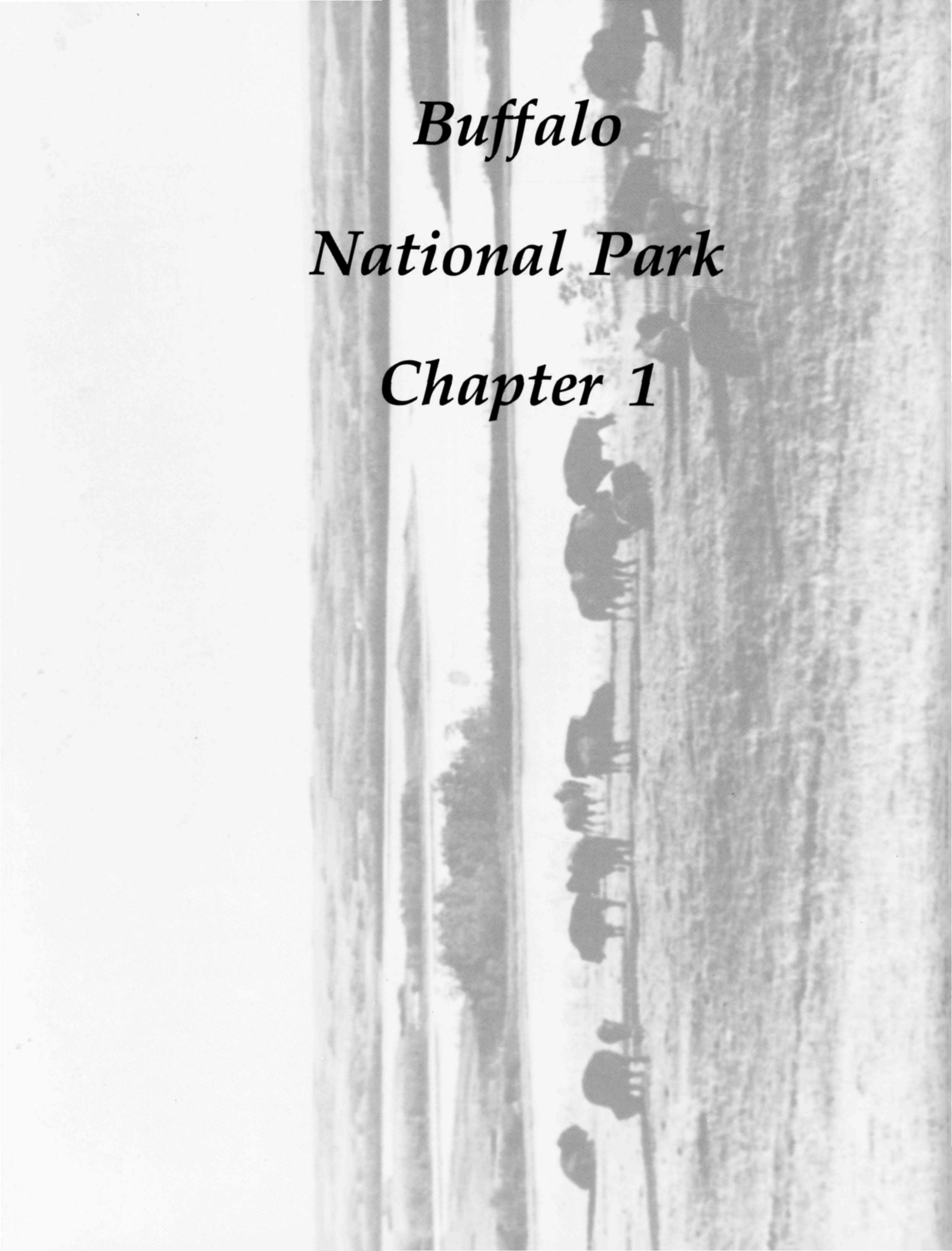


Buffalo National Park Chapter 1

In the Beginning

Of Time and Change

Buffalo! Their size and abundance frightened or astounded explorers and settlers; more than 60 million beasts roaming freely across the vast plains of North America.

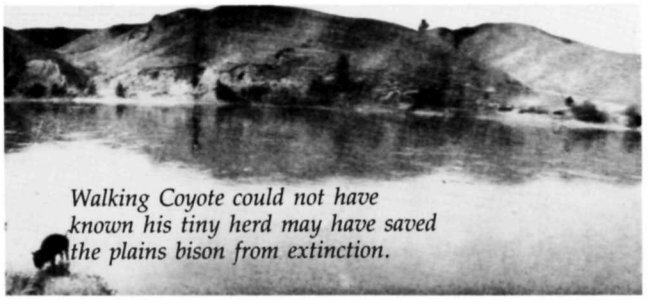
To the Indians, buffalo promised food, warmth, tools, medicine, and an opportunity to prove their brave expertise during the hunt.

Most hunts took place between the months of November and March when the hides were coated with warm winter hair. To save themselves the work of scraping away this protective growth, the Indians sometimes hunted through the summer, using these skins for teepee coverings.

When whiteman appeared on the scene, the slaughter and destruction of buffalo multiplied, depleting the herds by sometimes 1000 per expedition. Where once there were millions of bison, there now were threats of extinction. The Canadian government issued parliamentary legislation in 1893 to protect the remaining 500 within its borders.

Remnants of buffalo hunts are still evident today; circles of rocks used to secure teepees, "pounds" having become deathtraps to unsuspecting stampedes of buffalo tricked by clever hunters, and bones so plentiful that they were collected and sold to the railroad by the ton.

It was in 1873 during a buffalo hunt along the Milk River that Walking Coyote, a Pend d'Oreille Indian, was fortunate enough to capture four buffalo calves. Having been separated from their mothers amidst the commotion of the hunt, they followed the riders' horses as their maternal substitutes. Walking Coyote wintered with his newfound livestock and in the spring, returned to the St. Ignatius Mission on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana.



Walking Coyote could not have known his tiny herd may have saved the plains bison from extinction.

As the years slipped by, Walking Coyote's foursome matured and multiplied. By 1884, thirteen purebred plains bison grazed along the banks of the Pend d'Oreille River. Soon it became apparent that maintenance of such numbers severely outweighed the owner's financial ability. The animals would have to be sold.

Michel Pablo and Charles Allard were Montana ranchers with grazing rights on the Flathead Reservation. Hearing of the proposed sale of such unique livestock, the two partners selected ten healthy buffalo and paid a delighted Walking Coyote $250 per animal. A short time later, the once-rich Indian was found dead under the Missoula bridge. The cause of his death has been surrounded by speculation, folklore presenting various situations but none being completely accurate.

Pablo and Allard saw their flock increase adding 26 purebred plains bison and 18 hybrids acquired from the Buffalo Jones' herd in 1893. About two years later, Charles Allard suffered a knee injury which eventually resulted in his death.

The partnership dissolved, existing animals were divided between Allard's estate and Pablo, each claiming approximately 150 bison. The heirs separated their stock by selling to individuals throughout the central and northern states. Pablo's lot remained together, protected within the confines of the Reservation. Their presence was not endangered until 1905 when Pablo learned his grazing rights would be terminated soon due to this land being opened up for settlement.

Michel Pablo

Michel Pablo was of Indian Mexican descent, entitling him to native rights at the Flathead Reservation. When settlements threatened his grazing priveleges along the Pend d'Oreille River in 1905, Pablo began his quest for a suitable buyer.

President Theodore Roosevelt had favored the possibility of obtaining Pablo's herd but 60th Congress was not to be convinced. The offer was rejected.

