



IN THE PRESENCE OF

Buffalo

Working to Stop the
Yellowstone Slaughter



DANIEL BRISTER

Nineteenth-century officials condoned the slaughter of millions of buffalo because they knew it would destroy the Indians' independence. Today's leaders are doing much the same. Because of their unique relationship with the buffalo, because they are legally considered sovereign nations, and because matters affecting the buffalo affect their communities, the Plains nations should have had representation on the team that drafted the management plan. The Yellowstone ecosystem is the last refuge for the last population of wild buffalo in America. Where else can the Plains tribes engage in their ancient spiritual and physical relationship with buffalo if not in and around Yellowstone?

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Cattle and Control: A History of Western Violence

The past is never dead. It is not even past.

—William Faulkner

VIDEOTAPE THE OPERATION FROM THE UPPER LIMBS OF A LODGEPOLE pine on the park side of the property owner's fence. Five buffalo—a bull, a cow, and three calves—are in the trap. The bull and the cow are locked in two pens, and the three calves share another. A DOL agent rides a bobcat tractor into the first pen and lunges at the bull, pushing him toward the long corridor on the far side of the pen. The bull runs from the machine through the open doorway and down the chute toward the back of the trap. A different agent reaches over the wall from his perch on a platform and prods the buffalo with a long stick as the tractor backs off. He pounds on the bull with the cattle prod, shouting "CHAO! CHAO!" as he jerks the animal through the trap. Each touch of the prod ignites an explosion of horn or hoof against steel.

The bull has nowhere to go. At the end of the narrowing chute, he is confined by his desire to be free. The harder he pushes, the tighter his body is wedged. A steel door slams closed behind him, cutting off all chance of retreat. Pressed by hard steel from all sides, he moves the only way he can—up—and slams his head against a metal grate. Other agents work the controls of a stockade-like clamp that closes around the buffalo's neck from each

side, and 2,000 pounds of pure wildness heave and thrust against the trap's jaws. The arm of one of the agents emerges from a small opening in the wall and plunges a needle into the buffalo's flesh. The bull is strong and determined, bucking and kicking until the tranquilizer hits his brain. After his final twitch, the agents smile and congratulate one another, triumphant in their mastery over the bull's wild strength.

I've witnessed scenes like these more times than I care to remember. The agents' mistreatment of the bison sparks in me the urge to run out and interfere or to hurl hurtful words across the space between us. But my work requires control. No matter how hot the flare of anger, how deep the sadness, or how infuriating the frustration, I try to hold my composure. If we act out of spite or insult, the agents will only make it harder on the buffalo and erode our efforts to gain public support for their protection. Knowing this intellectually is one thing. Holding my tongue as I watch gloating men malign buffalo is another.

Winters with the buffalo provide a lesson in extremes. Peaceful days of basking in Yellowstone's winter beauty suddenly dissolve into fierce and ugly violence. When my patience is all but spent, the only hope of refuge is to remember days when the DOL agents are not around. I conjure quiet mornings and picture myself as calm and unconcerned with revenge as the buffalo are, whose silhouettes in the sunrise resemble mountains against the sky. Quiet hours in their presence provide the balance to withstand disconcerting gun blasts, incessantly whining snowmobiles, and the all-pervading pounding of helicopter rotors. Without the calm days with buffalo, I would crack under the strain of watching the destruction of one of the last remnants of true wildness left in the world.

The ancestors of today's Yellowstone bison once ranged from the eastern seaboard to Oregon and from northern Mexico and Florida to Great Slave Lake in northern Canada. The heart of their habitat was the American Great Plains, a grassland ecosystem extending from the Rocky Mountains east to the hundredth meridian and running from northern Alberta in Canada to southern Texas. Although no one will ever know exactly how many bison once inhabited North America, recent scientific estimates put

the figure between twenty-five and thirty million animals. In terms of biomass, North America's bison comprised the largest concentration of animals known to exist. According to William Hornaday, a nineteenth-century naturalist with a deep interest in bison:

It would have been as easy to count or to estimate the number of leaves in a forest as to calculate the number of buffaloes living at any given time during the history of the species previous to 1870.

The nineteenth-century eradication of inestimable numbers of American buffalo is a story familiar to anyone who has taken a high-school history course. Most people, however, received an oversimplified version of events. History books often portray the near-extinction as the sole result of a US government policy to eradicate the buffalo and thereby defeat the Indian tribes who depended upon them for survival. While it may be true that the government pursued such a policy, the disappearance of tens of millions of buffalo from the Great Plains was the result of a convergence of many forces. Central among them was the growth of the Euro-American market economy and the emergence of the livestock industry in the West.

The bison's first brush with the market economy came in the form of the fur trade. A scarcity in beaver pelts, brought on by hundreds of years of market-driven trapping, shifted the burden of the fur trade to bison. By the end of the 1850s, millions of bison were being killed annually to satisfy the demand for their robes, and their numbers began to fall. According to F. F. Gerard, a Cree interpreter and trader who was employed with the American Fur Company in the mid-nineteenth century, nearly a million and a half buffalo were killed for their robes in the upper Missouri region in 1857 alone.

