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BUFFALO IN THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

On the first day of May, 1806, the Lewis and Clarke party was making its way through the Walla Walla country from the mouth of the Walla Walla River to the confluence of the Snake and the Clearwater Rivers and in his journal for that day Lewis makes the following observation with regard to the region: "I see very little difference between the apparent face of the country here and that of the plains of the Missouri only that these are not travelled by the vast herds of buffaloe Elk etc which ornament the other."¹ On May 7 six days afterwards, Lewis writes that the information which the Indians gave the party of the deep snow in the Bitterroot Mountains was "unwelcom inteligence to men confined to a diet of horsebeef and roots, and who are as anxious as we are to return to the fat plains of the Missouri and thence to our native home."²

As the explorers had considered themselves lucky on many occasions when they could get the flesh of dogs and horses, it is easy to understand that they looked forward with longing to the plains of the Missouri with their abundance of meat animals and that they probably regarded with a certain hungry scorn those grassy uplands south of the Snake River, so well adapted to and yet so singularly destitute of large game.

Lewis and Clark on their way to the coast the preceeding year had been told by the Shoshone Indians that game was scarce in the region of the Columbia. With regard to this Lewis makes the following statement: "They informed me that there was no buffaloe on the West side of these mountains; that the game consisted of a few Elk deer and Antelopes, and that the natives subsisted on fish and roots principally."³

Here, then, was a beautiful region of rolling grass lands, and an abundance of food for herbivorous animals, lakes and running water, a pleasant climate, and yet quite destitute of the buffalo which roamed the vast open regions in the continental interior by the millions.

¹ *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. 4, p. 345.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 369.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 383.

The white man found the buffalo in the valleys of the Appalachian Mountains, in the salt licks and cane brakes of Kentucky, in the glades and prairies north of the Ohio River, but the immense herds, dotting the landscape sometimes as far as the hunter could see, were found west of the Mississippi. In this area the hunting of the Indians, the destruction by bears and wolves, and the losses incident to flood⁴ and drought made only a slight impression. From this central reservoir of the species the surplus spread over into the adjacent regions into the forest lands east of the great river and across the Rocky Mountains toward the Pacific Coast.

The distribution of the buffalo over the continental area depended upon a number of factors. Among these were the normal length of life of the species and the rate of reproduction; the amount of available food as affected by soil, temperature and rainfall; such major obstacles as mountain chains, dense forests, deep canyons and areas of the extreme desert type; predatory animals and human enemies⁵. In considering the range of the buffalo, the Columbia Basin presents a curious and rather intricate problem of biological distribution in which hunting by the Indians and physiographic difficulties explain for the most part the scarcity or absence of the buffalo. The latter reason is particularly noticeable in the case of the Walla Walla region about which Lewis made the observations already noted. It is set in an amphitheatre of mountains and from Northeast to Southwest stand the rough, deeply furrowed and forested masses of the Coeur d'Alenes, Bitterroots, Salmon River Mountains, Seven Devil and Blue Mountains. Through these ranges the canyons of the Salmon and Snake carry the waters of streams along whose upper stretches the buffalo ranged, but whose rocky precipitous sides did not permit the animals to come down to the lower country.

The easiest and most natural approach to the Pacific Northwest was from the southeast. The eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains north of 42 degrees present many grassy inclines leading to easy passes that enticed the buffalo across the continental divide. On the western side of the Rockies in Southern and Central Wyoming, the valleys of the upper Colorado first led them south and west where they found their way into the basin of Great Salt Lake. J.

⁴ Sir George Simpson states that in the year 1829 he saw as many as ten thousand buffalo carcasses lying mired in a single ford of the Saskatchewan river. *Narrative of a Journey Around the World During the Years 1841 and 1842*, vol. 1, p. 92.

