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The Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy is a publication of the North Central Regional Planning Commission in cooperation with Kansas State University. The Journal serves the academic and applied interests of the Great Plains with a variety of topics of rural focus.

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The Buffalo Commons: Its Antecedents and Their Implications

[Deborah E. Popper](#) and [Frank J. Popper](#)

Since 1987 we have contended that the future of much of the Great Plains lies in a vision that we call the Buffalo Commons. A combination of literary metaphor, public-policy proposal, futurist prediction and ecological restoration project, the Buffalo Commons foresees a Plains whose land uses fall between cultivation on the one hand and wilderness on the other. The Buffalo Commons suggests a way for the region to avoid the excesses of its past boom-and-bust cycles--in particular, its repeated pattern of successive oversettlement, overuse, economic and ecological collapse, and



eventual population decline. To us the Buffalo Commons means that many short- and mixed-grass Plains places will have more buffalo and fewer cattle, more environmental protection and less extraction, and more ecotourism and less emphasis on conventional rural development. We have argued that because it draws on the most evocative parts of the region's past, the Buffalo Commons offers the Plains substantial future economic, environmental and community benefits (Popper and Popper 1987, 1994, 1998a, 1999, 2004, and 2006). This paper explores the antecedents of the Buffalo Commons idea and their implications for creating the region's future.

As a phrase the Buffalo Commons originated with us, but as an idea it has a long history. In the Native American period large chunks of the Plains were a Buffalo Commons. So are today's much smaller federal, state and Canadian provincial wildlife reserves for buffalo (Isenberg 2000, 165 and 178-185). But in this paper we show that throughout the Euroamerican period many prominent observers of the Plains, coming from strikingly diverse backgrounds, proposed grand-scale versions of Buffalo Commons-style preservation, conservation or set-asides--usually long before our work and in one case more than 160 years ago. The bulk of the Buffalo Commons proposals appeared after 1920, after the vast majority of the Plains was homesteaded or otherwise put into private hands. An exploration of the Buffalo Commons' predecessors aids in understanding both the reactions to it and the consequences of it.

The Buffalo Commons concept provoked much debate, misunderstanding and opposition (see, for example, Matthews 2002 [1992], Ettling 1996, and Vogel 2006), and also led, mostly indirectly, to many public and private initiatives, especially in the northern Plains. New buffalo-focused organizations emerged: for example, The reactivated American Bison Society, American Prairie Foundation, Great Plains Restoration Council (F.J. Popper chairs its board), Honor the Earth's Buffalo Commons Project, the InterTribal Bison Cooperative, and the North American Bison Cooperative. Plains acquisitions by land-preservation groups such as the Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, and the Grassland Foundation rose (for example, Stegner 2000, 46 and Herring 2006). Embryonic federal and state government efforts appeared (for instance, U.S. Department of Agriculture 1999, 1-23). There were mini-booms in the buffalo industry, buffalo artifacts and buffalo nonfiction (such as Matthews 2002 [1991], Brown 1995, Dickenson 1995, Manning 1995, Callenbach 2000 [1996] and Licht 1997).

In North Dakota alone a birding safari group, a string quartet, a Web design firm, a University of North Dakota adult outreach program, a medical heliport, and a company that built machinery for asphalt and pothole repair have been named after the Buffalo Commons. An award-winning Western novelist published *The Buffalo Commons* (Wheeler 1998), where the idea wins out a few years into the new century. A populist President of the United States, an Oklahoma Republican who is part Comanche, overrides devious bureaucrats, decadent environmentalists and hesitant ranchers in favor of a visionary superrich couple from Texas who sound a lot like Ted Turner and Jane Fonda before their divorce and who have spent eight billion dollars to buy up much of Plains Montana and Wyoming. The author, a Montanan, on the whole sees this outcome as happy. The billionaires and the salt-of-the-earth (but wealthy) ranch family at first most opposed to them end up friendly near-neighbors in the new Buffalo Commons.

The persistence of the Buffalo Commons idea over the last century and a half, the widely varying provenances and purposes of its proponents, and its growing but far-from-majority contemporary acceptance (for example, [Fargo, North Dakota] Forum 1999, Engel 2003, Rich 2004)--all reveal what we will call the Permanent Issue of Euroamerican Plains land history. The Permanent Issue is that large parts of the rural Plains are settled less securely than its communities and governments wish or admit. Euroamericans moved into the region relatively late in North American history, and sparsely even then. There have been continual settlement reversals ever since--most spectacularly the Dust Bowl, but also the slow-leak depopulation that began in the late 1880s and persists to this day. The region has never left behind its endemic cycles of boom-and-mostly-bust.

The Permanent Issue--that is, deep-seated settlement insecurity and a reluctance to face it--has clear practical and political effects. It means that across much of the Plains Euroamerican societies have never been able to reach a stable consensus about what to do with the place. They can agree, for example, that in many parts of the region the sod should never have been broken, but they are unable to agree on how to undo the effects of the sod breaking. Despite the region's high agricultural production, the Plains continually raises, in a way few American regions so persistently do, distinctive questions of use versus preservation--and if use or preservation, what kind and what combination of different possible kinds. The Plains still amounts to a physically open expanse, with settlement (and desettlement) possibilities that are at least theoretically open, and often practically open as well. Its most essential land-use issues remain undecided.

