

Ghastly Harvest: Montana's Trade in Buffalo Bones

Author(s): LeRoy Barnett

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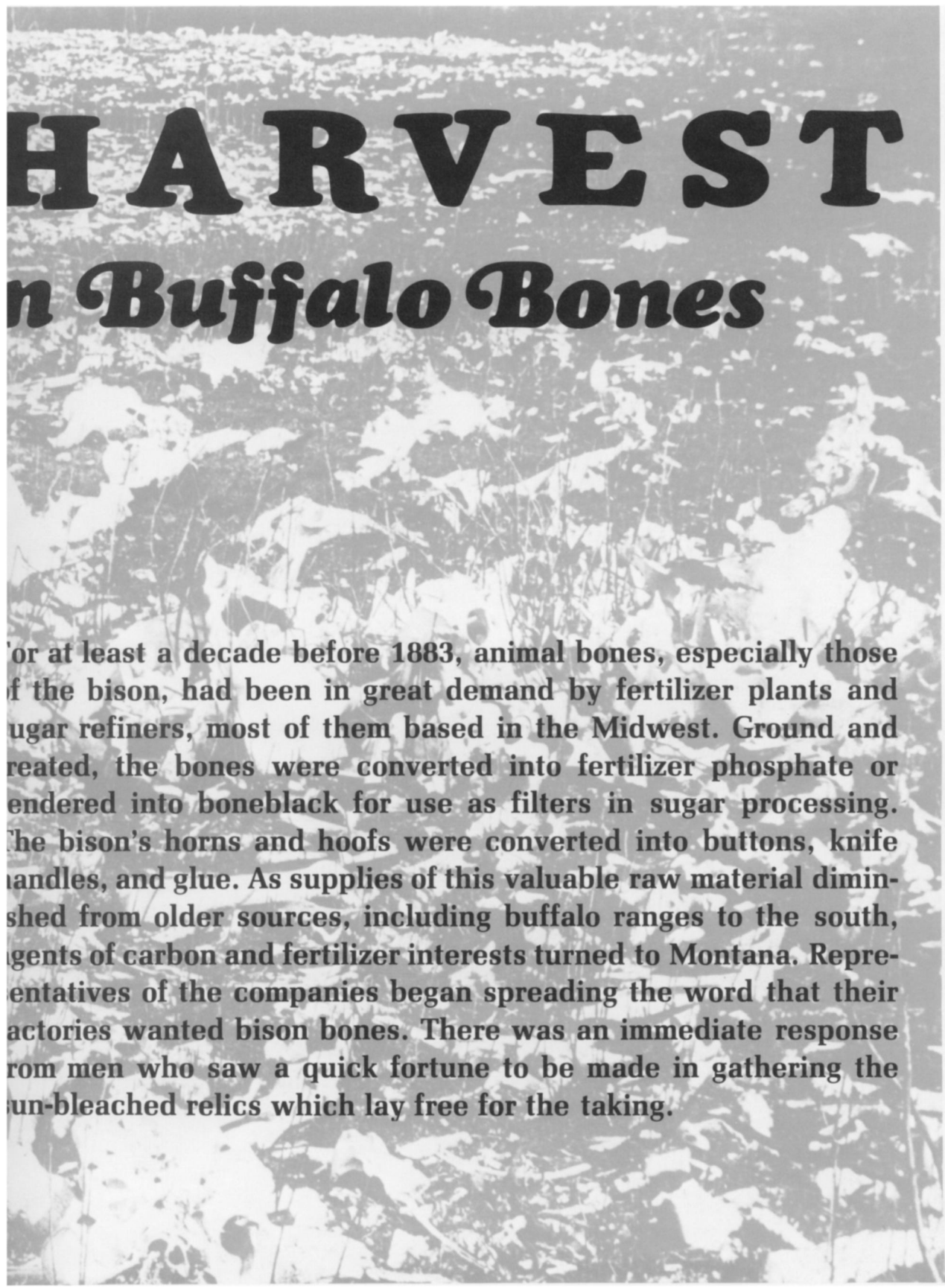
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# **GHASTLY** *Montana's Tradition*

by LeROY BARNETT

The senseless slaughter of the North American bison for hides and meat and sport left a residue of skeletons scattered across the prairies of the American West. By the 1880's, these remnants of the "Monarch of the Plains," picked clean by carnivores and polished and bleached by the elements, lay strewn about the landscape, in some places so thick that they covered the earth like a ghoulish carpet. Such relics seemed destined to serve as decaying memorials to the great herds that had once roamed the endless plains. But not even the bones of this great beast were allowed to rest in peace, for his skeletal framework became an item of economic value. Driven before a relentless search for new and unexpected profit, the bones of the buffalo began to disappear as rapidly as had his hide and meat.



