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looking back

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low the fresh green prairies south. In time, the mating of these giant grass eaters and the large areas of wild prairie grass slowly created their own self-contained ecosystem (or *biome*).

This magnificent, shaggy, eating machine we call the North American Plains Buffalo grew into enormous herds; grazing their way through thousands of acres a day and moving steadily as they ate. As they chewed the grass down, they passed the seeds through their digestive tract, and their hoof imprint loosened the soil and pressed those seeds into the ground – helping to replant as they went. In time they would become one of the most important animals in the American West.

Even before the arrival of horses, the Native Americans residing on the prairies hunted buffalo on foot. Archaeologists have excavated the remains of buffalo with stone spear points found between the ribs; the type that were used thousands of years before white men walked the continent. Carefully chosen canyons and cliffs were often used as places to stampede them over the edge as a method of collecting as many as possible at one time.

When the Native Americans mastered the use of horses, the buffalo became even more important; they became part of their culture and religion. The horse allowed Native Americans to kill only as many as they needed and only the animals that were considered the best. They consumed every part of the animal, including the intestines, the brains, and the marrow; the hides became lodges, clothing and items for trade.

THEN THE WHITE MAN CAME

By the time the white settlers started to gain a foothold in the Eastern United States, this denizen of the wild prairies numbered in the millions. Single herds often numbered in the hundreds of thousands, if not a million or more. Some estimates put the North American Plains Buffalo population at thirty to seventy million as recently as two hundred years ago.

The meeting of the buffalo and the grass proved to be a perfect moment in the history of North America's prairies.



Another game changer for the Native Americans was the horse. (This old illustration was created by Dore after Caitlin, published on *Le Tour du Monde*, Paris, 1860).

This 2,000 pound, grass loving, cud chewing ruminant with the cloven hoof of an ungulate not only flourished, but helped the grass to grow and provide a place for many other species to reach strong, healthy populations.

After the turn of the nineteenth century, the early explorers and trappers discovered that a new market for tanned hides was developing in Europe and in America. The tough hide was also perfect for many other products, and every industry that used leather in any form, from the shoe and saddle industry to industrial pulley belts, clamored for more hides.

Between 1820 and the start of the Civil War, professional white hunters and Indian hunters killed an estimated three million animals a year with little serious effect to the herd size. Most of these were killed just for their hides, the carcasses left to feed the various predators and scavengers.

After President Lincoln signed *The Homestead Act* on May 20, 1862, the stage was set for the greatest rush for free land in history. A few months later, he signed the Pacific Railway Act; an action that would forever change the history of the greatest icon the American West had ever produced.

Several wagon trails through the grasslands had been forged by pioneers from St. Louis destined for places like Oregon, Santa Fe, and California, and these trails were used for decades. For some unknown reason, in their haste

to get to the Pacific Coast, those early settlers appeared to pass through the prairies with blinders on. They saw little value to the vast expanses of grass, considered by many to be a desert. Instead they hurried west to stake their claims and start their farms and ranches in Oregon and California.

May 10, 1869, marked two important moments in the history of the West; on that day the last spike was driven at Promontory Summit, Utah Territory, finishing the rail line – and at the very same moment marked the start of the death march of millions and millions of the grasslands' most perfect resident – the American Plains Buffalo.

With the railroads the hide hunters came in unprecedented numbers; they could now kill and ship tens of thousands of hides a week. Some hunters were to become legends, killing thousands in just days or weeks by themselves. U.S. General Phil Sheridan promoted the extermination as the easy way to remove the Indians from their ancestral lands. Even though there were laws regulating hide hunting, the government turned their head at the shameless slaughter of these magnificent animals. By the 1880s the buffalo and the prairie ecosystem it helped create was doomed to be a footnote of history. **WR**

Stay tuned for Part 2 - Hooves, Horns and Grass in the next issue of *Working Ranch* magazine due out late August.

Hooves, Horns and Grass

Part 1



The railroad changed everything in a very short period of time.

What Lewis saw from that bluff (in western North Dakota) on a cool April morning was the edge of one of the largest wild grasslands in the world. The early French trappers and explorer's in North America called it the "prairie," meaning meadow, and the name stuck. Worldwide, it is comparable to the South American Pampas, the Serengeti of Africa, or the Steppe of Asia.

Thousands of square miles of nutritious grass, forbs, and shrubs drew these animals to the prairie. All of these have three important characteristics in common that made it a match made in heaven; they are all herbivores, all ruminants, and all ungulates.

This vast area of prairie stretched from Saskatchewan, Canada, to central Texas. Considered to be three distinct zones, they are divided as such; from the Rocky Mountains going east there is the shortgrass prairie, the mixed grass prairie, and the tallgrass prairie.

The formation of the North American prairies began to take place with the upwelling of the Rocky Mountains. In prehistoric times, as the mountains started to push their way up, they created a rain shadow that slowly cut off the moisture to the east and caused most of the trees to die off and the terrain to dry out. The land closest to the mountains received less moisture and the grass came in shorter. The prairie land farthest to the east had the benefit of more rainfall and became the tallgrass prairie. Average rainfall on the prairie is considered to be 10" to 30" a year.

After the receding of the last ice age the earliest Native American ancestors started their migration to North America across the Bering Land Bridge. Among other early arrivals to the continent were the bison; and as the herds began to increase, they started to fol-

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“ascended to the top of the cutt bluff this morning, for whence I had the most delightfull view of the country, the whole of which except the valley formed by the Missouri is void of timber or underbrush, exposing to the first glance of the spectator immense herds of Buffaloe, Elk, Deer, & Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture.”

- Meriwether Lewis, April 22, 1805.