

BUFFALOAK

Narrative: Sue Schuit

Then and Now

The buffaloes are gone.
And those who saw the buffaloes are gone.
Those who saw the buffaloes by thousands and how they pawed the prairie sod into dust with their
hoofs, their great heads down pawing on in a great pageant of dusk,
Those who saw the buffaloes are gone.
And the buffaloes are gone. – Carl Sandburg, Buffalo Dusk

Some may say the last of many; others say the first of few. I'll leave that up to you. Unlike the buffalo, the Indians, the wolves, the prairies and the otters, I remain. The rest are largely forgotten now.

It's only two centuries, a blink of time; an eon of change. Time changes all things... today at dusk thousands of lights are flashing and moving, sounds of the times advancing and rising, retreating and fading. The night sky is obscured by today's artificial beams and fast-moving pinpoints of light etching swathes of white across the dark, while only the closest stars are able to shine through the synthetic light glowing below.

1808 and countless centuries before; a quiet moon waxing and waning, the lonely hoot of the owl, limitless stars and ribbons of galaxies stretching across the endless arched curve of the sky.

Ageless

“Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.”

— *Hermann Hesse*

The oak tree, which is the national tree of many countries, primarily symbolizes strength and endurance. Other qualities associated with the oak tree include protection, success and stability.

In addition to representing qualities related to power and durability, the oak tree was considered a bearer of good luck, fertility, potency, healing and health by the Druids. Revered by the Druids, it was distinguished as one of three types of sacred trees. The longevity and size of the oak tree was appreciated in addition to the mistletoe and acorns that it produces.

Quercus alba, the white oak, is one of the preeminent hardwoods of eastern and central North America. It is a long-lived oak, native to eastern and central North America and found from Minnesota, Ontario, Quebec, and southern Maine and south as far as northern Florida and eastern Texas. Specimens have been documented to be over 450 years old.

The white oak typically reaches heights of 80 to 100 feet at maturity, and its canopy can become quite massive as its lower branches are apt to extend far out laterally, parallel to the ground. Trees growing in a forest will become much taller than ones in an open area which develop to be short and massive. The tallest known white oak is 144 feet tall. It is not unusual for a white oak tree to be as wide as it is tall, but specimens growing at high altitudes may only become small shrubs.

Although called a white oak, it is very unusual to find an individual specimen with white bark; the usual color is a light gray. The name comes from the color of the finished wood.

Pishtaka

“The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.
They hear the first and last of every Tree
Speak to humankind today. Come to me, here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside the River.”
— **Maya Angelou**

My grounds lie on the banks of the Pishtaka River; translated from Potawatomie, Buffalo River, aka the Fox River. As early as the 1820's both names were used interchangeably. I am on the east shore of the Pishtaka/Buffalo River. Some time back an extensive, well-used Indian path followed the west shore of the Fox and wound north thru the prairies and woods. Like farming and government, roads are one of the many things gained by Native Americans and this ancient Indian path is now known as Highway 83. The path through age-old prairies and woods today takes one thru towns such as Burlington, Waterford, Rochester and beyond.

The Pishtaka/Buffalo/Fox River is a natural waterway and the earliest explorers took advantage of it as the Indians had done for centuries before.

The natural power of water is a great enticement and in 1835 Moses Smith and William Whiting were the first white men to stake out a claim upon the present site of Burlington. They left and returned with Lemuel Smith and Benjamin Perce and these four men built a shanty in the grove of trees in the river bend on the east side of the Fox River. They then built another shanty also on the east side of the river but some distance south, on land that later became the Bushnell farm. This gave them access to water power for a mill. During the summer of 1836 arrivals of settlers became more numerous. The birth of Burlington had occurred.

My domain is further south of this activity. It didn't take long though before settlers staked claims and by 1878 my prairie was known as section 10. By 1887 my grounds were in the name of S. Toombs; 1931, Anton Koenig and 1968, Carl Schranz. Today my land is known as 6612 Brever Rd and my current stewards are Steve and Tracy Swantz.