# **HARVEST**

## ***n Buffalo Bones***

For at least a decade before 1883, animal bones, especially those of the bison, had been in great demand by fertilizer plants and sugar refiners, most of them based in the Midwest. Ground and treated, the bones were converted into fertilizer phosphate or rendered into boneblack for use as filters in sugar processing. The bison's horns and hoofs were converted into buttons, knife handles, and glue. As supplies of this valuable raw material diminished from older sources, including buffalo ranges to the south, agents of carbon and fertilizer interests turned to Montana. Representatives of the companies began spreading the word that their factories wanted bison bones. There was an immediate response from men who saw a quick fortune to be made in gathering the sun-bleached relics which lay free for the taking.

**T**HOSE WHO first sought to "harvest" the bleached relics found them in abundance almost anywhere on the plains of Eastern Montana, but the first profitable concentrated efforts came in the lower Yellowstone Valley. Although there is evidence that the shipment of bones from there began as early as 1883, the trade did not become fully developed until the following year. In 1884, personnel from several midwestern firms began visiting towns along the Yellowstone, contracting with dealers to buy all the buffalo skeletons they could supply. Agents for the Michigan Carbon Works of Detroit proved to be the most aggressive in the field, purchasing most of the bones the pickers had gleaned.

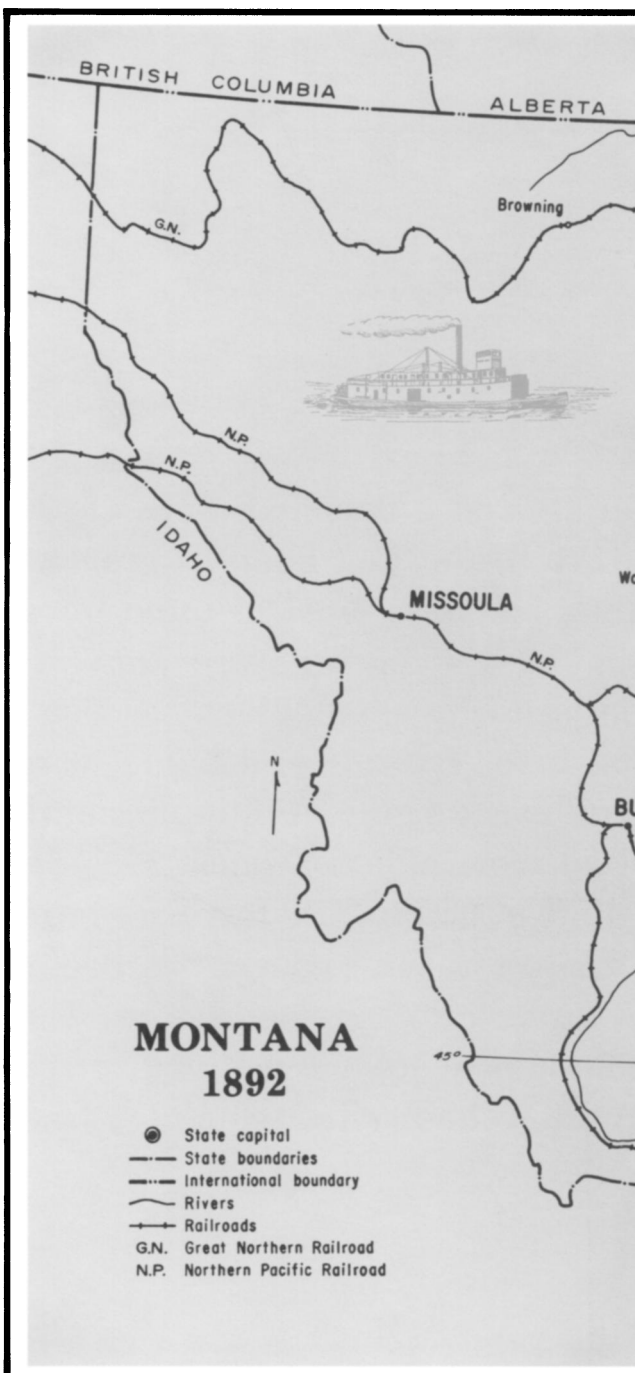
The going price for bones in 1884 was \$7.00 a ton at the Northern Pacific freight yards as far upstream as Miles City. But by 1885, they had significantly increased in value, with the Michigan firm offering \$12.00 a ton for skeletons hauled to their mill by rail. An additional \$6.00 a ton was paid for bones that were carried from the Yellowstone Valley by boat, the extra sum occasioned by the higher cost of preparing for water transport. Bones moving by steamer had to be first crushed and bagged.

Considering the additional labor required of those who shipped skeletons by water, it is surprising that the paddlewheel steamers got any of this grisly business at all. But many of the men who went north of the river in quest of bones were unable to get their wagons to the railroad where no freight restrictions applied. Thus, a large number of pickers were compelled to move their harvests at least part of the way by water, a fact which kept riverboats competing with the Northern Pacific. One group of prairie scavengers working near Miles City with eight wagons reportedly sent 200 tons of bones downstream in 1885. Similar loads were shipped from other landings along much of the lower valley, providing strange cargoes indeed.

