

The Monarch of the Plains may once more be classed as a game animal

A Prophecy Fulfilled

"And the buffalo shall return to the Northern pastures"

By MICHAEL O'MAYO

CHIEF GREAT RUNNING HORSE sat before his tepee, surrounded by his squaws and a few of his young braves. Gazing across the swirling waters of the Athabaska, mighty river of Canada's northland, he echoed an age-old prophecy. "And the buffalo shall return to the Northern pastures!" cried the aged Indian Chief. "For so it was told to me by my father and grandfather, who learned it from the wise men of our tribe. They shall return in a moon when the skies shall weep much, and when the Athabaska shall fill her banks with spring waters."

The squaws sagely nodded agreement, but the young braves grinned among themselves at these old men's tales. Those dark-skinned youngsters had reason to scoff, for had not the palefaces driven the buffalo from the plains years before? The Monarch of the Plains had been vanquished by the onward rush of civilization.

For all that, Chief Running Horse was right, for in the spring of 1925 there

moved down that same Athabaska one of the strangest cavalcades since Noah drove the original pair of buffalo into the ark and started on his journey which ended at Mount Ararat. In that year the buffalo returned to the Northern pastures! And strange to say, like the original pair of buffalo, they came in a boat.

Now the Athabaska, while a mighty river, is sluggish, and her ever shifting currents throw up sand-bars to hinder navigation. Only a river man who knows her whims and moods can follow the channel. The good ship *Northland Echo* had such a pilot, and steadily she pushed her way between the sandbars of the river. Just before reaching Fort Fitzgerald an order was transmitted from the bridge to the engine-room. The engines were throttled down, and the ship slowly nosed her way toward the east bank, pushing ahead of her a great decked scow from which came curious noises of clashing horns and shuffling hoofs.

A gate at the end of the scow was open-

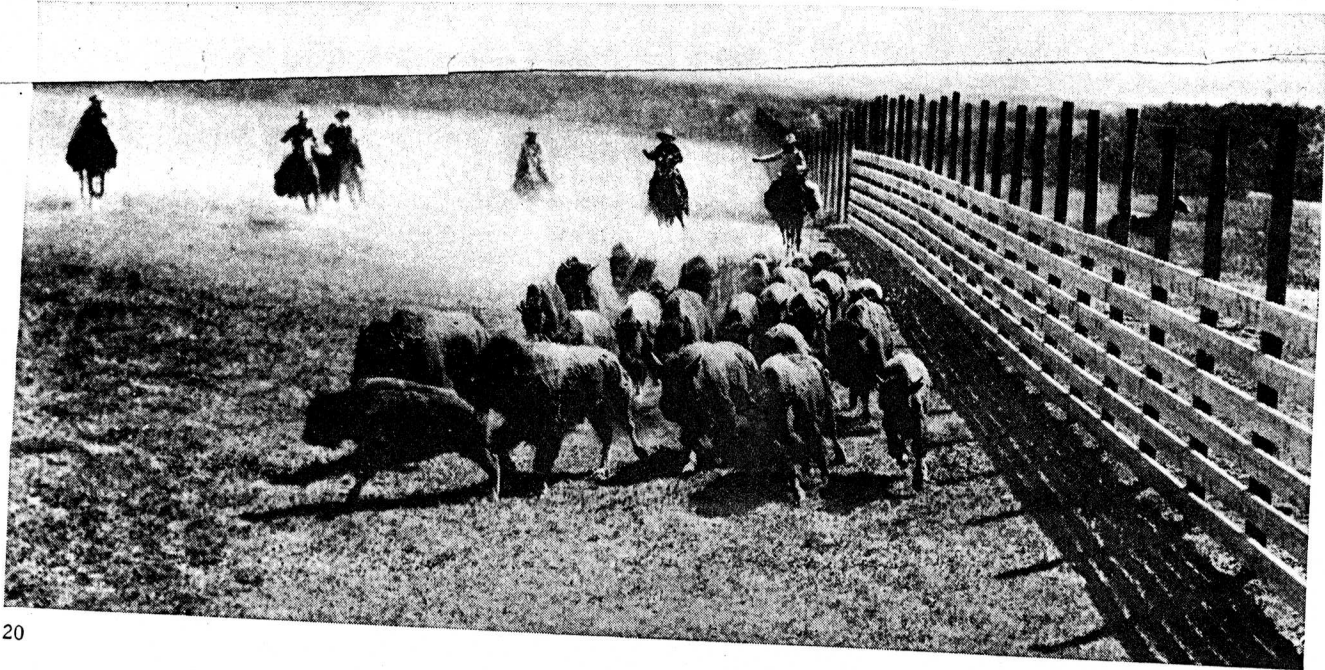
ed and a shaggy, inquiring head peered forth. A deck-hand, from somewhere in the rear, yelled "Hi!" and the owner of the shaggy head hied. A two-year-old buffalo ambled ashore. Just ahead was a tuft of grass. The buffalo bull tasted it, and somehow telegraphed a soundless message to his fellows aboard the scow. More of the animals went ashore, following the venturesome one.

