



"Catlin the Artist Shooting Buffalos with Colt's Revolving Pistol," Lithograph—Gilcrease Library

"The Buffalo Runner," bronze by Charles M. Russell, Gilcrease Collection



were placed at short intervals extending out to form wings for a chute. Hunters would hide behind these and wait for the animals to be driven into the wings of the enclosure. They would then shout and wave robes, driving the animals into the enclosure where hunters would use knives, spears, and bows to slaughter them. Other tribes drove buffalo herds over a high bluff, often killing hundreds at a time. Those animals not killed by the fall were easily killed with weapons. Of all methods used by Indians to kill buffalo, this was undoubtedly the most wasteful. Captain Lewis wrote in his journal as the Lewis and Clark expedition was moving up the Missouri River and had just passed the mouth of the Judith River:

Today we passed on the star side the remains of a vast many mangled carcasses of buffalow which had been driven over a precipice of 120 feet by the Indians and perished; the water appeared to have washed away a part of this immense pile of slaughter and still there remained the fragments of at least a hundred carcasses that created a most horrid stench. In this manner the Indians of the Missouri destroy vast herds of buffalo at a stroke.

This account also shows that tribes continued to use some of the old methods of killing buffalo after acquisition of the horse.

Hunters also hunted on a small scale disguised under the skin of the common plains wolf. These animals were well known to the buffalo who showed no particular fear of them when seen singly or in small numbers. This trait allowed the disguised hunters to approach within easy range for use of a bow. In winter, northern tribes used snowshoes to trail buffalo and run them into deep snow drifts where they would flounder and be easily killed. With the coming of the horse, the life of the Plains Indian changed. Theirs truly became a horse culture. The changes also applied to their methods of hunting buffalo. A well trained buffalo horse was prized by any hunter of the plains tribes. These horses required few if any commands from a rider's hands, thus leaving the rider free to use weapons.



When the great American fur companies began to exploit the West, they found the western tribes eager to trade for buffalo robes as well as other furs. With the decline of the beaver fur trade in the late 1830's and early 1840's, there was a surge of interest in buffalo robes. In trade for robes, Indians were given blankets, guns, knives, beads, powder, and other goods. It was reported in 1843 by an official of the American Fur Co: "The total amount of robes annually traded by ourselves and others will not be found to differ much from the following statement:

American Fur Co. . . . 70,000 robes  
Hudson's Bay Co. . . . 10,000 robes  
All other companies . . 10,000 robes

This is an average annual return for the last eight or ten years."

Although it was not recognized at the time, this was the beginning of the devastation of the vast herds.

By 1863, the trade in buffalo robes with the Indians had grown to tremendous proportions, and these hides became a stable article of commerce. The hides were made into robes, overcoats, overshoes, mittens, and other articles. In 1865, building of the Union Pacific Railroad was begun. With its completion, the buffalo in the United States were divided into two herds. The northern herd was estimated at approximately one million and a half while the southern herd estimates ran close to five million animals. The northern herd ranged through the Powder River country into Canada; the southern herd was focused in the plains country around the Republican River between the South Platte and Arkansas Rivers with many ranging into Western Texas. With completion of the trans-Pacific railway, the way was open for other rail advancements. The Kansas-Pacific was crossing Kansas toward Denver, and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe was laying track along the well-established Santa Fe trail.

These railroads acted not only as a wedge dividing the great southern herd again, but also made the buffalo country easily accessible to hunters as well as providing convenient transportation for hides, meat and bones. And so the stage for the great slaughter or harvest was set. Some chose to shoot buffalo from the comfort and safety of a railcar or platform. Railroads anxious to promote busi-

ness on their new lines advertised with broadsides such as this:

### RAILWAY EXCURSION AND BUFFALO HUNT

An excursion train will leave Leavenworth at 8 am. and Lawrence at 10 am. for Sheridan, on Tuesday, October 27, 1868, and return on Friday. This train will stop at the principal stations both going and coming. Ample time will be had for a grand

### BUFFALO HUNT ON THE PLAINS.

Buffaloes are so numerous along the road that they are shot from the cars nearly every day. On our last excursion our party killed twenty buffaloes in a hunt of six hours. All passengers can have refreshments on the cars at reasonable prices. Tickets of round trip from Leavenworth, \$10.00.

In 1870 John W. Mooar from New York City settled at Fort Hays, Kansas. While there he became acquainted with James White who had a contract to supply meat to the post commissary. White was in the habit of throwing away the hides of the animals he killed. Mooar suggested they find a market for the hides and sent twenty-one to his brother in New York. Unable to sell them, Mooar's brother finally gave them to a tannery in Pennsylvania. After experimenting with the hides, the tannery contracted the Mooar brothers and White for two thousand hides at three and one-half dollars each. Other tanners, American and English, jumped on the wagon and the buffalo hide business went into full swing.

