

Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam ...

By Charla Fleming

The buffalo, a symbol of the American West, has prompted numerous lyrics to poetry and song, such as “Home on the Range,” the unofficial anthem of the West that was written by Dr. Brewster M. Higley and first published in 1873. Dr. Higley wrote the words to what would later become the state song of Kansas when the number of buffalo that roamed the western plains was immeasurable. In fact, it is estimated that there may have been as many as 40 million buffalo in North America around 1800. However, due to unregulated shooting and mass killings of these amazing animals beginning in the 1830s and lasting through the 1880s, it is said that there were no wild buffalo left in North America by 1905 and only about 1,000 left in captivity.

Ironically, the buffalo, whose picture graced both the face of the \$10 buffalo note issued from 1901 until 1925 and later the buffalo nickel, is actually not a buffalo at all — it is a bison. Bison

are native to North America, while buffalo are native to Asia and Africa and are a completely different species. There are two subspecies of bison: the wood bison found in Canada and the plains bison, which once roamed the American West and is found in Colorado.

“It just doesn’t feel right to say bison. The buffalo is the icon of the West. It is like the eagle and its representation of America,” says Marty Homola, Operations Supervisor and Caretaker at Genesee Park where numerous people stop at the Buffalo Herd Overlook to take pictures and catch a glimpse of these remarkable animals. “Besides, who ever heard of Bison Bill?” says Marty with a chuckle. Marty has been working with and taking care of the Genesee Park bison herd for 40 years. “I came to Colorado at the age of 18 and applied for a job with the City of Denver. They sent me here and I stayed.” Marty lives on the bison ranch in the historic Patrick House (1859) and has developed a deep love and appreciation for the bison herd over the last four decades. “I have never found anything I wanted to do more.”

The bison at Genesee Park, which are free to roam from one side of Interstate 70 to the other via a tunnel that runs under the highway and connects the south and middle pastures to the north pasture, derive from two bulls that were brought to Genesee Park from Yellowstone National Park in 1914. (The bison have always been provided with a tunnel under the road.) In addition to the two bulls, an unknown number of cows were brought from the City Park Zoo in Denver to start the Genesee herd. Denver had an interest

in acquiring bison and tried to obtain purebred bison for the City Park Zoo as early as 1900. (Early settlers bred bison with cattle in hopes to create a stronger, more robust animal.) In 1905, Denver acquired a bull named Goodnight from the Goodnight herd in Texas, one of six private purebred herds left after the near extinction of bison in North America. The herd at City Park Zoo represented the only purebred bison in Colorado in 1908 and for several years following.

According to the new interpretive sign being created for the Bison Herd Overlook, “When Denver established the Genesee Game Preserve in 1914, its purpose was ‘adding to the picturesque character of the Mountain Parks, giving educational opportunities to those interested in zoology and affording a recuperative resort for depleted zoo specimens.’”

By 1929, the bison population at Genesee Park increased to 59, and in 1938, a second herd was established at Daniels Park about 20 miles south of Denver where they remain today. Similar to the herd at Genesee Park, the herd at Daniels Park, cared for by Jarret Trujillo, is able to be photographed and admired by those passing by and is free to roam 800-plus acres of pasture land.

At the current time, Daniels Park and Genesee Park have 27 head of bison each. The numbers change as the young calves are auctioned off in early spring and new calves are born in April and May. “Our goal is to raise the number of bison in the Genesee herd

to 34,” says Marty. Due to the elk herd, which was also brought to Genesee Park from Yellowstone National Park, leaving a little over a year ago, there is more pasture area available for the bison. “We also are working toward having a purebred herd within 8 to 10 years,” says Matt Brown, Operations Supervisor at Genesee Park, who also found his passion right out of high school and has been alongside the bison for 12 years. “Before today’s DNA testing, people in the early 1900s must have determined whether or not a bison was purebred based on appearance and whatever records they had,” says Sally White, historian and webmaster.

Along with increasing the number of bison and working toward a purebred herd here in Colorado, both parks are working on improvements, such as safer vehicular access at observation points with short-term parking, drainage, and water quality, landscape and bison fencing, educational and interpretive signage, paved pedestrian viewing areas, and preservation of views. “We have big plans for the future,” says Dick Gannon, Mountain Parks Superintendent.

Although the “buffalo” will never romance the prairies of the American West again, their fate is secure with 500,000 animals in the United States. So, next time you are on I-70 and pass by the Genesee Park Bison Herd Overlook or find yourself on a drive down Santa Fe toward Castle Rock, stop and see where the buffalo roam — right here at home. 📍

Fun Facts:

Bison can reach 6 to 6 1/2 feet at the shoulder and can be 10 to 12 feet long.

Bison weigh anywhere from 900 to 2,000 pounds.

Bison can live 18 to 22 years in the wild and over 30 years in captivity.

Bison shed their coats once a year from the shoulders back and are left with a short, wiry hair similar to a pig.

Bison raise their tails when they are about to charge.

Bison are the largest mammal in North America.

Bison can jump six feet in the air.

Bison can run 35 miles per hour.

Old Bull in Genesee Herd, July 2010.
Photo by Sally White