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Andrew Meskil

The University of Montana

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Standing at a Precipice: Bison Survival and Decline on the Nineteenth Century Northern Plains

by

Andrew Meskil

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Nineteenth century bison decline did not happen for any one reason, nor did it occur along an identical timeline for all regions of the Plains. A host of human and environmental factors combined to bump bison out of the ecological niche the animal had held for millennia. theirs is a story of both life and death, destruction and preservation. Two questions must be answered in order to understand the history of bison on the Northern Plains: 1) what led to the almost complete decimation of bison by 1883? and 2) with so many forces arrayed against the animal, how did bison survive for as long as they did? In attempting to answer these questions, I have explored five interrelated factors affecting bison: the fur trade, competition from domesticated animals, a changing climate and ecology, human disease and warfare. Ultimately, bison were almost completely exterminated across the Great Plains. however, because of the strict regulation of the Upper Missouri fur trade by the American Fur Company prior to the Civil War, less competition from domesticated animals, a reduction of Native American population and bison hunting due to disease-related population loss, and the protection afforded bison from buffer zones, bison survived in significant numbers on the Northern Plains for a decade longer than anywhere else in North America.
Introduction

On a recent six-day marathon of a drive from Oregon to the Midwest, I lingered for four of those days in the slice of America I like best: the mountains, plains and badlands of Montana, Wyoming and the western Dakotas. I found myself weaving stories I knew of the region’s past into the tapestry of scenery passing outside the window. As I left Missoula and sped down Interstate-90 – passing Deer Lodge, Butte, Bozeman – my mind erased the roads, towns, ranches, and cattle and imagined thousands of bison in their place, grazing the shortgrasses of the valleys I traveled. I hoped that I’d get to see buffalo before I left what I considered, romantically, to be “the West.”

In Badlands National Park – where a semi free-ranging herd can be found – I was greeted by towering, dusk-painted sculptures of eroded earth, rising from and descending below an endless sea of emerald green prairie grass. Pronghorns and prairie dogs abounded, but I saw no buffalo. A few hundred miles further east I consoled myself on the banks of the Missouri river at a roadside tourist trap, second only to Wall Drug in faux-western tackiness. I eagerly devoured a quarter-pound bison burger while staring at a stuffed buffalo.

This is a fitting image, for bison now occupy a marginal place in North America, lying somewhere between a preserved relic of the past and a novel food resting between two buns. Although currently there are well over two hundred thousand bison living in North America, the vast majority of these are contained within private herds, fenced in and raised as a high priced alternative to beef, a spectacle for tourists, or in some cases as game for wealthy trophy hunters. Even the roughly eleven thousand bison on public land, in parks like Yellowstone and Badlands, exist in an ecological landscape significantly altered from a century and a half ago. Although Yellowstone and Wood Buffalo National Park in Canada have wolves and grizzly bears that prey on bison, these natural predators are absent in many public refuges for buffalo. But this is only one of many problems. In Yellowstone, where

\[1\] While the term “buffalo” actually refers to animals native to Africa and Asia, rather than the species Bison bison addressed here, it has long been used interchangeably with “bison” and I use both in this paper.
some resident bison are infected with bovine brucellosis – which impairs the reproductive success of afflicted animals – bison are shot when they leave the park out of fear of the disease spreading to surrounding cattle herds. In the Badlands, bison are surrounded by perimeter fencing, supported by supplemental water and feed, and culled by biologists when the herd’s natural increase exceeds the carrying capacity of the park.2

Despite these problems, it is remarkable that there are any bison left in North America at all, let alone in substantial numbers. Just over a century ago there were probably no more than three hundred of the animals alive out of the roughly thirty million that had ranged the Great Plains two hundred years earlier. How the animal came so perilously close to the brink of extinction is a complex and interesting tale that I will explore in the following pages.

I am not treading new ground in this endeavor: the destruction of the American bison has captured the attention and intellect of a number of fine scholars, past and present. Early works were primarily natural histories of the animal. One of the first to take the subject on was the zoologist William T. Hornaday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While Hornaday was prone to the ethnocentrism of his day, his work remains an important examination of bison decline and figured prominently in the animal’s eventual preservation. Half a century later, Frank Gilbert Roe used Hornaday to dive far more deeply into the waters of bison history. His book, *The North American Buffalo*, remains a standard in the field. Roe’s and other early works have laid a strong foundation built upon by recent scholars utilizing the tools of

environmental and ethnohistory.\textsuperscript{3}

One of the most contentious issues addressed by early scholars being revisited by contemporary academics is the role of humans in the devastation of bison. More specifically, were Plains Indians major players in the demise of the species that was such an important part of their traditional cultures and livelihood? Hornaday answered this question with a resounding yes. This is not surprising given his support for American expansionism and that he was examining the bison’s near-extermination through the lenses of Social Darwinism. American Indians made an easy scapegoat. Roe took a contrary view. For him, Plains tribes were very much in tune with their surrounding environment and did not exceed the limits of their resources – particularly bison. Roe’s view has found favor in recent decades of environmentalism and a romantic fascination of many Americans with all things Indian. No where is this more clear than in the “Keep America Beautiful” campaign of the 1970s. Shepard Krech III points out that in the 1970s the tear filled eyes of the Cherokee-Italian actor Iron Eyes Cody, staring out from the television and poster adds of the campaign, indicted white Americans for polluting the land while implying that Native Americans had kept it pristine. Krech concludes that this idealized and perhaps anachronistic notion of American Indians ignores a far more complicated relationship that tribes had with the land and the flora and fauna that shared it with them.\textsuperscript{4}

At about the time the environmental heartstrings of Americans were being plucked by the weeping Cody, cultural anthropologist Preston Holder mildly accused mid-twentieth century anthropologists of having “glorified” the bison hunting lifestyle of Plains Indians. Holder contended that in reality Plains nomads lived in a


"dynamically imbalanced situation." In the past decade environmental historians, and a handful of scholars from other disciplines, have tested Holder's view by taking a much closer look at Plains Indians and the environmental consequences of their nomadic lifestyle. On the Southern Plains, Dan Flores has concluded that Indians there contributed to the decline of southern herds, through their hunting, the competition of their horses with bison for forage, and their supernatural beliefs surrounding the animal. In a larger work questioning contemporary notions of Indians as ecologists, Shepard Krech III has explored and largely supported the findings of Flores for the Great Plains in general. Analyzing American settlement and Indian responses on the Central Plains, Elliot West has arrived at many of the same conclusions: in the face of a changing economic, environmental, and demographic world, tribes were forced to make accommodations that had damaging repercussions on the natural world around them. Examining the extermination of bison farther to the north on the Canadian Plains, William Dobak echoes the above authors by asserting that for northern tribes "a healthy, functioning ecology" was "impossible to achieve." 

Native Americans, however, were not living in an isolated bubble, and (by the nineteenth century) their actions were tied to the larger ecological, demographic, political and economic world enveloping them. Climate change, a growing market economy, warfare, politics, and American expansionism were also major players in the nineteenth century tragedy of the bison. Although the above authors explore these other factors in their regional examinations of the Plains, two books examine in more detail the history of bison across the entire Great Plains. The first, by the archaeologist Douglass Bamforth, examines the interplay of Indian adaptation and ecology on the Great Plains from the Pleistocene to the nineteenth century.

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ecology on the Great Plains from the Pleistocene to the nineteenth century. Banforth’s study, however, lacks an examination of nineteenth century ecological change in the region wrought by Euroamericans. Another work, by historian Andrew Isenberg, traces the “destruction of the bison” from the eighteenth century through the early twentieth century. Isenberg’s book reflects the more holistic approach – examining social, ideological, political, economic, and environmental factors – of Flores, Krech, West, and Dobak, but it encompasses all of the Plains for the period after 1750. For a broad scale ethnohistorical, environmental, and gendered portrait of bison decline on the Great Plains, Isenberg’s book is an achievement. However, the tremendous geographic and temporal scope of the work has led Isenberg to at least partially overlook, for the sake of regional continuity, the unique cultural, environmental, and historical landscapes of the various subregions of the Plains.

The Northern Plains extend from the Rocky Mountains of Montana north to the open grasslands and hills of Alberta and Saskatchewan, stretching southeastward to the Missouri river and back again west to central Wyoming. I chose this strikingly diverse and beautiful country as the setting for my study in part because it has received the least attention from recent scholars taking a revisionist approach to bison history. While Isenberg and Krech cover the destruction of northern bison, their conclusions for northern grasslands are based primarily on findings for the Central and Southern Plains. Dobak’s work, on the other hand, is centered on the Canadian Plains and largely excludes the Northern Plains below the 49th parallel. The latter region holds a social, cultural, environmental, and political history of bison diminution that is decidedly unique. While many of my findings resemble those found by scholars addressing the history of humans and bison in other parts of the Plains, there are important distinctions between the section of the Northern Plains I examine and other areas.

Dan Flores has recognized these distinctions with a more in depth analysis of people and buffalo on the Northern Plains. However, his work on the topic functions

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more as an introduction to, rather than an exhaustive treatment of, the topic. Nevertheless, I have been greatly influenced by it, as well as by his analysis of the Southern Plains. Flores has identified three points central to the historical reinterpretation of Indian and Bison on the Northern Plains:

1. "How many Indians hunted bison, and what factors affected their bison kill?"
2. "What other factors, both long-term and short-term, might have affected bison populations?"
3. "Did Plains Indian world views function, as we have often been told, to give native peoples special insights into how nature worked, and to keep Indians in harmonious balance with the natural world? Or were there other forces afoot in the West by the nineteenth century that influenced the Indian relationship to nature in even more compelling ways?"*

In my analysis of the Northern Plains I have tried to expand on the findings of Flores and others on these points, noting the continuity and contrast between this area and other subregions of the Plains. Overall, two central questions drive my endeavor. The first: why were bison nearly annihilated in the nineteenth century? In this, I am very much following the models of scholars noted above. This has allowed me to test the conclusions of others against my own findings, while offering a point of comparison for histories of people and buffalo in other parts of the West.

The second question is somewhat paradoxical to the first: why did bison, with so many forces arrayed against them, live in sizable numbers for as long as they did on the Northern Plains? So much academic attention has gone into figuring out what factors nearly destroyed buffalo that we have ignored the incredible viability of the animal in at least some corners of North America. While this inquiry could be directed toward any sub-region of the Plains, it is particularly relevant to the American Northern Plains, which harbored substantial numbers of bison a decade after their slaughter elsewhere in the West.

These two questions cannot be separated, nor should they be. The

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nineteenth century history of northern bison is a tale of both life and death, destruction and preservation. In attempting to identify why this was the case, I have explored five factors that impacted bison in different ways: the American Fur Company, competition from domestic animals, a changing climate and ecology, human disease, and warfare.

Ultimately, the historic interplay of humans and bison (whether from the standpoint of the animal's decline or survival) on the Great Plains makes for a complicated story with numerous characters and plots. Out of necessity this is an abridged version. I have included what I consider to be the most relevant factors relating to the history of bison and people in the nineteenth century. Rightly or wrongly, there are many more that I have ignored. In focusing on the Northern Plains, specifically the section of it lying within the United States, I offer a case study that can be compared and contrasted with like-histories of the Central and Southern Plains for a more complete understanding of the interior West. In the end I have raised more questions than answers and hope that this study will lead to further inquiry into the historic interactions between people and environment on the Northern Plains.
Chapter One:

"A Market was Furnished for His Robe": The Effects of the Fur Trade on Northern Bison

For years white hide hunters bore the lion's share of blame in the near extirpation of the bison. More recently, however, the burden's been spread by contemporary scholars. Current research notes that buffalo were moving toward near-extinction earlier than the large scale hide hunt of the latter nineteenth century. Still, the economic motivations that drove white hide hunters to kill bison on a massive scale in the 1870s and 1880s were the same incentives that encouraged many western tribes by the 1830s to kill more buffalo than were needed for subsistence. The nineteenth century market economy, then, remains an important factor in the dramatic reduction of the bison's population and range throughout the nineteenth century and offers an excellent point of departure for the story of the destruction of bison on the nineteenth century Northern Plains.

In the early years of the western fur trade, little value was placed on buffalo products. Instead, the market's attention was centered on the beaver and the importance of its underhair to the making of hats popular in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although Native Americans did hunt the beaver for exchange at Anglo trading posts, Euroamericans were the major producers and entrepreneurs of the western version of the beaver trade (beaver were cleared from the East primarily by Indian procurers). The geographer David Wisart has characterized this production method as the "Rocky Mountain Trapping System". This system, with the technological help of steel traps, was incredibly successful throughout much of the West – thousands of beaver pelts were taken by mountain men, and Indian hunters, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²

By the late 1820s beaver populations across the West were declining as a result of intensive hunting. On the Snake river plains the famed trapper Peter Skene Ogden and his brigade, following the policy of Governor George Simpson of the Hudson’s Bay Company, nearly trapped the country bare in an effort to keep American fur men out of the region. Subsequently, some of the more daring trappers turned their attention to the beaver-rich lands of the Blackfeet and Crow Indians. The abundance of wildlife along the waterways in present day Montana and northern Wyoming was due in part to the animosity of the Blackfeet to American trappers, who effectively kept the latter from entering the region following the Lewis and Clark expedition (1803-1806). Much has been made of Meriwether Lewis’s fight with Blackfeet warriors in 1806 and the event’s importance in fostering the tribe’s long-standing aversion to Americans. Probably the better reason for the Blackfeet’s anti-American attitude is their sensible dislike of Americans trapping beaver on Blackfeet hunting grounds, rather than relying on Blackfeet hunters to trade beaver pelts, which bypassed the tribe’s pecuniary interests altogether. The British were not allowed to trap legally below the 49th parallel east of the Rockies and, much to the tribe’s liking and economic benefit, relied on Blackfeet hunters to funnel furs from the area to British trading posts. Although a few daring fur expeditions (most notably those of Manuel Lisa) tried to penetrate the Upper Missouri in the early years of the nineteenth century, it was not until 1829 that American trappers successfully entered the area and began reaping the rewards of the lucrative trapping and trade it held. Within a year, large brigades of mountain men were
setting their traps, albeit with considerable risk, in the Blackfeet hunting grounds.³

By the mid-thirties even the rich Upper Missouri and Yellowstone beaver country was showing signs of depletion and St. Louis-based fur companies (the American Fur Company being the most important of these until the Civil War) became increasingly dependent on another animal for profit: buffalo. The emphasis on the latter animal also brought with it a different, and perhaps more normal, procurement system based on trade and a reliance on Native Americans as the primary producers. This was far more acceptable to Upper Missouri tribes, the Blackfeet included, and they soon became active in the trade in buffalo products. The 1832 arrival of an American Fur Company steamboat, with its high-volume carrying capacity, at the mouth of the Yellowstone made it even more convenient to transport bison robes to St. Louis. The shift in importance from beaver to bison in the fur trade was made complete in 1834, when the market for the former animal crashed. By actively market hunting the buffalo, tribes unconsciously were taking a course far more dangerous to their livelihood than when they hunted the beaver. Unlike beaver, buffalo were central to the nutritional and cultural survival of traditional tribal life on the plains. When beavers became scarce tribes lost a commodity for trade. When bison became scarce Plains tribes lost a way of life.⁴

Nevertheless, even before the beaver lost its elevated status in the Western


market economy, buffalo played some role in the trade. Although elk, deer, antelope and other wildlife were sources of food for Euroamerican trappers and traders (and, of course, western tribes) in their quest for pelts, buffalo provided the favored fare for these men and their families. In some places this use of buffalo merely for subsistence could be devastating to the animal. According to the renowned trapper and later Indian agent Thomas Fitzpatrick, buffalo once ranged into many Rocky Mountain valleys in "immense numbers." The trapper John Work told of significant numbers of buffalo in the mountains of present-day Idaho in his travels of 1831 and 1832. By 1839, according to one observer, there was an increasing scarcity of bison in the mountains, likely as a result of over-hunting by white trappers. Although it was the beaver that mountain men were after in the early fur trade, it was the meat of the buffalo that sustained them. Apparently this Euroamerican hunting pressure, added to that of tribes in the area, was enough to drive bison out of the mountains altogether after 1840. Although buffalo roamed the Rockies in far fewer numbers than in the plains to the east, their decline in the former range offers a telling example of the impact of human hunting of the animal merely as a food source.

Buffalo products dominated the fur trade by the mid-1830s, but the economic importance of the animal dates back at least twenty years before. As early as 1815 buffalo robes were being sent down the Missouri in significant numbers. Between that year and 1834 an annual average of 25,000 robes were coming down the river. The establishment of pivotal trading posts along the Missouri and neighboring waterways at the tail end of this period expedited the collection and transport of

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robes and other peltries. Among the more important of these: Fort Union was built in 1829 at the mouth of the Yellowstone; Fort Clark became a more permanent post among the Mandan and Hidatsa villages in 1831; Fort Pierre was established near the mouth of the Teton river in 1832; and in 1834 Fort Laramie became a prominent post on the North Platte river. Perhaps one of the most significant breakthroughs for the American Fur Company came in 1831, with the establishment of Fort Piegan at the mouth of the Marias river. This latter post, to be replaced three years later and six miles away by Fort Mackenzie, enabled the company to tap, at long last, the valuable Blackfeet trade on a large scale. Another post, Fort Cass, was built on the Yellowstone at the behest of the Crows in 1834, but constant intertribal warfare in the area made it a position difficult to maintain. After reaching Fort Union in 1832, steamboats became the vital thread that tied these far flung northern posts together for much of the next half century.⁹

Beginning in 1835 the expanded presence of the fur trade, dominated by the American Fur Company, paid off. From this year through 1845 the average number of robes shipped annually to St. Louis was 90,000.¹⁰ The number of robes traded in the second half of the 1840s, however, is more difficult to gage. Father Pierre-Jean De Smet reported that by 1847, 110,000 robes were being shipped to St. Louis.¹¹ This number contrasted sharply with that of figures given in Hunt's Merchant's Magazine, stating that an average of only 30,850 robes arrived in St. Louis between 1845-1853.¹² Sources examined by John E. Sunder have led him


¹⁰ Merrill G. Burlingame, "The Buffalo in Trade and Commerce," 277. The number was likely as much as 20,000 less for 1842 and 1843 because Fort Mackenzie, and the valuable trade it brought, was abandoned in these years due to the slaughter of a large party of Blackfeet by the traders Alexander Harvey and Francis Chardon in 1842. The tribe was understandably incensed and trading bonds were not reestablished until Alexander Culbertson returned to the Upper Missouri in 1844. See Bradley, "Affairs at Fort Benton," 236-239.


to conclude that the “St. Louis market averaged 90,000 per year during the 1840’s and 100,000 during the fifties and sixties.”

Andrew Isenberg accepts De Smet’s estimate, finding a report by the Indian agent William S. Hatten that also gives 110,000 as the number of robes shipped.

Even given the difficulties posed by often contradictory sources, most records indicate that the northern robe traffic declined, with two exceptional years, for more than a decade following 1849. Historian Merrill Burlingame has found that only 11,023 robes were received in the latter year; 67,654 in 1850; 95,844 in 1851; and 59,441 in 1852. Isenberg, examining American Fur Company records, discovered that in 1853 the company collected 88,927 bison robes. Alfred Vaughn, Indian agent for the Blackfeet, took into account opposition and American Fur Company returns and put the number for the year at “[n]ot less than 100,000.” Although I have not found robe shipment figures for 1854 and 1855, the statement of profit shares for individual American Fur Company employees for the latter year are a fourth of what they were in 1853, which indicates a relatively meager year for the robe trade. The year 1856 also continued poorly with only 34,243 robes being purchased by the American Fur Company. Business picked up, but was still below earlier levels, in 1857 with approximately 75,000 robes coming down the river. By 1859, the trade had again slowed to 50,000 robes a year.