Thus the settlement insecurity and its denial continue, the Issue remains Permanent and desettlement concepts like the Buffalo Commons keep appearing and meeting opposition. Precisely because the debate over the Buffalo Commons will not go away, it is useful to place the concept in historical context. To do so we first focus on a painter and a novelist as anticipators of the Buffalo Commons and then a slew of other anticipators in an effort to understand how the Permanent Issue offers insights into the region's past and future.

George Catlin, 1841

Catlin (1796-1872) was a painter, author and early ethnographer of the American Indian. He was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, into a large family whose mother (along with her mother) had been briefly captured by Indians when she was eight and, according to her son's entry in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, remained fascinated by them. He had little formal education, became a competent outdoorsman, and briefly pursued a law career in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, during which he developed an interest in painting. In 1821 he moved to Philadelphia and in 1827 to New York to devote himself to portraiture, and over the next few years painted such figures as New York's Governor DeWitt Clinton, former First Lady Dolley Madison, and the 115 members of the 1829-1830 Virginia constitutional convention.

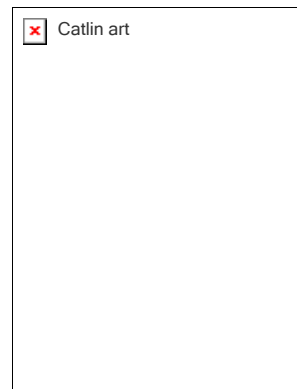


Restless with his work, he was struck in Philadelphia by the sight of a visiting delegation of Western Indians and resolved to spend the rest of his life documenting the Native heritage, which he thought was disappearing (see

Limerick 1987, 181-188 and Mitchell 1981, 98). He arrived in St. Louis in 1830 and then headed up the Missouri River in 1832. Over the decade he painted some 600 portraits of Indians, in the Plains and elsewhere, plus pictures of their villages, household practices, games and religious ceremonies. Returning to the East, he exhibited and published widely in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1852 he suffered financial losses because of speculation, had to sell his paintings and the Indian artifacts he had found on his travels, and lived in distress for the remainder of his life. He painted Central and South American Indians, resided in Europe between 1858 and 1870, and died two years later. After generations of neglect, his reputation began to revive in the 1940s. He is today regarded as the leading visual and literary chronicler of Plains Indian culture at or near its height.

Catlin's best-known book is *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, published in 1841. Its best-known chapter is "Letter--No. 31," written from the "Mouth of the Teton River, Upper Missouri" (Catlin 1973, 247, emphasis in original) near present-day Fort Pierre, South Dakota, probably in 1832 or 1833 and polished later. The chapter opens with a description of the habits of buffalo and analyzes the ways Indians and wolves hunt them. Then it goes into a "forced reverie" (Ibid., 258) on how the onslaught of white settlement threatens Indians, whites, buffalo and the land:

I could see...the Rocky Mountains, and beneath them and near their base, the vast, and almost boundless plains of grass, which were speckled with the bands of grazing buffaloes!...Hundreds and thousands were strewed upon the plains--they were flayed, and their reddened carcasses left; and about them bands of wolves, and dogs, and buzzards were seen devouring them. Contiguous, and in sight, were the distant and feeble smokes of wigwams and villages, where the skins were dragged, and dressed for white man's luxury! where they were all sold for *whiskey*, and the poor Indians laid drunk, and were crying. I cast my eyes into the towns and cities of the East, and there I beheld buffalo robes hanging at almost every door for traffic; and I saw also the curling smokes of a thousand *Stills*--and I said, "Oh insatiable man, is thy avarice such! wouldst thou tear the skin from the back of the last animal of this noble race, and rob thy fellow-man of his meat, and for it give him poison!" (Ibid., 258, 259-260, emphasis in original)



The reverie intensifies into a vision, in what became the most famous passage Catlin ever wrote:

And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has traveled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they *might* in future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wilderness, in a *magnificent park*, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! *A nation's Park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!



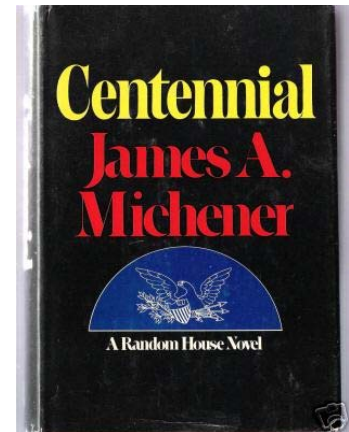
I would ask no other monument to my memory, nor any other enrolment of my name amongst the famous dead, than the reputation of having been the founder of such an institution. (Ibid., 261-262, emphasis in original)

Catlin got his wish, but in perverse ways. His 1841 call for a Plains national park led eventually to the 1872 creation of the world's first national park, Yellowstone in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, which is well outside the Plains (Mitchell 1981, 96-97, Nash 1982 [1967], 100-107, Opie 1998, 370-371 and Weber 1998). As Congress debated Yellowstone, Catlin was just down the Washington Mall at the Smithsonian Institution, trying to persuade it to buy his

existing collection and the one he had sold in the 1850s. Catlin died, penniless and largely forgotten, in Jersey City, New Jersey, ten months after President Grant signed the Yellowstone Park bill into law. Seven years the Smithsonian acquired the bulk of both Catlin collections as a gift from Catlin's heir, Sarah Poulterer Harrison, and many of his pictures still hang there.

