

This month's theme:
The American Bison

Contents

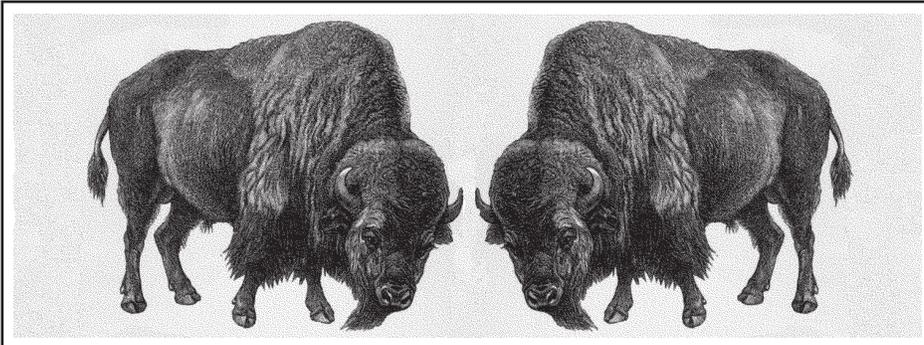
Feature	1	Fun page	5
Famous People	3	Next month	6
From the Attic	4		



The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

PROSPECTOR

Oct./Nov. 2008



The American Bison

Nowadays, if you want to see a wild bison you'll have to drive across eastern Idaho and into Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Except for a few parks and ranches across the country, the mighty bison has disappeared from North America. Not too long ago though, the great beasts ranged across the continent from the forests of the East to the great mountains of Idaho. Herds in the center of North America, an area we call the Great Plains, numbered in the millions. There were so many bison that when they ran across the open plains the ground shook like an earthquake earning them the nickname "thunder of the plains."

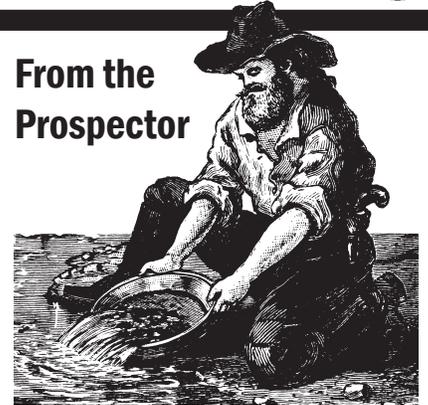
Many scientists think that the

North American bison is related to a bison species from Europe and Asia. It's possible that thousands of years ago, when the Earth was trapped in an Ice Age and the oceans were lower, that the bison's ancestors walked across a temporary piece of land between what is now Russia and Alaska. Once the bison crossed over to this new continent, they spread out across the land and multiplied into great herds.

Like many Ice Age creatures these early bison were huge. They could weigh up to 5,000 pounds (over two tons) and had horns that sometimes stretched over 6 feet long. As conditions changed in North America the bison changed too. Over thousands of years, the great beast evolved and became

Continued on next page

From the Prospector



Welcome to the fourth grade and the Prospector Club Junior Historian Program. My name is Lucky Noah and I'm in charge of writing your newsletters. Although most of the time I'm out in the mountains looking for gold, my mule and I have an office in the basement of the State Historical Museum, which is located in Boise, our state's capital city.

This is the first newsletter you will receive as a Prospector. Each issue will have exciting stories on a different Idaho history topic and fun activities for you and your class to do.

For this month's theme, we've decided to tell you the story of an animal that was very important to the American West. I hope you enjoy the tale of the North American bison.

The American Bison Continued

smaller. Just because it's tinier than its prehistoric cousins though, doesn't mean it's a weakling. The bison we see today have an average weight of about 2000 pounds and an average height of 6 feet. The modern bison can run at a speed of 35 miles per hour and the bulls can put up a fierce fight when they think they are in danger.

Native American hunters had to be clever to bring down these great beasts. Early on, the native people of our continent didn't have guns and horses to help them. They had to rely on their brainpower to hunt the buffalo.

