

# THEY SHOOT BUFFALO, DON'T THEY

Hazing America's last wild herd

By Christopher Ketcham

**T**he day before the buffalo were to be killed, six state livestock agents set out on horseback along Horse Butte to haze the animals that had migrated out of Yellowstone National Park during the night. The herd they were tracking was small, only eighteen head, but up close and streaming through the sage where the butte touched the waters of Lake Hebgen, the buffalo shook the earth and seemed even to shake the water. The horsemen chirped and *hiyached* and whistled as they drove the animals into a pine forest. I followed them to the edge of the woods, to where the bison would be hazed east across U.S. 191, the two-lane blacktop that parallels the park.

The forest was silent but for the buzzing of gnats and the breeze moving through the pines and the firs. Then the buffalo burst from the trees, nearly trampling me, the calves with their umbilical cords still hanging, the cows panicked for the safety of the calves, and one big bull not happy at having his morning disturbed. Hard behind them came a rider from the Montana Department

of Livestock (DOL), clad in a Stetson, chaps, and aviator glasses, and carrying a whip. Seconds later, the forest was flooded with horsemen slaloming through the trees, hollering into their walkie-talkies—"Your goddamn mike's open"—wary of broadcasting the details of their locations or methods over the airwaves. On the dirt road to my left came an SUV from the Gallatin County Sheriff's Office and a pickup from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; on horseback and in more trucks came agents from the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S.D.A.'s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The DOL even brought in its own helicopter—a Hughes 500, piloted by a National Guardsman home from Iraq—to channel the herd with its noise and rotor wash. In total, perhaps twenty officers had been dispatched from six different agencies, in as many as twelve vehicles and riding as many as eleven horses, deployed sometimes sixteen hours a day, arrayed at a cost of \$3 million, their purpose nothing less than the corralling of the last wild free-roaming herd of genetically pure buffalo in the United States.

The men and machinery were meant to ensure the survival of a

different yet equally beleaguered creature of the American West: the rancher. The alleged threat posed by Yellowstone's 3,600 buffalo<sup>1</sup> came from the fact that they carry *brucella*, a bacterium that cycles harmlessly enough in *Bison bison* but has considerably more dire effects on cattle. Brucellosis can ravage the reproductive capacity of entire herds, causing pregnant cows to miscarry their fetuses, and typically spreading from cow to cow through the blood and flesh of the dead fetus. If a significant number of Montana cattle became infected with brucellosis, the federal government would revoke the state's "brucellosis-free" status, which under U.S.D.A. regulations would require Montana's cattlemen to spend millions of dollars to quarantine, test, and, in the worst case, slaughter the animals. Therefore, the state could not allow brucellosis-infected buffalo to roam freely on public land reserved for cows, because they threatened not just the cattle but ranching itself.

I struggled to keep up with the haze,

<sup>1</sup> An estimated 300,000 fenced, domesticated buffalo, raised for their meat and their hides, circulate on farms and ranches in the United States. Almost all of them carry cattle genes; scientists believe there are fewer than 15,000 genetically pure buffalo currently alive, the Yellowstone herd among them.

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running through the trees and the blowdown, until I reached a dirt road that a DOL detective named Bob Morton had blockaded with his pickup. His purpose, Morton told me, was to keep “the public” from getting too close to the haze. (The public consisted of me, a PBS cameraman, and a dozen or so local activists protesting the “persecution” of the buffalo.) Morton explained that the DOL was conducting the haze now, in May, in order to confine the animals to the park before summer, when the ranchers loosed their cattle on the grass outside Yellowstone. If the animals continued to slip the boundaries of the park, the Montana DOL decreed, they would be slaughtered, in groups or

one at a time, by pistol or rifle, by accidental self-goring in the backs of trucks, or beneath the butcher’s blade, their meat to be distributed to food banks and local Indian tribes, who still consider the creature sacred.

The government began large-scale operations against the Yellowstone buffalo in 1989, after forest fires drove the herd out of the high plateaus and geyser basins of the park. The severity of the treatment the animals receive each year depends on how far they venture from the park, which itself depends on the size of the herd, the availability of forage, and the vagaries of weather. In the winter of 1996–97, for example, 1,084 stray bison were slaughtered by the DOL—at the time, the largest single-

season buffalo kill since the nineteenth century. In 2005–06, more than 30 percent of the herd was culled, including fourteen bison that, pursued by government agents on snowmobiles, died after crashing through the ice on Lake Hebgen. The buffalo, it was reported, struggled for three hours to stay afloat, until two of the creatures at last sank beneath the water; several others were then retrieved and shot. The surviving buffalo instinctively gathered around the victims, shaking their heads, jumping, turning in circles, performing a kind of dance. These too were killed.