Romantic tales of buffalo hunts in the West increased the popularity of recreational hunts. Easterners and Europeans pined for robes of their own—as much for their romantic value as for their superior warmth. Grown to keep bison alive through some of North America's most severe winters, buffalo robes provided unparalleled warmth. They were the material of choice

for covers on sleighs, wagons, and coaches and were used as blankets and tailored into winter coats.

The railroads connected the West with East Coast markets and played a watershed role in the bison's brush with extinction. Buffalo steaks provided a cheap and abundant food source for railroad workers. Companies hired hunters to shoot buffalo as food for their track-laying crews, instantly creating a new incentive to kill bison. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody earned his name and fame as a contractor with the Kansas Pacific Railroad as a buffalo hunter. He excelled in this line of work and bragged of killing 4,280 buffalo in an eighteen-month period.

While demand for buffalo robes and meat undoubtedly took a heavy toll on the bison, demand for their hides pushed them to the brink of extinction. The 1871 development of a means to convert raw hides into leather sealed the buffalos' fate. This industrial process revolutionized the buffalo hunter's work, removing the temporal limitations of hand tanning and making it possible to sell as many hides as the hunter could shoot and skin. Hides could be stored and shipped raw as soon as they dried in the sun. Millions of buffalo were gunned down for the skin on their backs, their carcasses discarded and left to rot where they'd fallen.

East Coast mills rendered hides into armor, book bindings, and shock-absorbing springs for carts and wagons. Bison hides, unparalleled in strength and elasticity, were the material of choice for the drive belts on the presses and machines powering the Industrial Revolution. Responding to the new demand, "buffalo runners"—as the hide hunters romantically called themselves—flocked to the plains.

Suddenly bound to the global economy, the buffalo were doomed. Where steamships had previously enabled tanned robes to be shipped, railroads made it possible to send vast quantities of untanned hides to the East Coast. Trains brought thousands of hunters to the plains and hauled millions of hides away.

Railroad advertising campaigns increased demand for robes in eastern markets and planted daydreams of adventure in the minds of well-to-do adventure seekers and sportsmen from the East and from Europe. It became

fashionable and patriotic for train passengers to blast buffalo from the roofs and windows of moving cars. One firsthand account describes a church-sponsored hunting expedition in which passengers assembled into a cornet band to play "Yankee Doodle" over the corpse of a bull buffalo they'd just gunned down.

The railroads cut an industrial swath across the buffalos' central range, physically dividing the plains. Increased hunting and human activity along the train corridors split the herd into northern and southern sub-herds. Both were quickly diminished and all but extinguished. By 1880, the entire southern herd and all but a vestige of the northern herd were gone. The bison's demise ended the migratory ways of the horse-mounted Indian tribes and cleared the way for the rapid rise of livestock as a powerful industry in the West.

The presence of the livestock industry has had a profound impact on the buffalo and the plains ever since. One contemporary scholar describes the industry's initial impact on the buffalo:

There were probably no more than 3 or 4 million cattle in the West, mostly in Texas, in 1865 when the war ended. Two decades later, the figure was 26 million, along with nearly 20 million sheep. The diminished range resource, coupled with excessive hunting, drove out the buffalo, the main competitor for forage.

The railroads made it possible to raise cattle in the rural West and sell them in eastern markets. Before railroads arrived in the West, Texas had produced more livestock than any western state. Ranchers had built a local economy around the longhorn—a lithe breed of Spanish cattle gone semi-wild in the Southwest. Early Texas missions maintained longhorn herds, and cattle escapees populated the Texas grasslands. Some were rounded up and domesticated and others were hunted for meat, but prior to the Civil War, there was very little demand for Texas cattle outside the state.

The post-Civil War economic boom created a new cattle economy in the West and stimulated the demand for beef. The growing middle and

upper classes had a nearly insatiable appetite for beef, and the postwar economic boom gave them the purchasing power to appease it. With railroads reaching farther and farther west, ranchers began shipping livestock to eastern markets.

Millions of cattle, sometimes in herds exceeding 10,000, were driven north from Texas to the railroad depots. Between 1866 and 1884, more than five million cattle were driven north from Texas. Feedlots sprang up around the railroad stations as more and more ranchers discovered that their herds could be sustained on the northern range. In the coming years, thousands of cattle were put to pasture on the public domain, devouring prime bison habitat. An article in an 1867 Kansas newspaper described the scene:

The entire country, east, west, and south of Salina down to the Arkansas River and Wichita, is now filled with Texas cattle. There are not only cattle on a thousand hills but a thousand cattle on one hill and every hill. The bottoms are overflowing with them and the water courses with this great article of traffic. Perhaps not less than 200,000 of them are in the state, 60,000 of which are within a day's ride of Salina, and the cry is, "Still they come."