⁵ The rapid increase of the species when protected against foes and the natural agencies of destruction is shown by the experience of the Canadian Government in the National Buffalo Park at Wainright, Alberta. Here in 1909 and continuing during the next two years a herd of 716 animals was collected and since that time the herd has multiplied more than thirty times.

S. Smith in 1862 noted the existence of buffalo in Northern Utah as far south as Utah Lake but did not see evidence of their presence south of that point.⁶

Crossing the divide west and northwest from Bear River or by means of mountain passes in Northern Wyoming and Southwest Montana, the buffalo entered the great valley of the Snake River. Here at times they were found in large numbers. Their migrations were erratic; some years they were very numerous and in other years few were to be found. But all the evidence of hunters and explorers in the first half of the 19th century agrees that they used the Snake River country as one of their usual grazing areas.

Both the overland Astorians in 1811 and the Stuart party, on its way east in 1812, saw almost no buffalo. However there were evidences of their presence in the region and a lone, buffalo bull saved Stuart and his companions from starvation.⁷

J. S. Smith in 1824 crossed from the headwaters of Green River to the Snake and thence went down the Snake about one-hundred miles. From this point he proceeded northward to Flathead Post on the Clarkfork River and found as he penetrated the country no scarcity of buffalo.⁸ Peter Skeene Ogden in 1825-1826 was the leader of a Hudson's Bay trapping party in the Snake River country and fourteen buffalo were killed between Malade River and American Falls.⁹ Six years afterwards the trapping expedition of John Work encountered buffalo on a number of different occasions. At the source of Godin's River they were "numerous." Eight days later "large herds of buffalo were about" and three days after this he notes in his journal on December 1 that herds of buffalo were observed in the valley.¹⁰

John K. Townsend, the naturalist, encountered buffalo in 1834 on the trail between Fort Hall and the Boise River and describes a meeting with Snake Indians who were on their way to hunt buffalo. Apparently they were then able to obtain supplies of buffalo meat in the eastern part of the valley and without going across the Rocky Mountains.¹¹ The party with which Wislizenus traveled as far as Fort Hall in 1839 found a few buffalo along the Green and Bear

6 Harrison Clifford Dale: *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific*, 1822-1829, p. 187.

7 Washington Irving: *Astoria*, vol. 2, chap. 17.

8 Harrison Clifford Dale: *The Ashley-Smith Explorations and the Discovery of a Central Route to the Pacific*, 1822-1829, pp. 157-158.

9 *The Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 10, p. 331.

10 *Ibid*, vol. 13, p. 363, and vol. 14, p. 281.

11 John K. Townsend: *Narrative of a Journey Across the Rocky Mountains to the Columbia River*, pp. 117 and 124.

Rivers.¹² According to Osborne Russell there were great herds of buffalo in the upper Snake River region in 1835-1836.¹³

Peter Burnett who came to Oregon in 1843 with the large immigration of that year, bears testimony to the former plenty of the animals: "The valley (around Fort Hall) had once been a great resort for buffalo and the skulls were scattered about in every direction. We saw skulls of these animals for the last time at Fort Boise, beyond which point they were never seen."¹⁴

Fremont traversed the region in 1843 and his comments regarding the buffalo are instructive. He derived his information largely from Fitzpatrick who had known the country intimately since 1824 when the Americans first began to trap along the streams. These first hunters had found the buffalo in immense numbers between the Green River and the Snake, but Fremont states that in the Snake River valley in 1843 they were diminishing at an extraordinary rate.¹⁵ As a rule he thought their migrations did not extend west of the meridian of Fort Hall, but at times they moved west as far as Fishing Fall,¹⁶ and beyond that point they did not go in any considerable numbers. Osborn Russell also bears testimony to the disappearance of the buffalo herds in the region of the upper Snake where the great numbers that he describes in 1835-1836 had nearly disappeared by 1841. George Gibbs, one of the scientists who accompanied the Stevens surveying party of 1853, writes as follows on this subject: "in 1845 they left the valley of Bear River and I doubt whether they now cross Green river or even come through the south pass."¹⁷

