

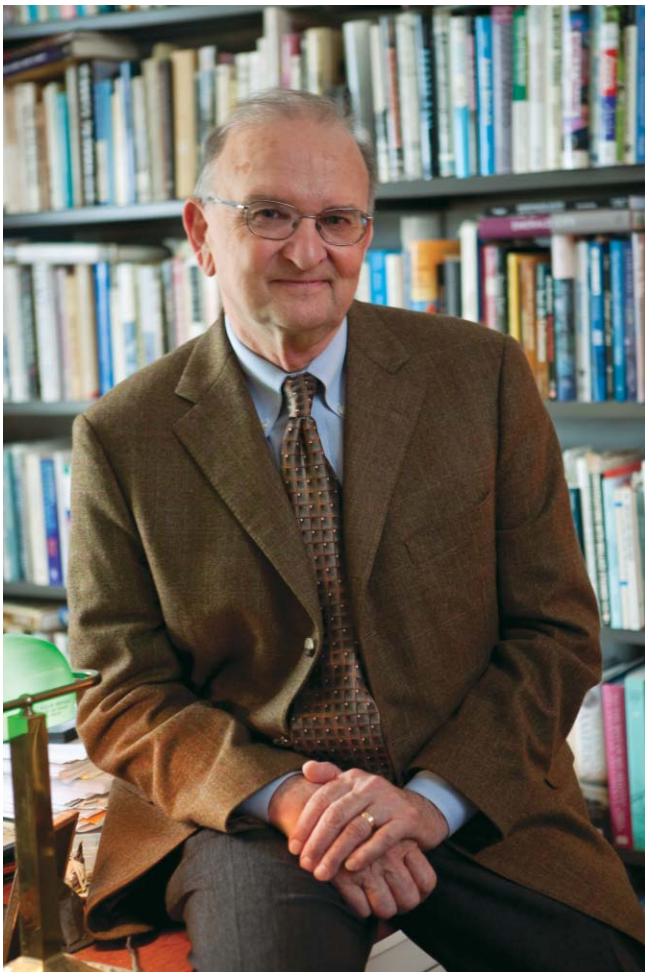
# Early Living on the High Plains—Problems and Challenges

## An interview with Elliott West

**E**lliott West, Alumni Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, is a specialist in the social and environmental history of the American West and the author of six books and more than a hundred articles and chapters in books. *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers and the Rush to Colorado* received the Francis Parkman Prize as the best work in American history for 1998. *The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story* appeared in April 2009 from Oxford University

Press. He has twice won his university's award as the outstanding teacher of the year and in 1995 was named Arkansas Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Elliot is a featured speaker at the Plenary Session of the 2010 Joint Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America, 7–11 February 2010, in Denver, Colorado. In an interview with Elliott we learn a little of the early uses and settlement of the High Plains.



Elliott West.

*Question: You have written several books describing life on the Central Plains. What do you consider the major factor of the plains that attracted first the Native Americans and later the early settlers?*

*Answer:* Attractions varied over time and with different cultures, of course. Early Indians were drawn to the profusion of game. Settlers after the Civil War imagined fertile farms and lush pastures. But more generally I think there is something about the openness of the plains that has inspired a sense that this is a place of truly grand possibilities—a great stage waiting for great things to be done, whatever those particular things might be.

*What role did finding gold in Colorado play in the conflict between the Native Americans and the early settlers?*

It was devastating. Before 1858, most in the East thought of the plains mainly as a place to get across on the way to viable lives farther West. After the gold rush, the plains were soon seen as an agrarian and pastoral heartland waiting to be developed. That change in the national imagination, plus the catastrophic effects of tens of thousands of persons moving across the plains, soon made untenable the remarkable way of life of plains horseback peoples.

*What do you consider the major factor leading to the near extermination of the bison?*

The decline in bison population came in two phases. The second, from 1872 to the mid-1880s, occurred when teams of white hunters killed and skinned millions of the animals

to satisfy a world market in leather for, among other things, factory fittings. That episode, the “great hunt,” is what most people think of as the threat to the plains bison. But by 1872, the numbers had already declined by as much as half. For that decline (1820s–1872), there was no one main cause. Bovine diseases from the overland migration may have infected the animals. Clearly, however, two factors were in play. A rise in Indian population led to some overhunting, as native peoples killed huge numbers to support themselves and supply the market in bison robes. And Indians, plus the overland travelers, destroyed riverine habitats essential for bison (and anything else warm-blooded) to survive the plains winters.

*My ancestors emigrated from Michigan, Ohio, and Kansas to homestead in western Nebraska. These people were in their early twenties and younger. I grew up on the High Plains and have felt the searing summers with no rain and the killing blizzards of the deep winters. Do you think the young people of today could survive under the relative primitive conditions that the early settlers endured?*

Some of them could, sure. Teaching nearly 40 years has taught me one thing: young people will surprise you, for good and bad. It would take some serious adjustment, however. No way to Google “signs of frostbite” or “patching a sod roof.”

*What advice would you have given to a young family starting a new life as a homesteader on the High Plains in the 1880s?*

Be ready for anything, then try to imagine something worse. Settle close to family and friends you can rely on in a pinch. Keep your connections back home. Hold something back (money, food, feed) for harder times, which *will* come. Try to keep a sense of humor.

*How would you describe the American Indian way of life on the Plains prior to the arrival of the horse?*

Prime locations were on the eastern fringe, in villages along rivers, and on the western fringe, close to the protecting mountains and the streams leaving them. That’s where

people wintered and, in the east, where there were permanent villages. The plains between teemed with game, bison the most obvious but many other kinds as well. Indians hunted there in summers, using an extraordinary knowledge of the region’s varied terrain and its nexus of springs and natural waterholes. These peoples were also connected to much of North America via a sophisticated system of trade routes and rendezvous.

*What do you consider the single most important factor that has shaped the social/economic conditions we now see on the plains?*

I don’t see any one that is most important now. The plains today are webbed into the rest of the world as they never were in the past, so plains peoples are influenced as much by international markets, national elections, hemispheric population shifts, and even popular culture, as they are by any regional conditions. If we look at the plains over its entire human history, however, the single most important factor would be the extremes of the plains environment and its erratic climate. It’s not so much the environmental factors usually noted—semiaridity, annual swings in temperature, and rainfall, for instance—as it is the utter unpredictability of all of it. To a considerable degree, there is no “normal” on the plains.

*What are some of the questions or challenges that the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America should be aware of and maybe work toward developing a solution?*

Following up on the previous response, I guess I would say that there can be no solution in the usual sense. For there to be a solution, there has to be a clearly defined problem, and on the plains you can never really predict what the problem is going to be. I suppose the best advice, from a historical standpoint, is to encourage a spirit of what was the key to past survival, especially among plains Indians—adaptability. Expect the unexpected. And be careful.

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*Interview by Gary Frasier, co-chair of the Public Relations Committee, 2010 Annual Meeting of the Society for Range Management and the Weed Science Society of America (gfrasier@aol.com).*