

BUFFALO

(or AMERICAN BISON)

By George Constantourakis

This article attempts to present the Buffalo first from a Historical perspective and then from a Naturalist's point of view. When the first Europeans came to America it is estimated that some 50 to 60 million Buffalo roamed North America from the Rockies east to the Appalachians, and from the Great Slave Lake (Northwest Territories of Canada) south to the Rio Grande. During the warm months they grazed in the northern prairies and in winter they moved south, hundreds of miles, to find more grass.

As the white man's civilization moved westward so was the Buffalo. By 1800 there were few Buffalo left east of the Mississippi River. Their population was now down to 30 million. In the west there were still large herds of thousands of Buffalo (*Figure 1*). In 1806 when Lewis and Clark came across a herd at South Dakota's White River they wrote: "The moving multitude... darkened the whole plains". In 1801 Alexander Henry of the North West Company, while wintering 60 miles south of Winnipeg on the Red River described incredible numbers of Buffalo: "The ground was covered at every point of the compass... as far as the eye could reach, and every animal was in motion".

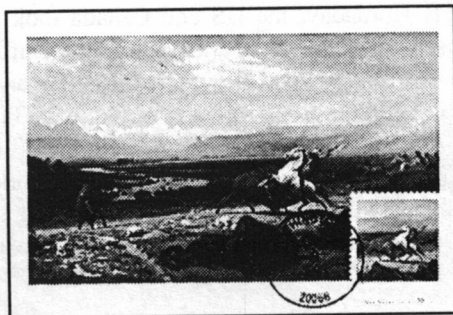
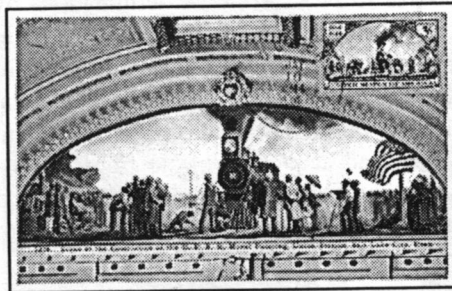
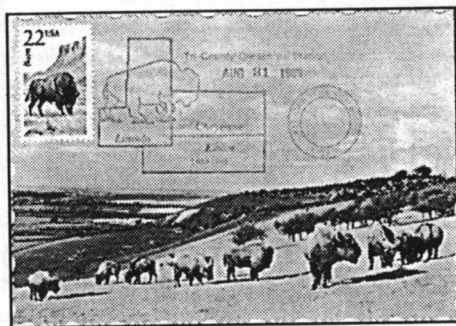
The Plain Indians literally lived on the Buffalo which they killed with bow and arrow

(*Figure 2*) or with spears(*Cover & Figure 3*). They hunted the Buffalo for its meat. They made clothes and tents from hides, and threads for weaving from its hair. They used their bones for sled runners and toys; their horns for drinking vessels; their hooves for glue; their fat for hair grease and their gall for yellow paint. However the Indians made only necessary demands on the Buffalo, without upsetting the age-old population balance. The building of the transcontinental railroad (*Figure 4*) opened the west to market hunters. Hunters supplied Buffalo meat to railroad camps, to army garrisons, and to frontier settlements. Thus the slaughter of the Buffalo began.

In the 1860's the policy of the US government was to confine the Indians to reservations, in order to facilitate the opening of the west to white settlers. In the mid 1860's during the Indian wars, 20 percent of the US Cavalry serving in the western frontier was made up by the 9th and 10th Colored Cavalry Regiments. The native Americans so admired the African-American soldiers' courage and fighting ability that they began calling them the "*Buffalo Soldiers*" (*Figure 5*). This name was quickly and enthusiastically accepted by the men of the 10th and later the 9th Colored Cavalry, as they recognized that the Buffalo was a sacred animal to the Indians and that only a respected enemy would be named for it.

However the campaign against Indians was facing great difficulties. The government's policy was best summed up in 1876 by J.Throckmorton, representative of Texas: "There is no question that, so long as there are millions of Buffaloes in the West, so long the Indians cannot be controlled, even by the strong arm of the Government.