By 1886 fragments of the bison found within forty miles of the Yellowstone had been gathered from the ground and hauled to market. William T. Hornaday, leading a hunt out of Miles City early in that year for the Smithsonian Institution, reported the earth devoid of buffalo bones as far north as the landmark known as Red Buttes, near the present-day settlement of Crow Rock. From that point on, Hornaday later reminisced, one could "see where the

millions had gone." The wreckage of the vanished herds lay thickly on the prairie beyond. There the carcasses still rested precisely as they had fallen only a few years before, their bones held together by the strength of dried-up ligaments.

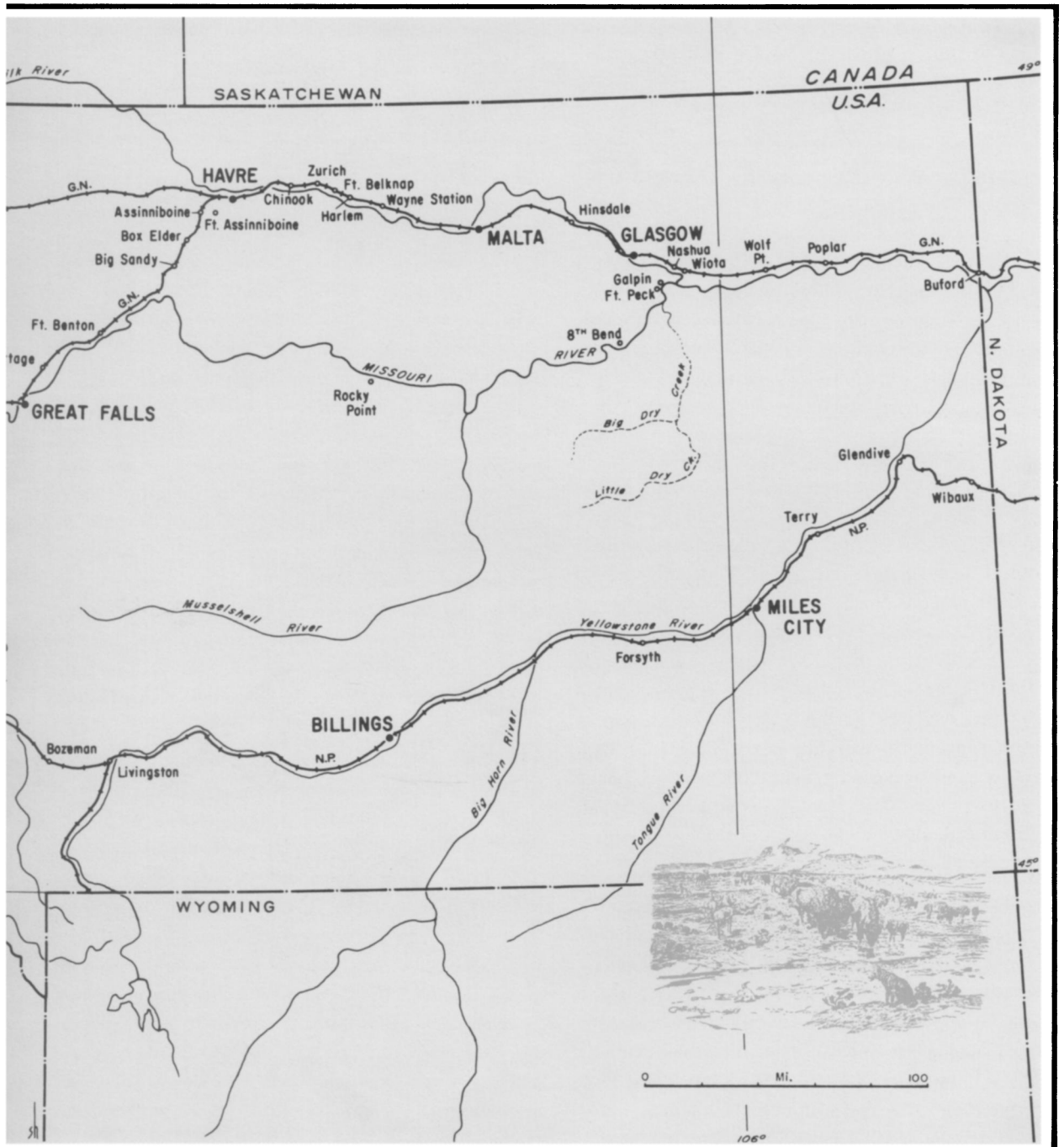
"Go wherever we might," said Hornaday, "on divides, into badlands, creek-bottoms, or on the highest plateaus, we always found the inevitable and omnipresent grim and ghastly skeleton, with the bones of the body bleached white as chalk."