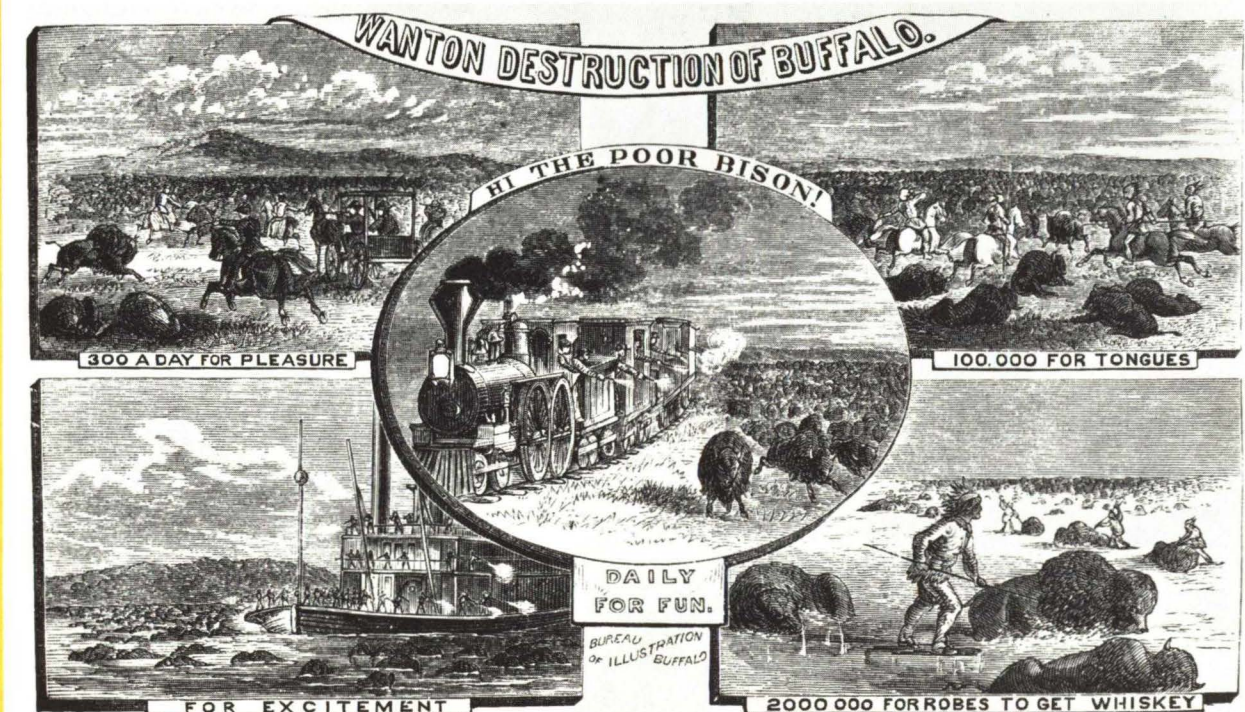
Hide hunting was looked upon as a get-rich-quick proposition. Bull hides brought an average of two dollars each. Cow and calf hides averaged twenty-five cents less. Salted tongues packed in barrels and the "mop" or long hair on top of the buffalo's head brought good side money. However, few hunters bothered with these but rather concentrated on taking as many hides as they could.

The majority of hides were made into buggy robes, coats, and other articles for warmth. "Summer hides," hides in poor condition taken during summer months, came into demand for leather. Many of these were used for machinery belting in America's fast growing industrial age. This added demand meant that hunting could be carried on the year round. There would be no time of immunity for the buffalo during the summer or rutting season. Therefore additional pressure was put on the herds. The largest buffalo tannery was built at Greeley, Colorado. Dodge City, Kansas, also developed as a major handling point for hides.

The "Great Harvest" attracted a multitude of types and characters to the buffalo range. When construction work on the Santa Fe was halted in 1872, hundreds of men were out of

work and stranded on the plains. Every man that could muster an outfit of wagons, guns, and supplies, or could get a stake for an outfit, became a hunter. In the fall and winter of 1872-73 there were more hunters on the plains than during any other period. The result was a glutting of the hide market and prices for hides dropped to an all time low. Hides sold for seventy-five cents each with meat bringing a half-cent a pound. This was enough to scare off many of the newcomers and prices gradually rose. As during any boom period, an unusual assortment of men became hunters. Frank Mayer described it this way:

"At the close of the Civil War there were thousands of young men who found peacetime pursuits too dull for their action-packed young lives. The frontier was a good substitute for war."



Pictures used in campaign for legislation of game laws to protect the buffalo.





*"Running Buffalo," oil by Charles M. Russell, Gilcrease Collection.*

The professional hunter did not actually "run buffalo," Indian style, riding up behind the animals and up along side them to shoot them, but rather fired from a stand and methodically shot them down. Although the running method was considered to be the sporting way to hunt the animals it was not profitable. It is not known who actually developed the method of hunting from a stand. It most likely evolved as a method rather than being the brain child of any one hunter.

From accounts of early travelers who crossed the buffalo country came stories of a solid mass of moving animals so great that it required hours to pass a given point. In

actuality the herds were broken up into small bands of 50 to 200 animals, coming together in larger herds only when traveling or stampeding. The small herd was not led by a magnificent young bull but rather by a sagacious old cow who, by her intelligence, made herself the leader.