Clockwise from Left. *Figure 1: Plains Buffalo grazing.* Stamp issued June 13, '87 for North American Wildlife. Cancel: Aug. 31, '89, Kit Carson CO, concordant (triplee). *Figure 2: Indian Hunting Buffalo.* Indian on horseback hunting Buffalo with bow and arrow. Stamp issued June 18, '98 for Centennial re-issue of the Trans-Mississippi 1898 Stamps. Cancel: Aug. 21, '99, Granger WY, concordant (triple). *Figure 3: The Last of the Buffalo.* Painting by Albert Bierstadt c.1889 at The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., showing an Indian attacking a Buffalo with a spear. Stamp issued Aug. 27, '98, for Four Centuries of American Art. Cancel: Aug. 2, '99, Wash. D.C. *Figure 4: Completion of First Transcontinental Road* on May 10, 1869. Mural painting by John McQuairrie, entitled "Golden Spike Ceremony" at Union Station Salt Lake City. Stamp issued May 10, 1944 for 75th anniv. Cancel: F.D., Ogden Utah.



"I believe it would be a great step forward in the civilization of the Indians and the preservation of peace on the border if there was not a Buffalo in existence." Thus came the unrestrained hunting, the true mass slaughter. Hunters killed entire herds for meat, skins and simply for sport. The Great Plains became the killing fields of the Buffalo, a vast bone yard. In 1890 a bone collecting industry sprang up and soon Buffalo bones were sold for \$3 to \$6 a ton for use as fertilizers or in refining sugar. By 1893 the bones were gone. The Plain Indians without their Buffalo were now reduced to a pitiful condition, without food, clothing, or all the other items that came from their Buffalo.

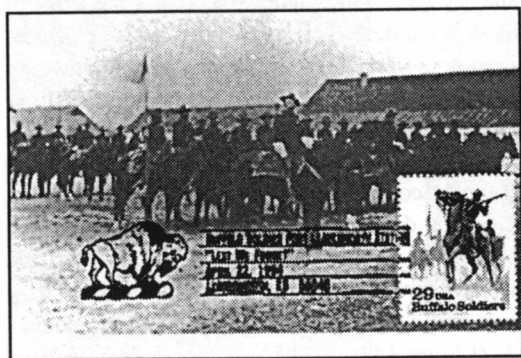
In 1883, at the time when white settlements were springing up in the empty plains, at the expense of the Indian tribes, who were now pacified and relegated by force to reservations, and also at the expense of the near extinction of the Buffalo, which was now replaced by herds of cattle, William F. Cody started his Wild West Show, aiming at reviving the western frontier experience, that had now come to an end.

William F. Cody (1846-1917) was better known as "*Buffalo Bill*" (Figure 6) after killing nearly 5000 buffalo in eighteen months for a contract to supply workers on the Kansas Pacific Railway with meat. Cody turned his youthful adventures as Pony Express rider, Army scout, and Buffalo hunter into his extraordinary travelling show the Wild West, which toured towns all over the US, Canada and Europe for 30 years, from 1883 until 1913. In Cody's Wild West Show, they hunted a Buffalo herd with blanks. Annie Oakley (1860-1926), known as "*Little Missie*" for her small size (Figure 8), shot a hundred flying targets without a miss, and earned a top billing for her unerring skill as a sharpshooter. Cowboys re-enacted the Pony Express. Presidents, Princes and common people rode in the *Deadwood Coach* to undergo attack and capture by Indians in war paint, and then rescue by the Cavalry riders and Cody.

In reality the old wild west had never died, it simply took a different form. Buffalo were replaced by range cattle. The heroes such as the US Cavalry riders were now replaced by the Cowboys, who were rounding up cattle or still chasing Indians or outlaws. The Western Frontier experience in its old form of the Cavalry soldiers or the new one of the Cowboys shaped the American psyche. Hollywood movies recreated this image, that became so popular not only in America, but also in Europe.

By 1900 there were less than 2000 Buffalo left. Some sources put the number to about 1000. Then, as a result of a concerted action by conservationists led by William T. Hornaday, the US and Canada took measures to prevent their extermination by setting aside Nat. Parks, where the Buffalo could live in safety. In the US the main such parks were in western Montana and in Yellowstone Nat. Park in Wyoming. In Canada the largest herd was at Wood Buffalo Nat. Park across the NWT and Alberta. Zoos also played a very important role in the preservation of the Buffalo, and particularly the Bronx zoo in New York, which had acquired Buffalo from various herds, thus ensuring genetic variety and avoidance of inbreeding problems. By the mid 1950's the Buffalo population had increased to about 7000 animals in the US and to 15000 in Canada.