Hornaday reported that it was often possible to see forty or fifty tons of remains at one time decorating the terrain, some places covered with up to "seventeen skeletons on a little more than an acre."

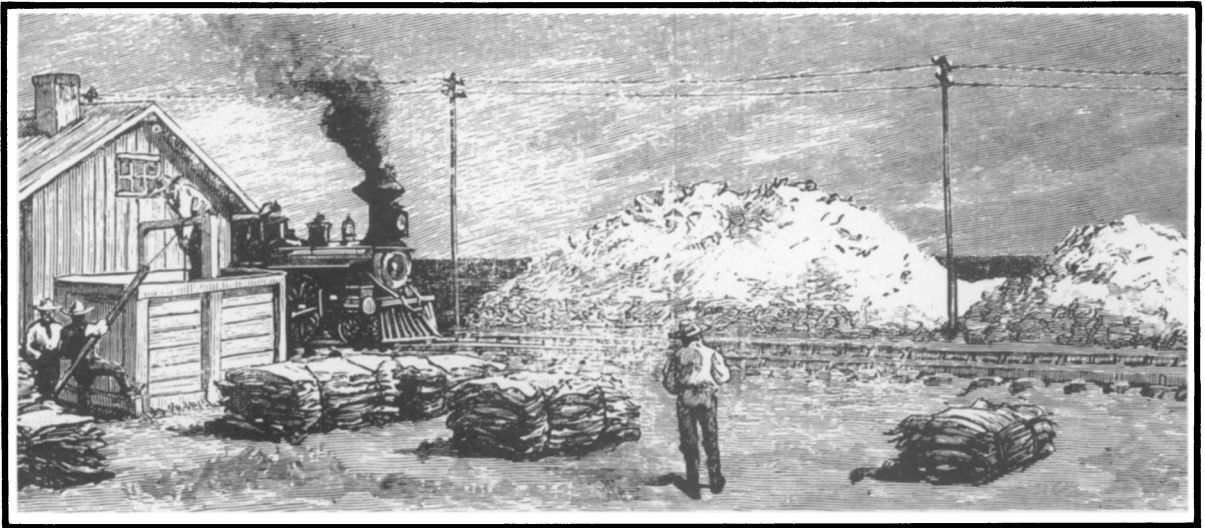
Such concentrations of bones continued to attract the prairie scavengers despite the need to travel forty miles to reach them. The *Mandan (D.T.) Pioneer* claimed that twenty tons a day were being collected above the Yellowstone for transport to St. Louis, and by the end of 1886, thousands of

tons of the bison's anatomy had been freighted from east-central Montana, making profitable cargoes for the railroads and steamers serving that part of the state. But the gathering activities left the "unharvested" bones ever farther from the river valley, leaving too great a distance between the skeletons and the shippers for economical picking. Thus 1886 was the last year on record in which buffalo bones were floated down the Yellowstone. All later trade in Montana shifted north to the Upper Missouri.



map prepared by Sherman Hollander, Michigan State University





This steel engraving, adapted from a drawing by P. Frenzeny, appeared in the October 29, 1887, issue of the *Illustrated London News*. While the locale is not definitely known, the fact that the Northern Pacific between Forsyth, M.T. and Dickinson, D.T. was the only line from which both bones and hides could be shipped at the same time (note the hide press at left) indicates that it was a scene witnessed by the artist in the lower Yellowstone Valley.

**A**BOUT THE SAME TIME buffalo bones acquired economic value in the Yellowstone Valley, his denuded framework also became a sought-after object of commerce along the Missouri. In 1884 a few people gathered bones near the winding course of the Missouri, but the biggest operator working along its capricious channel was Charles Aubrey, an agent for T. C. Power and Brother. The trading post at Wolf Point which Aubrey managed for the company became one of the major supply depots upstream from Bismarck. As soon as he discovered there was a market in the midwest for buffalo bones, this frontier merchant sought to profit from the skeletons which littered the surrounding countryside. Aubrey announced that he would pay \$4.00 a ton for bones banked between Rocky Point and Buford, a rate below that being offered on the Yellowstone where railroad competition had raised the price.

Although most potential pickers thought Aubrey's figure was too low, some men along the Missouri responded to his deflated offer. The Sioux-Assiniboiné Indians on the Fort Peck Reservation, for example, anxious to get additional supplies, gathered and sold 150 tons of buffalo bones to Aubrey within six weeks of his call. Other local Indians, under the direction of a headman hired by Aubrey, began picking in the Milk River Valley. Wood cutters along the Missouri with free time on their hands also hauled skeletons to such now-forgotten landings as Walker, Sanders, and 8th Bend.

