

"When we choose a plot to order our environmental stories we give them a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses." -- William Cronon

"We have had our historians, too, and they have held over the dark backward of time their divining rods and conjured out of it what they wanted." --Van Wyk Brooks

12 Short Histories of the Bison in Golden Gate Park

1

If you walk westward through Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, along John F. Kennedy Drive, and walk past the Victorian cupcake of the arboretum, past the cement rectangle where people roller skate in short shorts to a staticky boombox, past the copper facade of the deYoung museum, past the waterfall, past the meadows where people gather for soccer matches and family reunions and Renaissance fairs, you will find the bison.

The further away you move away from the park's entrance, the more the manicured landscape surrounding the park's main buildings buckles and dissolves into something more improvisational. The park's eucalyptus trees, steadfast since they were first planted in their determination to kill every plant not themselves, let loose drifts of fragrant, acid leaves. The hand of gardner is undone by the hand of gopher and the smooth green turf laid down for the benefit of soccer leagues is pocked with busy holes ringed with coronas of freshly kicked dirt. And so you will have to look. It is not a landscape that invites lingering and the bison - or buffalo, which is taxonomically inaccurate but which it still somehow feels correct to call them - are easy to miss. The manicured landscape surrounding the park's main attractions has given way to one where muddy grass pocked by an epic network of gopher holes.

To see the buffalo, you need to stop, walk over to a chain link fence about ten feet high - the sort that is usually placed around construction sites or very deep holes in the ground - and peer through. They look like brown, muppety haystacks. Here are things I have seen them doing: standing on the grass, laying on the grass, chewing.

The bison's own webpage, on the Golden Gate Park website, attempts to prepare the viewer for this possibility:

Overall, don't expect a grand show of movement and daring feats when visiting the bison. They tend to keep to themselves and really don't engage in any exciting activities. They appear in the standing position for most of the day and sometimes sit about. If you are lucky, one of the bison may slowly travel from the field to the corral.

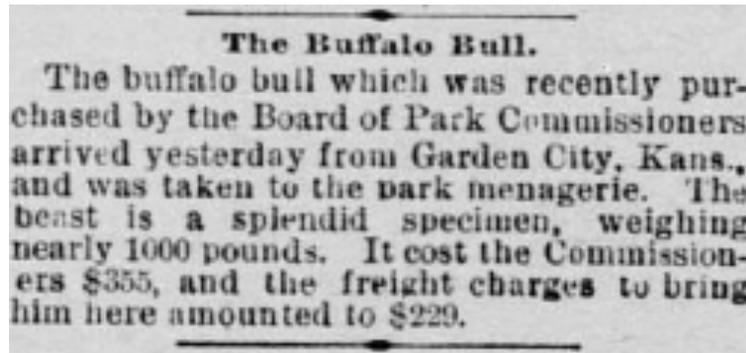
Interesting Fact: Although you may not have the chance to observe, bison are known to reach speeds of up to 30 miles per hour.

On the review site Yelp, writeups of the bison run next to reviews of local bars and noodle joints. The bison receive mixed ratings. "It pains me to not give the bison 5 stars," writes one poster, "but I can't in good conscience until I see them AWAKE."

"They aren't very entertaining and they refused to pose and run valiantly for me," wrote another, "but nevertheless, it was cool...Star off for not giving me the photograph I wanted. And for the fact they look so sad."

Another leaves out the review altogether. "What the hell," it reads, "are bison doing in Golden Gate Park?"

The first bison arrived on February 13, 1891. Notice of its arrival appeared in the San Francisco Call the following day. It merited exactly one paragraph.



That's it. Weight, cost, and splendidness.

Four days later, a more detailed portrait of the buffalo emerged, in an article about the eclectic assortment of animals (donkeys, llamas, elk, and pheasants) living in a pasture located to the east of the deYoung museum, near where the Academy of Sciences would later stand. The article is a fluff piece - breezily written descriptions of what the average visitor might find: a herd of "deer of all sizes, colors, and degrees of friendliness and intelligence," a large elk who "can be very majestic when he chooses, but yesterday morning he threw aside his dignity and growled and grunted like a hypochondriacal dyspeptic. He...poked out his nose pathetically, as if craving sympathy" and the buffalo, described as "the glory of the park menagerie."

