



Bison at Theodore Roosevelt National Park.

The Onset of the Buffalo Commons

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[T]he panhandle was the most complicated part of North America, the last piece of Texas to be settled . . . the remote and level land, tempestuous blasts, tornadoes drilling down from super cells and the peculiar configuration of the territory worked with the wind to blow away the human chaff, leaving the heavy kernels. It was defeat to give up and pull out. It took sticking qualities — humor, doggedness, strength — to stay.

Annie Proulx, *That Old Ace in the Hole*, p.102

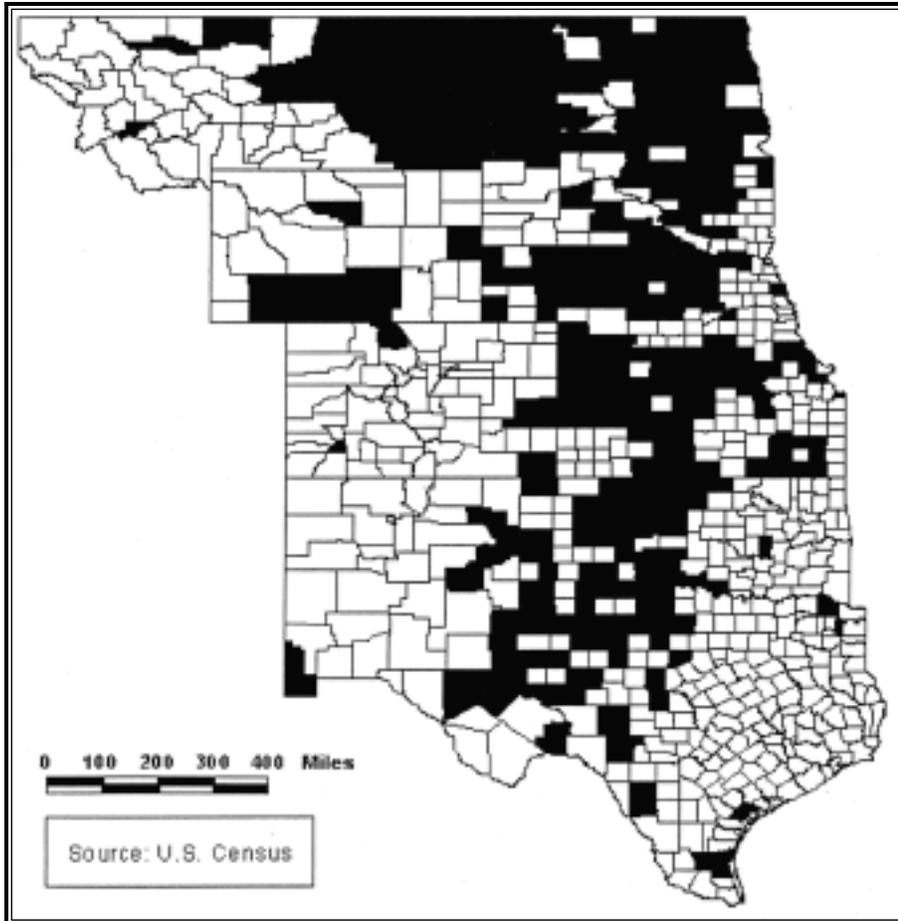
Perhaps I am also redefining frontier not as a place you exploit and abandon but as a place where you build on the past for the future. When we journey here, we discover it is no less old than new.

Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, pp. 133-134

Like a lot of ranchers, especially in Texas, the Millers have come to the realization not only that the wild is more fun to be around than a country with nothing in it except vapid, screw-loose cattle but also that the wild plus recreational tourism can make plenty of cash.

Dan Flores, *Caprock Canyonlands: Journeys into the Heart of the Southern Plains*, p. 42

THE history of the Great Plains has been one of booms and busts, tests for those who came and pressures for those who stayed. The busts have always lasted longer and cut deeper. Literature, memoir, and social science provide different ways to understand the Great Plains experience, but reading the excerpts introducing this article, one would be hard-pressed to tell which was which. Likewise, our Buffalo Commons work seems poised precipitously between the fact and



Great Plains states' counties that lost population during 1990-2000.
 ■ Lost Population □ Gained Population

fantasy, but over the years we have found what might seem like fantasy is becoming fact. Perhaps the transformation merely echoes the unfolding history of the bison around which our ideas build.