The Snake River valley served as a corridor to lead the buffalo westward. By crossing the Snake or by following its southern bank, they entered the present State of Oregon and found in eastern and central Oregon a region that was a counterpart of South Idaho. Although the pioneer hunters found few buffalo as far west as the Boise River, there is no doubt that in small bands at least they entered Oregon and at times may have been found in considerable numbers. Indian traditions as preserved among the Piutes picture a time when many buffalo were found in Oregon. Professor O. C. Marsh the noted palaeontologist in a letter dated February 7, 1875

12 Wislizenus: *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains*, p. 104.

13 Osborne Russell: *Journal of a Trapper*, chap. 8.

14 Peter Burnett: *Recollections and Opinions of an Old Pioneer*, p. 116.

15 Capt. J. C. Fremont: *Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842 and to Oregon and North California in the years 1843-44*, p. 143 ff.

16 Now Salmon Falls, six miles below the mouth of Salmon Falls River in Twin Falls County.

17 *Pacific Railroad Reports*, vol. 12, book 2, p. 138.

writes: "The most western point at which I have myself observed remains of buffalo was in 1873 on Willow Creek, Eastern Oregon, among the foothills on the eastern side of the mountains."¹⁸ The drying of Malheur Lake in 1930 disclosed the skeletal remains of more than forty buffalo scattered over an area of 2,000 acres.¹⁹ It was in this region that Peter Skeene Ogden saw evidence of buffalo in 1826 and noted in his journal "buffalo have been here and heads are to be seen."²⁰ In the Oregon State College museum at Corvallis is a collection of buffalo skulls from a number of different places in Eastern Oregon. A note from Mr. J. B. Horner states that they were found on Crooked River, in Harney Valley, in Wallowa Valley, and in various other places in the eastern part of the State.

When David Thompson descended the Columbia in 1811, he was told by Indians that he met at the confluence of the Snake and Columbia Rivers that they could go in three days to where the buffalo were.²¹ At that time the buffalo in their migrations in Eastern Oregon may have come to within seventy-five or one-hundred miles of the Snake River.

In time the buffalo wandering on from the South would probably have entered the region where Lewis and Clark noted their absence, although the country over which their approach lay was more arid and rough than the region east of the Rocky Mountains and therefore less capable of supporting immense herds, the surplus stock of which would push on into hitherto unoccupied regions.

Two great and impassable river canyons obstructed the migration of the buffalo to the northwest. They could not come down the Snake River in the deep canyon which separates the Blue Mountains from the Seven Devils Range and consequently they either had to make their way through the defiles of the Blue Mountains or by a roundabout migration to central Oregon and thence northward to the Columbia.

The other canyon is that of the Salmon River. Buffalo came to the upper part of the Salmon River drainage area but could not make their way down the river. Ogden's brigade in 1827-1828 reported buffalo numerous at the forks of the Salmon River.²² Alex-

18 *Smithsonian Report for 1887*, part 2, p. 384.

19 *The Oregonian* (Portland) December 26, 1930, pages 1 and 9 gives an account of the Malheur find. Other articles and comments will be found in the following numbers of the *Oregonian*: December 27, 1930, p. 4; December 29, 1930, p. 7; January 4, 1931, sec. 2, p. 1; April 24, 1931 (editorial); March 28, 1931; October 26, 1930, sec. 1, p. 5; October 17, 1930 (editorial); August 19, 1928, sec. 1, p. 19. *The Journal* (Portland) has material on the subject in the following issues: December 21, 1930, sec. 2, p. 6; July 27, 1931.

20 *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 11, p. 207.

21 *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 15, p. 58.

