

Blue Goose Alliance  
Albuquerque, NM

**Origins of Founding Bison at the National Bison Range, MT**  
By William Reffalt

When William T. Hornaday, Director of the New York Zoological Park and President of the American Bison Society (ABS), traveled to Kalispell, Montana in 1909 to negotiate the purchase and delivery of a founding bison herd for the newly established National Bison Range (NBR), he kept a promise and launched a major conservation program. Congress and President Roosevelt had already fulfilled the Government's part of the arrangement, passing an establishing statute and appropriating money for land purchase and fencing of the carefully selected government refuge area.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in U.S. history an entire conservation unit was purchased with U.S. Treasury funds—established by Roosevelt as directed by the U.S. Congress—a hallmark and firm cornerstone for the story of wildlife restoration that would unfold in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The search for precise origins of the 40 founding bison released into the NBR pastures follows a far less certain path than the well-documented account of the Refuge's establishment. One major contribution to origin stories is the book: *I Will Be Meat for My Salish...*, published in 2001 by the Salish Kootenai College and MT Hist. Soc., which contains numerous oral traditions documented by the Federal Writers Project of the Depression Era.<sup>2</sup> The well-informed conclusion of Robert Bigart, the Editor, is found in the Introduction: "The origins of the [Pablo-Allard] herd are obscure. The primary sources and oral traditions record various accounts of how the herd started."<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, literature on the decline and resurrection of the American Buffalo often contain interpretive accounts of the first few buffalo obtained by Charles Allard and Michel Pablo to begin a commercial buffalo venture on the Jocko Indian Reservation<sup>4</sup> in the Mission Valley of Montana. The stories are centered on Samuel Walking Coyote, a Pend d'Oreille Indian from the Jocko Reservation who, with his wife, was hunting in the plains of northwest Montana *circa* 1872-1877 (depending on the individual account). The following is based on an account published in a popular sportsmen's weekly in 1902 by a person directly involved in the story.<sup>5</sup>

During his stay on the plains, Walking Coyote became enamored with a young woman of the Blackfeet nation, and soon made arrangements with her family for her hand in

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<sup>1</sup> Hornaday, William T, 1909. *Report of the President on the Founding of the Montana National Bison Herd*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report of the American Bison Society, pp. 1-17, NY; Ruth, Clara, 1921. *History of the Montana National Bison Range, Saunders and Lake Counties, Montana*. Compiled from records in the Bureau of Biological Survey. U.S. Biol. Survey, 27 pp., mimeographed (Orig. with photos omitted from Xerox copy made Jan. 20, 1966, U.S. FWS); Palmer, T.S. 1917. *Our National Herds of Buffalo*. 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Am. Bison Soc., pp. 46-48, NY.

<sup>2</sup> Whealdon, Bon I., et al, Robert Bigart (Ed.), 2001. *I Will Be Meat for My Salish – The Montana Writers Project and the Buffalo of the Flathead Indian Reservation*. Salish Kootenai College Press, Pablo, MT and Montana Historical Society Press, Helena, MT, 279 pp.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> As named in the original Hell Gate Treaty of 1855, now known as the Flathead Reservation.

<sup>5</sup> Aubrey, Charles, 1902. *Montana's Buffalo – The Pablo-Allard Herd – The Origin of the Herd*. Forest and Stream Publ. Co., NY, July 5, p. 6; Dary, David A., 1974. *The Buffalo Book - The Full Saga of the American Animal*. Sage Books, Swallow Press, Inc., IL, Chap. 16, pp. 222-225.