Frustrated and angry, Pablo turned to his friend Alexander Ayotte, a Canadian immigration officer in Montana. Ayotte and Canadian National Parks Superintendent Howard Douglas, persuaded the Minister of the Interior Frank Oliver that the acquisition of this last sizeable herd of purebred plains bison would indeed be a feather in Canada's still new cap. Agreement signed, Pablo proceeded to undertake the largest roundup and shipment of wild animals known to North America.

The Deal

The key figures in the deal enabling Canada to purchase Michel Pablo's herd of buffalo were: Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior; W.D. Scott, Superintendent of Immigration (Ottawa); W.W. Cory, Deputy Minister of the Interior; Howard Douglas, Superintendent Rocky Mountains Park; Benjamin Davies, Canadian Emigration Agent, Montana; Alexander Ayotte, Canadian Immigration Agent, Montana; J.B. Harkin, National Parks Branch; and Sir Wilfred Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada.

Confident, Canada felt this to be a profitable investment for their country, soon to own approximately 80% of all the existing buffalo in North America. There evolved much correspondence and personal discussion prior to the signing of a binding contract. Perhaps rumors of the American Bison Society's sudden interest in Pablo's herd expediated culmination of the bargain. Those men listed above were jointly responsible for having Pablo's proposal become a reality.

The original arrangement allowed for the undetermined number of Pablo's entire herd to be purchased for $200 a head, the owner wishing to retain a dozen beasts. A shipping allowance of $18,000 would transport approximately 300 head via rail from Ravalli, Montana to Edmonton. Pre-shipment inspection confirmed only purebred plains bison would be exported. A $10,000 deposit in Missoula's First National Bank officially sealed the deal in February of 1907.

Later that year more bison were available, as Pablo had misjudged his herd's size. A follow-up agreement approved and signed by Sir Wilfred Laurier, authorized the increased appropriation. Amended, the purchase would be for as many bison as Pablo could supply at $200 each with shipping costs averaging $45 per head.

Upon termination of Pablo's contract in 1912, he received payment for 716 buffalo plus shipment costs, Canada's expenditure totalling $200,000.

Roundup in Montana

First Things First...

Michel Pablo may very well have scratched his head wondering what on earth he had gotten himself into! This was truly a mammoth undertaking, requiring coordination, courage and commitment. Pablo was determined to make it happen, setting out to begin an unexpected four years of hard exasperating work. It was May 1907.

First on the agenda was to secure experienced riders with strong horses. This was relatively easy, as he offered an extravagant wage of five dollars daily. Supplies purchased, cooks and chuckwagons prepared, maps checked and spare horses obtained, the roundup crew headed for the open ranges of the Flathead Reservation.

Meanwhile, activity was plentiful in Ravalli. Workers were commissioned to construct sturdy chutes, corrals and holding pens near the railway where the animals were to be lodged until such time as their numbers constituted a load. Feed procured for the buffalo's journey was delivered to the location and extra hands were on-call if needed.

Easier Said Than Done!

Pablo's herd of wild buffalo had never been disturbed by insistent riders, never been penned and had no intention of being railroaded into emigrating. They knew nothing of gates and fences, these barricades proving to be quite inadequate unless specially constructed for the bison's weight and strength.

Alert and cautious riders found the buffalo able to travel at unbelievable speed for surprisingly long periods of time. Always vulnerable to attack by a crazed animal, the men tried to maintain their strategic positions during the chase. Failure to do so resulted in the possiblity of the entire mass escaping.

Many days ended in disappointment, when up to 75 bruised and tired cowboys admitted to having once again failed in corralling even one buffalo. A number of horses died due to injuries caused by constant running upon uneven terrain, being gored by defensive bison, or collapsing from pure exhaustion. Pablo's crew indeed suffered losses in the attempt to honor the contract with Canada.

Charles Allard (front center), son of Pablo's late partner, was an experienced rider and trusted by Pablo to supervise several cowboys during the roundup. Later, he was contracted to collect stragglers for the last shipments to Canada in 1912.

Where To?

Howard Douglas, Superintendent of Rocky Mountains (Banff) Park had been appointed to oversee the shipment of buffalo into Canada. The schedule permitted loading at Ravalli, transportation to Edmonton, then a switch to Canadian Northern line, with Lamont, Alberta as their destination.

As the Battle River area location was not yet prepared to accomodate them, Elk Island Park was chosen as a stop–over for the first two shipments from Montana. Its sixteen square miles had been reserved in 1904 as an elk sanctuary and was subsequently surrounded by strong wire fences. The Park's northern perimeter was very near Lamont where the imported cargo was to be unloaded.

A temporary but secure fence was constructed to channel the bison to the park boundary where they remained until 1909 when 325 head in 26 cars were transported to what was now allowed the title Buffalo National Park. The stragglers finding refuge in the many poplar bluffs remained at Elk Island and became added attractions for the Park's many tourists.

Loading at Ravalli

For one seemingly endless week Pablo's hired assistants struggled to load their powerful captives. With amazing agility for animals weighing nearly a ton, the bison charged, climbed and sometimes shattered the planks and timbers that imprisoned them. Once inside the rail car, each occupant was separated by a thick plank gate. The stalls contained water troughs and feed boxes for the long trip ahead.

At Douglas's request the railway had fortified the cars to accomodate the huge passengers, however, one bull's determination to be free ended in death when he broke through a car wall. After his destruction, immediate dispersal of meat, hide and head made the loss bearable.

Pablo's Progress

Pablo lost only five bison during the week long loading of his first shipment to Canada. Three more died after arriving at Lamont, perhaps of injury or shock. In June of 1907 Elk Island Park welcomed 196 temporary guests. Pablo inspected the wooded grazing area and feared the type of grasses and dense bush cover may not be suitable for the plains bison. Unfortunately, the alternate location would not be ready for yet another year. Pablo resigned to that fact, returned to Montana to begin the next roundup.

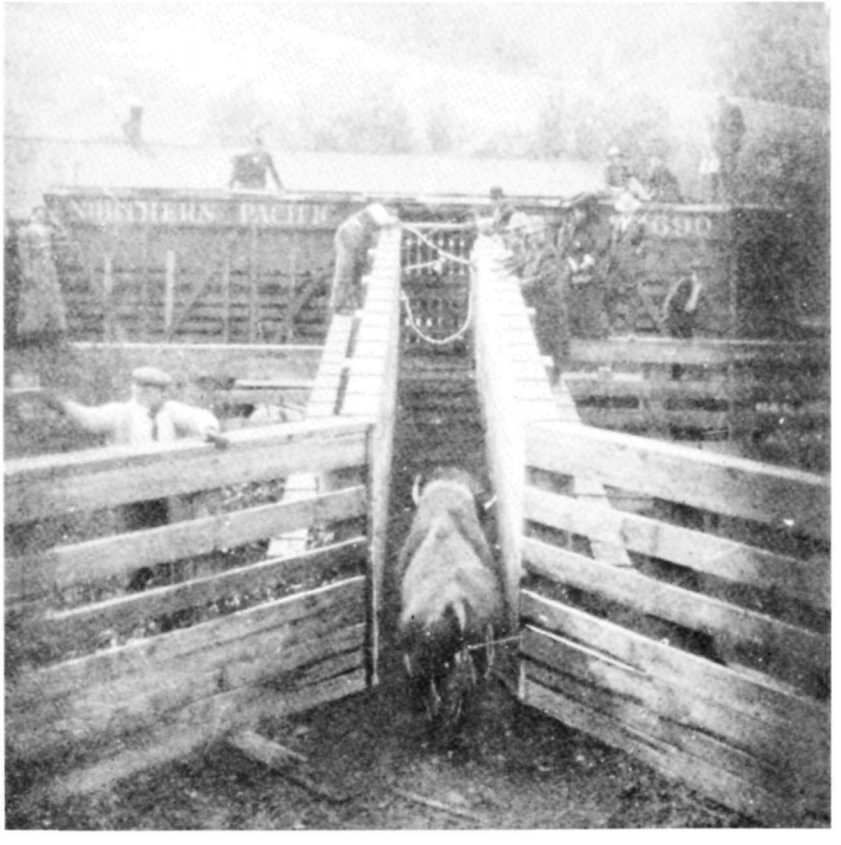
October saw a second shipment of approximately 200 head arrive at Lamont. Shortly afterward eleven buffalo were found mired in muskeg, only one surviving the ordeal after being pulled out by ropes and horses.

