Popular Science Monthly/Volume 34/April 1889/Domestication of the Buffalo

< Popular Science Monthly | Volume 34 | April 1889

←Agnosticism | **Popular Science Monthly Volume 34 April 1889** (1889) | Zoological Gardens: Their Uses and Management→

Domestication of the Buffalo *by John Wesley Dafoe*

[777]

DOMESTICATION OF THE BUFFALO.

By JOHN W. DAFOE.

ONE of the most striking results due to the building of transcontinental railroads is the approach to extinction of the buffalo. Its vast range once extended from Great Slave Lake to the northeastern provinces of Mexico, and in British territory from the Rockies to wooded highlands six hundred miles west of Hudson's Bay. In the United States, remains of buffaloes have been found west of the Rockies in Oregon, in the Great Salt Lake basin, and westward as far as the Sierra Nevada. Of the species bison, two well-defined varieties are known, the prairie and the wood or mountain buffalo. The latter, compared with the other, is larger, coarser-haired, straighter-horned, and excessively shy. This shyness, together with the protection its habitat of forest affords it, have preserved its numbers in larger proportion than those of its congener of the prairies. Although the buffalo is savage of aspect and strong of limb, yet it is much less formidable to a hunter than the so-called tame cattle of the Texan plains. It is an expert and fearless climber, and only a very swift horse can overtake it, yet its stupidity and lack of courage have had not a little to do with the sweeping destruction which has overtaken it. As long ago as 1825, Prof. Joel A. Allen tells us, in his valuable monograph, "The History of the American Bison," it had been exterminated throughout the whole region east of the Mississippi, except for a limited area lying around the sources of that river. This extermination was utterly wanton; buffalo-hunting was chiefly mere sport, and often the only portion of the carcass removed was the tongue, much esteemed as a tidbit. In gainful hunting, it was rarely the buffalo's meat that was sought; its robe was the object of its relentless pursuit. This pursuit was immensely facilitated by the Pacific Railroads, which at the same time opened up new markets both for robes and meat. Colonel H. I. Dodge, author of "The Plains of the Great West," estimates that, in the three years ending with 1874, no fewer than 5,500,000 buffaloes were slaughtered. Mr. Miller Christy, who carefully

took a census of the species last year, finds their total number to be but 1,100 or thereabout. So wantonly have the buffaloes been slain that their very bones have become an article of commerce. Regina, the seat of the territorial government of the Canadian Northwest, is built on Pile-of-Bones Creek, so called from the vast accumulation which encumbered its banks. Throughout the whole Western prairie [778] region the earth is pitted with buffalo-wallows, often deep enough to long survive cultivation. These wallows are due to the instinct whereby the huge brute, with a quickness which would not be expected of it, can roll itself in loam until it has donned a garment impervious to flies, and which in falling away carries off loose hair. When only dry, dusty soil is available, the buffalo will roll in that, greatly to the prejudice of its insect parasites. Wallows thus formed, numerous enough to testify to the comparatively recent existence of vast herds, can be most easily seen about the time of sunrise or sunset, when the almost horizontal solar beams throw them into shadow. In years gone by it was not uncommon to find in the hot springs of the Yellowstone Park, and of Banff, in the Canadian National Park, the remains of a buffalo strayed from a herd to find death in a scalding basin. The reckless extirpation of the buffalo has been fraught with very serious consequences to Indian tribes north and south of the international boundary. One of their hardships, which has been the frequent source of complaint and rebellion, has been the deprivation of buffalo-meat which in large areas was the Indian's principal food. Scarcely less serious has been the like deprivation entailed upon pioneer settlers, whose sites have in many cases been indicated to them by the buffalo-trails. In their migrations between north and south, and in their search for herbage least covered with snow, the buffalo has ever marked out the best and most feasible path.

