An Attempt to Capture Buffalo Alive in Present Oklahoma in the Late 1880’s

Lee Howard

I. Introduction

The following account of an attempt to capture adult buffalo alive in the Panhandle country was written by Lee Howard who operated a ranch in the 1880’s in the southwestern part of what is now Texas county, Oklahoma.

The experiences related in Howard’s narrative probably occurred while he was a member of one of C. J. “Buffalo” Jones’ expeditions to capture some of the few remaining buffalo in the plains area. “Buffalo” Jones, who lived near Garden City, became widely known for helping to save the buffalo from extinction and for his experiments in crossbreeding cattle with buffalo, whose offspring he called “catalo.”

Col. Henry Inman, in his Buffalo Jones’ Forty Years of Adventure, recalled that Howard and Jones met in the Panhandle country on May 6, 1888, when both were out to capture buffalo calves. Jones, who had noticed the scarcity of buffalo, thought there wouldn’t be enough for both and promptly engaged Howard, an old acquaintance, to work for him for the following two months for $500.¹ In 1889 Howard again was a member of a Jones expedition, and the events related here possibly occurred while on this 1889 expedition, instead of 1888 as stated by Howard.² E. Hough wrote that Howard was “half-hunter, half-freighter, and half-ranchman, . . . .”³ Colonel Inman referred to him as “the typical cowboy of the Great West.”⁴ According to Henry C. Hitch of Guymon, Okla., Howard quit ranching in Texas county about the turn of the century and spent some time on a hunting and prospecting trip in Alaska. Mr. Hitch believes that when Howard returned to the states he continued to prospect for gold until his death several years ago in Arizona.

Howard’s story, written in a clear Spencerian hand, was found

¹. Col. Henry Inman, Buffalo Jones’ Forty Years of Adventure (Topeka, 1889), pp. 188, 184.
². Ibid., pp. 220-223. Howard stated in his letter which follows that he was writing of his last buffalo hunt. Inasmuch as he accompanied Jones’ 1889 expedition, and Inman’s description of the 1889 hunt is similar in many respects to this story of Howard’s, it seems likely that Howard was mistaken about the year.
by Dr. E. Raymond Hall, director of the Museum of Natural History of the University of Kansas, in going over manuscript material saved by his colleague, the late Charles Dean Bunker.\(^5\) Through Dr. Hall's courtesy it is here reproduced. The capitalization, punctuation and spelling of the original longhand copy have been followed in the printing.

II. **Lee Howard's Story**

**Optima Oklahoma Ty**

February 18th, 1892

Mr. L. L. Dyche,\(^6\) Friend Your letter received about two weeks ago And I have been so very busy that I could not answer before this time. In this letter you will find an outline of my last Hunt after the Buffalo or the Hunt in which we tried to capture some of the grown buffaloes alive. In this rambling Narrative I hope that you will find some information that will be of some benefit to you in writing you[r] Book. If there are any way[s] that I can assist you in the way of information let me know.

I think that I could furnish an interesting chapter on hunting Buffalo and Antelope especially Horse back hunting which you know is the most Exciting hunting there is. I tell you I have had some big hunts, and lots of Fun and no one to see it but ourselves. If you think that a chapter in the back part of your Book would be of any Benefit to you I will try to get it up in readable style, if not say so frankly No harm done and no offense.

Yours truly Lee Howard

Well to begin with I suppose it would be the proper thing for me to inform you what we Started with. In the first place we had three mule teams, a 6 Spring platform wagon, to carry water and provision for ourselves and horses also some blankets for bed, 9 head of good Saddle horses. We left Ranch 20th in May 1888\(^7\) with Spring wagon one Span of mules and driver Mr. Kennedy 2 Saddle horses and 2 riders (Decordova and Howard) With enough provision and horse feed to last 6 days also Enough water to last 2 days. Leaving our Extra teams and horses at the ranch with Granville Thomas, to take care of until such time that we should

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5. Charles Dean Bunker (1870-1948) joined the staff of the Museum of Natural History, University of Kansas, in 1895 and was curator emeritus of modern vertebrates at the time of his death.

6. L. L. Dyche (1857-1915) was professor of systematic zoology and taxidermy at the University of Kansas from 1900 until his death. In addition to his duties as a teacher, Professor Dyche made numerous scientific expeditions, and as a result the university acquired one of the largest and finest collections of mammals in the world.

7. Probably this should read "1889." See Footnote 2.
need them. We went west about 45 miles to a place called Aqua Frieo (cold water) the wagon went the road and the 2 riders went one on each side of the wagon, and about 6 miles from it so we could see considerable country. all went in the same direction and came together at night at the place spoken of, there is splendid water at that place.

We saw Buffalo on a creek called cold water, (Now to better understand things, I will explain about the water on cold water creek and Beaver creek for a distance of about 45 mi west from my place there is a dry strip on both creeks. I state this for in our hunt we had to cross both creeks several times. on this dry strip there are water both above and below this dry strip) But had to go on to camp to let the Boys Know and get the wagon. Camped at aqua Frieo that night and the next morning bright and Early we started for the place where we saw the Buffalo the day before, arrived at that place about 10 o'clock. The Buffalo were gone. But their tracks were there, so we began trailing. We trailed them about 20 miles northeast camped on trail. Next morning took trail again in a northerly direction, crossed Beaver (dry place) followed trail north of Beaver about 10 miles where the trail began to turn in a north westerly direction, and here a big rain came upon us and washed the tracks out, and as it was nearly night we camped.