In December 1987 we first wrote about the future of the rural Great Plains for the American Planning Association's magazine, *Planning*. We reviewed the region's previous 150 years, extrapolated the trends and projected them into the future. We dwelt especially on the boom-and-bust cycles, particularly in the late-twentieth century. We wrote of the Homestead Acts in the mid-nineteenth century that encouraged new settlers to the West and of Nellie Bly's reportage of wagon trains heading east in the 1890s in response to drought and economic depression; of revised Homestead Acts early in the twentieth century and then the 1930s Dust Bowl. The prevailing federal response for the rest of the twentieth century — subsidy and technical service programs directed at the remaining farmers and ranchers — made for continuing, but subtler busts.

Over the last century and a half the booms became less boomerish. From decade to decade, whether or not other regions grew, most plains counties, especially the most rural ones, lost people. In the 2000 U.S. Census, for example, the first in many decades in which all U.S.

states showed a net increase in residents, North Dakota ranked last in growth, and almost all its increase occurred in the major cities of Fargo and Bismarck.¹ That is, the most rural areas of North Dakota, like those in other Great Plains states, are depopulating (and aging) fast. Despite the overwhelming amount of rural land, these states are becoming more concentratedly urban. In an odd way this pattern echoes Native American and buffalo declines and concentration a century earlier, but those were imposed while this contemporary one is voluntary. Native Americans and buffalo were confined to land with ostensibly little economic value, while today's population selects the most economically viable.

Since the 1930s, new waves of regional economic growth have waited for new hordes of migrants, but they failed to show up. Economic opportunities diminished as the region's commodities — cattle, wheat, corn, and, in the South, cotton — became ever less profitable. The local commercial

interests struggled because they had fewer customers. The remaining rural plains' population concentrated in fewer and fewer places. It continued to age as young people, finding opportunities mostly lacking, left. One study shows that nearly all plains nonmetropolitan counties lag behind the national average in income and employment growth.² The booms and busts have affected the region's environmental conditions equally problematically. Technology center-pivot irrigation systems, fertilizers, bioengineered crops — made manipulation of ecological systems ever easier, but also made it possible to ignore the signals of exceeded limits. Water tables and soil profiles declined. Federal responsibility for rural growth policy has traditionally resided in the Department of Agriculture. Now that much of rural America across the country has become less agricultural, USDA development efforts have diversified, but they have had relatively little impact on the rural plains, where the drift toward dying towns, departing young people, closing banks, schools, churches, and farm implement dealerships continues.

In 1987 we concluded that if these trends persisted, a generation hence the region would be much emptier. We suggested a look back as a way of rethinking what could come later — that is, we used the past as a source



Newell, South Dakota.

for a leap into the future. We coined the term *Buffalo Commons* as the metaphor for a restoration-based future. We elaborated by drawing out a somewhat fantastical notion of what one then might see in the plains: wide-open spaces no longer fenced, replanted grasses, and free movement of all native species. One could imagine safaris following large, free-ranging herds of bison and pronghorn. Buffalo were central to this image of the regional future.

Many people in the region rejected the vision, deriding the notion of the return of buffalo as impractical. Our late-1980s and early-1990s speaking engagements in the Plains were often greeted (or reported) with lines like EASTERN ACADEMICS WANT TO FENCE OFF GREAT PLAINS (or TO REPOPULATE THE REGION WITH BUFFALO). The objections were twofold. Some believed buffalo an inferior species, particularly in comparison with cattle. Its useful hind end was smaller than a steer's and its useless head was bigger. Those who took this position in effect said, "If they were better we wouldn't have gotten rid of them, and good riddance." Others feared buffalo would harm their livelihoods by breaking through their fences, spreading brucellosis to their cattle herds, or endangering their state's brucellosis-free designation.