The professional hunter used the small herd instinct and the blind following of the old cow by the herd to his advantage. After the hunter wounded or killed the leader the rest of the herd would mill around her, bellowing, pawing the ground and seemingly going mad. This peculiarity had nothing to

do with sorrow over the death of a fellow being. Primitive excitement produced by the strong scent of fresh blood is not uncommon among the bovine family and was common to stockmen handling the Texas longhorn cattle.

With the wind in his favor and concealed, the "buffalo runner" could methodically shoot down the entire herd and move on to another. This also gave the hunter the advantage of dropping the animals in close proximity to one another. Saving his "skinners" time in going from animal to animal proved to be the most profitable method. The professional hunter normally would set up his stand



*"Buffalo Bill," portrait in oil by William de la Montagne Cary, Gilcrease Collection.*

at approximately 200 or more yards. This might vary with the velocity of the wind. If the range were too close, the report of the heavy rifles used might cause the herd to stampede. A hunter would not normally kill all the animals he could but rather only as many as his skinners could handle. Fifty kills were not uncommon; sometimes as many as one hundred or more were reported. Since most professional runners developed into excellent marksmen, some could kill a number of buffalo with an equal number of cartridges. Wasting buffalo was never a concern to the runners, but wasting expensive ammunition was.



A typical "outfit" might consist of one shooter, two skinners, and a cook who also stretched the hides and tended the camp. Two wagons were common, a large one with up to twelve mules or oxen used to haul the hides, and a smaller wagon with possibly four mules was the camp wagon used to haul supplies and equipment. A large wagon would normally cost \$600 or more and a small one \$300 or more. With supplies, guns, a couple of saddle horses, and other necessities, \$2,000 or more might be required to put a good outfit on the range. Many went out with much less and inferior equipment. Profits from running buffalo were not always as high as one might suppose. Frank Mayer stated that 1874 was his best year on the buffalo ranges. His gross income account reads:

|                    |            |
|--------------------|------------|
| Hides .....        | \$3,020.00 |
| Meat .....         | 1,260.00   |
| Tongues .....      | 905.00     |
| Trophy heads ..... | 250.00     |
| TOTAL .....        | \$5,435.00 |

However, after expenses, his net income for the year was \$3,124. This was probably better than average. Very few runners became rich on the buffalo range.

As might be imagined the type of work a buffalo runner did and the conditions under which he performed turned the common runner's camp into something that would not have passed any sanitation inspection. A contemporary writer of the period described the average as such:

*In place of the buckskin suit of the mountain hunter, the buffalo hunter goes clad in a coarse dress of canvass, stiffened with blood*

*and grease. His hair often goes uncut and uncombed for months together and his hands are frequently unwashed for many days. The culinary apparatus of the whole party consists of a single large coffee pot, a "dutch oven," and a skillet, and the table set, of a tin cup to each man, and the latter vessel often consisting merely of a battered fruit can. Each man's hunting knife not only does duty in butchering the buffalo, but is the sole implement used in dispatching his food, supplying the places of spoon and fork*

The Sharps rifle, above, and the Remington, right, were generally considered the best choice by professional hide hunters for buffalo. They ranged from .40 to .50 calibre and varied in weight, length, cartridge types, sights and trim.

*as well as knife. The bill of fare consists of strong coffee, often without milk or sugar, "yeast-powder bread," and buffalo meat fried in buffalo tallow. When the meal is cooked, the party encircles the skillet; dip their bread in the fat, and eat their meat with their fingers. When bread fails, as often happens, "buffalo straight," or buffalo meat alone, affords them nourishing sustenance. Occasionally, however, the fare is varied with the addition of potatoes and canned fruits. They sleep generally in the open air, in winter as well as in summer, subjected to every inclemency of the weather. As may well be imagined, a buffalo hunter, at the end of the season, is by no means prepossessing in appearance, being, in addition to his filthy aspect, a paradise for hordes of nameless parasites. They are yet a rollicking set, and occasionally include men of intelligence who*

*formerly possessed an ordinary degree of refinement. Generally none are more conscious of their unfitness for civilized society than themselves, and after a few years of such free border-life they can hardly be induced to abandon it and resume the restraints of civilization.*

Probably the most important pieces of equipment used by the hunters were their guns. At the beginning of the hide hunting era, following the Civil War, the guns in use

powder was 120 grains and the lead slug weighed 550 grains. They were made in various weights, barrel lengths, cartridge types, sights, depth of rifling, and extra fancy engraving or trim to suit the particular shooter's preference. Weights ran from ten to sixteen pounds with the average Sharps, and somewhat lighter with the Remington. A good Sharps without a telescope sight would cost approximately \$100 to \$150.00.

Most hunters loaded their own ammunition. Factory loaded ammunition was expensive



on the buffalo ranges varied as much as the characters packing them. Old army rifles and carbines of all varieties were common: old Kentucky muzzle loaders, plains rifles, Springfield muskets, Spencers, Henrys, Winchester, and Remingtons to name a few. Some of these were heavy enough as to calibre but totally inadequate in accuracy.