James A. Michener, 1974

Michener (1907-1997) was a writer whose lifetime book sales, according to his *Current Biography* entries, totaled about 100 million. Raised in a foster home near Philadelphia, he received a BA from Swarthmore College and an MA from the Colorado State College of Education in Greeley (today the University of Northern Colorado), where he taught for five years and eventually became a major benefactor. As a young man he also traveled extensively, taught elsewhere, wrote three books on teaching the social sciences, and worked as an editor at the Macmillan Company in New York City. In World War II he enlisted in the Navy as a seaman third class, rose to lieutenant commander and served as a historical officer based in the Solomon Islands. His first fiction, a collection of stories called *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947), won the 1948 Pulitzer Prize and became the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, a theatrical and movie hit. He wrote long place-based, fact-packed historical novels such as *Hawaii* (1959), *Iberia* (1968), *Chesapeake* (1978), *Poland* (1983) and *Mexico* (1992). He participated in suburban Philadelphia politics as a liberal Democrat in the 1960s and 1970s, and later moved to Austin, Texas, where he died in 1997. In 1977 he won the Presidential Medal of Freedom.



In 1974 Michener published *Centennial*, a 909-page doorstop novel on the settlement of the American West. The book was the number-one best-seller on the *New York Times* list for 29 weeks. It focuses on the fictional Plains town of Centennial, Colorado, along the South Platte River, a place reputedly based on the South Platte town of Orchard, Colorado, with a population in the low hundreds, a half-hour's drive east of Greeley. The novel was intended as a contribution to the upcoming 1976 Colorado centennial and national bicentennial. The book spans geological prehistory, the Indian period, pioneer days, the Dust Bowl and Nixon-era America, and clearly builds to its last and most environmentalist chapter, "November Elegy," set in fall 1973.

The 69-page chapter's hero is Paul Garrett, 46, a widowed fourth-generation Centennial rancher who is part Arapaho and leans Republican. He is, says the narrative, "one of the most perceptive men in Colorado, and a leader in many fields" (Michener 1974, 833)--a creative cattleman, former tackle on the University of Colorado football team, Korean War veteran, confidant of the governor, chair of the state's centennial committee, deputy commissioner of its resources-and-environment agency, board member of its biggest beet company, and aficionado of Appaloosa horses and Mexican folk music. He is about to marry the lovely Flor Marquez, a divorced waitress whose grandfather was an immigrant Mexican beetworker.

He should be happy, but his mood, as the chapter title indicates, is often autumnal. Watergate, Vietnam, the energy crisis' gas lines, the then-familiar brown cloud over Denver, Top 40 radio, his fellow ranchers and his children all dismay him. Ranching has become less profitable and, separately, less fun. Centennial and the nearby towns are in steep decline:

Over dirt roads we drove to the ruined town of Line Camp, where only the grain elevator and the two stone buildings erected by Jim Lloyd more than a century before remained. Where was the sign that boasted WATCH US GROW? Where were the Library and the bank and Replogle's Grocery Store? Where was the tractor agency that used to sell sixty tractors a year? And worst of all, where were the homes that had been so painstakingly built, so painfully sustained during the years of drought?

They were gone, vanished down to the building blocks of the cellars. A town which had had a newspaper and a dozen flourishing stores had completely disappeared. Only the mournful ruins of hope remained, and over those ruins flew the hawks of autumn. (Ibid., 903)

Garrett visits his Indian relatives on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming and begins to feel better:

I'm immensely impressed with the cultural persistence of my people. We may find, and very soon, too, that if the white man wants to survive on the prairie, he'll have to go back to the permanent values of the Indian. Respect for the land. Attention to animals. Living in harmony with the seasons. Some kind of basic relationship with the soil. An awful lot of the white man's progress will come to grief when the next dry spell comes along. (Ibid., 900)

Then the solution hits him, wrapped in the political rhetoric of the time:

What the United States ought to do right now is take the money we're spending in Southeast Asia and on space shots and build a barbed-wire fence around the whole state of Wyoming. Declare it a national treasure and allow only five hundred thousand visitors a year. When you come through the gate, the officer ties a little broadcasting radio around your neck, the way Floyd Calendar did with his bears, and they'd keep track of you, and after seven days a message would go out, "Paul Garrett, driving a gray Buick with a beautiful Chicano girl. He's been inside a week. Kick him to hell out"...I say, "Declare Wyoming a national park and treat it as such." (Ibid., 901)

It is as close as Garrett or Michener comes to a policy suggestion anywhere in the book.

Understanding the Anticipators

Catlin and Michener took startlingly different paths through American life to arrive at their versions of the Buffalo Commons, but the concept has had numbers of other diverse anticipators as well. The great Montana photographer L. A. Huffman, whose depictions of the 1880s-1890s frontier created some of the classic Plains/Old West images, wrote of:

my scheme to make a great pasture of the "Flat Iron" [the Montana shortgrass prairie between the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers], to fence it with a great woven wire to banish forever the skin hunters, maybe enlist them in an army of wardens. How and where the great park gates should be guarded, how tame wild things would get--bison, antelope and elk--and too how splendid would be when the yellow-green carpet of spring had come, to see it all teeming with life. (Licht 1997, 20, quoting Brown and Felton 1955, 49, brackets from Licht)

In 1940 Victor Cahalane, then a wildlife section chief in the federal Biological Survey and formerly chief of the wildlife division of the National Park Service, proposed the creation of a buffalo-oriented national monument, a type of Park Service holding that ranks just below a national park (Cahalane 1940). He suggested a tract of almost 1200 square miles: much of Fall River County, South Dakota, and some of neighboring Sioux County, Nebraska, along the Wyoming border of both states. The area was then held largely by federal, state and county government and is now mostly the Buffalo Gap and Oglala national grasslands. In 1976, as part of a bicentennial lecture on the next two centuries of the American landscape, Daniel Luten, a University of California-Berkeley geographer and previously president of Friends of the Earth, foresaw the "establishment of a national buffalo migrating corridor 200 miles wide from Montana to Texas" (Vale 1986, 271).

