

The Extinction of Bison Culture

By

Austin Marshall Preller

Senior Seminar: Hst 499

Professor John L. Rector

Western Oregon University

May 28, 2010

Readers

Professor Kimberly Jensen

Professor Penelope Brownell

Copyright © Austin Preller, 2010

The history of the American west is a story that serves as a defining moment for many Americans, as it is often times interpreted as the experience that shaped what would become the truly American “Identity”. The nineteenth century Great Plains played host to many of the developments held in the consciousness of Americans that when pieced together create the experience that fostered the American “identity”. The scientific exploration marked by the Lewis and Clark expedition, the fur trade industry, the building of a transcontinental railroad, the Oregon Trail, the California gold rush, and the overcoming of First Nations resistance are familiar narratives in what has been popularized as the “civilizing” of the west.

Mainstream America has overlooked the complexities in the understanding of how the west unfolded, particularly in the case of understanding the role of First Nations life ways. First Nations peoples were often times visualized as “savages”, resisting civilization, or simply as infantile and in need of directed guidance. All of these interpretations do not account for the fact that the nineteenth century was a time of rapid consequential change in the life ways of First Nations tribes of the Great Plains. The changes taking place had a great deal to do with the invasion of peoples onto the Great Plains introducing important factors that combined to degrade first nations life ways and ultimately the disappearance of the bison culture. Though the scholarship that exists often times relies too heavily on the emphasis of external factors undermining First Nations life ways giving minimal attention to the internal aspects of change that occurred within tribes, changes which left tribes more vulnerable to external forces of displacement, dependence, and eventual assimilation. This paper focuses on the internal forces of change that allowed for the external changes to develop a stronghold in forced displacement,

dependence, and assimilation. The transition from displacement to dependence, to eventual forced assimilation began in the middle half of the nineteenth century with the signing of the treaties of Fort Laramie in 1851 displacing the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux and other Plains tribes by outlining the extent of land that they were to occupy. Dependence and assimilation did not arise until the later nineteenth century with the development of the reservation system, and furthermore boarding schools where the intent was to kill the Indian and save the man. Outside agents particularly the federal government, white contact through the fur trade and disease has been accounted for largely as the sole contributor to the degradation of First Nation's life ways without developing deeper complexities. There were also internal impacts of change that came with the evolution of the bison culture that allowed for short term economic gain but ultimately proved detrimental in ripping the seams opening the flood gates to an onslaught of grave changes.

The bison culture emerged during the second half of the eighteenth century as many tribes of the plains shifted from sedentary farming accompanied with seasonal bison hunts to a life way that was centered entirely on bison. This was made possible because of the introduction of the horse to the Plains in the latter half of the eighteenth century, allowing for bison to be hunted year round. The shift from sedentary farming to a more nomadic hunting society can be attributed to the economic gain that the year round hunt allowed for. As tribes of the plains became deeply dependent on bison the role of the bison expanded beyond simply the need for subsistence and became entrenched in tribal culture. This cultural entrenchment of the bison among Plains tribes is exemplified through the spirit of the white buffalo that will be expanded upon later. By the end of the nineteenth century almost all aspects of tribal life

ways were in some way altered by the transition of the bison becoming the independent resource that subsistence patterns revolved around creating the bison culture.

Through my research I have developed a conceptualization of how the Great Plains region was transformed during the nineteenth century, centered on the bison culture, as the role of the bison culture among tribes had ripple effects that reached many of the internal and external factors working both for and against First Nations peoples. For the purposes of this paper I intend to show the role of the bison culture in strengthening particular tribes such as Cheyenne, and the Sioux while simultaneously weakening others such as the Crow, Pawnee, and Arikaras. The strengthening and weakening of tribes through economic gain opened the door for increased contact with outsiders, and also alienated tribes into semi autonomous clans each actively perusing prosperity and subsistence of their own. This created competition between tribes that shaped hunting patterns and also perceptions of white settlers by natives, which played a key role in the evolution of the fur trade in which much of the economic gain was invested. The Most famous of the contributors to the destruction of the bison culture was the impact of the federal government through treaties and acts allowing for exploitation to be imposed. However the federal government's impact must also be evaluated as having internal motives of causation within the tribe stemming from the bison culture that allowed for the exploitation to be simplified. As the bison culture bred competition between tribes it caused them to become less unified, and thus less able to be represented as an all encompassing nation and allowed the federal government to deal on an individual basis within sub regions of the Great Plains, rather than having to deal with a unified holistic model. Ultimately the three main factors in forced assimilation for First nations peoples intertribal competition and conflict,

decreasing bison herds, and the federal government's use of broken treaties and acts were all impacted greatly by the belief system and practice embedded in the bison culture.