It is no coincidence that the 1870s, the bloodiest decade for the buffalo, saw an exponential rise in the number of cattle on the plains. Even without the slaughter, bison populations would have been hard-hit by the increasing numbers of cattle. The newly introduced ungulates infected bison with European diseases to which they had no previous exposure or immunity and degraded the grasslands on which they fed. Between 1874 and 1880, cattle numbers in Wyoming jumped from 90,000 to more than 500,000. By 1883, eastern Montana was also home to more than half a million cattle, which soon replaced buffalo as the dominant plains grazer. In the words of Richard Dodge, a firsthand observer: "For every single buffalo that roamed the plains in 1871, there are in 1881 not less than two, and more probably four or five, of the descendants of the long-horned cattle of Texas. The destroyers of the buffalo are followed by the preservers of the cattle."

During the 1870s, more buffalo were shot than in any other decade in history. The three years from 1872 through 1874 were the worst. According to one buffalo runner, who based his estimate on firsthand accounts and shipping records, at least four and a half million buffalo were slaughtered in the three years between 1872 and 1874. By the end of the 1870s, the buffalo were nearly gone. A chapter in history, tens of thousands of years in the unfolding, came to a sudden end.

Eradicating the buffalo helped to conquer the Indians and generated demand for beef in the process. Tribes that had been self-sufficient for millennia were suddenly forced to subsist on government rations. Ironically, these handouts consisted largely of beef. In 1880, the US government brought 39,160,729 pounds of beef from western ranches "to be delivered on the hoof at 34 Indian Agencies in ten western states." To the early western livestock industry, these government contracts were a major boon.

Granville Stuart, a pioneering Montana rancher who profited from the bison's demise, described the wasteful bloodshed in 1880:

The bottoms are literally sprinkled with the carcasses of dead buffalo. In many places, they lie thick on the ground, fat and meat not yet spoiled, all murdered for their hides which are piled like cordwood all along the way. . . . Probably ten thousand buffalo have been killed in this vicinity this winter (1879-1880).

General Nelson Miles predicted the rise of the livestock industry in 1876: "When we get rid of the Indians and buffalo, the cattle will fill this country." Francis Parkman saw it coming even earlier. In his preface to the 1872 edition of *The Oregon Trail*, he wrote:

A time would come when those plains would be a grazing country, the buffalo give place to tame cattle, farmhouses be scattered along the watercourses, and wolves, bears, and Indians be numbered among the things that were.

Parkman was right. Cattle soon filled the buffalos' niche on the plains. A remnant bison herd avoided the fate of its kin by holing up in the Pelican Valley, in the Yellowstone interior. The descendants of this herd continue to travel between the Pelican Valley and other areas within and around Yellowstone. They are the bison with which I spend my winters—the ones I watch being shot and trapped each winter.

From my perch in the tree on the park boundary, I videotape as DOL agents push and prod five of these buffalo through the trap. They now have the female in the squeeze chute. Like the bull before her, she pushes and pulls against the clamped steel jaws. The panels of the trap rattle in their hinges, splintering the still morning air. After one very loud crash, the agent controlling the squeeze chute smiles and shouts, "She's a live one, ain't she?"

I hear a voice cry out, "Not for long, thanks to you!" and realize it is mine. The agents working the trap don't look up. Two Montana highway patrolmen walk out from behind the facility, scanning the trees through binoculars.

They come over and stand at the base of my tree. One of them says to the other, "Say, Jim, have you seen those tree huggers lately?"

Jim answers, "No, but I smell 'em."

"Hey, tree huggers," the first patrolman calls. "Why don't you come down and start looking for a job?" They both chuckle.

Such conversations are doomed from the start, and this one is no different. I shout down, "I'd rather hug a tree than you," then realize how petty it sounds.

Jim laughs and says, "That's not what your mother says."

I almost tell him, my mother's dead, you asshole, but bite my tongue instead, wishing I had kept my mouth shut from the start.

The sound of steel on steel sends chills through my bones as the trap groans in protest of its task. The buffalo is quaking now, out of place and

distressed in the steel maze. Watching her tremble in the cage, I try to imagine how the squeeze chute must feel to a creature honed over centuries for life on the fenceless plains.

I stare down on the scene through the camera lens and pan to the police car on the far side of the trap. Painted on its door are the Montana Highway Patrol insignia and the numbers "3-7-77." The same cryptic insignia is emblazoned on the shoulder patches of the heckling officers. The numbers are a reference to Montana's early vigilantes, who etched the symbol as a warning onto the front doors of those whom they did not like. Vigilantism was prevalent among Montana's early mining camps and later among ranchers. Granville Stuart, an early and influential rancher, was known to have organized vigilance committees.