The men who banked the buffalo ruins along the river could not immediately benefit from their labors because there was no accurate way of measuring the value of the bones they had collected. Not until each pile had been separately ferried to Bismarck, and its weight determined on the Northern Pacific scales, was Aubrey able to settle accounts with individual pickers. For this reason most of the ghastly stacks on the banks of the Missouri were brought directly to Aubrey's headquarters at Wolf Point. There the harvested relics could be weighed on the spot and after a deduction of ten per cent for dirt and moisture, the amount due was quickly computed. Each picker was given a written receipt indicating the worth of his load, and was required to take his payment in goods from the T. C. Power store.

Charles Aubrey did not find it easy, however, to arrange the movement of bison remains from Wolf Point and other points along the Missouri. From the outset in 1884, the Benton Transportation Company, the only shipping firm west of the Yellowstone, refused to carry bones as cargo unless they were bagged in one hundred-pound lots. To satisfy this requirement, Aubrey considered buying a portable steam crusher with which he could reduce the cumbersome bones into the size of coarse sand. Such a machine, however, proved to be too heavy and expensive, leaving the merchant with an ever-increasing mound of skeletons and no way to get them to market.

**A** BREAK IN THIS situation came when the Coulson Steamship Line, which served the Yellowstone Valley, offered to float bones down the Missouri in gross form, having decided that for \$10.00 a ton it could haul the bison remains in large wooden boxes with side handles to facilitate loading. Such a transportation rate was outrageous — and few shippers accepted the deal — but the custom of carrying bones in sacks or barrels was finally changed for the more practical bulk techniques. This new method of conveying freight forced the competition to respond in kind, and by August the Benton Transportation Company was accepting loose bones from Wolf Point at \$6.00 a ton.

After negotiations with Captain I. P. Baker, manager of the Benton line, Aubrey arranged to have the skeletons he purchased taken downstream at the reduced rate. From Bismarck, where the bones were loaded onto railroad cars for the carbon works at St. Louis, the freight charges came to \$7.50 a ton. Since transfer costs from boat to boxcar were seventy-five cents a ton, Aubrey was left with shipping expenses of \$14.25. Added to these freight costs was the \$4.00 a ton he paid for bones, leaving

him a profit of \$3.75 a ton from the factory buying price of \$22.00.

Although the income from the bone trade along the Missouri was small for those picking and selling, a number of people besides Charles Aubrey found the business attractive. In late July, 1884, some teams came up from Bismarck to look for bison remains on the Dry Forks south of Nashua. They gathered skeletons along these streams and placed them in large piles throughout the region, then later hauled them to the Missouri River for shipment to buyers in the East.

Other people also managed to make a living from the buffalo bone trade along the Missouri, but if Aubrey's problems are any guide, most of them earned every cent they received. For example, it was found at Fort Berthold in Dakota Territory that the Indians hauled in skeletons during the day and stole them back at night. To see that he did not pay twice for the same load of bones, Aubrey was forced to store all the bones he bought inside the trading post corral.

Although he was able to cut his losses to nocturnal Indian pickers, there were other claims to his bone stocks that were not as easily stemmed. Grass

Montana Historical Society photo



The general store of R. P. Lewis, located near the Great Northern tracks in Glasgow, in Northeastern Montana, was the stopping place for this wagon train of buffalo bones, no doubt a result of the late harvest along the Missouri. This store building, shipped by flatcar in pre-built sections from St. Paul in 1889, eventually became the Lewis-Wedum Company. It may be that part of this load of bones was sold in the store, for in July, 1889, a newspaper ad offered, besides dry goods, hats, boots and tobacco, ALL KINDS OF BUFFALO HORNS FOR SALE AT LOW RATES.

fires, a common occurrence on the prairie, could burn entire piles of skeletons if provisions were not made to protect them. To prevent such disasters during the period of high fire risk, Aubrey paid someone to watch his bone heaps at landings remote from Wolf Point.

If flames did not consume the bones, water often did. Bison remains ready for shipment on the Benton Company's vessels had to be stacked near the river's edge to facilitate loading. If there was some delay in the arrival of boats or if the steamers arrived fully loaded and had to leave the bones behind, high water sometimes claimed the bone piles. In one year alone Aubrey lost over fifteen tons of skeletons to the crumbling river banks.

**A**UBREY'S GREATEST problem, however, was getting the riverboat skippers to transport his piles of bones. Captain Baker, sitting in his far-off Bismarck office, was eager enough for the business, but the shiphands who had to load the cargo had other ideas. Transferring tons of bones from shore to deck was a strenuous, all-night proposition and one that was very unpopular with the Missouri River stevedores. To keep peace with their men, the officers of each vessel resisted carrying Aubrey's unusual freight until ordered to do so by Baker. As a consequence, the Wolf Point bone buyer was forced to wage a constant struggle to keep his investments moving downstream.

Because of the reluctance of the captains to carry the bones for Aubrey, he was left with a large inventory on hand when the shipping season closed in 1884. At least 100 tons of the sun-parched ruins had to be left in the corral at Wolf Point, and another twelve or fifteen tons remained at Galpin, Walker, and Denvall Point. Most of these skeletons had already been taken in exchange for goods at the trading post, so Aubrey was forced to carry them on his books until the following year. This situation was a risky and unprofitable way to conduct a business, but it was just another problem of the trade to those engaged in the buffalo bone commerce.