The scholarship dealing with the American west can broadly be placed in to two categories. The first was western history which is largely the scholarship that existed for the better part of a century from the 1890's through around 1980, and generally follows similar narratives of the West. The new western history is the scholarship largely dominated by publications over the last thirty years seeks to provide answers to previously unimagined questions while furthering developing new questions and interpretations including narratives focused on gender, race, and environmental issues among others.

One piece of scholarship dominated the profession of western history for decades. Frederick Jackson Turner published *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, in 1893. This is important because it allowed western history became stale and when western history did come under new investigation Turner was highly criticized. Turner argues that the frontier was *the* most important shaping force in American character, institutions, and its history.<sup>1</sup> This American character was constructed on the grounds of individualism, nationalism, mobility, and egalitarianism. Turner states that "In the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English neither in nationality or characteristic."<sup>2</sup> Illustrating that through the frontier experience Americans became united as one nation representing a unique "identity" as a result. This outlook portrays that it was the experience that shaped the man rather than the man shaping the experience and is a major

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard W. Etulain, *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999) ,17.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: GPO and American Historical Association, 1894) ,204.

flaw in this argument. The experience of each individual in the west was vastly different than that of any other individual, though groups of people may have shared similar experiences it cannot be argued that one experience shaped the character of all. Furthermore Turner does not remain gender neutral in his narrative of the west depicting only men as having had the experience of the west shape them, this conforms to sentiments held during the Victorian era as the accomplishments of women often went unrecognized while those of men were often times exaggerated.

This gives insight into the perspective of white Americans on the transformation of the west during the nineteenth century as its publication came only three years after the census had declared the frontier closed in 1890. The closing of the frontier was decided on the basis that Americans had settled from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and that there was no land left unclaimed on the continent. This is important to bear in mind because this means that with a publication date so close to the events in which Turner is discussing, this document can also be interpreted as a primary document. Revealing sentiments through his writing and characterization of the west from the perspective of an educated white man who had lived through (however as an outsider looking in) the events to which he is writing.

By arguing that the frontier was the most important shaping force in American character, institutions, and history, Turner developed a narrative that portrayed the west as largely uninhabited land scarcely roamed by nomadic "savages" whose largest contribution history was that of resistance. Turner states "Long before the pioneer farmer appeared on the scene, primitive Indian life had passed away. The Farmers met Indians armed with guns. The trading

frontier, while steadily undermining Indian power by making tribes ultimately dependent on the whites, yet, through its sale of guns, gave the Indians increased power of resistance to the farming frontier".<sup>3</sup> This portrayal of First Nations people assumes that dependence on whites was somehow created through trade relations, while the guns acquired through trade gave tribes a source of power in resistance without taking into account economic and cultural influences also at work. The whites were actually dependent on First Nations peoples in trade for many decades before the strategic modes of oppression employed by whites forced First Nations dependency on them. The emphasis on resistance to the farming frontier is of particular interest to the holistic interpretation of how cultural life ways vanished during the nineteenth century for First Nations tribes.

Following what might be considered a "Turnerian" style, Walter Prescott Webb published his interpretation of the west *The Great Plains* in 1931. Webb expressed his purpose in writing , "to show how this area (The Great Plains) with its three dominant characteristics (treelessness, levelness, and semi-aridity) affected the various peoples, nations as well as individuals, who came to make and occupy it".<sup>4</sup> This statement of purpose has the appearance of providing a more complete vision of the west. This is not entirely the case since each new theme is met with interpretation that closely resembles those put forth by Turner. This is particularly evident in Webb's chapter "Plains Indians".

Dedicating an entire chapter dedicated to what Webb refers to as "Plains Indians" recognizing the First Nations peoples as important group, and shows some growth from Turner.

---

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of The Frontier..." ,203

<sup>4</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset &Dunlap, 1931) ,14.