To this day, no one knows the meaning behind the mysterious numbers 3-7-77. Some think that they signify the dimensions of a grave: three feet wide, seven feet long, and seventy-seven inches deep. Others say that the numbers represent a period of time—three hours, seven minutes, and seventy-seven seconds—that the vigilantes gave potential victims to flee before killing them. Others, failing to account for the final pair of sevens, insist that they were a reference to the three-dollar fare on the 7 A.M. train from Helena to Butte. Whatever their meaning, the message was clear: Leave town or we'll take your life.

Watching the officers on the ground, I wonder if they ever consider the significance of the numbers on their shoulder patches and police-car doors. I look down at the policemen standing beside the cattle detectives and consider the long relationship between Montana cattlemen and the law.

The buffalo caged below is only the latest example in a cycle of violence originating with the western livestock industry. DOL employees assigned to the buffalo slaughter were given the power to arrest in 1998. Many of my friends and fellow workers have been arrested or detained by DOL agents. The agency responsible for protecting and promoting Montana's livestock industry is now entrusted to incarcerate citizens for alleged violation of laws having nothing to do with livestock.

Enforcement of general laws is a role long coveted by livestock producers. Granville Stuart, first president of the Board of Stock Commissioners (a precursor to the DOL), wrote of the importance of giving stock inspectors the power to make arrests for crimes unrelated to livestock in 1887:

The Stock Detectives have rendered material aid in the enforcement of the law and the capture and conviction of offenders, not only against the stock interests of Montana, but in the general enforcement of its criminal laws.

The wealthy ranchers who hired the stock detectives did not take kindly to small-scale homesteaders, who threatened their exclusive control of the land and their way of life. Under the General Homestead Act of 1862—designed to encourage settlement of the West by small, family farmers—settlers could earn title to 160 acres if they could prove, over time, their ability to earn a living from it. These struggling homesteaders quickly found themselves victims of an undeclared war.

Cattle producers were vehemently opposed to homesteading, which broke their stranglehold on vast expanses of public land, excluded cattle from some of the most fertile and well-watered areas, and spelled an end to their monopoly of the West. To protect themselves against the homesteaders, the ranchers made fraudulent claims under the Homestead Act and illegally secured the surrounding lands. Recruiting strangers and hiring ranch hands to make claims was a preferred method of maintaining control over their public-land empires. When this became impracticable, the ranchers resorted to more nefarious tactics.

The industry has a long history of lethally eradicating human and animal competitors in its crusade for control of the public domain. Cattle barons, accustomed to controlling vast expanses of public land, were threatened by the wave of homesteaders settling the West in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Understanding that the new homesteads would break their hegemonic hold on the landscape, the ranchers used their power to intimidate the competition. Many settlers were accused of rustling the ranchers'

stock. Many were killed without ever being formally charged, tried, convicted, or sentenced.

The tensions between homesteaders and ranchers were exacerbated in the wake of the winter of 1886–87, when thousands of range cattle across the plains starved to death during a winter of extreme cold and heavy snows. The "Big Die Up," as the winter has come to be called, put many of the early cattle barons out of business. The few who survived the ordeal with the will to continue ranching resolved to defend their industry against any threats over which they could exert any level of control. The growing waves of settlers became targets of the cattle barons and livestock associations.

Homesteaders were shot, hanged, burned to death, or—if they were lucky—banished. In northern Wyoming, a succession of such murders took place between 1889 and 1892. In July 1889, a couple was lynched after filing for a homestead on land controlled by a wealthy rancher. Two years later, three other settlers who had been openly critical of ranchers' tactics were murdered in a campaign organized by stock growers.

The violence culminated in the Johnson County Invasion of April 1892, when the leaders of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association hired a militia to invade northern Wyoming and assassinate dozens of people on a list compiled by wealthy ranchers. The association sought to make an example of the settlers and reverse the influx of settlers moving into northern Wyoming.

The Stock Growers Association was the most powerful political organization in Wyoming at the time, with influence on Wyoming's governor and attorney general, a judge, both US senators, and the president of the United States. Gunmen were hired on a five-dollar per diem, given guns from the state arsenal, and offered fifty dollars for each confirmed kill. More than \$100,000 was spent on the invasion. The invaders carried a list with the names of seventy settlers and officials whom the association wanted dead. Among the names were Buffalo's sheriff and mayor, the county commissioners, businessmen, a newspaper editor, and assorted settlers.

The invading army was comprised of fifty-two men, including nine members of the Executive Committee of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association, deputy US marshals, wealthy ranchers and managers, and

twenty-two Texas mercenaries. Rumors of the invasion, which had been circulating northern Wyoming for months, were confirmed on April 5 when an unusual six-car train was seen heading north from Cheyenne. The special train—including a Pullman car with blinds drawn, three cars full of horses, a flatcar carrying three Studebaker wagons, and a car for baggage, munitions, and equipment—was an unusual sight in the Cheyenne yards.