One factor that may have contributed to the ebb and flow in this decade-long record of robe returns is climate. Richmond Clow has questioned the doomsday

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16 Isenberg, The Destruction of the Bison, 106.
19 Joel A. Allen, The American Bisons, Living and Extinct, 188.
20 Isenberg, The Destruction of the Bison, 106.
accounts of some contemporary scholars regarding over hunting by Plains Indians in the nineteenth century. Clow points out that bison scarcity, particularly in the 1830s, was linked more to weather patterns than Indian arrows. Clow and others have found a wealth of primary evidence demonstrating that during harsh winters bison sought shelter in grassland riparian zones — places where people could easily hunt them. Conversely, mild winters kept bison on the open Plains, away from Indian hunters.21 The apparently poor robe returns of 1855, then, might have been due in part to the mild winter of 1854-1855, when, according to one account, “the buffalo herds avoided the river valleys...”22

Regardless of the reasons behind periodic fluctuations in the numbers of robes sent down river to St. Louis, from the mid-1830s on Upper Missouri tribes were killing far more buffalo for market than they did in the days before the inducements of Western trade. This was not lost on nineteenth century observers. Lieutenant James H. Bradley, a perceptive student of frontier history who died fighting the Nez Perce in the Battle of the Big Hole, wrote of the Blackfeet: “formerly they had accumulated no more buffalo robes than was necessary for their own use; but now that a market for them was created within their reach they began their manufacture on a more extensive scale.” This scale reached as much as 21,000 annually for the tribe by the 1840s. An old Crow informant told Bradley in 1876 that before traders came to his people, the Crows “never dressed more robes than they needed for themselves, but this winter [probably 1833] they went to Wind river, where the buffalo were plenty, and killed a good many, and dressed all the robes, so that every lodge had from sixteen to eighteen robes to sell to the trader.” The Crows, with a much smaller population than the Blackfeet, traded approximately


5,000 robes annually.\textsuperscript{23} Henry Macdonald, who was at various times following the Civil War a trapper, trader, guide, pony express rider, and rancher, also emphasized the significance of trade in Indian bison hunting: "[w]hen the Indian merely killed buffalo for food and clothes these animals were probably on the increase in spite of the forces arrayed against them. But when the trader came and dangled before the longing eyes of the savage glittering trumpery gewgaws, a market was furnished for his robe and the fate of the buffalo was sealed."\textsuperscript{24}

By the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of Indian agents recognized, in often condemning terms, the effect the fur trade was having on Indian predation of buffalo. In his 1849 report, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown blamed the trading practices of the Hudson's Bay Company for "...destroying, annually, immense quantities of buffalo and other game on our side of the line, for their own purposes and those of the company, which gives great dissatisfaction to our Indians, and must eventually prove of serious injury to them, by the extermination, in a few years, of this their chief source of subsistence."\textsuperscript{25} Luke Lea, who followed Brown as Commissioner, made a similar accusation a year later, again blaming the trade of the Hudson's Bay Company for "...the immense annual destruction of the buffalo."\textsuperscript{26} Alfred Vaughn complained that buffalo were fast declining as a result of the "...improvident and reckless course pursued by the Indians in destroying them."\textsuperscript{27} In a report of 1858, Vaughn said that the buffalo were "...followed and ruthlessly slaughtered that its furred robe may demand its price from

\textsuperscript{25} Orlando Brown, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 31st Cong., 1st Sess., 1849, H. exdoc. 5, 951. This comment was undoubtedly more of a nationalistic attack on the Hudson's Bay Company than a fair appraisal of the fur trade, and should be viewed with this in mind. If Brown had wanted to be a bit more even handed he would have acknowledged that the buffalo robe trade of the American Fur Company was often four times that of the Canadian-based company.
\textsuperscript{27} Alfred J. Vaughn, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 33rd Cong., 1st Sess., 1854, H. exdoc. 1, (Serial 710), 354.
the trader. Were these inducements for its speedy extermination withdrawn – this price upon its scalp no longer offered the buffalo would again increase till it filled the valley and the plain...” He then noted:

when a sufficiency for the absolute want of the lodge and the prairie demanded its destruction, its increase was coequal with the necessities of the red man; but when the cupidity of the whites forged the iron arrow point, and the passion of the Indian was stimulated to draw the bow, myriads of buffalo were recklessly sacrificed for the gain of the one and the pleasure of the other.28

E. A. C. Hatch, Vaughn’s replacement as the Blackfeet agent, concurred with his predecessor by saying that the Blackfeet “…annually destroy much more game than they require to subsist and clothe themselves, but as there is yet no sensible decrease in the number of buffalo in their country, it is impossible, at present, to induce them to become more economical.”29 In 1858 Charles E. Mix, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, went as far as recommending that “[m]easures should be adopted to prevent the annual slaughter of the Buffalo...merely for their skins to sell to the traders.”30

However, focusing on the fur trade, and traders, purely as agents for the bison’s destruction is to ignore the complex role that the American Fur Company played in manipulating bison ecology on the Northern Plains in the first half of the nineteenth century. For almost forty years, beginning in 1827, the Upper Missouri outfit of the American Fur Company – first under the guidance of Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and later under his son Charles – had a periodically contested but powerful monopoly of the Upper Missouri trade. The effects of this monopoly on the people, wildlife, and environment of the Upper Missouri country were substantial. The sizable trade in buffalo products controlled by the company certainly had a debilitating effect on the overall bison population of the Northern and Central Plains. Whether or not the early trade in robes, and to a lesser extent tongues and pemmican, prior to the intensive hide hunt of the early 1880s would have led to the

29 E.A.C. Hatch, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., 1856, H. exdoc. 1, (Serial 840), 627
extinction of the animal is more open to debate. The historical record shows a bison range and population that was shrinking throughout the nineteenth century, and the robe trade undoubtedly played a role in this process. Still, the annual volume of the robe trade was far less than the trade in hides that followed it, and no doubt the buffalo would not have vanished so early, suddenly, and completely had the trade remained exclusively that of the animal’s pelt procured and processed by the tribes.

By way of its monopoly, the American Fur Company functioned somewhat as a regulatory entity for Northern Plains commerce and a limiting factor on the trade in buffalo products. The latter point can seem problematic given the company’s inherently exploitative and profit-motivated use of western wildlife. Yet the fact that the American Fur Company was able to nullify competition effectively resulted in fewer robes being processed and traded by Native Americans than otherwise might have occurred. It was in the company’s interest not to flood the market. If a lasting opposition had established itself in the Upper Missouri trade during the forty years of American Fur Company domination, it likely would have benefited the tribes by raising the value of robes and other peltries. As a result, an incentive for plains tribes to kill more buffalo for robes, to capitalize on improved rates of exchange, might have resulted.

Andrew Isenberg has rightly pointed out that the American Fur Company, having learned from the crash in the beaver pelt market in the 1830s, intentionally fixed a low price on bison robes to discourage saturating the market. He argues that the company was able to garner a profit selling robes at a “moderate” price due to the high volume of the commodity being shipped east. According to Isenberg this marketing scheme “meant heavy pressure on the herds.” Perhaps, but the paltry price of robes sold to eastern merchants was compensated for not only by high volume shipments, but also by the ridiculously low prices paid in trade goods by traders to Indians for their pelts. Euroamerican traders marked up their wares from 80 to as much as 2000 percent. Indians were not innocent dupes, but lacking any other
trading alternatives most were forced to accept the exorbitant rates of white traders.31

An exception to this situation existed on the far Northern Plains for the Piegans, Bloods, Blackfeet, Assiniboines, and Crees, who were in a better commercial position, geographically, than many tribes given their proximity to the 49th parallel. These tribes could ply the trade of both the Hudson Bay Company north of the line in Canada and the Americans further south, thereby gaining a stronger hand in barter. In light of this, it hardly seems coincidental that the tribes of the Blackfeet confederacy were among the top suppliers of peltries in the western trade, often supplying as many as 20,000 robes annually by the 1840s to Upper Missouri posts. By comparison, the Crow, who had a similar population to the Blackfeet following the smallpox epidemic in 1837-1838, only traded 5,000 robes on average. It seems likely, therefore, that had a stronger opposition fur company existed along the Missouri and its tributaries, exchange values for furs would have increased proportionally to competition among the fur companies. Tribes might have capitalized on the more favorable economic situation by killing more buffalo for use in trade and reduced bison populations more quickly than actually occurred. One might describe the American Fur Company’s monopolistic hand in destroying buffalo as “restrained exploitation” when compared to the orgy of destruction undertaken by the independent hide hunters of the 1870s and early 1880s.32

Another reason for the American Fur Company’s importance to the northern bison range was as a partial barrier to Euroamerican settlement. While the company remained powerful it controlled, to a large extent, what and who went upriver from

31 Isenberg, The Destruction of the Bison, 105, 107; Sunder, The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 3; Rudolph Friedrich Kurz, Journal of Rudolph Friedrich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and the Upper Missouri Rivers During the years 1846 to 1852 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 177; Francis A. Chardon, Journal At Fort Clark, 1834-1839 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 351.

32 In 1844 the Union Fur Company and the fur interests of Pratte and Cabanne were vying with the American Fur Company for the Upper Missouri Indian trade and the tribes shrewdly took advantage of it. Ultimately, the latter company came out on top. See Thomas H. Harvey to T. H. Crawford, October 8, 1844, 28 Cong., S. exdoc. 1, 438. John C. Ewers discusses the importance of fur company competition to border tribes in “The influence of the Fur Trade upon the Indians of the Northern Plains,” Plains Indian History and Culture: Essays on Continuity and Change (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 52-55. See also Oscar Lewis, “The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture,” Anthropological Essays (New York: Random House, 1970), 179-180.
St. Louis on its steamboats. Further, the limited bureaucracy, in the form of Indian agencies, that did exist for the Upper Missouri during the second third of the nineteenth century was strongly influenced by the company. In part this was due to the political acumen of Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and later by his son Charles, along with other partners of the American Fur Company. Indian agents and a number of politicians who balked at the political leverage of the company found it exceedingly difficult to change the situation. Indian agents depended on trading posts for annuities, interpreters, and a host of other services—not the least of these being transportation. Annuities were delivered on the company’s steamboats, for years being the only craft on the Missouri that were remotely dependable. An interesting consequence of this was that tribes associated—much to the benefit of the company and consternation of Indian agents—federal gifts and annuities with the American Fur Company, rather than the United States government.\textsuperscript{33}

Fur traders were also willing to promote another view first articulated by the explorer Stephen Long: that the western plains were a “Great American Desert” unfit for civilized habitation and occupation. It was obvious to traders that with Euroamerican settlement came a sharp decline in a region’s wildlife populations. To keep the fur trade productive, so-called civilization needed to be kept at bay. According to the fur trader W. H. Parkinson, he was requested by John B. Sarpy, a partner in the American Fur Company, to say nothing of a gold discovery made along the Cannonball river, in present day southern North Dakota, in 1852 because “...it would cause an emigration and destroy the fur trade.”\textsuperscript{34}

Others accused traders, and the American Fur Company in general, of discouraging tribes from becoming “civilized.” The Frontier artist Rudolph Friederich Kurz, himself in the employ of the American Fur Company, recorded that “[t]hey [fur


traders] regard civilization of the Indian with detestation, because that means the end of their traffic.” Going further, he noted that “[a]s long as there are buffaloes to kill fur traders are going to take a resolute stand against the civilization of Indians.” A similar comment was made in a broad critique of the company by the Indian agent Samuel N. Latta in 1862:

This old American Fur Company (so called) is the most corrupt institution ever tolerated in our country. They have involved the government in their speculations and schemes; they have enslaved the Indians, kept them in ignorance; taken from them year after year their pitiful earnings, in robes and furs, without giving them an equivalent; discouraged them in agriculture by telling them that should the white man find that their country would produce they would come in and take their lands from them. They break up and destroy every opposition to their trade that ventures into their country, and then make up their losses by extorting from the Indians.

At the time of Latta’s report the American Fur Company was only three years away from dissolving and its hold on the Upper Missouri was slipping. The Democratic sympathies of American Fur Company employees hampered the company’s political influence, renewed trading opposition threatened its monopoly, the fur market remained poor due to the war, Sioux belligerence was interfering with trade, and reports of gold in the northwestern mountains meant swarms of wealth-seekers would soon be heading up the river. By 1865 these forces had taken their toll, and, simultaneously with the Civil War, the American Fur Company came to an end. The vacuum it left soon was filled by a number of smaller firms engaged in both trade and the growing shipping business on the Missouri. With the American Fur Company’s demise, many of its employees remained in the west – becoming independent traders, teamsters, shop keepers, boatmen, guides, ranchers, and miners – helping to open for settlement the same land the early fur trade had sought to keep shut.

The end of the American Fur Company signaled the end of one era and the beginning of another for the Upper Missouri country. The first brought a gradual

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35 Journal of Rudolph Friedrich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and the Upper Missouri Rivers During the years 1846 to 1852 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 177.


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decline in the range and population of northern bison as a result of consistent and prolonged indigenous subsistence and market hunting. It was also characterized by a small transitory Euroamerican population of traders and river men nominally accepted by the native one. The second culminated in a short, intensive, and wholly destructive exploitation of northern bison by non-native hunters; an emphasis on mineral and agricultural, rather than wildlife, resources; and a dramatic rise in the Euroamerican population, which brought with it an equivalent rise in Indian/white conflict.37

From the end of the Civil War until the late seventies and the start of the northern hide hunt, there is little reason to think that the sometimes-reached pre-Civil War average of 100,000 robes a year traded on the Upper Missouri was exceeded. Although accurate shipment statistics are hard to come by for this period, this is a safe statement for a number of reasons. For one, until approximately 1878 Native Americans remained the primary procurers and processors of bison on the Northern Plains. Probably the most significant limitation on the number of robes that could be traded at a given time, prior to the hide hunt, was the labor-intensive process involved in curing the product. Although it was usually Indian men who killed the buffalo, in the autumn or winter if the animal's pelt was to be used in trade, it was the women who did the bulk of the work in preparing the robes. Although a robe could take less than three days of labor to process by one woman, the work was difficult and a woman generally prepared ten robes for market in a single season.38

Further, because of disease, war fatalities, and the fact that the northern bison range had diminished to what is now present day Montana and northern Wyoming, not as many tribes, and subsequently not as many individual Indians, were actively


involved in the robe trade during this period. But the impact on northern buffalo of 100,000 robes per year traded in the sixties and seventies was probably far more detrimental than it was earlier in the century. Because the overall numbers of buffalo appears to have decreased across the northern plains by the 1860s, 100,000 robes meant a much larger percentage of northern buffalo killed than a like number earlier in the century.

Although some observers from the period believed as many as 250,000 buffalo hides were shipped from Fort Benton alone as early as 1874, one must agree with Frank Gilbert Roe, an authority on the North American history of the horse and bison, that this is an impossible figure. Steamboat records for T. C. Powers and Company, at the time one of the more important – but not the only – transport and trading firms on the Upper Missouri, show that only 16,240 robes or hides were sent down river from Benton in 1874. According to these same records, the peak of robe or hide shipments sent by steamer from Fort Benton came in 1878, with 28,323 being transported. After this year the country surrounding the fort declined as a major hunting ground, with the plains of southeastern Montana becoming the primary final refuge for the buffalo, and the one most vigorously tapped by the white hide hunters when they finally made it onto the Northern Plains.\(^\text{39}\)

In 1870 bison still numbered in the millions on the Southern Plains and white hide hunters are most responsible for the near complete slaughter of these remaining animals by the middle of the decade. These men, unlike Indian hunters, were not limited by the number of hides that their wife, or wives, could tan; rather, they took advantage of rapid and efficient railroad transportation and the newly developed industrial tanning process. For reasons discussed later, hide hunters were prevented from tapping the northern buffalo until 1878, and did not truly begin hunting there on a large scale until 1881.

Once hide hunters did venture onto the Northern Plains the buffalo vanished within a few years, becoming virtually extinct by the end of 1883. William T. Hornaday estimated that 300,000 hides were shipped east by non-native hunters

from the Northern Plains between 1881 and 1883. A proficient hunter with a good .50 caliber rifle could kill as many as 100 buffalo in a day. One exceptional hunter on the Southern Plains killed 5,855 bison in two months. The Montana pioneer and historian Granville Stuart observed at the time 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 in awful sight.” Despite their killing proficiency, the hide hunters only brought to a close a process of bison decline that preceded them. And thus, additional factors that impacted the buffalo’s place on the Northern Plains require examination.

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Chapter Two:
Gold Strikes and Grazing: The Impact of Humans and their Animals on the
Northern Bison Range

In March of 1863, six men – Barney Hughes, Tom Cover, Henry Rodgers, Bill Fairweather, Henry Edgar and Bill Sweeney – left their winter camp in western Montana’s Deer Lodge valley to seek their fortune. Miners by inclination but with little to show for it, the group had left Elk City, Idaho, the previous summer heading east in the hope of finding fresh diggings. They decided to try their luck in the remote Big Horn mountains to the southwest, and left their winter camp with the intention of meeting another prospecting party led by James Stuart. After passing an old camp of Stuart’s, Hughes and his group followed Granite Creek and crossed over to the Madison River. As they crossed the Madison Plateau, with the sharp snow covered peaks of the Gallatin range towering to the south, the men were in the heart of Big Sky Country. Unfortunately, the beauty of the land was matched by its danger. Not far from the Three Forks of the Missouri river, the area the men traveled bordered a risky hunter’s paradise traversed by war parties of the Nez Perce, Blackfeet, Crows, Bannocks, Salish, Pend Oreilles, and Sioux. Now it was being crossed by white miners whose vision of the land differed greatly from the tribes Hughes and his party hoped to avoid. For the Indians who came there, the richness of the Northern Plains and mountains lay on the surface of the land: in the teeming herds of buffalo and horses that crossed it, in the grass that grew from it, and in the water that coursed through it. For the miners, the abundance of the land came from below: in minerals and metals formed there millions of years before. Both visions shaped the land, and ultimately both had a hand in the fate of the buffalo.

1 John Work gives a good description of the plentiful “game” in this dangerous area, particularly buffalo, in his travels through the area in 1823–1824. See The Journal of John Work: A Chief-Trader of the Hudson’s Bay Co. During His Expedition from Vancouver to the Flatheads and Blackfeet of the Pacific Northwest (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1923), 98-109. The Montana pioneer Granville Stuart also noted the importance of the region as a hunting and war ground. See Forty Years on the Frontier as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart: Gold Miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher and Politician, Vol. 1 (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1925), 204.
The miners continued east, forded the Gallatin river and then veered slightly north, ultimately reaching Shield's river, which they followed to the Yellowstone. After a month of travel, still without meeting up with Stuart, the prospectors were camped directly across from Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone. Unfortunately for the men, while they were at this spot Crows came upon the camp and all of the miners were taken prisoner. After four days of deliberation, the Crows released the men, now stripped of most of their possessions and mounted on poor horses. The disgruntled party continued out on their original course, traveling for only half a day when they were again overtaken by the Crows. The tribe had changed its mind and told the miners they must either turn around or die. The Crows did not want miners on their land. With little choice, Hughes and his band headed back the way they had come. On their return trip the prospectors idly checked here and there for "color." On May 22, at a place later called Alder Gulch, they got lucky. The strike soon proved to be a substantial one and it, along with other rich mining claims that followed, quickly opened the floodgates of American settlement on what would become the territory and then state of Montana.

