Extermination of the Bison

Bison hides stacked for shipment. Photo Credit: J. Peaco; Courtesy of NPS

While early European travelers to the region disapproved of the traditional Native American practice of slaughtering small herds in their entirety, nothing would compare to the widespread decimation of plains bison that was soon to follow at the hands of both European and Native Americans. In 1832, George Catlin recognized that the bison population of the plains was headed toward destruction, stating that "so rapidly wasting from the world, that its species (bison) must soon be extinguished" (Isenberg, 2000). He urged the U.S. government to set aside land as a reserve in order to preserve the bison, but his pleas fell on deaf ears (Isenberg, 2000). In 1830, members of the American Fur Company located at Fort Union, near the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers, were able to initiate trading with the Blackfeet, thereby bringing the region that is now Montana into the heart of the Missouri River fur trade (Foster, 2006). As herds were slaughtered in the east, hunters traveled west to harvest the vast herds that occupied the northern range. In 1858, Fort Benton, located in Chouteau County, shipped an estimated 20,000 bison robes to the eastern markets (Foster, 2006). In 1875, hunters in southeastern Montana, northeastern Wyoming, and western North Dakota were reported to have shipped between 50,000 and 100,000 hides (Gard, 1968). Hide hunting was seen as an opportunity to quickly prosper, and as the demand grew it attracted less-skilled hunters, thus increasing the amount of bison that were wasted (Krech III, 1999).

The bison population was at risk from a number of compounding factors including overhunting by both Europeans and Native Americans for hides, robes, tongues, and meat; regional drought; introduced bovine disease; and competition for range resources and water from domestic livestock and wild horses (Hornaday, 1889; Geist, 1996; Krech III, 1999; Isenberg, 2000). Settlers had begun raising cattle and domestic sheep in Montana in the 1850s and with their introduction came exotic livestock diseases, which infected the native wildlife (Picton and Lonner, 2008).

By the mid-1850s buffalo robes were increasing in popularity in the eastern markets, creating a high demand. Bison robes were created using the tanned hides of bison cows, which resulted in increased cow mortality and reduced calf production (Haynes, 1998). The rapid growth of industry in North America led to a high demand for leather drive belts for industrial machinery. Tanners began to soak hides in a strong lime solution to create elastic leather for belts. This created a demand for bison hides year-round, with

summer skins preferred for tanning and winter skins for robes (Branch, 1929; Krech III, 1999; Franke, 2005).

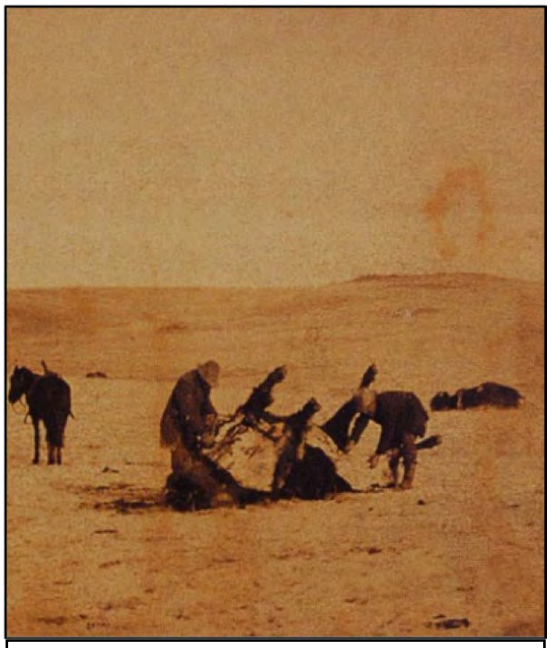
Bison and the Native Americans who depended on them were viewed as an impediment to the settlement of the West. President Ulysses Grant's Secretary of the Interior, Columbus Delano, stated in 1873 that "the civilization of the Indian is impossible while the buffalo remains upon the plains" (Geist, 1996). The U.S. government supported the slaughter of the bison as a means to subjugate the Native American tribes through starvation and the destruction of the basis of their barter system (McHugh, 1972; Geist, 1996; Danz, 1997; Isenberg, 2000; Gates et al., 2010). Mary Foreman Kelley, a resident of Deer Lodge who traveled the Bozeman Trail in 1864, reminisced in 1920 that "the buffalo supplied all his (Native Americans) wants—General Sherman well knew if he has the buffalo exterminated it would stop all Indian wars" (Doyle, 2000, pp. 336).