The invaders' first stop was the cabin of two supposed rustlers, whom they surrounded in the night. One of the men was shot when he came out for water in the morning. The other, a skilled marksman named Nate Champion, held off the attackers for the better part of the day and even found time to write in his journal as he did so. Here are his final words, written moments before he bolted through a window to his death:

Well, they have just got through shelling the house like hail. I heard them splitting wood. I guess they are going to fire the house to-night. I think I will make a break when night comes, if alive. Shooting again. I think they will fire the house this time. It's not night yet. The house is all fire. Good-bye, boys, if I never see you again.

Having accomplished the first two deaths on a list of seventy, the Stock Growers' army made way for Buffalo, where they planned to blow up the courthouse and shoot settlers as they tried to flee. Fortunately, word of the attack had already reached the city, and 200 angry citizens had quickly organized to defend themselves. The invaders, learning of this resistance, retreated and holed up in a fortified ranch. The angry townspeople surrounded them and held them captive for two days until the US Cavalry arrived and the invaders surrendered. Although they were detained for a short time, the political influence of the Stock Growers Association ensured that none of the invaders was sentenced to jail.

Montana's ranching pioneers employed similar tactics. Granville Stuart organized a vigilance committee known as Stuart's Stranglers to lynch a gang of suspected horse thieves. Stuart's vigilantes set fire to a cabin full of sleeping suspects early one July morning in 1884. Five people burned to

death in the blaze. The four who managed to escape were later hunted down by the aptly named Stranglers and were promptly lynched. Before the killing spree was over, at least nineteen accused rustlers and the men who were unfortunate enough to be in their presence were killed. According to a contemporary of Stuart, such killing of innocent bystanders was common at the time: "You run with horse thieves, them days, you hung with them."

Such attacks were not isolated instances of individual cowboys seeking revenge on people who had spited them. They were organized attempts on the part of the prominent stock growers to maintain power and control. While all ranchers didn't participate in or even support such tactics, they were embraced by the livestock associations and overwhelmingly supported by the most powerful ranchers. One rancher, who lived in the area where the arson took place, said it was not carried out "by bands of lawless cowboys but was the result of a general understanding among all the large cattle ranges of Montana." Granville Stuart was named president of the newly formed Montana Stock Growers Association that same year.

Homesteaders and "rustlers" were not the only victims. Fifty-three thousand sheep and dozens of sheepmen were slaughtered by western cattle ranchers between 1880 and 1920 in a series of bloody conflicts known as the Cattle/Sheep Wars. Cattlemen, unwilling to share the public-range resource with sheepmen, resorted to violence to preserve the status quo. Sheepmen refusing the ranchers' warnings faced death threats and the prospect of having their flocks slaughtered. Sheepmen and shepherds were sometimes kidnapped, beat up, or killed while their flocks were shot, clubbed to death, or stampeded over cliffs. This technique of "rim rocking," as the ranchers called it, was adapted from the buffalo jumps of the Plains Indians.

The Bear Creek Raid of December 27, 1900, provides a good example of a rancher's typical response to the increasing number of sheep on the public domain. Northern Wyoming cattle rancher John Kendrick, who illegally laid claim to the valleys east of the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming and Montana, was infuriated when Robert Selway, a sheepman, brought his flocks onto the public lands of southeastern Montana. Kendrick and his neighbor, George Brewster, organized a posse of local cowboys to carry out

the dirty work. Riding to the sheep camp before dawn, the eleven men in the cattlemen's posse held the lone shepherd at gunpoint and proceeded to club the defenseless sheep to death. Before sunset, the cowboys had slaughtered the entire herd of 3,000 animals without firing a single shot.

The sheriff, himself a cattle rancher, found the bloody clubs but refused to investigate or prosecute anyone in the case. Instead, he mockingly assured Selway that he would arrest the first person that came in to claim one of the clubs. Although they were never charged, Kendrick and Brewster enjoyed a bit of local notoriety for their parts in the raid. Brewster used the resulting popularity to gain election to the Montana House of Representatives in 1905, 1907, and 1909 and to the presidency of the Montana Stock Growers Association in 1911. Kendrick would go on to serve as president of the National Livestock Association, governor of Wyoming, and US senator.

This violent chain of events didn't die with the persecuted homesteaders or the slaughtered sheep. The livestock industry's use of intimidation and slaughter to eliminate predators and competitors has continued to the present day. The nineteenth-century cattle-baron-sponsored killing of homesteaders and sheep has its modern counterpart in the killing of coyotes, wolves, lions, bears, wild horses, prairie dogs, and bison. Understanding this uninterrupted history of violence is essential to understanding the present buffalo slaughter—the latest manifestation of the livestock industry's campaign to destroy perceived threats to its hold on the West.

Since the early days of the western territories, the industry has used its political clout to force the killing of predators. Western counties, largely controlled by stockmen, offered bounties on wild species that the ranchers wanted killed. Wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions were early targets. Montana paid bounties on 81,000 wolves between 1883 and 1918. In 1915, Congress appropriated \$125,000 to the Department of Agriculture's Biological Survey for predator control. The agency used the money to hire 300 men to kill predators on public and private lands. From the ranchers' point of view, the program, which resulted in the near eradication of wolves from the western landscape, has been a success. For the rest of the American public and for the wild species themselves, the program is a travesty. The

establishment of a government-sponsored predator-control program set a precedent that, as one observer put it, "opened the door to using public funds to kill publicly owned animals on public lands for the economic gain of private stockmen."