**W**hen the English first settled in Virginia in the 1600s, the buffalo



numbered as many as 60 million from coast to coast, surpassing in size even the vast wildebeest herds of Africa. By the time the pioneers crossed the Great Plains in the 1840s, that population had been devastated, the result of two centuries of hide hunting by mountain men in the West and encroachment by settlers in the East. There remained, however, as many as 20 million buffalo filling the horizon in black shrouds that stretched for tens of miles.

To the first European pioneers, the plains must have been terrifying—the huge spaces, the sun and wind and rain, the lack of wood for warmth and meat for protein. In the buffalo, with its heavy fur and plentiful meat, they found first solace and then dependence. They also found a road map: migrating from feeding grounds to salt licks to calving grounds, the buffalo carved out the first mass thoroughfares across North America, paths pounded through soil and forest and snow-covered mountain passes. With time, the pioneers learned what the American Indian had known for countless generations: the buffalo were the link to continued life.

In the years following the Civil War, financial and government interests sought to sever that relationship. The belief was that wherever the buffalo roamed, so too did the American Indian, whose very presence threatened the success of westward expansion. By the 1870s, the U.S. Army was losing one soldier for every three Indians it killed. Railroad barons, whose interests the Army was in large part working to protect, needed to indemnify their transcontinental investments against native intrusion. Texas cattlemen, meanwhile, had already begun driving their longhorns north, looking for new forage, links to the Union Pacific, and access to eastern markets. All parties saw the buffalo, which fed and clothed the Indian, as the key obstacle to dominance. "When we get rid of the Indians and buffalo," enthused General Nelson Miles, commander of a garrison near Fort

Keogh, Montana, in 1876, "the cattle . . . will fill this country."<sup>2</sup>

The rail and cattle tycoons were abetted in their efforts by an unlikely nexus of interests. Chief among them were British banks and investment companies, which, along with eastern banks looking to leverage British capital, conspired to corner the trade in beef (beloved of the British aristocracy) and grab land and resources in a largely unregulated part of the United States. British-owned investment firms such as the Anglo-American Cattle Company, the Colorado Mortgage and Investment Company of London, and the Scottish American Investment Company secured hundreds of thousands of acres of the American West, often through fraud and "stockmen's associations," which were really thinly disguised fronts for their interests. At the same time, other foreign financial organizations invested millions of dollars in U.S. railroads, most notably the Union Pacific. "With the help of eastern and British capital," wrote one observer in the 1880s, "[the stockmen's associations] have expanded all of a sudden into confederacies dangerous alike to private enterprise and to public liberty."

Eastern cities and the markets of Europe, sold on the romance of the buffalo robe, hastened the buffalo's demise. Buffalo coats, softer than lamb's wool, were warm and stylishly wild—the frontier brought to the salon. The hides, transformed by new methods of tanning, became belts, bags, the uppers for the most fashionable boots and shoes; the preferred

<sup>2</sup> In an 1875 speech to the Texas legislature, General Philip Sheridan summed up the feelings of the day: "[the buffalo hunters] have done . . . more to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years. They are destroying the Indians' commissary. . . . Send them powder and lead, if you will; but for the sake of a lasting peace let them kill, skin and sell until the buffalo are exterminated. Then your prairies can be covered with speckled cattle and the festive cowboy, who follows the hunter as a second forerunner of an advanced civilization." That Sheridan's speech is believed to be apocryphal—the invention of a contemporaneous buffalo hunter turned historian—should not diminish its usefulness as a snapshot of life on the plains. For their part, the Indians, wrote Dee Brown in *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, were flabbergasted at "a civilization that advanced by exterminating useful animals."

leather for carriage tops, sleighs, and hearses; the prize material for the drive belts in the factories of the Industrial Revolution; and armor and jackets for the English, French, and German armies, which were resupplying in the wake of Bismarck's wars.<sup>3</sup> The tongues, fresh or smoked, were considered a delicacy by the rich and brought twenty-five cents apiece; the hams went for three cents a pound at the rail depots; the horns and hooves became buttons, knife handles, and glue; and the bones, used as fertilizer or as a whitener for sugar, sold for eight dollars a ton.