Ahead of them lay knee-deep, lush pasture and a fringe of trees which afforded shelter from these humans who crowded them into strange places, poked their ribs and shouted queer noises. A few at a time, the young buffalo moved toward their new pastures. Then, with heads down and tails in the air, they raced toward the inviting shelter.

A time-honored prophecy had come true, for the buffalo had returned to the pastures of the North!

There was a time, to be sure, when the rolling plains of North America were blackened, as far as the keen eye of the

Round-up of young buffalo stock for shipment to Wood Buffalo Park



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pioneer could see, with these huge, shaggy, hump-backed creatures. They bellowed, fought and pawed the earth until it trembled as though under the stress of an earthquake. They roamed from the Gulf of Mexico to the Peace River, and their numbers were so great that they seemed as inevitable as the sunrise.

BUT the course of civilization was westward, and the paleface crossed the plains, lured by the promise of gold. The buffaloes fell before the blazing guns of pioneers, frontiersmen and hunters. The slaughter was terrible, but the immense numbers of buffalo seemed to be inexhaustible.

After more than half a century of this unbelievable slaughter, William Blackmore, a railroad pioneer, wrote in his diary in 1868 that "whilst crossing the plains on the Kansas Pacific Railway, for a distance of upwards of twenty miles, between Ellsworth and Sheridan, we passed an almost unbroken herd of buffalo. The plains were blackened with them . . . and more than once the train had to stop to allow unusually large herds to pass."

Three years later, Col. R. I. Dodge recorded that from Old Fort Zara to Fort Larned, in Arkansas, he saw a herd of buffalo twenty-five miles wide and fifty miles long, which took three days and nights to pass him. He estimated that there were more than four million animals in that enormous herd. And this, be it remembered, was after millions of buffalo had fallen to the red-hot guns of hide hunters frenzied with the lust of slaughter!

The carnage was terrible. In Canada, for instance, many large expeditions left the Red River colony (now Winnipeg) to hunt buffalo. Westward went these expeditions with their long trains of Red River carts, made without nails and with wheel-tires of stretched buffalo-skins. In 1825 there went forth an expedition of 680 of these creaking carts. Five years later the number had grown to 820, while in 1840 no less than 1,200 Red River carts, accompanied by "an army of buffalo hunters greater than that with which Cortez subdued an empire," set forth to carry death to the buffalo of the Northwestern plains.

Men slaughtered for the sheer lust of

slaughter. Parties of European tourists would gamble as to the number of animals they could kill in a day, and would leave the bodies to rot or as food for the wolves. Professional hunters, armed with long-range rifles, butchered on a wholesale scale in order to secure buffalo tongues—a great table delicacy. Prairie fires were deliberately lighted to drive the animals into death-traps.

The plains were turned into a shambles. In 1874, for instance, the I. G. Baker Company shipped from its trading post in the West more than 250,000 hides, to secure which hunters had to butcher on a vast scale. And added to the process of extermination were dread diseases peculiar to cattle.

With amazing rapidity the great American bison vanished from the scene. Its amazing numbers and heroic courage could not withstand the terrific onslaught of civilization, bent on conquering the plains. In 1882 over 200,000 of them were killed. In the following year the number had dwindled to 40,000. In 1884 the hunters were running short of victims, for in that year only 3,000 fell to their guns. In 1885 the record comes to an end. The buffalo, once proud Monarch of the Plains, had been swept away by the onward march of civilization.

Mournfully the great naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton, wrote that the buffalo had "fed a quarter of a million and clothed twice as many human beings. But these services are ended! As a wild animal the buffalo is gone! The great herds will never again be seen roaming the plains!"

