

## THE BISON, OR BUFFALO, IN THE UNITED STATES.

[Reprinted in part from the *Indianapolis News*, September 3, 1910. Consult also J. A. Allen, "The American Bisons" (Cambridge, 1876), and W. T. Hornaday, "Extirpation of the American Bison," in Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for 1887.—*Editor*.]

THE seal of Indiana shows a wild buffalo fleeing before civilization, represented by a pioneer felling a tree. Whoever devised the seal was not wrong, historically speaking, for the buffalo was once found in Indiana, though never in as great numbers as he was farther west. His natural range and habitat covered a larger extent of country than most persons think. There is a consensus of authorities that this range extended from north of the Great Slave lake, in Canada, latitude about 63 degrees north. To the west it extended as far as the Blue mountains of Oregon and east to include the western portions of New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. There is no reasonable doubt that the animals were once found in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and all of the northern, western and northwestern states. This does not mean that all parts of this extensive region were equally inhabited with buffaloes at all times, or that they always appeared in large herds. They were migratory in their habits, moved while feeding, and, though they generally moved slowly, they covered long distances.

For obvious reasons historic evidence as to the prevalence of buffaloes is scant, but there is reason to believe that they once inhabited this continent from the Arctic slope to Mexico and from Virginia to Oregon. The Indians hunted them long before the white man did, and, for all anybody knows, the mound builders may have hunted them long before the Indians. They roamed the wilds of America long before the white man joined in the work of extermination. The early explorers were constantly astonished by the multitudinous herds which they met with, the regularity of their movements and the deep paths they cut in traveling from place to place. Some of the earliest roads in the middle west were laid out along buffalo trails. Ebenezer Zane, an early pioneer and surveyor in

Ohio, for whom Zanesville was named, laid out some of the early roads in that state on buffalo paths.

An article on zoology in a natural history of New York, published by authority of the state, says:

"The bison, or American buffalo, has long since been extirpated from this state; and, although at present it is not found east of the Mississippi, yet there is abundant testimony from various writers to show that this animal was formerly numerous along the Atlantic coast, from New York to Mexico."

Aside from fossil remains and the marks of "buffalo beats" which were still visible a generation or two ago, there is reliable evidence that buffaloes once ranged over Ohio and into Pennsylvania and New York. La Salle, who made a journey in 1680 from the Illinois river to Quebec, passing south of Lake Erie and across the present states of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and a part of western New York and Pennsylvania, mentions "wild bulls" among the animals encountered, and says the Indians "are continually hunting them." Charlevoix, who traveled nearly the same country in 1721, says that "on the south side of the lake (Erie) there are vast herds of wild cattle." Other early French explorers referred to the wild cattle, which, of course, were buffaloes.

Fifty years ago there were old men living in Ohio and Pennsylvania who had heard from their fathers or grandfathers of buffaloes being killed in those states.

Perhaps buffaloes were never very abundant in Indiana, but this region was once embraced in their range, especially the western counties of the state. Dr. Hahn, formerly of the National Museum at Washington, says:

"In Indiana buffaloes were not so numerous as west of the Mississippi, but were doubtless as abundant as in Kentucky. Indeed, there seems to have been a regular migration from the prairies of the west across Indiana to the salt licks and bluegrass meadows of Kentucky. One of their trails crossed the Wabash river nine miles south of Vincennes."

W. T. Hornaday places the date of their last appearance in Indiana in 1810, but a foreigner who spent the winter of 1832-'33 at New Harmony said they were still abundant on the Illinois prairies, a few days' journey from there. The man who made the brick for

the Harrison mansion at Vincennes saw buffalo near there in 1808; and a man named Bailey, who came to Vincennes in 1806, said he could have killed buffalo just east of the town as late as 1810.

A buffalo skull was found a few miles from Vincennes about fifteen years ago. When found it was several feet below the surface, and was partly unearthed by the caving in of the bank of a deep ditch. Though somewhat decayed, the horns were well preserved, and measured more than three feet from tip to tip. This specimen was sent to Earlham College, and probably is still preserved there. Several buffalo horns and bones have been brought to State Geologist Blatchley from different parts of the state.

But the principal habitat of the animals was on the great plains west of the Mississippi, and they herded there in vast numbers. All the early explorers, travelers and hunters gave wonderful accounts of those great herds. Lewis and Clarke, Colonel Fremont, Colonel Pike, Major Long and other army officers who made early explorations tell about them. An early traveler in the west, Farnham by name, says in his diary:

"On the 23d (June) the buffaloes were more numerous than ever. They were arranged in long lines from the eastern to the western horizon. The bulls were forty or fifty yards in advance of the bands of cows, to which they were prepared to give protection. June 24: The buffaloes during the last three days had covered the whole country so completely that many times it appeared extremely dangerous for our cavalcade to attempt to break its way through them. We traveled at the rate of fifteen miles a day. The length of sight on either side of the trail, fifteen miles; on both sides, thirty miles; \* \* \* 1,350 square miles of country so thickly covered with buffaloes that when viewed from a height one could scarcely see a square league of land uncovered by them."

There are persons still living who have seen them on the western plains in vast numbers. When the Kansas Pacific railroad was first built its trains were frequently detained by herds crossing the tracks in front of the engines, and as late as 1870 a train was "held up" three hours by this cause. At first the engineers tried the experiment of running through these passing herds, but after their engines had been thrown from the tracks they learned more wisdom and gave the buffaloes the right of way.

But the Indians and whites both made war on them. The Indians depended on them largely for subsistence and used their skins for tents and robes. They hunted them the year round and killed them recklessly. Later, when the white population increased and a demand sprang up for the skins, the Indians did a large business in that line. In 1843 a Mr. Sanford, partner in the American Fur Company, made a report to Lieutenant, afterward General John C. Fremont, in which he said:

"The total number of buffalo robes annually traded by ourselves and others will not be found to differ much from the following: American Fur Company, 70,000; Hudson Bay Company, 10,000; all other companies, probably 10,000, making a total of 90,000 robes as an average annual return for the last eight or ten years. In the northwest the Hudson Bay Company purchased from the Indians but a very small number, its only market being Canada, to which the cost of transportation nearly equals the cost of the furs, and it is only within a very recent period that it has received buffalo robes in trade; and out of the great number of buffaloes annually killed throughout the extensive region inhabited by the Comanches and other kindred tribes no robes whatever are furnished for trade. During only four months of the year, from November to March, are the skins good for dressing; those obtained in the remaining eight months are valueless to traders, and the hides of bulls are never taken off or dressed as robes at any season. Probably not more than one-third of the skins are taken from the animals killed, even when they are in good season, the labor of preparing and dressing the robes being very great; and it is seldom that a lodge trades more than twenty skins in a year. It is during the summer months and the early part of the autumn that the greatest number of buffaloes are killed, and yet at this time a skin is never taken for the purpose of trade."