The railways placed advertisements offering to pay a bounty on each beast felled. In 1869, a report in this magazine described passengers shooting from "every available window, with rifles, carbines, and revolvers." Another account told of the Russian Grand Duke Alexis, son of Czar Alexander II, who joined General Philip Sheridan, commander of the Armies of the West, and Buffalo Bill Cody on a hunt. As reported by Lieutenant General George Custer, who was also in attendance, the Duke was so enthused at the sight of his first kill that he leaped onto the cadaver, carved off its tail, and spattered the blood of his trophy through the air while choking out "a series of howls and gurgles like the death-song of all the fog-horns and calliopes ever born." Between 1870 and 1880, at least 10 million buffalo, and possibly as many as 20 million, were killed. Two hundred thousand hides were sold in Fort Worth in a single day. West of Fort Dodge, Kansas, it was said, one could walk a hundred miles along the Santa Fe line hopscotching the dead. Army Colonel Richard Dodge, stationed in Kansas in 1873, wrote that "the air was foul with a sickening stench, and the vast plain, which only a short twelve months before teemed with animal life, was a dead, solitary, putrid desert."

Thereafter the northern plains would be cattle country. Between 1866 and 1884, at least 5 million longhorns were driven north out of

<sup>3</sup> British imports of buffalo hides shot from under 50,000 in 1871 to an estimated 620,000 four years later.



Texas. The number of cattle in Wyoming rose from 90,000 in 1874 to 500,000 by 1880; and by 1883 in Montana, where ten years earlier there were practically no cows, half a million now grazed on grasses untouched by their rivals. "For every single buffalo that roamed the Plains in 1871," wrote Colonel Dodge, "there are in 1881 not less than two, and more probably four or five, of the descendants of the long-horned cattle of Texas."

The cattlemen would soon learn the shortcomings of the animal they had chosen to replace the buffalo. In the disastrous winter of 1886–87, hundreds of thousands of cows died of exposure and starvation on the plains, some of them even crushed to death on barbed-wire drift fences during the storms. Buffalo hunter Charles Jesse Jones, a marksman whose fame rivaled even Cody's, and who shot and skinned ten buffalo a day at the height of business in the 1870s, noted in his memoirs that "Every one of [the cows] died with its tail to the blizzard." Buffalo, as Jones knew, face storms in marching columns, taking turns driving through the drifts. Cattle lack other essential survival instincts: they calve during storms, unlike the buffalo, which prudently stop and wait for the weather to pass; cows have thin hides and store less fat to counter the cold. And in the warm months, cattle, if provided the feed, will gorge almost to death; buffalo, whose digestive systems are considerably more efficient, won't overeat given a binful of grain, and they won't bloat in a field of alfalfa, as cows do. The buffalo's sharp hooves even serve to break up and oxygenate soil rather than flatten and deplete it, which improves the turf and increases the variety of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Buffalo eat a wider array of plants than do cows, which likely helped to sustain their massive populations. They don't gather in large groups around springs and streams, opting instead to wallow in potholes, which, seeded with their manure, become fertile ground for much-needed vegetation. In short, they are a better

animal than the cow—better built, anyway—for the hardships of the high country and the arid West.<sup>4</sup>

By 1889, Jones, who had quit the hunt and would spend the next two decades working to corral the remnants of the herds for conservation purposes, reported that "there cannot be more than one hundred [buffalo] left in the whole United States outside of those in the National Park." The park was Yellowstone, and it was here that Jones, appointed game warden by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1902, sought to increase the numbers of the holdouts of the last known genetic pool linked to the original 60 million. This terminal wild bunch, ancestors of the modern herd, had by 1902 been reduced at the hands of poachers to just twenty-three members holed up in the Pelican Valley, one of the coldest and snowiest places in the continental United States, a place no cow would consent to graze.

**M**ay 16, 2007, the date established by the DOL to begin killing any buffalo still in violation of the border between Yellowstone and the Montana public lands, came and went without fatalities. The buffalo were granted a reprieve mostly for reasons linked to bison breeding and the fear of bad publicity: too many calves in the spring herd meant the DOL would look like baby-killers. No animals would be killed, if at all, until the first of June. Instead, the haze was intensified in order to drive the beasts deep inside the park.

