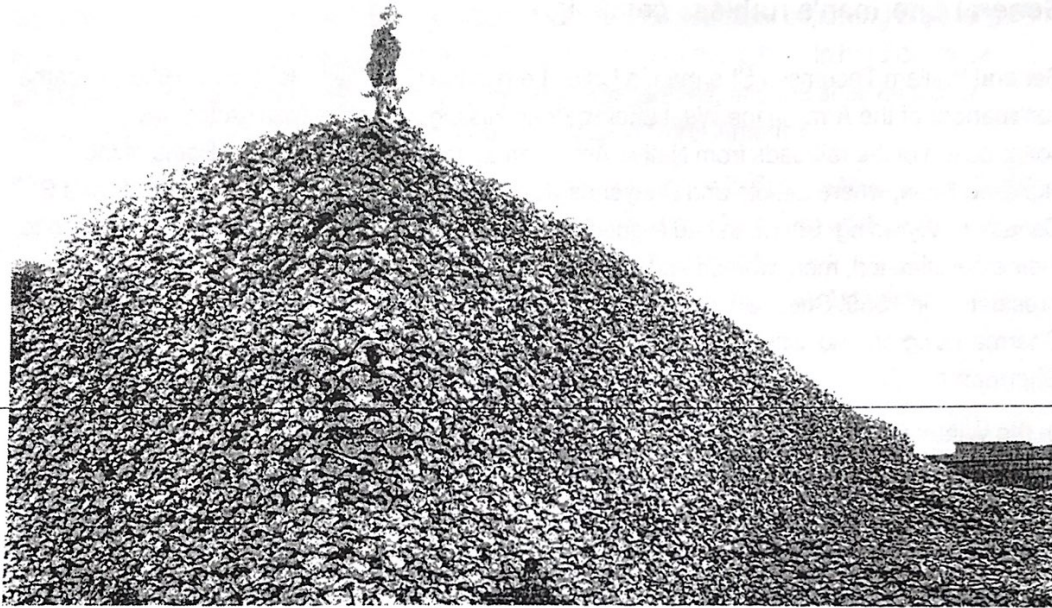


Where the Buffalo no Longer Roamed

By Smithsonian, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.08.17

Word Count 887

Level 1060L



A mountain of bison skulls in 1870. The skulls were to be ground up into fertilizer. Photo from public domain

Cheers greeted the telegram that arrived in New York City from Promontory Summit, Utah, at 3:05 p.m. on May 10, 1869. It announced the long-awaited completion of one of the greatest engineering accomplishments of the 19th century: the Transcontinental Railroad was complete. After more than six years of backbreaking labor, east officially met west with the driving of a ceremonial golden spike. In City Hall Park in Manhattan, the announcement was greeted with the firing of 100 guns.

Bells rang out across the country in celebration. In Utah, railroad officials and politicians posed for pictures. Meanwhile, the Chinese, Irish, German and Italian laborers who built the railroad were hidden from view.

Not long after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Pacific Railway Act of 1862, railroad financier George Francis Train proclaimed, "The great Pacific Railway is commenced.... Immigration will soon pour into these valleys. Ten millions of emigrants will settle in this golden land in 20 years.... This is the grandest enterprise under God!"

Yet Train could not imagine the full and tragic effect of the Transcontinental Railroad. Within 40 years, it would wipe out millions of buffalo and destroy the lives of countless Native Americans. Deadly European diseases and wars with settlers had already killed off many

Native Americans. The U.S. government had signed nearly 400 treaties with the Plains Indians. But the pressures of Manifest Destiny, the belief that it was the Americans' God-given right to settle the West, led to greater expansion as settlers continued to stream westward. The government, citing the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, broke most of the treaties and continued pushing Native Americans off their ancestral lands.

General Sherman's ruthless campaign

General William Tecumseh Sherman, a Union hero in the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865), became commander of the Army in the West after the war. His biggest job was to protect the construction of the railroads from Native American attacks. Outraged by the Battle of the Hundred Slain, where Lakota and Cheyenne warriors ambushed and killed a troop of 81 U.S. Cavalry in Wyoming, Sherman had argued for a ruthless campaign against the Sioux, "even to their extermination, men, women and children." When Ulysses S. Grant assumed the presidency in 1869, Sherman was promoted and General Philip Henry Sheridan assumed Sherman's command. Sheridan's attitudes toward Native Americans were just as tough as Sherman's.

In the Winter Campaign of 1868-1869, Sheridan set out to destroy Cheyenne encampments, destroying the Indians' food, shelter and livestock. One of the best-known surprise raids took place at dawn during a November snowstorm in Indian Territory, which is now the state of Oklahoma. Sheridan ordered the nearly 700 men of the 7th Cavalry to "destroy villages and ponies, to kill or hang all warriors, and to bring back all women and children." The soldiers charged into a Cheyenne village on the Washita River. They attacked people as they fled from their lodges. Despite orders to capture women and children, Cavalry scouts reported seeing them pursued and killed "without mercy." The event became known as the Washita Massacre.

The Transcontinental Railroad made Sheridan's call for "total war" much more effective. In the mid-19th century, it was estimated that 30 million to 60 million buffalo roamed the plains. Native Americans were careful not to overhunt. Even men like William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, who was hired to kill bison to feed rail laborers, did little to change the buffalo population. By mid-century, an estimated 200,000 buffalo were killed annually. But then the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad sped up this process of decimating the species.

Buffalo population is severely threatened

Massive hunting parties began to arrive in the West by train, and thousands of men came packing .50 caliber rifles. Unlike the Native Americans or Buffalo Bill, who killed for food, clothing and shelter, these hunters killed mostly for sport. The railroads advertised trips for "hunting by rail," where trains encountered massive herds alongside or crossing the tracks. Hundreds of men aboard the trains climbed to the roofs and took aim, or fired from their windows. They left thousands of the 1,500-pound animals where they died. Native Americans looked on with horror as the prairies filled with rotting buffalo carcasses. Some settlers made

efforts to save the buffaloes from extinction. However, Sheridan and others pointed out that destroying the buffalo meant wiping out Native Americans' main food source, and this argument won the day. The slaughter continued.

The devastation of the buffalo population signaled the end of the Indian Wars. Native Americans were pushed into reservations. By the end of the 19th century, only 300 buffalo were left in the wild. It was only then that Congress finally took action, outlawing the killing of any animals in Yellowstone National Park, where the only surviving buffalo herd could be protected. Conservationists established more wildlife preserves, and the species slowly rebounded. Today, there are more than 200,000 bison in North America.

Sheridan acknowledged the role of the railroad in destroying the buffalo, defeating the Native Americans and changing the West. In an 1878 report, he wrote: "We took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this they made war. Could anyone expect less? Then, why wonder at Indian difficulties?"