On the other hand, the way in which Webb presents the First Nations peoples adopts the “Turnerian” perspective by multiple references to “wild” and “nomads”, using references to First Nations peoples that offer that they were nomadic and had no settled village life, concluding that Plains Indians were the least “civilized” of all tribes in distinguishing between the “civilized” Indians of the Eastern tribes and the “wild” Indians of the Plains tribes, and stating that “The Plains Indians were nomadic and nonagricultural, they used beasts of burden for transportation, an indication of their nomadic culture.”<sup>5</sup>

It is also important to note that Webb considered the Plains Indians influence on whites and their institutions, but the context of cultural stratification was not developed here. Webb simply dismisses the influence as obstacle to westward expansion, similar to the ideology put forward by Turner. While asserting that certain characteristics of Indians profoundly influenced the white man and his institutions, Webb emphasizes that the Plains Indians mostly represented problems for those who invaded the inhospitable land, stating that “the plains Indians constituted for a much longer time than we realize the most effectual barrier ever set up by a native American population against European invaders in a temperate zone”.<sup>6</sup> Webb even goes so far as to say that the horse brought the Plains Indian a golden age of glory, ease, and conquest which he had never known before.<sup>7</sup> This glorification that Webb so liberally asserts can be viewed as a reproduction of dominant social visions of Plains Indian in the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly the horse transformed life ways for many Plains tribes and effectively made select tasks less of a burden; however the introduction of the horse also had

---

<sup>5</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, 52-59.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, 47-48.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, 493.



connections to the evolution of many other developments that would ultimately prove to be degrading forces in the life ways of all Plains tribes.

With new questions emerging about the story of the west and growing interest in developing a deeper understanding of the complexities of the west came what is known as “new western history”. New western history emerged in the 1980s with best known through works by such historians as Richard White, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Donald Worster, and Jeffrey Ostler. New western history evaluates previously understood events and develops them from new perspectives, recasting the study of American frontier history by focusing on race, class, gender, and environment in the trans-Mississippi West

Richard White offers a narrative of the entire west spanning the nineteenth century through to modern developments of the twentieth century in his book *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*. White covers a breadth of time and regions in his narrative of the west but gives significant mention to the developments of the nineteenth century Great Plains in part II of his book “The Federal Government and the Nineteenth Century West”. Here White focuses his work on the political evolution of the Great Plains from varying perspectives, developing themes through examples such as the Louisiana Purchase, the conquest of Texas, Manifest Destiny, Indian sovereignty and removal, the development of the reservation system, forced assimilation, railroad exploration, American land policy, and the Homestead Act.<sup>8</sup> White regards that wave after wave of settlers crossing the Missouri river shaped the landscape with

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: a New History of the American West* (Norman Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 55-137

no regard for those who came before them, making for the misfortune of Indians as trappers, cattlemen, miners, and farmers filled the region.

The most useful of the chapters for the purposes of this work is the fourth “the Federal Government and the Indians”. In this chapter White shows the complete evolution of the relationship between First Nations peoples and the federal government: beginning with early explorers such as Lewis and Clark’s reliance on First Nations Peoples, to the long list of broken promises through acts and treaties that merged in tribal mistrust of the government and ultimately culminating in the outbreak of war on several occasions. This offers an extensive look at how not only white relations with Plains tribes shifted during the nineteenth century but also how perceptions changed, thus altering policies that were imposed upon them. White also, investigates intertribal competition and how the federal government played on these alliances and animosities to further the cause of white settlement, providing examples of times when Americans came into contact with tribes who themselves had been victimized by larger Plains tribes. The Crows, Pawnees, and Arikaras viewed Americans as allies against competing tribes particularly the Sioux, who at the time appeared to be a much larger threat to their own survival.<sup>9</sup>

Elliot West’s narrative of the Great Plains *The Way to the West* published in 1994 examines the Federal government’s relations with Plains tribes during the nineteenth century and how even internal pressures impacted such relations. The essays compiled in this book give depth to four main topics relevant to new western history and the Central Plains. The topics are Land, Animals (primarily looking here at bison), Families, and Stories. All four essays present

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard White, *It’s Your Misfortune.* ,101

both an understanding of First Nations people as well as early settlers and pioneers of the region, though the chapter on Animals is the largest contributor to this work as West develops an understanding of the Bison's near extinction in the region and offers new interpretations about the cause of this integral development. Straying from the usual assumption that declining numbers of bison were due to white emigrant populations hunting and vast wagon trails causing disruption to the survival of bison by chewing away at the landscape that provided the natural resources to support great herds<sup>10</sup> West suggests that although these factors did influence rapidly declining herds they do not account for the entire decline. Rather, West asserts that it was the combination of the disappearance of previously contested hunting grounds between competing tribes, the over hunting of herds beyond what was necessary for subsistence due to increasing fur trade pressures, and the introduction of disease to bison by means of infected cattle traveling the region in waves that all played contributors to the near extinction.