The DOL's riders clearly took pleasure in their work. One afternoon I approached four men chewing tobacco in the sun on the bridge over the Madison River, downstream from where I'd pitched my tent to watch the buffalo migrations out of the park. They were relaxing with their boots

<sup>4</sup> Cows are also major contributors to global warming. A 2006 report issued by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization noted that livestock account for 18 percent of all greenhouse-gas emissions, including, from human-generated activities, 37 percent of methane, which has twenty-three times the warming potential of CO<sub>2</sub>; and 65 percent of nitrous-oxide emissions (296 times the warming potential of CO<sub>2</sub>).

up on the railing, and they obviously didn't want a reporter around, wouldn't give last names, referred my questions to the upper echelons, and every few seconds or so spat with a kind of perfect contempt for the chew or the earth (or me).

I asked them what they did as government livestock agents when they weren't hazing buffalo. "Investigate theft," the men said. "Inspect brands." Modern-day rustling is a dead-end business in Montana, largely because it's not very profitable. To find a brand-free zone where the stolen stock can be sold, a rustler would have to truck the animals—or, God forbid, drive them—east of the Missouri River into the Drift Prairie of South Dakota. It seemed that what the men liked to do was ride horses, and chasing buffalo was a good opportunity for that. "Twenty-five miles today. Horses are done. Hard riding. Timber. Jumping cricks. Up and down them hills." In a trailer parked off 191, the horses suddenly clattered and cried out for no reason. Four heads turned as one, quick as if a bomb had exploded, and the men excused themselves to calm their steeds.

About two weeks into the haze I was able to arrange an interview with Rob Tierney, the DOL's director of bison operations. We sat by the side of the road in his Ram 3500 while above us the Hughes, in which Tierney normally perched with binoculars, zipwired from cloud to cloud. Tierney, a third-generation rancher, wore a DOL cap and a DOL fleece (he has worked for the agency for twenty-six years, as a brands inspector, detective, manager, and now director). He told me he could spare twenty minutes, probably less. He was overseeing eleven riders, a spotter in the chopper, and a recalcitrant herd of more than 400, many of them bulls, on Horse Butte.

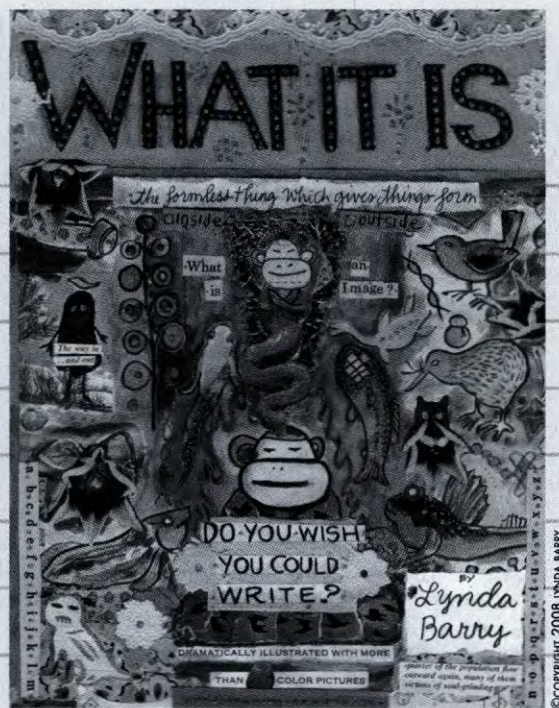
He also had another problem, in the form of the troublemakers from the Buffalo Field Campaign (BFC), a nonprofit activist group. The BFC's dozen or so volunteers, he said, were strung out along 191 and on Horse Butte's back roads, chasing the DOL riders with video cameras. They had been watchdogging the haze since



1997, filming the horsemen, pestering members of Congress, and occasionally hampering Tierney and getting arrested. They operated out of tepees and cabins at the site of an old Union Pacific lodge west of Yellowstone Park, and they were generally derided among locals as "the buffalo hippies"—long-haired, long-bearded, scarecrowish in old fatigues and in hats made of buffalo fur they'd collected from the branches of trees (buffalo shed uncontrollably in the anxiety of the haze). As if on cue, a group of what looked like tiny bears drove up in a dented Subaru. "BFC," said Tierney, sounding tired. Tierney had tangled with the BFC many times, in public debates and at their arrests, but the hippies were usually docile and allowed themselves to be hauled into the jails in Bozeman and Missoula.<sup>5</sup>