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marriage. This not only led to turmoil with his first wife, but broke a taboo established by the Catholic Mission on the Reservation, adopted and vigorously enforced by his tribe with fines and flogging. Domestic matters worsened and Samuel increasingly longed to return home; he eventually sought counsel from a trusted Trader in the area who suggested that Samuel annul the marriage and think about a peace offering for the Jesuit Fathers at the Reservation's Mission as atonement and to lessen any punishment. The offering became several bison calves, caught either by lasso or enticed to follow Samuel's horses to his camp, from an area most likely near the Milk River in Canada. After a period of nursing and imprinting the calves, Samuel and his wife made the return trip through the mountains to the Reservation, but soon after arriving he was discovered and beaten by Tribal "soldiers" as punishment for his well-known transgression. Samuel resolved to keep his buffalo calves, and for a number of years grazed them near his home, about 10 miles south of the St. Ignatius Mission. In about 1882 (or 1884), Samuel sold his buffalos, now numbering 13 or 14 animals, to Charles Allard and his partner Michel Pablo for \$2000 in gold coins. Samuel died in about 1886.<sup>6</sup>

Both Mr. Allard and Mr. Pablo were half-breed Indians, and both were married to Indian members of the Jocko Reservation. Mr. Allard was born in Seattle and his Indian affiliation is not known; Mr. Pablo was born of a Mexican father and Piegan (a major division of the Blackfeet) mother.<sup>7</sup> Under their partnership, the combined herd of cattle they grazed on the Jocko Reservation and the growing herd of buffalo were commercially successful.<sup>8</sup> In all likelihood the partners acquired buffalo other than just those from Samuel.<sup>9</sup> In about 1893, the partners bought twenty-six buffalos (and 18 cattalos) from C.J. "Buffalo" Jones of Kansas. Jones, a man with many projects including a large bison herd started with his capture of 57 calves in Texas, had suffered a sharp reversal of fortune and was broke. However, in 1895-96 he bought his animals back when his finances recovered—thus, the mixing of diverse genetic material from that acquisition occurred at most during one or two breeding seasons.<sup>10</sup> In 1896, Allard suffered a knee injury from which he suddenly died that year. At the time of his death, the partners' herd contained 300 buffalo. In 1901, the Allard family called for settlement of the estate, which by then included additional buffalos. That same year Mrs. Allard sold her share, 36 buffalos, to Charles Conrad, a rancher near Kalispell, MT. Shortly after, the other Allard family members sold most of their shares to Mr. Howard Eaton, of Wyoming.<sup>11</sup> Mr. Eaton was essentially a "buffalo broker" who sold the animals in many outlets

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<sup>6</sup> Aubrey, 1902, *Ibid.* p. 6; Monroe, J. B., 1902, *Samuel, the Pend d'Oreille*, p. 6, same issue; Dary, 1974, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-225.

<sup>7</sup> Monroe, J. B. 1902. *Montana's Buffalo – The Pablo-Allard Herd.* Forest and Stream, July 12, pp. 24-26; Haines, Francis, 1970. *The Buffalo.* T.Y. Crowell and Co., NY, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> Isenberg, Andrew C., 2000. *The Destruction of the Bison.* Cambridge Univ. Press, p. 182; Monroe, 1902, Forest and Stream. *Ibid.*, p. 26; Hornaday, 1909, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Whealdon, et al, and Bigart (Ed.), 2001, *op. cit.*, Chaps. 4 and 5.

<sup>10</sup> Garretson, Martin S. 1938. *The American Bison – The Story of its Extermination as a Wild Species and its Restoration Under Federal Protection.* NY Zool. Soc., NY, pp. 218-219; Haines, 1970, *op. cit.* p. 222; Dary, 1974, *op. cit.*, pp. 222-225.

<sup>11</sup> Grinnell, George Bird, 1925. *The American Bison in 1924.* In: Hunting and Conservation – The Book of the Boone and Crockett Club. Yale Univ. Press, CT, p. 405; Anon. 1905. *Howard Eaton's Buffalo.* Forest and Stream, April 20, p. 334; Haines, 1970, *op. cit.*, p. 222; Dary, 1974, *op. cit.* pp. 222-225.