The near extinction of the bison and declining herds is significant in establishing the nucleus for broad spectrums of change during the nineteenth century. This is because of the importance of the bison culture within tribes: the connection between First Nations peoples and bison was much deeper than simply what can be amounted to need for survival. With strong bonds having been formed between the bison of the plains and the cultural spirit of tribes of the Plains came great changes in social and economic foundations at work particularly through the relations thrust into motion by the fur trade.

---

<sup>10</sup> Elliot West, *The Way to the West* (Albuquerque NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1995) ,54.

Continuing the development of new western history Albert L. Hurtado's article *Sex and Gender on Three Frontiers*<sup>11</sup> provides an in depth look at how gender relations both softened the racial friction of the frontier while simultaneously putting groups of people at even more risk because of the changes in social and economic relations. Hurtado suggests that because First Nations Peoples had differing ideologies about the nature of sexual relationships than those of European settlers, the relations between the two groups were often misunderstood. This ultimately culminated in the exploitation of not only Native women, but of the First Nations society as a whole. He depicts such relations and exploitations on three frontiers, The Great Plains region, the southwest, and in California (particularly in Spanish missionary areas). Hurtado links the sexual relations and power structure between men and women to the economic changes taking place citing the fur trade and bison dynamics, as well as developing the many integral religious aspects colliding amongst the peoples. Ultimately Hurtado has one fundamental ideology: that it was cultural and power structure differences among the integrated peoples of the west allowed for the exploitation of the First Nations peoples resulting in much suffering and loss through out the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By exploring the shifting economy of the nineteenth century Plains, a greater understanding of how it was not just the bison culture that amounted in the rise and collapse of many tribal economies, but rather that sexual practice and conflicting value systems at play among the fur trade each played key roles.

---

<sup>11</sup> Albert L. Hurtado, "When Strangers Met: Sex and gender On Three Frontiers", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (1996).

Jeffrey Ostler continued the development of introducing new complexities to the understanding of the west when he published *the Plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee* in 2004<sup>12</sup>. Similar to the narrative that White offered Ostler takes a detailed look at the political developments of the Plains and how relations among tribes and the federal government shaped the unfolding of the west, though Ostler's approach is much more acute than the holistic model that White presents as his focus is specific to the Sioux tribe and their dealings with the government. Ostler main objective is to reconsider the relations between the Sioux and the Federal government and further more white society as a whole. The book provides many specifics focused on the years between the Civil War and the ghost dance at Wounded Knee, citing the Great Sioux War, Sitting bull and Crazy horse's death, the Ghost Dance, and the resulting massacre at Wounded Knee. The specifics give insight into how Plains Indians were ostracized and how shifting political policies within tribal authority greatly affected the dealings with agents of the Federal government providing another example of how the bison culture impacted eventual displacement, dependence, and assimilation.

By the turn of the nineteenth century the tribes making the Great Plains region their home can be separated into two separate groups. First were tribes who had been making the region their home for hundreds of years through subsistence patterns of sedentary farming encapsulating the Pawnees, Omahas, Mandans, Hidatsas, and the Arikaras. The second a group of tribes who had themselves migrated onto the Plains during the preceding decade developing subsistence patterns centered on bison. These tribes include the Blackfeet, the Sioux, the

---

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Ostler. *The plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*. (Cambridge University Press. 2004).

Cheyenne, the Arapahos, the Crows, the Kiowas, and the Comanches. This migration of tribes onto the Great Plains set the stage for inter tribal conflict as there was now a growing competition for resources available. The competition was elevated by the fact that by the turn of the nineteenth century Plains tribes had become mounted as the diffusion of horses had reached the northern limits of the Plains by then 1770's.<sup>13</sup> The mounting of tribes allowed for them to cover much more ground than had ever been imagined previously, bringing contact amongst tribes possibly never aware of each other's existence. The increased contact was in large due to changing ways of the bison hunt for tribes of the Plains, as tribes were now mounted it allowed them to hunt year round rather than when the season allowed for it.