European-Americans were not the only ones to utilize the destruction of the bison as a means to reduce the strength of an enemy. While attempting to defeat the Sioux in 1867, General George Crook worried that the wanton slaughter of bison by his allies the Crow and the Shoshone would alert the Sioux to their presence. The Crow and Shoshone, however, stated that it was "better kill buffalo than have him feed the Sioux" (Finerty, 1994, pp. 78; Franke, 2005).

Within Montana the confinement of Native Americans to their respective reservations was not as strictly enforced as it was elsewhere in the United States, due to the recognition that Native Americans needed to continue to find buffalo in order to prevent starvation (Farr, 2004). The U.S. Army was unable to keep the tribes from leaving their reservations to pursue bison; therefore to reduce the conflict between the tribes and settlers, the army began to escort tribes to their traditional hunting grounds (Farr, 2004). General Sherman recognized that the treaty Native Americans needed to be able to hunt bison to support themselves, stating, "they must go for buffalo or starve" (Farr, 2004, pp. 42). "The army, by participating in the development of permits and escorts, not only tolerated, but stood by the treaty Indians, actually enabling and promoting off-reservation buffalo hunting to the consternation of the territorial newspapermen, settlers, miners, and stockmen" (Farr, 2004, pp. 42). Once the bison were exterminated, "destitution settled over the reservations and the northern plains like a fog. Indians could not find their way" (Farr, 2004, pp. 43). Following the extermination of bison in Montana between 1883 and 1884, 600 Blackfeet perished due to starvation (McHugh, 1972). "White Calf, one of the leaders of the southern Piegans, remembered the Blackfeet wandering around not knowing where they were going or where they were" (Farr, 2004, pp. 43).

In order to promulgate the settlement of the West, the U.S. government promoted hide hunting by providing support and protection for the railroads (Geist, 1996). The spread of the railroad into the western regions allowed the bison resource to be more economically and efficiently extracted to the eastern U.S. and European markets, where the demand for hides and robes was insatiable (Geist, 1996). In 1881, the Northern Pacific Railroad expanded across the plains of Montana, first to Glendive, and then to Miles City. With the railroad came an increase in the slaughter of Montana's bison herds (Hornaday,

1889; McHugh, 1972). Reports indicate that in 1881 an estimated 200,000 hides were shipped out of the large triangle formed by the Missouri, the Musselshell, and the Yellowstone Rivers (Gard, 1968). By 1882, there were over 5,000 bison hunters and skinners on the northern range. Taking note of their operations, one army lieutenant described "a cordon of camps, from the Upper Missouri, where it bends to the west, stretching towards the setting sun as far as the dividing line of Idaho, completely blocking the great ranges of the Milk River, the Musselshell, Yellowstone, and the Marias, and rendering it impossible for scarcely a single bison to escape . . ." (McHugh, 1972, pp. 277–78).



Skinning of a bison. PHOTOGRAPH BY L. A. HUFFMAN; FROM THE COLLECTION OF GENE AND BEV ALLEN

The U.S. government was reported to have also supported the bison hunting by providing free ammunition to bison hunters (Dary, 1989). The support was unofficial, but Dary (1989) notes that Mayer, a buffalo hunter, recalled that "the army officers in charge of plains operations encouraged the slaughter of buffalo in every possible way . . . It consisted of ammunition, free ammunition, all that you could use, all you wanted, more than you needed" (pp. 128).

