THE DECIMATION OF THE BUFFALO

A TIMELINE OF AN ANIMAL BROUGHT TO THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION BY OVERHUNTING, LAND THEFT, SETTLEMENT, AND DESTRUCTIVE COLONIAL POLICIES.

FIG. 1: BUFFALO IN SASKATCHEWAN PAINTED BY PAUL KANE

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PRE CONTACT - EARLY 1600S: BUFFALO AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

Before the arrival of Europeans, an estimated 30 million buffalo roamed across what is now known as North America.

For Indigenous communities that lived on and moved across the plains, buffalo were integral to their ways of life. They sustained families and communities, fueled economies, and anchored cultural practices.

FIG 2. THIS DRAWING BY ARTIST JOHN MIX STANLEY SHOWS HOW LARGE BUFFALO HERDS COULD BE THE PLAINS.

PRE CONTACT - EARLY 1600S: BUFFALO AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

FIG 3: A BUFFALO HERD STRETCHES ACROSS THE PRAIRIE, REACHING TO THE HORIZON.

1600S - LATE 1700S: EXPANDING TRADE NETWORKS

As the fur trade expanded westward, intermarriages and social ties between European traders and First Nations communities formed relationships that would later shape the beginnings of the Métis Nation.

Buffalo became critical to the fur trade economy, not for their hides initially, but through pemmican, a preserved food made of dried buffalo meat, fat, and berries. Pemmican fueled voyageurs, traders, and long-distance transport networks.

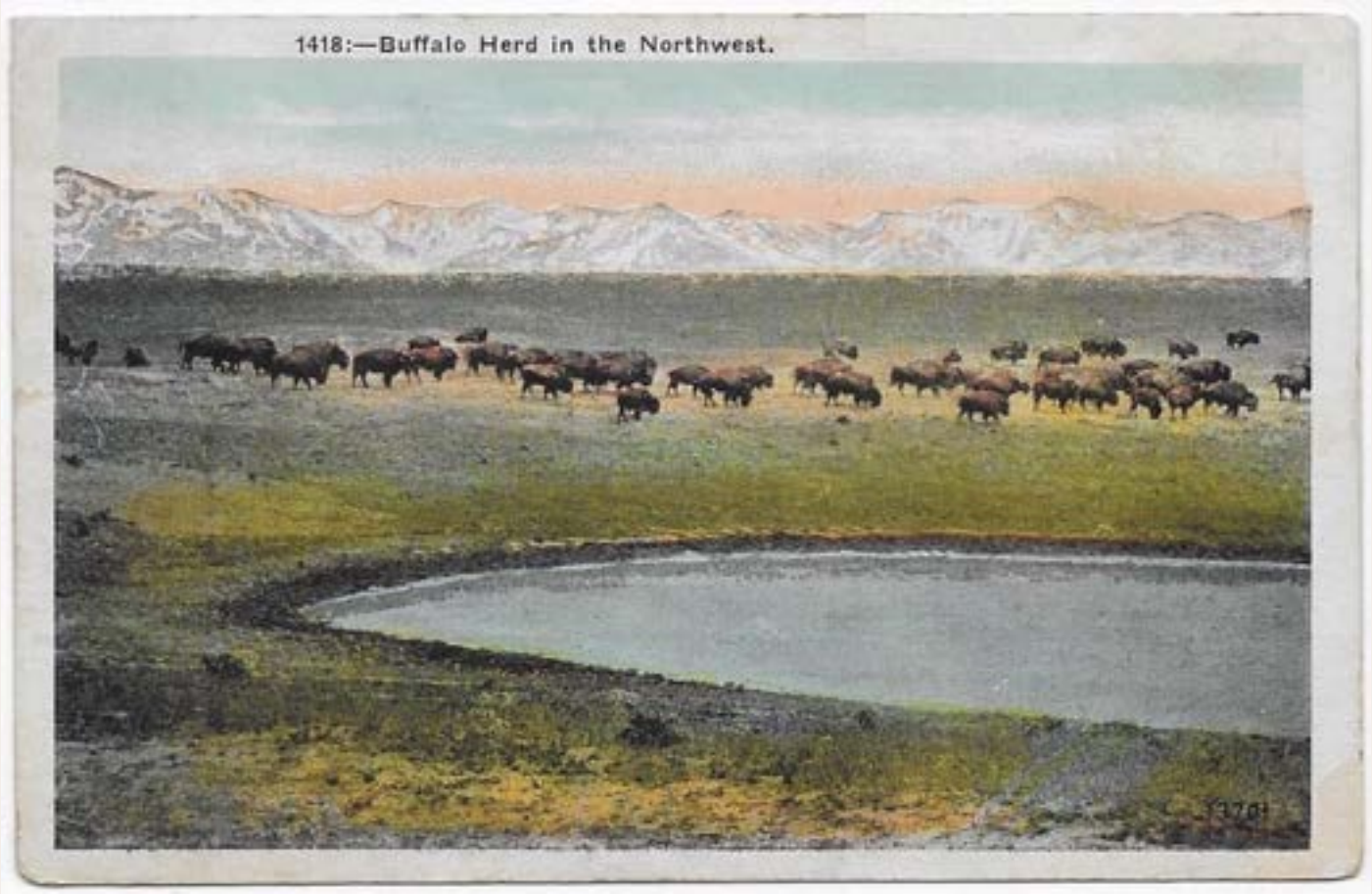

FIG 4: A BUFFALO HERD DEPICTED ON A POSTCARD.