With the true professionals the choice finally settled down to only two types of rifles, Remingtons and Sharps, with the Sharps generally more popular and considered the best. Rivalry was hot between the Remington and Sharps men. These rifles were both ideally suited for the job they were intended for. Both were made in various calibres for the buffalo trade, ranging from .40 to .50 calibre. One of the most popular rifles with the runners was the Sharps .45-120-550. This means the bore was .45/1000 in diameter, the load of black

and often hard to come by. They used black powder of the best quality, and often with the true professionals better quality English black powder was used. Many of the big Sharps were mounted with telescopic sights and set triggers. The set trigger could be adjusted so the slightest touch would set it off.

The heavy rifle and extreme power of the scopes, twenty power or more, necessitated the use of rest sticks in shooting. Shooting was normally done from a kneeling or sitting position. The prone position was not often used with the big bore guns. A gun fired close to the ground reverberated, causing more sound and increasing the chances of scaring or stampeding a herd.

Another small but important item carried by many runners was a glass vial of hydrocyanic acid attached to a .40 calibre cut-down case and covered with a .45 calibre case. This would be bitten into and swallowed if capture by Indians seemed certain. This death was preferred to the slow torturous one that would be theirs if captured. Indians developed a



special hatred for the hunters for obvious reasons.

The shooter was the boss and the elite of an outfit. He did the planning, brain work, the shooting, and took care of his guns. Most runners took half of the profits and divided the rest among the crew. However, some would deduct expenses and then divide the rest equally. Undoubtedly the most disagreeable job on a buffalo hunting outfit was that of the skinner. They often worked under a hot sun, fighting countless flies while wrestling 150-pound green hides. The most common method of skinning was to cut the hide the entire length from tail to chin and around the knee and hock joints. Some skinner tried pulling the hide off by staking the animal's head down to the ground and hitching a team of mules to the hide around the neck and yanking the hide off. This was successful at times but too often it damaged the hide. A good skinner would brag that he could skin an adult animal in five minutes. However, the average time would be quite a bit longer.

The ballad "The Buffalo Skinners" would leave little doubt that life on the buffalo range was enjoyable.

*Come all you jolly skimmers and listen to my song,  
There are not many verses, it will not detain you long;  
It's concerning some young fellows who did agree to go  
And spend one summer pleasantly on the range of the buffalo.  
'Twas in the town of Jacksboro in the spring of Sev'nty-three,  
A man by the name of Crego came stepping up to me,  
Saying, "How do you do, young fellow, and how would you like to go  
And spend one summer pleasantly on the range of the buffalo?"  
"It's me being out of employment," this to Crego I did say,  
"This going out on the buffalo range depends upon the pay.  
But if you will pay good wages and transportation, too,  
I think, sir, I would go with you to the range of the buffalo."  
"Yes, I will pay good wages, give transportation too,  
Provided you will go with me and stay the summer through;  
But if you should grow homesick, come back to Jacksboro,  
I won't pay transportation from the range of the buffalo."  
It's now our outfit was complete—seven able-bodied men,\*  
With navy six and needle gun—our troubles did begin;  
Our way it was a pleasant one, the route we had to go,  
Until we crossed Pease River on the range of the buffalo.  
It's now we've crossed Pease River, our troubles have begun.  
The first damned tail I went to rip, Christ! how I cut my thumb!  
While skinning the damned old stinkers our lives they had no show,  
For the Indians watched to pick us off while skinning the buffalo.  
He fed us on such sorry chuck I wished myself most dead,  
It was old jerked beef, croton coffee, and sour bread.  
Pease River's as salty as hell fire, the water I could never go—  
O God! I wished I had never come to the range of the buffalo.*