22 *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, vol. 11, p. 375.

ander Ross says that there were 10,000 in the region in 1823 and that his party killed 60.²³ Bonneville reported that this was the western limit of their wanderings but that in the winter of 1832-1833 the Nez Perces had hunted them out of the valley.²⁴ Samuel Parker while in the company of a party of Nez Perces and Flatheads in 1835 describes the killing of between 50 and 60 animals in the upper Salmon River region.²⁵

The next possibility in the way of the western migration of the species is that afforded by the Clarkfork Valley in western Montana. Buffalo crossed the Rockies and grazed in the valleys of the Big Blackfoot, Hellgate and Bitterroot Rivers. They came down as far at least in the valley as the site of the present City of Missoula. In the spring of 1833 Nathaniel Wyeth was encamped with a large band of Flathead Indians near the point where the Bitterroot joins the Clarkfork and he remarks in his journal: "Buffalo have come here and even farther, but they are killed at once and do not get wonted here."²⁶

The journal of John Work who led a trapping expedition into the Clarkfork, upper Missouri, Salmon and Snake River valleys in 1831-1832 throws considerable light on the distribution of the buffalo at that time. His party crossed the Bitterroots by the Lolo Trail and trapped beaver first along the upper waters of Clarkfork. Here only four buffalo were killed. They were twice in the Big Hole and Beaverhead valleys of the upper Missouri and here they obtained 229 buffalo. In the Salmon River watershed the party killed 47 and 23 farther south on the Snake River side.²⁷

A quotation from the report of Dr. George Suckley, surgeon and naturalist in one of the Stevens surveying parties of 1853, may be quoted in this connection regarding the buffalo in the region between the Rocky Mountains and the Bitterroots: "The only buffalo that I have heard of which has been killed within late years north of the South pass and west of the Rocky mountains was a 'lost' bull, which was seen and killed at Horse Plain, at the junction of the Flathead and Hellgate rivers, on the day I passed it on my canoe voyage in November, 1853. The Indians were in great glee, saying 'The buffalo are *coming back* among us!' a hope in which, it is needless to say, they have been disappointed. Their remark, however, would

²³ Alexander Ross: *Fur Hunters of the Far West*, vol. 2, p. 60.

²⁴ Washington Irving: *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, p. 127.

²⁵ Samuel Parker: *Journal of an Exploring Tour beyond the Rocky Mountains*, p. 106.

²⁶ Nathaniel J. Wyeth: *The Correspondence and Journals of Captain Nathaniel J. Wyeth, 1831-36*, p. 191.

²⁷ John Work: *The Journal of John Work* (Lewis and Phillips, editors).

indicate that these animals formerly were abundant in the valleys on the headwaters of Clark's Fork of the Columbia."²⁸

In a letter to the writer, Duncan McDonald²⁹ states that buffalo were killed west of Missoula around Grass Valley and Frenchtown by the Salish Indians, and that he himself had found many buffalo bones in Pleasant Valley west of Kalispell, and other buffalo remains in the neighborhood of Ravalli. According to McDonald an Indian named Batiste killed buffalo near the present Northern Pacific Railway station of Perma in 1866 and another Indian named Nicola killed a bull on the Clearwater, (Mont.) as late as 1874.³⁰

The Bitterroot Range offered a much greater obstruction than the Rockies to the spread of herbivorous animals like the buffalo. Dense forest growth of fir and pine covered a bewildering maze of ranges and yawning canyons whose precipitous walls were cut out by great glaciers that have long ago disappeared. The Bitterroots were always a serious obstacle to Indian travel and the few trails of which the most important were the Lolo and Nez Perce, followed the crests of the primary ranges. But had there been no human enemies, the buffalo would probably have found their way down the Clarkfork and around Lake Pend Oreille into the open country beyond although the lower Clarkfork is wooded and rough. The number of animals that succeeded in reaching what is called the Inland Empire either by getting through the mountains or by migrating around through the plains of Oregon, was very small. The writer has been able to find only two references in the literature of the first half of the 19th century to the finding of buffalo in this region.