As the BFCers deployed with their cameras, Tierney laid out the state's position on the brucellosis threat posed by bison: It was serious, imminent, and potentially catastrophic for ranching—the same argument I'd read in the DOL's press releases and in statements from Governor Brian Schweitzer's office ("My priority," Schweitzer testified before Congress in March of last year, "is to protect Montana's brucellosis-free status"), and heard from the Montana Stockgrowers Association and just about anybody in Montana whose job it is to justify the hazing and killing of buffalo. To date, how-

<sup>5</sup> On May 9, 2007, the director of the Buffalo Field Campaign, a thirty-eight-year-old New Englander named Dan Brister, was arrested after a Montana highway patrolman, for apparently no reason other than that Brister refused to lower his camera, threw him to the ground with a pressure lock on his right arm and opened his forehead on the asphalt. Brister, who required three surgical staples to close the wound, noticed the numerals—3-7-77—on the epaulets of the man who was shoving his face into the ground, numerals found on every Montana patrolman's uniform and cruiser. The numbers refer, in part, to the era of rancher vigilantism in the 1870s, when sheepherders and homesteaders and anyone who didn't like cattle on public lands died or was pushed out. They signify, variously, the dimensions of a grave (three feet wide, seven feet long), the time remaining to split town (three hours, seven minutes, and seventy-seven seconds), or the three-dollar fare for a seat on the 7:00 A.M. train from Helena to Butte.



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# SOLUTION TO THE MAY PUZZLE

NOTES FOR  
"A (K)NIGHT AT  
THE OPERA":

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov.  
Note: \* indicates an anagram.

G	M	S	F	I	O	C	F
I	T	N	O	C	I	D	B
U	F	L	S	T	E	E	U
H	V	T	R	H	E	E	A
A	P	E	E	R	O	S	T
R	T	E	O	A	T	R	H
L	N	E	F	M	W	A	H
T	O	O	S	K	C	T	E

The operatic character is Wagner's *Parsifal*. The knight's move message, which begins with squares 28, 22, 32, 15, etc., is: READING FROM THE BOTTOM UP, LOOK AT THE FIFTH LETTER OF EACH SUCCESSIVE ANSWER.

CLUES: A. TICK-LE; B. T(her)E-STATE; C. SHUFFLE, two mnngs; D. HIT-TITE, homophone; E. TOO-TSI\*-E(ngland); F. H-OVER-C-R-AFT; G. PAGEANTRIES\*; H. ECTOPLASM\*; I. C-HUM-S(eries); J. EFFERVESCE(N)T\*; K. TENDER-FO(rev.)-O-T(alent); L. S(H[ockey]-RINK)ABLE; M. B(ooth)-ROUG(h)-HAM; N. O-UTFACE\*; O. WÖR(rev.)-M-WOOD (homophone).



ever, there has not been a single documented instance of brucellosis transmission from buffalo to cattle—not in more than half a century of monitoring, not in the thousands of times buffalo and cattle have mingled. A 1992 study by the Government Accountability Office called the risk of such transmission “extremely low.” In 1998, the National Academy of Sciences found that, while it was theoretically possible for buffalo to infect cattle with brucellosis, the chances of its happening were remote. “Perhaps few situations in life are risk-free,” U.S.D.A. epidemiologist Dr. Paul Nicoletti said in an interview for a BFC documentary that same year, “but this one seems near.”

The real threat may very well lie elsewhere: in the elk feedgrounds of Wyoming. The elk population there is six times the size of the Yellowstone bison herd and is believed to be the cause of multiple transmissions of brucellosis to cattle. On May 18, as the haze continued apace, it was discovered that several cows in a Montana cattle herd had tested positive for brucellosis. This was ominous news: if members of a second herd also tested positive, the state would lose its coveted brucellosis-free status. The brucellosis-infected cattle herd had never come in contact with the Yellowstone buffalo. Epidemiologists suspected the infection could be traced to the elk, which Montana game officials had always claimed were no threat (the elk feedgrounds are a cash cow for politically connected ranchers in the hay-growing business in Wyoming and Montana, and elk hunting brings in tens of millions of dollars a year to state government). Meanwhile, the federal and state governments footed the bill for brucellosis testing in the area, though no other cattle herds were found to be infected.

