

# Buffalo!

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Waves of heat shimmered on the prairie horizon during the summer of 1844 but only the leaders in the wagon train could see that far. Most of the wagons in the Oregon-bound train struggled with the swirling dust which enveloped each wagon with a brown pall of monotony. Even the food added to the dull sameness of the westward trek. Any change would be welcome.

One morning the scouts spotted a large buffalo herd nearby. The wagon train erupted into a frenzy of activity. Horses were roped, harnesses untangled and tempers exploded in the anxious impatience to join in the buffalo hunt. The brightened eyes of women and children were alive with eager anticipation. Those left with the wagons could only discern the outlines of the huge herd—a brownish-

black sea of hump-backed shaggy beasts plodding along through the dust.

Rifles cracked amid the torrent of dust and confusion as the first horsemen reached the herd—but no buffalos fell. A couple of scouts spurred their mounts to catch up with a great buffalo bull loping on short legs across the sod. The first scout matched the speed of his horse with the big bull, turned around and fired point blank into the buffalo's broad forehead. The bull shook his tousled head, but kept on coming. Two more riders joined the attack. Each jockeyed his horse among the herd to get a clear shot at the bull. Both rifles barked as more balls entered the beast's skull, but the buffalo continued bounding across the prairie seemingly unaffected.

Without warning, the bull halted in its tracks. Riders reined their horses and scrambled to avoid careening into each other. More rifles cracked. The bull angrily lowered its head and charged, its horns menaced the nearest rider. Another

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*Editor's Note: The two illustrations were done by William Carey, who went on several buffalo hunts on a cross-country trek from 1860 to 1861. Illustrations Courtesy, Special Collections, Texas A&M University Library.*



*The Guardians of the Herd—Buffalo Bulls Charging Hunters. (Special Collections, Texas A&M University Library.)*

rifle shot finally brought the great beast tumbling to the earth.

Over buffalo steaks that night, the riders told and retold the story of the chase and how they were almost "buffaloed" by the curious actions of the buffalo. Capable of ponderous lethargy or furious energy, the buffalo could be a very bewildering quarry. It could absorb several balls from the gun of a hunter and still continue galloping across the plains. Because the buffalo could be so frustrating, "to buffalo" entered the speech of the frontier as a term for any act which bewildered, overawed or frustrated someone.

In fact, a whole herd of buffalo phrases rumbled into the vocabulary and life of every new pioneer. One does not have to delve very far into the literature of the West before encountering numerous colorful references either to the buffalo itself or to something that reminded the pioneer of the buffalo. The constant use of "buffalo" in the language of the West speaks volumes about the impact of the hordes of buffalo upon the imagination and language of the westering pioneer.

**The word buffalo itself entered the language** of the frontier through the French and Spanish. In its original latin form, *Babalus* signified several species of wild cattle such as the Cape or African buffalo and the water buffalo of Asia. Nevertheless, travellers indiscriminately labelled all sorts of new wildlife "buffalo" and the term almost became a generic description for wild hoofed animals. Thus, historical records indicate that European explorers, travellers and trappers often described bison, elk, and moose all as "buffalo." Soon the colonists were more discriminating, however. By 1700, the big woolly hump-backed denizen of woods and plains was universally called buffalo. By the time naturalists decided that the wood buffalo (*Bison athabascae*) and the plains buffalo (*Bison bison*) were really bison, it was too late to change popular speech. Indeed, popular speech would never be the same as before the encounter with the buffalo.

Many things reminded westerners of the buffalo without actually having anything to do with the animal itself. For example, western rivers teemed with fish which had large dorsal humps. Fishermen naturally made the comparison of the hump-backed fish with the hump-backed buffalo. The bigmouth buffalo fish, the smallmouth buffalo fish, the black buffalo fish, the buffalo perch and others entered the lexicon of the American frontiersman and woman because they reminded people of the buffalo.

Another of these categorizations which were reminiscent of buffalo characteristics was the so-called buffalo cow. The buffalo cow had shorter and smaller horns than the bull. Particularly among the wood buffalo of forested regions, the buffalo cow was often minus one or both of her horns—or merely had stumps left after skirmishing with wolves and trees. Some said that the hornless head of a domestic cow resembled a buffalo cow's head. However it may have started, by mid-nineteenth century it was common to refer to hornless domestic cows as buffalo cows.

**One of the more peculiar attributes** of the buffalo is its need to rub and scratch its thick hide either on trees or by rolling in the prairie sod. When one buffalo discovers a good, soft spot to roll on the prairie, others join in. Hundreds of buffalo wallowing in the dirt over the years created a depression in the prairie which was aptly called a buffalo wallow. This need to rub and scratch also had its effect on the vegetation of the prairie. Dozens and even hundreds of buffalo could rub the bark off a tree in fairly short order. Often, those

trees which survived were grotesquely twisted and gnarled, the scars from generations of buffalo. The lone and twisted tree on the prairie earned the sobriquet—buffalo rubbing post.

One can imagine the difficulty the telegraph company had with the buffalo. Hundreds of telegraph poles planted across the plains became ideal rubbing posts. Line maintenance crews were hard pressed to keep the lines open as an army of buffalo queued up to rub the poles right out of the ground. Telegraph lines were regularly down because of the depredations of itching buffalo. One bright engineer suggested that metal spikes be placed on the poles to discourage rubbing. Rather than solving the problem, the metal spikes apparently stimulated the tough hides of the buffalo. Company employees observed dozens of buffalo contentedly rubbing themselves on the spiked poles while leaving the plain poles unmolested. The telegraph company got no respite until the buffalo had been exterminated.