1600S - LATE 1700S: EXPANDING TRADE NETWORKS

During this time, buffalo were plentiful across the plains, with herds numbering in the tens of thousands. In 1801, explorer Alexander Henry described the immense scale of these herds, noting that the plains were “black... covered at every point of the compass as far as the eye could reach” with buffalo (as quoted in Brink, 2008, 35).

FIG 5: A HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY VOYAGEUR CAMP PAINTED BY PAUL KANE.

LATE 1700S: THE MÉTIS AND THE FUR TRADE

By the late 1700s, the Métis were an integral part of the fur trade. Many Métis men were employed by fur trading companies, in roles ranging from labourers and traders to interpreters and even Chief Factors. Métis women provided fur traders with clothing, food, and other essential supplies. Both Métis women and men also built the social and political relationships that helped keep the fur trade running smoothly.

At this time, even with the growth of the fur trade and the introduction of European weapons and hunting methods, buffalo herds still flourished across the plains.

FIG 6: A GROUP OF VOYAGEURS PAINTED BY FRANCES ANNE HOPKINS IN 1871.

LATE 1700S: THE MÉTIS AND THE FUR TRADE

> The ground is entirely covered by them & appears quite black...no ground could be seen for them in a complete semicircle & extending at least 10 miles.

EXPLORER PETER FIDDLER IN 1793 (AS QUOTED IN BRINK 2008, 35).

FIG 7: MARTIN S. GARRETSON WAS A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN BISON SOCIETY AND AN EARLY CONSERVATIONIST OF THE BUFFALO IN AMERICA. HE DREW THIS IMAGE OF A LARGE BUFFALO HERD FROM MEMORY IN 1860.

EARLY TO MID-1800S: THE DAYS OF THE PEMMICAN TRADE

Many Métis families started to take part in seasonal buffalo hunts, both to feed their families and to supply pemmican for the fur trade. The Métis were highly skilled at buffalo hunting, and for years they controlled much of the pemmican trade.

FIG 8: A MÉTIS BUFFALO HUNT, AS DEPICTED BY IRISH ARTIST PAUL KANE.

EARLY TO MID-1800S: THE DAYS OF THE PEMMICAN TRADE

FIG 9: MÉTIS DRYING BUFFALO MEAT FOR PEMMICAN.

1800S: MÉTIS BUFFALO HUNTERS

During this time, the buffalo hunt became highly organized. Métis families and communities came together to hunt, and the rules they followed during these hunts helped shape traditional Métis systems of governance and decision-making.

FIG 10: A BUFFALO HUNT IN RED RIVER.

1800S: MÉTIS BUFFALO HUNTERS

The commercial demand for pemmican did increase the number of buffalo killed each year, and herds began to retreat southwestward. However, Métis and First Nations hunts were not wasteful, and typically every part of the animal was used. There was still a great number of buffalo on the plains at this time, and the size of herds continued to amaze European observers. Written accounts of this time note that the herds were "impossible to describe or even conceive" with numbers that "exceeded imagination"(Brink 2008, 34).

FIG 11: A MÉTIS BUFFALO HUNT AS DEPICTED BY SWISS PAINTER PETER RINDISBACHER IN 1822.

1840S - 1860S: DEVASTATION ON THE HORIZON

In the middle of the 19th century, buffalo still roamed the prairies in great numbers. There are many accounts from this time that report herds of 10,000, even 100,000, buffalo (Markewicz 2017 ,5). One account from 1843 described how the “masses of buffaloes” made the “immense prairies... look black to the top of the hill, though the ground was covered with snow.” (Brink 2008, 33).

> "they blackened the whole country...so that not a glimpse of green grass could be seen."

HBC EMPLOYEE ISAAC COWIE IN JULY OF 1869 (AS QUOTED IN MARKEWICZ 2017, 5)

1840S - 1860S: DEVASTATION ON THE HORIZON

Despite the sightings of these huge herds, by 1850 buffalo populations had begun to decline on the plains. White settlers arrived in increasing numbers during this period, and many saw the buffalo as a threat to agriculture, railways, and colonial expansion. Settlers and their livestock pushed buffalo herds further west, driving them off their traditional grazing lands and exposing them to new diseases carried by cattle. Colonial governments supported settler expansion, along with the displacement of Indigenous people, and did little to prevent the decline of the herds.