For hundreds of years many tribes had only gone on a long hunt only twice a year when scouts reported that bison were abundant on the Plains.<sup>14</sup> In contrast the horse allowed for the hunting of bison year round, but also allowed for single men to carry out a bison hunt a task previously requiring the efforts of the entire tribe. The recollections of Wooden Leg of the northern Cheyenne exemplify this transformation, stating "on another winter hunt I went out alone. My mother said, "we have no meat". So I took a packhorse and started out. The snow was deep. I led the horse as I walked, to keep warm. It was a long and tiresome day. I was becoming discouraged when I found the tracks of a buffalo. I followed them, and finally I got into the right position and killed the animal with a rifle". Upon returning to camp "All of our family laughed in joy, for we had plenty of meat."<sup>15</sup> This shows the way that trade relations allowed for the strengthening of the bison culture beyond the way in which the horse allowed

---

<sup>13</sup>Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune*. ,21

<sup>14</sup> Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way; A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood*. (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. 1966) ,17.

<sup>15</sup> Wooden Leg, Interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg; A Warrior Who Fought Custer*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska press. 1931) ,10

for the year round hunt of the bison as the rifle in this example also plays in important role.

Guns were also acquired through trade routes on the Plains serving many purposes, though in this example the use of the rifle to hunt the bison illustrates a convenience that was allowed in hunting bison a task that was previously much more difficult using a bow and arrow which may have taken several shots to kill a buffalo.

The dynamic created by the evolution of the bison culture through the utilization of the horse initially was accepted as being a major contributor to the increasing quality of life for plains tribes allowing for the bison culture to reach a climax of strength during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. Many recollections of Plains tribes depict this time as being the greatest years of their existence and express dreams of returning to the almost euphoric times of the bison culture as Althea Bass explains “A boy growing up today has no way of knowing how good life was for the Cheyenne and Arapaho, or even what life was like, unless he reads about it in books. Even if he should read about our life, he would miss something. Books could not make him see the sun rising over the land that stretched for miles without fences or roads”.<sup>16</sup> During the climax of the bison culture there was no perception that the changing life ways that allowed for the euphoric times would, or could for that matter prove to be instrumental to the degradation of the life that it allowed for.

The horse was instrumental in the bison culture because it was the vehicle that allowed for economic gain on the plains through the dealings of the fur trade. For this reason the horse was also a prized possession for Plains tribes and was the motivating factor for much intertribal

---

<sup>16</sup> Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way* “These Were the Arapaho”, 9, and *Wooden Leg; A Warrior Who Fought Custer*, “Boyhood wild days” ,1 .

conflict. Often time's tribes would raid camps of rival tribes of capturing horses among other goods, but the horse was the real trophy, this solicited retaliation and usually ended in much bloodshed. However this was not interpreted as being a threat to the bison culture from within tribes, as it was often looked at as being a display of bravery and adolescent members of the tribe even acquired names by participating in a raid and often times young boys of a tribe longed to participate in war parties.<sup>17</sup> The idealization of participating in raids and war parties gives insight into how the bison culture fostered tribes into semi autonomous clans which would later make them less able to resist outside agents of change.

The acquiring of a name in Native society can come from many origins either passed down from generation to generation, or given after a moment of significance in one's life commemorated through ceremony or feast. An example of the passing of a name through generations comes from Black Elk "My father's name was Black Elk, and his father before him bore the name, and the father of his father, so that I am the fourth to bear it."<sup>18</sup>

However the inherent difference between inter tribal conflict and white conquest deserves mention. The motivating factors driving expansion, and ultimately conquest amongst tribes was very different in nature than that of outside agents primarily white easterners. As Jeffrey Ostler points out in his writing Americans envisioned and accepted their mission as to transform the whole continent into one civilized land reconstructing it entirely in justification that they had achieved the highest form of human existence in history echoing sentiments of

---

<sup>17</sup> Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings; The Making of A Crow Warrior*. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company. 1967) ,11.  
*Wooden Leg; A Warrior Who Fought Custer.*, 5.