While, as in other departments of her great natural wealth, America has been prodigal and spendthrift, there have been several noteworthy attempts not only to stay the threatened extermination of the buffalo, but to multiply its numbers and improve the race by crossing it with domestic cattle. It is curious how far back experiments in this direction date. Peter Kalm, in his "Travels in North America," says that buffaloes were domesticated in Quebec in 1750, and that in Carolina they had been crossed with domestic cattle. So docile indeed was a buffalo bull mentioned in Schoolcraft's "History of the Indians of the United States," that he had been yoked to the plow. Robert Wickliffe, of Lexington, Ky., in 1843, wrote Audubon and Bachman that he had secured quarter, half, and three-quarter crosses between the buffalo and domestic cattle. The progeny were tame, worked in yoke, exceeded the ox in strength, and retained the wallowing habit. All the half-bred heifers were fertile, but the half-bred bulls were not. Colonel George C. Thompson, of Shawnee Springs, Ky., concurrently with Mr. Wickliffe's experiment, domesticated a buffalo bull and three buffalo cows; they were thoroughly docile, hardy, and long-lived. Mr. I. W. Cunningham, of Howard County, Neb., in 1878, recorded that both domestication and crossing had been [779] successful in the county mentioned—just as in Mr. Wickliffe's case. However, with the horse as a competitor as a draught-animal, and the ox and cow as their rivals in the production of beef and milk, buffaloes have not until recent years sufficiently risen in

value to warrant their domestication and breeding being taken up systematically and on a large scale. It is their rapid approach to extinction that has made the man of business succeed to the curious experimenter of a decade or a century ago.

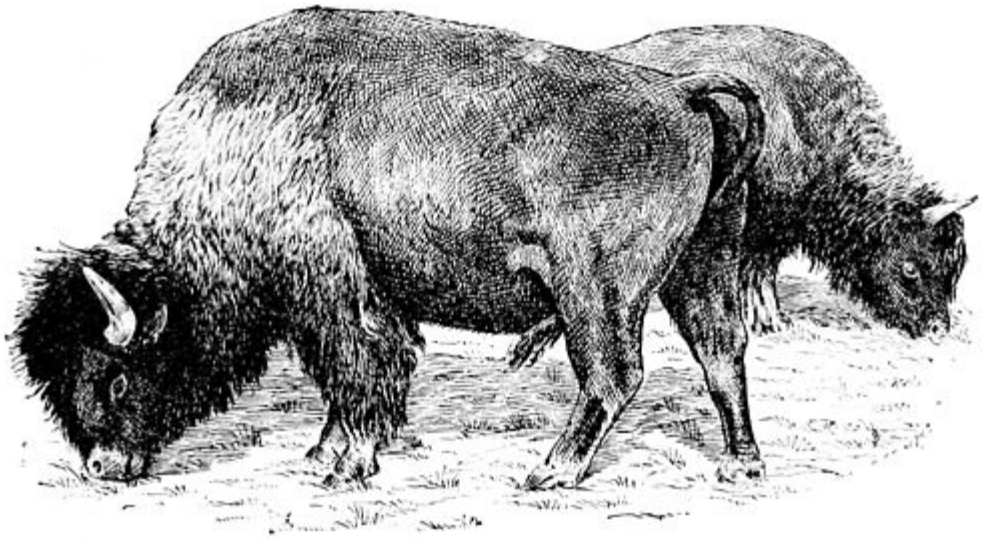

Fig. 1.—Full-Blood Buffaloes domesticated.

and recognize how much of value there is in a strain which, if opportunity be not promptly seized, will soon be no more than a remembrance. Regarding, then, the buffalo as an animal well worthy conserving, what are his good and bad points? First of all, he is hardy, not liable to disease, and on the plains of the American and Canadian Northwest he can forage in deep snow and live in the open air all winter long. His meat brings nearly as good a price as beef. His robe is worth $25 to $40; and his head taxidermized, thanks to the decorative tastes of sportsmen, fetches as much as the robe, or even more. So much for the credit side of the account; now for the debit. The buffalo is a strong brute, and of a temper at times so fierce that his domestication is a task not seldom accompanied by decided hazard. Ordinary fences are as gossamer to a buffalo bull, especially during the irritable years when he is past his prime and finds himself less attractive than of yore. Still, the example of well-behaved domestic cattle, with which buffaloes readily amalgamate, is very effective. It is not, however, in mere domestication, but in cross-breeding that the buffalo's value consists. In pairing a buffalo bull and domestic cow the young are brought forth without any unusual percentage of loss being sustained. The offspring combines good points of sire and dam. It has nearly all its sire's hardiness and strength, and so much of its dam's tractability as to be well suited for draught purposes. When killed, the net weight of its carcass exceeds that of a buffalo's, while the meat is better. Such a carcass has been known to weigh as much as 1,100 pounds net. Its robe is much more valuable than the buffalo's; for its fur, instead of being chiefly bunched at the