The buffalo, named Ben Harrison after the then-U.S. President, was described as "a quiet, somewhat reserved, but well-behaved buffalo. Occasionally, however, he gets on the rampage and on such occasions his domestic arrangements are sadly disturbed." The article went on to say that "the Park Commissioners expect soon to procure two buffalo cows who will lighten the hours of his confinement."

The day Ben Harrison arrived in San Francisco by freight car, another short article ran on the front page of the Morning Call about the other Ben Harrison - the President.

CALLED ON THE PRESIDENT.

Mr. Harrison Has an Interview With the Sioux Chiefs.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 12.—The Indian chiefs now in this city called at the White House this afternoon and paid their respects to the President.

The President pointed out the folly of their going to war with the whites, and made it very plain that if they made any more trouble they would be punished. He told them they must teach their young men not to be warriors, but citizens, and endeavor to earn their own living by some peaceful industry. The Government, he said, would protect and encourage every Indian who is disposed to be peaceful and industrious. The Indians then shook hands with the President and withdrew.

In 1800 there were an estimated 28 and 30 million bison living on the shortgrass prairie between the western Mississippi and the Sierras. Less than a hundred years later there were about 500. In the last few decades of the 19th century, the U.S. government had carried out a deliberate plan to exterminate the bison in order to force the last Indians outside of government control, a group of nomads living on the Great Plains, onto reservations.

The Indians on the Great Plains, had been farmers and only occasional hunters a few generations ago, but they had learned the dangers of staying put. The buffalo had become everything. Twenty buffalo skins made a teepee. Buffalo marrow, boiled out of cracked bones and then packed into a cleaned-buffalo stomach was butter, and spread on everything. Another stomach made a water bottle. Strips of buffalo skin, twisted together, made ropes and bridles. Tendons become bow strings. Buffalo meat, pounded flat and mixed with salt and fat, would keep all winter. Get rid of the buffalo, the thinking went, and you get rid of the Indians.

Not everyone thought this was a good idea. Nearly 20 years earlier, Representative Charles Fort of Illinois entered a bill into Congress making it "unlawful for any person who is not an Indian to kill, wound, or in any manner destroy a female buffalo, of any age, found at large within the territories of the United States." "I am not in favor of civilizing the Indian by starving him to death," said Fort, in his opening address in 1874. Ohio Republican James Garfield - who would be president of the United States in 6 years - disagreed, and so did the rest of Congress.

In 1876 Charles Fort entered the bill into Congress again. Again, it was shot down. The Texas Democrat John Hancock told him, "I hope sir, there is no humanitarian sentimentality that would induce legislation for the protection of the buffalo. If the theory up on which the Government is now treating the Indians is a proper one, and I am inclined to believe it is the best, the sooner we get rid of the buffalo the better it will be for the Indian and for the white man too."

As the buffalo Benjamin Harrison was being introduced to Golden Gate Park and the President Benjamin Harrison was meeting the Sioux, the last herd on public lands, a group of 200 bison in Yellowstone, was being decimated by poachers. By 1901, there would be just 25 bison left in the park.

On the Ogala Sioux Reservation in western Nebraska, hunters would prepare for the delivery of government cattle the way that they once prepared for the summer bison hunt. As the government cattle were released into a corral, the Ogala Sioux would hunt them down on horseback - or at least they did until 1897, when government authorities built a slaughterhouse and began distributing pre-butchered meat instead. The Ogalas responded by setting the slaughterhouse on fire.

3

In April of 1891, Benjamin Harrison the bison got married, in a meadow that, like all of Golden Gate Park, was a recently willed act of pastoral invention, crafted from horse manure laid on top of a shifting aggregation of sand dunes. The ceremony was timed to coincide with a visit from Ben Harrison, the President. "Ben Harrison's Nuptials Solemnized at the Park," read the headline, and the ceremony was presided over by the Captain of Park Police. As the clock struck noon, the Captain opened a crate containing a bison cow the city had shipped via train from a ranch in Wyoming. The female bison raced around the paddock frantically until, (bison) Ben Harrison, "gallantly ran out to meet her." At this, "The appearance of her future lord and master calmed her tumultuous feelings. Both bride and groom appeared perfectly happy, and the crowd left them to spend their honeymoon among the trees of the inclosure."