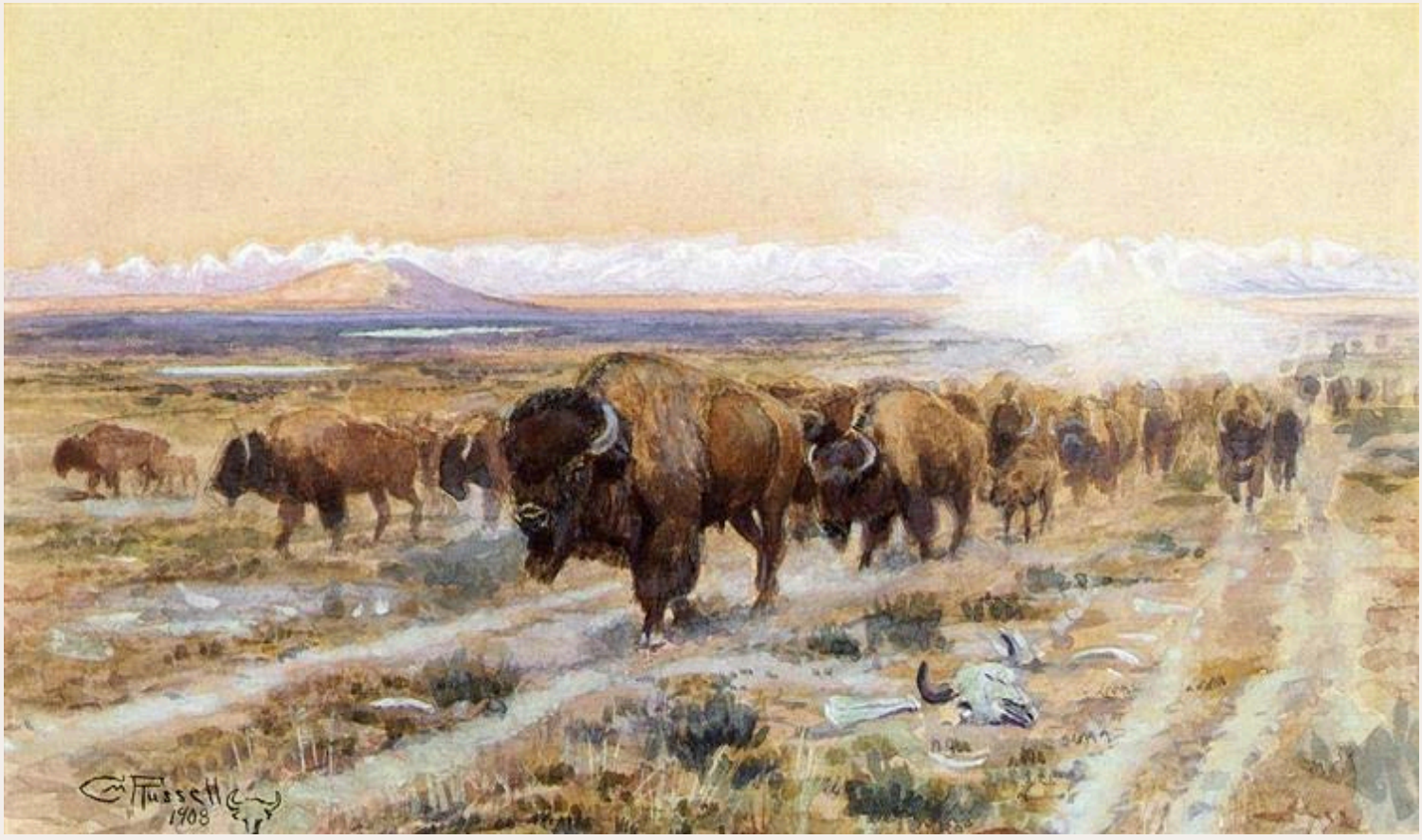

FIG 12: A BUFFALO HERD PAINTED BY CHARLIE RUSSELL.

1870S: BROUGHT TO THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

The decimation of the buffalo became critical.

Commercial overhunting quickly intensified as new markets emerged for specific parts of the buffalo, including tongues and hides. Tongues had become a delicacy in Europe, while buffalo hides were found to be ideal for industrial machine belts. As the Industrial Revolution accelerated in Europe, demand for hides skyrocketed.

FIG 13: A HUNTER TAKES ONLY THE TONGUES FROM A SLAUGHTERED BUFFALO, LEAVING THE REST OF THE ANIMAL TO ROT.

1870S: BROUGHT TO THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

In 1874 alone, the I.G. Baker Company in Fort Macleod purchased a quarter of a million buffalo hides.

This demand for hides drove a wave of wasteful hunting. Hunters often killed multiple buffalo at once, taking only the tongue or hide and letting the rest of the animal go to waste.

FIG 14: BUFFALO SKINS BEING SOLD IN EDMONTON, ALBERTA.

1870S: BROUGHT TO THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

The popularization of the repeating rifle made this mass killing even easier.

Some First Nations and Métis people also took part in this overhunting, driven by the starvation, displacement, and poverty that had been caused by colonization.