In the winter of 1862-1863, fewer than 700 non-natives lived in what is now the state of Montana. Two years later the number increased to almost 15,000. Considering that in 1857 the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Upper Missouri estimated the entire Native American population under his charge—which included the most numerous Montana tribes—at 24,248 souls, the dramatic influx of EuroAmericans was a serious boon to the region's human population. Even in 1861, before the main rush of gold-seekers came to Montana, a rising stream of miners and other emigrants was coming up the Missouri to Fort Benton. From here...
they could travel the recently completed Mullan road westward, taking it as far as Fort Walla Walla in Washington Territory if they so desired. Although Mullan’s overland route never became a major artery of western travel, it was busy enough to impact the region’s ecology. This impact is summed up well in the 1862 diary of James Harkness. Traveling from Fort Benton to Deer Lodge on a trading venture, Harkness recorded: “[g]ame very scarce owing to the emigrants.” In earlier years western Montana valleys like the Deer Lodge, Big Hole, Beaverhead, and Jefferson were visited by buffalo and other wildlife, but as whites began to settle the region the animals became scarce. It seems the Crows probably had some idea of what the white’s quest for gold might bring when they refused to let the miners pass in May of 1863.

Although the troops of prospectors undoubtedly ate buffalo when they could, their hunger was probably less damaging to the ungulate’s range and population than other things the group brought with them. Prospectors needed horses, mules, and oxen for transportation, and 15,000 miners meant a considerable amount of domesticated animals were hoofing it into Montana. The growing mining camps also needed a steady supply of meat and, to serve this purpose, cattle began to dot the ranges of western Montana. Raising livestock was such a success in the region that in the 1870s the “Great American Desert” view of the Northern Plains had changed to “the Great Western Pastoral Region.” As early as the mid-1850s one Indian agent of the Upper Missouri went so far as to say “there is not a possibility of overstocking the country, subsistence being inexhaustible...” By the 1870s the national press was espousing similar views and settlers and their animals

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were moving onto the Northern Plains in increasing numbers.10 Unfortunately for the bison, their dietary needs overlapped considerably with that of the encroaching livestock, putting the animals in competition with each other.

In 1860 the cattle herds of present day Montana were summed up by Granville Stuart as “a small herd at St. Ignatius, a few at Fort Owen, and about two hundred head in and near fort Benton.” As non-natives came to the region in increasing numbers after 1863, however, so did their animals. By 1880 there were 250,000 cattle in Montana and that number dramatically rose to 600,000 by 1883, the same year the range was cleared of the remaining bison. Cattle herds, like horses, on the Central and Southern Plains were larger and present for a longer period than in the north, and likely were more damaging to the bison range in those areas. Nevertheless, northern cattlemen penetrated the hunting grounds of northern tribes and certainly had a negative impact on the buffalo. Tribes were understandably incensed by white ranchers and raided the latter frequently. By 1881 stockmen had so infiltrated the northern hunting grounds, and were so incessantly harassed by Indians because of it, that they formed the Stockgrowers Protective Association to forcibly curb Indian depredations of livestock. Granville Stuart, one of its founders, actually used the Blackfeet Treaty of 1855 to support the claims of cattlemen. He noted that the treaty acknowledged tribal hunting rights for 99 years so long as there was game. Stuart reasoned that cattle had invaded the hunting grounds to the extent, and pushed out native wildlife enough, that the treaty rights no longer held. The tribes took a decidedly different, but ultimately ineffective, view.11

Whites were not the only humans whose animals vied with bison for feed. For over a century prior to the Montana mining boom, the horses of northern tribes

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were primary competitors with buffalo over Northern Plains grasses. Horses came first to the southwestern plains, brought by the Spanish in the seventeenth century. In 1680 Puebloan groups, violently oppressed by the Spanish encomienda system and intolerance of native beliefs, revolted and forced the Spanish back into Mexico. The Spanish horses remained, however, and very quickly the animals, and the knowledge needed to care for them, spread northward via indigenous trading networks. As early as 1742, according to the explorer and trader Chevalier de la Verendrye, the Shoshones were well supplied with horses, and most other northern tribes had them.\(^\text{12}\) Although some tribes hunted buffalo for hundreds of years prior to the introduction of the horse, they were only partially dependent on the animal for food. Horticultural peoples such as the Hidatsas, Mandans, Pawnees, and their precursors, hunted to supplement their crops of corn, beans and squash. The coming of the horse, and the mobility it provided, allowed other tribes living outside, or on the periphery, of the plains to move out onto the grasslands and pursue bison hunting full time. Tribes like the Assiniboines, Aytinas, Arapahos, Cheyennes, Crows (originally part of the Hidatsas), and Sioux did not become permanent Central and Northern Plains residents and buffalo hunters until after they acquired the horse.\(^\text{13}\)

Whether or not the horse produced a cultural revolution for plains tribes matters little here. What does matter is that the horse was an important plains technology used in varying degrees by some tribes to exploit the region's elusive resources. Like all technology, the adoption of the horse carried both environmental and cultural consequences. With the horse's use, the indigenous population of the Northern Plains rose to 50,000 in 1780, while added, and perhaps detrimental,
pressure was put on the region’s plant and animal resources.” Horses fit much the same ecological niche as buffalo and, along with their human masters, preferred the same riparian zones for shelter and sustenance when the weather turned bitterly cold. During the winter, when grasses were often covered by snow and lacked the nutritional content of spring and summer months, Indians fed their ponies the bark, branches, and saplings of cottonwoods and willows. Although this diet could sustain horses until the weather warmed, it left the animals weak and degraded important riparian areas over time. The latter was noted by Lt. Gouverneur K. Warren, on his 1857 expedition in Dakota Territory, when he observed that deforestation had occurred in places where the Sioux had wintered their mounts. In the waning years of the pre-reservation days, these environmental constraints on horses also proved a liability for some tribes in their wars with the United States military. American soldiers capitalized on the stationary winter camps of hostile tribes, knowing their horses would be weak and the tribe’s fighting capacity reduced. For these reasons the historian James E. Sherow believes that the reliance of tribes on horses made their adaptation to plains life incomplete.

But in viewing plains Indian material culture as an “incomplete environmental adaptation,” Sherow ignores one other important role of the horse: it tied a number of tribes to an exclusive bison hunting lifestyle that was precarious at best. The very trading networks that allowed tribes initially to obtain horses were easily co-opted by white traders, whose Western manufactured trade goods induced the now highly mobile equestrian tribes to hunt substantially more buffalo than they needed for subsistence. From the mid-1830s on, buffalo products were the most important commodities in the Upper Missouri fur trade, with as much as 110,000 robes sent down river annually. Beginning in the 1840s observations that the bison were in a

steady state of decline became increasingly more common. As previously discussed, not a few observers of the time held Indian market hunting as the main culprit. Although far from the sole cause, Indian hunting, both for subsistence and for the Western market, certainly stressed bison populations.

Without their mounts Indians could not have hunted buffalo to the extent that they did. The renowned anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber believed pre-horse Indians only “nibbled at the buffalo.” Frank Gilbert Roe asserted that horses made Indians more “conservative” hunters. Before the horse, pedestrian native hunters surrounded buffalo on foot, or used natural features of the land, such as cliffs and cut banks, to assist them in corralling and killing large numbers of bison at once. To work, the entire tribe — men and women — needed to assist in driving the buffalo over large distances until the animals, ideally the entire herd, were concentrated and killed. According to Roe, after plains Indians acquired the horse, individuals could selectively hunt, no longer killing buffalo en masse. However, Roe chose not to emphasize that equestrian buffalo hunting was a year round — rather than seasonal — endeavor, or that it was market driven. Further, the selectivity horses brought to buffalo hunting carried other consequences. Post-horse Native Americans could selectively kill cows and calves, whose tender meat was preferred by the hunters themselves, and whose pelts were favored by the fur traders. Over time the favoring of the young and females had serious consequences for the reproductive success of bison.

It is difficult to estimate how many horses western tribes had at any given time, but the ratio for the early nineteenth century used by one recent scholar is between six and fifteen horses per person. Estimates for nineteenth century Indian populations are also sketchy. During the first three quarters of the nineteenth

century, the Northern Plains native population lay somewhere between 25,000 and 58,000.\(^2\) Using these figures, it is possible that there were between 150,000 and 600,000 Indian horses on the nineteenth century Northern Plains.

For several reasons, the number was probably much nearer, and perhaps below, the lower figure. The previously cited ratio of between six to fifteen horses per person was applied by historian Andrew Isenberg to horse Indians across the entire Plains, even though it is based on estimates specific to the Southern Plains. Also, when compared to the exhaustive research of anthropologist John C. Ewers, these figures appear quite high even for the Southern Plains. The highest horse/person ratio given by Ewers for any tribe over the course of the nineteenth century is 11.8 for the Umatillas, Walla Wallas and Cayuses – tribes west of the Rocky Mountains. For the Great Plains, Ewers found that the Kiowas and Comanches – Southern Plains tribes – had the most horses per person at four. According to Ewers, the average for the majority of western tribes was significantly lower, between 0 and 2. Considering all of this, 150,000 Indian horses should be considered a high upper limit for the early nineteenth century Northern Plains. One should also note that over the course of the nineteenth century Indian horse populations may have declined – an 1874 commissioner of Indian Affairs report shows that roughly 58,000 Northern Plains Indians had only 40,000 horses.\(^2\)

Even if a decisive population estimate for nineteenth century western horse herds remains elusive, there is little doubt that most northern tribes had significantly fewer horses per capita than Indians further south. The crux of the extensive examination of the historical record by Ewers supports this assertion fully. A comparison between two sets of figures, the first for the Northern Plains and the


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second for the southern, offers an illustration. According to Lieutenant James H. Bradley, a soldier as well as amateur historian and ethnographer of Montana, the horses per lodge for a number of northern tribes circa 1830 are as follows: Crow — fifteen; Piegan — ten; Blackfoot and Blood — five; Gros Ventre (of the prairie) — five; Flathead and Nez Perce — fifty; Assiniboine — two. Although the Sioux are not included here, they probably had averages similar to the Blackfeet. Mid-century figures given by W. D. Whitfield, Indian agent for the Upper Arkansas agency, indicate that the more southerly Comanches, Kiowas, Plains Apaches and Southern Arapahos had an average of 6.25 horses per person. The Southern Cheyennes had a slightly smaller average of 5.55. These latter figures are higher than those of Ewers, but not dramatically so. Depending on the tribe, estimates on the number of people per lodge on the Northern Plains fluctuated between two and sixteen. Even if one uses the conservative average of two people per lodge, when factored with Bradley's figures northern Indians — save perhaps the Crow — had significantly fewer horses per person than those to the south. The above 1874 Commissioner of Indian Affairs report verifies this. According to the report approximately 28,000 Southern and Central Plains Indians had roughly 10,000 more horses than approximately 58,000 Northern Plains Indians. This report is particularly interesting because at the time it was written many northern tribes were still equestrian bison hunters. Tribes to the south, however, were confined to reservations and left by white hide hunters with almost no buffalo to hunt, and yet they still had more horses than Indians to the north.

Alan J. Osburn has used Ewers as a platform to attribute the fewer horses of northern tribes to harsh winters, which made it difficult to maintain large herds. Relative to the Southern Plains, northern grasslands experienced a shorter growing

season and a longer winter dormancy—a time when short grasses lose over half of their summer protein. Northern horses, then, were forced to subsist for longer periods on the less nutritious supplements of cottonwood and willow. During average northern winters, Ewers has found that these seasonal feeding strategies were probably enough to prevent heavy horse losses. However, during more severe winters, losses to northern herds could be heavy. Such was the case during the bitter winter of 1862, when the Montana pioneer Granville Stuart reported that “...the Indians that were over in buffalo country suffered terribly...[t]hey lost most of their horses.” Another likely consequence of more difficult northern winter climes, when human interventions were important to horse viability, was far fewer wild horses in the north than in the south. This, and the relatively silent historical record on the subject, indicate that the two million wild mustangs purportedly living on the Southern Plains was nowhere replicated on the Northern Plains. Northern bison, then, were spared the far more intense competition over grasses faced by the animal on the Plains to the south.

This is very significant to understanding why northern bison fared better than the animals elsewhere in the West. The dietary overlap of horses and bovines posed a serious problem for buffalo by reducing grassland carrying capacity. Although it varied greatly according to location, grass type, and precipitation, approximately seven acres worth of grass a day were needed to feed one thousand horses. A substantial population of horses and other domesticates on the range, then, had the potential of seriously reducing the number of bison the plains could support. This was certainly true for the Southern Plains, where an estimated .25 to .5 million Indian horses and two million wild mustangs likely consumed the forage of over two million bison. On the Northern Plains, where there were far fewer Indian and wild horses, the equestrian impact on the buffalo range was probably far

Henry Edgar, and the miners that traveled with him, surely gave little thought to the possible ecological implications of their horses as they rode them onto the Plains to find their fortune—nor the dramatic changes finding that fortune would bring to the West. Similarly, the Crow who stopped the miners, probably did not recognize the environmental constraints that led them to rob the white men of their ponies. In a northern environment that was particularly hard on horses, stealing, rather than breeding, was a far more certain way to acquire mounts. Both parties were caught in a rising flood of cultural and environmental change that promised to leave in its wake a western landscape changed in ways no one—Indian or white—could predict.

Chapter Three:  
A Changing Climate and Ecology  

Horses and other domesticates were not alone in making the Plains a more difficult place for bison to survive. From the fourteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, a climatic period known as the Little Ice Age brought the world lower annual temperatures and higher annual precipitation relative to the present. These conditions may have benefited bison by promoting a five hundred year anomaly of richer grassland habitat. When the global climate returned to more “normal” temperature and precipitation levels droughts became more frequent and the grassland carrying capacity of the western plains may have diminished.¹

Even though drought has been shown as an important factor in the decline of buffalo in some areas of the plains, its relevance to northern herds has not been given much attention. Beginning in 1846, and continuing for as long as nine years in some places, much of the Central and Southern Plains were plagued by below normal precipitation. If the Northern Plains were abnormally dry at the time, no one living there at that time mentioned it. However, dry years finally descended upon the region in the 1850s and continued with few respites until 1866. In 1865, while on an unsuccessful Powder river campaign against the Sioux, one officer remarked that “it seemed as if no rain had fallen in this part of the world for ages.”² Indian crops across the plains failed in several of these years. Alfred Vaughn lamented in the fall of 1855 that “the great drought in that region of the country [Upper Missouri] was such that all kinds of vegetation presented but a very languishing appearance.” The


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crops of the village horticultural tribes were reduced by two-thirds from lack of rain. Not until 1858 did northern grasslands get a break when, according to Vaughn, “more rain fell in the valley of the Upper Missouri during the months of July and August last than during the whole preceding five years.”

Interestingly, the impact of drought may have been felt less had trappers earlier in the century not devastated northern beaver populations. The anthropologist R. Grace Morgan has noted the importance of beavers in maintaining standing bodies of water that provided areas of refuge and sustenance to both humans and animals in an often arid plains environment. Most plains tribes had cultural taboos against hunting beavers, Morgan argues, in part because Indians knew their environment and the beneficial role of beaver in it. Beavers stabilized and conserved water resources that became especially important during periods of drought. Eventually the fur trade and increased intertribal animosity eroded tribal proscriptions against beaver hunting and added to the devastation of northern beaver populations wrought by white trappers. By 1831 the trader William Gordan was able to report that the devastation of the beaver in the Upper Missouri and Rocky Mountains was “general and extensive.” Although the fur trade shifted its focus to buffalo, the earlier destruction of beavers continued to impact Northern Plains ecology by making buffalo and Indians more susceptible to periods of little rain.

Dry years also impeded American attempts to turn Indians into “civilized” farmers. Unfortunately for the Indian agents, they tried to get northern tribes to till the soil beginning in the 1850s, just as drought began to grip the region. Many of the

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5 R. Grace Morgan, “Beaver Ecology Beaver Mythology” (Ph.D dissertation in Anthropology, University of Alberta, 1991), 1-17
7 Davidson, “Climate Variability on the Northern Great Plains,” 11.
tribes persuaded by agents to try farming had already been horticulturalists on some level only a century before, when they climbed atop horses and took up bison hunting full time. Subsequently, history and climate worked against the agricultural dreams of Indian agents and only reinforced the native perception that the hunt was far better than the plow. The Blackfeet agent Henry W. Reed observed in 1862 that the “Indians do not seem to have received any very encouraging views of farming from the experiment.” It appears that the Brule Sioux, Iron Nation, agreed with Reed, when in a statement made a few years later he said: “[w]e have planted corn and the frosts kill it – we do not...like to plant corn, we had rather hunt buffalo...” Another Sioux, Spotted Tail, spoke in a similar vein: “[t]he Great Father wants us to plant corn...we want to live as our fathers have lived on the buffalo and the deer that we now find on our hunting grounds.” Ironically, white attempts to make Indians farmers in a time of drought only made them more ardent bison hunters.

Unlike domesticated crops, western shortgrasses were especially adapted to survive dry periods, but they did so at the nutritional expense of the ungulates that fed upon them. The first response of grasslands to drought is a decrease in the forage yield, which is matched by a decrease in grassland carrying capacity. If severe enough, malnutrition can make animals more susceptible to disease, reduce fertility (already an important nineteenth century factor for buffalo because of selective human hunting), and reduce the viability of offspring. The devastating drought of the Great Depression saw a reduction of forage yield in Montana of seventy-five percent in just three years. In 1942, in southeastern Alberta, twelve acres produced the same amount of feed that seventy acres grew during the drought year of 1936. But the drought year of 1860 was even worse: only two thirds of the precipitation of the worst years of the Dust Bowl fell on the Great Plains.

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9 Stuart, Forty Years on the Frontier, Vol. 2, 70, 72.
10 Quoted in Jeffrey Ostler, ""The Regard Their Passing as Wakan": Interpreting Western Sioux Explanations for the Bison's Decline", Western Historical Quarterly 30 (Winter 1999), 489.
While drought more frequently impacted Southern and Central plains bison, exceptionally dry periods undoubtedly hurt northern herds as well. In fact, the severe drought of 1883 probably helped the hide hunters finish off the remaining northern buffalo.