Lewis Gray was at the center of federal efforts in the Dirty Thirties to reverse the Great Plains development push of the past. Paul Bonnifield (1979, 170) in his book on the Dust Bowl describes Gray as "the father of 'rational land use planning'." A land economist with a doctorate from the University of Wisconsin, Gray joined the federal government in 1919 as the first head of the Department of Agriculture's Division of Land Economics. He spent the next decades in an effort to develop and implement a coordinated federal land policy based on rational assessment of land capability. Judging much of the Great Plains submarginal for agriculture, he worked on relocating farmers and reacquiring land for the federal government to create the national grasslands. His vision of the problems and solutions for the region is perhaps best seen in *The Future of the Great Plains*, the report of the federal Great Plains Committee charged with assessing and recommending how to overcome the Dust Bowl (Kirkendall 1966, 2170 and Worster 2004 [1979], 188-196).

In the 1980s, as the rural Plains' economy again suffered and its population dropped further, proposals for Buffalo Commons-like measures became more frequent. Bret Wallach, a University of Oklahoma geographer and at the time a MacArthur Fellow, suggested that the Forest Service gradually buy out Plains farmers and ranchers while

contractually requiring them to reestablish native shortgrasses (Wallach 1985). Charles Little, a policy analyst and former editor of American Land Forum, proposed that by expanding the national grasslands, the grazing districts operated by the Bureau of Land Management, and the Department of Agriculture's national conservation reserve, the nation could retire enough land to slow the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer (most easily available in Little 1992, 80-87). Similarly, Douglas Coffman, Charles Jonkel and Robert Scott of the Institute of the Rockies in Missoula, Montana, urged that 15,000 Plains square miles of the state, about a tenth of it, be transformed into an East African-style game preserve, largely privately operated, called the Big Open (most easily available in Coffman, Jonkel and Scott 1990).

The Buffalo Commons' anticipators vary widely in their professional background, geographic range and faith in government, as well as in their methods, goals and moods. Some framed their proposal as a form of national park, but others did not. A few, such as Wovoka, the Northern Paiute founder of the Ghost Dance movement, offered a spiritual path to a restored West (Hittman 1990). He conceived the lost Plains past as Edenic and prophesied the disappearance of the whites and the return of the large buffalo herds. The Lakota followers taking up its call to dance were massacred at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890. All the anticipators regarded the region's history with some sorrow or regret. All used some form of rueful last-best-West rhetoric to justify their version of the Buffalo Commons. Yet, the earlier predecessors were primarily interested in protecting Indian or frontier culture, while the later ones concerned themselves more with preventing agricultural, demographic, economic, environmental, or wildlife decline. A few--particularly Wovoka and Gray, to some extent Michener--regarded the Plains' problems as intimately linked with those of other regions, but most made no such connection. Some of the anticipators saw their ideas as leading to entirely public or entirely private landownership of the rural Plains, but most accepted a more mixed pattern of holdings. Most did not propose specific locations for their versions of the Buffalo Commons. Many of the predecessors concentrated on the northern Plains.

All the anticipators' proposals were controversial, often offensive, to most of the Plainspeople of their time. For one thing, the proposals could seem to imply (or be taken to imply) that the Euroamericans of the region or their ancestors were mistaken in settling there and foolish to try to stay. For another, the proposals implied or explicitly stated that the Plains were fast nearing the end of a social or resource-extraction era and that new land-use or environmental practices would soon become necessary--rarely a publicly attractive proposition, but especially not in the stylistically and politically conservative Plains of any Euroamerican period. Perhaps as a direct result, few of the proposals, with the exception of Catlin's (perversely) and Gray's (partially), ever materialized on the ground.

Interestingly, the Buffalo Commons' intellectual anticipators were, in important ways, outsiders to the Plains. As far as we can tell, almost none were born in the region; nor were we. Most never lived there for long periods of time, and some, including us, never lived there at all. Michener, who did live there for a time and with the freedom of writing narrative fiction, significantly makes his Buffalo Commons proponent, Paul Garrett, the perfect Plains insider. Wovoka lived mainly in Nevada, but he prophesied for and led Indians, pluperfect Plains insiders, on their own very nonwhite quest for a Buffalo Commons, which for them amounted to a restoration. But, as the late Vine Deloria often noted, while numbers of local Native Americans have offered alternative visions for the region, few have gotten national attention. In general outsiders bring a detachment useful for looking at the Plains differently from those already there, and for reimagining the region. Their outsider status also gives them some security against retaliation by angry Plains insiders (Popper and Popper 1999, 507).

Exploring the Permanent Issue

The long-term persistence of ideas similar to the Buffalo Commons underscores, in a way that no individual proponent ever could, the Permanent Issue of Plains land history in the Euroamerican period. That is, the last century's settlement of large parts of the rural Plains has been insecure--sparse, spasmodic and fundamentally unstable--and Americans and Canadians have generally tried to avoid confronting these facts. They have lived on the Plains in a crisis-prone style over long stretches of time. They keep making what the eminent North Dakota historian Elwyn Robinson called the Too-Much Mistake (Robinson 1966, VII and passim), oversettling the region and overmastering the land.