4

It is hard to write historically about nature because nature doesn't care. Nature predates storytelling and will probably postdate it too. "When we choose a plot for our environmental stories," the historian William Cronon, once wrote "we give them a unity that neither nature nor the past possesses so clearly."

But even if nature doesn't live by stories, we do, and the stories that we tell ourselves affect how we live with the other species around us. A little over a hundred years ago the government of this country virtually exterminated the largest land animal on the largest biome on the continent, one that roamed from Pennsylvania to the Sierras. And a little over a hundred years ago, my city held a wedding for two of them.

In 1870, before the buffalo were entirely gone, Red Cloud, the Chief of the Ogala Sioux (or, as they called themselves, the Lakota) went to New York to give a speech at the Cooper Institute. "You have children, and so have we," he told the crowd, through an interpreter. "We want to rear our children well, and ask you to help us in doing so." He asked that the Lakota be protected on the land they currently had and be dealt with honestly.

"It seems to us that this is not an unreasonable request," noted a reporter from The New York Times, "even though it does come from a "savage." The reporter continued, historicizing the event just a few hours after it was over: "A few years more and the great Chiefs who yesterday stood before the New-York public will also have melted away, like "snow upon the hill-side." Their attempts to tell their own story to the white men, instead of allowing it to pass through all sorts of corrupt and adverse channels, will hereafter rank conspicuously among the historical events connected with the Indian race."

Red Cloud sounded reasonable, but it was hard for the reporter to see him through the haze of story hovering around him - Red Cloud had arrived as a representative of a people whose way of life had to end, because that was the story. "The buffalo trail became the Indian trail and this became the trader's "trace;" the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads."

as Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1894, in "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" an essay in which he formally declared the frontier closed due to there being no more frontier to take.

In Turner's story, the wilderness took the colonist and stripped off his "garments of civilization." In order to learn how to survive, the colonist had to unlearn the ways of Europe and begin "planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion." Turner emphasizes that this is a temporary state. Gradually, the colonist begins to transform the landscape until it is something entirely new - America. The Indian has somehow vanished in the creation of this new self - like the top hat that needs to disappear in order to reveal the rabbit.

5

Here's another story:

10,000 years ago, the most recent ice age is ending. Humans cross over the Bering land bridge between Siberia and Alaska. On their way they might see horses for the first time - they have evolved in North America, but are striking out across the land bridge in the other direction, seeking their fortune. Homo sapiens continues migrating down into the Great Plains. Among the dwellers on the Great Plains at the end of the ice age are horses, camels, mammoths, mastodons, the American lion, the American cheetah, the dire wolf, the giant short-faced bear, and several species of sabre-tooth cats. According to the fossil record of these species - after millions of years of evolution - seem to become extinct around the same time: 10,000 and 12,000 years ago, which is right around the time that Homo sapiens arrives. Some people think this is a coincidence. Some people do not.

B. bison, the smallest bison in North America, becomes the largest one by virtue of not dying. The gray wolf also survives, to become the bison's sole remaining predator besides humans, "In my mind's eye," wrote Dale Lott, author of *American Bison: A Natural History*, "I see these two species walking silently together through a gray fog of extinction with larger predators and grazers dissolving into the mist around them. Apparently they were just small enough to get through."

The bison survive for another 10,000 years, evolving into symbiosis with the shortgrass prairie. Shortgrass actually thrives when its being grazed - it has a deep root structure, which both supports the plant in terrible weather, and stabilizes sandy soil of the prairie. It has a 6-1 protein to carbs ratio, which is convenient, because bison, being huge, are all about the protein. The shortgrass feeds the bison and the bison also eats up all the competition that hasn't bothered to develop a low-lying root structure.

The Homo sapiens have settled in villages in locations where the good farmland is. They plant crops in the spring, leave the village to hunt bison in the summer, and return in the fall to harvest the crops and store a lot of preserved meat. The horses were among the species that mysteriously went extinct, so the Homo sapiens catch the bison by chasing it on foot until it runs over a cliff, or by wearing a bison head and pretending to be a bison and leading other bison off a cliff, ducking behind a rock at the last moment.