George Gibbs, who accompanied the Stevens surveying party of 1853 as geologist and ethnologist, says that he was told in that year by an Iroquois hunter that a lost buffalo bull had been killed 25 years before in the Grand Coulee. Gibbs adds that this was an extraordinary occurrence perhaps before unknown.³¹

Dr. Charles Pickering who accompanied the party of Lieutenant Johnson of the Wilkes expedition in 1841 which crossed the Cascades and visited Colville, Lapwai and other places in the interior, mentions the absence of game in the region, and that it was outside the range of the buffalo although well adapted to them, and he adds

²⁸ *Pacific Railroad Reports*, vol. 12, part 2, p. 138.

²⁹ Duncan McDonald (1849-....) of Dixon, Montana, a son of Angus McDonald of the Hudson's Bay Company and Catherine, a sister of Eagle of the Light, a Nez Perce chief. His long life and wide acquaintance with both Indians and white men have given him an unusual knowledge of frontier affairs during the past seventy years.

³⁰ East of the Rockies commercial hunting ceased about 1883 as buffalo had become too scarce to make it profitable. Small bands and stray animals were found at rare intervals until 1886 or 1887.

³¹ *Pacific Railroad Reports* vol. 12, part 2, p. 138.

in quotation that but "a single instance was on record of a stray animal having been seen in the vicinity of Colville."³² As Pickering had already been to Colville it seems likely that the statement was made on the authority of some responsible person at the Hudson's Bay post.

Mr. W. S. Lewis, well known to the readers of the *Washington Historical Quarterly*, writes as follows: "Years ago in talking with some of the older Spokane Indians, they told me that their fathers had surrounded and killed the last buffalo in the Spokane Valley somewhere up near the Idaho line. I figured that that was sometime along about 1810 to 1820.

In this connection Duncan McDonald recalls that he was told by a Spokane Indian who had the information from older members of the tribe that a number of buffalo were once killed north of Moses Lake or the Grand Coulee.

Evidence to support the theory that in spite of physical obstacles and human enemies, buffalo occasionally came west of the Bitter-roots is afforded by a discovery made by J. D. McGary in 1910. Mr. McGary at that time was cruising land and locating settlers in the recently opened Coeur d'Alene Indian reservation when he found near the summit of the divide between the Coeur d'Alene and St. Joe Rivers and about ten miles south of Medimont, Idaho, the skulls and other skeletal remains of some six buffalo. Three of the best preserved of the skulls were brought to Spokane where they were on exhibition for some time. These animals may have wandered or been driven down the Clarkfork to the St. Regis and then up that valley and over the summit into the Coeur d'Alene River watershed, and from there they may have made their way down the Coeur d'Alene Valley in the direction of the lake.³³

Mr. M. M. Fry, one of the oldest settlers in the Kootenai Valley and an active hunter and prospector for nearly fifty years, tells me that he has never seen or heard of buffalo remains along the Kootenai River or in the adjacent areas, but while freighting from the

³² *Washington Historical Quarterly*, vol. 20, p. 60.

³³ The writer's attention was called to this incident by Mr. W. D. Vincent of Spokane who knew Mr. McGary and the circumstances of the discovery at the time the find was made. The heads were on display at the real estate office of Neeley and Young and a newspaper cut of a photograph of the display appears with the account printed in the *Spokesman-Review* of May 1st, 1910. In a recent conversation with Mr. McGary he stated that later in the same year (1910) he was told by Steve Liberty that buffalo skulls had been found many years before on Squaw Creek, Idaho, in the Coeur d'Alene reservation. Liberty was one of the earliest settlers in the Spokane Valley and Liberty Lake is named after him. He married a Coeur d'Alene woman and had much to do with the Indians of that tribe. He died January 19, 1911.

Snake River to Sineacateen³⁴ on the Pend Oreille he encountered evidence of the former existence of buffalo in the country. To quote from his letters—"On Genessee flat...buffalo skulls horns and bones were taken from a bog hole, for I saw the place. Many bones had been fished from the muck and some of them had crumbled from exposure to the air. Parts of skulls, some nearly perfect with horns were there."