The image of a Buffalo Commons took hold nonetheless. It worked as a way of getting discussions started on alternative ways of inhabiting the rural Great Plains. Just as a poetic metaphor can stimulate imagination, so too can a regional one. The metaphor's two words, buffalo and commons, when linked together effectively provoke images both of the region and how it might look different. Both words are accessible rather than obscure, and, as we have found, powerful individually and even more so together. The fact that they are not generally used together propels the envisioning, making the listener strive

to *give* the term sense. The strong emotional power of each word, coupled with the dim but powerful memories associated with them, is what writer Wright Morris sees as the driving force behind imagination and creativity.³ The diversity of images evoked allows a greater building process as each person's individual interpretation reverberates against that of others. Since 1987 we have spoken about the Buffalo Commons at a wide variety of forums organized around the future of the region. We have been invited to present our ideas to citizen and academic groups and to annual meetings of agricultural producers, economic development specialists, newspaper publishers, and restoration groups, among many others.

Although we bring a metaphor to the discussion, the talk at the meetings quickly turns practical. Self-employment rates are high in the Great Plains, so many individuals have the power to make decisions on their own land-use practices. For us the word *buffalo* functions as an open-ended reference to native species and character of place, but Great Plains people focus strongly on bison as a species. They reflect on how the animals might fit into the region and into their own lives. Much discussion has centered on raising buffalo commercially. Many people grapple with the tangible impact of a switch from cattle to bison for them and for their communities. What kinds of fences are necessary? How should they calculate the best stocking rates? Who will buy the meat? Who will buy the animals? How will they brand them? How will they move them? Is there enough genetic diversity for a healthy population? How will their lending institutions respond?

Much of this discussion drew on the expertise of people already raising buffalo who served as experts and as examples. The two organizations devoted to bison — the National Buffalo Association formed in 1966 and the

American Bison Association formed in 1975 — grew in the 1990s and merged in 1995 into the National Bison Association (NBA), hoping for greater influence as one group. There is a comparable Canadian Bison Association. As interest in the animal increased, the organizations wanted to better serve the animals' and the membership's interests. There are now individuals raising bison in every state, and nearly every province, but the largest group is in the plains. The NBA's membership, for example, is greatest in Colorado. There are increasing numbers of regional organizations as well, some under the umbrella of the NBA, and others such as the Great Plains Buffalo Association, entirely separate. The largest number of regional and state organizations are in the Great Plains. Increased commercial production led to the development of its own infrastructure for slaughter and processing. The North American Bison Cooperative was established in New Rockford, North Dakota, an early center of bison producers. Its membership is heavily from the plains. The practical questions got their answers. Private ranchers, state extension service, the NBA, and academic researchers all contributed. Montana State University has a research program housed in the Center for Bison and Wildlife Health. Researchers at Texas A&M, Colorado State University, and Kansas State University, among others, have conducted numerous studies. Most bison ranchers use electrical fences and tougher corrals than for cattle. A few ranchers slaughter on site, but most truck the animals to the slaughterhouse. At first North Dakota's state bank began to lend for bison, and increasing numbers of commercial banks did as well. Genetic diversity seems adequate.

Markets are growing, but very slowly. Prices of animals went up rapidly, but have since dropped. One can find buffalo in the supermarket in Wyoming where they are raised and in foodie centers like Berkeley, but they are still unusual in food outlets in much of the rest of the country. Still, each year brings a few more markets. The national warehouse chain Costco, for example, recently began carrying frozen buffalo burgers in buns. Ted Turner, who has the largest private herd, opened a chain of restaurants, Ted's Montana Grill, with restaurateur George McKerrow, Jr., that features buffalo as well as beef. Thus far they are split between Colorado, Georgia, Ohio, and Tennessee, and several more are due to open soon. A delegation from the NBA, reported the January/February/March 2003 *Bison World*, even went to Cuba and met with Fidel Castro in its search for new markets.