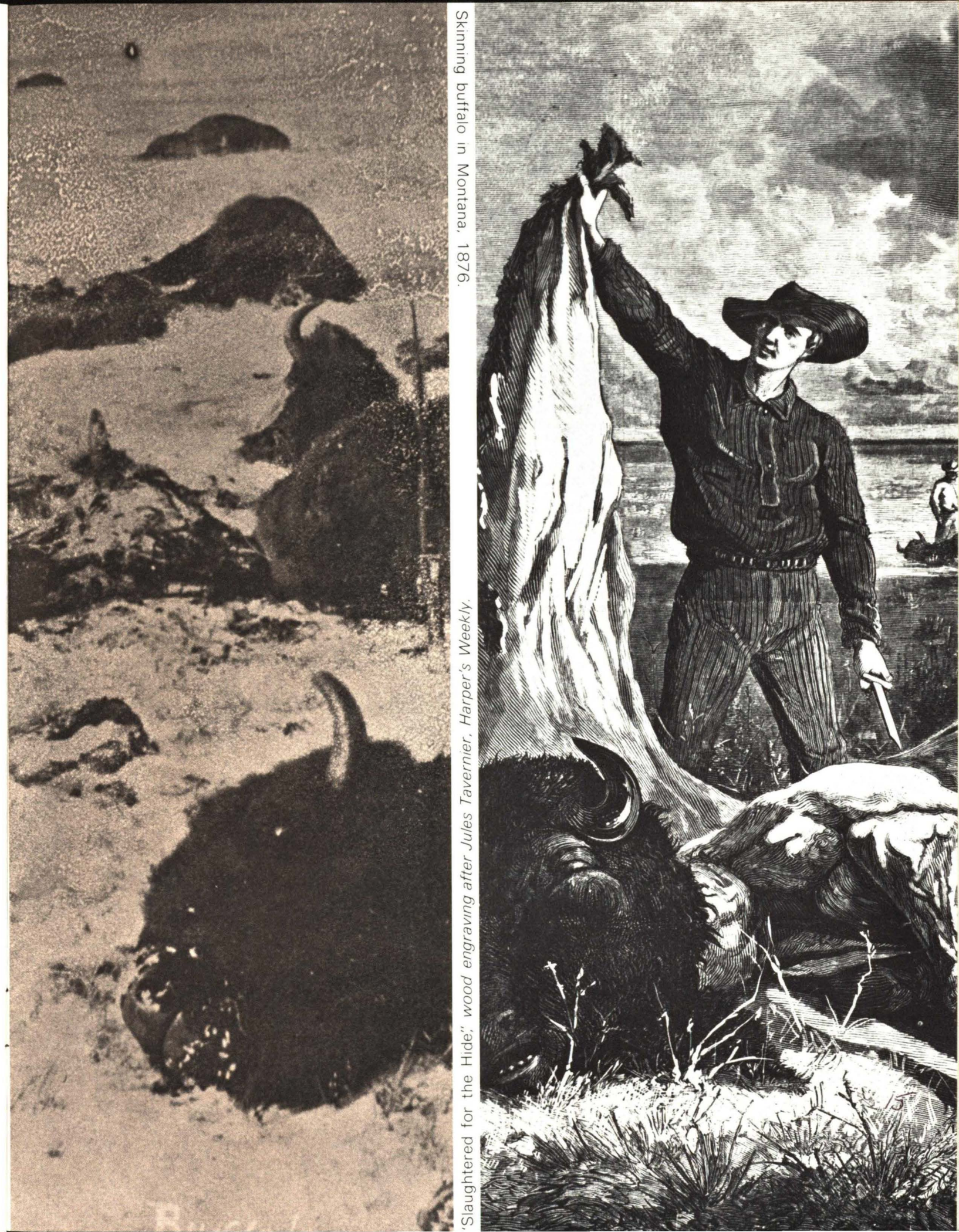
*Our meat it was buffalo hump and iron wedge bread,  
And all we had to sleep on was a buffalo robe for a bed;  
The fleas and graybacks worked on us, O boys, it was not slow,  
I'll tell you there's no worse hell on earth than the range of the buffalo.  
Our hearts were cased with buffalo hocks, our souls were  
cased with steel,  
And the hardships of that summer would nearly make us reel.  
While skinning the damned old stinkers our lives they had no show,  
For the Indians waited to pick us off on the hills of Mexico.  
The season being near over, old Crego he did say  
The crowd had been extravagant, was in debt to him that day.  
We coaxed him and we begged him and still it was no go—  
We left old Crego's bones to bleach on the range of the buffalo.  
Oh, it's now we've crossed Pease River and homeward we are bound,  
No more in that hell-fired country shall ever we be found.  
Go home to our wives and sweethearts, tell others not to go,  
For God's forsaken the buffalo range and the damned old buffalo.*

*\*Two to kill, four to skin, and one to cook.*

Caring for the hides was a somewhat simple job. After they were taken back to camp they were pegged down, flesh side up. They were left to dry a few days and then loaded flat or rolled lengthwise and tied into bundles. When the outfit had gotten a full load of hides, they were taken to the nearest market.

Life in a buffalo camp followed somewhat of a routine. Up before daylight, breakfast, the runner would then go out to "work the herd" which he had scouted the day before. Moving close to the herd upwind, the hunter would try to locate some protection, a wallow, tall grass, soapweed or some other cover. At about 300 yards he would set up his stand. A good horse was trained to lie down especially in Indian country where he might be spotted. When dawn came, the shooting began. Afterwards the entire outfit was moved to the site of the kill while the skinner worked. Afternoon was usually spent by the runner in scouting the country for more animals. Evenings were spent in cleaning rifles, loading ammunition, sharpening tools, and making other preparations for the next day's hunt. The lives of the professional runner and his crew could be boring, but not too uncommon were brief incidents which made up for the longer periods of boredom. Storms, floods, and other potentially dangerous natural occurrences were taken in stride. Attack by hostile Indians was an everyday possibility. Buffalo stampedes were not uncommon.

On October 28, 1867, a treaty was made with the major plains tribes of the Southwest at Medicine Lodge, Kansas. The major complaint by the tribes at this meeting was



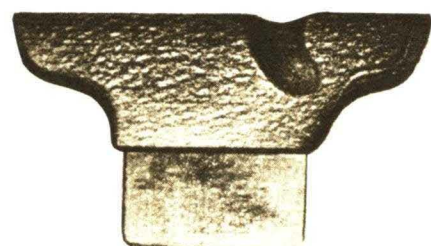
Skinner skinning buffalo in Montana, 1876.