Such discoveries as those reported by Mr. McGary and Mr. Fry are most unusual. The early settlers usually say that they never saw or heard of buffalo in the Inland Empire country and that they do not believe that they were ever found here. So far as being within the general range of the species, this view is unquestionably true, but it seems likely that at rare intervals small bands and stray animals came from the east through the mountains or crossed the Snake River from the south.

The scarcity of buffalo in the Pacific Northwest led to important consequences for the Indians. After they obtained horses they made long journeys to the buffalo hunting grounds and here if they were lucky they killed and feasted to repletion, dried great quantities of meat and with meat and robes packed on their ponies, made their way back to their home country west of the mountains. A trade in robes and dried meat was part of the aboriginal commerce of the Northwest. When David Thompson descended the Columbia in 1811, he found buffalo robes among the Piscouse or Wenatchee Indians which he thought they must have obtained by trade with other tribes.³⁵ White traders bought packages of dried meat from the Indian hunters. John Work was at Flathead Post in the winter of 1825-'26 and a part of his journal entry for November 30 summing up the trade since his arrival six days before reads as follows: "The bales as bought from the Indians average about 60 lbs. net each. Of the above 4094 lbs. neat, and are 2314 lb. lean, 1340 Back fat and 440 Inside fat." Besides Work notes on the same day that he had bought 170 fresh tongues and 103 dried tongues.³⁶

The widest distribution of the species may have been before the Indians acquired and began to use horses. In the Pacific Northwest the Indians of the upper Columbia region probably obtained horses about the middle of the 18th century. After that it was much

³⁴ A noted river crossing at Laclede, Idaho. The Indians crossed here from the earliest times and the whites, first following the Indian trails and later their own rough wagon roads, likewise crossed at Sineacateen. The county maintains a ferry there at the present time.

³⁵ David Thompson: *David Thompson's Narrative of His Explorations in Western America, 1784-1812*, p. 484.

³⁶ *Washington Historical Quarterly*, vol. 5, p. 186.

easier to run down and kill the animals and the straggling bands or stray individuals that wandered into these new grazing grounds were soon exterminated.

Indian hunters slaughtered great numbers of buffalo. Osborne Russell states that a camp of 332 lodges of Bannack and Snake Indians killed 1,000 buffalo in one hunt.³⁷ De Smet says 200 Flathead and Pend Oreilles killed 600 at one time and at another hunt seven Flathead killed 189 buffalo.³⁸ Joe Meek tells of a hunting party of 100 Nez Perces who killed between 2,000 and 3,000 buffalo.³⁹

Most of the examples quoted are of hunting expeditions east of the Rockies but the same ruthless spirit prevailed wherever buffalo were to be found. East of the Rockies on the vast praries the great herds could maintain themselves, despite their losses, but west of the mountains in the more arid and broken regions, they were killed or driven out. Neither Indian nor white felt the need of conserving game, and it seems a fair conclusion that first the Indian and later the white hunter prevented to a much greater degree than the physiographic obstacles the spread of the buffalo westward. They could gradually make their way around a mountain range if it could not be directly surmounted, but the human destroyer was an active danger and not a mere passive obstruction. On this point the opinion of W. T. Hornaday may be quoted: "It is probable that had the buffalo remained unmolested by man and uninfluenced by him, he would have crossed the Sierra Nevada and the Coast range and taken up his abode in the fertile valleys of the Pacific slope."⁴⁰

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37 Osborne Russell: *Journal of a Trapper*, p. 41.

38 Pierre-Jean De Smet: *Life Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, 1801-1873*, vol. 4, p. 1376, and *Letters and Sketches with a Narrative of a Year's Residence among the Indian Tribes of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 149.

39 Frances Fuller Victor: *The River of the West*, p. 248.

40 *The Smithsonian Report for 1887*, part 2, p. 377.