Drought intensified the impact of grazing animals on western grasslands, and it did much the same for a few other environmental mainstays of the plains: grasshoppers and fire. Although Walt Disney made a soft spot in some hearts for a cricket named Jiminy, nineteenth century westerners harbored little love for the insect. The journals and memoirs of western travelers bear testament to the devastating potential of grasshoppers. Yet histories of nineteenth century bison decline have all but ignored the impact these creatures had on the plains. In 1936 the ranges of western North Dakota lost as much as 40 percent of their new growth to grasshoppers. Sixty-two years earlier, in 1874, the Northern Plains were sieged by swarms of the insects so thick observers wrongly took them for storm clouds. In some places they covered the ground six inches deep. William Ludlow, a captain of engineers with Custer's Black Hills expedition of that year, estimated that grasshoppers covered the plains near Fort Lincoln a hundred per square foot. Although he picturesquely compared their descent from the sky to falling snow flakes, Ludlow went so far as to call grasshoppers "one of the most serious

obstacles to the future successful colonization of the country.” Grasshoppers were so bad in eastern Montana in the spring of 1863 that James Stuart anticipated that “there will not be a spear of grass here in two weeks.” A year later the country surrounding the Yellowstone river was “stripped of vegetation” owing to “drouth and grasshoppers.” Fortunately for the the Sioux, this seriously impeded the effectiveness of General Alfred Sully’s 1864 campaign against the tribe. In another expedition twelve years later, Captain John G. Bourke mentioned that while camped along the Tongue river “the heat of the sun was tempered by a gauze veil which inspection showed to be a myriad of grasshoppers seeking fresh fields of devastation.” In 1870 an agent for the Yankton Sioux recommended removing the tribe from “a climate where crops are so uncertain owing to the scarcity of rain and the ravages of the grasshopper...” He goes even further, saying that “...in five years of the last ten the crops were totally destroyed by the drought and grasshopper, and in one year of the ten there was about half a crop...” Andrew Isenberg uses an 1864 account of Oglalla Sioux supplementing their diet with Rocky Mountain locusts to illustrate the often meager rations of plains nomads. He might have missed a larger point: the Sioux were lacking in meat because of the very insects they were eating. Grasshoppers (particularly after mild winters did not destroy the eggs) had the potential, when combined with periods of low rainfall, to reduce the carrying capacity of western ranges.

Unlike grasshoppers, fire could be both beneficial and devastating to the plains and the people and animals who lived on them. The significance of fire ecology to native North America, and more specifically to the plains and buffalo, has

been addressed in detail by other authors, but a brief summary can be made here. For centuries Indians strategically burned the prairies in the spring, understanding that many grasses thrived in burned over areas. Edwin Denig, an important Upper Missouri trader and ethnologist, found grass "more lively and thick than the former owing to its having been freed by the fire from all briars and decayed vegetation." The new growth attracted buffalo and other grazers, allowing tribes to more easily hunt the animals. Burning kept shrubs and trees from invading the plains and taking over. Intentionally firing the prairie also allowed tribes to more directly manipulate animal migrations, if the winds were right, by forcing them in a certain direction. The same strategy could also be used defensively to keep other tribes away from, or force them out of, key hunting grounds.

Unfortunately, fire could go quickly from a useful indigenous tool to an uncontrollable plains nightmare. Throughout the summer and fall nineteenth century observers on the Plains frequently saw fires burning, some set intentionally and others accidentally lit or caused by lightning. The 1834-1839 journals of Francis Chardon, the principle trader at Fort Clark near the Mandan and Hidatsa villages, are sprinkled with accounts like "weather continues smokey," and "the prairies are on fire." Chardon specifically blamed the Arickaras and Yankton Sioux for some of these blazes. Others were probably accidental. Chardon himself started one grassland fire simply because he had "nothing else to do." The impact of flame on buffalo could be substantial. In 1819 Wilhelm Ferdinand Wentzel recorded that "fire having overrun the plains in Red River, buffaloes had become so scarce that none were to be found nearer than the upper part of the Pembina River." Other accounts describe buffalo blinded and blackened by fire with "half roasted carcasses" of the

20 Edwin Denig, Five Indian Tribes, 107.
22 Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839, Anne Heloise Abel, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 7, 8, 37, 45.
animals scattered along the plains.²⁴

Fire was an important defensive tool used by tribes against one another, but it was also used, particularly by the Sioux, in their wars against the United States military. An American colonel complained in 1865 that for as much as two hundred miles his company’s mounts were dying daily from a lack of grass arising in part from Indian burning. In 1876, Lakotas burned the plains of eastern Montana for “not less than one hundred miles each way” from the Tongue river. Captain John Bourke described the vast expanse of burned over land “as destitute as the sahara.”²⁵ Although these blazes hampered the offensive efforts of American soldiers, it probably did as much harm to the Sioux and other northern tribes dependent on forage for their horses and bison.

By the 1860s the Sioux from the east had effectively driven the buffalo west of the Little Missouri river, while other tribes and white settlement were constricting the northern bison range from the west, north and south. As the northern range of buffalo shrank to the grasslands of Montana and northern Wyoming by the 1870s the impact of human and environmental factors on the land and bison increased considerably. In earlier times, if the western plains were hard hit by drought, insects, or ravaged by fire, bison could migrate north or eastward to take advantage of the improved conditions brought by latitudinal and longitudinal changes. When humans, Indian and white, prohibited this migratory safety valve by effectively surrounding bison on all sides, buffalo were far more susceptible to population loss from human and environmental pressures.²⁶

Among scholars interested in bison there has been an ongoing debate about

²⁵ Bourke, On the Border with Crook, 334, 408-9.
whether or not the animal's migrations were predictable.\textsuperscript{27} Even though the bison's whereabouts were far from predetermined, the tribes, and eventually the whites, who hunted them could make some fairly good informed guesses. When Indians burned the prairie in the spring they did so to attract buffalo and other wildlife. Tribes also used fire to prevent bison from heading one way or to force them to go another. Further, Indians and whites living on the plains knew that climatic changes influenced bison migrations. If the weather was extremely cold, buffalo tended to seek shelter in forested riparian zones. However, if a winter was mild, or other observable forces such as prairie fires occurred, buffalo would likely remain on the plains making it more difficult for hunters to find them. According to Lieutenant Warren, Lakotas by the late 1850s actually seemed to be herding the animals, confining them for months in the vicinity of the Black Hills: “the whole range of the buffalo was stopped so that they could not proceed south, which was the point to which they were traveling. The intention of the Indians was to retain the buffalo in their neighborhood till their skins would answer for robes, then to kill the animals by surrounding one band at a time and completely destroying each member of it.”\textsuperscript{28}

From the mid-nineteenth century onward a shrinking range reduced the migratory possibilities for bison and subsequently made it easier for humans to find and kill them. One archaeologist, Douglass Bamforth, has made a good case for an increase in the size of bison herds over the course of the nineteenth century as a result of hunting and settlement pressure. These factors – a constricted range and large herd aggregations – made it possible for white hide hunters, along with

\textit{continued indigenous hunting}, to be the capstone on the grave of northern buffalo in


the early 1880s. The hundred bison a day a good individual hunter could kill would not have been possible if herds had been small and dispersed. Technology — in the form of highly accurate Sharps or Remington .50 caliber rifles — combined with the ecological responses of buffalo to human and environmental pressures to make hide hunters extremely successful in their short-lived profession.29

29 Bamforth, Ecology and Human Organization, 80-84.
Chapter Four:
Death and Disease on the Upper Missouri

The changes, many of them detrimental, to the bison range wrought by the fur trade, domesticated animals, and an altered Northern Plains climate and ecology, were partially offset by the tremendous loss of human life associated with epidemics on the western plains in the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, determining the significance of this impact has long been a contentious issue for those interested in Native American demography. Scholars of the American Historical School, typified by Alfred J. Kroeber, hold that epidemics did not cause significant population decline in the early post-contact period, and have subsequently made fairly conservative population estimates for pre- and early post-contact native America. On the other hand, some more recent scholars, led by Henry Dobyns, have questioned the findings of Kroeber and his supporters, believing their pre-contact population estimates for aboriginal North America are far too low and that disease was a devastating agent of indigenous population decline from the earliest post-contact years onward. In the words of one archaeologist, “it is not unreasonable to suggest a minimal population loss of ninety percent from all introduced diseases.”

This is a debate important to an accurate understanding of bison history. If disease was as rampant and destructive as Dobyns and others have asserted, then the vast multitude of buffalo encountered by the earliest European and American

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explorers of the Plains may not reflect of the pre-contact landscape. European-introduced illnesses may have reached and wiped out tribes years before Europeans themselves actually made contact with the Indians. Subsequently, bison populations and range may have expanded dramatically as the animal's human predators were wiped out by disease.

Erhard Rostlund has essentially made this argument in his examination of bison in colonial southeastern America. Rostlund asserts that prior to around 1675 there were no accounts of bison in the region. However, for a hundred years after this date the animal appeared to flourish. Rostlund speculates that disease-related Native American mortality opened to bison a southeastern range that had previously been inaccessible because of a large and well organized tribal presence. Although the American southeast was not the grassland Mecca of the Plains, it was a region characterized by open park-like meadows caused by Native American burning, where bison would have found plenty of forage. In the West much the same thing occurred at approximately the same time as bison moved west of the the Rocky Mountains, to present day Lassen County in California. By the 1830s a growing Euroamerican population in both eastern and western America had pushed bison back onto the plains west of the Mississippi and east of the Rockies, and over the next fifty years the animal's range and population continued to contract.

It is possible that the cool, wet climate of the Little Ice Age, which may have increased grassland carrying capacity, combined with a disease-related decrease in human pressure to promote an exceptionally large North American, and more specifically Northern Plains, bison population and range in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Even ignoring the probable impact of disease early in the post-contact period (archaeological evidence suggests that large scale population decline in the region began as early as the seventeenth century), known epidemics in the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century seriously reduced Northern Plains tribal populations. Smallpox came to Plains tribes in 1780, 1801,

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1837, and 1870, while cholera swept through the region in 1849. From 1780 to 1877 a forty-five to seventy-nine percent reduction in tribal populations occurred, much of this due to disease.\(^3\)

The horticultural tribes were the hardest hit by these epidemics. Their sedentary villages protected them from attack and made ideal centers of trade. Gaining an early access to European trade, and particularly the firearms it brought, enabled tribes like the Mandans, Hidatsas, Arikaras, and Pawnees to prosper for a time. Unfortunately, these villages proved excellent transmission grounds for illness and the perks of village life were quickly overshadowed by the ruinous effects of disease.\(^4\) The 1780-81 smallpox epidemic destroyed as much as one-half of the Missouri horticultural tribes.\(^5\) The French trader Jean Baptiste Truteau, on a journey to the Upper Missouri country in 1795, recorded that prior to the 1780 epidemic the Arikara had "32 populous [sic] villages," which were reduced by smallpox to two.\(^6\) This population loss of the sedentary tribes was matched by a decline in power. Although some plains nomads were hard hit by smallpox – the Plains Cree lost as many as "half of their former numbers" in the 1781 epidemic – overall they fared much better than the horticulturalists.\(^7\) The lifestyle of Plains nomads limited the transmission of disease – they had a relatively low population density, and moved their villages seasonally, which made sanitation less of a problem. Perhaps more importantly, their smaller, more isolated villages made epidemics, such as smallpox, dependent on direct person-to-person contact more difficult to get going.\(^8\) From the 1780s on, nomadic tribes took control of the Northern Plains to the detriment of the


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horticulturalists. However, this process, contrary to the views of some historians, was not complete until another devastating epidemic in 1837.\(^9\)

The 1837-38 smallpox epidemic virtually annihilated the sedentary Upper Missouri tribes. Francis Chardon, a trader at Fort Clark, said by the end of September, 1837 “seven eights of the Mandans and one half of the Rees Nations” had perished.\(^10\) In less than a year the former tribe of close to six hundred warriors was reduced to “about thirty souls.”\(^11\) Jacob Halsey, another Upper Missouri trader, believed at the time that “10 out of 12 die with it [smallpox].”\(^12\) The plains nomads were hard hit too, but their populations tended to be higher and they could afford to lose more people than the horticulturalists. The ethnologist James Mooney believed that Upper Missouri tribes taken together to had lost “nearly one half.”\(^13\) Joshua Pilcher, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, wrote that all told the Blackfeet, Assiniboines, Cheyennes, Crows and Cree, lost 25,000. The Blackfeet alone were reported to have lost “not less than six thousand,” which translated to close to two-thirds of their number.\(^14\) This epidemic was the deathnell for any lingering dominance the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arickaras still had, but it also seriously affected the power dynamics among the nomadic tribes. After the epidemic ran its disastrous course, the precarious balance of tribal power on the Northern Plains was tipped in favor of the many bands of Sioux, who had managed to sidestep the dramatic population losses that decimated other tribes.\(^15\)

Regardless of its impact on trade, smallpox and other diseases carried far-reaching consequences for those who survived them. After the smallpox outbreak in the early 1780s the Cheyenne and Oglala and Minneconjou Sioux abandoned agriculture for good. \(^16\) With as much as half of the Upper Missouri’s indigenous

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\(^10\) *Chardon’s Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839*, Annie Heloise Abel, ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 138.


\(^12\) Jacob Halsey to Pratte, Chouteau & Co., November 2, 1837, in *Chardon’s Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839*, 394.


\(^16\) Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison*, 59.
population falling to the disease, tribes were affected culturally as much as demographically. Social fragmentation was the natural result of sudden and dramatic population loss. For some bands of the Sioux and the Cheyenne, this social and cultural fragmentation combined with other factors, particularly the adoption of the horse, to cause these tribes to give up agriculture. For the Mandans and Hidatsas, other horticulturalists who refused to give up their sedentary lifestyle, disease had so whittled down their populations by 1838 that the two tribes were forced to combine in one village – Like a Fishhook. Even among already nomadic groups, like the Blackfeet and Assiniboines, epidemics had a significant social and political impact, compelling decimated tribes to reorganize themselves.

Like all infections, smallpox reduced both the appetite and the ability of tribes to procure food in their debilitated condition. Such was the case at Fort Clark, where the trader Francis Chardon recorded that “although Cattle have been in Abundance all winter the Indians have not laid up a Morsel of dried Meat, They will starve before long as they have no Corn.” The Mandans and Hidatsas, like many other tribes ravaged by disease, were too weak to harvest or hunt; starvation came to finish the fatal job smallpox had begun.

Given the appalling attrition rates of most Upper Missouri tribes during the 1837-38 smallpox outbreak, it would be reasonable to assume that the Upper Missouri fur trade declined as a result. In fact, just the opposite occurred. The season following the epidemic, Fort Mackenzie (later Fort Benton) saw 10,000 robes traded – a better return than any previous year. Three years later, not nearly enough time for tribes to replace their substantially depleted ranks, the number had improbably increased to 21,000 robes. James H. Bradley, commenting in the 1870s, explained this post-epidemic increase in the robe trade as surviving Indians trading the robes of their many tribesmen who had fallen to smallpox. But the Upper Missouri robe returns remained much higher than pre-epidemic years for

18 John C. Ewers, The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture, 320.
19 Shepard Krech III, Ecological Indian, 90-91.
20 Francis Chardon, Journal at Fort Clark, 152.
over thirty years following the 1837-1838 outbreak – certainly far longer than could be accounted for by the trade of the robes of the smallpox victims alone.\textsuperscript{21}

The observations of Bradley and others, along with fur company records, amply demonstrate that nineteenth century epidemics, despite killing thousands of Plains Indians, did not seem to hinder the trade in bison goods. Why? By the 1850s the indigenous population of the northern plains was roughly 42,000 souls – and, as historian Dan Flores has pointed out, this is a figure that excludes Rocky Mountain and village tribes who frequented the plains to hunt buffalo.\textsuperscript{22} Other scholars have concluded that native bison hunters, across the Great Plains, required approximately 6.5 bison a year to meet their subsistence needs.\textsuperscript{23} Twenty-five thousand bison hunting Indians of the northern plains died during the 1837-1838 smallpox epidemic. For the most part these tribal population losses were never recovered in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} Subsequently roughly 156,000 bison were no longer required to meet the annual subsistence needs of shrunken post-epidemic tribal populations.

Does this mean that smallpox was the Indian's executioner and the bison's savior? Not exactly. Before the smallpox outbreak in 1837 only about 25,000 robes annually were traded on the Upper Missouri. By 1840 the number had dramatically increased to 100,000 and stayed there, with some notable exceptions, for the following thirty years. This substantial growth in the exchange of bison robes is an acknowledged and oft-cited fact by historians of the fur trade. Unfortunately, no

\textsuperscript{21} See chapter one.


\textsuperscript{24} James Mooney, \textit{The Aboriginal Population of America North of Mexico}, 13.
one has explained adequately why it happened, only that it did. One explanation, given by Lieutenant Bradley in the 1870s, while wild buffalo still inhabited the Plains, has already been noted: Bradley thought the robes of those Indians who died were traded by the survivors in the first few years following the smallpox epidemic. This, however, does not account for robe returns lasting well into the second half of the nineteenth century that were much higher than in pre-epidemic years. To address this, Bradley offered a second explanation that nearly all recent scholars echo: the inducements of the world market economy lured Plains tribes into hunting far more buffalo than they needed for subsistence alone. The 1840s, then, just happened to be the decade when tribes finally swallowed, after years of cautious nibbling, the bait of Western trade goods.

There may be more to the story, however. Bradley, while on the right track, too loosely tied the effects of smallpox to the expansion of the robe trade. If smallpox had killed the fur trade like it did Upper Missouri tribes, as many as 156,000 buffalo might have been spared annually. These were bison that the 25,000 Upper Missouri Indians who perished in the epidemic would have harvested just to meet their basic needs for living a year on the unforgiving Plains. But the fur trade did not die, in fact it flourished, following the epidemic.

Although Western trade goods undoubtedly were alluring to indigenous hunters, they needed buffalo to get them. Prior to the epidemic, northern plains tribes were, primarily, subsistence hunters: as many as 67,000 Indians probably killed 400,000 buffalo, but traded only 25,000 robes – which translates to roughly sixteen percent of the total robes taken. Given the size of the historic Northern Plains herd (perhaps as many as 5,600,000 animals), only 200,000 bison could be killed without exceeding the natural increase of bison. Tribes, then, were pushing the sustainability envelope of their bison hunting lifestyle just to meet their basic needs, let alone actively engage in the fur trade. Prior to the 1837 smallpox outbreak there simply may not have been enough buffalo, or time to procure them, beyond what was needed for subsistence to allow Indian hunters to participate in the

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fur trade on anything other than a small scale.

This changed when smallpox hit. The epidemic left Upper Missouri tribes with far fewer mouths to feed and a northern buffalo herd far less taxed by the subsistence needs of these same tribes. Along with leaving thousands dead, smallpox may have left gaps in the traditional and material cultures of Northern Tribes that were filled by an increased reliance on Western trade goods. Nothing could have been better for the fur trade. Indian hunters, their tribal roles depleted by disease, could devote more energy to robe production for market rather than for subsistence use. This is exactly what northern tribes did, increasing the number of robes they traded by as much as 75,000 more in the post-epidemic years. This increase in market hunting by tribes, then, cut into the 156,000 post-epidemic decrease in annual subsistence hunting by almost half.