"Slaughtered for the Hide," wood engraving after Jules Tavernier, Harper's Weekly.



# Buffalo Hunters Tools.

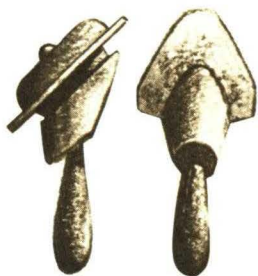
1870s



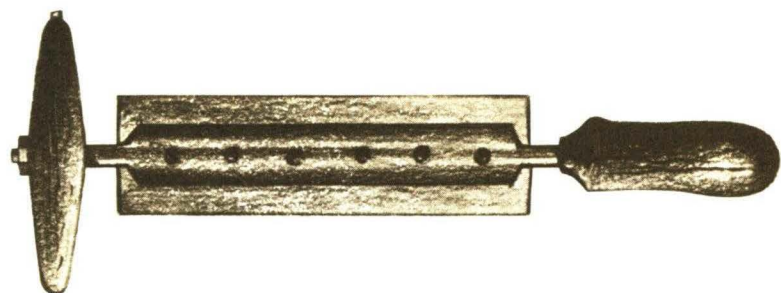
SCRAPER 9"



CUT DOWN 40 CAL.  
SHARPS CASE FOR  
GLASS VIAL TO  
HOLD HYDROCYANIC ACID 3"



SHAVER 7"



FLESHER (SHAVER) 18"



BUTCHER  
KNIFE 13"



SKINNING  
KNIFE 11"

against the destruction of buffalo in the region. A treaty was agreed upon with the main point being that the Indians would stay south of the Arkansas River and that white hunters would not be allowed in this region.

By 1874 buffalo became scarce on the ranges north of the Arkansas River, and hunters began to eye the forbidden ranges to the south. In March of 1874 a party left Dodge City headed south. They crossed the Arkansas, went down through no-man's-land into Texas to the old Adobe Walls, and from there up the valley to a stream called East Adobe Walls Creek where a main camp was established. A number of buildings were erected of sod. Less than a dozen men would live there. Other occasional occupants were buffalo hunters who used the camp as a supply depot and a place to bring hides.

On June 26, 1874, there were twenty-eight men at the new townsite of Adobe Walls. Early the following morning they were attacked by a party of approximately seven hundred Indians led by the famous Comanche chief, Quanah Parker. The hunters had been up before sunrise and so were not caught by surprise. They grabbed their weapons and used three of the largest buildings from which to defend themselves. By four in the afternoon, the hottest part of the battle was over. The hunters had lost the two Shadler brothers who were freighters contracted to freight hides to Dodge City. They were caught asleep in their wagons on the first charge and killed. Only one of the hunters was killed. The next day a few Indians were seen but they stayed beyond rifle range. Again on the third day, Indians appeared on a bluff on the other side of Adobe Walls Creek. It was at this time that Billy Dixon, a well-known buffalo runner, made his famous shot which became legendary far beyond the buffalo ranges. Dixon was considered an excellent marksman. Taking careful aim with his big Sharps "50," he killed one of the Indians. The distance was later paced off and found to be 1,317 yards or three-fourths of a mile. Regardless of the fight put up by the hunters, the battle of Adobe Walls Creek ended the use of the community and curtailed hunting in the area for the time. Following rescue of the buffalo hunters by a troop of cavalry, the Indians burned the buildings.

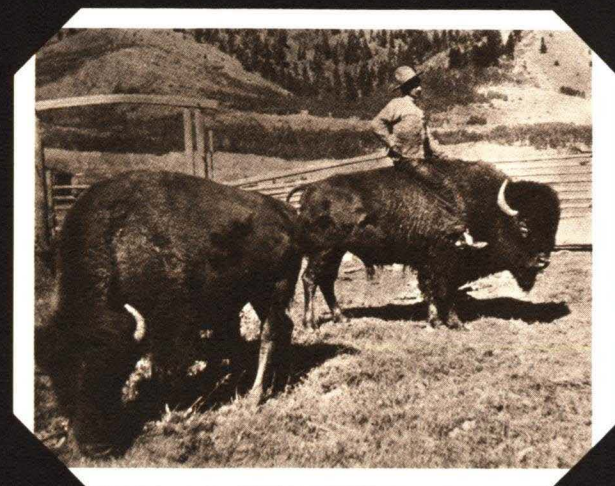
During the winter of 1877-78, the final

slaughter of the southern herd occurred. A few surviving buffalo moved south to the Llano Estacado. Some stayed in the southwest corner of Kansas until 1879 when the last buffalo was killed in that state. The impossible was happening. Few if any of the runners actually believed that "Old Buff" would or could be exterminated although it had been discussed in some circles. In fact, if not officially sanctioned, destruction of the herds was encouraged by many army men on the frontier. Ammunition could be had in great quantities by hunters merely asking for it at virtually any army post in buffalo country. Many military and non-military people in the country shared the belief that only with the annihilation of the buffalo would the Plains Indian be subjected. Destroy the enemy's commissary at its source, and you destroy his ability to wage war. Others felt that either the Indian or the buffalo had to be destroyed; and it was a lot more humane to annihilate the buffalo.