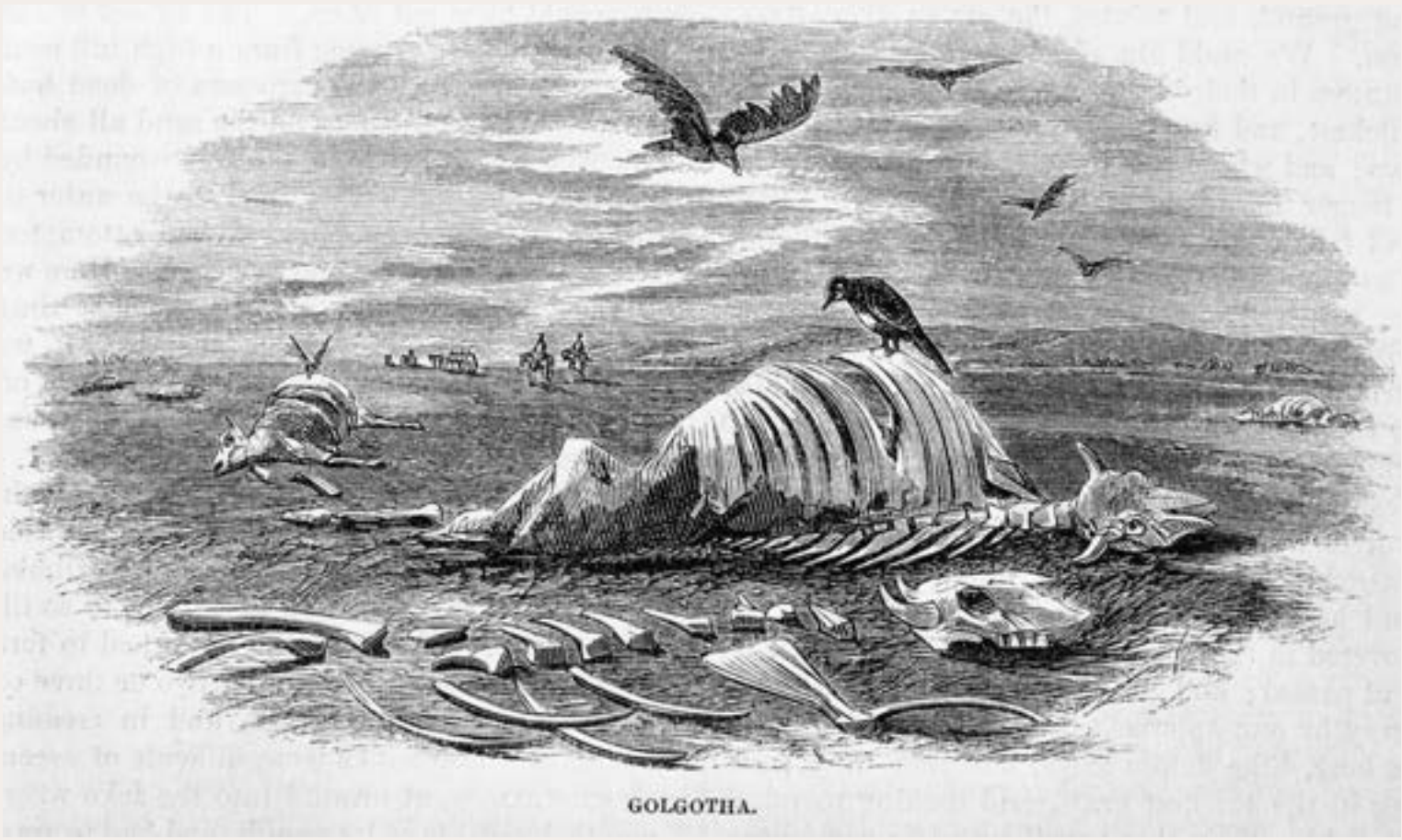

FIG 15: CARCASSES OF A BUFFALO LEFT BEHIND BY HUNTERS.

1870S: RAILROADS MULTIPLY, BUFFALO DWINDLE

As overhunting and wasteful practices escalated, more and more railroads began cutting across the buffalo's grazing range. This forced herds to retreat and opened the plains to even more hunters. With railroads, it also became cheaper and faster to ship heavy buffalo robes east and overseas, which further fueled overhunting.

A 1914 MAP SHOWING RAILROADS ACROSS CANADA

1870S: RAILROADS MULTIPLY, BUFFALO DWINDLE

The expansion of the railway brought another destructive force: sport hunters. Drawn by prestige and thrill, they slaughtered buffalo for trophies, not sustenance. There are several reports of hunters shooting buffalo from moving trains, with no intention of collecting the animals. The carcasses were left to rot on the prairie, an example of the wasteful destruction that accompanied colonial expansion (Markewicz 2017, 15).

FIG 16: HUNTERS SHOOTING BUFFALO FROM A MOVING TRAIN.

INTENTIONAL ERADICATION

Buffalo were being killed faster than they could reproduce.

Despite growing warnings, both the Canadian and US governments failed to take meaningful conservation action.

While there were no official government policies calling for the extermination of the buffalo in either country, large-scale hunting was unofficially encouraged and supported as a way to clear the prairies of both buffalo and Indigenous Peoples. (Phillips 2018, 25)

FIG 17: A GROUP OF HUNTERS KILL MULTIPLE BUFFALO AT A TIME.