Given that Indian market hunting on the Northern Plains never exceeded much more than 100,000 robes, and was often far less, and that indigenous populations never really recovered from their population losses resulting from the 1837-1838 epidemic, a net decrease in bison mortality from native hunting occurred after 1838. While the market and subsistence hunting of nineteenth century tribes after 1840 exceeded acceptable limits for the long term viability of bison on the Northern Plains, bison were still better off than a decade earlier when a much larger indigenous population was hunting primarily to meet their basic needs. The rise of

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The population of a number of northern tribes were decimated again in subsequent outbreaks of disease. In 1848, the Northern Shoshones contracted smallpox, who then passed it along to the Crows. A fierce cholera epidemic swept the Plains in 1849-1850, which was particularly devastating to tribes of the Southern and Central plains. In 1856 smallpox once more traveled up the Missouri and wiped out between 2,000 and 3,000 Indians – mainly Arikaras, Hidatsas, and Crows. Some might make the argument that a growing number of Sioux on the Northern Plains – through a high birth and low (relative to other tribes) mortality rate, and migration west by eastern bands – made up for the population losses of other tribes hard hit by disease in the late 1830s. This does not appear to be the case. While estimates by white observers at the time are decidedly shaky, the Sioux population on the Northern Plains seems to have reached roughly 25,000, their population in the 1850s and 1860s, at approximately the time of, or shortly after, the 1837-1838 smallpox epidemic. See E. Wagner Stearn and Allan E. Stearn, The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the Amerindian (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1945), 85-86, 97-99; Alfred Cumming, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 34th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1856, H. exdoc. I, (Serial 893), 624; Warren, Preliminary Report of Explorations in Nebraska and Dakota, 51; J. W. Denver, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 35th Cong., 1st Sess., 1857, H. exdoc. 2, (Serial 942), 292; White, “The Winning of the West,” 330.
Indian market hunting in the 1840s was not the beginning of the end for bison, but merely a continuation, on a lesser scale, of the over-exploitation of the animal.
Chapter Five:

"When Everyone was at Peace...the Buffalo would Soon Disappear": Warfare and Bison Preservation on the Northern Plains

Warfare has long been a favorite theme of both historians and Hollywood filmmakers in portrayals of the historic West. But the impact of war on Western ecology has long been overlooked. This has begun to change. According to Paul Martin and Christine Szuter, the teeming herds of buffalo, elk, deer, and other mammals observed by early nineteenth century explorers along the Upper Missouri were not entirely "natural." In fact, the multitudes of bison, deer, elk, and other wildlife that greeted the likes of Lewis and Clark were intensively shaped and manipulated by human action. This action, according to Martin and Szuter, took the form of intense intertribal warfare - a fact of indigenous life on the plains for most of the nineteenth century and certainly centuries before. In the nineteenth century West, warfare had the interesting side effect of creating no-man's lands between belligerent tribes. These buffer zones were too difficult for one tribe to control and too dangerous for people to enter with any security. Bison naturally congregated to these grassy havens where humans, horses, and arrows were few.¹

Martin's and Szuter's hypothesis is not altogether new. Historical accounts are sprinkled with references to warfare and its effect on wildlife. The nineteenth century British explorer John Palliser, reporting on the plains drained by the Sasckatchewanan

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river wrote, "[t]he abundance of game here is accounted for by its being the neutral ground of the Crees, Assineboines, and Blackfeet; none of these tribes are in the habit of resorting to its neighbourhood except in war parties." One indigenous observation coming from the early nineteenth century is that of Herosche, a Konza chief, made while addressing his enemies the Otoes, Missouries, and Iowas: "My Friends! We wish for peace, and we are tired of war; there is a large tract of country, intervening between us, from which, as it is so constantly traversed by our respective hostile parties, we cannot either of us kill the game in security, to furnish our traders with pelties." An intrepid Canadian, General Sam Steele, clearly identified the impact of war on western wildlife: "...peace, rather than war" was the greater threat to buffalo; "when everyone was at peace with his neighbor and could go where he liked, the buffalo would soon disappear..."

Martin and Szuter limit their analysis of Northern Plains buffer zones predominantly to the early nineteenth century and the journals of the Corps of Discovery. How much further in time can their martial ecological theory be taken? A perusal of the documents indicates that the lands adjacent and between the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone rivers, at least in part, remained highly contested and rich in bison until the very end of the hide hunt in the early 1880s. But Martin's and Szuter's argument must be approached with caution. Their hypothesis potentially reduces complex ecological and cultural processes to a simplified causal relationship between indigenous warfare and plentiful wildlife. Their argument also raises the question of what even constitutes a "natural" ecosystem, and whether humans can be included in it. As the nineteenth century progressed the dynamics of intertribal warfare changed. The technology, tactics, role and power of various tribes involved in plains conflict evolved and changed over time due to a wide array of factors, and these changes affected, in some cases dramatically, the environment(s) of which

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3 Irene M. Spry (ed.), *The Papers of the Palliser Expedition: 1857-1860* (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1968), 146 with more discussion of "neutral grounds" on 143.
northern tribes were a part.

Warfare provided an important cultural mechanism with which tribes cognized the landscape around them. It dictated, in part, how tribes understood and related to each other and the animals they hunted. Not surprisingly, both the act of hunting and of war made similar social and technological requirements of their participants. The weapons, horse skills, rules of engagement, and ceremonialism used by Plains Indians were very similar for both pursuits. Warfare and hunting were major sources of indigenous cultural identity, particularly for men, and provided the primary means of social mobility in the relatively egalitarian, though not entirely unstratified, tribal societies. Indeed, the two pursuits went hand in hand – hunting often led to war, and war was often waged to allow tribes to hunt.

The brush of history, until quite recently, has painted the nineteenth century Plains – an important stage for both indigenous hunting and war – as a veritable paradise. In 1820, Stephen H. Long noted that the "...whole of this region seems peculiarly adapted as a range for buffaloes, wild goats, and other wild game, incalculable multitudes of which find ample pasturage and subsistence upon it." This view was first established by the awe-struck accounts of the first white explorers in the region, particularly Lewis and Clark. In an exceedingly flowery example, Lewis, describing the plains drained by the lower Marias river, says the area is one of "...the most beautifully picturesque countries that I ever beheld, through the wide expanse of which, innumerable herds of living animals are seen it's borders garnished with one continued garden of roses, while it's lofty and open forrests are the habitation of miriads of the feathered tribes who salute the ear of the passing traveler with their wild and simple, yet s[w]eet and cheerfull melody." Whether the "innumerable herds" present on the nineteenth century Northern Plains were actually a natural phenomenon independent of human influence has been a question long neglected by scholars, and is only recently receiving some academic light by the

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likes of Martin and Szuter and others.

There does seem to be a link between indigenous warfare and the sizable animal populations of Upper Missouri grasslands. However, the innumerable animals of the Northern Plains that Martin and Szuter associate with indigenous conflict simply would not have been there, warfare or not, if the ecosystem had not been able to support such a substantial biomass. The wildlife implications of indigenous warfare combined with a diverse and healthy ecosystem on the Northern Plains to make the region one of the most, and by the mid-eighteen seventies the most, bountiful bison ranges in the West.

Douglass Bamforth has argued that Northern Plains grasslands, including the area encapsulated by warring Upper Missouri tribes, consistently provided the most abundant habitat for buffalo. This contradicts a number of ethnographic accounts that long held the Southern Plains as the better buffalo range. William T. Hornaday believed that “...although the northern herd ranged over such an immense area, it was numerically less than half the size of the overwhelming multitude which actually crowded the southern range.” But this traditional view, according to Bamforth, is entirely unsupported by evidence. He finds a general trend, for both historic and pre-contact buffalo, whereby the animal’s population and density decreased as one moved southwestward from the northeastern plains of North Dakota to the southwestern plains of the Texas panhandle. Overall, the Northern Plains had a higher annual precipitation, milder summer temperatures, less fluctuation in climatic trends, as well as more consistent and longer growth patterns for grasses than the plains further south – all factors that promoted northern bison herds that would have been “larger, more densely distributed, less mobile overall, and more regular in their

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The temporal, cultural, and ecological landscape described by Martin and Szuter was the result of a combination of human and ecological processes. On a material level, the debatable zone of the Upper Missouri in the early nineteenth century existed in part because of the technological equilibrium and social alliances among the tribes surrounding it. By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century all Northern Plains tribes had at least some horses while at the same time European traders and their posts were becoming more common on the Northern Plains and in the Rockies. Subsequently, western tribes—primarily the Salish, Kootenais, Pend Oreilles and Nez Perce—who for a number of years had lacked access to the firepower acquired by their enemies via the fur trade, were able to obtain a moderate amount of guns and ammunition. At the same time, tribes farther east on the Upper Missouri plains, particularly the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, also acquired guns through trade. A number of these early nineteenth century indigenous groups, long pressed by the Blackfeet from the west and the Sioux from the east—who had access to European trade longer than many northern tribes—suddenly found themselves in a better position, not only to defend themselves, but also to go on the offensive and carve out a piece of the northern hunting grounds for themselves. ¹⁰

The importance of guns to the Salish and other mountain tribes is reflected in this comment by Cartier, a chief of the Salish, to David Thompson in 1810: "...You

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¹⁰ For a discussion on the diffusion of horses and firearms across the Plains see Frank Raymond Secoy, Changing Military Patterns of the Great Plains Indians (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); For the importance of horses in promoting indigenous warfare see David Thompson, David Thompson’s Journals Relating to Montana and Adjacent Regions, 1808-1812, M. Catherine White, ed. (Missoula: Montana State University Press, 1950), lii.
are well aware when you go to hunt the Bison, we also prepare for war with the Peeagans and their allies; if we had ammunition we should already have been there, for the Cow bisons are now all fat, but we cannot go with empty Guns: we do not fear War, but we wish to meet our enemies well armed..."11 By 1805, even the Crow, one of the more remote tribes along the Yellowstone, saw their access to firearms increase with the trading trip of Francois-Antoine Larocque. In the eastern plains, the Sioux took advantage of their early access to firearms, via their connection with eastern woodland European trade, and forcefully entered the plains in the mid-eighteenth century. This began a process of plains conquest, according to Richard White, that would rival that of the British and Americans for over a century.12

While the war potential of many northern tribes during the first three decades of the nineteenth century was balanced by the access most of them had to guns and horses, numerical inequalities between belligerent tribes were compensated for by the formation of alliances: one between the Salish, Kootenais, upper Pend Oreilles and Nez Perce; another between the Assiniboines and Plains Cree; still another, and one of the most powerful, composed of the Piegans, Bloods, Blackfoot, and Gros Ventres; and an alliance between the Mandans and Hidatsas, which the Arikaras sporadically joined throughout the early nineteenth century. Another peace made in 1825 between allied bands of the Sioux and the Cheyennes and Arapahoes became one of the most important indigenous alliances in Plains history. The common thread running through all of these alliances is that tribes joined them primarily to better their ability to hunt buffalo in the face of their enemies. Although the Sioux alliance was astonishingly successful in conquering much of the plains, it was never able to wrest fully the rich hunting grounds between the Upper Missouri

11 Thompson, David Thompson's Journals Relating to Montana and Adjacent Regions, 3.
and Yellowstone rivers from the other northern tribes who hunted there.  

Interestingly, though the aforementioned are all significant rapprochements, there was never a comprehensive alliance between all, or even most, of the principle Northern Plains tribes. This is strikingly different from what occurred on the Southern Plains. In 1840 a grand alliance was formed between the previously warring tribes of the Comanches, Kiowas, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Kiowa-Apaches. For well over a decade these tribes had been killing one another for control of the plentiful Southern Plains hunting grounds. As in the north, this warfare promoted buffer zones in the Southern Plains that limited tribal hunting and provided some protection for southern bison herds. With the transfer of eastern tribes to the west side of the Mississippi during the 1830s a new competitor was introduced to the struggle over Southern Plains hunting grounds. The 1840 peace was made, in part, to keep these eastern tribes off the plains. The peace also brought a more favorable situation for white traders and gave western tribes better access to firearms and other trade goods. Despite its benefits to the tribes involved, the ecological consequences of the peace were dire. Without the threat of war to keep them out, Kiowas, Comanches, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, and Kiowa-Apaches exploited the bison resources of the area with far less restraint. Subsequently, more buffalo were killed and the southern herds were pushed eastward into a new buffer between eastern and western tribes.

Intertribal and Indian/United States warfare continued unabated on the Northern Plains until the 1880s. Regardless of shifting tribal boundaries and fluctuations in tribal power across the Plains, much of the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone grasslands remained contested ground for most of the nineteenth century. While hunting grounds east of the Missouri and south of the Platte were being disrupted by American and Sioux expansion, hunting grounds west of the Missouri were partially stabilized by buffer zones that had been established by the

time of Lewis and Clark.

The ecological impact of these war-induced buffers is reflected in the accounts of the Corps of Discovery in the early nineteenth century. As the fifty-man contingent led by Lewis and Clark journeyed northwestward from St. Louis, Lewis recorded that a variety of wildlife was plentiful from the junction of the Missouri with the Mississippi river. However, he made it clear that buffalo were not seen in significant numbers until the party reached the Sioux river, near present day Vermillion, South Dakota. From there to Fort Mandan, "the buffalo, elk and deer increase in great quantity." From the time they left Fort Mandan until they reached the Shoshone at Lemhi Pass, the Corps of Discovery saw no people, but an amazing quantity of wildlife. Only in the established hunting grounds of the Mandans and Hidatsas, and in the heart of the Badlands, did the group meet with any scarcity of wild animals. The explorers recorded an "abundance of wild game, especially buffalo, elk and deer, the animals often tame and easily dispatched."15

This wildlife paradise was surrounded and in part created by warring tribes – including the Mandans, Hidatsas, Arikaras, Assiniboins, Blackfeet, Shoshones, Bannocks, Crows, Kootenais, Pend Oreilles, Salish, and bands of the Blackfeet and Sioux. Captain William Clark wrote: "I have observed that in the country between the nations which are at war with each other the greatest numbers of wild animals are to be found."16 Upon reaching the Rocky Mountains, wildlife decreased and west of the range almost none was to be found at all. Martin and Szutzer demonstrate the ecological continuity of the grasslands east and west of the Rockies, but note that the western tribes were at peace and their lands were virtually devoid of wildlife. Without the prohibitive hunting consequences of a war zone, the substantial human population sandwiched along the Columbia drainage between the Cascades and Rockies over hunted the region. Agreeing with a number of recent conservation

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16 Garry E. Moulton, The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 11 volumes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983-1997) from the journal entry of 16 September 1804; Martin and Szutzer distinguish this quote in their article, see "War Zones and Game Sinks in Lewis and Clark’s West," 42-44.
biologists and anthropologists, Martin and Szuter believe many indigenous subsistence hunters to have been highly opportunistic in their hunting strategies. The two authors contend that contrary to the environmentalist label often ascribed Native Americans, many tribes were fully capable of seriously altering their environments. Nevertheless, warfare can, and on the nineteenth century Northern Plains did, minimize the potency of human predation and maintain animal populations in core areas.

An 1825 expedition to the Yellowstone, led by General Henry Atkinson and Major Benjamin O'Fallon, was sent with the task of putting an end to the rampant intertribal warfare in the Upper Missouri region and lessoning the animosity of some tribes toward the United States. Northern tribes, particularly the Blackfeet and Arikaras, had shown a vehement hostility toward the Americans since the War of 1812, and in some cases earlier. In 1824 Congress passed an act authorizing treaties with the Missouri tribes. United States representatives held council with the Poncas, Tetons, Yanktons, Yanktonais, Cheyennes, Arikaras, Mandans, Hidatsas, and Crows; the Blackfeet and Assiniboines were the only two tribes the expedition had planned to but failed to meet. Bison, bears, deer, various birds, and other creatures of the plains were a constant sight all along the Upper Missouri, but became particularly plentiful upon reaching the Yellowstone – the beginning of the region bordered by the most tribes. Promoting access to this rich Upper Missouri bison range by the increasingly profitable fur trade was one primary impetus for the expedition. Although Atkinson's and O'Fallon's mission went smoothly, it did little to curb intertribal rivalries and bloodshed. The continually turbulent nature of the Upper Missouri before and after the Yellowstone expedition of 1825 is evidenced by the conflict in the lands surrounding the sedentary villages of the Mandans and Hidatsas. 17

The latter tribes were feeling the expansionist pressure of the Yanktonai


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Sioux even at the time of Lewis and Clark. Although the Arikaras to the south of the Mandan-Hidatsa villages occasionally joined the latter tribes to fend off the Sioux, by 1832 the Arikaras had been forced further afield by the Yanktonais. With the Arikaras gone, the Mandans and Hidatsas composed the bastion preventing the Sioux from taking complete control of the Upper Missouri to Fort Union. Despite facing a much larger force of Yanktonai and Yankton Sioux warriors, the Mandans and Hidatsas were not bested by the latter until 1838, following the devastating smallpox epidemic of the previous year.

Throughout this period, hunting the still rich buffalo country surrounding the Mandan and Hidatsas was a dangerous endeavor. The observations of Francis A. Chardon, the clerk at Fort Clark for much of the 1830s, reflects this. Chardon’s description of one outing – “[w]ent out hunting, saw enemies, and returned” – is typical. On another occasion he wrote that a large party of Mandans went on a hunt and successfully killed a “quantity” of buffalo cows, only to abandon the meat when they “saw enemies” on the way back to their village. During the difficult winter of 1836-1837 buffalo were only thirty miles from Fort Clark, yet though they were starving, the Mandans refused to leave. According to Chardon, “Fear Makes them Keep at home.” In March, 1837, the Mandans finally submitted to the call of hunger and went to kill buffalo, reported in abundance forty miles from Fort Clark, but “fear overtook them on the way” and they returned starving and empty handed.¹⁸

But the Mandans and Hidatsas were not to be taken lightly. Indeed, the Yanktonais feared the horticulturalists enough to move their village up the Heart river in February, 1837 to get away from the two tribes. The Yanktonais had good reason to be cautious. In 1836, in a state of near starvation, the tribe went north in search of buffalo. Along the way they stole some corn from the Mandans and Hidatsas. The latter sent chase the next morning and decimated the Sioux encampment, killing at least 150 and taking forty-three women and children prisoner. On Prince Maximilian’s visit to Fort Clark in 1833 and 1834, Toussaint Charbonneau,

¹⁸ F. A. Chardon, Chardon’s Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839: Descriptive of Life on the Upper Missouri; of a Fur Trader’s Experiences Among the Mandans, Gros Ventres, and Their Neighbors; of the Ravages of the Small-Pox Epidemic of 1837, Annie Heloise Abel, ed. (Pierre: Lawrence K. Fox, Department of History, State of South Dakota, 1932), 6, 35.
still alive thirty years after his journey west with the Lewis and Clark expedition, observed that despite Sioux harassment, the Mandans and Hidatsas often bested their adversaries in battle.\footnote{Fulkerson to Clark, 1 Oct. 1835, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs; Alexander Philip Maximilian (Prince of Wied Neuwied), \textit{Travels in the Interior of North America}, Vols. XXIII, 230-2; XXIV, 13-14, 54, of \textit{Early Western Travels, 1748-1846}, Ruben Gold Thwaites, ed. (32 vols, Cleveland, 1904-1907).}

By the late 1830s buffalo were becoming scarce on the lower reaches of the Missouri. Upriver, the horticultural tribes kept up a successful resistance to Sioux advances and buffalo remained in sizeable numbers in a contested zone between Forts Pierre and Union. North and west of Fort Clark the Mandans and Hidatsas fought over hunting grounds predominantly with the Assiniboines and Plains Cree. The land south of Fort Clark to Fort Pierre roughly corresponded to the region fought over by the village horticulturalists and the Yanktonais and Yanktons.