<sup>18</sup>John G, Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks; Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. (Lincoln, University of Nebraska press. 1979) ,7.  
*Wooden Leg; A Warrior Who Fought Custer.* , 2.



manifest destiny. While to tribes of the Great Plains the region was their whole world, and they understood that there would always be other peoples inhabiting the Plains and further more that there would always be other worlds beyond their own.<sup>19</sup>

Mentioned above, the horse expanded upon the amount of land that was available for tribes to hunt this also aided in increased conflict between tribes, as many wars broke out over contested hunting grounds. Standing Bear of the Sioux recalls a time when the Pawnee were found hunting on grounds that the Sioux believed belonged to them resulting in the eruption of mass conflict between the tribes.<sup>20</sup> This is an example of the importance of bison to the subsistence of Plains tribes in that encroachment on hunting grounds of a rival tribe was viewed as being worthy of fighting to the death to protect. However it is unclear how hunting grounds came to be controlled by a particular tribe outside of relative location. This may have been the cause for the merging of hunting grounds escalating into warfare simply out of genuine misunderstanding, further heightened by the fact that Plains tribes did not share a common language.

The difference in language between tribes of the Plains is another example of how Plains tribes came to be semi autonomous groups. Even between tribes who formed close alliances the language barrier was still present. The Cheyenne and the Arapaho were able to overcome language barriers through the adoption of a form of sign language which was undoubtedly largely responsible for the longstanding alliance that unfolded between the

---

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Ostler, *The plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism From Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*. (Cambridge University Press. 2004), 27.

<sup>20</sup> Luther Standing Bear, *My people the Sioux* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Riverside Press. 1928), 4.

tribes.<sup>21</sup> The language difference between tribes was also a factor that would reappear when dealing with the federal government for Plains tribes which will be discussed later. Language also impacted trade relations on the Plains that sometimes ended in consequences that might usually not be thought of in terms of resulting from language barriers. Two Leggings gives an example of these ill consequences describing a life altering incident when his father returned home after having traded for gun powder. While explaining its use to his mother Two Leggings father spread the powder close to the fire resulting in an explosion that took his father's life.<sup>22</sup>

It can be argued that the bison culture developed from trade relations between plains tribes and peoples outside the tribe. This began with the acquisition of horses through trade with Spanish settlers of the southwest dating to the late seventeenth century.<sup>23</sup> Often times it is interpreted that particularly within tribes themselves that the trade was a degrading factor in the degradation of the bison culture, usually resonating sentiments that before the white man First Nations peoples knew no wants and lived a much more full life. These feelings of outside agents destructing the bison culture are generally directed toward the trade relations that unfolded during the middle to second half of the nineteenth century. This can be attributed to many causes, beginning with disease. Disease ran rampant on the Plains beginning in 1849 as prior to this period the Plains relative isolation allowed them to remain relatively unaffected by epidemic than that of eastern tribes, but with increased migration through the plains driven by the California gold rush this relative isolation disappeared.<sup>24</sup> An alternate explanation for the negative sentiments toward trade during this time might have been changing attitudes towards

---

<sup>21</sup>Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way*. ,3

<sup>22</sup>Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings*. ,1

<sup>23</sup>Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune*. ,20

<sup>24</sup>Elliot West, *The Way to the West*. ,88

whites and more generally outsiders as the federal government's involvement in plains tribes lives dramatically increased during this period. This is particularly true for tribes of the northern plains mainly speaking here of the Sioux as the first series of treaties were signed at Fort Laramie in 1851.

However this negative attitude toward trade and the belief that it was having an adverse affect in changing lives for Plains tribes fails to look at the holistic model of the trade evolution. It was initially the trade that allowed for the development and strengthening of the bison culture, as the economic gain that propelled many tribes to what is now recalled on as they greatest times in their peoples existence. In the early days of the fur trade many of the peoples inhabit ting the Plains were reliant on trade with Plains tribes for subsistence as they provided the buffalo robes needed to survive the harsh winters of the Plains. Furthermore exemplifying the engrained role of trade in the bison culture is the literal translation of the word "Arapaho" meaning trader.<sup>25</sup>

The fur trade industry had another affect on the bison culture and Plains tribes, simply the demand that was created for buffalo robes. This rising demand coupled with other factors culminated in what was the most influential change that took place on the Plains during the nineteenth century. This change was the rapid decline of bison herds. The near extinction of the bison from North America crippled the bison culture and tribal life ways altogether. Bison inhabited the Plains for thousands of years, though by 1880 they faced a real threat of complete extinction. Interestingly even with obviously decreasing numbers the Plains tribes did not slow their hunting even when presented with opportunities to develop new means for

