

# UNNATURAL DISASTERS:

## The Last of Wild Bison in the Great Plains

Article by **Robert T. McElroy**



**The Bison Trail by Charles Marion Russell (1908)**



**Buffalo Hunt by Charles Marion Russell (1897)**

*Managing Editor's Note:* The Spring/Summer 2014 edition of *PRAIRIE WINGS* included an article by Dr. McElroy entitled “*The Last of a Species 100 Years Ago*” based on accounts of the total destruction of hundreds of millions of Passenger Pigeons--and then, with the death of the last living specimen, extinction in 1914. That and other previous articles can be viewed on the AOK website. This article is also based on another book in the collection inherited from Jean's aunt. The book recounts observations during the short period of time when the continent's most numerous large grazing mammals were extirpated from the wild in the Great Plains by greed and a combination of governmental neglect and decree. It was a time when destruction of American Bison and other wildlife was part of the ethnocide of America's Plains Indians. It occurred here, in the decade leading to the establishment of the State of Kansas in 1861 and the two decades that followed.

### Thirty Three Years among Our Wild Indians

By Col. Richard Irving Dodge with introduction by William Tecumseh Sherman, General

Published by A.D. Worthington & Co. 1882

Col. Dodge lived, worked and fought with the Plains Indians for over three decades and his observations of Indian life are wide-ranging and insightful. Below are first-hand accounts of what he saw and experienced.

“It is almost impossible for a civilized being to realize the value to the Plains Indian of the buffalo which furnished him with home, food, clothing, bedding, and horse equipment, almost everything. With it he was rich and happy, without it he is poor as poverty itself, and constantly on the verge of starvation.

“Fifty years ago the buffalo ranged from the Plains of Texas to far north beyond the British line; from the Missouri and upper Mississippi to the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains. Every portion of this immense area called the Plains was either the permanent home of this animal, or might be expected to have each year one or more visits from migratory thousands.”

In 1871 Col. Dodge noted the buffalo appeared to move northward in one immense column, oftentimes from twenty to fifty miles in width, and of unknown depth from front to rear. Other years the northward journey was made in several parallel columns, moving at the same rate and with their numerous flankers

covering a width of a hundred or more miles. He was informed by old frontiersmen: “that the line of march has not, within twenty-five years crossed the Arkansas River east of Great Bend, nor west of Big Sand Creek. The most favored routes crossed the Arkansas at the mouth of Walnut Creek, Pawnee Fork, Mulberry Creek, the Cimarron Crossing, and Big Sand Creek.”

The Plains Indians developed techniques to hunt and kill the buffalo with great precision. Col Dodge described one hunt in the fall, when the buffalo were at their fattest, employing the use of a “surround” where the buffalo were forced into a circle and over three hundred were killed in short order. The carcasses were processed by the women of the tribe while the men retired to the camp to brag about their exploits

“The danger from Indians and the great distance from market had heretofore protected the buffalo from wholesale slaughter by whites, but by 1872 the buffalo region had been penetrated by no less than three great railroads, and the Indians had been forced from their vicinity. About this time too it was discovered that the tough, thick hide of the buffalo made admirable belting for machinery

and the dried skins readily commanded sale at three to four dollars each. The news spread like wildfire, and soon the Union Pacific, Kansas Pacific, and Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroads, swarmed with hunters from all parts of the country, all excited with the prospect of having a buffalo hunt that would pay. By wagon, on horseback, and a-foot the pothunters poured in, and soon the unfortunate buffalo was without a moment's peace or rest. Though hundreds of thousands of skins were sent to market, they scarcely indicated the slaughter. From want of skill in shooting, and want of knowledge in preserving the hides of those slain one hide sent to market represented three, four or even five of dead buffalo.

"The merchants of the small towns along the railroads furnished outfits,

arms, ammunition, etc. to needy parties, and established great trades, by which many now ride in their carriages.

"The buffalo melted away like snow before a summer sun. Congress talked of interfering, but only talked. Winter and summer, in season and out of season the slaughter went on. In 1871-72 there was apparently no limit to the numbers of buffalo. In the fall of 1873 I went with some of the same gentlemen over the same ground we had hunted previously. Where there were myriads of buffalo the year before, there were now myriads of carcasses. The air was foul with sickening stench, and the vast plain, which only a short twelve months before teemed with animals, was a dead putrid desert. During the three years 1872-73-74, at least five million buffalo were slaughtered for their hides.

"The slaughter was all in violation of law, and in contravention of solemn treaties made with the Indians, but it was the duty of no special person to put a stop to it. The Indian Bureau made a feeble effort to keep the white hunter out of the Indian Territory, but soon gave it up, and these parties spread all over the country, slaughtering the buffalo under the very noses of the Indians."

Col. Dodge sadly notes: "Ten years ago the Plains Indians had an ample supply of food, and could support life comfortably without the assistance of the government. Now everything is gone, and they are reduced to conditions of paupers, without food, shelter, clothing or any of those necessities of life which came from the buffalo; without friends, except the harpies, who under the guise of friendship, feed upon them."

## LAW AT LITTLE BIG HORN

By Charles E. Wright

A friend and distinguished attorney, Charles Wright of Lincoln, Nebraska has been working for the past eight years on a manuscript entitled **LAW AT LITTLE BIG HORN**. The book details the conspiracy between President Grant and Generals Sherman and Sheridan to use the Army to attack and forcibly remove the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians from their treaty lands located north of the North Platte River and east of the Bighorn Mountains. The story is told from the perspective of the Indians and their legal rights, and describes in detail Custer's defeat at Little Big Horn.

For those of us who consider the motives and actions of Custer to be a disgrace—including the earlier (November 1868), merciless, dawn attack led by Custer on a band of peaceful Cheyenne living with Chief Black Kettle in Oklahoma—the manuscript is loaded with relevant facts and insights.

The book is scheduled to be printed by Texas Tech University Press in January 2016. It will be available from the distributor at 800-621-2736 and Amazon.

Charlie Wright is a former Audubon of Kansas Trustee, has helped with our stewardship of the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary, and continues as an Honorary Trustee.



**Law at Little Big Horn**  
*Due Process Denied*  
Charles E. Wright  
Foreword by Gordon Morris Bakken  
History / American West



**Plains Histories**

6 x 9, 352 pages; index  
40 halftones; 19 maps  
\$45.00 hc 978-0-89672-912-4  
e-book available  
January 2016

In 1876, the United States launched the Great Sioux War without a formal declaration of war by Congress. During the nineteenth century, the rights of American Indians were frequently violated by the president and ignored or denied enforcement by federal courts. However, at times Congress treated the Indians with good faith and honored due process, which prohibits the government from depriving any person of life, liberty, or property without a fair hearing before an impartial judge or jury. These due process requirements protect all Americans and were in effect when President Grant launched the Great Sioux War in 1876.

Charles E. Wright analyzes the legal backdrop to the Great Sioux War, asking the hard questions of how treaties were to be honored and how the US government failed to abide by its sovereign word. Until now, little attention has been focused on how the events leading up to and during the Battle of Little Big Horn violated American law. Though other authors have analyzed George Armstrong Custer's tactics and equipment, Wright is the first to investigate the legal and constitutional issues surrounding the United States' campaign against the American Indians.

This is not just another Custer book. Its contents will surprise even the most accomplished Little Big Horn scholar.



Born and raised in western Nebraska, **Charles E. Wright** is a retired lawyer who spent fifty years practicing in Nebraska and Colorado. He has long been associated with Indian rights and has funded scholarships and organized a mentoring program for promising Indian students from recognized tribes to attend law school.



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