Huge profit could be made through the harvesting of bison, and hunters and skinners flocked to the region to gain their share of the wealth. The bison hunters were incredibly efficient at their task. Punke (2007) notes that barring a misplaced shot, the number of buffalo that a skilled runner (hunter) could harvest in a stand was limited primarily by the capabilities of his skinners" (pp. 66). "We never killed all the buff we could get," remembered Frank Mayer, "but only as many as our skinners could handle." In his brutally blunt fashion, Mayer explained the governing economics: "killing more than we could use would waste buff, which wasn't important; it also would waste ammunition, which was" (Punke, 2007, pp. 66).

In Montana, Vic Smith is reported to have shot 107 bison in a single stand and boasted that he harvested 5,000 hides in one season (Gard, 1968). The tactic that experienced hide hunters like Smith utilized was called "tranquilizing" or "mesmerizing" a herd. It involved selectively firing to injure the lead cows in order to keep the herd in place. In a description of this practice, Punke (2007) notes that Smith's "first shot had found its precise target in front of the cows hip. When it hit in that spot, Smith knew the animal could not run off but instead would just stand there, all humped up with pain. As Smith intended, other members of the herd . . . were already starting to mill about, confused, some sniffing at the blood that seeped from the cow" (pp. xvi).

The hunters, both European and Native American, were mainly interested in procuring the hides of the bison and often left everything else to rot on the prairie. Granville Stuart, famed Montana rancher and miner, observed that "from the Porcupine clear to Miles City the bottoms are liberally sprinkled with the carcasses of dead buffalo. In many places they lie thick on the ground, fat and the meat not yet spoiled, all murdered for their hides which are piled like cord wood all along the way. 'Tis an awful sight. Such a waste of the finest meat in the world! Probably ten thousand buffalo have been killed in this vicinity this winter" (Peterson, 2003, pp. 247).

Commercial hunters were not the only ones who traveled west to engage in bison hunting. Wealthy individuals from the East and Europe went on lavish hunting forays into Montana. One infamous hunting expedition was that of Sir St. George Gore of Ireland. While the true extent of the game that was taken during Gore's 1854–57 expedition is unknown, it has been reported that "the British 'sportsman' slaughtered more than 4,000 bison, 1,500 elk, 2,000 deer, 1,500 antelope, 500 bear, and hundreds of assorted smaller animals and birds. Gore massacred half of those creatures in Montana's Yellowstone Valley during a ten-month period (1855–56)—most frequently leaving their carcasses to rot" (Walter, 2000, pp. 7). Led by famed guide Jim Bridger, Gore hunted along the Powder River to the Yellowstone and Tongue Rivers. It was a few miles up the Tongue River, on Pumpkin Creek, where "Fort Gore" was constructed, and the party remained and hunted almost daily from July 1855 until May 1856 (Walter, 2000). The Crow kept note of Gore's hunting and filed complaints about the devastation of their food supply, estimating "that his hunting tally included 105 bears, more than 2,000 bison, and 1,600 elk and deer" (Walter, 2000, pp. 15).

During his travels along the Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers in the early 1840s, John J. Audubon foreshadowed that the fate of the bison appeared grim. He recorded in his journal, "one can hardly conceive how it happens, so many buffalo are yet to be found. Daily we see so many that we hardly notice them more than the cattle in our pastures about our homes. But this cannot last; even now there is a perceptible difference in the size of the herds, and before many years the Buffalo, like the Great Auk, will have disappeared" (Punke, 2007, pp. 47–48). Shortly after, in 1851, famed artist George Catlin noted, "it is truly a melancholy contemplation for the traveler in this county, to anticipate the period which is not far distant, when the last of these noble animals, at the hands of white and redmen, will fall victim to their cruel and improvident rapacity; leaving these beautiful green fields, a vast and idle waste, unstocked and unpeopled for ages to come, until the bones of the one and the traditions of the other will have vanished and left scarce an intelligible trace behind" (Brink, 2008, pp. 237).

By the 1880s, the bison herds in Montana were rapidly becoming decimated. Laton Alton Huffman, famed photographer and illustrator of eastern Montana, captured the image of a small herd of bison grazing in the 1880s. In reference to this image, entitled *Buffalo Grazing In The Big Open 1880s,* Huffman remarked, "in the eighties it was still possible to see herds of six hundred to one thousand buffalo in many of the smaller valleys or high plateaus between the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers" (Peterson, 2003, pp. 246).