During the 1875 session of the Texas legislature at Austin, a bill was presented to enact laws protecting the buffalo. General Philip Sheridan who commanded the military department in the southwest became aware of the bill's intent and appeared before the joint assembly of the house and senate. He suggested that instead of their being sentimental regarding the extermination of the buffalo, they should reward the hunters by awarding them bronze medals with a dead buffalo represented on one side and a distraught Indian on the other. Claiming that the hunters had done more to settle the Indian question than the army had accomplished in thirty years, "Let them kill, skin, and sell until the buffalo is exterminated, as it is the only way to bring about a lasting peace and allow civilization to advance." His appearance must have had effect. No action was taken on the proposed bill.

In Washington, Representative Fort of Illinois introduced a bill to protect the buffalo. He stated that he was not in favor of civilizing the Indian by starving him, by destroying the means which God provided him for support. This bill was passed by the House and ratified by the Senate. It was sent to President U. S. Grant where it died a quiet death. In his annual report for 1873, the Secretary of the Interior stated that serious com-





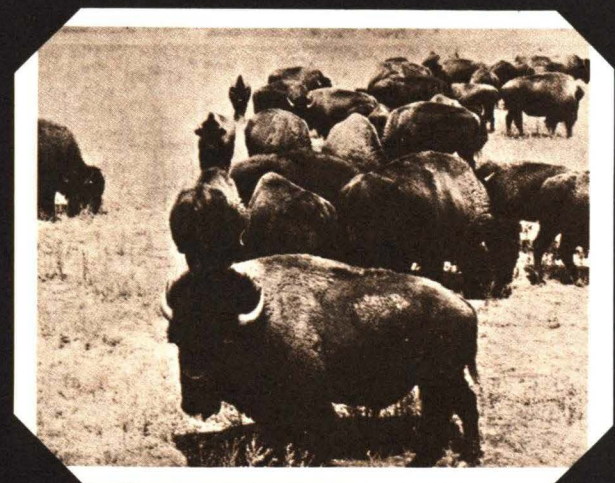
↑ Dick Rock, Idaho Ranchman riding bull he raised from a calf. Same buffalo later charged and killed Rock.

Hide Hunters' Kill (Montana in 1870's)



Buffalo Hide Hunting, Wyo. 1876.

Hide Hunting, Wyo. 1870



plaints had been made to the department concerning the presence of buffalo hunters on Indian reservations. While he thought that possibly something should be done about it he also stated, "I would not seriously regret the total disappearance of the buffalo from our western prairies, in its effect upon the Indians, regarding it rather as a means of hastening their sense of dependence upon the products of the soil and their own labors."

This sentiment was shared by many living on the great plains. Easterners far removed from depredations by Indians viewed them with a Fenimore Cooper eye. Cattlemen, making a living on the plains, saw that the buffalo competed with cattle for grass. This left little doubt as to who had to go. Still the legal fight to end the slaughter was carried on. R. C. McCormick of Arizona was the first to introduce a bill to protect the buffalo. This bill proposed to make it unlawful for anyone to kill the buffalo on public lands for any other reason but for food or preserving the skin. This bill was ordered printed and then promptly forgotten. Other bills were proposed and forgotten or beaten down. One official in the Department of the Interior made this statement regarding a bill that would protect the buffalo:

"The bill is utterly worthless in point of fact. There is no law which human hands can write, there is no law which a Congress of men can enact, that will stay the appearance of these wild animals before civilization. They eat the grass; they trample upon the plains. They are as uncivilized as the Indian."

The course America had taken left no room for the buffalo who were unable to adjust to a settled country which could not be domesticated. Nor would the Plains Indian be able to survive in his old environment next to white man's civilization. It seemed both forms of life would have to go. The buffalo had no means to fight the inevitable. The Indian did and as a result the plains remained in a blood bath for years to come. The verbal argument set out by the Indian was a difficult one to face. Little Robe, the well-known Cheyenne chief, answered an Indian agent who had censured him for allowing his young men to kill a settler's steer.

"Your people make big talk, and sometimes make war, if an Indian kills a white

man's ox to keep his wife and children from starving; what do you think my people ought to say when they themselves see their cattle killed by your race when they are not hungry?"

Following destruction of the southern herd, many hunters saw the handwriting on the wall and left the range. Others turned their attention to the north. There, conditions remained somewhat better. Railroads had, as yet, not penetrated the north country. This would, however, soon change. In the meantime the slaughter continued on both sides of the Yellowstone River. Thousands of hides piled up ready for shipping. Fort Benton, Montana, alone sent 80,000 hides to market.