INTENTIONAL ERADICATION

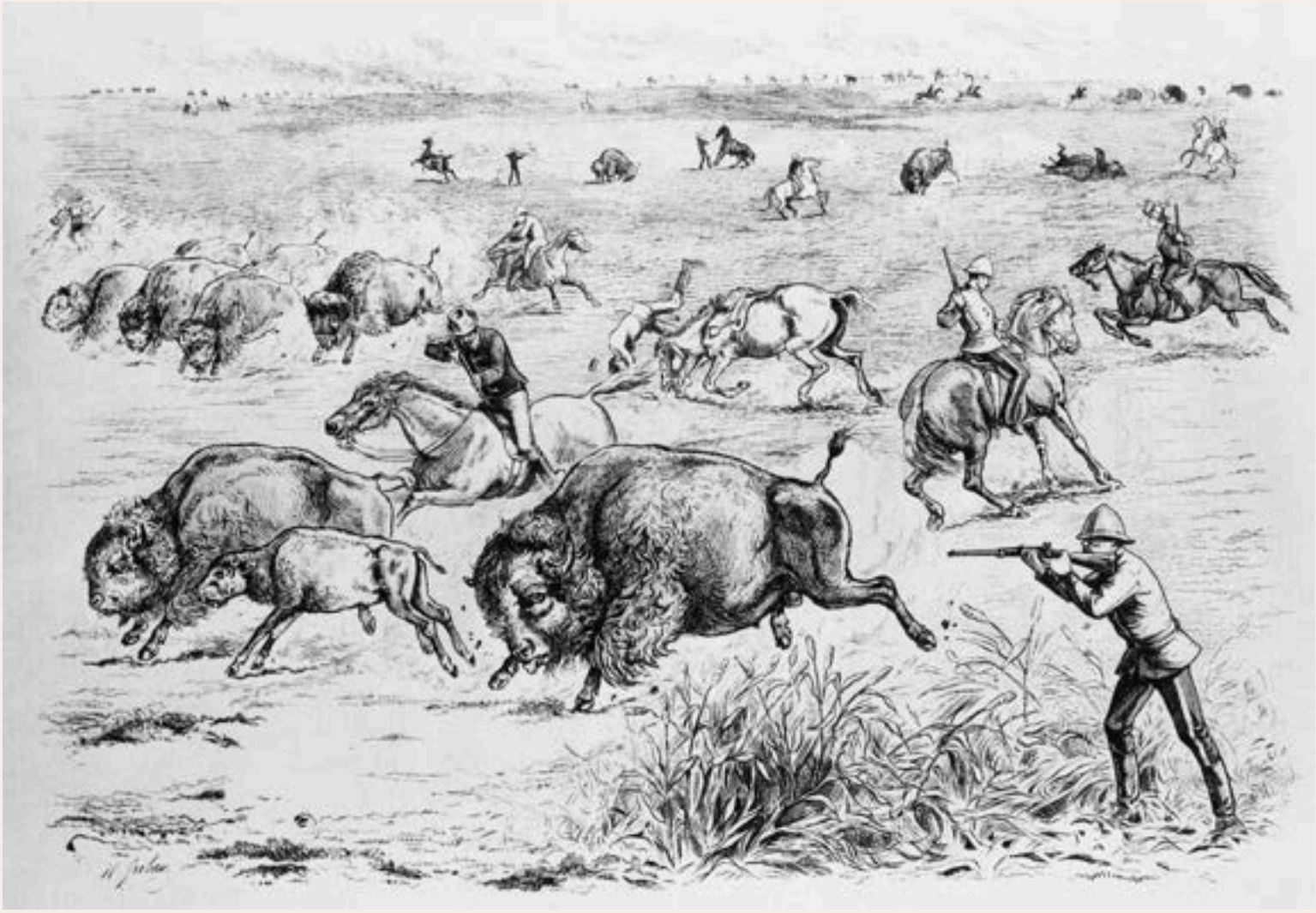

FIG 18: THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE OFTEN HUNTED BUFFALO FOR SUSTENANCE. WHILE THERE IS NO DIRECT EVIDENCE THAT THEY INTENTIONALLY KILLED BUFFALO IN ORDER TO HARM INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, THEIR PRESENCE AND POLICIES SUPPORTED COLONIAL SYSTEMS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THE HERDS AND THE DISPOSSESSION OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

INTENTIONAL ERADICATION

Many Indigenous communities raised concerns about the rapid disappearance of the buffalo and called on the government to intervene.

During the negotiations for Treaty 6, several leaders asked for protections for the buffalo. Chief Beardy of the Willow Cree near Duck Lake expressed his anxiety about the vanishing herds and urged the Canadian government to take action to protect them. At a Treaty 6 meeting in 1876, Chief Sweetgrass also voiced his concern, saying that the land and the shrinking buffalo population could no longer sustain the Cree people.

Despite these urgent appeals, Treaty 6 did not include any official provisions to protect the buffalo (Waiser 2021).