In 1882, a herd that is estimated to have contained between 50,000 and 80,000 bison was observed crossing the Yellowstone River near Miles City (McHugh, 1972). In reference to what may have been the same herd, Huffman recalled, "I saw many thousands (of bison) while hunting for robes, leather, hides and smoked hump on the Big Dry, Smoky Butte, and Timber creek (these streams are between the Missouri and the Yellowstone in eastern Montana), but it was, I think late in April, 1882, that I saw the Rosebud valley (south of Forsythe, in eastern Montana) more or less black with them from near where Lee now is to the present Busby, a distance of 35 or 40 miles. Much has been said about this herd . . . and (it has been) variously estimated at 30 to 50 thousand, my own belief is (that it) was much larger than the last figure" (Trexler, 1921, letter to author from Mr. L. A. Huffman of Miles City, Montana, dated July 12, 1917). The bison hunters slaughtered almost the entirety of the herd during that season (McHugh, 1972). Anticipating an equally profitable hunt the following season, the bison hunters of Miles City were unable to locate a single herd, and were forced to end their efforts (McHugh, 1972). By 1884 less then 100 hides where shipped from the Miles City-Glendive area, which had shipped 40,000 the prior season (Kidder, 1965).

Buffalo Grazing in the Big Open 1880s.
PHOTOGRAPH BY L.A HUFFMAN; FROM THE COLLECTION OF GENE AND BEV ALLEN

The residents of Montana quickly noted the absence of bison. Harvey Spencer, a rancher in White Sulpher Springs, in south-central Montana recalled, "I remember seeing a great number of buffalo along the Musselshell in 1881 and 1882, by 1884 only a few were left. The Montana buffalo seem to have disappeared in a year or two" (Trexler, 1921). Many recall the last bison they encountered. Occasionally some of the remaining scattered bison were secured in "round-ups." C. B. Perkins of Valier, in northern Montana, "recalled that the last one taken in this manner in his part of Montana was found in Teton county, about a hundred miles north of Great Falls in 1886" (Trexler, 1921, letter to the author from C. B. Perkins, dated 1917). Vaughn, an early settler, noted that "now the buffaloes are extinct. Where they used to roam, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle now graze" (Vaughn, 1900, pp. 198). Huffman also recalled an account of the last wild buffalo he saw: "I saw two bulls in July 1887, near a ford not far from (the present town of) Birney (Tongue River) . . . I saw them fall into the breaks east and realized that I probably never would again see another wild (buffalo). I never have" (Trexler, 1921, letter to author from Mr. L. A. Huffman of Miles City, Montana, dated July 12, 1917).

Soon all that remained of the great bison herds of Montana were their bones, which lay scattered across the range bleaching in the sun. "Over the whole of this vast area their bleaching bones lie scattered . . . from the Upper Marias and Milk Rivers, near the British

boundary, to the Platte, and from the James River, in central Dakota, to an elevation of 8,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains" (Hornaday, 1889, pp. 508). Where bison hunters once flourished, now came bone collectors, who gathered bison bones for use in industry, as fertilizer, in animal feed, and as a carbon-filtering agent for sugar refining (Krech III, 1999).

Shipments of bone began in the Lower Yellowstone Valley in 1883 and spread throughout the entire region (Barnett, 1975). One group located near Miles City is reported to have shipped 200 tons of bones in 1885, and by the end of 1886 thousands of tons of bones had been shipped from east and central Montana (Barnett, 1975). The Native American tribes also participated in the collection of bone, with 150 tons gathered on the Fort Peck Reservation (Barnett, 1975). The bone collectors efficiently erased almost all evidence of the fact that bison once existed throughout much of Montana. Early cattleman H. J. Rutter recalled that "this wholesale collection of bones accounts for the fact that there are so few traces of buffalo remains around Hinsdale (in Valley County), a district that was once one of the greatest hunting areas in Montana . . ." (Montana Historical Society, 1976, pp. 125).

Bison bone collecting. PHOTO CREDIT: BUELL; COURTESY NPS