I mentioned these facts to Tierney as we sat in his truck watching the buffalo hippies. Tierney just shook his head. “We believe there is a huge risk of transmission of brucellosis from bison to cattle,” he repeated. “If we lose our brucellosis-free status, it will be that much more difficult for industry folks to make a living. It’s

very difficult to keep things going when you’re a rancher. Very difficult in this day and age to pass things on. My daughter is twenty-one. She’s going to be an X-ray technician.”

A few days later, I stood by the side of 191 watching Bob Morton mortar a volley of timed firecracker rounds from his shotgun at a group of a dozen buffalo, the munitions arcing high and bursting with a yellow splash in the air. When the fireworks failed to dislodge the animals, Morton windmilled his long arms and screamed, “Yah! Yah! Git!” tossed the shotgun into his flatbed, leaped into his truck, and drove straight at the buffalo. The bigger of the bulls stood its ground and stared down the grill of the oncoming truck for a full ten seconds; then it shrugged and fell away eastward into the tree line, followed by the rest of the herd. Whenever Morton turned his back, the animals, confounding his efforts, sneaked back over the road toward Horse Butte.

After twenty minutes of this, Morton stood swatting the gnats from his hat, thoroughly disgusted. “We cleared this area yesterday of two hundred head,” he said. “Today there’s a hundred more head in there. Ain’t never seen anything like it! Let me ask you—’cause you been hanging round these Buffalo Field Campaign people—I get the feeling that they’re back in there gettin’ these bison to move.” He stared hard at me from behind his Ray-Bans. “You see any BFC people doing that?” I said no, and Morton shook his head. “Well, I just can’t understand it. These bison ain’t doin’ what they’re supposed to. I’m gonna git me to town”—West Yellowstone, six miles to the south—“and find some more tools to deal with the situation.” Soon the word went out on the scanners that someone among the agents was buying rubber bullets.

One morning not long after that, I awoke at my camp along the Madison River and saw two bulls with foot-long beards standing by my tent, their fur smelling of mud, their heads like walls, and, beyond them, a herd leisure-boating in the grass. The bulls pulled away to a path through the arcade of willows next

to the river, grunting *ach ach ach* as they went, mud dreadlocks swinging as their heads nodded forward, and the herd followed like a conga line through the willows and out to the banks of the Madison.<sup>6</sup> I crawled from my tent, half-asleep, one-shoed, and followed them to the river. The buffalo were already crossing west, and I waded out until one of the bulls snorted at me, looking up with locked eyes, as if to say, *You’re some kind of dumb thing*. A mature bull can weigh 2,500 pounds, broad-jump eight feet, and charge at thirty-five miles an hour, outpacing racehorses at distances greater than a mile; buffalo injure more tourists each year in Yellowstone than bears do. I sat down in the midstream flow of the river, where it ran warm and fast from the hot springs in the park, watching until they were gone. This happened pretty much every morning: the buffalo edged their way through the jackstraw timber, heading west, moving like fog. And every evening they were driven back into the park.

Midway through the haze, the DOL’s riders took a weekend off to be with their wives back home in Helena and Livingston and elsewhere across western Montana. I decided to leave as well. I packed my tent and drove thirty miles to the north end of the park, to a place called Paradise Valley, a patch of high desert swallowed up by mountains of snow and pine and aspen. It’s a favored ground of the Yellowstone buffalo, which migrate there each year to escape the cold of the high country. The wealthy and the famous also like the place; they have bought up the ranchland and converted it to viewsheds for their mansions. The Fonda family, Tom Brokaw, and Jeff Bridges, among others, have acquired pieces of the valley, as has Arthur Blank, co-

<sup>6</sup> I wondered if one of these guides was Don King, an old bull with a high head of hair, who had received his nickname from a local woman. Perversely, the DOL’s riders had taken to using the name themselves. “Don’t push him too fast,” the scanner would squawk, worried he would charge and take out one of their horses. “Stay back boys, it might be Don King.” Rumor has it that Don King was shot dead by the DOL last June, but this was never confirmed.



founder of Home Depot. Rupert Murdoch is said to be looking to buy.