Once opened, the door would never close. The Animal Damage Control Act of 1931 created the division of Animal Damage Control (ADC) and expanded the list of animals targeted for control. Bobcats, lions, prairie dogs, and other species "injurious to agriculture and animal husbandry" joined coyotes and wolves as prime targets of government-funded killers. The expanded list, no longer limited to predators, was the result of pressure from the ranching lobby.

In 1940, the "coyote getter," a contraption designed to eject a deadly cloud of sodium cyanide into the mouth of the hungry animal attracted to the trap's scented wick, came into popular use. By the end of the decade, an arsenal of dangerous chemicals had been deployed to indiscriminately poison wildlife across the West. Chief among them was compound 1080 (sodium monofluoroacetate), a poison that causes failure in the immune and cardiovascular systems of mammals and birds. These and other chemicals were mixed with meat, tallow, feed pellets, and grain and scattered across the landscape. Between 1961 and 1970, more than seven million pieces of poisoned meat and tallow and nearly a million and a half pounds of poisoned grain were dropped from airplanes, trucks, and horses by ADC agents and cooperating agencies.

Due to the indiscriminate nature of poison bait and traps—and the vast expanses across which they were spread—approximate numbers of targeted and non-targeted species killed are impossible to ascertain. But numbers of confirmed kills in the seventeen western states give an idea of the slaughter's magnitude. According to its own figures, the ADC killed more than 809,000 animals in 1990, including 91,158 coyotes; 8,144 skunks; 9,363 beavers; 7,065 foxes; 5,933 raccoons; 1,083 porcupines; and 3,463 opossums.

One firsthand account, from a former ADC agent, paints a vivid picture of the magnitude of the slaughter on a local scale and of the attitudes of the ranchers behind it:

I killed so many coyotes I got ashamed of myself. I think I got 700 and some coyotes in three months. Of course next spring, I didn't notice any difference in the amount of telephone calls I got. It was the same old whine, "The coyotes are putting us out of business, the coyotes are eating us up."

Ranchers were seeing just as many coyotes because there were just as many; the killing was compensated by an increase in birthrates. Coyote packs are biologically wired to produce more offspring in the wake of traumatic events resulting in attrition.

The western livestock industry's long history of violence against competition is rooted in the fact that European cattle, demanding large quantities of water and food throughout the year, are not suited to survival in the arid western United States. Without taxpayer-funded subsidies like predator control, drought and fire relief, fencing, and below-cost grazing allotments, public-lands ranching would be, at best, a money-losing pursuit. The industry-organized killing of homesteaders, sheep, wolves, and bison are all industry attempts to create ideal conditions for cattle in an environment to which they do not belong. George Wuerthner, a prominent critic of public-lands livestock grazing, explains the ranchers' predicament:

By growing domestic animals that demand large quantities of water and forage in a place that is dry, and by favoring slow-moving, heavy, and relatively defenseless livestock in terrain that is rugged, vast, and inhabited by native predators, ranchers have actually put themselves in a position of constant warfare with the land.

This state of perpetual warfare is reflected prominently in the cowboy ethos. Some twenty-first-century cowboys are proud of their industry's violent heritage. Bob Peebles, former manager of the Boone and Crockett Club Ranch on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, told a group of visiting graduate students in 2000, "We're a product of the raping era and we can thank our lucky stars we are." Other ranchers share Peebles's enthusiasm for their

profession's violent past. In the summer of 2001, Nevada ranchers held a rally to protest the confiscation of cattle that they were grazing illegally on the public range. A prominent placard displayed at the protest made reference to the nineteenth-century lynchings of accused cattle thieves. "Rustling is still a capital offense," it read.

Still others put pages from the past to practice, using death threats and intimidation to maintain the status quo. In 1990, Don Oman, district ranger for Idaho's Sawtooth National Forest, sought to reverse ecological damage from years of overgrazing and announced a 10 percent reduction in the number of permitted cattle. Furious ranchers, acting through the Stock Growers Association, lobbied Congress and US Forest Service administrators to have Oman transferred from the district. When this failed, a millionaire rancher named Winslow Whitely reverted to death threats: "Either Oman is gone or he's going to have an accident," he said. "Myself and every other one of the permit holders would cut his throat if we could get him alone." When asked if he was making a threat on Oman's life, Whitely responded, "Yes, it's intentional. If they don't move him out of this district, we will."