In 1880 with the construction of the Northern Pacific railroad the "harvest" went into full swing. The road extended its line from Bismarck westward through the heart of the northern buffalo range. Following the defeat of Custer and the Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn in 1876, the Indians' opposition began to wane, leaving the country open to the buffalo runners. Hides of the northern buffalo were worth far more than the southern animals. Due to the colder climate the hides were more luxurious. By 1883, few buffalo were left on the northern ranges. For all practical purposes this was the end of the hide hunting period.

Only small remnants of the once estimated 60,000,000 animals remained in 1889. Twenty-five to thirty buffalo were seen on the desolate east side of the Red Desert Country in Wyoming, and those were shortly killed. These, along with a few individual animals and those small herds in the confines of Yellowstone National Park, were the last buffalo of the Northern herd.

In 1897 a small herd ranged in Lost Park, Park County, Colorado, where they were protected by ranchers operating in that country. However, even these were finally killed by vandals in February, 1897. These were believed to be the last wild buffalo in the United States.

As far back as the 1860's, portions of the plains were fairly white with bleached bones of buffalo. For a period of time it seemed as though no use for the miles of bones could be found, but eventually these also were used. A regular trade was established in buffalo bones and another breed of character appeared on the ranges. The "bone picker"



with his loaded wagons headed for the same shipping points that handled hides. Most were sold to carbon works where fresh bones were used in refining sugar, and older carcasses were ground into fertilizer. Horns were used in making combs and buttons. Many a destitute homesteader on the plains kept his meager home together by selling and trading buffalo bones.

*Springtime outran the furrowings of raw sod;  
There must be bread' in August the bone pickers  
Go harvesting the prairie, dragging out—  
Rich roof for the hundred-legs and scurrying beetles—  
From the fingers of the grass and spiderweb  
Long curving rib and broad white shoulder-blade.*

It would not be many years before a buffalo skull would become a collector's item.

Almost since man's first contact with the buffalo a select few gave thought to his domestication and use. Many who voiced loudly that they should and could be domesticated confused subjugation with domestication. The two do not always go hand in hand. There are many recorded instances where buffalo were raised from calves and broken to the yoke. Even after extensive time and training the animals would always show a mind of their own. A western rancher remarking about a neighbor's trained buffalo stated, "Oh Yeah, Old Harry hitches 'em up, and they take him right where they damned well please."

While the buffalo remained an unpredictable animal, many tragedies occurred through people's ignorance in handling them. A prime example of this was the case of Dick Rock, an Idaho ranchman, who had raised a buffalo bull from the time he was a calf. The animal became so docile that it allowed Rock to ride him within the corral. One day with no warning, the buffalo charged Rock and killed him. The animal had to be shot before Rock's body could be removed from the corral.

Charles Goodnight, the popular Texas and Colorado rancher, maintained a private herd of buffalo on his ranch. Don H. Biggers, author, tells of an incident that took place on the Goodnight ranch. Biggers was climbing over the high fence that surrounded the pasture where buffalo were kept. On seeing him, Goodnight asked where he was going and got the reply that he just thought he would take a walk and see the buffalo. Goodnight replied that if he would wait he would be glad to get a buggy and drive him out. Biggers replied, "Never mind colonel, I don't

want to put you to so much trouble."

"It won't be nearly so much trouble to haul you out there as it would be to locate the pieces, haul you back, dig a grave, go after the coroner, hold an inquest, and notify your folks."

Colonel Charles J. Jones (Buffalo Jones), a successful buffalo runner himself, was uppermost of those who worked to domesticate the buffalo. He was also instrumental in his later years in development of the Yellowstone Park herd. For some years Jones experimented with the cross-breeding of buffalo and domestic cattle or "cattalo."

According to William T. Hornaday, there remained only 635 wild buffalo in the whole of North America in 1889. Compare this figure with his estimate of 60,000,000 at the end of the Civil War.

The Yellowstone herd was virtually exterminated by poachers when in May, 1894, the U.S. Government finally took action. The law, signed by President Grover Cleveland, provided a fine of \$1,000 or imprisonment for anyone found guilty of killing buffalo. This was the first protection given the buffalo by the United States government.

Through this belated protection the buffalo was saved from total extermination. In the past seventy-five years their numbers have increased to a point where they must occasionally be "thinned out" to prevent overgrazing. In a few instances sportsmen can even hunt them.

The "Buffalo runner" has taken his place among the characters of the old west. Like many others he did not come to stay but rather took only what he wanted, then left. Most certainly he was not a builder, yet he made way for the stockman and was instrumental in bringing about the submission of the Plains Indian. His era was a brief one, a dozen years, but staggering in its impact on the affected region.

Frank Mayer summed it up this way: "Maybe we runners served a purpose in wiping out the buffalo. Maybe it was our ruthless harvesting of him that pushed the control of the Indian by a decade or more. Maybe we were just a greedy bunch who wanted to get ours, and to hell with posterity, if we thought of it at all. To hell with the buffalo, and anyone else, just so we kept our money pouches filled and our scalps on. I think maybe that is the way it was."



"The Old Bone Picker of the Plains" From a sketch by R. F. Zogbaum, 1887.

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