[780]

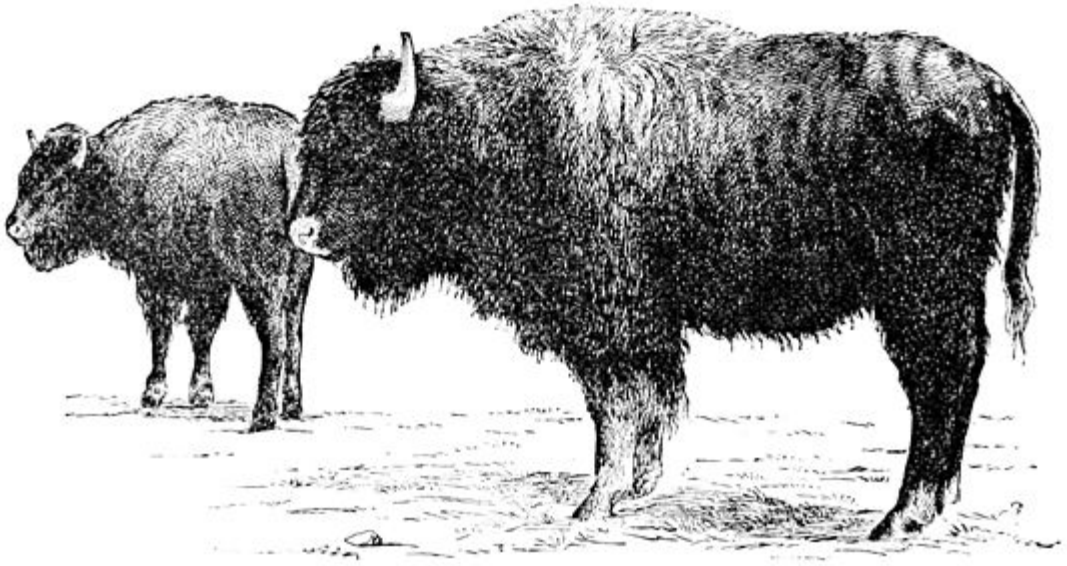

Fig. 2.—Theee-quarter-Blood Buffaloes. Cross between Buffalo Bull and Half-blood Buffalo Cow.

mane, is evenly distributed over the hide, and is much finer in quality—its present value being from $50 to $75. A buffalo crossed with a half-bred cow produces an animal quite as hardy as its sire, but not quite so large. Experiments of much interest are in progress with various strains of domestic cattle, the outcome promising to be perhaps only less important than the original domestication, and subsequent molding, of horses and cattle from their primitive wild forms.

Chief among the ranches where the domestication of the buffalo is taking place and its crosses are being bred is that of Mr. C. J. Jones, at Garden City, Kan. The nucleus of his herd, seven calves and fifteen adult buffaloes, were run down by him on the Texan plains, two to three hundred miles from Garden City. He has crossed Texan cows with buffalo bulls, and obtained excellent results. In November last he acquired a herd of eighty-three animals from Mr. Samuel L. Bedson, of Stony Mountain, sixteen miles from Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba. The crosses in this herd were from Galloway or polled Angus cattle; they are much superior to those from Texan strains, and are presented in the accompanying illustrations. Mr. Bedson's herd dated from 1877, when he first corraled a buffalo bull and four heifers. These five animals were part of the small remnant grazing in the vast region between the Saskatchewan River and the international boundary, the region now traversed by the Canadian Pacific Railway. In that immense plain the slaughter of buffaloes, due to the traffic of the Hudson's Bay Company, had been for two centuries much more active than that on American soil. In [781] eleven years Mr. Bedson's herd increased from five to ninety-seven, fourteen of the number having been disposed of before the sale to Mr. Jones. Of the eighty-three which he bought, there are eight adult crosses, or grades as they are called, and seventeen calves of 1888, pure and grade. It is Mr. Jones's intention thoroughly