The death threats against Whitely testify to the violent tendencies of an industry rigid in its resistance to change. Cattle producers, seeking to maximize profits, have been slow to read the ecological signs of overgrazing. Oman's attempt to reduce the number of cattle on grazing allotments within the Sawtooth came only after he documented firsthand the effects of too many cows: "deepening gullies, soil erosion, [and] dried-up creeks." The ranchers' push to have Oman removed—and even the death threats he received—are typical. The political clout of the range-cattle industry is strong enough to stifle reform. The resulting overgrazing continues to denude vast expanses of the western landscape, fosters the spread of exotic species, reduces biodiversity, arrests natural succession, and diminishes the biomass and density of native plants and animals.

In Montana and other western states, the cowboy myth is stronger than the reality. Old West images of cowboys herding stock across Montana's open range obscure the fact that public-lands ranching in Montana contributes less

than one-quarter of 1 percent of total US beef production. Private lands in Maryland produce as much beef as Montana's BLM and US Forest Service lands combined. It takes seventy-three times the land base to raise a cow in Montana as it does in Iowa. And Montana is not an anomaly; smaller eastern states, where rainfall is more abundant, support more livestock than their famous western counterparts. A cow can live for a year on two acres in the East; the same cow would require a hundred in the West. Florida, not exactly famous for its cattle industry, produces more beef cattle than the cowboy state of Wyoming. Louisiana produces twice as many cattle as Nevada. Ranchers, struggling to make ends meet in the arid West, have long fallen to the temptation of stocking the public range with more cattle than it can sustain.

Millions of acres of publicly owned land have been overgrazed to the point where they can no longer support native flora or fauna. According to a 1991 report issued by the GAO, continued public-lands grazing "risks long-term environmental damage while not generating revenues sufficient to provide for adequate management." The report concludes with a reference to a common argument used by ranchers in defense of their profession: "according to the [ranch] operators, [an] important benefit they do receive is the ability to maintain a traditional ranching lifestyle they enjoy." Enjoyable as it may be for its practitioners, the lifestyle is not self-sufficient. Taxpayers, rather than the ranchers themselves, bear the burden of supporting the ranching way of life.

Subsidized grazing permits give ranchers control of hundreds of millions of acres of federal land for the artificially low fee of \$1.35 per AUM, the amount of forage needed to sustain one cow and her calf, one horse, or five sheep or goats for a month. In the West, this amounts to a little more than 10 percent of the \$11.10 average charged on private lands. Nearly 80 percent of the land under BLM and US Forest Service management is grazed. Half of our designated wilderness areas are stocked with cattle. Overall, some 307 million acres of public land in the sixteen western states are leased to ranchers at a fraction of their market value. According to a recent study conducted by Robert Nelson, professor of environmental policy at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs, the BLM's grazing program cost

\$200 million to administer in 1993. During the same year, the program generated just \$20 million in revenues. In other words, taxpayers pay ten times as much to support the grazing program through taxes as ranchers do through grazing fees.

Despite the assistance they receive in the form of subsidies, predator control, and other programs, ranchers have an uneasy relationship with the federal government. In *Centennial*, his historical novel on cattle ranching in the American West, James Michener describes the irony of the cattleman's attitude toward the federal government:

All he wanted from Washington was free use of public lands, high tariff on any meat coming from Australia and Argentina, the building and maintenance of public roads, the control of predators, the provision of free education, a good mail service with free delivery to the ranch gate, and a strong sheriff's department to arrest anyone who might think of intruding on the land. "I want no interference from the government," the rancher proclaimed, and he meant it.

The financial and ecological burdens of the Yellowstone buffalo slaughter, like public-lands grazing in general, rest on the backs of all taxpayers while relatively few livestock producers reap the benefits. The Horse Butte grazing allotment, near West Yellowstone, Montana, which was vacated in 2002, is a case in point. The Horse Butte allotment supported just 142 cow-calf pairs and brought the treasury less than \$800 a year. Yet the bison management plan, developed at the urging of Montana's livestock industry, is costing taxpayers more than three million dollars a year, most of which is funded by the federal government. This doesn't account for the tremendous ecological costs of the DOL's bison haze, capture, and slaughter operations.

Since 1998, the Horse Butte Peninsula has been the epicenter of the DOL's war on Yellowstone bison. The peninsula, located just a few miles from the western edge of Yellowstone National Park, provides crucial habitat to most of the park's native species. Bison, wolves, grizzly and black bears, deer, elk, moose, golden and bald eagles, white pelicans, trumpeter

swans, sandhill cranes, and great blue herons are some of the more charismatic species who make their home in the area.

DOL operations, whether they involve hazing, capturing, or shooting bison, take a heavy toll on all species. From late fall to early spring, agents patrol this sensitive habitat in search of any bison outside the park. Shooting cracker rounds (explosive charges fired from shotguns), agents tirelessly pursue, capture, and slaughter bison. Between the deafening bursts of these explosive charges and the nerve-quaking noise of their machines, the agents disturb virtually every species in the ecosystem.