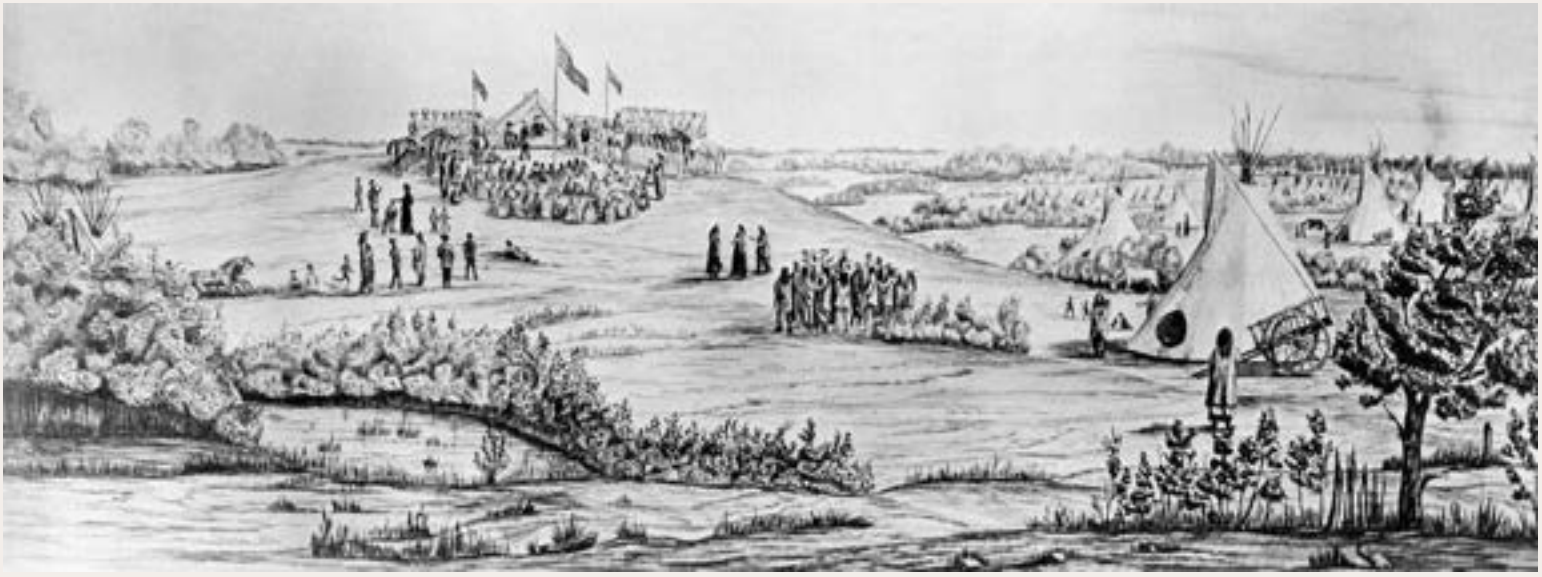

FIG 19: THE SIGNING OF TREATY 6.

LATE 1870S: "KILL EVERY BUFFALO YOU CAN"

Colonial officials on both sides of the Medicine Line launched deliberate, though unofficial, campaigns to eradicate the buffalo. Many believed getting rid of the buffalo was an effective way to resolve the “Indian problem.” Both Canada and the US saw Indigenous people, and by extension the buffalo, as standing in the way of settlement in the West.

The once-vast herds were pushed westward, increasingly confined to smaller and more fragmented ranges.

> *The buffalo, like the Indian, stood in the way of civilization and in the path of progress, and the decree had gone forth that they both must go.*

US ARMY COLONEL NELSON A. MILES (AS QUOTED IN PHILLIPS 2018, 26).

1880S: THE GREAT HERDS ARE NO MORE

The buffalo population had collapsed by 1880. The last known wild plains bison was seen in Canadian territory in 1881.

This loss had a devastating impact on First Nations and Métis communities. Starvation, displacement, and increasing dependence on settler governments followed.

FIG 20: BUFFALO SLAUGHTER BY HIDE HUNTERS.

1880S - 1890S: THE BISON BONE TRADE

> They destroyed the buffalo that was our food and took everything they could sell. They only left the bones, but wait and see what comes next; as soon as they find out how to sell them, they'll be back to get the bones too.

ATTRIBUTED TO A CREE MAN ON THE FORT LACORNE RESERVE IN SASKATCHEWAN, APPROXIMATELY 1944 (AS QUOTED IN PHILLIPS, 2018, 28-29)

1880S - 1890S: THE BISON BONE TRADE

It was discovered that the bleached bones of buffalo, which were left scattered across the prairies, could be used to make fertilizer, charcoal filters used to process and refine sugar, and even bone China.

In 1883, The Canadian Pacific Railway established major collection points for buffalo bones along the railway tracks, including Regina, which was nicknamed "Pile of Bones." (Phillips 2018, 29).

Many Métis participated in the collection of bones, driven by the displacement and poverty amplified by the 1885 North West Resistance.