Pablo anticipated future difficulties in collecting the now scattered and depleted herds within the Reservation. He commissioned the erection of an eight mile fence in 1908. This would simplify the roundup somewhat, providing a barricade and guide to drive the herd toward Ravalli.

But 1908 was to be an unproductive year. After a slow start and various complications, the cowboys successfully corralled 120 buffalo only to have them stampede and climb an almost perpendicular clay cut–bank to their freedom. Recapture was unlikely, as the animals were frightened and winter was approaching. Pablo regretfully notified his Canadian contacts.

In July and October 1909 Pablo shipped 218 buffalo directly to Wainwright. The following seasons resulted in little success. Parts of the wing fence used in directing the herd, had been destroyed, perhaps intentionally. Only two small shipments were dispersed. Finally in 1911 Pablo contracted Charles Allard Jr. to round up the remaining few buffalo. The last shipment of 7 plains bison was received at Wainwright in 1912, completing the contract between Canada and Michel Pablo.

Some of the original roundup crew relax by their campfire.
Rear L to R: ***Joe Mariow, ? Wise, Bill Link, Chas Russy.***
Front L to R: ***Michel Pablo, Alexander Ayotte, George Sloan, Fred Decker, Walter Sloan, Alec Pablo.***



Loading the ornery critters sometimes required an extra bit of persuasive strategy. Outside the railway car opposite the chute and entry door, men assisted with the use of a snubbing post. Rope was gingerly secured around the uncooperative animal's horns and stretched through the car to the post, where mere muscle dragged the beast into its livery.

Howard Douglas (right), pictured here with Ayotte and Allard, came west in 1882 as superintendent of construction materials for Canadian Pacific Railways. In 1896, he was appointed Superintendent of Rocky Mountains Park (Banff).

Douglas proved to be a valuable government representative during negotiations with Michel Pablo, allowing a fair and reasonable contract to be signed and carried out. He accompanied the first shipment of buffalo into Canada after personally attending to shipping arrangements with Northern Pacific, Great Northern, Canadian Pacific, and Grand Trunk Pacific Railways.

His devotion to the project ensured continuity and organization during the several years before its completion. Douglas died in 1929.

Planning the New Park

From Start to Finish

As Canada's deal with Michel Pablo was formulating, a hurried search of land available to accomodate such a prize herd, scanned the new province of Alberta. An ideal grazing area east of the Battle River near the tiny townsite of Denwood, seemed a likely spot. This tract of relatively vacant land was positioned between the Wetaskiwin branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the more northern nearly completed Grand Trunk Pacific Railway.

Arrangements to reserve approximately 160 square miles of public land were made by the Minister of the Interior, Frank Oliver in 1907. Any property owned by Hudson's Bay Company or C.P.R. was surrendered in return for vacant land elsewhere.

Shortly thereafter fencing of the area began as supplies such as tamarac posts and strong page wire arrived by the wagonload. Interior and exterior fences were erected, including a display paddock of 2800 acres, totalling 73 miles and $60,000 initially. A residence to house the superintendent and his family was also contructed. This was located just outside the original boundaries, northeast of the Park gates.

A flurry of activity surrounded the area as the Park's enclosures were completed. Denwood had moved a short distance west and was renamed Wainwright, due to the recent finalization of the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway divisional point in 1908. Water tank, turntable, Fabyan bridge and a raft of community related construction was underway. A much needed medical official, Dr. Middlemass, arrived amid the bustle.

R.A. Snyder, first G.T.P. station master, found his place of employment the central point for more than just trains, with its restaurant ''The Beanery'' boasting a roaring business.

Ladies in London were about to receive their first permanent waves (perms), and Wilfred Laurier was still Prime Minister of Canada when the much celebrated arrival of the bison at Wainwright took place in June 1909.

Crowds of spectators flocked near the tracks, setting up picnics, tethering horses, awaiting their first peek at the monarchs of the plains. Superintendent of the new park, Edward Ellis ceremoniously commenced Buffalo Park's thirty year existence.

The district of Wainwright in June of 1909, witnessed the beginning of a viable tourist trade develop within its thriving boundaries.

Awed onlookers searched for any available vantage point as the buffalo from Elk Island Park took up permanent residency in Buffalo National Park.

Buffalo National Park

Its Buffalo

On March 7, 1908 an Order of Coucil named the 160 square miles of Dominion Lands near Wainwright, a national buffalo park. It was not officially acclaimed Buffalo National Park until March 27, 1913. By that time, all retrievable buffalo from Pablo's herd and Elk Isand Park were present and accounted for. Including the additional 30 bison from Kalispell, Montana and 87 from Banff, census figures totalled a whopping 1188 head. This was believed to be the largest herd of buffalo in the world.

The grazing areas of their ancestors proved to be an ideal habitat for the plains bison, their population increasing by an average of 20% yearly. Elk, moose and deer shared the confines and the pasture which may have threatened the buffalo's food supply periodically.

In winter the buffalo were driven to their fenced feeding grounds near Park Farm. Grasses were allowed to grow tall and undisturbed in this area during the summer. This made foraging easier for the bison, who often use a swish of their head to clear a spot rather than pawing the snow away. Supplement feed, baled from the farm's haymeadows, was distributed throughout the winter. When the lakes froze over, the buffalo ate snow for their liquid intake, although a sluice-like trough system was later designed for their watering needs.

During their thirty years at Buffalo National Park, the bison's increased numbers necessitated scheduled kills, eventually ending in their complete removal. Bovine tuberculosis was detected in a large portion of the slaughtered animals. This may or may not have lessened their productivity and it was undetermined how their mortality rate would have been affected. Younger, presumably unafflicted animals made up the shipment of approximately 6600 bison that were shipped to Wood Buffalo Park from 1925 to 1928.

Its Administration

Edward Ellis transferred from Banff to become Buffalo National Park's first superintendent. His replacement in 1912, W.E.D. McTaggart held position until 1916 when Alfred G. Smith began. Smith continued until his retirement and the Park's closure in 1940. The Park administration office for 20 years was located near the superintendent's residence but later moved to the federal building in Wainwright.

Buildings for Park personnel were constructed throughout the next few years. An additional 36 square miles of crop and hayland was acquired, establishing the Park Farm area. A winter range for the buffalo was created by cross-fencing 12,000 acres segregating the southeastern portion of the Park to be used for agricultural purposes.

The Park was divided into two districts, each with a warden: Bud Cotton (1912-1940) on the west side; Hi Dunning (1912-1925) and Ray Sharp (1925-1940) on the east.

Farm foremen over the years were: L. Balettie 1909-1913; W. Douglas 1913-1915; H. Walker 1915-1935; and D. Folkins 1935-1940. Most lived on Park Farm, their children attending Park Road School which was a few miles north and west of the farm.