This is not the most efficient way to kill a bison, but there are so many bison that it doesn't make much of a difference. Or rather: there are so many other ways that bison die that humans don't make much of a difference. Later settlers on the plains will be shocked at the bitter cold and the horrible scorching droughts and the chaotic weather patterns, and especially the effect that this has on their farming/ranching investments, but chaos is old hat to the bison. Bison have evolved to withstand temperatures of 110 degrees in the summer and 30 degrees below zero in the winter, and they did that by dying. They still die, all the time. They freeze, they starve, they fall through the ice. It's just that no one is there to write in their diary about it.

Sometime in the late 1600's, horses show up. Hernando Cortes brought them over in 1519, but it takes them a while to make it to the plains. In *Destruction of the Bison*, Andrew Isenberg recounts Cheyenne folklore collected by the ethnographic team Mariott and Rachlin:

The Cheyenne are approached by the Comanches, who offer them horses, and their chief god, Masto, speaks through a priest and tells them that "If you have horses everything will be changed for you forever. You will have to move around a lot to find pasture for your horses. You will have to give up gardening and live by hunting and gathering, like the Comanches. And you will have to come out of your earth houses and live in tents...You will have to fight other tribes, who will want your pasture land or the places where you hunt. You will have to have real soldiers, who can protect the people. Think, before you decide."

The horses change everything, but then, so do smallpox, cholera, and increasing numbers of European settlers and traders. By the 1840's western plains nomads are bringing over 100,000 bison robes a year to the steamboats to sell. Travelers report seeing vast numbers of dead buffalo on the plains, skinned, with their tongues cut out. The tongues are, reportedly, delicious. The skins are not, but they turn out to be perfect belts for industrial machinery. The wheels of the industrial revolution will turn on bison. The Cheyenne and the Comanche will attempt to limit the full-scale hunting of the bison, the Blackfeet will participate in it, but the plains are also filling with teams of Europeans who have switched to the buffalo hide trade after being disappointed in the Gold Rush.

In 1870 the Kansas Pacific arrives in Denver, in 1872 the Sharp Rifle Manufacturing Company develops the Sharp "big fifty" - a 50 caliber rifle which becomes the most common rifle used by bison hunters. It fires slugs weighing up to one pound. In 1872 the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroads all reach Dodge City, KS. Even before the railroad is completed on September 1872, "the streets of Dodge are lined with wagons, bringing in hides and meat and getting supplies from early morning to late at night. Seven million pounds of buffalo tongue are shipped out of Dodge City, Kansas in a single two-year period."

Between 1872 and 1873 the largest hide dealers in Dodge City, Robert Wright and Charles Rath, ship over two hundred thousand hides to Santa Fe.

In the fall of 1873, one man writes "where there were myriads of buffalo the year before, now there were myriads of carcasses. The air was foul with sickening stench, and the vast plain which only a short twelve months before teemed with animal life was a dead, solitary, putrid desert....The miserable animals, continually harassed, are driven into localities far from their haunts, anywhere to avoid the unceasing pursuit."

In 1874 Joseph Glidden, a farmer in DeKalb, Illinois, receives the patent for barb wire - one of the things that has been holding off settlement of the west has been a lack of fencing to demarcate territory and cattle herds. At the time of his death in 1906, Glidden will be one of the wealthiest men in America.

The winter of 1881 is particularly bad for bison. There's a lot of snow that year, and the bison get caught in the drifts, making them particularly vulnerable to hunters. By 1883 the bison is nearly extinct. The plains are strewn with their bones, A.M. Bede, a county judge from Fort Yates, North Dakota, writes of those days in the northern plains, "the country out here used to look like a charnel house with so many skulls staring at a man, and so many bones that newcomers felt nervous, and, in some cases, could hardly plow the land."

Poor homesteaders and Indians scavenge for any bones they can gather, and sell them to sugar refineries or fertilizer plants for \$4-\$12 a ton - 100 skeletons worth of bones, give or take a bison or two.