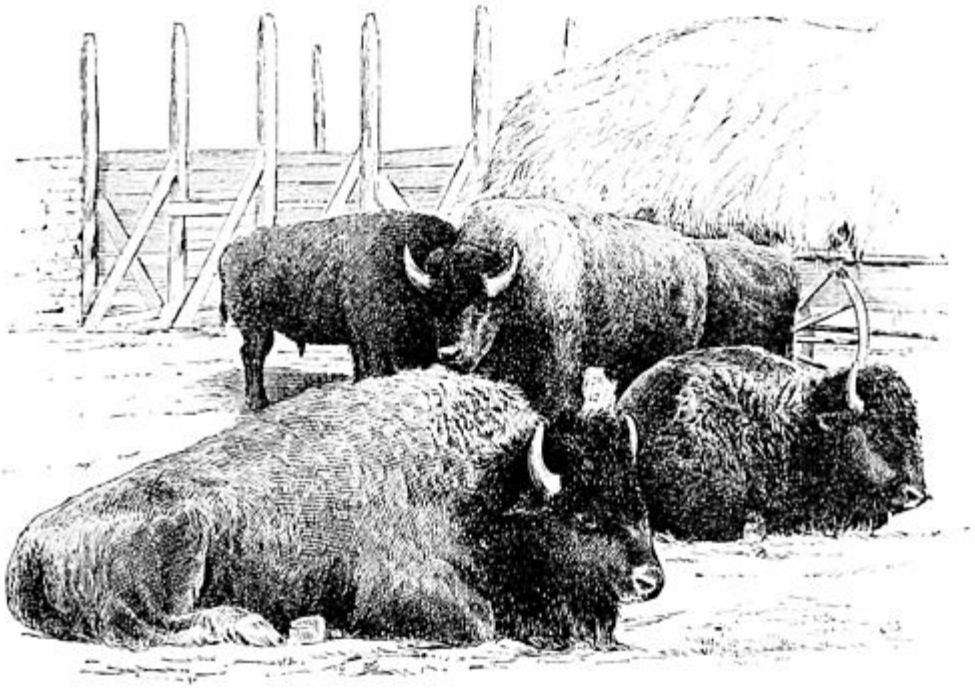

FIG. 3.—HALF-BLOOD BUFFALOES. Cross between Buffalo Bull and Domestic Cow.

to test various strains with a view to ascertain which are best adapted for grazing herds on the plains of the Northwest. In producing a robe he has already attained what he calls a "seal-skin buffalo," from crossing with black cattle.

At Silver Heights, five miles from Winnipeg, Sir Donald Smith has a small herd of buffalo-crosses presenting unique points in beauty and docility. Elsewhere in Manitoba, in Alberta Territory, and in Minnesota, it is proposed to parallel Mr. Jones's enterprise of Garden City.

It has been suggested as an additional advantage of technical education that it will afford room for the cultivation of what may be called man's instinctive intelligence, for which hardly any provision is made in the present systems. "While the rational faculties and purely physical capabilities are elaborately cared for, practically nothing is done, save in the most casual and haphazard way, for improving the faculties which lie upon the border-land of instinct and reason," for the development of such powers, for example, as the exquisite adjustment and co-ordination that give the cricketer's skill in catching a passing ball, or the violinist's in eliciting a succession of enrapturing harmonies from his instrument. Genius can not be manufactured or conferred, but the average of the instinctive intelligence and facility might be greatly raised by well-directed training.

←Agnosticism ▲ Zoological Gardens: Their Uses and Management→

Categories: Popular Science Monthly Volume 34
Livestock articles in Popular Science Monthly