Awoke next morning Early, after the rain we did not know which way to turn. I told the Boys that from the indications the night before I thought the trail turned to the south. I told them that I did not think that the rain had extended more than 5 mi south from where we was. I told them to spread out about 5 miles wide and to gradually come together on a level flat about 8 miles south and to look well for tracks and be sure and not cross them. We did this and sure enough as I predicted it hadn't rained there and we found the trail all right going south.

We followed the trail all that day and about Sundown we came up with them 19 in number and fine ones. 18 cows and one Bull one of the Bulls that you got was one of the number as was also the cows.8 As it was late we thought it best not to start them until morning, and we had come 50 miles that day. We camped on north fork of the palladuro. We arose the next morning with the expectation of finding the Buffalo in sight. But in this we were mistaken. They had turned north again so we had to trail them again, in

8. Refers to eleven specimens of buffalo which are preserved in the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas. Two are mounted and are on display.
about 10 miles we came up with them they were running when we saw them they evidently got wind of us. It was a great relief to us to get a look at them for it saved us trailing them. As I said they were running when we saw them, so I tied my horse up beside the mules, as I was all the rider along and got in the wagon at that time the other one had gone back to camp directly after the rain I did not think it of any use of but one at that time and wanted to save men and horse flesh as much as possible.

We started in pursuit as fast as our mules could go and they went pretty fast for the country was level as a floor for miles, but the Buffalo Steadily gained on us finally they went over a small elevation about 3 mi away. We went as fast as we could I got on my horse and rode ahead of the team but when I got to where we last saw them, I could see nothing of them. So I got on the trail again for fear that they might turn to oneside I could trail as fast as the horse could lope, the Buffalo crossed (cold water creek dry place) going back almost the same way they had gone over. We followed the trail 5 or 6 miles and came in sight of them again they were on a level plain 5 miles away and by the aid of a field glass we could see that they were walking so we thought it best to feed the team and eat a little ourselves while we were eating dinner the Buffalo went out of sight. So when we got to the place where the Buffalo went out of sight, we began trailing and in about 5 miles we came in sight of them again they were walking as night was approaching we thought it best not to Excite them for fear that we would have a days trailing on the morrow.

As our mules and saddle horse was getting weary and with the expectation of having some hard riding in the near future, W[e] thought it best to go to camp 25 miles distant and get a change of Horses. So leaving the Buffalo on the Breaks of Beaver we went down Beaver Creek to Ranch arrived there about 9 o'clock at night. This is the end of the 4 day or 3½ days actual trailing the distance covered was about 150 mi, and we had only been in sight of them but one day we got an early start in the morning and got back to where we left them, the night before about 9 o'clock, they were gone so began trailing. In going back to where we left the Buffalo, I sent the wagon upon the north side of Beaver and gave directions where to meet me. I knew from the direction the Buffalo were going the night before that they were going to cross Beaver, But to make everything sure I went back and took trail followed
trail until about one o'clock and came up with Buffalo in sand hills north side of beaver.

Aus Decordova on his way with the wagon saw two Buffalo cows and one calf. He caught the calf and put it in the wagon. When the wagon came up, we ate dinner. And I went back to camp with the calf which was about 30 miles distant. I went to Ranch as fast as I could, arrived there about 5 o'clock got supper changed team and went back to where I left the other two boys. I told them to watch the Buffalo but not to disturb them. There was a small hole of water near where they slept about one hundred yards distant. After the Boys made down there bed about 8 o'clock at night, the Buffalo came down and drank out of the hole they stayed around for some time finally they grazed off without getting frightened. I got to where the Boys were about midnight.

Started the Buffalo Early next morning. We did not have to trail much, they run all day in the sand hills south of Beaver creek, they having crossed beaver. Towards evening they were going in the direction of a place called Company M 9 it is about 45 miles from my Ranch on Beaver it is a place where the Beaver has living water on it again. But when we got within about 5 mi of it the Buffalo turned south east in the direction of Coldwater creek. We went to Company M, and camped for the night. Took trail next morning followed the trail all day (We went off of trail about 2 miles for water) Buffalo did not get any until Evening, that I know of for we followed trail all day and followed it fast, and when we found the place where they drank it was 60 miles from where we took trail in the morning. It was almost night when we came to the water we went a few miles farther and camped for the night on the south side of Coldwater Creek, (this was two days and two nights without water and the day that we were after them in the sand hills they never went less than 50 miles and [on] a very warm day if that is not Endurance I do not know what you would call it, This was the only day that we did not get to see them in the 60 days.

