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BISON
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THE GREAT PLAINS AN INTRODUCTION

KENNETH WINKLE

Throughout history, bison have exerted a fundamental influence on life and culture on the Great Plains, as both an ever-present reality and an enduring symbol. When planning the Center for Great Plains Studies' Interdisciplinary Symposium for the spring of 2000, Charlene Porsild, now with the Montana Historical Society, and I wanted to choose a topic with relevance that spanned the millennia, and so we selected the bison. Three years in planning, "Bison: The Past, Present, and Future of the Great Plains" brought over five hundred people to discuss, debate, analyze, and celebrate the bison as perhaps the premier symbol of Great Plains history and culture. The symposium explored virtually every aspect of the bison's presence on the Great Plains—prehistory and history, science and culture, symbol and reality, destruction and preservation, and, hopefully, renewal.

Keynote speakers highlighted the historical, artistic, scientific, and spiritual dimensions of the bison. On opening night, Dan Flores, A. B. Hammond Professor of Western History at the University of Montana, Missoula, delivered the keynote address, "Bison Past, Bison Future in the American West." Following the address, the Great Plains Arts Collection opened its doors for a reception in honor of its gallery exhibit, "Prairie Music Suite." At a plenary session the following morning, Chief Arvol Looking Horse, Keeper of the Sacred White Buffalo Calf Pipe for the Lakota, led a prayer and delivered a presentation on "The Legacy of White Buffalo Calf Woman." At lunch, Louis LaRose, President of the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, addressed the topic "Bison on the Prairies: What's Happening Now?" Additionally, Don Gayton, independent writer and ecologist from Nelson, British Columbia, delivered an analysis of scientific aspects of bison ecology, "Bison: Symbol, Science and Bioregion."

The symposium was co-sponsored by more than a dozen organizations and individuals

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from across the Great Plains and beyond. Of the fifty-six papers presented at the symposium, the editors have chosen three for this special symposium issue of Great Plains Quarterly. Together, the essays adopt the latest techniques of historical and ecological analysis to refine our understanding of the dynamics of human interaction with the bison and revise the standard portrait of the destruction of the bison on the Great Plains.

In "The First Phase of Destruction: Killing the Southern Plains Buffalo, 1790-1840," Pekka Hämäläinen of the University of Helsinki, Finland, examines the interaction of two human societies—Native Americans and Euro-Americans—and of two animal populations—bison and domestic herds—as a factor in the decimation of bison on the Southern Plains. His ecological approach, grounded in authoritative historical sources, points to an earlier beginning for the bisons' decline—the 1790s—and a different geographical focus—the Texas Plains—than previously appreciated. Complex components of Comanche society and culture encouraged extensive killing of bison long before the Great Peace of 1840 among Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Kiowa, and Plains Apache Indians opened the Arkansas basin to Euro-American overhunting. Hämäläinen's closely argued essay offers new insights that will refine previous interpretations while encouraging additional debate on this controversial topic.

In "'The Last Buffalo Hunt' and Beyond: Plains Sioux Economic Strategies in the Early Reservation Period," Jeffrey Ostler of the University of Oregon shifts our focus to the Northern Plains in the late nineteenth century. His essay analyzes the ways in which Lakota adapted their society and culture in response to the disappearance of their basic food source, the bison, during the early reservation period. Drawing upon innovative research into archival records, Ostler charts the complex changes that wracked Lakota society and elicited a host of changes in their way of life, some subtle and little noticed, and others remarkably profound. The treaty bands created a rational economic strategy in response to the new systems of land ownership, trading, and government control. Overall, Ostler's essay portrays the Lakota as active participants in shaping their own destinies under the novel reservation system, rather than passive victims.

The final essay, "'When We Were First Paid': The Blackfoot Treaty, The Western Tribes, and the Creation of the Common Hunting Ground, 1855," by William E. Farr of the O'Connor Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana, examines an important exception to the federal reservation policy of land cessions, removal, and allotment. The Blackfeet of the Columbia Plateau maintained a common hunting ground that represented a striking alternative to the more typical reservation system. The unusual arrangement between the Blackfeet and the US government allowed them to share prime hunting grounds between the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers with their traditional rivals, including the Nez Perce, Yakima, and Walla Walla. The commons permitted the Blackfeet to continue their traditional seasonal migration as long as the bison thrived, but established precedents for federal control, Euro-American intrusion, and military occupation that eventually doomed this hopeful alternative. The decline of the bison inexorably rendered the idea of a viable "buffalo commons" tragically moot.

Overall, the three essays demonstrate the wide variety of human and ecological interactions, Native American responses, and cultural adaptations that accompanied the decline of the bison during the nineteenth century. The cultures and experiences of the Comanche to the south, the Lakota to the north, and the Blackfeet to the west represent case studies of the general process of Euro-American encroachment, bison decimation, and Native American adaptation. This issue of *Great Plains Quarterly* offers readers an important view into the insights, innovations, and interpretations generated by the Center for Great Plains Studies' 24th Interdisciplinary Symposium on the bison.