---

<sup>25</sup>Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way*, 2

subsistence as the idea of abandoning the life way passed down from generation to generation and abandoning the hunt for bison was unthinkable. In 1871, Quaker agents tried to convince Pawnees to skip the bison hunt that year to try and recover the quickly diminishing numbers. Richard White explains “The buffalo were not just a source of tepees and robes, of meat and tools. The animals were crucial to the cosmology of both the plains nomads and horticulturists”.<sup>26</sup> Once again this was not accepted as a solution because they did not believe that hunting had anything to do with the bison’s disappearance. They believed that bison were intentionally withdrawing themselves because they had been mistreated and when they were eventually again hunted and treated with respect, they would return in abundance. Thus the bison hunt continued between 1872 and 1874 an estimate of 1,378,359 hides were processed, and 6,751,200 pounds of meat were obtained from Plains herds.<sup>27</sup> Further pressuring the near extinction and making independent subsistence for Plains tribes increasingly difficult.

Often times particularly in new western history, scholarship points to agents of destruction outside of the tribe in explaining the near extinction of the bison. Explanations rooted in intentional slaughtering of herds, disease introduced to herds carried by cattle and other animals through the Plains, and the killings of bison for sport are all examples of such explanations. Supporting this explanation is an account from George Caitlin on partaking in a hunt among white settlers of Oklahoma, stating that he went not for meat but rather for trophy

---

<sup>26</sup>Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune.* ,219

<sup>27</sup>Roe, Frank Gilbert. *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in its Wild State.* (University of Toronto Press, 1970.),437.

actively seeking out the bull with the largest head and horns.<sup>28</sup> Though as Elliot West describes even given these factors there must have been other factors working against the bison as these explanations surely do not account for the remarkably fast decline in population. To help explain another possibility West argues that over hunting by Plains tribes themselves had much to do with decreasing populations, and combined with the outside explanations may provide a more encompassing telling of the near extinction.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that Plains tribes themselves held responsibility in the extinction of the bison is hard to understand because of the deep respect they exhibited toward the bison and the place the bison held among tribal spirituality. This can be exemplified through the story of the coming of the White Buffalo Calf Woman. The story begins with the San Arcs in a time of great famine moving toward the west in search of bison when two young members of the tribe are sent out with the mission of finding bison. The two young men come across a beautiful young woman who explains that she has been sent by the buffalo tribe to deliver a message to their people. The next day she appears with a pipe explaining to the people that they are all of the same family, and that she is their sister. She then shares that she represents the buffalo tribe and that the pipe is a gift from them to the San Arc people. After they partake in the smoking of the pipe the woman turns into a white buffalo calf and leaves.<sup>30</sup> The respect of the bison within tribes, which was what the bison culture largely, revolved around offers answers questions as to why tribes could not simply forgo the hunt. The hunt was not just a means for subsistence but was largely embedded in the cultural hearth of the tribes. Even after the instillation of the

---

<sup>28</sup> George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*. (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1973) , 26.

<sup>29</sup> Elliot West, *The Way to the West.*, 56

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Ostler, *The plains Sioux.* ,27

reservation system many elders among tribes remembered the bison hunt as the best thing they had ever known.<sup>31</sup> In this context it is much easier to understand the resistance that many tribes had toward abandoning the hunt and ironically it was the strength of the bison culture itself that aided in its demise.

All of the destructive forces mentioned above offer complexities to the traditional understanding of the loss of traditional life ways for Plains tribes, however independently (without the introduction of outside agents of change) they may not have resulted as catastrophic than when they were intertwined with the federal governments and more generally Americans imperialism justified by the teachings of manifest destiny. The involvement of the federal government through physical presence on the Plains began in 1849 as Fort Laramie was purchased from the American Fur Trade company, and immediately troops were brought into the region. Two years later the first treaties were signed at Fort Laramie outlining the extent of the land to be occupied by the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, and other Plains tribes allowing the crossing of such land in exchange for payments to the tribes. The signing of the treaties at Fort Laramie was only the first in the series of many more treaties to come over the next four decades ending with the Dawes sovereignty Act of 1887. The Dawes Act gave the president the power to reduce the landholdings of tribes across the country by allotting 160 acres of land to the heads of families or 80 acres to the individual, while making the excess land of the reservation open for settlement.