The impact of this conflict on wildlife is reflected in Chardon's record of an upriver trip taken in 1838. Returning to Fort Clark from Fort Pierre, Chardon saw very few Indians in this war zone but an abundance of buffalo, antelope, deer and other animals on his way up the Missouri. Elsewhere in his journal, Chardon’s entries repeatedly punctuated by references to war parties of Sioux, Assiniboines, and Cree, who consistently threatened the Mandans and Hidatsas his post served. But by the late-1830s, there was no clear victor in this battle over hunting grounds and Mandans and Hidatsas held their own against their many enemies.\footnote{Chardon, \textit{Chardon's Journal at Fort Clark}, 171.}

Following a devastating smallpox epidemic in 1837-1838, the dynamics of intertribal warfare, and subsequently the dynamics of the hunting grounds on the Upper Missouri east and south of Fort Union, changed considerably. In the fall of 1837 Jacob Halsey, a trader for the American Fur Company, noted that although buffalo were plentiful in the area, there were few Indians left to hunt them. Interestingly, the epidemic did not hurt the fur producing capacity for trade of Upper Missouri Indians, but did significantly reduce the number of buffalo killed for subsistence by northern tribes.\footnote{See chapter nine, footnote twelve.}
The consequences of disease on the balance of tribal power were significant. The stationary and confined village environs in which the horticultural tribes lived provided ideal conditions for the spread of illness. That only twenty-three Mandan men, forty women, and sixty children were left standing at the end of the epidemic bears testament to this. On the other hand, equestrian nomads like the Sioux, with a more loosely organized social structure and a shifting demographic, presented a less favorable environment for the transfer of disease. In speaking of the Sioux, who had not yet succumbed in any great numbers to the epidemic, Jacob Halsey wrote "...we hope the disease will not be so fatal as with their neighbors." His hope was fulfilled: comparatively the Yanktons and Yanktonais suffered much less from the 1837 outbreak than other northern tribes. In addition to a more epidemic-resistant social structure, many Sioux had heeded the warning given by Missouri Indian agent, Joshua Pilcher, to stay away from the smallpox infested trading posts. Furthermore, Richard White believes the domination of the Missouri trade route by the Yanktons, Yanktonais, and Saone Tetons helped these tribes to weather the storm of disease. In 1832 the Office of Indian Affairs sent doctors up the Missouri to vaccinate tribes met along the way. The Sioux were the first Indians the doctors met with and over a thousand Yanktonais were vaccinated. Lacking the funds to bring the vaccine farther upriver, the noble project ended in giving the Sioux a biological edge over their less immune enemies.  

Human disease had an indirect, yet profound, impact on Northern Plains ecology. Following the scourge of smallpox the remnants of the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras fled the Sioux and moved farther up the Missouri river, finally

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22 Preston Holder, *The Hoe and the Horse on the Plains: A Study of Cultural Development among North American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 84-85; Halsey to Pratte, Chouteau & Co., 395; Richard White, "The Winning of the West," 328-329; J. Pilcher to Wm. Clark, Feb. 27, 1838, July 3, 1838, and Sept. 12, 1838, Upper Missouri Superintendency, Letters Received, Records of the Office of Indian Affairs. In reference to horticultural tribes of the Missouri, Thadeus Culbertson related: "because they live in villages and in these mud houses they are more exposed to the epidemic and again their enemies always know where to find them and lurking about kill them when working in their fields...while these [horticulturalists] have decreased the Sioux, a wandering people, have greatly increased. Their mode of life giving them advantages of all the particulars mentioned as being disadvantageous for the others." See Culbertson, *Journal of an Expedition to the Mauvaises Terres and the Upper Missouri in 1850* (Washington, 1851), 102.
ending up at Fort Berthold in the early 1850s. After the horticultural tribes were decimated by disease, the Sioux effectively took control of the Upper Missouri to Fort Union. With intertribal competition nullified, the buffalo herds were quickly hunted out and pushed west of the Missouri. By the 1840s buffalo were virtually gone from grasslands east of the river. The story was much the same further south along the Missouri. Below the Yanktonais and Yanktons, the Oglala and Brule Sioux had pushed southwestward of the Missouri into the Black hills and Powder river country of the Crow. When the smallpox epidemic hit, these Sioux bands, and the Crow as well, were well away from the Missouri disease corridor and lost few of their number to the illness.

Farther west, the area surrounding the Three Forks of the Missouri, the Judith Basin, and lands to the north drained by the Sun, Teton, and Marias rivers, now became an even more highly contested hunting grounds – primarily between the Crows, Shoshones, Bannocks, Salish, Kootenais, Pend Oreilles, Nez Perce, Assiniboines, and the four allied tribes of the Blackfeet confederacy. In 1805, Lewis noted that the Shoshones, Salish, Nez Perce and other western tribes journeyed from the Rocky Mountains onto the plains “at the risk of their lives.” The Three Forks of the Missouri was an important meeting place for these mountain and Columbia river peoples, where they could boost their numbers and increase their chances of a successful hunt on the dangerous western buffalo range. Unfortunately, the Three Forks also provided a not-infrequent stage for bloody clashes between these tribes and their enemies. John Colter, an early trapper and one-time member of the Corps of Discovery, discovered this to his dismay in 1808 while traveling with a party of Salish. The latter tribe, numbering close to 800 with the addition of some friendly Crows, was set upon by a party of 1500 Blackfeet. Significantly, Colter’s participation in the battle on the side of the Salish further eroded the already poor

Blackfeet relationship with the Americans.²⁴

Much like the Sioux to the east, the Blackfeet were a painful and persistent thorn in the side of most western tribes for much of the nineteenth century. War between the Blackfeet, Salish, Kootenais, Pend Oreilles, Nez Perce, Shoshones, and Bannocks was so severe that the entrance to the Blackfoot river corridor leading mountain tribes onto the buffalo plains was called “Hell's Gate.” The Blackfeet were firmly possessive of the plentiful Upper Missouri hunting grounds and did their best to restrict all access — of both whites and other tribes — to these lands. Just before his trip along the Yellowstone to the Rockies, the fur trader John Work reflected: “I escaped with my scalp last year. I doubt whether I shall be so fortunate this trip.”²⁵

The smallpox epidemic that aided the Sioux in their play for northern hunting grounds loosened the Blackfeet’s grip on them. Ironically, the Blackfeet’s desire to protect their hunting grounds ultimately limited their ability to do so by bringing the destructive disease to the tribe. Alexander Culbertson, the trader at Fort McKenzie on the Marias river, tried and failed to prevent the Blackfeet from coming into the infected post to trade. The tribe wanted to get hold of a crucial shipment of guns to be used in Blackfeet excursions against the Salish and Crows. As a result, the Blackfeet, Piegans, and Gros Ventres were devastated. Although the Blackfeet remained a potent force after the devastating epidemic had gone, their less populous enemies — particularly the Salish, Pend Oreilles, Nez Perce, Kootenais, and Crows — weathered the epidemic more successfully and faced better odds in war against the dramatically reduced tribe. Americans, too, benefited from the outbreak of disease among the Blackfeet. The latter tribe, seeing the epidemic as a judgment against their violent actions toward the whites, lost much of their previous

²⁴ Chittendon, The American Fur Trade, 838, 841; DeVoto, The Journals of Lewis and Clark, August 19, 1805 entry; Stallo Vinton, John Colter Discoverer of Yellowstone Park: An Account of His Exploration in 1807 and of His Further Adventures as Hunter; Trapper; Indian Fighter; Pathfinder; and Member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (New York: Edward Eberstadt, 1926), 79. François Laroque at about the same time as Lewis, noted the danger of traveling in the Yellowstone country and recorded the uneasiness of the Crow he was traveling with. The area abounded in game but there was considerable fear of attack among the group. See Laroque, The Journal of François Laroque, 57-59.
animosity toward the Americans.\textsuperscript{26}

Most northern tribes exploited the buffalo as much as they were able to, but the Sioux posed the most significant ecological threat to the hunting grounds. Despite gaining almost complete control of the Northern and Central plains stretching diagonally from western Minnesota southwestward to the White and Niobrara rivers, then northward through the Black Hills and up to Fort Union, the Sioux gained only a limited foothold in the bison-rich Montana interior. This is significant, because buffalo were fairly quickly wiped out in lands that did come under the firm hegemony of Sioux tribes. Colonel Richard Irving Dodge illustrated the ecological consequences of both intertribal warfare and Sioux conquest:

the vast plains watered by the Niobrara and White Rivers, became a debatable ground into which none but war parties ever penetrated...immense numbers of buffalo took refuge in this debatable land, where they were comparatively unmolested...when the Pawnees were finally overthrown, and forced onto a reservation, the Sioux poured into this Country...and finding buffalo very plenty and a ready sale for their robes, made such a furious onslaught on the poor beasts, that in a few years, scarce a buffalo could be found.

With competition nullified, the Sioux quickly stripped the area of its animal resources.\textsuperscript{27}

Such was the case all along the Upper Missouri when the grasslands surrounding it came under Sioux control in the nineteenth century. Buffalo became scarce and the Sioux pushed further westward. In 1855, Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Manypenny lamented that animals had all but abandoned the lands of the Sioux, along with the traders. Even in 1832, it seems clear that wildlife was being hunted and pushed out along the Missouri in areas of the plains that fell into Sioux hands. Prince Maximilian of Weid, journeying up the Missouri in 1832, noted that "wild beasts and other animals, whose skins are valuable in the fur trade, have already diminished greatly in number along this river," further positing that in ten years the animals would be all but gone. He also recorded that bison were "yearly

\textsuperscript{26} Bernard Devoto, \textit{Across the Wide Missouri} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), 279-301; David Wishart, \textit{The Fur Trade of the American West}, 68; Chittendon, \textit{The American Fur Trade of the Far West}, 617-18;

decreasing and driven further inland.” The section of plains Maximilian described had been rich in wildlife and an intertribally contested area at the time of Lewis and Clark’s passage, but had since come, or was coming, under the control of the Sioux.28

When Maximilian left Fort Union and headed further upriver into a hunting ground still violently contested by the Assiniboine, Cree, Blackfeet, Crow, and Sioux, his party met with the vast numbers of animals described by Lewis and Clark. Leaving the mouth of the Yellowstone behind, Maximilian and company had a field day killing a copious number of animals with reckless abandon. The hunting was phenomenal throughout the journey, other than in the Badlands. Not surprisingly, Maximilian was hunting in an area fought for by several tribes.29

John C. Fremont observed that in 1843 the Sioux along the upper Missouri were in such dire straits from lack of buffalo that many of their “...villages...came over to the mountains at the heads of the Platte, in search of them. The rapid, progressive failure of their principal and almost their only means of subsistence has created great alarm among them,” and, according to Fremont, encouraged the creation of an alliance “...between the various tribes of the Sioux nation, the Cheyennes and Arapahoes... [to] make war against the Crow nation, in order to take from them their country, which is now the best buffalo country in the west.”30 The latter was eventually the course taken by the Sioux. However, in the 1840s the Sioux – including the Yanktons, Yanktonais, and Teton – were far more focused on taking control of Pawnee, rather than Crow, hunting grounds. By 1847 the Sioux had forced the Pawnees south of the Platte and controlled much of the productive hunting grounds surrounding the river. Like other plains conflicts engaged in by the Sioux,

28 George Manypenny, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., 1855-1866, H. exdoc. 1, 396-398; Maximilian, “Travels in the Interior of North America,” Vol. 22, 379. Although Maximilian’s prediction was more than thirty years off, it is a telling one nonetheless. Maximilian relates that at Council Bluffs, at the mouth of the Platte, the fur trade was virtually dead. See Ibid., 381.
29 Grizzly bears particularly fascinated the group, and many were killed. See Ibid, Vol. 23, 43-44. A typical day of buffalo hunting saw the deaths of 12 buffalo, with the party bringing away “only the flesh of the cows [five of the twelve], leaving all the rest to the wolves, the bears, and the vultures.” Ibid, 47. This after Maximilian chastised other white hunters for their wanton waste of animals! See Ibid, Vol. 22, 382;
30 John C. Fremont, Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842; and to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44 (London, 1846), 142.
their wars with the Pawnees were fought more for buffalo than anything else. As soon as the once abundant Platte buffalo herds began to wane in the 1850s, the Sioux then aggressively turned their attention to the bountiful Yellowstone hunting grounds of the Crows. 31

By 1850, much of the Missouri drainage was more or less controlled by various Sioux tribes. In 1851, when the German artist Rudolph Friedrich Kurz headed up the Missouri, the Sioux occupied the lands extending westward beyond the Missouri to the Yellowstone and hunted south beyond the Arkansas River. At the same time, bison populations, or at least their range, had decreased across the Northern Plains. There was no sign of the animals anywhere along the Missouri in present day South Dakota, and at least one trading post, Fort Vermilion, had been abandoned. Kurz first saw buffalo a short distance below Fort Clark; the animals had declined considerably in number since Maximilian’s visit. After a stint at Fort Berthold, Kurz spent the winter at Fort Union, serving as clerk to Edwin Denig. In the middle of March, 1852, Kurz joined a hunting party camped roughly twelve miles from the fort. That the land between Fort Union and now Fort Benton (which had replaced Fort McKenzie as the westernmost post on the Missouri) remained a highly contested hunting ground is made clear with this remark by Kurz: “If we fail to find sufficient game here to supply the fort with meat we shall remove our camp to a region on the other side [west] of the Yellowstone where, on account of frequent forays into that neighborhood by hostile Blackfeet, little hunting has been done.” 32


32 J.N.B. Hewitt, ed., “Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz: An Account of His Experiences Among Fur Traders and American Indians on the Mississippi and Upper Missouri Rivers During the Years 1846 to 1852,” Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 115 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1937) footnote 10, 283; For decreasing bison in Eastern Dakota Territory see also Edwin Thompson Denig, Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri, John C. Ewers, ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 36; Hewitt, Journal of Rudolph Friederich Kurz, 70; identifying the shrinking bison population Kurz exclaims: “Today for the first time I saw buffaloes. One hundred and eighty years ago they were still to be found in the State of Ohio! Good-by buffaloes, Indians, and fur companies.” Ibid, 72, 310; At one point Kurz mentioned that the large number of Indians in the vicinity of Fort Union makes for very poor hunting. He noted his fervent wish for heavy snow, which would keep the tribes away from the fort and subsequently allow game animals to wander closer, being easier to shoot. See ibid, 268.
The plains cradling the Missouri in present day Montana remained a bloody war zone home to many bison until the early 1880s. Edwin Denig, commenting in the 1850's, predicted that it would be the last Indian battleground – and that it would be fought over the buffalo. Father Pierre Jean De Smet agreed. In 1851, De Smet described the same expanse and saw “...thousands of buffalo, the whole space between the Missouri and the Yellowstone was covered as far as eye could reach.” A few years earlier De Smet felt that “[t]he buffalo field is becoming narrower from year to year, and each succeeding hunt finds the Indians in closer contact...it is highly probable that the Blackfoot plains, from the Sascatshawin to the Yellow Stone, will be the last resort of the wild animals twelve years hence [sic].” In a similar vein, Alexander Ross believed that in 1850 “…Buffalo, the only inducement to the plains, are falling off fast. They are now like a ball between two players. The Americans are driving them north, the British south. The west alone will furnish them a last and temporary retreat...” In 1859 a Lakota chief told Indian agent, Thomas Twiss, that the Arapahos and Cheyennes “have no longer any hunting grounds” and that “before our children are grown up, we shall have no more game.” These were prophetic statements.33

In an annual report to the Secretary of the Interior in 1849, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Orlando Brown expressed his concern for the tribes living on the plains and in the mountains of the western interior. These tribes were beyond federal control and posed a significant threat to western American migration and settlement. For nineteenth-century bureaucrats like Brown, the difficulties surrounding the western tribes stemmed primarily from their hunting-based lifestyles. Western Indians, especially those most dependent on bison, did not fit into the sacred mold of Jeffersonian republicanism. For many Americans, living on the eve of the Industrial Revolution and Darwin’s theory of evolution, the lifestyles of many indigenous groups represented an anachronistic blemish on the face of American progress. According to Brown, the interior tribes had not been “induced to give up their natural habits of war and the chase.”

Brown and other bureaucrats believed — accurately — that declining bison populations led to bloodshed between tribes. Further, inroads into Indian country by white emigrants heading for the West Coast raised the hackles of many Plains Indians toward Americans, and Brown felt that open hostility between the United States and some western tribes was in the wind. To prevent this, American bureaucrats faced two options: either to send a large military force west to protect emigrants and subjugate the Indians; or negotiate some agreement with and between the tribes. The United States took the latter course in the first half of the 1850s, but its idealistic nature and inability to tame western hunting grounds doomed it to failure. By the end of the decade the United States was drawn into the larger web of intertribal relationships and warfare, and bison remained partially protected within grassland buffers contested by tribes and whites.²

In 1849, Brown articulated the need for a comprehensive peace treaty that

² Ibid, 942-43.
included several western tribes and allowed for the unrestricted right of passage of Americans through the West. In agreeing to this, the signatory tribes were given an annuity, by way of agricultural supplies and other goods, as compensation for any native fauna emigrants killed or disrupted on their way west. Another federal goal in this proposed treaty was the consolidation of tribes, especially smaller bands, which were increasingly exposed to attacks by more powerful groups, particularly the Blackfeet and Sioux. Consolidation better enabled the government to protect and monitor tribes, it believed, with the additional bonus of opening up surplus lands to be sold to non-Indians. A declining buffalo population and the precarious nature of the hunting grounds presumably provided a powerful inducement for smaller tribes to seek government protection.\(^3\)

If this was an idealistic bureaucratic approach to Indian problems, it was also a cost effective one. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the western tribes were formidable obstacles to American expansion. At the time, the American government believed a massive military assault to subjugate western tribes was impractical, if not impossible. Peace treaties, on the other hand, offered a relatively cheap solution. However, such treaties depended on a multitude of factors that had to mesh together and somehow follow the plan drawn up by white policy makers. In most cases, the United States ignored the unique cultural mores of the tribes entering into the treaties, while the bureaucratic web was often too thick to carry out the treaty provisions efficiently. More importantly, treaties, and the policy makers who created them, took a static view of hunting grounds as stationary places rather than highly mobile herds of animals responsive to the human and environmental forces arrayed against them.