In 1893, a railroad inspector interviewed by Harpers expounds further, "It is a mercy they can't eat bones. We were never able to control the savages until their supply of meat was cut off. We have had no trouble worth speaking of since 1883."

Some people kill the bison because it was fun: people go on safaris in the Great Plains. Bill Cody, aka "Buffalo Bill" makes his name organizing a buffalo hunt in 1872 for the Grand Duke of Russia. Buffalo Bill and the Sioux escort the Grand Duke and an ample supply of champagne through Kansas, helpfully pointing out bison along the way.

Others kill the bison because they cut into their profit margins: in 1883 the US. government hires a band of Sioux to slaughter around 5,000 buffalo near the Northern Pacific railroad line, out of fear that the bison could cause a train wreck. Trains have learned to watch for approaching bison, since herds can and do derail trains. Telegraph companies kill bison too - bison, beleaguered by flies, scratch against telegraph poles until they fall over. Telegraph companies begin attaching bradawls to the poles, but that only makes it worse. Bison travel for miles to find a pole with a bradawl on it and battle one another for scratching rights. "The victor would proudly climb the mountainous heap of rump and hump of the fallen," writes one account, "and scratch himself until the bradawl broke or the pole came down."

There are many stories at play about the future of the West. Not many of them are useful if you happen to be a bison.

6

The year was 1883. Theodore Roosevelt, a young New York state assemblyman, took a train out to the edge of Dakota territory. and hired a Canadian hunting guide. He really, he explained, wanted a buffalo head. The guide told him he didn't have much of a chance: bison were almost extinct. It takes days of trudging through thunderstorms and sleeping in the rain before Roosevelt finally managed to shoot a buffalo. The guide looked over and saw Roosevelt run over to the carcass and begin hopping and whooping in an improvised war dance. He reached into his pocket and handed the guide a \$100 tip.

Roosevelt rode back to New York accompanied by the buffalo head, wrapped in burlap. When he arrived, he took down the lion's head in his study, and put up the buffalo head in its place.

7

The first bison was born in Golden Gate Park on July 26th, 1893. She was described “looking like a calf, but with a veritable swelled head....it was amusing to note yesterday now readily and naturally the baby dropped into habits of her ancestors. The whole herd would win a prize in a contest for laziness by lying and sleeping - principally lying, as they sometimes seem too lazy to sleep.” The article went on to mention that the saddest animal in the park appeared to be a donkey named Billy, whose daughter, Mary, was “dying from reckless overindulgence in candy and sugared popcorn. Mary was a pet with the children with whom she was very friendly on account of candy,” the newspaper continued, “But she is now reaping the sad penalty of excesses.”

8

Today, accounts of the Bison Paddock in Golden Gate Park describe it as a conservation effort. Accounts then make it sound more than a little like a zoo.

It was a zoo. Golden Gate park had seals, an aquarium, kangaroos, zebras and a bear pit which featured Monarch, both the largest and the last grizzly to be captured alive in California. It is said that Allen Kelly, the reporter who helped organize his capture as publicity stunt, used to visit him there, to apologize.

In death, Monarch, served as the model for the bear in the current version of the California State Flag. Monarch was moved to the San Francisco zoo but returned, stuffed, as an exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences. In the early 2000s the Academy transformed itself from a warren of taxidermy into a sleek glass-lined blob of the future, complete with a green roof and a rainforest biosphere with real live butterflies. It was at this point that the stuffed carcass of Monarch was moved to the basement, where it remains.

In 1895, another bison was born, the fourth to be born in Golden Gate Park. A reporter visited the park and talked to John McLaren, the park superintendent, who reported himself quite elated at the success of the bison in the park. This population may in time, he said, supply the demand of those who visit the plains to hunt the bison.

9

In 1894, Theodore Roosevelt began collaborating with Madison Grant on the Bronx Zoo. The zoo, Roosevelt insisted, would have a buffalo paddock. It would breed the buffalo and release their offspring into the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. Roosevelt’s advisors suggested that it might be cheaper and more sensible to raise buffalo closer to their former habitat, but Roosevelt was insistent. The Bronx was going to repopulate the Great Plains, ideally in a decade or less.