It is highly likely that the conquest of the west by the federal government would have been carried out regardless of the efforts of Plains tribe's efforts to resist forced displacement,

---

<sup>31</sup> Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way*, 43

dependence, and assimilation. However the developments previously outlined as internal factors of degradation to the bison culture also played significant roles in the ways that the conquest was carried out. The competition between tribes resulting in semi autonomous clans allowed for the federal government to operate in regions of the Plains rather than addressing the tribes of the Plains and the region as whole. This did not necessarily make the conquest easier for the federal government though it did provide the ability to subdue individual tribes as conflict arose. In essence the federal government was working against many small nations rather than one large strong nation. Allotting troops and reinforcements to relatively small areas, while had the tribes formed one large nation the federal government would not have been able to use these tactics had tribes worked together toward a common goal. This may have been notably effective during the years of the Civil War as troops were spread thin during this time.

The many languages of the Plains tribes also impacted the operations of the federal government, and more importantly often times the treaties that were signed were not fully understood by Plains tribes themselves as few people could interpret many tribal languages if any into good English.<sup>32</sup> This allowed the federal government to further take advantage of treaties as many of the intentions of the treaties were unclear or went misunderstood.

The near extinction of the bison however was the largest of the factors aiding in the federal governments conquest of the Plains. Prior to 1880 Plains tribes were able to rely on subsistence patterns of the bison culture making them less dependent on rations provided on the reservations. Post 1880 Plains tribes facing declining numbers and starvation were left with

---

<sup>32</sup> Althea Bass, *The Arapaho Way*, 4

no choice than to essentially give in to the government's demands of reservation life simply for survival. This put the federal government in the position of directing the future of Plains tribes rather than having to negotiate with them. Ultimately controlling the culture that was founded in the abundant economic gain invested in bison that enabled the years of prosper during the first half of the nineteenth century for many Plains tribes evolved into its most prominent mode of destruction as it was not the bison themselves that ended in extinction but rather the bison culture that would be lost forever.

There were many factors that culminated to erode the bison culture and each deserves critical evaluation and mention as no single factor can be drawn upon a single handedly driving the bison culture to extinction. Mechanisms of change from outside the tribe were the driving mode of change for First Nations tribes of the Plains; however internal modes of change from within the bison culture must be evaluated as having played supporting roles in how the extinction was carried out. The transition in life ways that allowed the bison culture to flourish during the first half of the nineteenth century proved to be rooted in the development of the foundation that ultimately lead to its destruction.



## *Bibliography*

### ***Primary Sources-***

Cook, John R. *The Border and the Buffalo: An Untold Story of the Southwest Plains*. Topeka, KS: Crane and Company, 1907.

Luther Standing Bear, *My people the Sioux*. Cambridge Massachusetts: The Riverside Press. 1928)

Wooden Leg, Interpreted by Thomas B. Marquis, *Wooden Leg; A Warrior Who Fought Custer*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska press. 1931.

Abel, Annie Heloise. *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939.

Camp, Charles L. *James Clyman Frontiersman: The Adventures of a Trapper and Covered-Wagon Emigrant*. Portland, OR: The Champoeg Press, INC. 1960.

Bass, Althea, *The Arapaho Way; A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood*. New York: Clarckson N. Potter, 1966.

Peter Nabokov, *Two Leggings; The Making of A Crow Warrior*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company. 1967.

George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*. New York: Dover Publications, 1973)

John G, Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks; Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press. 1979.

Black Elk, Wallace and William S. Lyon. *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of the Lakota*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

Calloway Colin G. *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground; Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost*. Boston/ New York: Bedford St. Martins, 1996.

### **Secondary Sources-**

Turner, Frederick Jackson, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893*. Washington, D.C.: GPO and American Historical Association, 1894.

Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Great Plains* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931.

Lavender, David. *Bent's Fort*. New York: Doubleday & Company. 1954.

Roe, Frank Gilbert. *The North American Buffalo: A Critical Study of the Species in its Wild State*. University of Toronto Press, 1970.

Albers, Patricia and Beatrice Medicine. *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women*. New York: University Press, 1983.

White, Richard. *A New History of the American West: It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: a New History of the American west*. Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

West, Elliot. *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains*. The University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

Albert L. Hurtado, "When Strangers Met: Sex and gender On Three Frontiers", *Frontiers: A journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (1996).

West, Elliot. *The contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the rush to Colorado*. University Press of Kansas, 1998.

Calloway, Colin G. *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark*. Lincoln, NE: University Of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Ostler, Jeffrey. *The plains Sioux and U.S. Colonialism from Lewis and Clark to Wounded Knee*. Cambridge University Press. 2004.