I was there to visit a rancher who, I had heard, did not fear buffalo coming near his stock. Hank Rate, a compact and ambling seventy-six-year-old, is engaged, like all ranchers, in a war of survival—against flood, disease, drought—running twenty-five head on seventy acres next to the Yellowstone River, which each May rises with the snowmelt and threatens to sweep away the foundations of his house. Rate tells me that the reason the buffalo are being killed in Montana has as much to do with the local mind-set as it does with brucellosis. “It’s still the 1860s for these boys,” he said. “Let the buffalo roam and soon the Indians will be back and the whole country’ll go to hell. It’s certainly not sound veterinary science, and it’s not about brucellosis, which is no threat anymore,” he added. “The brucellosis program is an industry. If the state vet comes to you and says, ‘Kill all the buffalo in sight’ because of brucellosis, you’re gonna do it if you make your livelihood off cattle.”<sup>7</sup>

Rate is what they call a family rancher in the strictest sense, since he manages a tiny herd with no hands except his wife, daughter, and son-in-law. “There’s not a real ranch for fifty miles up and down Paradise Valley—and a real rancher would laugh at you if you called me a rancher,” he said. “These were eighty-head operations at the least, but the economics just don’t cipher out anymore. If their land is worth four, eight, ten times what you can use it to run cattle on—they’ve worked their ass off all their lives, and their kids have nothing to show for it—well, then they’re gonna sell out.”

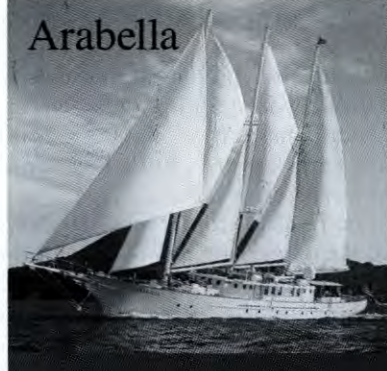
Over the past twenty years, ranching as a sector has been consolidated

<sup>7</sup> Acting as proxies for the livestock producers, state veterinarians—who receive funding from the U.S.D.A.’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service—have used the brucellosis threat as a tactical weapon against competing cattle interests in other states. This can be accomplished by having, say, a Montana vet whisper to the federal government that Wyoming is not dealing with its brucellosis problem.

in the hands of a few powerful operators who can survive the exigencies of land speculation and the globalization of the beef trade. Today, 10 percent of Montana’s cattlemen own 50 percent of the state’s cattle. These rich few now shape ranching in the American West, despite contributing minimally—under 3 percent—to national beef production. The key to their success lies in their ability to co-opt public resources for private gain.

Most large-scale ranchers don’t keep their cattle on their own land. They let the animals out to feed in the national forests, on land run by the Bureau of Land Management, and on the fringes of national parks and monuments. This land includes some 300 million acres of forage—a space that encompasses 85 percent of all federal properties in the eleven states of the West, or the equivalent of three Californias. Both Democratic and Republican Congresses have defended this subsidy as the cowboy’s divine right, though in fact federal grazing provides just one out of every 1,400 jobs in the western states and just one dollar out of every \$2,500 of taxable income. The largest of the public-lands ranchers include J. R. Simplot, a billionaire who provides half of all the french fries sold at McDonald’s; Ted Turner, who in addition to raising cattle also maintains a sizable domesticated buffalo herd; Barron Hilton, grandfather to Paris and chairman of the Hilton Hotels chain; Anheuser-Busch; the heiress to the Hewlett-Packard fortune; and many others. The top 10 percent of grazing-permit holders on federal lands control 65 percent of all livestock on those lands; the bottom 50 percent control just 5 percent. A permit for a cow-calf pair comes to \$1.35 a month, about \$12 below the market rate for private forage and at a direct cost to taxpayers of more than \$120 million a year. (Estimates of annual hidden costs run much higher, between \$500 million and \$1 billion.) The U.S. government clears forests; plants grass; builds roads, cattle guards, and fences; diverts streams; blows up beaver dams; “improves” habitats; monitors the health of live-

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stock; excises predators, including 80,000 coyotes; and poisons, traps, or shoots more than 30,000 prairie dogs and beavers—both keystone species—each year.

The result of this federal largesse, and the enclosure and monoculture it accommodates, is that ranching has become the primary cause of species extinction, topsoil loss, deforestation, and desertification in the American West, courtesy of too many cattle on land too dry and fragile for their needs. Everywhere cattle go you find streams, watersheds, rare grasses, and shrubs mucked or stomped or gorged out of existence; exotic seeds carried on the animals' hooves; and soil eroded beyond repair. In 1991, the United Nations reported that 85 percent of western rangeland was being degraded by overgrazing, and a 1998 study in the *Journal of Arid Environments* found that livestock grazing on public land near the White Sands Missile Range was more damaging to the long-term health of flora than multiple nuclear bomb blasts.<sup>8</sup> In that light, the haze and slaughter of buffalo sit at the milder end of a continuum of destruction.

