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## looking back

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group that would be later responsible for the famous Johnson County cattle war, realized they needed to adjust their thinking on the cattle they raised. By the middle eighties, led in part by the influence of the English investors, European breeds like Angus and Hereford (then called *blooded* cattle), were imported and the Longhorn rapidly disappeared from the open range.

Replacing their existing cattle with the European breeds was considered by most to be the right thing to do; but the replacements were much slower and more docile, and proved to bring with them their own set of problems - they were not by nature grass eaters like the buffalo or even the Longhorn.

They had evolved in a part of the world that had more than enough rainfall; as a result they were very picky eaters. They preferred plants of the leafy variety, searching out broadleaf plants and forbs over the regular grasses of the prairie.

The new arrivals would eat grass when necessary, but would always migrate to the streams and areas where they could find an abundance of leafy, green, broadleaf plants. The buffalo

had loved the wide open prairies full of wild grass, and helped it to flourish. When the winters gave them a lot of snow and ice, they would paw the ground and swing their massive heads back and forth in the snow to reach the grass underneath.

The European cattle simply weren't evolved to survive the winters in the American West. They would graze the ground to the dirt before they went to the grass. When the blizzards hit the prairie they would be knotted up in the gullies and the streambeds, found in the spring - dead by the thousands.


By the 1890's, the days of the open range style of cattle ranching was over. It had really died years before, but many of the early ranchers refused to let it go; the idea of getting rich on the open range (public land), was just too good to give up.

In time, the cattle barons of the day began to catch on to what a future without free public land for grazing might look like. They soon started to buy all the land they could, stocking it with the new European breeds. Large private ranches were born, and on the fringes, the farmers with their quarter-section and half-section claims began in earnest to break the sod of the American grassland.

Left mostly unregulated, the prairie suffered the indignity of having more than forty-percent of the grassland seriously overgrazed, and even more of it wasted to bad farming practices. By the early 1930's, the government finally woke up to the degradation of the Western grasslands and passed the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. It set up the system of grazing allotments we still have today.

Looking back to that day in 1805, when Meriwether Lewis recalled the "*immense herds of Buffalo, Elk, Deer & Antelopes feeding in one common and boundless pasture,*" we have to wonder if he could have ever imagined what this magnificent ocean of grass might come to in the short span of a hundred years.

With the foresight of several people in the late nineteenth century, a campaign to preserve the American Buffalo began to slowly bring back America's favorite Icon. Thanks to those forward thinking people, this unique animal was saved from extinction; today the population is estimated to be close to 500,000 animals. As for the historic prairie grass, what's left of it is preserved in several locations around the West, allowing us to go back in time to the days when the American Buffalo reigned as king of the grasslands. **WR**



The Longhorn had it figured out, except for one little tidbit; tick-borne Texas Fever.

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## Hooves, Horns and Grass

Part 2 - continued from June / July 2013

**B**y 1890, the story of the American Plains Buffalo was all but over. The tale had started with tens of millions of animals and finished with under a thousand head, captive instead of free-roaming, in less than a hundred years. Man, like always, continued to prove there were few things he could not conquer. The twenty-five years after the Civil War had proven to be devastating to the American prairie. Millions of buffalo were wiped off the face of the earth, mostly for their hides; their rotting carcasses left scattered across the grass from Texas to Canada.

At the same time, the Plains tribes lost not only their major source of sustenance, but their very identity. By the end of the century, most Plains Indians had been moved into reservations; the Indian and the buffalo, whose lives were so intertwined for thousands of years, were, for all practical purposes, just a footnote in the history of the American prairie.

The railroads had laid their steel across the West, and thanks to the Pacific Railway Act, found themselves the sole owners of millions of acres of land in the now empty prairie. They set up towns and stations along the way,

selling the remaining land to anyone that had the money. Wealthy people from all over realized that this was a huge opportunity to get into the live cattle business. Many of the early ranches were funded by investors from England; the common joke among the Americans at the time was this was where the English fathers sent their errant sons to keep them out of trouble.

The loss of the buffalo caused a domino effect throughout the prairie ecosystem; the rest of the ruminants that shared the prairie like the elk, deer, and antelope became harder to find. Millions of hooves no longer softened

up the ground and deposited new seeds. Predators like the wolf and coyote began to disappear, even the smaller prairie scavengers found it hard to make a living in the newly barren country.

For many years, the cattlemen had been bringing in Longhorn cattle from Texas. These tall, lanky, wild cattle had been raised in some of the most inhospitable country Mexico and Texas had to offer, and had learned to survive almost anything Mother Nature could throw at them.

The Longhorns also came with a built-in problem; they carried Texas Fever, a disease spread by ticks. Over time they had become immune to the disease, but wherever they went, the local cattle would pick up the diseased ticks and suffer a miserable death. The early ranchers, men like the cattle barons of Wyoming, found that many states and places along the new rail line had started to ban moving the Texas Longhorns across their states.

The members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, the same

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The American Buffalo (*Bison bison*) was hunted to the brink of extinction, and we mean *the brink*.

TOM RECHNER

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