In the spring of 1885, when activity resumed on the river, Aubrey found that the cost of shipping skeletons had increased eight per cent over the preceding year, but the price for bones in St. Louis

had also risen \$2.00 a ton, more than making up for the additional expenses incurred in transportation. Anxious to get the bison remains stored at Wolf Point downstream while rates were favorable, Aubrey began banking the bones for loading on the Benton steamers. By mid-June all the skeletons had been hauled from the trading post corral to the landing, and the first boatload of over eighty-five tons had been ferried to the railhead at Bismarck.

While Aubrey was busy sending buffalo bones to factories in the Midwest, he was not very active in buying more skeletons from pickers along the Missouri. Although the going rate for bison bones in 1885 was \$4.50 per ton, an increase of fifty cents from the year before, few of the prairie gleaners were willing to work at the price. The easily accessible remnants of the buffalo had already been gathered in 1884, and only those that lay at a distance from the Missouri were left for the picking gangs. It simply did not pay the pickers to travel great distances when the value of their product was low. Thus most of them simply found other jobs and waited for the market to improve.

Still Aubrey was convinced that he would be able to buy more buffalo bones and in a letter to T. C. Power predicted he could get 200 to 250 tons by the fall of 1885. Approximately 175 tons of the skeletons he expected to purchase were to come from the Indians at Poplar Creek, but the tribe at that station chose to cut wood for the steamers rather than hunt bones for the Wolf Point agent. This situation meant that very few pickers brought in cargoes to the trading post, and Aubrey's plans for another big year in bison bones proved illusory.

Hopes for a "good bone season" were further tarnished by a return of shipping troubles. Aubrey's problems in getting the riverboats to accept his osseous freight were compounded in 1885 when even Captain Baker seemed to have difficulty persuading his men to load the skeletons. After the first cargo of bones was taken downstream in June, 1885, Aubrey was unable to get the rest of his stock moved from the banks of the Missouri. Only by complaining directly to T. C. Power was he able to get action on his transportation needs. Through the influence of his boss, the Wolf Point agent soon had steamers calling at the landing, and by November all the skeletons that had been held over from 1884 had been floated to Bismarck.



P

T. C. POWER & BRO.,  
General Merchandise, Indian Tanned Buffalo Robes,  
RAW DEER, ELK AND ANTELOPE SKINS, ETC.,

Poplar Creek, Ne. T. April 26<sup>th</sup> 1882  
Messrs D. C. Power & Bro  
Fort Benton M.T.

Dear Sirs. If you want me to ship robes on "Butte" please telegraph me, so that I can have them in the bank ready for her when she comes down - as it is a mile and a half from here to the landing, want robes in time - Have no tags - You had better send some already marked as they can be put on only used on robes - A few other skins as well. J. Power



In 1882, T. C. Power's trading post at Poplar Creek (Wolf Point) was busy shipping skins and robes rather than buffalo bones. In the letter at the left, sent to company headquarters in Fort Benton, a request is made for ready-marked tags for shipping robes, along with a plea that since the boat landing was a mile away, due notice be given by telegraph of the boat's arrival. In 1885, however, the post, managed by Charles Aubrey, was indeed in the buffalo bone business. The receipt below, sent from the Bismarck office of the Benton line, showed the Power firm had been credited with \$750.31 after water and rail charges had been deducted. Both documents are in the Power Papers, Montana Historical Society.

"Original"  
Statement of "Bones" shipped by Power & Bro. Half Pt on  
Str Benton Trip #2 - 1885.

To Proceeds of Six tons bones 154480 @ \$24.00 per Ton	\$185376
Less. Str Benton's freight on same.	\$51795
" Rail Road " " Bismark to St Louis.	\$58550
	\$110345
Amount placed to Credit of T. C. Power & Bro this day.	\$75031

Bismarck August 13<sup>th</sup> 1885

## AUTHOR'S BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Anyone wishing to gain an overview of the buffalo bone industry would be best served by consulting some of the many good books written about the bison. Those publications that have particularly outstanding chapters on the bone traffic are *The Authentic Story of the Buffalo*, by Major I. McCreight (1950); *The North American Buffalo*, by Frank Roe (U. of Toronto Press, 1970), and *The Great Buffalo Hunt*, by Wayne Gard (U. of Nebraska Press, 1968).

Information about the buffalo bone trade on the Yellowstone came from two works by Dr. William T. Hornaday, the zoologist affiliated with the Smithsonian, who was instrumental in the preservation of the buffalo. The contributions from this scientist that proved to be of greatest value were "The Extermination of the American Bison" in the *Smithsonian Report of 1887*, and "The Passing of the Buffalo," (*Cosmopolitan*, October, 1887). Other minor references to the bone commerce of southeastern Montana were found in various 1884 editions of *The Weekly Yellowstone Journal* and the *Glendive Times*.