**Some of the most famous buffalo phrases** derived from military experience in the West. Indians named the black troopers sent west after the Civil War buffalo soldiers because of the similarity between the buffalo's mane and the curly-haired Negro. The cavalry adopted other buffalo phrases. Westerners noticed that the buffalo herd was usually protected on its flanks by large bulls. Many units during the Civil War utilized horse soldiers to "ride buffalo" for the unit. Like the buffalo bull which protected the herd, the troopers who were ordered to "ride buffalo" protected the flanks of the advancing cavalry.

Human conditions were also described in terms of the buffalo. Cushing's disease produces fat pads on the back of the human neck. This symptom of the disease became known in the literature as buffalo hump because of its obvious resemblance to the hump-backed buffalo.

Another interesting human condition which stemmed from the buffalo was buffalo mange. The unfortunate possessors of buffalo mange were almost invariably buffalo hunters. Buffalo hunters had the dubious distinction of being able to go without a bath longer with stronger results than just about anyone. This condition of the buffalo hunter led to a very fertile field for the propagation of lice, which was the chief ingredient of buffalo mange. It was said that you could smell a buffalo hunter long before you saw him—especially if the wind was right. This early warning device undoubtedly aided more fastidious westerners in escaping the contraction of the mange.

**Buffaloisms also found their way** into politics. During the Civil War, the South had its equivalent to the northern copperheads. Particularly along the southeastern seaboard, a buffalo was an individual who was disloyal to the Confederate cause. Unfortunately, the derivation of the original comparison to the animal buffalo seems to have been lost to posterity.

Many buffaloisms came into being through an association with buffalo—either geographically or some other more intimate relationship. Buffalo bugs, buffalo moths, the dreaded buffalo gnat, and buffalo beetles were all insects found in quantity in buffalo country.

Other buffalo-related terms included the buffalo bean, buffalo pea, or buffalo plum which are all plants of the genus *Astragalus* or near relatives which inhabit buffalo country. The bright red buffalo berry and the buffalo bush are of the *Shepherdia* genus—spiny shrubs, the first of which served as natural food for man and beast alike. Buffalo burs (*Solanum*



*Holding the Wolves at Bay: Buffalo Bulls Protecting the Herd. (Special Collections, Texas A&M University Library.)*

*rostratum*) irritated their way into the clothing of early westerners—not to mention their original annoyance of tangling in the coat of the buffalo. The buffalo flower or buffalo clover, is what is more commonly known today as the Texas bluebonnet (*Lupinus texensis*). In some locales, buffalo clover can be one of the *Trifolium*s. Whether buffalo clover was *Trifolium stoloniferum*, *T. reflexum*, *T. pennsylvanicum* or the lovely *Lupinus texensis* was completely immaterial to the westerners; what mattered was the buffalo clover lived with the buffalo. The golden or buffalo currant and the buffalo gourd (*Ribes odoratum* and *Cucurbita foetidissima*) grew in the southwest buffalo country. These plants were strongly identified geographically with the buffalo as were the buffalo tree, buffalo nut and myriads of other “buffalo” plants. Probably the most significant buffalo vegetation was the luxuriant buffalo grass (*Buchloe dactyloides*, Grama St. Augustine, etc.). These lush grasses flourished all over the West and allowed not only the support of numberless buffalo, but thousands of trailing cattle as well.

**The last grouping of buffalo phrases** includes those which come from part of the buffalo itself. Buffalo wood was another name for dried buffalo dung. Also called buffalo chips, they fueled innumerable prairie campfires generations ago. James G. Bell, a cowboy on the Texas-California cattle trail in the early 1850's, suggested a novel use for buffalo chips. Bell had been on the trail for some time and had become accustomed to sights, sounds and smells which were not as prevalent elsewhere. One night, while writing in his diary next to a buffalo chip fire, Bell wrote that he thought that burning buffalo chips smelled like hickory wood and that buffalo chips would be excellent for smoking meat.

While almost everyone is familiar with the savor of “hickory smoked ham,” it seems at least questionable that “buffalo dung smoked ham” would whet very many appetites. Bell's musings on buffalo chips apparently never went beyond thoughtful reflection—he does not mention ever putting his theory to the test.

The imaginativeness of westerners in naming buffalo products is notable. Buffalo wood is very descriptive, but what about buffalo cider? Occasionally also called buffalo gall, which is closer in description, buffalo cider was the rather ridiculous name given to the foul-tasting liquid found inside a buffalo stomach. When far from water, buffalo hunters used buffalo cider to quench their thirst—although one might imagine that it was drunk through clenched teeth.

The buffalo coat, buffalo robe or buffalo wrapper are easy to identify as coverings made from the hides of buffalo. A buffalo tug was a leather thong used by hunters as a rope substitute. Buffalo tea was the water left in a wallow after the buffalo finished wallowing.

The impact of the once mighty sea of woolly buffalo on the Indian and westward-moving pioneer probably can never be assessed, but buffalo cow, buffalo pea, buffalo robe, buffalo street, buffalo wallow, buffalo rubbing post and dozens of other buffaloisms bear quiet testimony of the force with which the buffalo bellowed its way into the experience and life of the pioneer and stimulated the westerner's imagination. The constant use and re-use of buffalo as a descriptor, verb and noun in the diaries, journals and histories of pioneers highlights the telling impact of the buffalo on frontier life. ●