The north gate was tended by: G. Anderson 1909-1910; W. Terpenning 1910-1915; and D. Davidson 1917-1938. The gatekeeper's residence was just inside the main Park entry. The south gate was cared for by Mrs. Alexander from 1909-1945. A trip to Hardisty or Hughenden entailed traversing the dusty or muddy roads across the Park, with the occassional detour to avoid the grazing bison.

Thirty years saw growth and change, the farm producing adequate fodder, and a stable source of revenue was generated by the sale of hides and meat contracts. This was an operation that paid its own way.

Park Farm, located 12 miles SE of Wainwright, was home to many over the years. It has since been completely demolished.

Its Employees

Permanent employees of the park included wardens, gatekeepers, farm foreman, one repairman, and six to eight teamsters. Additional staff was hired to assist with haying, harvesting, fencing and roundups.

Warden duties consisted of patrol of fencelines, repairs, care of the bison, spotting poachers (which was not a great problem), and guiding tours of sightseers.

Park Farm, twelve miles southeast of town, housed most of the staff, sporting a warden's residence, farm foreman's dwelling, and boarding house. Also located here were two barns, blacksmith shop, cookhouse, granaries, sheds for equipment and a water tower. The yard was fenced and well maintained, buildings and fences painted regularly. An abbatoir was built southwest of the farmsite, when it was decided to begin scheduled kills to control bison population.

Threshing gangs harvested the oats which were delivered to a huge cement–floored granary. A steep runway led to the top of the building; wagons were roped to a pulley at the far end of the granary, and attached to a team of horses. This apparatus pulled and positioned the wagon for unloading into the bins. Spouts exited the bins for convenient loading when removal was necessary. The farm supplied Banff and Jasper parks with grain, hauled to Wainwright and shipped by rail.

July and August began the haying season resulting in 1500 tons salvaged for winter supplement feed. Four mowers and three rakes readied the meadow hay for crews to fork into balers. This task sometimes lasted into October.

Fencing crews began repairs after the spring thaw and continued until freeze–up. The 14 foot posts were often broken and new ones reset in the same holes.

Its Pros and Cons

There were few problems in the raising of buffalo at the Park. None escaped the exterior fences in the thirty years they roamed near Wainwright. Left alone in open grazing areas, they seemed content to share their space with other wildlife.

Calving season, April to June, created no particular difficulties. The calves are small, developing their heavier front quarters as they mature.

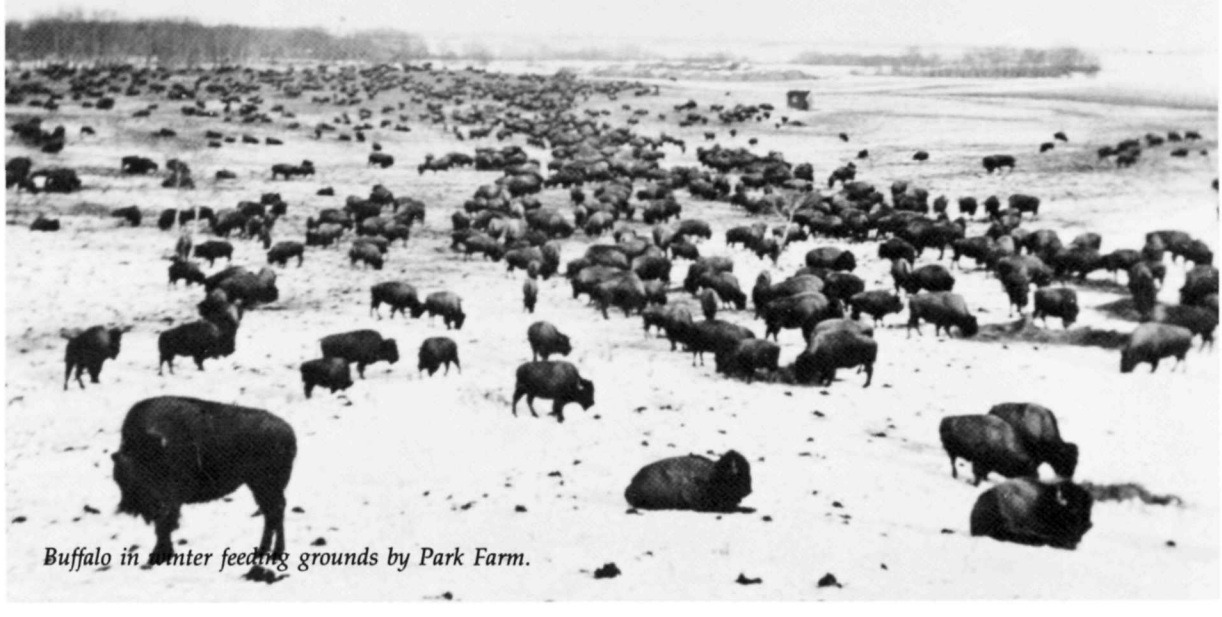
Flies and mosquitoes were plentiful but wallowing in sand or dust alleviated any discomfort these pests may have inflicted upon the bison.

During Buffalo Park's existence, no prairie fires threatened its confines. Fire guards were ploughed on either side of fencelines and maintained as a fire control method should an incident arise.

Badger holes created havoc with riders and horses, especially during roundup when speed allows little time to locate the burrows. Horses' injuries after encountering such an obstacle in full gallop, were often serious, some valuable animals having to be destroyed.

Strong willed and "on the prod" buffalo were always a concern. Ray Sharp recalls often a jilted bull during rutting season would sulk in the bushes until some unsuspecting cowboy approached. The buffalo would then take his anger out on the horse and rider. This ugly attitude also caused injuries to the herd, the bull being powerful to the point of lifting a cow into the air with his horns and thick neck.

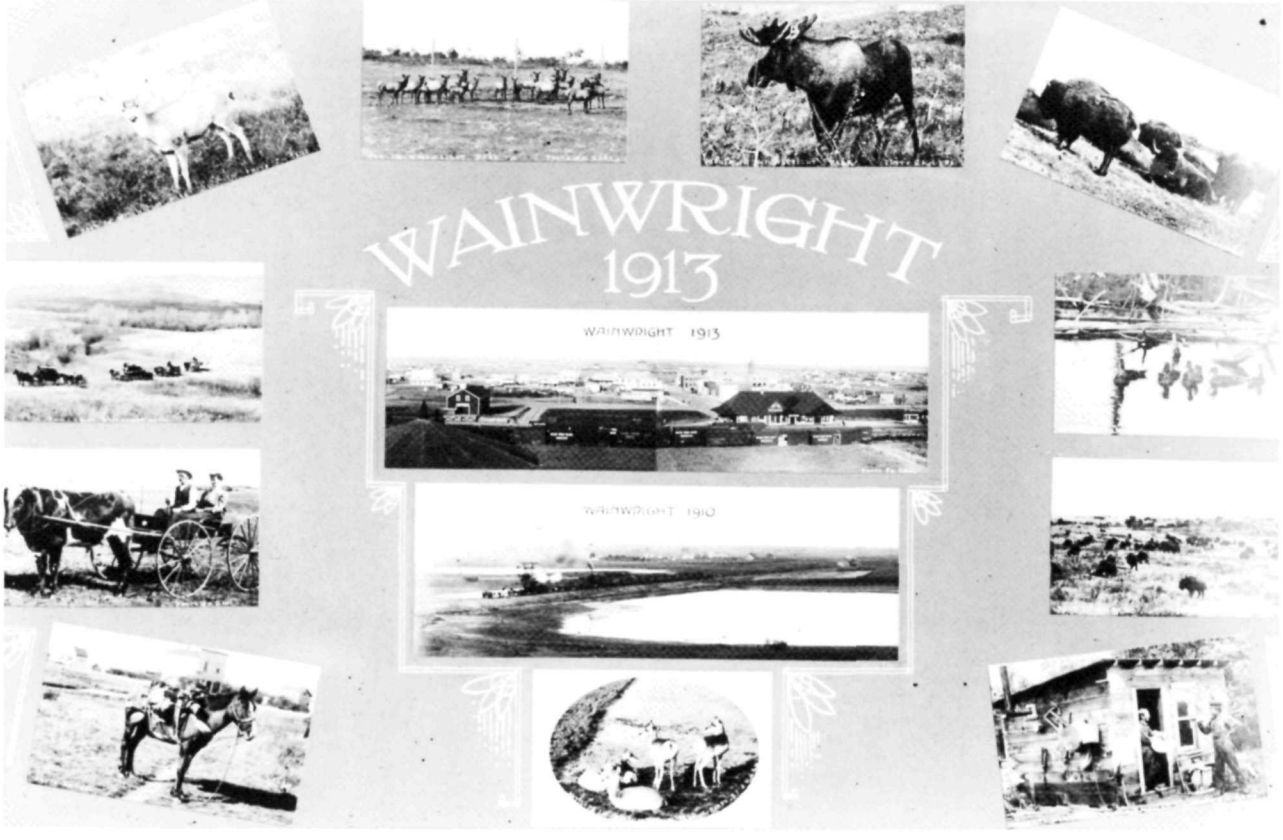
Also on occasion, a bison entrapped by muskeg had to be roped and rescued by riders. Once free from the bog, the ungrateful beast charged its saviors. This reaction was repeated during one incident with a cow and porcupine quills. Men snubbed her to a post, stretched her with a heel rope and proceeded to remove the seventy offending probes. To add insult to injury, they milked her before releasing the distraught momma, but she sent them scurrying to the top rails of the corral before returning to her youngster. The milk was sent to Ontario to be tested and found to be extremely rich in vitamin content. It was decided the market for such a product may not be worth the trouble to obtain the goods.