Nearly all the facts concerning the Missouri River bone business were gleaned from a trio of sources, the most valuable of which was the *T. C. Power Papers*, a remarkable collection recently acquired by the Montana Historical Society. Second in importance was the letterbook of Charles Aubrey, the Wolf Point bone buyer, now in the possession of Mrs. Herbert Swett of Dickinson, N. D. The last significant contributor to the story of the Mis-

souri River bone trade was the records and documents of Captain I. P. Baker, now at the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck.

The Missouri River bone trade, during its final years of existence, is documented in the *Northwest Magazine* of August-September, 1900, which provided the information about Charles Sivyer's picking activities ahead of the Great Northern Railroad in Montana. An item in the *Glasgow Courier* of August 4, 1949, revealed how the last bone piles along the southern bank of "Big Muddy" were finally claimed and shipped to market. Mary Ann Williams' *Pioneer Days in Washburn, North Dakota and Vicinity* (1936) gives an indication of the quantity of bison remains annually brought downstream by the Missouri River steamboats.

Although only one person is recognized as having authored this description of the buffalo-bone trade, the account could never have been written without the help of other people. To Sherman Hollander, for instance, staff cartographer in the Geography Department at Michigan State University, is due an acknowledgment for the map of Montana he prepared to accompany this article. A note of appreciation also goes to Mrs. Harriett Meloy, Librarian of the Montana Historical Society, for granting access to the unprocessed *Power Papers* on two separate occasions. And recognition is especially deserved by Frank Vyzralek, archivist of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, who discovered nearly half of all the references consulted in preparing this study.

With the backlog of bison remains finally removed from the trading post corral, Aubrey was free to devote his attention to restoring the local bone trade. At last realizing that a price of \$4.50 per ton would bring him few bones, the trader let it be known that in the fall of 1885 he would pay \$6.00 for skeletons banked along the Missouri the following spring. Although it was late in the season, some of the pickers responded to this offer and began to stockpile buffalo bones between Buford and Rocky Point. These ricks of skeletons, which resembled white fairy castles, were ready to be turned in on account to Aubrey when the shipping season began in 1886.

**T**HOSE WHO HAD gathered the bison remains were unable to profit from their labors, however, for the trading post at Wolf Point suddenly closed in May, 1886, and no dealer was left to buy the bones. It is not known why the trading post was abandoned and why

Charles Aubrey had quit the buffalo bone business, but one of the reasons must certainly have been the matter of increasing costs.

The zealous trader had managed to cope with Indian tricks, the problems of fire and water, and reluctant steamboat men, but adverse economics were apparently now beyond his control. Freight tolls on the river increased again in 1886, while the price paid for skeletons by the processing firms declined from the previous year. Under these conditions Aubrey probably realized that there was no longer any money to be made in handling bones, so he left the trade for more promising pursuits.

The commerce in skeletons experienced a brief revival in 1887, when a new personality briefly took Aubrey's place as buyer near the Upper Missouri. Charles Sivyer, working with halfblood French-Canadian Metis bone pickers, collected bison remains along the path of the construction crews of the Great Northern in the lower Milk River Valley. Recognizing that the arrival of the railroad in Northern Montana would reduce the transport costs from the region,



The great frontier photographer Frank Jay Haynes made these two pictures on the same day, May 24, 1886, at Minnewaukan, D.T., along the tracks of the Northern Pacific. A year later, these half-blood French-Canadian "Metis" bone pickers were working with Charles Silyer in a brief revival of the bone trade in the lower Milk River Valley of North-eastern Montana.