Public herds grew as well with more talk of buffalo, and the majority of sites are in the Great Plains.⁴ The public herds had long been a source of animals for new and expanding public and private herds. Oklahoma's Wichita Mountain Wildlife Preserve, for example, the oldest preserve with buffalo, acquired fifteen animals from the New York Zoological Society in 1907. Today it

has about 550 animals. It holds an auction every October, usually of older cows and bulls. South Dakota's Custer State Park has a roundup and auction every October too. North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park is still one of the least-visited national parks, but notable for its wildlife. It acquired twenty-nine bison in 1956. The number grew to 145 in 1962. Its visitorship keeps rising, and now the herd is capped at 400 in the southern unit and at 300 on the northern one. Texas acquired a state herd in 1997, descendants of Charlie Goodnight's herd. The herd is located in the Panhandle, at Caprock Canyon State Park.

Increased promotion of plains wildlife, including bison, draws new visitors to facilities, often people from outside the Great Plains who are excited to see an animal they mistakenly thought extinct. In response, the states incorporate buffalo into their own marketing, presenting them as desirable economic assets. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found wildlife especially important for tourism and recreation for the Northern Plains. The West North Central Region, a census-designated region that includes the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas, ranked highest in the nation for participation in wildlife watching, fishing, and hunting by both residents and nonresidents.⁵

In the last ten years there has been an increased interest in land preservation of the Great Plains through land trust organizations. The movement in America began a hundred years earlier in New England. In 1891 a Massachusetts group called the Trustees of Reservations set aside a 20-acre site. It now protects nearly 50,000 acres. Its efforts encouraged forest regrowth and also ensured that the densely populated state had park and recreational lands available. The land trust movement is still strongest in the densely populated parts of the East and coastal West, but it has recently become another piece of the Great Plains and the bison story.

The largest land preservation group, the Nature Conservancy, which operates nationally and internationally, is increasingly active in the plains states. It has sites in all plains states and several, like the one in Johnstown, Nebraska, along the Niobrara River, include bison as part of their habitat restoration. Some of them coordinate their work with private ranchers who raise buffalo, relying on easements to set land use practices. Smaller land preservation groups also exist in the Great Plains. These tend to be small, and only at the beginning of their land acquisition phase, but for some, like the Texas-based Great Plains Restoration Council, Colorado's Southern Plains Land Trust, and Nebraska's Conservation Alliance of the Great Plains, bison restoration is, implicitly or explicitly, part of their mission.

Plains Indians have long called for bison restoration. Those tribes with herds have increased their herd sizes and increasing numbers of tribes have tribal herds. The South Dakota-based InterTribal Bison Cooperative, a consortium of over fifty mostly Great Plains tribes, is the



Buffalo ranch.

most active institution providing technical assistance and coordination for Indian peoples. It has been generally supportive of the Buffalo Commons, and the Rosebud Sioux tribe in South Dakota has officially endorsed the concept, viewing it as fitting into its own efforts to improve tribal health and spirit. The South Dakota Pine Ridge Sioux tribe is beginning similar efforts.

All these different groups — the private bison rancher, the public herds manager, Native Americans, and the land conservation organizations — have varying constituencies. Yet each can find an appeal in bison — as a way of diversifying their operations through a largely underexploited economic niche; as a way of managing their ecosystem with grazers; as a way of honoring one's relatives; and as a way of passing on land to the next generation.

Quite separately, our work on the Buffalo Commons has coincided with numbers of important shifts: from a paradigm of mastery of nature to one of cooperation based on ecology; from hierarchical thinking to more systems thinking that relies on a wider range of inputs; from regulatory approaches to public-private partnerships and more grassroots participation. As one result, predators like wolves and rodents have found value. Prairie dogs, for example, were saved from extermination in Lubbock, Texas, because of their identified role in the ecosystem and because a vocal grassroots group made its objections heard. The animals were then relocated rather than poisoned. The Montana-based Predator Conservation Alliance (formerly the Predator Project)

seeks to defend prairie dogs as an endangered species. Earlier this year a *Wall Street Journal* article reported they were viewed as desirable pets in Japan, but the recent cases of American pet owners contracting monkey pox from them suggests their ecological role is the more appropriate one.

