

Buffalo: Lord of the Plains

by
Neil Byer

The origin and significance of unexplained symbols is, in my judgment, as important as life if it isn't life itself. Not that all symbols have a universality, although circuitous scholarship usually is able to prove that they do. But neither do all of us understand universals. So starting close to home, evaluating pertinent symbols, would seem to make sense. Kansas provides the subjects for our study. And the *Heritage of Kansas*, in this and subsequent numbers, will discuss the state animal, the state tree and song and bird and flower. And it may even look into the mysteries of the whatever, the Jayhawk.

So to the subject at hand, the buffalo. On March, 1955, the Legislature of the State of Kansas officially acclaimed the lord of the plains as the state animal. This was merely an action of expediency. There is another picture of the buffalo besides the one which the cold words of the statute book present, a picture which I shall here call the actual one. It is perhaps best typified by an old ballad, "The Buffalo Skinners," telling that "there's no worse hell on earth than the range of the buffalo." But the final and most important aspect of the buffalo tradition is the poetic one, and I know in my best heart that poetic considerations preceded and infused both the expedient and actual pictures. To elaborate this point of view I include below the statute and the ballad and some further discussion.

DESIGNATING THE AMERICAN BUFFALO AS THE OFFICIAL STATE ANIMAL OF KANSAS

Senate Bill No. 42¹

An Act designating the American buffalo as the official state animal of Kansas.

Whereas, The first line of the officially designated Kansas state song mentions "a home where the buffalo roam," and

Whereas, Said animals ranged over the Kansas prairies in countless thousands during the days of the Kansas territory and early statehood; and

Whereas, It seems appropriate to give recognition to the lowly but heavily fronted and stoutly built buffalo along with the popular western meadow lark as the state bird, and our beloved pioneer cottonwood as the state tree in Kansas: Now, therefore

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Kansas:

Section 1. That the American buffalo (*Bos* or *Bison americanus*) is hereby designated and declared to be the official animal of the state of Kansas.

Section 2. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after its publication in the statute book.

Approved March 28, 1955.

Shawnee County State Senator James W. Porter, a Topeka attorney, one of the principals in the buffalo bill, is quoted as saying that he felt if Kansas didn't adopt the buffalo, then some other state would. Hurrying and being first is not always meaningful. But Mr. Porter's own sense of the poetry of life is what really impelled him. For he evaluates the buffalo as "for years the basis for human life in Kansas, both for Indians and early settlers." He goes on to say, "The buffalo belongs more properly to Kansas, through association, than to any other state."

Senator Porter, along with Senator Wilfrid Cavaness, of Chanute, and Senator Alfred H. Harkness, of Hays, introduced the bill which became law.

But there is more poetry, more humanity involved. The original suggestion came from Bernard "Poco" Frazer, sculptor for the state office building, who told Senator Porter that he ought to have something allowing him to depict the buffalo in the building. And on Frazer's suggestion, the bill was introduced and passed without opposition. Nothing much has been done about it since. But Senator Porter favors creation of a state herd of buffalo, possibly to be pastured on the grounds of the new governor's mansion.

"The Buffalo Skinners" follows. I know of little in literature that surpasses it in stark drama and economy. To me it depicts an awesome actuality.

The Buffalo Skinners

'Twas in the town of Jacksboro in the spring of seventy-three,
When a man by the name of-a Craig-o come a-steppin' up to me.
He says, "How do you do, young feller. Say, how would you like to go
And spend one summer pleasantly on the range of the buffalo?"

Well-a, me not havin' any work, to Craig-o I did say,
"This a-goin' out on the buffalo range depends upon the pay.
But if you'll give me the wages, pay transportation, too,
Well, I think that I will go with you to the range of the buffalo."

"Yes, I will pay good wages, give transportation, too,
Provided you will go with me and stay the summer through.
But if you should grow homesick, come back to Jacksboro,
Well, I won't pay transportation from the range of the buffalo."

It's now our outfit is complete, seven able-bodied men,
With navy six and needle gun our troubles did begin.
Our way it was a peaceful one, the way we had to go,
Until we crossed Pease River on the range of the buffalo.

It's now we've crossed Pease River and our troubles have begun.
For the first damned tail that I went to rip, Christ, how I cut my thumb!
While skinnin' the damned old stinkers our lives it was no show,
For the Indians wanted to pick us off from the hills of Mexico.

