A small herd of plains buffalo have been at home on part of their ancestors' range for over 60 years. This is the Davison Ranch on the edge of the rolling red plains of western Oklahoma. Several buffalo wallows on the ranch are known to have been made over 100 years ago when buffalo herds roamed this country freely.

At one time, three sub-species of buffalo (*Bison, bison*) roamed the ranges of about a third of North America, from the Blue Mountains of Oregon east to New York and Pennsylvania. Their southwestern range started in northeastern Mexico and went north to the Great Slave Lake in Northwest Territories, Canada, north of Alberta Province. Their southeastern range started in central Georgia, north to the Tidewater section of Virginia and on to the Great Lakes.

The plains bison or prairie bison made up the tremendous herds that roamed the Great Plains. It has been estimated that once upon a time there were 60 to 75 million head of buffalo on the Great Plains. In 1871, Colonel Richard Irving Dodge rode for three days through a buffalo herd estimated to be 25 miles wide and 50 miles long. There were 15 to 20 animals grazing on an acre and the total herd was estimated to be about 5 million head.

It is generally accepted that the American buffalo came from Europe or Asia, arriving in North America in the middle Pleistocene period. The plains buffalo and the prairie grasses on the Great Plains of North America probably developed simultaneously.

The plains buffalo like open range. They are primarily grazers, preferring fine, short and mid-height grasses, such as the gramas, western wheatgrass, and buffalo grass. However, they will take sagebrush and little bluestem for variety and eat willow twigs and forbs in the winter.

*Buffalo are somewhat different* from other wildlife in temperament, preference for food and protection of the young, but are similar in some habits. Their large herd size, speed, herd instinct, body characteristics, and defensive attitudes have allowed them to compete very well with other wildlife in the temperate open spaces and timbered areas of North America.

Like caribou, the buffalo would travel 200 to 400 miles between their winter range to their summer range.

Like the wild horses, they water once a day and will travel 20 to 30 miles to water. Also, like the horse, they seek windy hill tops to keep cool and escape insect pests. Buffalo like to paw the ground and wallow in dust to obtain a soil covering to protect themselves from flies and mosquitos—the result is a buffalo wallow and more hungry flies and mosquitos.

Like sheep, the buffalo string out in single file, moving from one place to another. An old mother buffalo cow is usually the leader of the family herd with the older bulls appearing to act as sentinels. Like musk-ox, the aged or disabled bulls are stragglers and may separate completely from the herd.

Buffalo calves are born in April and May. Their mothers will not leave the place of birth until the new-born calf can travel with her. Young buffalo are tan in color with brownish noses and brown around the eyes. The young calf grows a new coat of brown hair and sheds the tan coat. As they grow older, the hair becomes darker until 2 years old.

Wooly, long hair develops on the hump, shoulders and front legs. On the head, the wooly hair may grow to about a foot in length. Both bulls and cows grow beards. Some bulls may grow beards 8-10 inches long. This, and the increased size of the hump, makes the buffalo appear massive in the fore part of the body.

Both sexes have horns. Bull calves grow to weigh from 1,800 to 2,000 pounds. One record weight bull in Kansas weighed 3,000 pounds (he must have been from Texas). Cows are smaller, weighing 800 to 900 pounds.

*The land of the buffalo* was also the land of many tribes of Native North Americans. The plains Indians depended on the buffalo for food, shelter, bedding, and clothing. They abhorred waste and usually judiciously killed the buffalo.

Many years ago, according to legend, Indians would burn off ranges in the winter to make fresh, lush grass available in the spring to attract buffalo to the area.

After the coming of whitemen and horses, the Indians learned quickly of the advantages of horses and obtained them, becoming superb horsemen. The Indian horsemen would force the buffalo to mill and then surround the herd. The horseback hunters would then come in and select their targets and sink their arrows to the feathers. The horse was a great asset to the Indian buffalo hunter.
A buffalo wallow made over 100 years ago.

The coming of the whiteman brought something in addition to the horse—the greed to kill for small returns. Thousands of buffalo were killed for their tongues alone. Thousands were also killed for their hides to make robes and leather. White hunters were followed by skinners and horse-drawn wagons. Acres of carcasses were left on the prairie to rot.

In the 1860's William F. (Buffalo Bill) Cody shot several thousand to feed Kansas railroad workers. Later hunters killed thousands just for their hides, bringing the buffalo near to extinction. Buffalo Bill later became a preserver and by 1890 had a show herd of 18 head, the third largest buffalo herd in captivity at that time.

The Union Pacific Railroad, completed in 1869, divided the Great Plains herd into a southern and northern herd. By 1895, wanton waste had brought the number of the northern herd to about 800 head.

In 1888, Colonel C.J. (Buffalo) Jones rescued a few buffalo calves from the southern herd and kept some of his Texas Panhandle ranch and gave some to his neighbors. By 1903, only 969 buffalo remained in the United States.1

The buffalo history of the United States and Canada are very similar. In early days, thousands of buffalo roamed the ranges near Calgary, Alberta. By the turn of the century not one buffalo remained in Canada except for a few wood buffalo in northern Alberta near the Great Slave Lake. This area was eventually established as the Wood Buffalo National Park. Early in this century, the Dominion Government re-established the plains buffalo and the numbers have steadily increased.

The American bison Society, the New York Zoological Society and strong-willed individuals helped prevent the extinction of the buffalo. Theodore Roosevelt played the leading role in persuading the United States Federal Government in protecting buffalo herds.

By the late 1800's, only one small wild buffalo herd remained in the United States. The few dozen animals lived in the Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. There were some small herds on private ranches. Game laws and other protective measures allowed the buffalo to live and multiply. As numbers increased, surplus buffalo were placed on other wildlife areas and on individual ranches. Today, small buffalo herds are established from Mexico to Alaska.

George Elbert Davison established a small herd of buffalo on his ranch in 1921. He obtained the magnificent beasts from the Wichita National Wildlife Refuge in southwestern Oklahoma. He had a strong belief that there should be a proper balance between range animal life and range plant life. He was very interested in preserving wildlife.

The Davison Ranch cowboys drove the first 11 buffalo from the Medicine Park Area of the Wichita National Wildlife Refuge to the ranch. Later, the ranch obtained a few more that were shipped in by truck.

Forty adult buffalo are now maintained on about 700 acres on the ranch. During the winter months they are fed about 2 pounds of protein supplement per head, per day. On an animal unit basis cows are counted as one animal unit, while large, mature bulls are rated at two animal units each.

Buffalo ranching is different from cattle ranching in that the ranchers have to build and maintain better and taller fences. Marketing surplus animals is not a problem. They are sold on a dressed weight basis. Buffalo meat, when properly prepared and cooked, is delicious. Some patients have been recommended to use buffalo meat in their diet to maintain health and prolong life.

Today, Francis Davison, present manager of the ranch, cares for the buffalo herd the same as he cares for domestic animals on the ranch.

As long as we have concerned ranchers as the Davisons, buffalo will have a "home on the range".

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1Buffalo Jones established a buffalo ranch in northern Arizona north of the Grand Canyon. This herd eventually became the property of the State of Arizona and is now being managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department.