In 1851, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs gave Superintendent David D. Mitchell the go ahead to make preparations for a peace council at Fort Laramie. The treaty that came out of this council included the Cheyennes, Arapahos, Mandans, Gros Ventres, Hidatsas, Assiniboines, Crows, and several bands of the Sioux. Although representatives of the Blackfeet were not present, the tribe's territory was included in the treaty. The primary goal of Fort Laramie was to "maintain good faith\(^3\) Ibid, 945-946, David D. Mitchell, Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs, 1849,1069-71. 72

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and friendship in all their [the tribe's] mutual intercourse, and to make an effective and lasting peace.” The treaty also stipulated that none of these tribes relinquished their hunting rights in any of the lands described in the treaty. Ideally, by defining tribal boundaries the various signatory tribes would abide by them and cease going to war. The granting of annuities was a way to circumvent violent aggression over encroachments of one tribe against another. Article 7 of the treaty stated that any depredations that occurred would be settled with the offending tribe giving up a portion of their annuity payments to the victimized tribe.⁴

The Fort Laramie treaty was only the first of numerous misplaced steps in the federal attempt to bring peace to the West, as it left out a considerable number of tribes. In 1853, Secretary of the Interior Robert McClelland described the Native American population in the United States as “a formidable number of savages to control and direct,” but expressed optimism that negotiations were underway with the interior tribes to open up their lands and subdue them. Commissioner of Indian Affairs George Manypenny, going further than McClelland, reported in 1853 that to pacify and forcibly prevent hostilities among the tribes “would, in all probability, involve an amount of expense far exceeding the cost of arrangements that would secure peace and tranquility with the various tribes, and at the same time tend to promote their domestication and permanent welfare.” The council at Fort Laramie reinforced the Indian Bureau’s belief that treaties provided an inexpensive solution to the problems facing the federal government in westward expansion. That the Bureau of Indian Affairs had been moved from the War Department to that of the recently formed Department of the Interior in 1849 only gave the former an added incentive to find a non-military solution.⁵

In his 1853 report, Commissioner Manypenny encouraged that superintendents be sent out to the various unsettled regions of the West to rein in


⁵ Robert McClelland, Annual Report of the Secretary of Interior, 33rd Cong. 1st sess., 1853, H. exdoc. 1, (serial 710), 60; 245, 253, 260.
tribes outside the boundaries of American control and to negotiate "such conventional and other arrangements as may be required to place them upon a safe, stable, and satisfactory footing." For the northern territorial rim of the United States, Isaac Ingalls Stevens was the man for the job. Having been recently appointed governor of Washington Territory, Stevens was also its \textit{ex-officio} superintendent of Indian Affairs. In 1853, as Stevens circuitously journeyed to Washington Territory while conducting a railroad survey, he meticulously followed Commissioner Manypenny's advice to record relevant information about the tribes he made contact with and begin the process of establishing peaceful relations between them.\footnote{George Manypenny, \textit{Annual Report of the Office of Indian Affairs}, 33rd Cong. 1st sess., 1853, H. exdoc. 1, (serial 710), 260-61; 461.}

Arriving in Olympia late in 1853, Stevens began the diplomatic process of bridging the gaps present in the Fort Laramie Treaty. Despite requesting several of the tribes he had met on his journey west to ready themselves for peace councils in the coming spring and summer, the young governor lost a year before he could disentangle himself from other bureaucratic duties to begin his peace mission. Although he conducted peace councils with tribes around Puget Sound as early as December of 1854, it was the three peace councils held the following year farther east, that are relevant to the Northern Plains.\footnote{Perhaps the most thorough examination of Stevens' life is found in Kent Richards, \textit{Isaac I. Stevens: Young Man in a Hurry} (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1979). Of particular relevance to this study are the pages 93-240 relating to the railroad survey and peace councils.}

In structure, the Walla Walla, Flathead, and Blackfeet councils, and the treaties that came out of them, were quite similar. In a letter to Stevens and superintendent Palmer of Oregon Territory, Commissioner Manypenny told the men that "[t]he principle objects to be attained by the negotiations and presents are...the establishment of well defined and permanent relations of amity with all the most numerous and warlike tribes in that remote region of country, both between the Indians and the United States, and between the tribes as among themselves." Like Laramie, the treaties Stevens and party were to negotiate were primarily treaties of
peace.

Unlike Laramie, the Stevens treaties created a hunting commons carved out of lands originally designated as Blackfeet territory in the Fort Laramie treaty of 1851. In the Walla Walla and Flathead councils mention was made of a common hunting ground east of the Rockies, to be established in the treaty with the Blackfeet. In the Blackfeet council the longest debates among the tribes — representatives of the Nez Perce, Salish, Kootenais, and Pend Oreilles were present — occurred over the issue of hunting grounds. Land was important to tribes, but far more so was land where buffalo could be found.

Article three of the Blackfeet treaty stated that the lands lying:
within lines drawn from the Hell Gate or Medicine Rock Passes in the main range of the Rocky Mountains, in an easterly direction to the nearest source of the Muskegelsh [sic] river, thence to the mouth of Twenty-Five Yard Creek, thence up the Yellowstone river to its northern source, and thence along the main range of the Rocky Mountains...shall be a common hunting ground for ninety-nine years, where all the nations, tribes, and bands of Indians, parties to this treaty, may enjoy equal and uninterrupted privileges of hunting, fishing, and gathering fruit, grazing animals, curing meat and dressing robes.

Unlike other tribes, the Blackfeet were given exclusive use of a tract of land stretching from the northern border of the commons to the Canadian line — a recognition by the United States of the Blackfeet's power reminiscent of concessions made to the Sioux at Laramie. Unfortunately for the success of the treaty, the

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9 James Doty mentions the "considerable anxiety" felt by Governor Stevens at the Walla Walla council. See Doty, Journal of Operations, 30; At the Flathead council, proceedings took considerably longer than Stevens had planned. In relation to the Blackfeet council, the Flathead treaty was secondary to Stevens and he had assumed it would be wrapped up quickly. Such was not the case and his impatience at the end of the proceedings was abundantly clear. See Albert J. Partoll, ed., "The Flathead Indian Treaty Council of 1855," Pacific Northwest Quarterly 29 (July 1938), 283-314. This has been reprinted, along with a number of other documents relating to the Hell Gate treaty of 1855, by Robert Bigart and Clarence Woodcock, eds., in In the Name of the Salish & Kootenai Nation: The 1855 Hell Gate Treaty and the Origin of the Flathead Indian Reservation ( Pablo: Salish Kootenai College Press, 1996), 19-65. For the Blackfeet treaty of 1855 see Kappler, Indian Affairs, Laws, and Treaties, Vol. 2, 736-39; see also Kent Richards, Young Man in a Hurry, 220-21, 227-230. Robert Ignatious Burns also addresses Stevens' impatience at the councils preceding the Blackfeet negotiations in The Jesuits and the Indian Wars of the Northwest, 79-81, 101-107.

favoritism of one tribe over the rest angered the delegates of many of the tribes present at the negotiations. Also, the treaties – at least from the native perspective – were meant only to make the lives of the tribes easier and safer by ending warfare. A restricted hunting ground seemed like a reduction of freedom and a step backward to some Indians present at the council. Buffalo and other animals did not pay attention to Anglo-defined boundaries and the treaty makers failed to address what tribes should do when no bison could be found on the grasslands of the hunting commons. More than a few Indians at the council recognized this and voiced their concern.

A chief critic of the proposal was Alexander, a chief of the Pend Oreilles. Alexander felt the proposed commons too small and that the lands to be reserved exclusively for the Blackfeet had long been lands his people had hunted on:

We Indians were all well pleased when we came together here in friendship. Now you point us out a little piece of land to hunt our game on. When we were enemies, I always crossed over there, and why should I not now, when we are friends? Now I have two hearts about it—why cannot I go there? What is the reason? Why do you point us out a small place?

In the same vein, Big Canoe, another prominent Pend Oreilles chief, stated in reference to the reserved Blackfeet lands, “I had a mind to go there.”

Little Dog, a Piegan, responded to the criticisms of the Pend Oreilles: “We are friendly. But the North Blackfeet are bad, it might produce a quarrel if you hunted near them. Do not put yourselves in their way.” This is an interesting comment. For one, it demonstrated that not all bands of the Blackfeet were present at the council. The “North Blackfeet” Little Dog referred to were those living beyond the 49th parallel in Canada, who journeyed south to hunt. How was the United States to control these Indians?

Competition intensified during the 1850s over a declining bison population

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11 Ibid, 8.
13 Ibid, 8.
14 Ibid, 7.
and other Plains resources, and the threads of peace treaties negotiated in the first half of the decade began to fray. Just a year after the Blackfeet treaty, Alfred Vaughn mentioned that the Assiniboine were forced by the Sioux from the lands "south of the Missouri, and along the Yellowstone" and that the area had become (once again) a "debatable ground." The tenuous peace in the interior west continued to erode, and by 1858 A. M. Robinson, superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Central Agency, reported that many tribes falling under his jurisdiction were showing a "degree of unrest" arising from want of "necessary subsistence." That same year A. H. Redfield, superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Upper Missouri, recorded in rather stronger terms that the tribes of the Northern and Central Plains "almost entirely disregard their treaty obligations, are involved in continual predatory wars upon each other and that, indeed, they frequently steal from and rob, and not infrequently kill, white people also" [italics in originals]." Hunger more than hatred was driving tribes to war. And the bison they were after continued to range in buffers between the tribes, and a growing number of Americans, inadvertently promoting the clashes that protected them.15

As the 1850s drew to a close, it was clear that the Laramie and Stevens treaties were not keeping the peace, and many bureaucrats began to question the entire rationale behind them. At the beginning of the decade the United States was still uncertain of its strength and ability to push west. Many bureaucrats believed that a number of interior tribes remained "wild" and too powerful to defeat militarily. Yet Americans were eager to expand into an area stretching from the Cascade mountains to the Mississippi river. This promoted a boon in federal treaty making early in the decade centered on the premise of ending intertribal bloodshed, consolidating tribes, negotiating land concessions, and defining tribal hunting grounds – all revolving around a system of annuities and common goodwill to keep the whole process together.

This idealistic approach simply did not work. Buffalo paid no attention to

hunting ground boundaries imposed by white bureaucrats. They traveled to the richest grasslands where they would face the least human harassment, in buffer zones of the Upper Missouri drainage lying between warring tribes and, increasingly, Americans. Coupled with other human and environmental pressures, the constant requirements of subsistence and a market driven fur trade were paring down bison numbers across the Plains, increasing the friction between tribes, as well as between Indians and Americans. By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, failed American peace efforts on the Northern Plains had created a brush pile of tension needing only a spark to set the region ablaze in violence. The Sioux provided it.

While the blood of the North and South was being spilled on Civil War battlefields, the Sioux were drawing the United States into the intertribal fray American diplomacy had tried to quell. Tensions, however, between the Sioux and the United States had begun much earlier. In an 1823 expedition, Colonel Henry Leavenworth journeyed up the Missouri river to punish a band of Arikaras who had overcome a trading party of William Ashley's earlier in the year. Leavenworth was joined by 1,500 Sioux warriors, and although the party destroyed an Arikara village, most of the fleeing tribe escaped. Leavenworth's failure to pursue disgusted the Sioux and seriously reduced the tribe's estimation of the American military for years to come. Joshua Pilcher, the Indian agent for the upper Missouri, was even more disgusted with Leavenworth than the Sioux. In a letter to the Colonel, Pilcher wrote, "[y]ou came to restore peace and tranquility to the country, and to leave an impression which would insure its continuance. Your operations have been such as to produce the greatest possible contempt for the American character."16

By the 1830s, the Sioux were exerting considerable pressure on Upper Missouri hunting grounds. The smallpox epidemic of 1837-1838, so devastating to other tribes, only helped the relative strength of the Sioux. In the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, it was the Sioux who received the largest portion of western lands

as their domain. As historian Richard White has explained, Fort Laramie sanctioned the Sioux right of conquest, and acknowledged them as the most powerful tribe on the plains. By the mid-1850s the Sioux became the primary competitor to American dominance over much of the West and, with their Cheyenne and Arapaho allies, were a force to be reckoned with. Sioux aggressions quickly splintered gains made by the mid-century peace treaties.\(^7\)

The reports of various agents of the Central and Northern superintendencies of Indian Affairs for much of the 1850s are laced with references to Sioux depredations and the tribe's failure to live up to the treaty stipulations of Laramie. In his 1855 report, Alfred Vaughn concluded that the Sioux were seriously threatening the peace. That same year, at about the time Stevens was negotiating with the Blackfeet and other northern tribes at the Judith, General William S. Harney was scouring the Plains in an expedition against bands of dissident Sioux. Harney, later called "the Butcher" by Indians and some whites, did manage to destroy an encampment of Lakotas belonging to a young Sioux named Crazy Horse. The latter's hatred of the United States would later be brought to bare in several successful engagements against the American military. But Harney's sojourn was an exception to the weak American military presence in the region, not the rule. In the 1850s, and for a decade and a half afterward, the Sioux had a free hand to grasp what they could from other Northern and Central plains tribes, forcing the latter to make new alliances with each other and, more significantly, with the United States government.\(^8\)

Of all the Sioux, the western Lakotas were the most assertive in their pursuit of new hunting grounds and the defense of those they had conquered. For almost a quarter of a century, beginning in the early 1850s, the Lakotas vied with the Americans as the major power brokers on the Northern Plains. This was made amply clear to Lieutenant Gouverneur K. Warren on his exploratory expedition up

\(^7\) White, "Winning of the West," 340.

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the Little Missouri river in 1857. Warren and his men were stopped in their tracks by a large party of Sioux before they could enter lush bottom lands covered with grazing bison. Bear's Rib, a Lakota chief, refused to let the white men pass. He did not want the buffalo disturbed, nor the country they grazed examined by white eyes. Bear's Rib shrewdly pointed out that "passing through their [Lakota] country would give us [Warren's party] a knowledge of its character and the proper way to traverse it in the the event of another war between themselves and the troops." Warren “was necessarily compelled to admit to...the truth and force of these objections.”

Unlike other tribes, the Lakotas had chosen to keep their ties to the American government minimal. Annuities meant little to the tribe when they had bison robes to trade. Bear's Rib made this point in telling Warren, “that if presents were sent to induce them not to go to war with the Crows and their other enemies they did not wish them. War with them was a necessity...the annuities scarcely paid for going after them; and that if they were not distributed to them while they were on their visit to the trading-posts...to dispose of their robes, they did not want them.”

Unlike other, smaller, tribes who thought that abiding by treaties might increase their access to buffalo, the Sioux could better exploit hunting grounds through force. This was a reasonable assumption being that they were larger and stronger than any other tribe on the plains by the time of Warren’s run in with them. To a large extent this was because the Sioux had undergone the least depletion of their population to that point, managing to side step much of the disease that had so devastated other tribes. Warren put the combined bands of Sioux, occupying an expanse stretching between the Mississippi and the Powder rivers, at a population of just below 29,000. If anything, Warren felt the Sioux population actually seemed to be growing.

The increasing threat of the Sioux by the mid-nineteenth century is reflected in the complaints of other tribes to Indian agents across the Plains. Long Hair, a Gros

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20 Ibid, 47-49.
Ventre, made clear his disdain of Sioux expansion in a speech to Indian agent A. H. Redfield:

My father, since my nation made the Platte treaty [Fort Laramie] I and my people have done nothing wrong; but our enemies, disregarding that treaty, have made war upon us here...[w]hat can I do my father?...my country extends from Hart river around to the mouth of the Yellow-stone, and yet I cannot send my young men just across the river here to kill a buffalo, if I see one, without their being attacked and killed. This country is not the Sioux country. Why do they not stay at home and let us alone?...[t]he Sioux seem to wish to be the strongest and most powerful people on the earth, and nothing else would seem to satisfy them.  

Long Hair asks a good question, why did the Sioux not stay “home”? Apart from a sizable and perhaps growing population, the Sioux were expanding because the buffalo were not. In 1849, Indian agent John M. Richardson predicted that the buffalo were growing scarce and that the day was coming when the “Indian race will terminate itself in an unnatural war and strive to satisfy the demands of hunger over the last remaining buffalo steak that can be found.”

There is some truth to this exaggerated comment. The peace treaties of Laramie and those negotiated by Stevens sought to regulate the hunting grounds by drawing imaginary lines around them and hoping tribes would abide by the boundaries. The treaties stuck only so long as tribes could feed themselves, and even then not all that well. As bison populations declined, many tribes – living both east and west of the Rockies – continued to pursue the dwindling herds, crossing imaginary lines on a map and clashing with the reality of one another’s desire to maintain a bison hunting lifestyle in a rapidly changing world of white expansion.

In August of 1862, a number of Sioux left their eastern home for a reason other than buffalo: there was an uprising of Santee Sioux in Minnesota. Although violence was put down quickly, some of the Sioux involved fled to their western relatives. The uprising increased not only the population, but the general animosity

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of western Sioux bands toward whites and other tribes. In 1863 and 1865 two army expeditions moved up the Missouri looking for hostile Teton and Santee Sioux who fled after the Minnesota uprising. The expeditions met with little success, but did afford the Mandans, Hidatsas and Arikaras a brief period of protection.\(^\text{23}\)

However unsuccessful at apprehending the renegade Sioux, the growing American military presence on the Upper Missouri was significant. With the Sioux becoming a primary threat to American interests on the western plains, the United States moved from its peace maker role of the 1850s to become entangled in the larger web of intertribal relationships and warfare. Some tribes were quick to take advantage of this new situation.

The Poncas offer one Central Plains example. In May of 1862 the tribe had not hunted in over a year due to fears of Sioux attack. In the words of Indian agent J. B. Hoffman, The Poncas were "destitute." To avoid starving the tribe finally decided to risk a two week hunt. On only their second day out the hunting party, four hundred strong, were attacked and turned back by Brule Sioux. Wanting to make another attempt the Poncas asked their agent for an armed escort of American soldiers. The request was granted:

> On the 5th day out...they discovered a war party of Brules...and these Brules came in to camp and had a talk. They told the captain that the country where they were belonged to them, and that the whites and treaty Indians had no right to hunt or travel there. That they had determined to kill or drive away all who came, but that for this time they would let them off...and they desired him to carry their warning to the Great Father...\(^\text{24}\)

The Poncas and their army escort heeded the warning and turned around empty handed. Although the hunt was a failure, the fact the United States military was being used to protect it in the first place is interesting. Far from being a benevolent arbiter of indigenous disputes, America was firmly entrenching itself in intertribal politics and conflict. By choosing sides in intertribal disputes the United States was not only


facilitating its own expansionary agenda, but also the access of less powerful tribes to bison.

The Sioux found themselves facing American troops, this time led by General Patrick Edward Connor, again in 1865. Connor's troops were trying to keep open the Bozeman Trail to mines in Montana Territory open. This sparked the beginning of a decade and a half of warfare between the Sioux and the American army—a war waged by the Sioux less over land than over the buffalo that could be found on it. At this point, the Lakotas were living in the buffalo-rich Powder River country west of the Black Hills. The famed war leader Red Cloud vowed that the Sioux would fight to close the road passing through what was perhaps the best hunting grounds of the Northern Plains. Beginning with the Fetterman massacre in December of 1866, warfare between Red Cloud's Sioux and the American army continued for two years, with a brief respite after the signing of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. This was a treaty that the Montana pioneer and historian Granville Stuart called "the most atrocious of them all." Elaborating, Stuart wrote that the "Sioux were not being driven from their homes or ceding large tracts of territory to the whites...they were themselves interlopers...who had been driven out of Minnesota in 1863 for the atrocities committed by them on the whites." Nevertheless, Red Cloud and the Sioux had kept the Bozeman Trail, and the hunting grounds it penetrated, closed.

By the time of the second Fort Laramie Treaty, the lands of the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone drainages were the most plentiful, and contested, hunting grounds on the Plains. Granville Stuart commented in his memoirs that "as the Indians were driven north and west so were the buffalo and other large game and this section of country (eastern Montana) became a veritable Indian paradise." The success of the Sioux in defending the Powder river country that they themselves invaded kept the encroaching whites out. Having stood their ground successfully against the federal government, the Sioux increased their pressure on the large

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26 Utley, The Indian Frontier for the American West 1846-1890, 100-110, 120-123.
27 Granville Stuart, Forty Years on the Frontier, Vol. 2, 60.
bison herds lying between them and their Crow and Blackfeet neighbors to the west — an area that was “disputed...from time immemorial...”

Unfortunately, lands outside such buffer zones were becoming sparse. In part this was because in the 1860's western white migration was picking up steam — literally. The Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads met at Promontory Summit, Utah, in 1869, while the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, Northern Pacific, and Great Northern railroads launched parallel lines to the north and south. The railroads spurred American settlement, and intensified the fur trade, allowing a far greater number of buffalo robes to be transported quickly from West to East.