Native American hunters observed that wolf packs often lived close to the great bison herds. Although the wolves would kill the weaker members of the herd, most of the great animals were so used to the wolves that they ignored their presence. Native Americans used this to their advantage. Hunters would kill a pack a wolves and careful remove their pelts. Then the hunters would wrap the fur around their head and necks. By crawling on all fours like a dog, the Native

Americans could trick the bison into thinking they were wolves. They would creep close to the unsuspecting herds and strike quickly with spears and arrows before the herds stampeded away.

Another clever hunting technique was to trick a herd into running off a cliff. Native Americans would look for a herd grazing near a small cliff. By carefully working as a team, the hunters would herd the animals closer and closer to the dangerous drop-off. When they were close, they would scare the animals into running and the great beasts would charge off the cliff and smash to the ground below. Cliffs where Native hunters used this technique are called Buffalo Jumps. You can visit one today near Challis, Idaho.

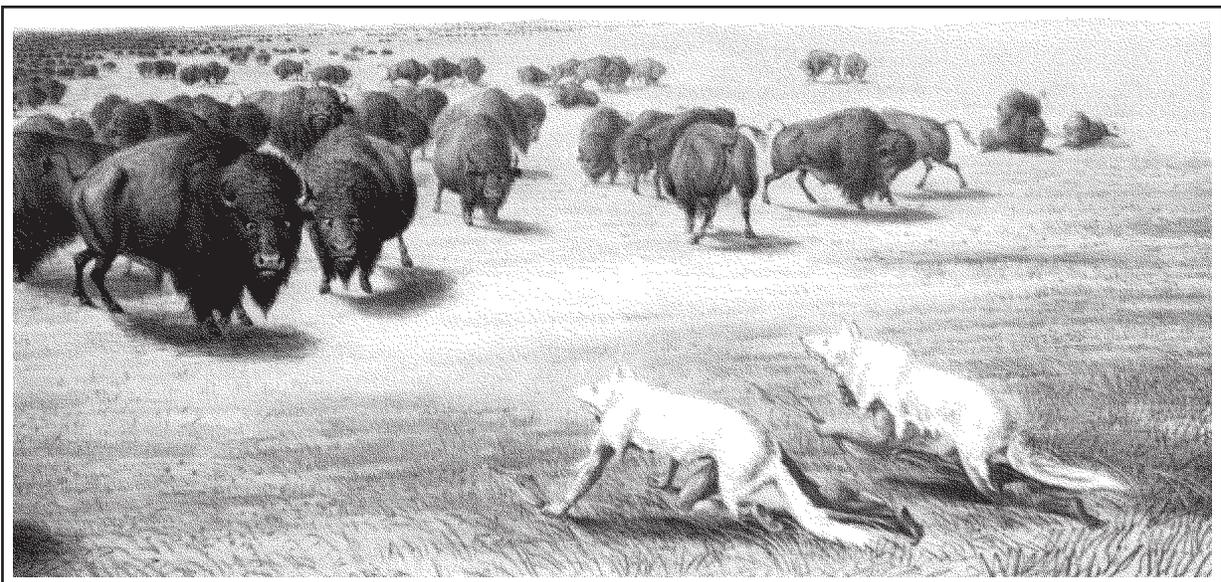
When European explorers brought horses to North America, hunting styles changed. Now the Native Americans could ride at great speeds and chase the thundering herds. With the help of horses, tribes from all over the continent would travel to the Great Plains to hunt. The Nez Perce and the

Shoshoni for example, were known to ride great distances to hunt the herds that grazed on the grassy plains.