The most formidable player in modern-day western ranching, other than the U.S. government, is the banks. U.S. banks have issued many billions of dollars in loans to ranchers who exploit federally issued grazing permits as collateral. The legality of these institutions' acceptance of grazing permits as escrow is suspect, but in the West the permits have achieved a special status: they are treated not as a privilege but as a right, not as a lease dictated by terms and therefore revocable but as a certificate of property in perpetuity.

As in the age of westward expansion, then, powerful private interests, banks, and government have arrayed in opposition to the buffalo. The cycle begins with the ranchers, who borrow money against their permits, the value of which largely depends on stocking rates for cattle. Buffalo, via brucellosis, supposedly threaten those stocking rates. The

government, in turn, provides the ranchers aid and assistance to keep the buffalo off the public lands, while the banks lobby Congress to hold grazing fees, a major factor in stocking rates, as low as possible. Ranchers continue to seek loans from the banks, which keep on handing them out. It is an endless loop, and within its perimeter wild buffalo have no place.<sup>9</sup>

**I**t ended up being a kind season for the buffalo. The mass killings threatened by the DOL never came to pass, due either to luck, the slyness of the herd, or the publicity efforts of the Buffalo Field Campaign. Just sixty-seven buffalo died by the summer of 2007, and of the many hundreds rounded up and released into the park, none—to great surprise—were injured in the process. The same could not be said for the 2008 haze. As of this writing, more than 1,588 buffalo had died during state-sponsored hunts or in Montana's slaughterhouses, a kill that surpassed the previous record set a decade earlier.

One day toward the end of May, I stood in the Madison River valley, inside the park, watching a herd of sixty buffalo make its way west along the river. The animals moved slowly over the land, taking, it seemed, just what they needed. Their ease brought to mind a concept that range biologists call the Buffalo Commons, an alternative future for the American West. In the Commons, vast corridors stretching across the Great Plains—corridors the size of Montana—would be given over to the roaming of buffalo, the culling of animals for meat, and the return of the shortgrass ecosystems of the frontier prairie. The buffalo would recolonize the high arid plain they once helped sustain, and the cow, hazed eastward back to Europe or the green pastures of England, would no longer dominate.

It is a utopian vision, but one not entirely removed from possibility. When the historian Frederick Jack-

son Turner pronounced the frontier closed in 1893, he used a population count—two persons per square mile—to justify his argument. More American frontier exists today, however, than a hundred years ago. The 1980 census counted 388 frontier counties west of the Mississippi; the 1990 census found 397, and the 2000 census 402. Many of these counties host fewer than two persons per square mile. By that measure, Turner's frontier never really disappeared. The Commons would put out of business just 2 percent of the nation's livestock producers. In return, the public would save hundreds of millions of dollars, and the West, free of the cattle curse, might possibly experience one of the greatest environmental recoveries in history.

That same week, the town of West Yellowstone unveiled twenty-six life-size fiberglass buffalo statues, the crowning achievement of the state-funded paean to bison known as the Buffalo Roam Project. The statues had been appearing since mid-May, popping up overnight, adorning café entrances and street corners and the arcades of mini-malls. The clean-shaven cowboy as American symbol follows the same path into diorama, meeting in the Buffalo Cafés and the Buffalo Burger Shacks and the Buffalo Trading Posts, where he eats buffalo wings and pays with a buffalo nickel.

The real cowboy, meanwhile, fades away, in inverse proportion to the return of the frontier on the plains. The average age of a family rancher is sixty-one. He is retiring, dying; his children have left for the city and aren't coming back. His decline might help explain the blind fervor with which Montana's ranchers pursue the buffalo. They have convinced themselves that the wildness of the animal is to blame for their own dwindling fortunes and bleak future, which have nothing to do with free-roaming buffalo and everything to do with factors beyond their control—rich strangers grabbing land, the consolidation of the meat industry, the corporatization of cattle ranching, and, ultimately, their own senescence. ■

<sup>8</sup> Edward Abbey, writing in this magazine in 1986, described the public lands of the West as "cow-burnt."

<sup>9</sup> As it happens, holders of public-land grazing permits in Montana have borrowed more money against them than in any other state—more than \$370 million in 2005, the most recent year for which figures are available.