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THE VANISHED BUFFALO.

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It is hardly possible for the thoughtful traveller to cross the prairies of Western Canada without some reflections on the vanished buffalo. That these apparently interminable plains, now so silent and destitute of animal life, were once the pasture ground for incredibly vast herds of bison or American buffalo (*Bos americanus*) can scarcely be realised. For fully a couple of days the Pacific express speeds across this treeless waste, clothed with brown grass except in summer when it is carpeted with the strange flowers peculiar to these monotonous plains. In every direction the flat waste melts in the blue distance like the sea in mid-ocean but no sign of life appears except a few birds, and that ubiquitous prairie rodent, the gopher. Herds of domestic cattle, the property of isolated ranchers, roam at will; but an occasional cayote or prairie wolf (*Canis latrans*, Say), a startled badger (*Taxidea americana*, Bod.), or a few antelope (*Antilocapra americanus*, Ord.) may be seen hastening away from the railway track.

It is fully twenty years ago since the buffalo in any considerable numbers were found on the plains. In 1884 out of a herd of twenty, eleven or twelve were killed in the vicinity of Cypress Hills not far from Maple Creek, and so recently as eight years ago a small herd of six or seven cows and calves was killed by Indians a little north of Swift Current, Assiniboia, N. W. T., these being probably the remnant of the Cypress Hills buffalo. In the early part of 1886 the Smithsonian expedition scoured Montana with the hope, a very meagre one, of finding

some living buffalo, and no less than 24 specimens, including 10 old bulls, were killed. The wood-buffalo still survive in remoter parts of the North West ; but they are probably not numerous, and are doomed to early extinction with the present opening-up of these distant gold producing areas.

Observers who crossed the prairies, before the buffalo were nearing extermination, confess that no description can do justice to the impressive spectacle which these bovine monsters presented. Their brown almost black forms scattered over the plains and quietly grazing in untold numbers or spurred by fear and fury rushing in irresistible stampede and leaving clouds of dust behind, can be only dimly imagined. Single herds of ten thousand buffalo were not at all uncommon, and nothing could resist the shock of these legions when in stampede. Fences, tents, waggons, even settlers' huts were thrown down, and railway trains have been compelled to stop until the monstrous troop passed by or run the risk of being overturned by the onward sweep of the buffalo.

The narrow winding paths along which they moved in single file can be still clearly seen upon the prairie, radiating in every direction and converging and crossing each other, while the hollow basins in the earth, the "wallows" where they rolled in the dust, or in wet mud where the ground was marshy are distinctly visible though hollowed out twenty or thirty years ago. Of the thousands of paths to be clearly discerned by the traveller on the C. P. R. west of Winnipeg, a large proportion run nearly north and south and indicate no doubt seasonal migrations from the usual summer resorts to more southerly winter grazing grounds. Six or eight paths frequently run side by side, and as the western rivers usually take an east and west course, the buffalo paths lead to water. Some of the paths are stated to have been worn down to a depth of 24 to 30 inches so vast where the long lines of buffalo which tramped along them.

If it is hardly possible to adequately picture the roving buffalo herds as they appeared a quarter of a century ago, we can happily still form some conception of their imposing and

even terrible aspect from the few living specimens that yet survive. Those survivors, like the couple of hundred in the Yellowstone Park, Montana U. S. are either in a practically wild state, under protection more or less effective, or in a confined park, securely fenced in, as at Silver Heights, near Winnipeg, where a herd of sixteen or seventeen roam in an extensive enclosure.* Col. Bedson, ten years ago had 70 or 80 of them, pure bred, at Stony Mountain, near Winnipeg but they have been sold and form part of the herd of Mr. C. J. Jones, Garden City, Kan., which probably numbers about 150 full blood buffalo. Mr. W. F. Cody and others have a few specimens, but there can hardly now be more than 1000 of these noble animals remaining of the countless myriads which not long ago peopled the plains.

Lord Strathcona had kindly suggested on my visits to the west that I should view his herd at Silver Heights, but the opportunity did not occur until last August, and my notes, made at the time may be of interest although nothing that is new or of scientific importance can now be said of the buffalo. The herd have a fenced reserve covering eight or ten square miles, and over this grassy park they wander with as much freedom as in nature. Some horses feed on this ground; but, while the buffalo do not associate with them much, there appears to be no animosity between them. One of the horses was injured, I learned, some months before, but the animal was possibly lame or weak, and unable to quickly get out of the way of the buffalo. Weak members of their own tribe are invariably attacked and killed. The principle of the survival of the fittest finds rigorous fulfilment among the buffalo. When a friend and myself reached the farm, the buffalo had not been seen for some hours, and were said to be several miles away. We determined to find out their whereabouts, but like other visitors who departed disappointed at not seeing the buffalo, we were just beginning to share in the same feeling, and were about to give up hope of viewing the herd, when we observed two