Nature and the economy inevitably rebel. Periodic crises--the 1880s-1890s when blizzards and economic panics uprooted new settlers, the 1930s Dust Bowl and the ongoing one that began in the 1980s--always recur. The

inexorable, cumulative results are decades-long retreats in conventional agriculture, declines in population, a regional cultural tendency to nostalgia for the period just before the latest crisis, and--most important--the continual reappearance of desettlement ideas like the Buffalo Commons. To paraphrase Wallace Stegner, the Permanent Issue repeatedly makes much of the Plains a geography of unrewarded hope.

The Permanent Issue has become so urgent (and so publicized) that over the last generation it has, for the first time since Dust Bowl days, broken through to national popular culture. The 1990 film hit *Dances with Wolves*, starring and directed by Kevin Costner, amounts to the world's first Buffalo Commons movie (Popper 1991). The film, which won seven Oscars, including for best picture and screenplay of the year, is loosely based on a novel of the same name (Blake 1988). Costner plays a wounded Union army lieutenant, a loner who in 1863 asks to be sent to the frontier "before it is gone." He becomes the sole occupant of a ramshackle Plains outpost. He hunts buffalo with the local Sioux (Comanche in the novel), who befriend him. He takes the Sioux name Dances with Wolves and goes native. He marries a white woman, played by Mary McDonnell, whom the Sioux found wandering as a child after her parents died in a Pawnee attack and raised as one of their own. The movie ends with a scene not in the novel: Costner and McDonnell headed by themselves over a hill, white Indians trying to escape the advance of white settlement (and the special wrath that the Army reserved for officers gone native).

The movie's conclusion in effect represents an alternative future for the Plains and for America. Suppose that in the 1860s and 1870s more Americans had empathized with the Sioux and other Plains tribes. Suppose that the country had made a national decision not to oust the tribes and occupy the Plains, but instead to leave most of it as it was. Would history have been different? Would the nation have escaped the cyclical, additive disasters that the Plains have suffered ever since? Would it have avoided the Permanent Issue? The answers that the movie offers over and over are yes. For instance, when the Army briefly imprisons Costner late in the film before the Sioux rescue him, he tells his captors, "There is nothing for you to do here." *Dances with Wolves* shows the nation the Plains that it has lost. The Buffalo Commons and comparable ideas show how it might still regain them.

A similar approach appears in Ivan Doig's 1990 book *Ride with Me, Mariah Montana*, a Buffalo Commons novel (Doig 1990). Doig, one of the West's leading literary voices over the last generation, has written a multigenerational family trilogy. The McCaskills are a Montana ranching family of distinct Scotch descent that lives near Gros Ventre, a fictional town on the northwest edge of the U.S. Plains. The first book takes place in 1889, the second in 1939 and this one in 1989, the Montana state centennial. (An unexpected fourth McCaskill installment, set in the present, appeared in 1999.)

Ride with Me, Mariah Montana offers a Big Sky Country road novel. The narrator is Jick, the aging McCaskill patriarch, who reluctantly travels around Montana in a too-small Winnebago with his daughter Mariah, a newspaper photographer, and her ex-husband, a reporter. The journalistic pair is working on a centennial historical series for a paper that much resembles the *Missoulian*. The family ranch is failing. Most of its neighbors have sold out to large Eastern agribusiness interests, what Jick likes to call "corporaiders." His children are uninterested in the ranch. He is heartsick over what to do with it. He feels elegiac and has continual "memory storms" about his youth. He recalls the Depression: "Here fifty years later there still was no goodbye to that grief of being driven from the land" (*Ibid.*, 234). "I don't have a paying occupation," he tells a nosy TV reporter. "I'm a rancher" (*Ibid.*, 119).

At the end of the novel (and the trilogy) Jick finds a Buffalo Commons solution. He announces at Gros Ventre's centennial celebration that he is selling the ranch to the *Nature Conservancy*, with the proviso that it restock buffalo on it. The ranch is to be renamed the Toussaint Rennie Memorial Bison Range, after a Méti who as an old man in the 1930s told the young Jick of his memories of 1870s Montana. "When all the buffalo were here," Toussaint said, "the country looked like one robe" (*Ibid.*, 39). Jick even gets back at the nearest corporaider:

After all, WW Inc. wanted to see maximum animal units on this piece of land, didn't it? It was about to have them. Buffalo. A whole neighboring ranchful. Right in here next to a corporate cow pasture...original inhabitants of this prairie, nice big rambunctious butting ones. Let the sonofabitching Double W tend *its* fences against those, for a change. (*Ibid.*, 314, emphasis in original)

Jick moves in with the woman who in the 1930s had jilted his now dead older brother. It is an overall upbeat ending. At the family scale, Jick has resolved the Permanent Issue. He tells the Nature Conservancy agent, "Happy next

hundred years" (*Ibid.*, 314).

Annie Proulx, whose novels and short stories are firmly situated in harsh times and places, offers her own version of a Buffalo Commons novel in her *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), set of the town of Woolybucket in the Texas Panhandle as concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) expand into the Midwest and Great Plains. Its main character, Bob Dollar, a sort of naïf, is hired by Global Pork Rind to worm his way into the hearts of the region's widows, who will then willingly sell their land at bargain basement prices, ostensibly for luxury home sites, but really for CAFOs.