The 1870s saw the buffalo range fast constricting around the lands between the Little Missouri and Yellowstone, and the Musselshell river and Judith Basin. That these havens provided forage enough for substantial ungulate populations is clear. The Crow claimed this region not only for the bison it supported, but also for keeping their horses. Louis Farnham described the Yellowstone region as “well watered, timbered, and capable of yielding an abundant reward to the husbandman.” Perhaps one of the best assessments of the region is that of a survey, conducted in 1874 by special Indian agent F.D. Pease and Army Lieutenant G. C. Doane, of the Judith Basin as a potential site for a new Crow agency.

After recording several violent episodes reflecting the turbulent nature of the region, Doane described it as "a first class Buffalo range. They may be found in some portion of the Valley or adjacent Badlands, all the year round. Elk are numerous on the ranges, deer along the Streams, and Mountain Sheep on the Summits of the Peaks." Referring to cattle kept at the trading post, Doane mentioned that even left in open pastures "fat beef can be killed" at any time of the winter. That the area was quickly becoming the primary hunting grounds, and point of conflict, of the Northern Plains is seen in the Crow complaints that "Flatheads, Nez Perces, Bannacks and Snakes all come here, passing through the Settlements on

30 For abundance of Crow horses see Thwaites, Travels in the Interior of North America, 352-53; Thwaites, Travels in the Great Western Prairies, 264.
their way, coming and returning...horses are stolen, and men are killed, both Indians and whites; in quarrels almost every trip.\textsuperscript{31}

Referring to the nearby junction of the Musselshell with the Missouri, Doane described it as the primary hunting ground of Upper Missouri Indians, "and the very heart of the present Buffalo Range." Going further, Doane wrote:

This District has not been the residing place of any particular tribe of Indians, for many Years, but has been held in common hunting ground, for all neighboring tribes, being frequented by parties of Sioux, Rees, Santees, Mandans, Assineboines, Gros Ventres, Piegans, Pen D'Orielles, Flatheads, Mountains and River Crows, Bannacks, Snakes and Nez Perces; for purposes of hunting and war. No large tribe has taken decided possession of it for their country, and a weak one could not hold it.\textsuperscript{32}

Blackfoot, a Crow Chief, affirmed the value of the Yellowstone lands, and its highly embattled nature, in a speech made in 1873:

...We have gone to Judith Basin a great deal, and you wish us to take it for a reservation. All kinds of men go there; trappers and hunters go there poisoning game. The Sioux Indians, Crees, Santees, Mandans, Assineboines, Gros Ventres, Piegans, Pen d'Oreilles, Flatheads, the Mountains Crows, the River Crows, Bannacks, Snakes, and Nez Perc Indians and white people, all go there. You wish us to take the Judith Basin for a reservation. All these Indians will come, and we will likely quarrel...Judith Basin is a small basin; a great many people go there; we all go there to eat buffalo. I have told you about the Sioux when they come to fight us...You think you have peace with the Sioux; I do not think you have.\textsuperscript{33}

Blackfoot recognized clearly that the Judith Basin was a no-man's land and, in his reluctance to have his tribe's reservation placed there, acknowledged how dangerous such a place was. Blackfoot also gave an insightful appraisal of the relationship between the United States and the Sioux – a relationship that continued to have an important impact on other Plains tribes and the bison they hunted.

By the time of Blackfoot's comment, the Sioux represented the greatest

\textsuperscript{31} United States Interior Department, Office of Indian Affairs Report (1873-1874), Small Collection 889, Helena; Montana State Historical Society Archives, 23-26.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 15-16, (emphasis added).
threat to American hegemony on the Plains. Prior to Connor’s campaign of 1865, violence on the Upper Missouri was predominantly intertribal. Afterwards the situation changed markedly as the United States became more at odds with the Sioux and drawn ever deeper into the intertribal politics of the hunting grounds. With George Armstrong Custer’s Black Hills expedition in 1874 the situation on the Northern Plains quickly deteriorated. During the winter of 1875 runners were sent to the camps of the Sioux and their allies with the message that all must report to their agencies. The message was ignored, and the stage was set for the the Battle of Little Bighorn.

Certainly the most famous fight between whites and Indians in American history, the Little Bighorn has been the subject of about as many books as there were bullets fired at the battle, and need not be discussed here. Suffice it to say that Custer’s defeat seriously impacted the human dynamics of the Northern Plains. After the battle, the hostile Sioux, Arapahos, and Northern Cheyennes were now on the most wanted list of nearly every American soldier and politician. Other Upper Missouri tribes, aware of the benefits of the American/Sioux animosity, continued to help the United States and maintain their access to key hunting grounds. Tribes like the Crow and Pawnee contributed scouts to assist the U.S. army in the ensuing five years of rounding up renegade Sioux and, with the famed flight of Chief Joseph in 1877, the Nez Perce.

In late December, 1876, through to the spring of 1877, Oscar Brackett roamed the Yellowstone country. A typical frontiersman of the time, Bracket had manned a pony express station in the midst of Indian country, mined in the Black Hills until the Custer battle, hauled freight across the Dakota territory, worked for the

34 White argues this convincingly. See White, “Winning of the West.”
35 See Utley, The Indian Frontier, 180-87; for the personal accounts of fighting, derived from pictographs, at the Little Big Horn, and descriptions of exploits in intertribal warfare, by the Sioux chief White Bull see James H. Howard, ed., The Warrior Who Killed Custer: The Personal Narrative of Chief Joseph White Bull (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 1-82; For a detailed account of the period and of Red Cloud see James C. Olson, Red Cloud and the Sioux Problem (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 1-96.
Northern Pacific railroad, and had done just about anything else he could do to make a buck. "We was going to make our fortune poisning [sic] Wolves," and hunting buffalo, he writes of his reasoning for entering the turbulent lands drained by the Yellowstone river. Buffalo were plentiful and hostile Indians still posed a very real threat. Wintering on the Yellowstone, upriver from Miles City, Montana, Bracket built a hunting cabin to see him through to spring. Throughout that winter buffalo were a constant sight:

...the morning after we had got our cabbain done it had turned very cold. I went out so I could see up & down the bottoms & the Buffaloo was comming down from the Bluffes by the hundreds & the Bottoms was covered with them & from that time untill Spring the Country was full of Buffaloo.\(^\text{37}\)

That spring, Brackett floated his hides down to Miles City and then headed down the Yellowstone to trap. He didn’t see a soul for two months. The first people he did see were Soldiers of the 7th Calvary. The U.S. army was beginning to assert its control and the next few years would see almost all northern tribes forcibly settled on reservations. The region was still in turmoil, however, in 1878 when Brackett lived for a brief time in a mail route station 40 miles into “Indian Country.” Spending the next year hunting for the stage line, Brackett recorded that buffalo remained in great numbers.\(^\text{38}\) He was hunting in one of the last refuges for the buffalo. The Canadian Mountie Sir Cecil Denny wrote that by 1879, “the main herd of buffalo now remaining were surrounded by most of the southern Indians together with those of Canada, in a section of country south from Milk River to the Little Rockies and the Bear Paw Mountains and across the Missouri River to the Judith Basin.”\(^\text{39}\)

By 1880, the protection afforded buffalo by an Upper Missouri buffer zone was almost at an end. Most Sioux were sequestered on reservations and whites and their livestock were starting to flood the plains. Still, Sitting Bull and his band


\(^{38}\) Ibid, OB7.

hovering on the Canada/United States border remained a threat, and other tribes continued to raid one another. A contested ground, plentiful in bison, remained on the plains surrounding the Musselshell river. Granville Stuart observed on his way through the area that there were "[b]uffalo by the thousands in every direction." Unfortunately for Stuart the degree of danger matched the still sizable number of bison. Crow Indians informed him "that the country between here and Flat Willow [creek] is swarming with Sioux in parties from ten to ninety strong." Stuart reported that the bison and antelope were "very tame" and that he and his men "had to run out and shake our blankets to frighten the buffalo away"—suggesting that the animals had been little hunted.

This was the final battleground over the last of the bison. Stuart saw ample evidence of war parties in all directions. In his travels through the Judith Basin he passed an encampment of Blackfeet, a band of Red River Metis, and a group of Crees who had just killed a number of cattle. In fact, it was this latter group that most vexed Stuart, who complained that "roving bands of Canadian Indians continued to harass us all winter."

The situation changed rapidly the following year, in 1881, when the railroad finally reached Miles City. After the iron tracks were laid the buffalo disappeared as quickly as they had on the Southern Plains. In 1882, Brackett killed 700 buffalo, killing only cows and "young stuff" most of the winter, switching to Bulls after March the following year. He hunted primarily in the region between the Yellowstone and Little Missouri rivers, one of the last places the animal could be found. In 1883 Brackett says he killed 700 more buffalo, and with the quest for hides "everyone was killing" bison. The northern hide hunt had reached its nadir. After 1883 the bison were all but gone. Brackett bluntly summed up the end of his buffalo career this way: "This was my last year hunting...in the Spring...I went into the Sheep..."
Oscar Brackett, Small Collection 29, OB7. Bracket's comment about hunting cows and "young stuff" suggest that at least some white hunters followed the indigenous practice of selective hunting, which is particularly damaging to the reproductive success of a species. For Discussion of the demise of the Northern herd, effect of the railroad and shift to hide hunting see Burlingame, "The Buffalo in Trade and Commerce," 282-291.
Conclusion:

Nineteenth century bison decline did not happen for any one reason, nor did it occur along an identical timeline for all regions of the Plains. A host of human and environmental factors combined to eventually bump bison out of the ecological niche the animal had held for millennia. Theirs is a story of both life and death, destruction and preservation. In attempting to identify why this was the case, I have explored five interrelated factors affecting bison: including the American Fur Company, competition from domestic animals, a changing climate and ecology, human disease, and warfare.

By the 1830s, market incentives combined with native subsistence needs to push Indian hunting outside the bounds of sustainability. But the market was far from being the only agent in the diminution of the bison. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Euroamerican settlers spread across the Northern Plains. Non-Indians – primarily fur trappers who adopted native ways and often married native wives – were living in the region before the 1850’s, but they were few and far between. Early in the 1860s, the promise of gold drew a much larger wave of Anglo immigrants across the plains to the Rockies. For most it was a broken promise. Nevertheless, the thousands of settlers who flooded early Montana boomtowns like Virginia City placed new constraints on the region’s ecology. Failing at striking it rich in the mines, some turned to merchandizing and ranching as a way to make a living. The horses, cattle and sheep that EuroAmericans brought with them consumed the same grasses that bison depended upon – limiting the carrying capacity of northern grasslands.

But the Indians had horses as well. Indian mounts figured into the destruction of northern bison in two ways: by competing for forage and by allowing Indians to selectively hunt buffalo throughout the year. Too, the horse allowed woodland and horticultural tribes living on the periphery of the Plains to take up bison hunting full-time in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, swelling native populations on the Plains and dramatically increasing the rate of human predation of buffalo. Horses
were the Indian’s “catch-22” — the animal enabled tribes to hunt bison too well.

By the early nineteenth century, native subsistence hunting was probably exceeding sustainable limits in the long term. In part, Indian beliefs in the supernatural origin of bison precluded any real strategies for conserving the species. Dan Flores has pointed out that even into the 1880s many plains tribes believed that bison were supernatural in origin. Most indigenous plains cultures had some variation of a belief that buffalo annually came to the earth’s surface from underground, generally through a cave or lake. Given that bison often wintered in river bottoms, it makes sense that an indigenous observer witnessing a mass spring exodus of these animals from a canyon, or similar land feature, might think bison were being magically produced from below ground. While poetic, this mystical perception of bison renewal did not promote Indian conservation of the animal. Even when buffalo had been annihilated everywhere on the plains, many Indians still clung to the belief that the animals were only hiding inside the earth and would return. In part, the Ghost Dance movement arose in the decade following the northern hide hunt to bring bison back through ritual.¹

For as long as tribes hunted buffalo there were times when the animal could not be found. One day the plains might be covered by what seemed to be an endless blanket of grazing bison, while the next showed not a sign of the animals, save their dung and the torn up ground that marked their passing. The historic population of bison was so enormous, and their range so vast, it is only reasonable that Indians would have had a difficult time seeing their actions as having a negative impact on the animals. The feedback loops were simply too large. R. Grace Morgan has concluded that “hunter/gatherers were highly perceptive of networks of causes and effects and of the operational systemics of particular environments, and that this knowledge was important in resource procurement strategies.”² This was likely true regarding the sedentary and highly observable beaver but not entirely so.

for bison. When historic bison populations were at their largest, tribes still faced times of famine where they did not see buffalo for weeks or even months. Periods of scarcity were the unfortunate burden of being committed to a nomadic plains existence. When bison were teetering on the edge of extinction by the late 1870s, northern tribes surely knew that they were facing an unusually long period of scarcity. Nevertheless, they could console themselves with the thought that bison had always returned, even after long absences.3

Certainly there were Indians who did notice that bison were disappearing and knew that one day they might be gone entirely. The prominent Crow Chief Plenty Coups had a vision in his youth that foretold of the destruction of the buffalo and of the importance of making friends with the whites so that the tribe might keep their homelands.4 But most of these individuals understandably preferred to place blame on whites or other tribes, rather than on themselves. The 1867 complaint of the Brule Chief Spotted Tail is typical: “[t]he country in which we live is cut up by the white men, who drive away all the game. That is the cause of our troubles.”5 Lone Horn, a Minneconjou Chief, lamented in 1865 that whites were “...fighting my people and scaring all the game off of my land.”6 At least into the 1870s other Northern Plains tribes tended to make similar complaints, only they often blamed the Sioux rather than the Americans.7 Unfortunately, the native realization that buffalo were on the decline did more to promote the destruction of the bison commons than any attempt to conserve it. So many different cultural groups surrounded the diminishing northern hunting grounds by the 1860s that an “us or them” mentality prevailed. The reporter John F. Finerty addressed this in part when he wrote that the Indian allies of the government “killed the animals in sheer wantonness, and when reproached by the officers said: ‘better kill buffalo than have him feed the Sioux.’”8

3 For periodic bison scarcity see Roe, The North American Buffalo, 543-600.
5 Jeffrey Ostler, “They Regard Their Passing as Wakan: Interpreting Western Sioux Explanations for the Bison’s Decline,” Western Historical Quarterly 30 (Winter 1999), 484.
6 Quoted in ibid, 484.
8 Quoted in Wooster, The Military and United States Indian Policy, 172.
At the very least, as Dan Flores points out, "such a conception did not aid the tribes in their efforts to work out an ecological balance amid the complexities of the nineteenth-century Plains." Plains Indians, however, never really had a chance to work out the kinks in their nomadic lifestyle: the cultural tenure of equestrian Plains Indian culture was too brief and exposed to a host of other external factors. From the moment Indians adopted the horse to hunt bison and accepted Western trade goods for the animal's robe, they were tying themselves to a much larger global economic and political web from which they could not escape.

One strand of this web was environmental: as the Northern Plains climate changed in the mid-nineteenth century, at the close of the Little Ice Age, so too did the ecological relationship of humans and bison. As precipitation dropped and periods of drought became common, once lush prairies began to dry up. Grasses went on the defensive and sent their nutrients deep into the ground, depriving ungulates of vital nourishment. Grass fires and grasshoppers only compounded the hardships facing humans and animals on the Plains. Even without the pressures of Euroamerican settlement and the Western market, life became increasingly precarious on the Plains for both Indians and bison in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Still, emphasizing the forces that reduced the viability of bison on the Plains can make the animal's decline seem predetermined. This declensionist approach obscures the complexity of historic human and bison interactions in the West and ignores factors that mitigated the decimation of northern buffalo. Northern Plains bison were offered some protection from the pressures that threatened their existence. Buffer zones lying between warring tribes and non-Indians gave the ungulate some degree of refuge in core areas of the Upper Missouri until the early 1880s. While major Central and Southern Plains tribes made peace with one another in the 1840s, such a grand rapprochement never occurred on the Northern Plains. Although the United States tried to curb intertribal conflict in the 1850s, the bloodshed did not end. In fact, America became another participant in the battle

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10 Ibid., 484; Dobak, "Killing the Canadian Buffalo," 52.

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over northern hunting grounds, facilitating access to bison for some tribes while opposing others. Conflict between two expansionary powers – the United States and the Sioux – who sought to control the region erupted in the 1860s, and kept northern hunting grounds in turmoil for twenty years – making it difficult for any group to penetrate the region and finish off the last of the bison.

The American Fur Company's tight grip on the Upper Missouri fur trade also kept American settlement at bay before the Civil War. The company actively discouraged any reports from the Northern Plains that might attract miners or farmers to the region and disrupt the wildlife that drove the trade in animal products. The American Fur Company's monopoly also strangled free-market competition in the region. Although the company encouraged Indians to kill buffalo for market, it discouraged a more prolific trade in robes by Indians saddled with the low prices the company offered for furs.

Epidemic disease, too, curbed human predation of bison. Although epidemics ravaged indigenous populations in the West numerous times during the last four hundred years, none devastated the Northern Plains as much as the 1837-38 smallpox outbreak. As much as half the native population of the Upper Missouri died. Although an increase in Indian bison hunting for market followed the epidemic, far more bison were spared after smallpox dramatically reduced the populations, and therefore subsistence needs, of northern tribes.

Northern bison had still another advantage, particularly over herds to the south: less competition from horses. Although northern tribes kept horses and used them with devastating effect to hunt and kill bison, southern tribes had far more. To a large extent this was a result of latitude and climate. Although the Northern Plains were wetter, less prone to drought, and more ideally suited to support bison than plains to the south, it was a difficult environment for horses. Northern winters were longer and harsher than on the Southern Plains. Subsequently, horses wintering on the Northern Plains required far more intensive care by humans to keep them alive. On the Southern Plains horses stood a much better chance of making it through the winter with less human intervention. Indeed, this is reflected by the two million wild
mustangs reportedly living on the nineteenth century Southern Plains. These equine numbers were not replicated on the Northern Plains, and northern bison were spared much of the competition over forage faced by southern herds.

Although it was not discussed, the expansion of railroads into the West also worked in favor of northern bison. While the Northern Pacific railroad reached Miles City in 1881, the tracks of several railroads were laid further south in the late 1860's and throughout the 1870's. On the Southern Plains, the penetration of railways, such as the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe line, corresponded to an innovation in the tanning of hides. This new tanning process skyrocketed the demand for buffalo skins, to be used in manufacturing products as varied as belts for machines, and leather for carriage seats. The railways offered a fast and efficient means of transport for the hide trade. On the Southern and Central plains, the concerted destruction of the bison, forever associated with people like Oscar Brackett, was launched in 1871 and finished by 1874. Northern bison held on for almost a decade longer, in part because it took that long for the railroad to fully penetrate the region thanks to a struggling economy in the 1870s and the violent efforts of the Sioux and other tribes.

Nevertheless, the edge northern bison had finally dulled. By the early 1880s white hide hunters followed the railroad into northern hunting grounds and, with astonishing speed, capped off the process of bison decline begun much earlier in the century. Fortunately the story did not end there. Over a century later bison are alive in significant numbers across North America. While the animal in many places is a domesticated shadow of its former self there is hope that more herds will be allowed to exist in a less managed state – in expansive refuges without fences where wolves and other predators complete a more ancient and poetic cycle of life and death.


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