

Wild Bill Buffalo by Chris Heacock

I am Wild Bill Buffalo. Well, I guess maybe I'm not so wild anymore. Not like the good ole days anyway. The days before the guns and trains and the new guys who shot us down and weren't even thankful for the life-giving food, warmth and shelter our deaths could provide.

We used to roam free, just like the native people of the Plains. No fences and barbed wire. Just tall grass, strong winds and warm sunshine in the summer. Snow, more strong winds, and freezing cold in the winter. We were made for the Plains. We're tough, ornery and resilient. We love our herd and have strong family units. The native people and we buffalo had a lot in common.

We didn't claim land as our own during the Wild Indian and Buffalo days. The Great Spirit gifted the land to us all, and we moved over it according to what Mother Nature provided. We journeyed through the seasons to wherever water, grasses and warmth could be provided. Our lives were hard. The challenges were great. But we had choices, we had pride, we had the comfort of our herds and the humans of their tribes.

But nothing stays the same. Changes came. Horses and cattle were brought across the ocean to join us and our neighbors, the elk and deer. I hated the horses because they made it easier for the humans to hunt us.

The humans faced a much smaller, but just as deadly an enemy when the new guys crossed the ocean. Their adversary was the virus. I've heard 75% of North American human natives and 90% of South American human natives died of smallpox, measles and other diseases.

The Native humans were our enemies but at least they showed us respect. They did not waste our bodies and even honored our death as a sacrifice, complete with prayer, song and dance. If it's your time to leave this world at least it's nice to go out in style.

The new guys that came were often redneck idiots. For better or worse, us buffalo are peaceful herd animals. We stick together and aren't good at running away like the deer and elk (though you don't want us to charge you!) But those new guys would shoot us down with their fancy guns and kid themselves that it was a fair fight. The worse hurt was when we'd be minding our own business, nursing our calves, grazing and swatting flies with our tails, and they'd shoot us from train windows and leave our dead bodies rotting on the land.

Some of them shot us for pretend sport. Others wanted to eliminate the food source of the native people who were roaming the plains. Those new folks didn't like roaming. They liked everybody to claim a box to fit in and stay there until some Great White Father gave them permission to leave. That's why Native people ended up on reservations. The new guys wanted the natives to grow crops on land where crops wouldn't grow and eat left-over farm produce from other places that they called commodities. I hear that really sucked.

I may not even be writing now except some Native women married to new guy ranchers took us in to mix with their cattle. Can you believe there used to be about 60 million of us and by 1889 they figure only 1100 of us remained? Personally, I think cattle are wimpier than us bison but I try not to be judgmental. I gotta admit cattle probably have more charisma than us. We've grown rather crusty over the years, what with surviving through blizzards and droughts.

Nowadays we buffalo and the native people have regained some of our respect, but it's still not like the good ole days. It's not too bad for us bison if we live at Wind Cave National Park or Yellowstone, but some ranchers put us in feedlots and that's worse than a reservation. I like those wacko environmentalist, bleeding-heart types who work for animal rights and make sure we get to live on grass and do a little roaming, though most of them still insist on eating us.

We have a nice bond with some of the native people as we share a common history and respect for each other. Nowadays some of the native people pair up with us just like in the old days. Others have found ways to take the new guys money by building casinos.

Well, got to go. Someone wants to take my picture. I may not get to roam wild and free anymore, but it sure is flattering that the new folks think I'm handsome.