Dollar, however, is the one who gets charmed. He comes to accept the views of LaVon, who rents him space in her bunkhouse, and as she tells him:

the panhandle was the most complicated part of North America, the last piece of Texas to be settled. "Light soil, drought, bad wind, terrible heat, tornadoes and blue northers. And you never can tell which one is comin [sic] next. It's a weather place." She implied that the remote and level land, tempestuous blasts, tornadoes drilling down from super cells and the peculiar configuration of the territory worked with the wind to blow away the human chaff, leaving the heavy kernels. It was defeat to give up and pull out. It took sticking qualities—humor, doggedness, strength—to stay. (*Ibid.*, 102)

Dollar's regular letters to his employer carefully and witlessly report all his observations and progress. He explains why he hasn't yet succeeded in his task, and suggests that perhaps they might want to rethink their objective. He tells them:

I have found out that bad droughts go with the region, this is where the big dustbowl was...Water is something to worry about. Although there is still a lot of water in the Ogallala, it is shrinking very fast. One lady I met said "I'm not worried, they will find another source, icebergs flown in or something, they always do." But I don't think they will be flying in icebergs in the near future...I'll just mention in closing that the entrepreneurial spirit is strong here. Most people live in small ranch houses and drive old trucks, they are conservative and frugal, and at first you think they are still pioneers. But I am finding out there is big money in the banks and big money invested in agricultural machinery and land. The trouble is, it will all come to an end in another generation as the young people do not wish to be here. Only the Mexicans (you don't hardly see them) are poor. There are *no* black people. Maybe you know all this. (*Ibid.*, 94-95, emphasis in original)

This is one of Proulx's lightest books, but it is still a contest of greed and decline, that is, until the end when a Buffalo Commons alternative emerges. As a large piece of property seems about to change hands, *Ace* (of the title) moves to the center. Always a mysterious character, seemingly a neer-do-well idly hanging around the Old Dog Café, he puts together a consortium to buy the land and run buffalo. The Poppers are even invoked. Bob Dollar is told:

"Ace is too rich to stand. He is a petrodollar billionaire. And see, him and Coolbroth Fronk and LaVon and the Shattles and Brother Mesquite and me and a bunch of other people is with him. He's got it in mind a buy up all the farms and ranches and the hog places he can, and politicians, too, if that's what it takes to git them on our side. We're goin a take down the fences and open her back up, run bison in the panhandle. Brother Mesquite's goin [sic] a help with it. We got them Poppers comin [sic] down a talk at church next Thursday. They're already doin [sic] this kind a thing in the Dakotas. Why not the panhandle? There's even a buffalo market now that Ted Turner's openin [sic] up them bison burger stands. Things is goin [sic] a change." (*Ibid.*, 349-340)

Bob Dollar has made his own good impression, and so invited to be part of the project, selling Prairie Restoration Homesteads, each sold with a covenant to maintain habitat for prairie species. This is clearly intended as a glorious end, but Proulx is too much the realist to stop there. Instead she leaves the actual outcome ambiguous, and puts the doubts in Bob Dollar's mouth.

How could they be so hopeful? How could they believe that prairie dogs would tame the urge to pump, to plow and crop, to build low white bunkers with giant fans and stinking lagoons?...More likely, *Ace* would fail, for even he could not afford to buy up the entire top of Texas... Then the place would

turn into a massive hog farm, millions of hog bunkers and scummy lagoons spread across the old plain, waiting for what would come next... But maybe Ace was right and this was the beginning of something huge. (*Ibid.*, 358)

One could conceive of clearly unhappy outcomes for the Permanent Issue, resolutions that would offer debased versions of the Buffalo Commons--the region as a Disneyfied 19th-century theme park, say, or as a vast source of agribusiness fast-food McBuffalo Burgers. These images have not appeared (yet) in popular culture. But Tom Clancy, the best-selling techno-thriller writer, has imagined what one might call the Final Solution to the Permanent Issue. His 1998 novel *Rainbow Six* envisions an ecoterrorist conspiracy in which a charismatic billionaire and his ex-wife, who is the President's science advisor (and has three doctorates), use the husband's malevolent molecular-biology company to strike for environmentalist world domination.

The company facility in central Kansas develops the Ebola-Shiva virus that will in a few months kill all but one person in a thousand (or possibly ten thousand) unless vaccinated. The company plans to keep the vaccine from everyone except a few attuned environmentalists, scientists and other sympathizers with useful skills. The aim is a global biowar Holocaust intended to start humanity anew. An evil epidemiologist named Killgore (!) muses on the future:

There'd be a division of labor, of course. Farmers to grow the food and tend the cattle they'd eat--or hunters to shoot the buffalo, whose meat was healthier, lower in cholesterol. The buffalo should come back pretty fast, he thought. Wheat would continue to grow wild in the Great Plains, and they'd grow fat and healthy, especially since their predators had been so ruthlessly hunted down that they'd be slower to catch up. Domestic cattle would thrive also, but they'd ultimately be edged out by the buffalo, a much hardier breed better suited to free life. Killgore wanted to see that, see the vast herds that had once covered the West. He wanted to see Africa, too...What a beautiful New World it would be, once you eliminated the parasitic species that was working so hard to destroy it. (*Clancy 1998*, 339)

Four hundred pages later, at the end of the book, a secret NATO-powers antiterrorist force based in rural England and led by American continuing characters in Clancy's multi-novel Jack Ryan saga, foils the plot. It maroons the conspirators without tools, supplies or even clothes in a suitably untouched part of the Brazilian Amazon. As he leaves the plotters to die, the force commander tells them, "You want to be in harmony with nature. Go harmonize." (*Ibid.*, 738) *Rainbow Six* hit the number 1 spot on the *New York Times* best-seller list in its first week.

