

M Historical Reflections

PHOTOS FROM MONTANA'S PAST



MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Few places are more synonymous with buffalo than Yellowstone National Park, a fact some people might almost consider a misfortune these days. The poignancy of Yellowstone's famous buffalo being killed as they try to extend their winter range beyond park boundaries because they might spread disease to domestic cattle has captured national as well as regional attention. It is a dilemma that arises from the difficulty of trying to preserve as well as control Yellowstone's buffalo, a conundrum well known to history.

Yellowstone's earliest superintendents faced uncommon difficulties in protecting natural resources, including the park's famed buffalo. By the 1880s, poachers had so decimated Yellowstone's native herd that by some estimates only twenty animals were left. Through the 1890s, park officials struggled with how to replenish and protect them. Ultimately, they mixed calves captured in the park with cows from northwestern Montana and bulls from Texas to create a small herd maintained near Mammoth. The herd flourished and eventually had to be moved to the more spacious Lamar Valley in north central Yellowstone.

What evolved was a ranching operation, formally conceived as such in 1907 when extensive corrals and other facilities were put in place. For the next four decades and more, as Yellowstone historian Aubrey Haines explains, the park service operated the Buffalo

Ranch. "The ranching operation was terminated following World War II," Haines writes in his most recent book, *Yellowstone Place Names* (1996), "but, at its peak, it was large." Indeed, as another Yellowstone historian, John Tyers of Bozeman, notes, standard ranching practices were followed to improve stock, and the herd size was kept within a prescribed limit of about two thousand animals.

In its heyday in the 1930s, Yellowstone's Buffalo Ranch was a colorful operation, as evidenced by the photograph above in which "chief buffalo keeper" Harry Trischman, waving his hat, assistant chief herder Tom Phillips, and two other cowboys, give chase to a craggy-faced, horned member of the herd. The big roundups ended in 1939, and dismantling of ranch operations began in 1944. All artificial management of what were by then Yellowstone's three buffalo herds ended in 1952 in deference to notions of Yellowstone as a natural wilderness in which all wildlife roamed free.

Haines describes Yellowstone's Buffalo Ranch as "a failed enterprise based on a noble idea." It clearly preserved the park's herd, but it also encouraged crossbreeding between imported plains buffalo and local mountain buffalo to produce "hybrid animals not really typical of either strain." Still, it was a solution which, for more than four decades, generated a particularly colorful episode in Yellowstone history. *M*