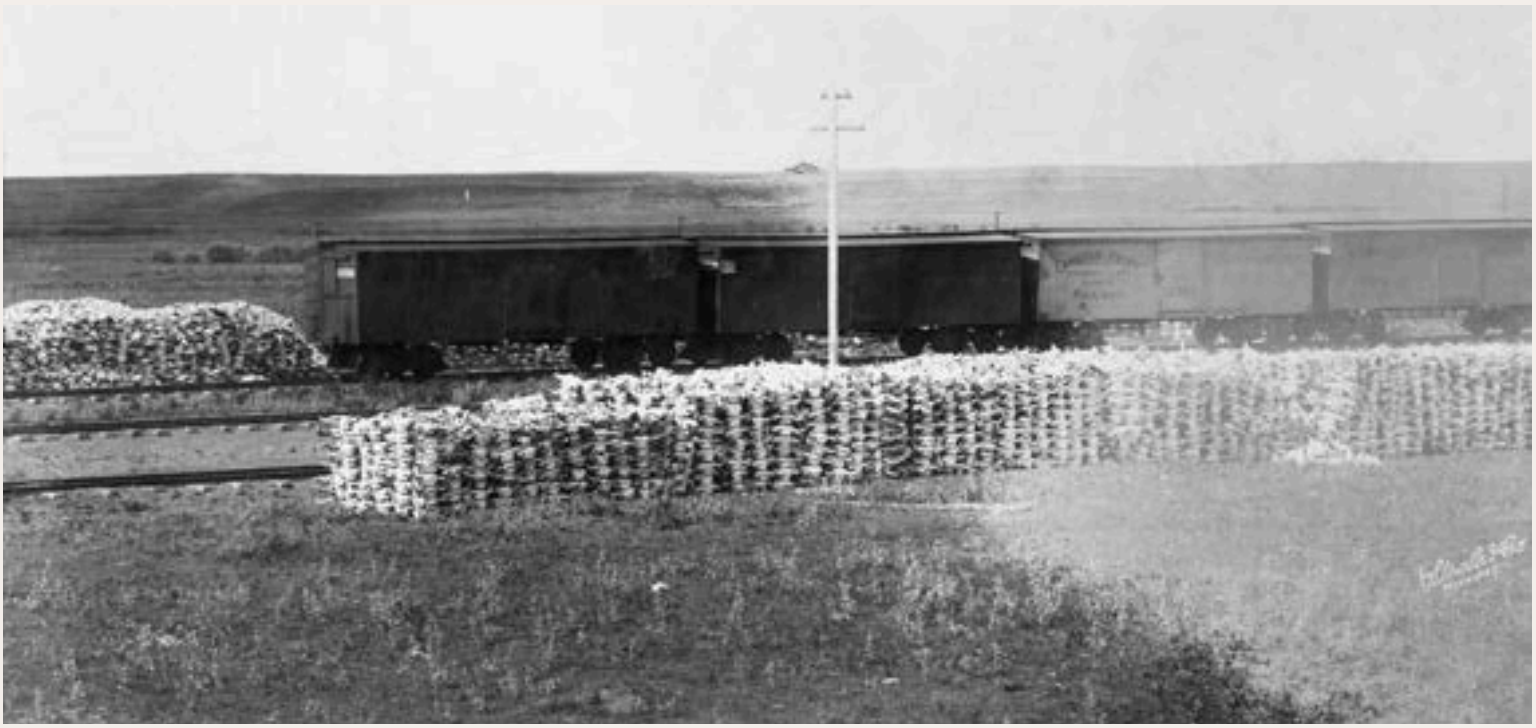

FIG 21: BUFFALO BONES ARE STACKED AT A RAILWAY COLLECTION POINT, AWAITING SHIPMENT OUT EAST.

1880S - 1890S: THE BISON BONE TRADE

1881/1882 was the peak of the buffalo bone trade. The railways could barely keep up with the demand, and freight cars full of bleached bones were in almost constant use.

By the end of the century, the buffalo bone trade was already winding down due to changes in manufacturing methods and the dwindling amount of buffalo bones available.

FIG 22: BUFFALO BONES BEING LOADED ONTO A CPR RAILWAY CAR IN MOOSE JAW, SASKATCHEWAN.

LATE 1800S - EARLY 1900S: CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Many people, both Indigenous and settler, were concerned about the rapid disappearance of the buffalo. Some began working to protect the remaining herds and support their return.

Wild buffalo were captured and raised in captivity in hopes of saving the species.

Today, much of the world's buffalo population descends from just a few of those herds collected in the late 1800s.

FIG 23: BUFFALO THAT WERE BROUGHT TO BANFF NATIONAL PARK AS PART OF A DISPLAY HERD.

LATE 1800S - EARLY 1900S: CONSERVATION EFFORTS

James McKay was a Métis politician, interpreter, fur trader, and HBC clerk. After serving on the Council of Assiniboia and playing a moderating role in the Red River Resistance, McKay was elected as an MLA. In his role as Minister of Agriculture for Manitoba, he worked to address the issue of the disappearance of the buffalo and the resulting starvation and displacement of Indigenous people.

FIG 24: JAMES MCKAY.

LATE 1800S - EARLY 1900S: CONSERVATION EFFORTS

McKay was also personally committed to preserving buffalo populations. Troubled by the dramatic decline in buffalo he witnessed during annual hunts, he began capturing and raising buffalo in captivity in hopes of protecting the species. After his death in 1879, McKay's herd was divided and sold off multiple times. Over time, descendants of those buffalo became part of the herd at Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park, and may have found their way to Elk Island National Park as animals were moved between herds.

FIG 25: "SIR DONALD" WAS CAPTURED BY JAMES MCKAY IN 1873. HE WAS LATER MOVED TO BANFF NATIONAL PARK.