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(including 18 cow buffalo from the Allard estate to Yellowstone National Park in 1902).<sup>12</sup>

During an interview by a reporter from *Forest and Stream* in 1902, Mr. Pablo indicated his greatest worry at that time was splitting up the herd by sale of the Allard ownership.<sup>13</sup> His worry was prophetic and soon nearly half the herd was gone. The next disruption would be a finale for his cattle and bison operations—the passage in 1904 of a federal law requiring final allotments of land to tribal members and opening of remaining reservation lands to settlement under general public land laws. This would mean the loss of all open and free grazing within the Reservation. Mr. Pablo contacted the U.S. Congress attempting to sell his buffalo herd, but that was rejected as too costly at \$250 per buffalo. Mr. Pablo next went to Canadian officials seeking grazing privileges for his herd. Canada however was more interested in buying the animals and in 1906 a deal for the entire herd was struck. Mr. Pablo's subsequent roundup resulted in shipping 709 bison during 1906-1912 from a rail head near Ravalli (in the southern part of the Reservation) to Canada. The total payment from Canada to Mr. Pablo was \$177,000, or \$250 per buffalo. An estimated 75 bison were left on the reservation, too wily to be herded or caught, but eventually killed individually and outside the law. The largest herd of plains bison in the U.S. had become the property of the Canadian Government.<sup>14</sup>

In the summer of 1909, Hornaday negotiated final arrangements for the ABS purchase of bison from the Conrad estate in Kalispell, MT. Following passage of the NBR establishing act in the previous May, the Bison Society had launched a fund raising campaign with a goal of \$10,000 using direct mail, and newspaper solicitations. The donations were from people from 29 states (of the 46 States then in the Union), the District of Columbia, Canada, England, and France. When the drive closed in 1909, the Fund contained \$10,560.50—with the largest contributions centered in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Even school children had been inspired to donate scarce lunch money to the popular cause.<sup>15</sup>

Bison on the Flathead Reservation were still being rounded up for rail shipment and that effort would continue until after the National Bison Range and its founding herd of bison were in place (37 animals were released in Oct. 1909, and 3 more in Dec. 1910). Mrs. Alicia Conrad, heir to her late husband's estate, had sold 34 bison to the ABS and also donated two animals to the new government herd, a bull and cow which she characterized as the finest of the Conrad herd. Other bison were also donated to the National Bison Range, two from Charles Goodnight in Texas, and three from the Corbin bison herd at Blue Mountain Preserve in New Hampshire, although one of Goodnight's animals died before release.<sup>16</sup> The origin of these other donated animals is generally known, although

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<sup>12</sup>Anon., *Forest and Stream*, 1905, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup>Aubrey, *Forest and Stream*, 1902, *op. cit.* p. 6

<sup>14</sup>Dary, 1974, *op. cit.*, pp. 225; Garretson, 1938, *op. cit.*, p. 216; Grinnell, 1925, *op. cit.*, p. 393-94; Palmer, 1917, *op. cit.* pp. 58-59; Hewitt, C. Gordon, 1921. *The Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada*. Chas Scribner's Sons, NY, p. 134; Isenberg, 2000, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup>Hornaday, 1909, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-13.

<sup>16</sup>Garretson, 1938, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-09; Ruth, 1921, *op. cit.* pp. 5-8; Palmer, 1917, *op. cit.* p.p. 46-48; Grinnell, 1925, *op. cit.*, p. 368.

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the Corbin herd had more than a single source of founders and the specific animals donated to the NBR came without descriptions of parentage. The Goodnight animals had originated with his personal capture of bison in the area of Palo Duro Canyon, Texas where he ranched for many years.<sup>17</sup>

The health and genetic diversity of the bison on the NBR attest to the soundness of the selected original animals. The National Bison Range herd is considered vital to the diversity and long-term well-being of bison within the Government herds.<sup>18</sup> Complete and accurate knowledge of the founding bison, and the few additions made to the herd since the beginning, has become very important to understanding and interpreting the genetic studies that have been undertaken within the government herds. The future of the American bison now depends on emerging technologies and the diligence of the managers and operational federal employees at each of the refuges and parks. With 100 years of proven successful adaptations to the many problems and challenges they faced, we can all have reasonable confidence that, with provision of the necessary resources, these government personnel will continue to assure a secure future for this keystone American species.

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<sup>17</sup> Palmer, 1917, *op. cit.* pp. 59-60; Ruth, 1921, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7; Dary, 1974. *op. cit.*, pp. 238-239; Garretson, 1938, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, Lee C., and Thomas J. Roffe, 2008. *Management of Bison in the National Wildlife Refuge System* U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Unpublished Report by FWS, Mar. 27, 11 pp.