Because there are three known bald-eagle nests on Horse Butte, much of the area is officially closed to human activity, as legislated under the Endangered Species Act. Livestock agents consistently ignore the closure, flying the helicopters over the restricted zones and entering on the ground. Although Buffalo Field Campaign has presented the US Forest Service with evidence of the eagle-closure violations, including video footage and signed affidavits, the agency has never issued more than a verbal warning to the DOL. As a result, citizens were forced to file a costly lawsuit in federal court.

Ranchers have been some of the most vocal foes of the Endangered Species Act since its passage in 1973. They commonly argue that the act constitutes a "taking" of property, since it can restrict the activities in which a landowner may engage. While the industry argues broadly in favor of property rights, its motives are more narrowly focused. Jerry Jones, a spokesman for the Montana Stock Growers Association, identifies the erosion of "private property rights" as "one of the major challenges to the beef industry." He and other representatives of the association identify the Endangered Species Act as a major infringement on the rights of ranchers.

The industry's respect for property rights doesn't extend beyond the ranch gate. After watching DOL agents shoot bison in their yards and neighborhoods, many landowners on the Horse Butte Peninsula refused agents permission to enter their property. The DOL's former staff attorney, in a letter to the Montana state veterinarian, advised that the department and the livestock industry should pursue lawsuits against such property owners:

It has come to my attention that there were individual landowners who refused our agents access to their lands. . . . For those individuals I would suggest that . . . a charge of violation of the statutes . . . might be proper. This is a civil penalty and . . . could prove extremely expensive to that person. [Additionally,] there is the possibility of a class action against those landowners by the livestock industry. I assure you that there are attorneys who would welcome that type of case so long as you understand it only takes a preponderance of the evidence and not proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

The letter carries echoes of the industry's nineteenth-century tactics and betrays hypocrisy in the agency's attitude toward property rights. It also contains less-than-sound legal advice. The statutes cited do not, in fact, permit DOL agents to enter private property in pursuit of buffalo. While the law does provide them with the right to "enter anywhere where there may be found [disease-infected] livestock," it does not authorize agents to enter private land to manage buffalo and other wild species.

The DOL's track record attests to this difficulty in distinguishing wild buffalo from livestock. The agents who manage the Yellowstone buffalo in Montana receive no formal training in wildlife biology or management. Wild buffalo are routinely rounded up by Stetsoned cowboys, corralled in cattle pens, and slaughtered in industrial slaughterhouses designed for livestock. On the Montana side of the park border, these attitudes translate into buffalo being killed while other wild species like moose, deer, and elk—also known to carry brucellosis—are allowed to enter Montana freely.

The boundary, a straight line drawn across the landscape, is the livestock industry's line in the sand. While the nineteenth-century slaughter was driven by fears of the pre-cattle West, the current slaughter is driven by fears of a West after cattle. Knowing that buffalo would naturally reinhabit their former range outside the park if they were allowed to, the industry insists that they be killed when they cross the line and enter Montana.

The words of Representative Omar Conger, spoken on the floor of the

US House of Representatives more than 120 years ago, reflect an attitude toward bison that is still popular within the livestock industry:

They eat the grass. They trample upon the plains upon which our settlers desire to herd their cattle and their sheep. There is no mistake about that. They range over the very pastures where the settlers keep their herds of cattle. They destroy the pasture.

Buffalo, as they were in the 1870s, are seen as an obstacle to be overcome and as an impediment to progress. They do not respect barbed wire or allow themselves to be domesticated. With the Yellowstone herd threatening to reestablish itself on public lands surrounding the park, lands officially designated as "wildlife habitat," the livestock industry has become alarmed. Conditioned to believe that grass grows on the western landscape for the sole purpose of fattening cattle, the industry considers it unacceptable and backward for buffalo to reclaim any of their former range outside the park. Buffalo are the ultimate symbol of the truly wild nature of our continent's past and the rich potential for its future. It is precisely this potential, and the fear it inspires in the livestock industry, that fuels the needless bloodshed.

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Direct Action

It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.

—Henry David Thoreau

I PRESSED MY BACK INTO THE SWAYING TRUNK AND BRACED MYSELF through the strong gusts. Charlie lay on the dirt floor of the Horse Butte trap, locked to the base of the swinging doors between the outer corral and the holding pens. The lone security guard didn't see him climb the rim of the bluff with the lockbox, slip through the horizontal bars, and secure himself to the trap. I was in a tree on the opposite end of the capture facility, doing my best to hold on through the wind and keep Charlie centered in the camera's field of vision. My brother had put his body between the buffalo and their capture, and my video footage would be his primary protection.

Charlie's decision to go in had been cemented when we received a radio call from the Madison patrol, who said that the DOL had just started hazing fourteen buffalo toward the trap. Charlie, Mike, and I—on the Horse Butte morning patrol—were surprised by the news. The operation blatantly violated the US Forest Service permit regulating DOL operations on Horse Butte. These regulations limit bison-hazing operations near the Madison River to the hours between 10 A.M. and 3 P.M., when eagles are less likely to be