Explaining the Permanent Issue

Aside from its anticipators, the Buffalo Commons has a more indirect line of intellectual descent. Here its prime predecessor is Frederick Jackson Turner, the great University of Wisconsin (later Harvard) historian. In 1893, in one of the most influential essays an American academic ever wrote, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," he declared the nation's frontier closed, or at least closing (*Turner 1962 [1920], 1-38*). He began his essay and based his declaration on a finding of the 1890 Census:

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled land has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement, etc., it cannot, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports. (*Ibid.*, 1)

Turner and the Census shared a precise demographic concept of the frontier: it was a large contiguous territory with less than six but more than two people per square mile--a density equivalent, for example, to Texas having at most 1.572 million people, less than Houston's 1990 population. Turner and the Census tracked the frontier's eastern boundary, the line that separated the more densely populated area with more than six people per square mile from the frontier area to its west with less than two. The late-nineteenth-century Census Office, using new statistical and mapping tools, traced the westward march of this national frontier line. The Census showed it moving from the Appalachians in 1790 across the Midwest and finally to the east edge of the Great Plains, the 98th meridian, by 1880. But the 1890 Census was the first that could not find a clear edge to demarcate settled from unsettled land.

The Census and Turner mostly welcomed the disappearance of the frontier line, which they interpreted as showing

that Americans were settling their nation. The disappearance represented progress of the sort the Victorian Era cherished. It suggested that the United States was entering a new, more mature state of development. But, as we and a colleague have argued extensively elsewhere, Turner overstated the 1890 Census finding and overanticipated the closing of the frontier (Lang, Popper and Popper 1995, Lang, Popper and Popper 1997 and Popper and Popper 1998b). Historians since have not grasped the consequences of his misreading.

The frontier, as the 1890 Census noted, was breached, but in fact that Census and all later ones show it surviving on a large scale. In the 1990 Census, for instance, even if one excludes Alaska, the country still has over 900,000 square miles--nearly a third of its Lower 48 area--in counties with less than six people per square mile. Within this expanse 400,000 square miles, almost a seventh of the nation's Lower 48 area, lies in counties with less than two people per square mile. The pattern persists in the 2000 U.S. Census and the latest *Estimates of Population*. The national frontier line still falls at the east edge of the Plains. The large-scale settlement that Turner and the 1890 Census expected to close the frontier never actually happened.

In the twentieth century the Lower 48 frontier moved east, retreating from the Pacific Coast and the Southwest and shifting to the Plains. Several of Turner's most prominent successors as observers of the American West noted the insecurity of settlement in the Plains and the frontier's survival there--for example, the geographer Isaiah Bowman, the ecologist and botanist Paul B. Sears, and the historian Walter Prescott Webb in the 1930s and the rural sociologist Carl Frederick Kraenzel in the 1950s (Bowman 1931, 122-142, Sears 1959 [1935], 45-59 and 112-120, Webb 1959 [1931], 3-9, 485-489 and 507-515, and Kraenzel 1955). Interestingly, two of Turner's three 1930s successors--Bowman and Webb--wrote before the Dust Bowl.

Turner and his successors amount to a collateral line of intellectual descent for the Buffalo Commons. Since the 1890s, Turner has become an American icon, so it is not surprising that the figures in the line of descent that he created proved less controversial than those in the direct line. Bowman, Sears, Webb and Kraenzel were nonetheless pointing out the limitations of Plains settlement in their time; they were aware of the Permanent Issue. In the 1980s we joined the conversation by arguing that settlement on much of the Great Plains is "the largest, longest-running agricultural and environmental miscalculation in American history" (Popper and Popper 1987, 12). We in effect maintained that the Buffalo Commons represents a key case of the reemergence of the frontier (see also Matthews 2002 [1992], Duncan 1993, 268-278, and Williams 2001). Recent on-the-ground trends in Plains desettlement bear us out. From 1980 to 1990, the number of Western counties with less than six people per square mile grew from 388 to 397, with most of the new ones in the Plains. The number with less than two people per square mile grew from 144 to 150, again mostly in the Plains (Lang, Popper and Popper 1995, 299). In 2000, the total number of Western counties with fewer than six people per square mile stood at 400. In the Plains, the frontier is not only surviving, it is expanding. Kansas actually had a larger frontier in 1990 than it did in 1890. Nebraska and South Dakota lost only a tenth of their frontier, and North Dakota less than 30 percent of its frontier, between 1890 and 1990. Together these four Plains states lost less than a sixth of their 1890 frontier area by 1990 (*Ibid.*, 301). Between 1990 and 2000, Kansas, Nebraska, and North Dakota's frontier each gained one county and Panhandle Texas added two.

Turner as a historical figure occupies several ironic positions here. He created the modern concept of the frontier, but thought the place was vanishing. As a good Victorian he saw peopling the frontier as an irreversible lock-step process, but twentieth- and twenty-first-century experience decisively suggests otherwise. He would not have thought the Permanent Issue an issue at all, in the Plains or elsewhere, but his work allows an explanation of how and why it persists in the region. Desettlement, settlement retreat, the Buffalo Commons or any of its ancestors over the last century and more would have been alien concepts to him. He believed that the American frontier was disappearing, yet devised the conceptual framework that today allows us to consider the Buffalo Commons as Exhibit A of its survival and expansion.