Buffalo in winter feeding grounds by Park Farm.

Approximately 1500 tons of hay were produced on Park Farm for winter feed each year, supplying the buffalo, the farm horses and of course the cook's cow.

Picture postcard from Wainwright, 1913.



Moving Pictures in the Park

October 1923 was definitly a highlight in Wainwright history. Hollywood film crews set up in Buffalo Park to record scenes from ''The Last Frontier''. Park staff and 150 Indians from Hobbema participated. As actors, they staged a pow–wow, fought American cavalry, and rode in the ''hunt''.

Horsemen drove 4000 buffalo toward hidden cameras and riflemen. One brave camera man from Calgary, William Oliver, even resorted to photographing from a hole, covered by a grate, right in the path of the stampeding animals. As part of the movie, 34 bison were killed, an incidental amount compared to the near 2000 slaughtered later that year at the abbatoir.

The film crew's six day stay swelled the Wainwright community's coffers as well as the Canadian government's. The Department of the Interior received $2500 for the film priveleges, $250 for each buffalo killed, and cuttings from the film for their own visual footage. It promised a multitude of free advertising for the Park, however some negative media coverage and angry public reaction to the actual killings were less than favorable.

In later years segments of other movies, ''The Covered Wagon'', ''Flaming Frontier'', and ''The Thundering Herd'', were filmed at the Park.

Cattalo

In 1916, the Department of Agriculture requisitioned six sections of land double fenced with eight foot page wire to establish an experimental range for the cattalo. Shorthorn or Herford were cross bred with buffalo, for the purpose of developing meatier, cold resistant animals with the foraging ability of buffalo and the easier handling nature of cattle.

Highest success rates were realized with the buffalo cows bred to domestic bulls, however a trend of sterility in male calves was prevalent.

Yak were also introduced into the experiment in 1921. A small herd was transferred from Banff, their offspring labelled yakallo.

Assisted by Park riders, Jim Wilson managed the enclosure and its animals until 1932 when Albert MacLellan became supervisor. In 1950 the operation was moved to a federal experimental farm in Manyberries, Alberta, where it was completely abandoned in 1964.

Above: Buffalo – Shorthorn cross, King, weighing 2400 pounds was believed to be the largest cloven hoof animal in the world. He remained on exhibition at the Park until bought by Phil May Sr., the hide becoming a museum showpiece. Below: Granny, the yakallo, was King's inseparable companion.

Roundups

Roundup crews funnelled buffalo into increasingly smaller enclosures, sorting and cutting the stock to be slaughtered.

The Why and the Wherefore

Buffalo National Park witnessed a strong and steady growth in its bison herd, estimated at over 5100 by March 1921. Increased hay supplies being necessary and the possibility of over grazing the park reserve were considerations resulting in the decision to eliminate excess animals.

Male and female counts were almost equal, this being double the amount of bulls necessary for herd reproduction. Thusly, it was the older bulls that were chosen for slaughter in the fall of 1922, most of this meat being used as pemmican, which is a mixture of dried buffalo meat and fat.

An abbatoir, bunkhouse and barn were built southwest of Park Farm in the northern part of the winter range. At this location the initial 264 bison were shot and butchered. Inspection by government officials disclosed 75% of the slaughtered animals showed signs of tuberculosis. This information remained unpublicized, unfit meat being destroyed. Inspectors' proposals advised the destruction of older animals whenever possible and improved winter feeding arrangements. And so began herd reduction procedures which included scheduled roundups to secure selected animals for slaughter.

The Market

Since buffalo had been protected for several years by legistation and conservation methods, public demand for hides, meat and trophy heads was high. To enhance sales, the National Parks Service issued pamphlets containing recipies for cooking buffalo meat and preparing pemmican. Northern Canada proved to be an interested consumer of pemmican, this being a prominent food in native diets.

Buffalo hides were utilized as winter coats for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and warm robes for many snowbound travellers.

The larger, older bulls provided prime trophy heads, requiring more of the cape growth to be preserved. Usables from head, horns and bones were made into fertilizer and various other products.

There also existed a market for live buffalo. Many were shipped across the world as gifts from Canada or puchased show animals. Also between 1925 and 1928 over 6600 young animals were dispersed to Wood Buffalo Park in the Northwest Territories, establishing a strong new herd in this region.

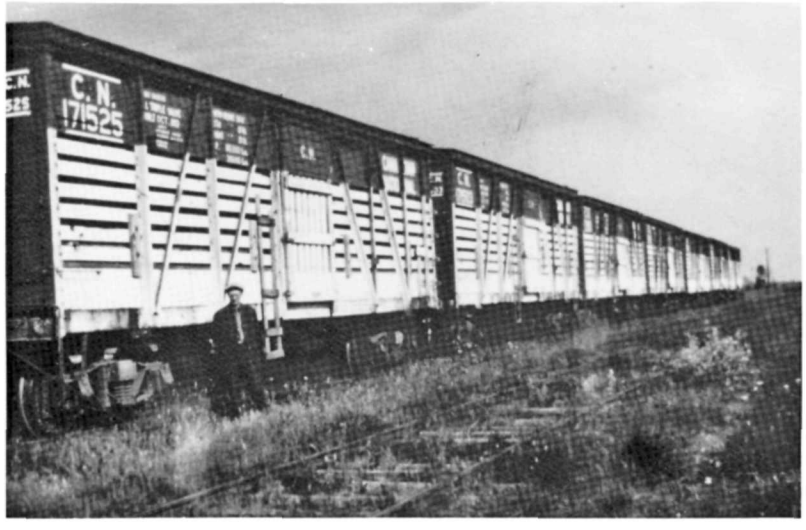
Shipments North

In 1924 an agreement was formulated which involved shipments of young buffalo from Wainwright to the Northwest Territories. Over a period of four years, in excess of 6600 bison were miraculously transported by rail and barge to the southern part of Wood Buffalo Park.