It has now become politically acceptable in a way it was not fifteen years ago to talk about the plains' population loss and the need for new regional visions. In 2002 and 2003 Senators Byron Dorgan (Democrat, North Dakota) and Chuck Hagel (Republican, Nebraska) introduced the Homestead Economic Opportunity Act. This new Homestead Act would direct tax credits, student loan, and investment incentives toward high out-migration counties. According to Senator Dorgan, the vast majority of North Dakota counties qualify. The financial incentives are intended to revitalize the area by attracting newcomers while helping them and long-term residents establish new businesses. Even if enacted and successful, to truly change the future of the region, the legislation will have to encourage many nontraditional as well as traditional possibilities. There would otherwise be too many places competing against each other for the same new ventures, some of which might even be unwelcome; among the fastest-growing businesses in parts of the plains, for example, are industrial hog farms. Numbers of communities have organized at the local and statewide level to keep them out. By comparison, wildlife has proven beneficial in the plains and farther west, as economist Thomas Power has shown in writings

like *Post-Cowboy Economics: Pay and Prosperity in the New West*.

It is nearing a generation since we first wrote about the Buffalo Commons. In many respects the Great Plains does not look much different from 1987. It is still the land of the Big Sky. Driving through the eastern half in the spring and summer, one's eye is filled with waving wheat and sunflowers whose heads swivel with the sun. The fields turn browner as one goes farther west. Cattle stand around where they find water. Cottonwoods signal the rivers from a long way off, lining up along the watercourses. But today more buffalo roam the plains. They have not recovered their mammoth numbers, but several hundred massed together are still impressive. Driving along the interstates, one may suddenly notice them off to the side or along quieter back roads. The term Buffalo Commons springs up surprisingly often too — as the title of the late South Dakota rancher Lawrence Brown's memoir and of one of Western novelist Richard Wheeler's books. It is also used by politicians. Wyoming's Governor Dave Freudenthal used it to express frustration at the unpredictable shifts in federal policy from oil and gas extraction to, in his term, a Buffalo Commons (although there has never been a federal Buffalo Commons policy). The idea shows up in classroom assignments at all levels from elementary through graduate school. Annie Proulx's recent *That Old Ace in the Hole* about the threat corporate hog farms pose to Panhandle Texas saw respite in buffalo. "We're goin a take down fences and open her back up, run bison in the panhandle." She even had the Poppers "comin down to talk at the church next Thursday," to help get things mov-

ing.⁶ The nineteenth century was terrible for buffalo, as was most of the twentieth. But early in the twenty-first, the buffalo are coming back, and a Buffalo Commons is forming.

NOTES

1. Richard Rathge, Karen Olson, Ramona Danielson, and Mandy Clemenson, "Demographic Chartbook: Profiling Change in the Great Plains" (Fargo, ND: State Data Center at North Dakota State University, 2001), for an excellent set of maps on demographic change.
2. Marvin Duncan, Dennis Fisher, and Mark Drabenscott, "Planning for a Sustainable Future in the Great Plains," *Proceedings of the Symposium: Planning for a Sustainable Future: The Case of the North American Great Plains*, 1995, <http://iisd1.iisd.ca/agri/Nebraska/duncan.htm>.
3. Wright Morris, *Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image-Makers* (New York, Harper, 1978), 169.
4. For a map of federal herd locations, see www.bisoncentral.com/history/herdmap.asp.
5. U.S. Department of Interior Fish and Wildlife Services and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, "2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation," October 2002 <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/FHW01.pdf>.
6. Annie Proulx, *That Old Ace in the Hole* (New York, Scribner, 2002), 340.

SELECTED READINGS

- Ernest Callenbach, *Bring Back the Buffalo! A Sustainable Future for America's Great Plains* (Berkeley: Island Press, 2000).
- Daniel Licht, *Ecology and Economics of the Great Plains* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
- Deborah E. Popper and Frank J. Popper, "The Great Plains: From Dust to Dust," *Planning* 53, 2 (Dec. 1987): 12-18.
- _____, "The Buffalo Commons: Metaphor as Method," *Geographical Review* 89, 4 (Oct. 1999): 491-510.
- Richard Rathge, Karen Olson, Ramona Danielson, and Mandy Clemenson, "Demographic Chartbook: Profiling Change in the Great Plains (Fargo, ND: State Data Center at North Dakota State University, 2001).

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