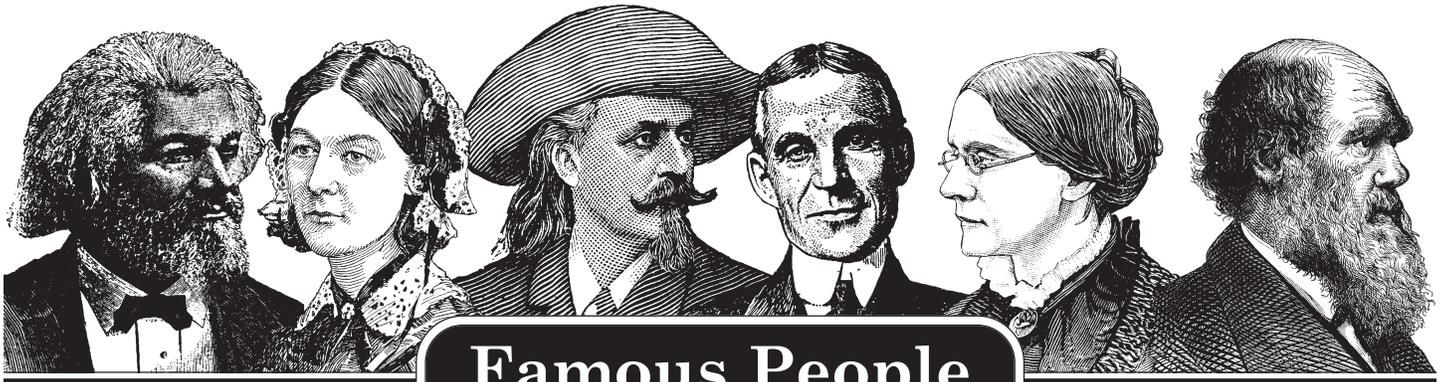
Bison were a great help to the Native Americans. The meat of one animal was enough to feed a large group of people. The animal's skin and fur could be turned into blankets, clothing, bags, and shelter. The muscles and bones could be turned into tools. Even the bison's horns could be made into cups and spoons.

Eventually the era of the North American bison came to a tragic end. As pioneers and other settlers began to move west, bison hunting increased. Native and European hunters had reduced the herds from millions to near thousands. Today you have to make a special effort to see bison in the wild. The tale of these great hunts and the eventual rescue of these grand animals from extinction is dramatic and exciting. Unfortunately, it's too long for this issue. We'll have to save that story for another day.

by Glenn Newkirk



Native hunters disguised as wolves



Famous People

Meriwether Lewis and the Buffalo

Some of our earliest written accounts of American Bison in the West come from the Lewis and Clark expedition. As they crossed the Great Plains on the way to the Pacific Ocean, the expedition frequently saw herds of bison. Sometimes the encounters were dangerous. Take this story for example, where Meriwether Lewis wrote about the time an angry bull charged in to the explorers' camp in the middle of the night.

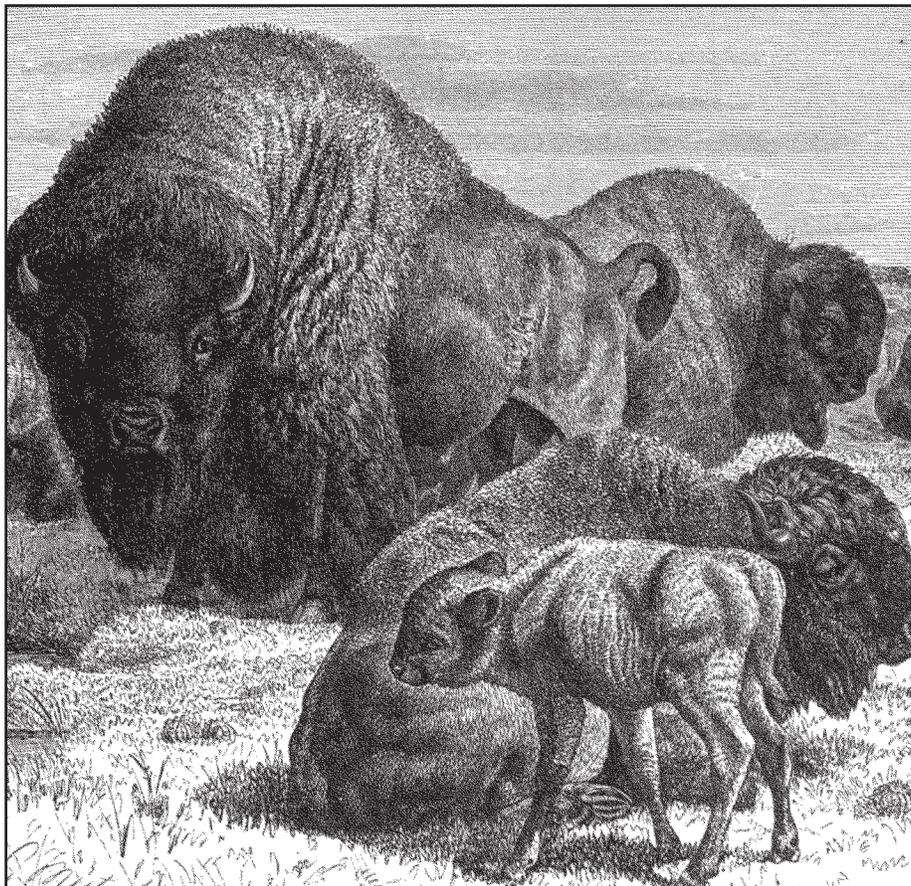
Last night we were alarmed by a large buffalo bull which swam over from the opposite shore