LATE 1800S - EARLY 1900S: CONSERVATION EFFORTS

The majority of plains bison that exist in Canada today descend from the Pablo-Allard herd, a herd managed by two mixed-blood ranchers, Charles Allard and Michel Pablo, from the Flathead Reservation in Montana.

There are different accounts of how Allard and Pablo acquired their herd, but all versions trace these buffalo back to First Nations people who had captured and raised them to protect the animals. (Markewicz 2017, 22)

FIG 26: MICHEL PABLO AND HIS BUFFALO HERD.

TODAY: HOPE FOR THE BUFFALO'S FUTURE

Indigenous Peoples have long been leaders in buffalo conservation, and they continue to play a vital role in their protection and reintroduction.

For thousands of years, Indigenous communities sustained healthy buffalo populations through respectful and sustainable hunting practices. When buffalo numbers began to collapse due to overhunting and colonial expansion, Indigenous people took action, advocating for buffalo in both public and political arenas, and capturing animals to protect them from extinction.

FIG 27: BUFFALO AT ELK LAKE PARK IN 1914.

TODAY: HOPE FOR THE BUFFALO'S FUTURE

Today, with support from Parks Canada and provincial governments, several Indigenous communities have successfully reintroduced buffalo to their traditional territories. These herds are managed using Indigenous knowledge systems, rooted in deep relationships with the land and animals.

FIG 28: A HERD OF PLAINS BISON AT GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK.

FIG 29: A WOOD BISON AT WOOD BUFFALO NATIONAL PARK.

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IMAGES

Fig 1: Kane, Paul. “*I*ndian Summer on the Saskatchewan”. 1859.

Fig 2: “Herd of Bison”, *Near Lake Jessie*. By John Mix Stanley, 1860. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 1964.58.

Fig 3: "Herd of Buffalo." [ca. 1875], (CU181976) by Nevitt, Richard Barrington. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 4: "Buffalo Herd in the Northwest." Postcard. 1920. Spokane, Washington.

Fig 5: "Boat Encampment", Hudson's Bay Company voyageurs. By Paul Kane, 1849-1846. Courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum. 912.1.60.

Fig 6: "Voyageurs at Dawn." By Frances Anne Hopkins, 1871. Library and Archives Canada/ Archives/ Collections and Fonds/ Acc. No. 1989-401-3 / e011154434.

Fig 7: Recto [imprinted] The Herd, 1860. Copyrighted 1914 by M. S. Garretson, Published by Standard Photogravure Co, N. Y. Courtesy of DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University/ Ag 1993.0915.

Fig 8: "Métis Running Buffalo." By Paul Kane, 1846. The Thompson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario. 2009/506.

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Fig 9:"Buffalo Meat Drying, White Horse Plains, Red River." By William Armstrong, 1899. Library and Archives Canada/Archives/Collections and Fonds/ Acc. No. 1989-492-2.

Fig 10: "Buffalo Hunt, Red River." 1860, (CU181386) By Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 11: "Buffalo Hunting in the Summer." By Peter Rindisbacher, 1822. Library and Archives Canada/ Archives/Collections and Fonds/Acc. No. 1981-55-69.

Fig 12: "The Bison Trail." By Charles Marion Russell, 1908.

Fig 13: "Buffalo hunter taking only the tongues of slaughtered buffalo, Northern Montana, USA.", 1882-01, (CU191510) by Huffman, L.A.. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 14: “ Buffalo skins hauled by MacCoshams Storage Company, Edmonton Alberta.”, [ca.1920s], (CU1104410) by Unknown, Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 15: Carcasses of buffalo left by Metis hunters near Souris River, Manitoba.”, 1860, (CU 181336) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

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Fig 16. "Hunters shooting buffalo from railway train.", 1884, (CU181387) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 17: "Riders shooting buffalo." 1884, (CU181357) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 18: "North-West Mounted Police buffalo hunt.", 1874-09-06, (CU198717) by Julien, Henri. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 19: “ Treaty 6 with Saskatchewan Cree.”, 1876, (Cu 178923) by McIntyre, A.C.. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 20: “Buffalo Killed in Smoky Butte region, Northern Montana, USA.”, 1882-1901, (CU191511) by Huffman, L.A.. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 21: “Stacks of buffalo bones beside Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway track and boxcars, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan." 1891 - 09-07, (CU1137105) by Steele and Company. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collection, University of Calgary.

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Fig 22: "Buffalo bones ready for loading on Canadian Pacific Railway boxcar, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan.", [ca. 1877-1889], (CU1124759) by Buell, O.B.. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 23: "Buffalo in Banff National Park, Alberta.", [ca. 1890s], (CU169804) by Unknown. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 24: James McKay, Archives of Manitoba.

Fig 25: PC010047. Image courtesy of Peel's Prairie Provinces (peel.library.ualberta.ca).

Fig 26: #ST001.045. Montana Historical Society Research Center Photograph Archives, Helena, MT.

Fig 27: Buffalo at Elk Lake Park, Alberta." [ca. 1914], (CU21222508) By Byron-May Company Limited. Courtesy of Glenbow Library and Archives Collection, Libraries and Cultural Resources Digital Collections, University of Calgary.

Fig 28: Photo: Photo: Parks Canada.

Fig 29: Photo: Charla Jones/Parks Canada.