*Since these notes were jotted down Lord Strathcona has gifted his herd to the Dominion for the Banff National park.

buffalo rapidly making for the cattle sheds where troughs of water stand. They were busily drinking as we approached, and we imagined that they were pretty well domesticated. We were quickly undeceived. In the first place, they were drinking out of the small pools formed by water overflowing from the adjacent pump. They are never known to drink out of the spacious troughs provided with clean water. In the second place a slight breeze arose and blew towards them from our direction. The effect was instantaneous. They raised their heads, sniffed suspiciously, curled their tails aloft, and bounded away with lightning speed. One gained some idea of the strength and swiftness of the buffalo, for these two monsters bounded away lightly as deer, and in a few minutes were lost to view. Their fear of man is still strong, and they retain so much of their original wariness, that anything touched by human hands they avoid. Hence they refuse to enter the cattle sheds in winter, and prefer the snowy waste. They will not even lie down upon dry straw which was thickly spread over the snow for them. Hence also they refuse to drink out of troughs, buckets, or any vessels placed for cattle or horses, and invariably quench their thirst at mud-puddles and small scattered pools of water. Foxes, bears, etc, exhibit similar wariness, and are able to detect the touch of man's hand on traps set for their capture. Hunters adopt many devices to elude this keen sense of smell, which warns wild animals of danger. Castor, which the beaver hunter procures, is invaluable for smearing traps set for certain fur animals.

We feared that the startled pair had rejoined the herd and that all would have hurried far away. That they were shy we had been assured. They were also less trustworthy than formerly, having been much disturbed by numbers of visitors, some of whom had thoughtlessly teased the animals. We were cautioned if we went in search of the buffalo to move quietly and slowly. Sudden movements or noises startle them, and they either rush off in stampede and may not be visible any more that day, or they turn threateningly upon the intruders.

Fortunately we found the herd leisurely feeding in the open not very far away from the farm buildings. They had been rejoined by the two animals which we had disturbed, but the whole herd were coming in for water.

There they stood like great bronze monsters statuesquely surmounting a slight eminence on the grassy plain. It is difficult to accurately describe the impression produced upon the spectator when he first beholds a living buffalo. Something of sentiment will naturally mingle with his thoughts, but apart from the feeling that he is beholding one of the last of a tribe of noble game, practically extinct, he is awed by the massive uncouthness of the animals. Uncouth and monstrous they are, yet noble and grand. A fine specimen of an adult lion in life never fails to impress the spectator, but he realises that it is a huge cat, a gigantic type of a familiar mammal. The buffalo recalls no other animal with which the spectator is acquainted. It is a wholly unfamiliar form, and unlike any other creature which the observer has seen before. For myself I had a feeling akin to that experienced when I have discovered upon some leafy branch a huge caterpillar rearing its bushy head in proud defiance—a strange delight and curiosity. The buffalo struck me as resembling in some features a bull, in others a lion, in others a bear, in others a colossal mule, yet really unlike any of them. His limbs resemble the first ; his mane, the second ; his dark furry head and cheeks, the third ; his body and tail, the last-named. The combination is a grotesque one, yet it is not wholly fanciful, and I was interested recently to find in Hornaday's report on the buffalo, a quotation from a writer in 1724, who gives his impression in these words : " a wonderful combination of diverse animals. It has the crooked shoulders with bunch on its back like a camel, its flanks dry and tail large, and its neck well covered with hair like a lion. It is cloven-footed, its head armed like a bull, which it resembles in fierceness, with no less strength and agility." The effect, at any rate, is as strange as it is impressive. The animals, as already stated, were grouped upon slightly rising ground, and their dark forms contrasted strongly with the