WHOO, then, can blame those young braves for scoffing at the fantastic prophecy of Great Running Horse? Had not the buffalo vanished from the plains? Had not that meant starvation and death for thousands of their dark-skinned brothers, who, from the dawn of history, had depended upon these animals for food, clothing and shelter? The squaws, wise in the lore of their tribe, might nod agreement; but the young braves, having full knowledge of the facts, could do nothing but scoff.

The year 1885, then, seems to close the history of the buffalo, but it did not. Two years previously an Indian, rejoicing in the name of Walker Coyote, captured four

buffalo calves—two bulls and two heifers—in the Sweet Grass Country of Alberta. He gave these animals to the Mission of St. Ignatius in settlement of certain debts, and went his way.

Some years later there entered the story a half-breed named Michael Pablo, who lived on the Flathead Reservation, Montana. This shrewd, far-sighted man conceived the idea of purchasing these animals, letting them run wild on the reservation and selling them, as occasion offered, to zoological gardens and public parks.

THE experiment prospered, and so did Pablo. In summer the animals fed out on the plains and in the fall swam the Pend d'Oreille River to winter in the hills and bluffs closer to the mountains. Their numbers increased rapidly.

In 1906 the shrewd half-breed began to think of turning his herd into money. He believed that he had two hundred animals, and he offered them to the United States Government. But the terms offered him were too low, and the Government of the Dominion of Canada purchased the herd. At the time of the purchase Pablo was afraid that he did not possess two hundred animals; so he changed the agreement to read "not less than one hundred and fifty."

In 1907 there was a spectacular round-up, and about 300 animals were transported across the International Boundary to their new home at Wainwright, Alberta. Two years later the final shipment was made, bringing the total number to 709 animals.

During the round-up there were many hair-raising episodes. The three R's learned at school failed to give the horsepower of one of these huge animals, but anyone who watched the loading will vouch for the statement that one of them is equal to ten cowboys. A buffalo doing a fandango in a cloud of dust, with ten or more dusky cowboys hanging on to a rope, is a thrilling sight, and would convince anyone that as an insurance risk one of these cowboys leads a more dangerous life than the most daring of stunt fliers.

Men escaped the enraged buffalo without knowing just how. Fifty horses were lost, huge vans smashed and reinforced cattle cars wrecked. The majority of the older animals had to be pulled into the

In the corral at the Wainwright reserve, ready to start the long trek northward



Field and Stream

railroad cars by means of a block and tackle. So desperate was the struggle that eight of these huge creatures killed themselves rather than submit to transportation north.

But loaded they were. Seven hundred and nine buffalo were finally turned loose in a pasture more than 105,000 acres in extent and completely surrounded by a nine-foot steel-wire fence. A few outlaws, stubbornly refusing capture, were left on the Montana range, only to fall in a buffalo hunt in which a few invited guests participated, including Colonel William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill.

The animals flourished in their new home. In sixteen years the herd grew to 12,000 animals. Wainwright Park became hopelessly overcrowded and the pasturage overtaxed. Killing off the surplus animals, although it did not meet with general approval, was the only possible solution at that time, and old-time buffalo hunts were staged in the great park. In 1923, for example, 1,600 animals were killed, and the meat of the early pioneers again found its way to dinner tables, while genuine buffalo-robbers were again offered for sale.

Such slaughter was objectionable, and the Canadian Government searched for a better solution of the problem of overcrowding. In the far North there was known to be a wild herd of wood buffalo; just how many, no one knew. Very few people had seen these animals—the only ones of their kind in the world—for the territory over which they roamed was a wild region, covered with poplar, willow and jack-pine bluffs, with stretches of prairie intervening.

THE Government made a bold move. The feeding grounds of these wood buffalo were declared a sanctuary, and one of the largest wild game reserves in the world—more than 10,500 square miles in extent—came into existence along the shores of Great Slave Lake. This far-flung sanctuary, Wood Buffalo Park, offered a brilliant solution to the problem of overcrowding at Wainwright Park, for the Canadian Government conceived the idea of transporting the surplus animals to this immense wild animal refuge in the northland.

which fulfilled the fantastic prophecy of Chief Great Running Horse. Special corrals were built at Wainwright and specially reinforced stock-cars were provided by the Canadian National Railways. Loading time brought practically the whole population of the town to the corrals where Bud Cotton and his gang of cowboys were engaged in the round-up of the first batch of 210 yearlings and two-year-olds. With heads down and tails up, the huge animals came at a gallop into the corrals, pursued by the daring horsemen, who swung their ponies in and out of the herd with amazing skill.