Clockwise from Left. *Figure 5: The Buffalo Soldiers* A name given to the 10th Colored Cavalry Regiment by the Indians for their fighting ability. Stamp issued on Apr. 22, '94. Cancel: F.D. special, Leavenworth KS. *Figure 6: Buffalo Bill*. He romanticized the West in his Wild West Show that toured the US and Europe. Photo on card taken in El Paso in 1915. Stamp issued on Oct. 18, '94 for Legends of the West. Cancel: Oct. 10, '95 special, Madisonville KY. *Figure 7: "Jerked Down"* Painting by C.M.Russel (1864-1926) at the Thomas Institute of Amer. History and Art, Tulsa OK. Cowboys bringing down cattle with their lassos. Stamp issued on Mar. 19, '64 for the 100 years birth anniv. of C.M. Russel. Cancel: Nov. 11, 1989, regular, Tulsa OK. *Figure 8: Annie Oakley*, better known as "Little Missie". Sharpshooter who joined the Wild West Show in 1885. Her charm and unerring skill in shooting earned her top billing. Stamp issued on Oct. 18, '94 for Legends of the West. Cancel: Oct. 22, '94, special, Tulsa OK.



From a Naturalist's point of view the name Buffalo, through widely used by most people in N. America, actually is incorrect. The only real Buffaloes live in Africa and Asia. The correct name is Bison. Bison is divided into two species the American Bison or (incorrectly Buffalo), and the European Bison or Wisent (*Bison bonasus*). American Bison is divided into two subspecies, the more widely distributed Plains Bison (*Bison bison bison*) (Figures 10,12,13), and the Wood Bison or Mountain Bison (*Bison bison athabasca*) (Figures 9,11,16) a larger species. Wood Bison are presently found in the Wood Buffalo Nat. Park, a large park stretching across the NWT and Alberta border.

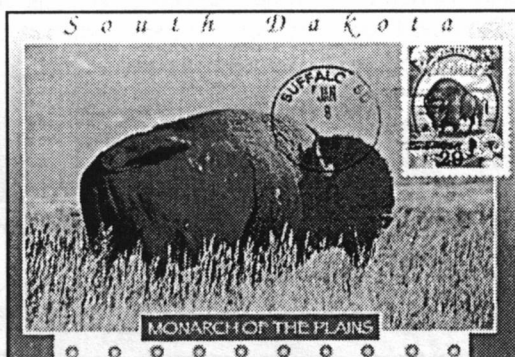
The Buffalo is the largest mammal in North America. It is a bovine related to the even-toed hoofed mammals, such as cattle, oxen, goats, and sheep. An adult male Bison is about 10 to 12 feet long and 6 feet high at the shoulder, and weighs 2000 pounds. The female is smaller weighing only 1200 pounds. Both males and females have rather small upcurved horns. The Bison has a large hump on its shoulder and its head hangs low. Under its chin it has a pointed beard, and on its head and for several feet up its back it has a mane of long, shaggy hair. Thick hair also covers the front of its body. Its tail is short and when the Bison is excited or angry its tail stands up almost as a cat's tail does. The Bison though big and powerful, are gentle and timid. However even though they may appear tame, they are wild, unpredictable and dangerous. Their eyesight is poor, but they can scent an intruder that is a mile away. They communicate within the herd by grunting, but when danger threatens they snort noisily.

In early summer, Bison shed their winter coats (Figure 13), and roll in shallow prairie depressions covering themselves with a dusty coat that protects its vulnerable hide from biting insects. The Bison's principal food is grama, bunch, and buffalo grass. When grass is scarce they ration themselves and when grass is plentiful they never overeat. They are much hardier than range cattle and they can better withstand cold weather and severe winter blizzards (Figure 14).

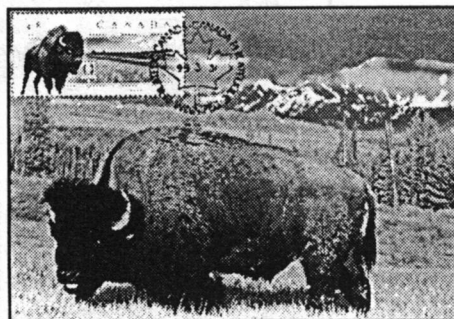
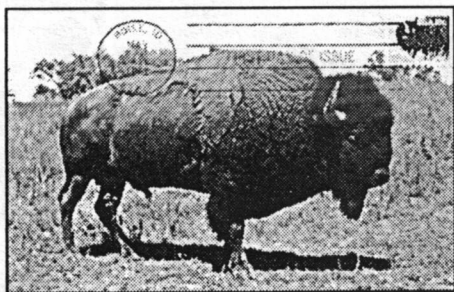
Bison lives 30 to 40 years. They do not multiply very fast. During a three-month breeding season from July to September, bulls guard their chosen mates, glowering at intruders and scaring them off. The female Bison normally gives birth once a year or twice every three years, to one 50-pound calf each time. The calves within a few hours after birth are able to follow their mother about. The calves are long-legged, and have orange-brown, crinkled coats, but lack their parents hump (Figure 15).