The calf crop from 1923 and 1924 were segregated within Buffalo Park and subsequently shipped the following spring. After being herded to a 20 acre holding area and crossing a gate – guarded roadway they were corralled south of the tracks at the town/camp spur line. Here they were branded with the "gamb joint W", to ensure easier identification for wardens of the northern park. This practice involving nearly 2000 bison, was only executed during this one year, before public complaints put an end to it.

Waiting at the loading chutes, each cattlecar was divided by a V – shaped area to store hay, with ten to twelve buffalo housed on either side. From this point they proceeded by rail to Waterways (which is now Fort McMurray), via Edmonton, reloaded onto specially designed barges, eventually ending their journey in Wood Buffalo Park.

The next three years saw more young animals cut from the main herd and follow the same route north.



Corralled and loaded into cattlecars, the bison were transferred to barges and pushed down the Athabaska and Slave Rivers by the Northland Echo pictured above.

Annual Events

With much of the calf crop already shipped north, the Park was still experiencing surprising advances in the buffalo population. Sage, drought, and over–grazing threatened the range, hay production had to be increased, and after an investigation by the Department of Agriculture it was determined the livestock were infected by a parasite known as liver–fluke.

In 1929 the Park resumed scheduled slaughters. This annual occurrence seemed drastic to some, but a necessary action to control the growing numbers of buffalo within the Park. During the next six years, more than 6300 bison were killed and butchered at the abbatoir. Meat packing firms bid on the contract, sending their own butchers and agreeing to government inspection of the carcasses. Hides were sold by the government for $45 each.

In 1935, roundup was cancelled due to fire destroying the abbatoir. A new structure with cement engine room was ready for operation the following year and by January of 1939 an additional 4768 buffalo were slaughtered. These last two years had included elimination of excess elk, the meat from these animals distributed to various Indian agencies across the Canadian Prairies.

Inspection of both buffalo and elk carcasses continued to reveal bovine tuberculosis and liver--fluke. Dr. Hawden, a doctor of Veterinary Science in Toronto, and familiar with the Park operation and slaughter, put forth a proposal that all animals now residing within the Park's enclosures should be destroyed immediately. Alternate, uninfected herds of buffalo existed in other Canadian parks, and it was with concern for these animals that the decision was made to order the complete removal of wild animals in Buffalo National Park.

The final slaughter took place in the fall of 1939, eradicating 2918 buffalo, 1806 elk, 113 moose and 242 deer.

Above: Buffalo carcasses at the abbatoir(1920's)
Below: In 1935 fire destroyed the first abbatoir. A new building, partially of cement, was constructed at the same site. Most of its equipment was sent to Elk Island Park after 1939's last roundup.

In 19 roundups, riders moved over 50,000 buffalo through the chutes.

Roundup Crews

It was beneficial to have the same riders each year if possible, as they knew the territory and were more familiar with the tendencies of the buffalo. There seemed to be an air of excitement at roundup time, the men working as a team, sharing experiences and experience during the two months they were together.

Wainwright and Districts' history, Buffalo Trails and Tales, lists Park riders as follows:

Annual Roundups – Bud Cotton, Ray Sharp, Vern Treffry, Blake Sharp, Bert Kitchen, Frank Love, George Armstrong, Allen Treffry.

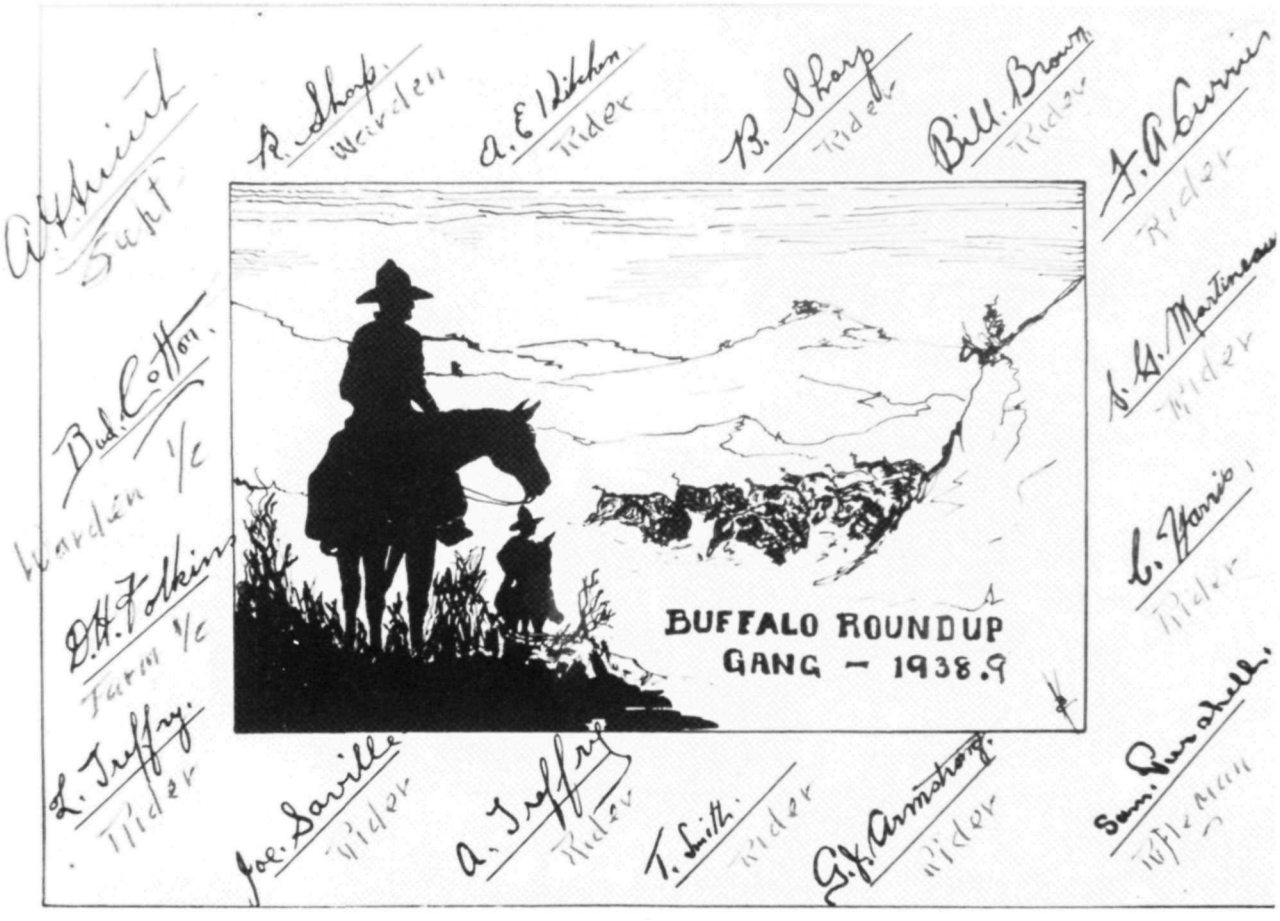
One to Seven Years – Dick McNern, Hi Dunning, Chris Harris, Paul Powell, Murray Treffry, Warren Blinn, Arthur Babb, Jack Johnston, Tommy Smith.

One to Three Years – Joe Saville, Miles Mabey, Felix Currier, Bud Mabey, S. Martineau, Bill Brown, M. Jackson, Art Massey, Bob Hyatt, N. Zender, S. Sorenson, Jim Saville.