From places of vantage atop box cars and fences, Wainwright, aided by a small army of newspapermen, watched the proceedings and clicked cameras. And there was excitement aplenty. The buffalo is apparently a two-speed animal—straightway gallop and dead still. He has neither sense

of humor nor sense of the fitness of things in general. The cowboys handling the animals were in just about as enviable a position as a lion-tamer with a bunch of untamed jungle cats.

But the animals were herded into the corrals, branded with the "rolling W" to signify their origin as part of the Wainwright herd, and driven into the cars, ready to speed them into the far North. After more than four hundred miles by train the animals were unloaded into an elaborate system of log corrals at Waterways, the end of steel. Here they were fed and watered and allowed to rest for thirty-six hours.

THEN they were reloaded on two river barges, specially designed for the purpose. Here began the 257-mile journey by water to their final destination. Toward the end of their journey, on which they had been fed and watered twice daily, the buffalo had become so accustomed to their temporary quarters that they would eat out of the hands of their keepers.

Four times that summer this strange flotilla sailed down the Clearwater, Athabaska and Slave Rivers, carrying contingents of plains buffalo to the Northern pastures. In four years, over 6,000 of them have joined their wild confrères in this immense wild animal sanctuary. Truly was Great Running Horse a prophet!

The wild wood buffalo is a sub-species of the American bison and is larger and more vigorous than the plains animal. It

the huskiest of wood buffalo bulls had added Cleo and a few of her sisters to his harem, though not without a protest and a fight from some of the young male plains buffalo which had accompanied them north. The animals mixed freely and flourished amazingly on the lush pastures of this far-flung country.

Contrary to popular belief, there is an abundance of vegetation on these Northern plains. It is true that the winters are sometimes severe, but the Monarch of the Plains has been able to withstand the rigors of frigid cold during centuries of time. The wardens of the reserve state that they have seen calves born when the thermometer registered forty-five below zero, and that the hardy youngsters have been on their feet and following their mothers inside half an hour! Under the solicitous care of the game wardens the animals are protected from the guns of hunters and the traps of trappers. It is not an uncommon sight to see these huge beasts grazing along the rivers with their new-born offspring, and paying no attention to the boats which ply to and fro in the summer.

A farm, five hundred acres in extent, has been started in order to supplement the natural pasturage. Large crops of oats are grown, while several thousand acres of lowlands are regularly flooded in order to provide hay. This is done so that the animals may be assured of an abundance of food if the winter snows and frosts make feeding difficult.

In addition to the buffalo there are 35 moose, 1,293 mule deer, 368 elk and 8 antelope in this huge game sanctuary, to say nothing of other varieties of animals and birds too numerous to mention.

It is one of the most interesting experiments in the preservation of wild life that has ever been attempted. Started for sentimental reasons, it bids fair to become a commercial undertaking of first importance as a ranch supplying meat to the teeming millions of our cities. It is part of that wise plan of stocking "the barren lands of the frozen North" which was formulated by the Canadian Government after the return of the famous Stefansson expedition ten years ago.

A FEW wood buffalo sanctuary there is an even larger wild game preserve. This is stocked with the only wild herd of musk-oxen in the world. Recently the newspapers carried the news that four thousand reindeer had been purchased from ranchers in Alaska and will be driven, in one of the most spectacular treks in history, to their new home on the shores of Hudson Bay. All of this means that civilization is pushing the frontier into the waste places of the North in order to ensure a supply of food.

If, then, a few years hence, some one tells you that he is going on a buffalo hunt, don't immediately call for a straight-jacket. It may possibly be true. And if, in future generations, this vast Northern hinterland becomes the world's greatest ranch, there need be no surprise. The fulfillment of the prophecy of Chief Great Running Horse presages such a development. Some day these "barren lands of the frozen North" may feed the world.



At home in Wood Buffalo Park

was feared that there would be hostility and disaster when the creatures met. To be sure, the plains buffalo at six years of age is no pigmy and is far from being a household pet. When it becomes necessary to ship one of them, the only safe way is to fasten him in an individual crate, made of strong planking and fastened with stout ropes, and then take no chances. At the same time, the plains buffalo was no match for the wood buffalo, and there was much misgiving and shaking of heads.

But these dire prophecies of disaster proved unfounded. It was not long before