Our meat it was a buffalo hump and iron wedged bread.
And all we had to sleep on was a buffalo robe for a bed.
Well, the fleas and the graybacks worked on us, and boys, they were
not slow,
Oh, I tell you there's no worse hell on earth than the range of the buffalo.

Our hearts were cased with-a buffalo hocks, our souls were cased with
steel.

Oh, the hardships of that summer would nearly make us reel.
Pease River's salty's hell-fire, the water I never could go.
Oh, God, I'd wished I'd never come to the range of the buffalo.

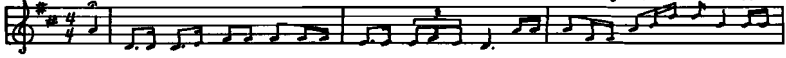
Well, the summer almost over, old Craig-o he did say
The crowd had been extravagant, was in debt to him that day.
We coaxed him and we begged him, but still it was no go.
So we left old Craig-o's bones to bleach on the range of the buffalo.

It's now we've crossed Pease River and-a homeward we are bound.
No more in that hell-fire country we ever will be found.
Go home to wives and sweethearts, tell others not to go
To the God-forsaken country called the range of the buffalo.

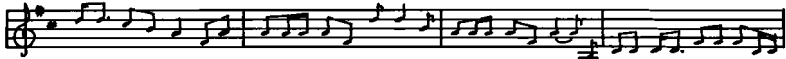
The Buffalo Skinners

Instrument: Merlin Mitchell

Transcribed by Jeanne Garnett



Yess in the town of Juks-be-vo in the spring of por-on-by three, then a man by the name of a Craig-o come to



steppi' up to me. He says, "How do you do, young fel-ler. Say, how would you like to go - And spend one sum-mer-plenty on the



range of the buf-fa-lo - I shall - we not hear' any more, to Craig-o I did say - "This a-go-'in' out on the



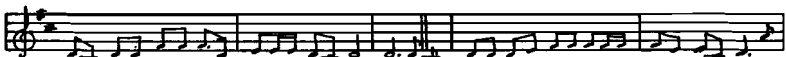
buf-fa-lo range da-pud up - on the pay - - - - - But if you'll give us the wa-ges, pay trans-per-ta-tion, too, Well, I



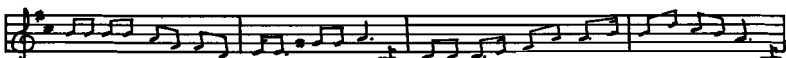
think that I will go with you to the range of the buf-fa-lo - - - - - Yes, I will pay you wa-ges, give trans-per-ta-tion, too, Pro-



vid-ed you will go with me and stay the sum-mer though, But if you should grow home-sick, come back to Juks-be-vo, Well, I



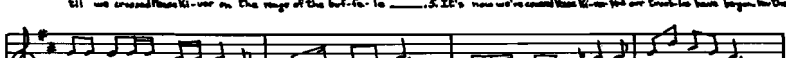
won't pay trans-per-ta-tion from the range of the buf-fa-lo - - - - - Yes, now our out-fit is com-plete - even a ble bed-lid mean, Well,



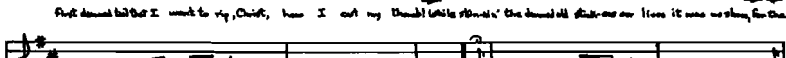
wa-ny six and wadd-le gun our trunk-les did be-gin. Our way it was a peace-ful one, the way we had to go, Un-



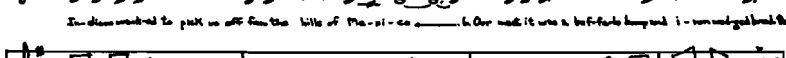
til we crossed these Ri-ver on the range of the buf-fa-lo - - - - - Yes, now we've crossed these Ri-ver and our trunk-les have begun for the



first down hill, But I want to say, Chief, how I cut my thumb while skin-nin' the down-hill skin-ner - - - - - how it was wakin' for the



in-dian wanted to put us off from the hills of the pi-co - - - - - Our next it was a buf-fa-lo camp and i - - - - - our wedged head, But



we had to sleep on top a buf-fa-lo rump for a bed. Well, the fleas and the gray-backs, waddled on us, and boys, they wanted their, Oh,