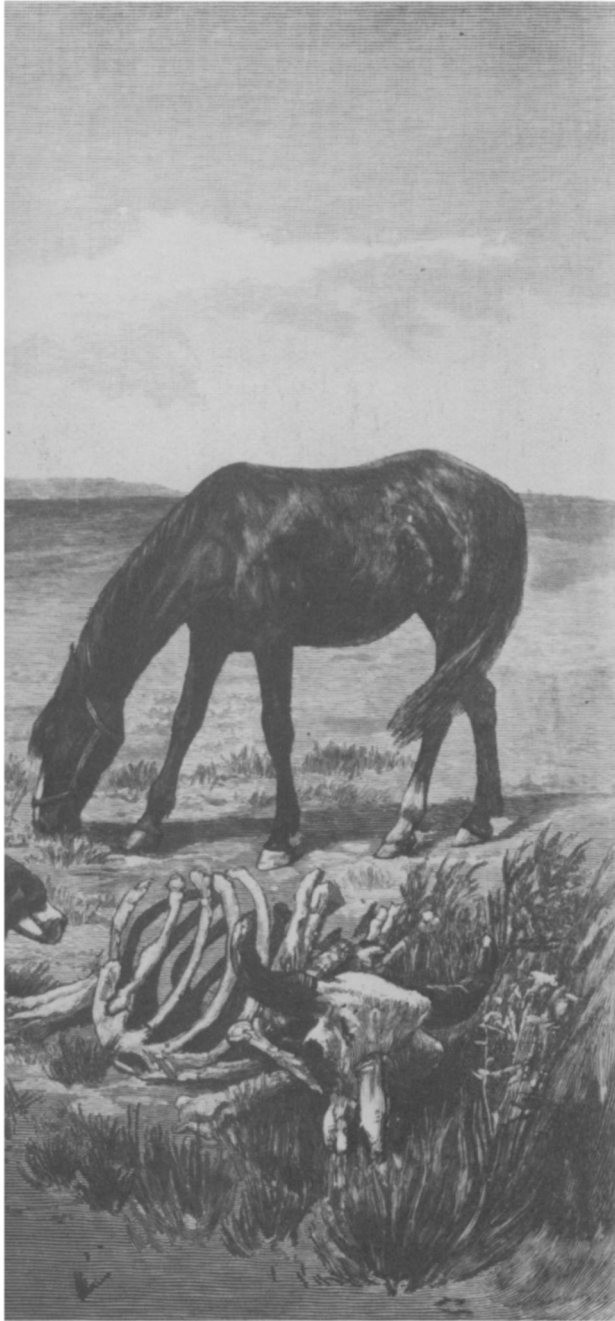


Sivyer and some Turtle Mountain Indians stacked bones by the right-of-way for shipment when the line was completed. By the time they had gathered several piles, however, the track layers had reached the territory, prompting other bone merchants to establish themselves at points along the route of the Great Northern. Realizing that competition would seriously reduce his profits, Sivyer sold his bone stocks for \$19.00 a ton and quit the trade.

The bone buyers that had come to the Milk River Valley took over in 1888 where Sivyer left off, and the scavengers of the plains brought them the buffalo's wreckage that had escaped the harvesters

of earlier years. Along the Missouri, particularly on the southern shore, many heaps of skeletons that had been gathered for Aubrey in the fall of 1885 were left untouched. These piles were not disturbed after the railroad came to the area because it was too costly to haul them to a siding or move them out by boat. These deserted mounds stood in place until 1889, when some enterprising trader mustered over thirty-two tons of bones from ricks left in the vicinity of Round Butte near Hinsdale and had the Benton Line float them to Bismarck.

The rest of the bone piles along the Missouri stood untouched until 1892, when six Glasgow resi-



**OLD BONE MAN OF THE PLAINS**, as R. F. Zogbaum depicted him in 1885, points up the lonely, brief business of gleaning buffalo bones from the plains of Montana. This engraving, published in the January 15, 1887, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, was apparently a scene the artist witnessed on the Missouri, as recorded in his diary on July 26, 1884.

dents built their own craft and plied the river collecting skeletons. These men gathered the abandoned heaps of bison remains from between the Milk and Musselshell Rivers, and then floated them to Wiota, where they were transferred to boxcars and shipped east. Later in the season, when the Milk became too shallow for navigation, the bones were unloaded near the Galpin telegraph station and hauled by team to Nashua for export. Throughout most of the summer months, the crew kept bringing in the buffalo bones, continuing their freighting activities until the bone ricks were gone forever.

Thus 1892 was the last year for buffalo bone traffic along the Upper Missouri. A few boxcar loads were sent out of the area in following years, but never again did boats cruise down the river laden with bison bones. The easily acquired clusters of skeletons had been gleaned by the picking gangs, and the volume of buffalo bones in commerce diminished as a result. By the 1890's supplies of skeletons could no longer keep pace with demand and the shortage forced many mills to find alternative raw materials. Most fertilizer industries turned to mineral phosphate for their soil-enriching ingredients, and sugar refiners developed an electrical process to replace the boneblack filter.

With the passing of the trade from the upper reaches of the Missouri, the buffalo bone business in the country as a whole became nearly as dead as its provider. During the brief heyday of the trade, the great shaggy animals which had nourished the American Indian for uncounted years became, in death, a resource worth over \$40,000,000. The contribution of Montana's riverboat landings to this staggering sum probably never exceeded 3,000 tons, but those who plied the trade and gathered the grisly harvest provide an interesting footnote to the presence of the American bison on the plains of Montana.

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LeROY BARNETT has been investigating the buffalo bone trade in Canada and the United States for over five years since he first learned of its existence in M. S. Garretson's *The American Bison*. During the course of his study he has traveled nearly 30,000 miles and invested both time and treasure. Contrary to the implication of the previous statement, Lee assures us he does not spend all his time tracking down information on the buffalo bone commerce. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in historical geography at Michigan State University in East Lansing, and is employed as an archival assistant by the Michigan Historical Commission. When not pursuing one of these interests, he enjoys his hobbies of reading and hiking.

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