Naturally, I am held in high regard. I am their hidden treasure, The Buffalo Oak. From whence the title? Did they know of my history, did they imagine my past? My realm is on the bank of the Pishtaka/Buffalo/Fox River. I was a mere juvenile oak when the last of the many, the remaining 2 Wisconsin buffalo were shot in 1832. It would be years before the first of the few returned once again.

But no, I'm the real deal; my title is justifiable. The buffalo and the oak. Where two icons meet. Painstakingly fashioned through the cycles of seasons and years. Protection and healing after a shock; torn branch, frost split, fungal infection? Whatever the cause, my buffalo-head burl is a striking profile of a quintessentially native symbol.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

“Over time, it is all too common for people to lose touch with their heritage, as the thrill and immediacy of the present crowds out the echoes and lessons of the past. — Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*

The American bison (*B. bison*), commonly known as the buffalo, or plains buffalo, is native to North America.

The great American bison is truly a magnificent animal. It is the largest land mammal in North America since the end of the Ice Age. Estimates of the pre-European herd size vary from 30,000,000 to 70,000,000 animals and they ranged over most of North America.

There are three subspecies of bison: the Plains bison, Wood bison, and the European Wisent.

Where bison and Native Americans lived together, the bison provided much more than food. Unregulated killing of bison led to the many millions of animals being reduced to no more than 1,500 individuals in the mid to late 1800s.

Legal protection of the bison in Yellowstone Park, the establishment of preserves like the National Bison Refuge in Montana, along with individuals raising bison on their own land, have helped restore the bison to over 350,000 animals. (Bison History from Bisoncentral.com)

Once hunted to the verge of extinction, Buffalo (or Bison) are beginning to make a comeback in our day. A small but growing number of farmers and agriculturalists are taking Bison seriously. The Bison's unique attributes and quality of their meat has been attracting more and more attention. There are individuals and groups in Wisconsin who are working hard to help make Bison a part of both our landscape and our diets once more.

Although bison are usually associated with the western plains, herds once ranged from Georgia to the Hudson Bay and from the Appalachians to the Rockies. Bison were prevalent in the original prairie and savanna communities in southern and western Wisconsin. Bison were once found in southeastern Wisconsin, but early day traders and Native Americans armed with firearms extirpated them from the state before the first settlers arrived in the 1830s.

Buffalo have played a major part in the life of many of North America's indigenous peoples. All parts of the buffalo were used and these magnificent animals were understood to be a gift to the people. From Buffalo came food and clothing. Even bones and skulls were used and appreciated.

This understanding survives today. On August 20th, 1994 "Miracle", a white-buffalo calf was born to Dave, Valerie and Corey Heider near Janesville, WI. This event was viewed by many people practicing Native spiritual paths as a sign of great import. Thousands of people from all over the world 'pilgrimaged' to see Miracle. The 'chance' of a white buffalo being born is somewhere in the region of one in six billion.

It will be awhile before we see another.

“Look forward. Turn what has been done into a better path.” - Wilma Mankiller

They've appeared in countless drawings,
Photos, paintings and emblems.
The endless herds of buffalo
Now merely stories of legend.

They've passed over the plains,
They've disappeared from the wild
All that's left now
Thunders across
Page after page
Gallop line after line
Thru stories and sagas,
Folklore, histories, rhymes,
Adventures and dramas.

In the blink of times eye
Just one century
Where once countless buffalo roamed
Is now a well-known tragedy.

The last of the many
Became the first of the few
Passenger Pigeons were we taught
This lesson by you?

From millions to none
Through no fault of their own
So many species now
Face the same fight,
Can we and will we
Take up their plight?

Can/will we do something to stem the tide?
Or will we avenge them
Attempt/pretend to revive
With paintings and stories
Zoos, reserves
And shrines?

Sue Schuit

TREES WE LOVE, 2018
HOY AUDUBON SOCIETY
WHITE OAK (QUERCUS ALBA)
APPROXIMATE AGE: 210 YEARS
42" DIAMETER AT BREAST HEIGHT
65' HEIGHT
85' SPREAD
PROUD STEWARDS: STEVE AND TRACY SWANTZ