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Tell you there's no corner left on earth than the range of the buf-fa- lo. 7. Our hearts were cold with a buf-fa- lo heart, our
 souls were cold with steel. Oh, the hard-ship of that summer world nearly makes us real. Race Ri-ver's salt-y's hot-fire, the
 wa-ter I wa-ter smile go. Oh, God, I'd wish I'd wa-ter come to the range of the buf-fa- lo. 8. Well, the
 summer almost o- ver old - Craig-o he did say The count had been as-tro-va-gant, was in debt to him that day. We
 could him and we begged him, but still it was no go. So we left old Craig's bones to bleach on the range of the buf-fa- lo
 9. It's hard we could find Ri-ver and a home toward us we bend. No more in that hot-ter country we ever will be found. Go
 home to wives and small hearts full o- them not to go To that God-fa-ther country called the range of the buf-fa- lo.

If you look around, you can find a number of versions, or variants, of this ballad, "The Buffalo Skinners." Its words depict the actual. But I am trying to show what I mean by the poetry behind, the poetry which infuses it. Some scholar knows "where it comes from." I am no scholar; I do not know; I do not care. I do know that I first heard this version from a man named Merlin Mitchel, a native Texan, who now is with the United States Air Force. I do not know where he learned it. He knows many, many songs. Mitchel sings with the voice of the people; he reports the stark drama, the actuality of the buffalo skinner's experience with a having-been-there expressiveness and albeit with joy. Jeanne Garnett, of Wichita, Kansas, who did both the words and the musical transcription for me, a frighteningly difficult task, wrote, "I really enjoy doing this sort of thing." A reproduction of her work was included to show the peculiar intricacies of the folk ballad sung.

Two people doing a thing with joy take away an actualness and make it poetry.

There are versions of "The Buffalo Skinners" which present an indistinct and vague locale. Mitch's version probably takes us to Texas. Yet the buffalo is the buffalo, from Texas to Montana. But he is ours of Kansas now and, wherever, is part of our heritage.

Much has been written on the buffalo. The selections which follow in this number are merely my idea of representative material. The first

comes from the Lyons Kansas *Daily News*, out of the edition of August 17, 1946, when the town was celebrating its 75th anniversary. It was prepared by S. H. Jones, currently the publisher of the paper. The selection entitled "The Buffalo" is by Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley and is reprinted from *The Overland Stage to California*. Root was a messenger in charge of express on the Overland Stage, making thirty-two trips between the Missouri River and the Rockies and riding approximately 22,500 miles. He later published papers in Atchison, Topeka, Waterville, Seneca, and Holton. Connelley was for many years secretary of the Kansas Historical society. He wrote or edited many works dealing with his native Kentucky, Kansas, and Indian tribes. De B. R. Keim spent six months on the frontier watching General P. H. Sheridan's troops operate



Commercial slaughter of buffalo simply for their hides was not an uncommon practice. This is a scene of the animals killed for that purpose about 1872.

against the Indians. A year later he reported his observations in book form. "General Sheridan Hunts The Buffalo" is from his book, *Sheridan's Troopers on the Border*.

But to summarize before we begin. For the most part, we have killed the buffalo—shall we also kill his spirit? Or—

I saw the trees write a poem against the sky. The light for the silhouette that was the poem came from the early evening moon which began its short, spirited life as a ball of humished metal, gold perhaps, in

the mellow mind's eye, then rose higher in time and space and color finally to depart for now. But its job was done.

For there was a knowing remembrance though not having been there of the spirit of the lord of the plains. An old and tried and tired elm, for example, bent by how many many persistent winds out of the north, assumed the pose, partially for the mind, of the great, shaggy beast nosing into the wind for danger signs. The moon showed this, high and low. It was a symbol out of the past, essentially a real buffalo—thus a part of the truth of meaning and an important symbol of truth itself.

Then other far-bordering trees became distinct in mass as the imagined herd charged like thunder to nowhere, but charged now with deep silence and dignity. I lacked now only the sharp report of the needle gun and my buffalo-trees dropping away to die and later to stink, to have their hides ripped off and packed away to the East. But there is no sharp report: instead fireflies flit showing where they have been and give perspective to the silent, stationary, charging herd which will be only trees tomorrow but buffaloes again, if you will, tomorrow night.

It's the kind of poem that sticks in the heart. It's the buffalo's poem. It sings of the lord of the plains.