At other times of the year, most of these men were farmers and ranchers, citizens of Wainwright and its surrounding districts. During the cold winter months when hides were prime, riders would head for the range where 8000 buffalo grazed contentedly until spurred into a frenzied run by the presence of the horsemen.

Horses were sharp–shod for safer footing on slippery terrain and fed generous rations of grain and hay for their much needed strength. They were buffalo–wise and wary of their enemies' fatal horns; gores inflicted by the ill–tempered or frightened bison caused the death of several of the Park's thouroghbreds.

Riders dressed for the extreme cold, often wearing woollen chaps, tweed hats with ear lugs, and felt socks in overshoes. Some sat atop sheepskin saddle covers for added warmth. Much of their time was spent travelling at high speed over frozen ground, snow and ice flying into their faces as they followed the herd. Their destination was a one mile square enclosure near the abbatoir where dinner and fresh horses were waiting.



The Kill

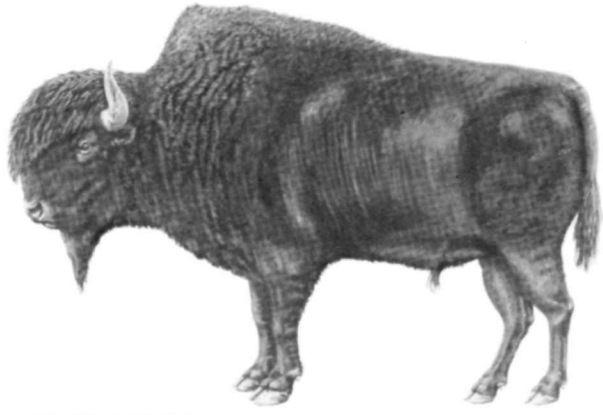
After dinner, fresh horses were saddled for the afternoon's toil. This involved channelling the same buffalo just enclosed, along drift fences, and eventually through the corral gates which slid shut behind a mass of angry muscle. The horses were now allowed to rest while courageous cowboys worked the corrals on foot, amid a hundred milling bison.

The animals were coaxed into the crowding pen and one at a time into the chutes, where they were inspected. Some were selected for slaughter and released into the beef enclosure, others counted for the yearly census and let graze in a sixteen square mile fenced area until roundup was complete. This method eliminated handling or counting an animal more than once.

Placed in a horse–drawn wagon within the beef enclosure, rifleman Sam Purshell, with his 303, shot each buffalo with accuracy. The animal was immediately bled and hauled to the abbatoir. Paid by the meat contractors, Sam averaged 70 animals daily, for a month of steady work for the butchers. It is believed that during the years Sam was involved with Park roundups, his total kill was 39,000 buffalo!

Each year the meat packing company would send out their own butchers, fed and housed at the abbatoir site. Carcasses were inspected, hung, quartered, hauled by wagon or truck to the train station and loaded into meat cars. Hides were stacked and sprinkled with salt to draw out the blood and initiate curing. They too were hauled to town to be shipped to the tannery.

Bison



Plains Bison

- Bulls average 730 kg. (Cows, 410 kg.)
- Shorter neck
- More rounded hump
- Smaller and stockier
- Chaps of long hair on forelegs
- Cape is usually lighter in color
- In summer, cape forms distinct boundary with the rest of body
- Frizzy hair on head
- Larger more rounded beard

Wood Bison

- Largest native land mammal in North America
- Bulls average 840 kg – 10 to 15% heavier than plains bison (Cows, 475 kg)
- Taller and squarer hump
- Darker in color
- Generally taller and larger
- Little or no chap hair on forelegs
- Cape usually does not form distinct boundary with rest of body
- Long, straight hair, sloping down on forehead
- Smaller, more pointed beard

Environment Canada / Environnement Canada

Canadian Parks Service

The above information from an Environment Canada pamphlet, describes the differences between plains and wood bison. Both varieties may be viewed at Elk Island Park.

Bison possess a high tolerance to cold and are able to forage on open range more efficiently than cattle. Unlike cattle, they face into the wind, easily protected by their insulating forequarters hair. They are not hesitant to ford rivers or small bodies of water, usually travelling in the most practical direct route. In deep snow they form a line, the leaders creating a passable pathway.

Calves are small at birth and reddish orange in color for their first few months; the herd shares protective responsibilities.

During mating season in particular, bulls' bellows and roars are audible for great distances. The entire herd grunts, snorts, and sneezes, also adding the unbecoming traits of grinding teeth and stamping feet.

Diseases threatening bison mortality are anthrax, tuberculosis, and brucellosis (Bang's disease). Bison are also host to several varieties of parasites.

Gate keeper's son Jack Davison, became a reknown lifeguard at Mott Lake resort. His abilities saved several swimmers, one being the young child of Rev. Huston in 1931.

Herds of yak (above) and elk (below) enclosed near Mott Lake. In 1939 the yak remained with the experimental project while a recorded number of 1806 elk were slaughtered. The meat from these animals was distributed by Indian Affairs.

Mott Lake

Horse Lake, situated in the northern part of Buffalo Park, was renamed Mott Lake in 1916 to honor Frank Mott, a one–time resident of the community. Mott was one of many killed at Ypes during the Great War.

Mott Lake became a resort with its official opening on July 2, 1917. A parade of over forty automobiles decked out with flags, followed a float and marching band along the new road to a scenic picnic and beach area. Mayor Greer officiated as the opening ceremony entertained a crowd of over 600 visitors.

A declaration from the Board of Trade allowed each Thursday afternoon in July and August a half–day holiday so townsfolk could utilize the facilities. Mott Lake was a much celebrated picnic spot with booths, changehouses, swings and a sandy beach patrolled by a lifeguard. Large family outings at the lake were Sunday events for many local residents as well as travellers.

When Buffalo Park closed in 1940, Mott Lake remained available for public enjoyment and later for Camp Wainwright personnel and their guests. In Canada's centennial year, 1967, Camp Wainwright undertook renovations of the area and upon completion, named it Donaldson Park in honor of Lt. Col. G.A. Donaldson, C.D.

In 1988, decreased water level of the lake revealed a mortar and gunnery range from the past. An underwater search located explosives, which were detonated, however there was no guarantee of safety. Mott Lake recreation area was closed.

1925

Town Clock

In 1925 the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.) dedicated the clock to men who fought in the Great War. This community's losses were inscribed upon a plaque positioned within the stone structure.

Frank Bailey designed and built the stately cenotaph with stones gathered from the community by school children and other residents. The clockworks were imported from England and run by batteries until 1959 when paved streets allowed underground electricity to be installed. In 1929, Wainwright burned around the clock, but the memorial was not to be damaged. Mr. Bailey also constructed the original stone gate pillars that marked the entrance to Buffalo National Park.

In July, 1947, a second ceremony and plaque commemorated soldiers lost in World War II. Represented at this ceremony were Camp Wainwright, Town, Legion, Sea Cadets, PPCLI Guard of Honor, Airforce, Army, Navy, I.O.D.E. and honored Mothers.

Dressed in summer khaki shorts, rolled shirt sleeves, white belts, knee highs, and smart berets, the PPCLI Guard of Honor marched from the train station to the cenotaph for inspection by General Worthington.

Each year a Remembrance Day ceremony is held and wreaths placed at the base of the clock in memory of those who fought for our freedom, '''Lest We Forget''.

PROGRAMME
of the
DEDICATION SERVICES
of the
MEMORIAL CLOCK TOWER
erected by the
Walter Musson Chapter, I.O.D.E.

WAINWRIGHT, ALBERTA
Sunday, September 13th, 1925
at 2.30 p.m.