There is a further Turner twist. He and the late-nineteenth-century Censuses saw the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner 1962 [1920], 3). The frontier was a seemingly temporary zone between wilderness, which had less than two people per square mile, and settlement, which had more than six. The frontier represented a demographic beachhead, where a (presumably white) population arrived, multiplied, produced an economy and culture, and created the conditions for settlement. Settlement in turn consisted of categories of 6-17, 18-44, 45-89 and over 90 people per square mile. Each category corresponded to specific economic activities. The

1890 Census report section, "Progress of the Nation," explicitly spelled out the links. Densities of less than 45 indicated agricultural societies. Turner and the Census believed that the frontier (2-6) meant a rudimentary agriculture. More settlement meant an intensified agriculture that would spread and deepen until nearly all available arable land was in production. A density of 18-45 indicated the agriculture was highly developed and successful. Urban areas would develop alongside the farms, serving as their retail centers but having denser populations. Densities greater than 45 indicated industrial societies, and a figure greater than 90 meant advanced industrial activity. To Turner and the Census all the transitions to higher densities were an inevitable part of settlement.

But the frontier line's post-1890 failure to move west of the 98th meridian defeated these expectations and put the Plains in an odd land-use limbo. Frontier densities create landscapes that are physically open, perhaps especially in the Plains where grasslands offer expansive, ocean-like vistas. Yet unlike the frontier parts of regions farther west--say, the Great Basin, the Pacific Northwest or Alaska--where the frontier is largely held by public-land agencies, the Great Plains frontier is mostly in private hands. It is a frontier mainly put to market uses rather than non-market ones. It is therefore a particularly difficult place for environmental or desettlement initiatives to succeed, even as the settlement insecurity keeps producing them. The Permanent Issue springs from this conflict. It is in fact the ultimate source of the Permanent Issue.

Thus the frontier qualities of the Plains lead to sharper political tensions about the region's future than they do in other frontier regions. The Plains landscape appears to offer vast possibilities, including for preservation. Yet its largely private ownership means that those who live on and work the land make choices that constrain possibilities, especially for preservation. Moreover, the local population or conservatives or anti-environmentalists elsewhere can always credibly argue that the Plains' very openness and seeming lack of landscape variation make preservation unneeded either in general or in particular places. This point may also help explain why so few of the Buffalo Commons' anticipators make site-specific proposals. But the overall result is that ideas like the Buffalo Commons continue to appear and to meet inevitably strong resistance. The Permanent Issue persists.

Extending the Permanent Issue

In 1953, in what became *A Sand County Almanac*, the great conservationist Aldo Leopold writes that to many tourists Plains Kansas is "tedious. They see the endless corn, but not the heave and grunt of ox teams breaking the prairie. History, for them, grows on campuses. They look at the low horizon, but they cannot see it, as de Vaca did, under the bellies of the buffalo" (Leopold 1970 [1953], 180). In an important sense Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, the sixteenth-century Spanish explorer, may have been one of the last whites to see the Plains whole (Flores 1999, 15-26). In the Euroamerican period changing economies, cultures and settlement styles never coalesce into a single vision for the Plains. None of them--economies, cultures, settlement styles or visions--really work across the entire region. The changes that do happen simply spur more Permanent-Issue conflict between opposing visions--that is, over the intensity, location and mechanisms of use or preservation.

On the pre-Turner frontier, George Catlin and Wovoka seek to stop development that restrains the Native population and adapts the Plains for Euroamericans. A Euroamerican future for the Plains--Manifest Destiny--defines the region's possibilities as largely agricultural. Catlin's and Wovoka's protests mark the end of the purely Native American Plains. After Wounded Knee active Indian resistance becomes impossible. Euroamerican land uses that steadily proliferate--Turner's land uses that close the frontier--seemingly win out.

But in truth, they do not. The frontier survives. After 1893 the anticipators of the Buffalo Commons on both its direct and collateral lines of descent respond, not as Catlin, Wovoka and Turner did, to white inroads, but to white departures. The later anticipators concern themselves with agricultural instability, environmental damage, economic failure and desettlement. Lewis Gray's call for national land policies that would establish the boundary of agriculture and eliminate submarginal lands from production offers a 1920s-1930s example. In the 1930s, so do the Resettlement Administration actions or the federal interventions that deprivatize farm and ranch lands and return them to their federal pre-homesteading ownership by creating the national grasslands. All these steps move toward the frontier rather than away from it.

After the 1930s, Plains population losses become less pronounced, but they persist. Technology allows the region's farmers and ranchers to multiply their impacts on the land while employing ever-fewer people. The landscape

empties; the frontier endures and expands. James Michener in the 1970s has Paul Garrett call for declaring Wyoming a Buffalo Commons, an eternal frontier. The frontier, the Buffalo Commons, its anticipators and the Permanent Issue they exemplify lie deep in the soul of the Plains. They offer material for recalling the Plains' pasts and imagining its futures. They show why so many of us believe that, in the words of one of the American West's leading historians, "In bison restoration on the Great Plains lies 21st century restoration's equivalent of Yellowstone or the Wilderness Act" (Flores 1997, 7).



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Published December 31, 2006 © Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy .