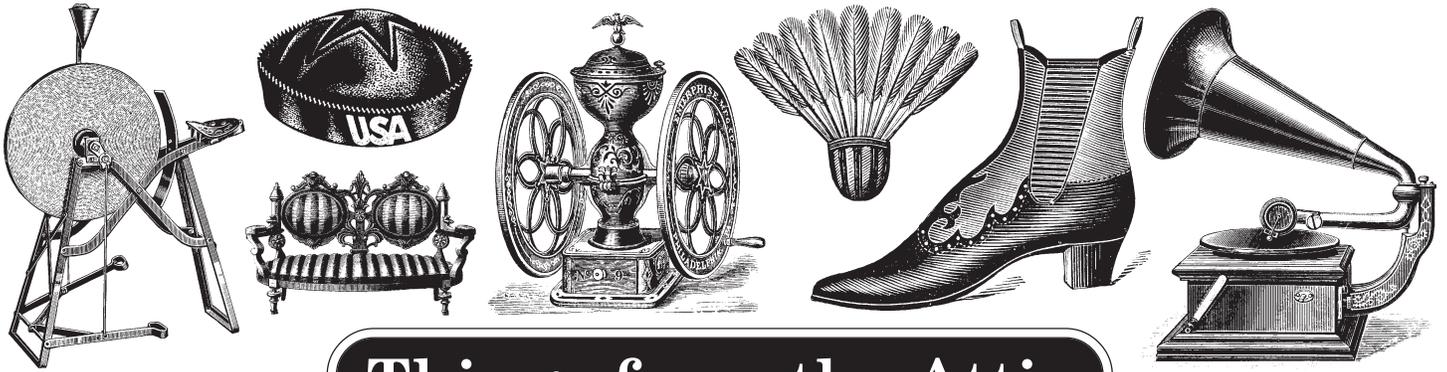
and coming along side of the white pirogue, climbed over it to land, he then alarmed ran up the bank in full speed directly towards the fires, and was within 18 inches of the heads of some of the men who lay sleeping before the

sentinel could alarm him or make him change his course; still more alarmed, he now took his direction immediately towards our lodge, passing between 4 fires and within a few inches of the heads of one range of the men as they

lay sleeping-when he came near my tent, my dog saved us by causing him to change his course a second time, which he did by turning a little to the right, and was quickly out of sight, leaving us by this time all in an uproar with our guns in our hands.

*Meriwether Lewis
May 29, 1805*





Things from the Attic

Buffalo or Bison?

If you've seen a Western cowboy movie or read about the history of Native Americans then you probably know what a buffalo is. But what about a Bison? According to scientists the American Buffalos roaming through

Yellowstone National Park, are not true buffalos. A real buffalo comes from Asia or Africa, like the Cape Buffalo or the familiar Water Buffalo. Those animals we might see on our way across Eastern Idaho are actually closely related to the

European Bison and the Canadian Woods Bison. So, technically they are not buffalo at all. Luckily, in our part of the world you can use either term, bison or buffalo, and most people will know what you are talking about.



African Water Buffalo

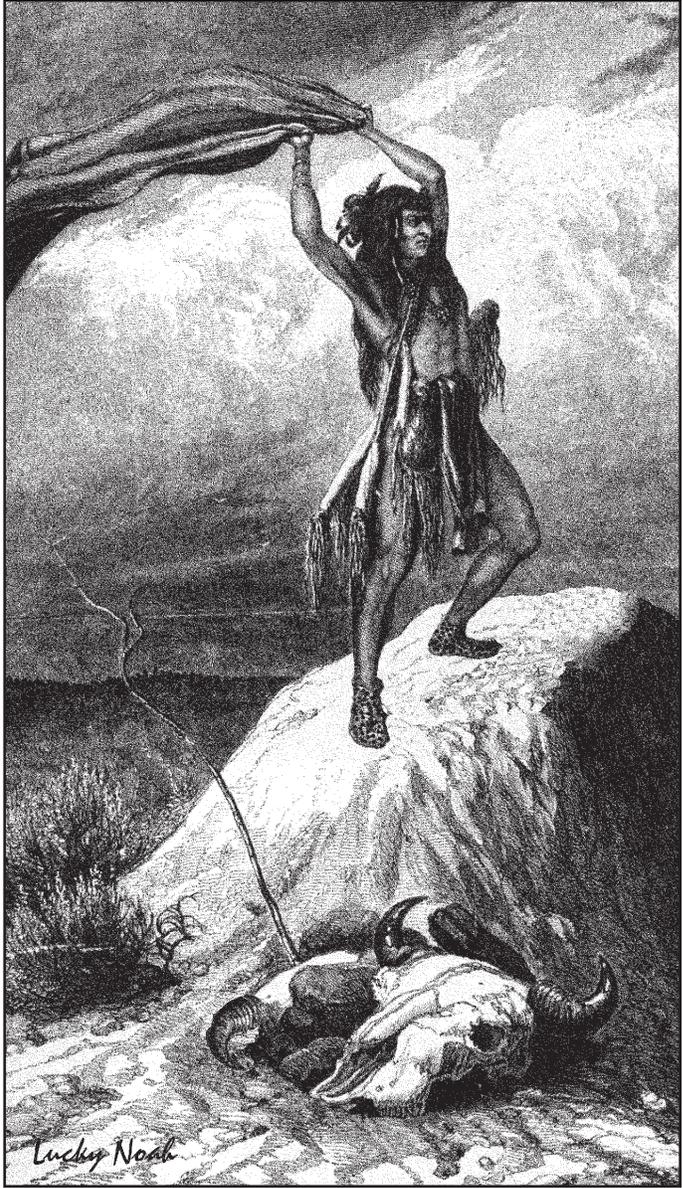
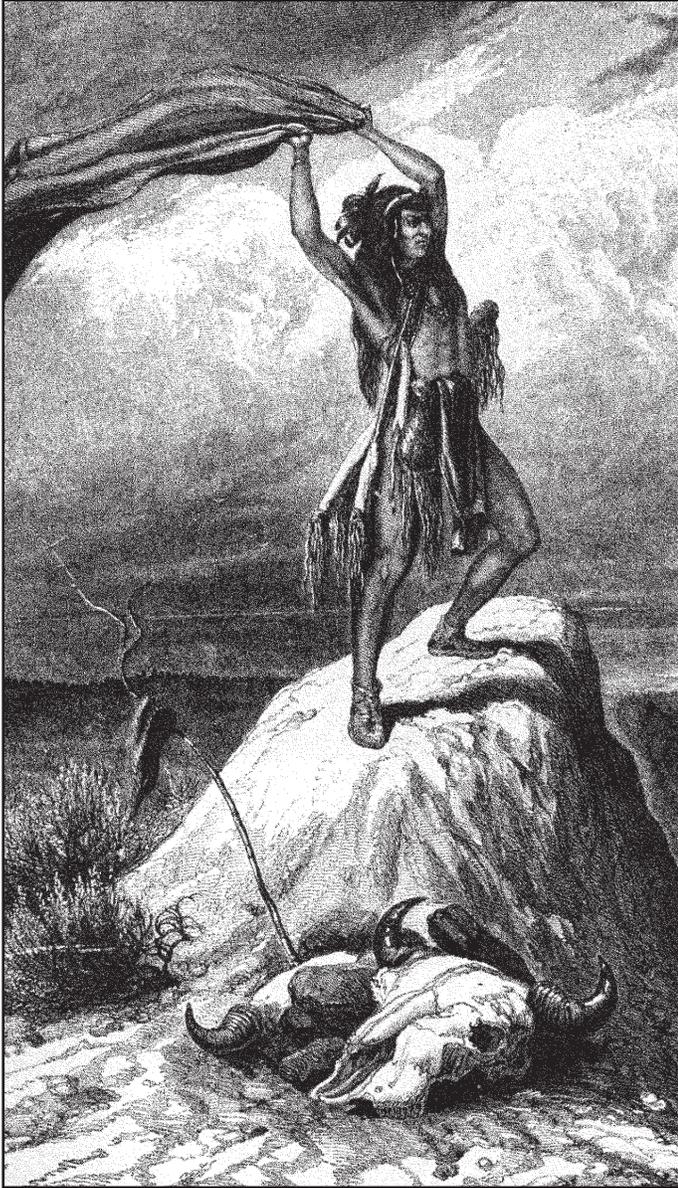


American Bison



The Fun Page

Can you find eight differences between the two pictures below?



1) The bison horn turns around 2) The hide on the stick disappears 3) The rock gets bigger 4) The man casts no shadow 5) The man's shoes have polka dots 6) He wears more bracelets 7) His headband disappears 8) Lucky Noah signs his name



Next Month's Activities

Well, we've told you all we know about the American bison, now it's your turn. This month you can pick from one of the activities listed below or make up your own bison project and send it to our Prospector Headquarters. We'll take some of your best work and print it in our next magazine. Remember to include your name, the town and school where you are from, and the name of your Prospector Club. We can't wait to see what you come up with!

Bison Trap: A bison's not like a mouse. You can't set up a little trap with some cheese and assume the animal will take the bait. If you were going to trap a bison you'd have to come up with a very clever trap. Pretend you are an inventor hired by The Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. Bill wants you to create a trap to capture a live bison that he will use in his show. How will you do it? Will you use something you learned from the Native Americans like a bison jump? Or will you come up

with a new idea of your own? Draw us a picture of your invention and write up a short explanation of how it works. We can't wait to see what you come up with!

Ice Age Giants: Many thousands



of years ago, the Earth was trapped in an ice age. During that time, many animals, like the Bison in North America were much bigger than the creatures we see today. As strange as it may seem, huge elephant like creatures called mammoths and mastodons once inhabited our continent as well as saber toothed tigers and giant sloths. Do a little research on some of these mega beasts of the past. Pick out

one of your favorites and write a few paragraphs sharing what you learned with the rest of the Prospectors.

Bison Art: Especially on the Great Plains, the bison were very important to the Native Americans' lives. To honor the great animals many tribes created art devoted to the buffalo. The Native people of North America created songs, dances, jewelry, masks, and other beautiful pieces of art inspired by bison. What do the bison inspire in you? Create a piece of art based on the North American

bison. Send us your song, drawing, poetry, or other creation and we'll feature it in our next issue.

Send in your work by December 10th to:
 Prospector Club/Lucky Noah
 Idaho State Historical Museum
 610 North Julia Davis Drive
 Boise, ID 83702
 Or email it to us at
kurtzwolfer@ishs.idaho.gov