The first herd of bison died, unaccustomed to Bronx grass. Workers in the park pulled up all the grass in the 20 acre paddock and fed the herd prairie grasses by hand.

10

Thomas Jefferson believed - as did many Americans, during his time - that nothing ever truly became extinct. The world had been carefully assembled by an infallible, all-powerful creator, all at once. Nothing could become, or ever had become extinct because the creator simply wouldn’t let it. Why would you, when you’d gone to all this effort to make something perfect? If an animal disappeared where you were living, that was fine - it still existed, somewhere far away.

Jefferson had found fossils at Monticello - mammoth bones - and when he sent Lewis and Clark to catalogue the Great Plains in 1804, he told them - keep an eye out for mammoths.

This is a concept that persists in evangelical circles. When I was a child I was taken on an expedition to a local megachurch where a speaker told the assembled group of several hundred children the good news that nothing had gone extinct - and the specific good news that dinosaurs were still alive. As proof, the speaker played an audiotape that he told us a group of researchers had recorded in the Amazon. "They never SAW what was making this noise," said the speaker, jovially, "but what does that sound like to YOU?"

The megachurch had good speakers. The tape sounded like something screeching and stomping and ripping the roof off the beige auditorium. When it was over we all filed out, slightly dazed. "Isn't the Lord's creation marvelous!" I could hear one of the adults say, distantly, behind me.

Teddy Roosevelt and other environmentalists of his era - William Temple Hornaday, George Bird Grinnell - believed that if you saved just a small biosphere's worth of a species, that was enough. In 1911, the group, led by Hornaday declared the bison no longer in danger of extinction, and dissolved the American Bison Society, which had been set up to further their protection.

There are now between 3,500 and 4,000 bison living in Yellowstone. Below Yellowstone is a place called Paradise Valley. Paradise Valley is, as you can imagine, pretty awesome - when the winter gets bad, bison try to migrate out of the park and into Paradise Valley, because there's grass there.

Any bison who tries to leave Yellowstone, though, is pursued by helicopters, rangers on horseback, and all-terrain-vehicles, trying to push it back into the park. If it continues onward, it's killed, either by ranchers or hunters granted permits to shoot any bison that wanders outside of the park's boundaries. Yellowstone's bison carry brucellosis, a disease acquired from a herd of cattle that park staff once kept inside Yellowstone for their own consumption. Cattle with brucellosis have a hard time reproducing -- an undesirable state of affairs in a business that depends on a reliable supply of freshly born cattle. Yellowstone's bison and elk are believed to be the last reserve of brucellosis remaining in the United States -- while cattle found to have the disease are immediately slaughtered, the wild creatures in their midst are permitted to live, as long as they never make a serious bid for Paradise.

11

In 2008, I walked out on Ocean Beach and saw that someone had arranged hand-painted cutouts of the performers in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, like a line of life-sized paper dolls, arranged in front of the gray surf of the Pacific like they were posing for a photograph. They were a work of obsession - ornately, fanatically detailed, each one unique. I scanned the beach to see who would have made them and saw a man with a bushy gray walrus mustache. He was engaged in a civil, though heated, conversation with a woman in a polarfleece beanie - she was telling him that that his art was disrespectful to Indians and he kept pulling on his cowboy hat, sticking his hands further into his brown leather jacket and telling her that no ma'am, it was a cruel world then and Buffalo Bill was a less cruel man in comparison and actually gave the Indians jobs and the self-respect that comes sort of being able to live out your culture, even if you do that by acting it out to people. I never found out how the argument ended.

12

Right before I left San Francisco, I took a friend who had just moved here to see the bison. She peered through the chain-link fence, unimpressed. Behind us, I could hear a small child whine, "Daddy! Why aren't the bison moving?"

“Why are there bison here?” my friend asked.

I thought for a minute. I began to feel guilty. “I don’t know,” I said. “I just know they’ve been here for a long time. I guess I should know.”

“Why,” my friend said, slowly, “are we here?”

I knew how this went. It was a tradition in San Francisco. “A long time ago,” I said. “When I first moved to the city, someone who had lived here a long time brought me here and said, “Look! Bison!” And so I am doing this with you.”