Today some of the largest Buffalo herds in the US are found in: "Yellowstone Nat. Park" in Wyoming with 4000 free roaming Buffalo. "Rocky Mountains Bison Ranch" in Colorado with a 2800 Bison herd. "Custer State Park" and "Wind Cave Nat. Park" in South Dakota with 2000 Bison. Ted Turner, the TV mogul, has the largest private herds, one near Bozeman in Montana with almost 6000 Buffalo, and another in New Mexico with over 2000 animals. There are numerous other small herds, mostly in private hands both in the US and Canada. Presently the Bison is enjoying a miraculous comeback with an estimated number of 200 000 Buffalo.

Clockwise from Left. *Figure 9: Bison bison athabascaae*. Wood Bison (or Mountain Bison) a larger species found mostly in Wood Buffalo Nat. Park in northern Alberta and NWT. Stamp issued on Mar. 24, '95 for Endangered Species. Cancel: F.D. special, Geneva, UN offices. *Figure 10: Plains Buffalo grazing*. Stamp issued on Oct. 18, '94, for Western Wildlife. Cancel: Aug. 8, '96, Buffalo, S.D. *Figure 11: Wood Bison (or Mountain Bison)*. Stamp issued on June 13, '87 for North American Wildlife. Cancel: Apr. 12, '97, Prairie city IA, concordant (triple). *Figure 12: Plains Buffalo*. Stamp issued on Mar. 31, '99 for Scenic Routes of Canada. Cancel: F.D., Winnipeg, Manitoba.



Clockwise from Left. *Figure 13: Buffalo in Summer.* Bison starting to shed its winter coat. Stamp issued on May 14, '81 for American Wildlife. Cancel: F.D. regular, Boise ID *Figure 14: Buffalo in Winter.* Buffalo can graze even under harsh winter conditions. When the ground is snow covered, they clear it with their hooves to get to the grass. Stamp of Wyoming Flag issued on Feb. 23, '76 for State Flags. Cancel: Dec. 31, '99, Cody WY, concordant (triple). *Figure 15: Pair of Buffalo with their Young.* The calf, with lighter color coat and without the hump, is feeding from its mothers milk. Stamp issued Mar. 31, '99 for Scenic Routes of Canada. Cancel: F.D., Winnipeg, Manitoba. *Figure 16: Mountain Bison grazing in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies.* Stamp issued Mar. 31, '99 for Scenic Routes of Canada. Cancel: F.D., Winnipeg, Manitoba.



WISENT (EUROPEAN BISON)

Wisent (*Bison bonasus*) are also erroneously called "aurochs". In Roman times they were plentiful throughout the plains of central and northern Europe. However they had been hunted down, particularly in Germany, and by the 16th century they became rare. The last wild, free roaming, Winsent died in 1925. Fortunately there were still about 45 animals in various European parks and zoos. By 1932 their number increased to about 60. However, not all of these animals were pure-bred, some were cross-bred with the American Bison producing a semi-domesticated animal. By 1938 there were some 97 pure-bred animals in four Polish Parks and eight European zoos. Many European Bison were killed during World War II. Until the early 1960's only a few small herds existed in reserves in Europe, then by the late 1970's the herds were once again been built up, now reaching more than 600 animals. In comparison to the American Bison, the European Bison differs by being slightly larger, with different skull features; by having larger legs and tail; by having shorter hair and beard; and by having thicker, shorter horns.

Top to Bottom, Figure 1: Wisent shedding its coat in summer, from the Berlin zoo. Stamp issued: Dec. 14, '56 to publize the Berlin zoo. Cancel: F.D., special, East Berlin, DDR. Figure 2: Small Winsent Herd grazing in the forest. Stamp issued: Mar. 25, '80 for European Nature Protection Year. Cancel: July 14, '84 , special, Busteni, Romania.

