

FIRST DRAFT

WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM

Bison arrived in Colorado National Monument a century ago, remained for nearly 60 years

One hundred years ago this month, Grand Valley residents — especially John Otto — received an early Christmas present: buffalo. They were properly called American bison, but everyone referred to them as buffalo.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

On Dec. 14, 1925, two cows and one bull bison arrived at Colorado National Monument, where Otto served as superintendent and custodian. He was determined to see his beloved monument become a game preserve. Unfortunately, the bison effort got off to a rough start. Several days after the animals were moved into Monument Canyon, the bull died, apparently from injuries he suffered during the train ride from Denver. The three animals came from a herd maintained by Denver City Parks.

A new bull was eventually obtained and the herd grew, reaching a total population of 45 animals. But they weren't well suited to the small area where they lived in the monument. After decades of trying to manage the herd, the National Park Service removed them in 1983.

When it announced the coming of the bison on Dec. 11, 1925, The Daily Sentinel noted that no bison had been in the region for many years. But they had lived here much earlier.

"There are several rock art depictions of bison in nearby Glade Park and northwest of the monument in the Colorado River canyon country," said Holly "Sonny" Shelton, who has studied prehistoric bison in Colorado as an associate of the Dominguez Archaeological Group in Grand Junction. She has not, however, looked specifically for archaeological evidence of early bison within the monument.

Even so, she said, prehistoric bison bones have been found in three Glade Park sites west of the monument boundary and in the canyon regions just northwest of the boundary. Radiometric testing from two of the sites showed one set of bones was about 600 years old, while the other dated from about 950 years ago.

"So, bison were definitely present and being hunted prehistorically" in the area near the monument, she said.

Colorado National Monument was designated a monument by President William Howard Taft in May 1911, after years of effort by John Otto to obtain recognition for the rimrock canyons where he spent most of his time.

Otto was supported in his efforts by Walter Walker, publisher of the Sentinel, the Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce and other local groups. In June 1911, Otto was named superintendent and caretaker for the monument, with a salary of \$1 a month, which was later supplement-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF TERRI AHERN AND THE COLORADO NATIONAL MONUMENT ASSOCIATION

Bison in Colorado National Monument with Independence Monument in the background. Although the photo is undated, it is likely an early photo of bison here, because it is listed as a Dean Photo, from the Frank Dean Studio in Grand Junction.

ed to \$25 a month.

Otto worked to build trails and roads for the monument, and he continued to promote it to the public. To that end, he sought to make the monument a national game preserve, which he envisioned would expand into higher elevations on Glade Park and Pinyon Mesa.

Although deer and other mammals frequented the monument, Otto wanted larger animals. With the help of local groups, he raised money to build fences in the monument's rugged terrain. He convinced the Colorado Fish and Game Department to plant elk in the monument in 1924.

"Otto then hatched the idea to start a buffalo herd to be purchased by donations of buffalo nickels from school children and by contributions

from the Odd Fellows and others," wrote S.W. Lohman in a report for the U.S. Geological Survey in the 1970s.

After the animals arrived in December, 1925, and a replacement bull was obtained in 1926, additional bison were brought in from Yellowstone National Park and private herds. "The small herd eventually multiplied to as many as 45 animals," Lohman wrote.

In February 1926, the Sentinel reported that people already were driving from Grand Junction to the monument to view the bison. It seemed that John Otto's vision was coming to fruition. However, Otto's tenure at the monument was nearing its end.

In February 1927, it was announced that Otto had been replaced as custodian

of the monument. About the same time, Otto wrote to his National Park Service superiors that he was "out as Custodian," which the Park Service accepted as his official resignation.

There were multiple reasons for Otto's resignation, including a lack of local support for his proposal to build a national highway up Serpent's Trail, through Colorado National Monument and on to Utah.

But another issue was insufficient support for his desire to expand the monument and make it a national park and game preserve. "Neither the city, nor the county, nor the state, nor the Chamber of Commerce, nor any service club is putting up ... any promotion or publicity work to aid me in these national park efforts," he wrote to the

Sentinel in 1928.

Otto remained in the Grand Valley another three years, feuding with the Chamber of Commerce, city, county and state officials and anyone else who refused to back his ideas, especially on the road issue. Then, sometime in 1931, he simply disappeared, showing up later in Yreka, California, where he died on June 19, 1952.

But the bison in Colorado National Monument lived on. And, while visitors enjoyed them, they created problems.

"Bison are migratory by nature and not well suited to confinement in small areas," said Hank Schoch, who became a ranger at Colorado National Monument in 1977. Before that, he worked at two other national parks in North and South Dakota, and helped manage their bison herds.

"Here, the animals were confined by fence and by terrain to a range of only about 2,500 acres," Schoch added. "The animals weren't adequately nourished, and their increasing numbers had adverse environmental impacts."

There were various efforts to thin the herd, from shooting animals in the early years, to corralling and hauling off excess animals in livestock trailers in the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1980, when Denny Huffman became superintendent of the monument, "He read all of the applicable studies and determined to eliminate the herd altogether," because of the environmental damage the animals were causing, Schoch said.

After working to convince local authorities and civic groups that eliminating the herd was necessary, Huffman authorized the removal to take place in 1983.

"I designed and we built a temporary corral near the White Rocks," Schoch said. "We baited the corral with rotten apples and managed to capture all but one old bull, which was left to wander alone for a year or so before it died of natural causes. I recall that one cow we captured had a face full of porcupine quills and surely would have starved to death if a veterinarian hadn't treated her."

Half the monument bison went to the a Ute Indian reservation, and the other half to Badlands National Park (in South Dakota) after the animals had been quarantined to make sure they had no diseases.

Schoch added, "John Otto was a booster, but he sure wasn't a competent wildlife manager. The bison never should have been introduced here."

However, in 1925, there was nothing but excitement for the arrival of the buffalo.

Sources: Early editions of The Daily Sentinel at www.newspapers.com; author email conversations with Hank Schoch and Holly "Sonny" Sheldon; "The Geologic Story of Colorado National Monument," by S.W. Lohman; "John Otto: Trials and Trails," by Alan J. Kania.

Bob Silbernagel's email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.



LEFT: This 1968 photo shows an early effort to reduce the number of bison in Colorado National Monument by capturing some of them and hauling them to other locations. RIGHT: Bison graze in Colorado National Monument. Date and photographer are unknown.