pale tints of the surrounding pasture. We moved quietly towards them ; but they appeared unconscious of our presence and with noses to the ground continued browsing. Not until we were within 60 or 70 yards did they appear to be aware of our presence. They all raised their heads together, turned and stared at us curiously. The small calves, of which there were several, kept at the further side of the cows, and ran hither and thither as if afraid. The bulls stand very high at the shoulder, the height being increased by the curly mane, which is golden or tawny, glistening like silk. A height of 5 ft. 8 in. appears to be a maximum measurement though the bushy mane adds another 4 or 5 inches. A short ridge of stiff bushy hairs extends behind the shoulders along the middle line of the back. The mane shows a distinct line of demarcation passing diagonally down from the back forward to the front legs. Behind this line the body is of a rich sooty-brown with a silky sheen like the coat of a well-groomed horse. In winter the hair becomes long, thick, and matted, and gives the buffalo a very different appearance. The tail is rather like that of a cow, or rather a mule as it is short and has a very slight terminal brush. The body slopes backward and diminishes very rapidly behind the massive shoulders. It falls away very much as does the body of a lion. Indeed, the appearance of the buffalo in many respects is suggestive of the lion. When the animal turns round the view from behind recalls the small and slender body of the mule or ass, but bears little resemblance to that of the ox or of the horse. A bushy conical beard of jet black hair hangs from the under side of the head in the bull buffalo. The horns are smooth and grey, not polished and black like those burnished for ornament. They are very sharp, and are gracefully curved upward and to the front. Between the horns, and above them, the hair of the forehead is long and thick and stands erect like plush or the pile of the richest black velvet. Later, in winter it may become paler and brown, and matted or curly ; but seen as I saw it, late in the summer, it did not appear woolly or curly, but erect and thick, so that it was blown about by every breath of

wind. The ears are not prominent. The snout is wholly unlike that of a horse, being blackish or dark grey, wet and shining, and so blunt and crinkled that it might be compared to the nose of a bull-dog. It certainly reminds one less of a cow than of a huge pug or bull-dog. I confess to a feeling of fear when standing fifteen or twenty yards from the full grown bull. He looked so much like a monstrous bull-dog, with no trace of mildness or docility. When the whole herd raised their heads and gazed at us the effect was not reassuring. They are not at all trustworthy, and the cow-buffalo, when her calf is young, is very fierce. They will not brook impediments or obstructions and will throw such down rather than divert their course. The massive skull, and the cushion of hair in the frontal region, enables the buffalo to charge an obstruction without injury. They are very obstinate, and a few weeks prior to our visit one of the Silver Heights buffalo had to be shot. He got into the vegetable garden, and was busy tearing up the beds and throwing down the crop, and every means taken to stop his unruly proceedings failed. It was found impossible to eject him. He made terrific rushes at the men who attempted to drive him out—nothing could move him, and the only feasible course appeared to be a dose of lead. When the herd are disturbed they gallop off in a straight line. Nothing can turn them aside. They never tire, but go on and on with their tongues hanging out like monstrous dogs, and no horse has sufficient endurance to keep up with them in a lengthened run. They are said to bellow at times like a bull ; but as a rule are perfectly silent. When wounded, especially by a shot breaking one of their legs, they endeavor to rise and charge at the hunter, snorting fiercely and glaring in the most savage manner. Many a hunter has been awed by the splendid fury of the wounded buffalo ; but unless the region of the heart or some vital part were penetrated, bullet after bullet might be discharged at the head or shoulders without effect. In early days when the Indian pursued the buffalo with bow and arrow, instances were common, of an arrow directed at the heart passing clean through the buffalo's body,



and out on the further side, so terrific was the force of the Indians' bow and so closely were the victims approached. The colour of the calves is uniform, not spotted or striped, and is much the same as that of the cows. The cow is invariably smaller than the bull and lacks his sullen ferocity and massive grandeur. Both sexes possess horns. The voice of the bull is a deep sonorous bass call or growl, and in the distance, especially when several bulls were bellowing together, it is said to have resembled the roll of distant thunder.

Among many traditions still current, old settlers have one respecting the so-called "sharpening-places," *i.e.*, low rocky cliffs in the "coulees" or hollows of the prairie where the bulls were said to rub their horns in spring in preparation for the pairing period in August or September. The bulls were fierce fighters, but this sharpening of the horns is probably a myth. I have, however, several pairs of very thick old horns, which are quite worn down by rubbing upon one side of each horn. Possibly this rubbing was done when the buffalo rolled upon the ground, a habit which was constantly indulged in, partly no doubt to get rid of the flies, which annoy them just as they annoy the caribou on the barren plains of the north. The tips of the horns in old bulls, are often narrow and pointed at the tip, but very thick, clumsy, and corrugated down to the base.

All attempts to induce the buffalo to shelter in winter, or even to lie down on beds of straw in the open air have failed at Silver Heights. Straw was abundantly laid down for them in winter, but they invariably preferred some place well covered with snow, where they lay down and slept.

While the extinction of the noble buffalo may be justifiably deplored, it is questionable whether the western country could have been settled, or crops profitably grown as long as their immense herds roamed at will. Certainly man's ferocious barbarity and love of merciless slaughter would have continued so long as any wild buffalo remained to be butchered.



Prince, Edward Ernest. 1898. "The Vanished Buffalo." *The Ottawa naturalist* 12(4), 73–80.

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