Hymn—"O Canada"

Prayer—Rev. Andrew Love

Address—Mayor E. L. Cork

Reply By Mrs Adelina Lasell, regent I.O.D.E.

UNVEILING Memorial Tablet—**The Hon. Senator Major-Gen. W. A. Griesbach, D.S.O., C.B., C.M.G.**

The DEDICATORY PRAYER will be offered by the Rev. A. Love.

One minute of silence will then be observed

Bugler Frank Stott will sound "Last Post"

Placing Floral Tributes—The School Children

Hymn—"O, God, our help in ages past" (see over)

Addresses will be given by—

Capt. G. L. Hudson, representing the G.W.V.A., and

Major Harcus Strachan, V.C.

Benediction—Rev. Andrew Love

GOD SAVE THE KING

Harcus Strachan, from the Chauvin district, received a Military Cross and the Victoria Cross for his bravery and achievement during World War I. Strachan was an honored guest speaker at the first dedication ceremony, at which time he was an officer of the 19th Alberta Dragoons.

Bits and Pieces

With the Dominion Day celebration in 1909 when the buffalo arrived in Wainwright, programmes listed events including racing, athletics and a dance; "busses" were available to Buffalo Park. The Palace Billiard Hall advertised "hot and cold baths", admission to the races was one dollar.

In 1908, the Wainwright Star began its existence. From 1918–1945, Walter John Huntingford owned and operated the flourishing newspaper business. He was one of a delegation from Wainwright who went to Ottawa at the time of the Park's closure, resulting in its transition to a military establishment. Len D'Albertanson bought the paper in 1949, naming it the Wainwright Star Chronicle. Len has kindly written the introduction to this book.

A telephone exchange was welcomed to Wainwright in 1911. There was often trouble in Buffalo Park with the telephone poles being mercilessly used by bison for rubbing posts. Some days the lines would sway for miles!

When the Elite theatre (now Thorps Drugstore) opened in 1912, silent movies were shown with piano accompanyment. After the show, rows of chairs with boards nailed beneath them, were swiftly moved along the walls, revealing a dance floor. The same pianist would entertain dancers; ladies were allowed free entry, men paid ten cents or better for admission. These were the days that town stayed open until midnight Saturday nights. And it was busy! Electricity supplied by a generator, sometimes konked out, leaving everyone in darkness.

Park Road School No. 3229: NE 17–43–6 was built in 1917 and opened in 1919. The first teacher was Miss Douglas, daughter of Park Farm foreman. Some folks recall Bert Walker, also a foreman's child, making his way to the schoolhouse aboard his stubborn Shetland pony. Closed with the Park in 1939, the building was moved to Wainwright.

The Canadian government presented Wainwright with a buffalo head to adorn the walls of the Council Chamber in 1916. It along with the Town Hall was destroyed in the fire of 1929. Wainwright requested a replacement and in 1931, the Department of the Interior provided a second buffalo trophy head to be placed in the new building.

Bud Cotton's warden cabin, called Rockyford station, was nicknamed "Ellofahole" by the riders. It had no insulation, no screen door, and a tin stove with do–it–yourself wood pile. This "palace" was situated on the west side of the Park, north of the Hardisty gate.

Aleck (Dick) Plater, Bob Barnett and Jack Fisher, Park Farm employees, batched in a one–room shack just west of the Park Farm house.

Davey Davison tended Buffalo Park's Main Gate. The gatekeeper's home is now the Gun and Country Club building. His duties included watching over the exhibition area where tourists were able to view buffalo, elk, deer, moose, yak and antelope. He had only one hand; a hook replacement for his left hand was seldom used. His journal notes shipments of buffalo to South America, Belgium, New Zealand, Australia, England and USA. Davison personally presented two bison, Daniel and Rebecca Boone, to the Governor of Kentucky.

Jack Channel was another Park personality remembered for his riding ability, minus one arm.

Dick McKay, a carpenter by trade, helped construct many of the buildings at Park Farm, Hardisty Gate, Rockyford, the Main Gate, and later the abbatoir. McKay erected corrals at the loading area near the tracks, and was responsible for measuring buffalo to be shipped overseas. He custom–built crates for them to be loaded into, thus making it possible to transfer the caged animals to ships.

Bud Cotton tells of a buffalo calf named One Spot, found weak and hungry near its dead mother. Bud took the orphan in, feeding him canned milk and oatmeal. As if with dog tendencies, the little fellow even came into the cabin and slept under the table on occasion! Bud's horse, Frost and One Spot were partners, sharing stall and fodder until the buffalo became aggressive and Bud put him out to range. Some evenings Bud would find One Spot lying right in front of the gate entrance to Rockyford. The only way to get the huge beast to move was for Bud to tie Frost, climb the fence, and throw some hay over to the other side, a little ways from the gate. Slowly the buffalo would rise and saunter down the fenceline to his bait. This would enable a tired warden and his horse to enter their yard without further obstruction. Later, however, One Spot forgot his old partners and fatally gored Frost. Finally in 1939, Bud, having lost all love for his one-time pet, saw the massive bull killed for pemmican; he saved the scalplock as a souvenir.

Ray Sharp remembers Jim Wilson from the cattalo farm phoning to report two deer with their horns locked. Ray and a few others went to help out. Just as they neared the entwined animals, the deer "put their heads together" and ran away! This happened a couple of times until they became tangled in some brush and two men on each side, pried the horns apart. The animals immediately fled the scene without so much as a thankyou.

Another incident Ray remembers is when they were tracking a moose yearling to be shipped. Ray and Vern Treffry cut the yearling from its mother, and while riding on either side of it, both men left their saddles to pounce upon the fleeing animal. Bert Kitchen and Bill Brown arrived on the scene, designing a rope halter for the catch. While one rider headed to the north gate to request a team to come for the moose, the other boys, one on each side and one behind, headed the yearling in the right direction. Before the team was completely harnessed for their trek to the range, a grinning threesome led their prize into the corrals, halter broke and leading up just like a horse!

Maude, a tame elk at the Park, had many admirers and appears in various visitors' and Park staff's pictures. Ole, a tame buffalo, was christened by the daughter of the King of Norway in 1929.

Ray Sharp was lucky enough to be blessed with a wife AND a new truck for the Farm in 1928. Irene Treffry became Mrs. Sharp. The truck happened to be a Rio Speed Wagon, licence number 59-412. Ray remembers receiving a little flack from the town constable for not having a rear view mirror.

Irene Sharp moved to the Park in 1916 when her father started on the fencing crews and her mother, with five children in tow, cooked for the men. Mrs. Treffry prepared three strapping meals every day from the mobile cook car. Measuring about 10' by 16', it had table ledges along each length of wall, bench seats, and a walkway between. At the end of the car was a cast iron cookstove heated with wood. Water was carried in by pail. The cramped quarters didn't hinder final output as there was still pie, cake and cookies for dessert. The cook would usually purchase a quarter of buffalo meat, which was hard to discern from ordinary beef. Each man paid her thirty cents a day for his fare.

In spring men would axe wood from the bluffs, haul it to the farm and cut it with a buzz saw attached to a Fordson tractor. When time permitted it was split and piled for winter use.

Derricks attached to trucks were used to load stragglers that were killed on the range during the winter of 1940. The derricks were collapsed and strapped down while travelling. This equipment was sent to Elk Island Park when all operations were complete at Buffalo Park.

On June 3, 1939, King George VI and his wife Queen Elizabeth arrived at Wainwright train station greeted by a throng of anxious citizens. The Royal Couple were formally welcomed by the Mayor, Dr. J.G. Middlemass and his wife. After a short speech by the King, they were again aboard the train.