I told the boys that I did not think that we were far from the Bu-

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9. According to Inman (p. 145) “Company M” was a “water-hole situated in a valley, where, years ago, a Company M of U. S. troops were snowed in and spent the winter.” The place had natural caves and may have been located in the southeast part of present Cimarron county, Oklahoma, or just over the line in Texas, for later there was a “Company M Ranch” in that area. The ranch improvements are “a few miles South of the Beaver River. But the Ranch land includes quite a little of the Beaver River valley.”—Letter of Henry C. Hitch, Guymon, Ola., to F. R. Blackburn, Kansas State Historical Society, May 24, 1940.
falo from the sign we were expecting to run into them every moment we trailed very late this Evening in the hopes of seeing Before we camped. The night looked stormy and we were afraid that it would rain and wash the trail out. Luckily we arrose and found the sky clear and the Buffalo in sight. We saw them on the north side of cold water they Evidently crossed during the night. they began to run north as soon as they saw us they went north about 8 miles and then made a quick turn to the south we were now about 12 miles from my ranch and as the Buffalo had turned south we were afraid that it would be several days before we would get a change of horses. we thought it best to send in and change so sent 2 of the Boy[s] into the Ranch with spring wagon and Decordova (the Buffalo generally went as far south as the Breaks of the Canadian River about 60 miles from Ranch) and myself Kept on after the Buffalo I told the Boys that I thought from the direction the Buffalo started they would go by a lake of water about 20 mi away And that we would follow the Buffalo and for them to meet us at the lake.

We arrived at lake about 3 oclock the Buffalo passed within a mile of the Lake, we kept so far behind them, that they were not going very fast So we went to Lake and got water and ate, our Lunch after our horses were rested a little I saddled my horse and went upon a high hill about a mile from the Lake to see if the Buffalo were in sight to my delight they were grazing about two miles from the hill I went back to lake and awaited the r[e]turn of the wagon, about sundown they came in sight with a fresh team and saddle horses the horses we were riding we sent back to the Ranch with one of the men and continued our chase with 2 saddle Horses team and 2 riders and one driver.

I think this is Enough of this. I Believe that I could give you Every days travel, But as the rest is a repetition of what I have written, I will skip to when we (We had been after the Buffalo about a month up to this time) Put the gentle Buffalo with them We had to send back to Garden City Kansas for the gentle ones a distance of 140 miles 10 two of the boys went after them and myself and Kennedy kept after the Buffalo in 7 days after they started they were back here with 22 head of gentle Buffalo. Kennedy and I came into camp the next night after the Boys got Back and as luck would have it the Buff[alo] crossed the Beaver creek

just below my Ranch that night. And next morning we took the
gentle Buffalo and started in pursuit. We had not gone more than
2 miles until we saw the wild ones.

We drove the gentle Buffalo up a draw out of sight of the wild
ones until we were within a half a mile of them then we kept back
out of sight and let the gentle ones go up to the wild ones them-
selves, the wild ones seemed frightened at first and began to run.
They did not run far, then stopped and took a good look at them
in a short time they got together, the wild ones did not seem
to like the gentle ones. They began to smell around one another
finally the wild ones began to go a way, the gentle ones began
to graze, then we began to drive them slowly. But the wild ones
kept about a mile ahead of the Gentle ones until almost noon
they then went into a Lake of water and drank as did the Gentle
ones, as it was noon we stopped for dinner while Eating, the
wild Buffalo began to Graze and the Gentle ones Traveled up to
where they were grazing. Pretty soon the wild ones began to lay
down, as did the gentle ones a few yards from the wild ones, So
near that you might say that they laid down together.

We trailed the wild ones and the gentle ones together for over
a week, but did not seem to do any good, they would leave the
gentle ones Every night—sometimes 8 and 10 miles then we had
to trail them up and drive the gentle ones; the gentle ones got so
foot sore, that they were a hinderance to us and did not seem to do
the wild ones any good, they went just as far in a day and left
us just as far in the night so we abandoned the idea of gentling
them with the Gentle B. we would be just about 200 yards behind
them all day and would drive the Gentle ones right in to them and
keep them there for hours. We would begin to think that we could
drive them, but as soon as we would ride out to one side of them
or in the lead they would turn right in the opposite direction from
where you wanted them to go. We sometimes made [a] turn on
them in this way when we wanted them to go to the right we
would go to the right—as if we were going around them and the[y]
would be sure to turn in that direction, so you see they were turned
but did not know it. the most obstinate animal that lives.

So we concluded to take the Gentle Buffalo back to the ranch and
try it a while longer the way we began at first. We run them for
several days, until they began to leave the Bunch. They would
sometimes leave the Bunch in the day time or attempt to in cross-
ing draws and creeks [when] they would try to leave by running
up or down the draw we would be watching for this and head them off and turn them back before they would get a great way from the herd. in this we were always successful. We soon saw that they would all split up some go one way and some another so we concluded to rope the first one that would leave the herd. our opportunity came soon Enough. We thought that we had some pretty fast horses but we soon found out that Buffalo could run some too. There was a 3 year old cow in the bunch that had been trying to leave the others for several days. So we started the Buffalo one morning. Hadn’t gone more than five miles until she started to leave the Bunch. We started in pursuit.

I run the Buffalo first. She was about 500 yards from us and when she saw that I was after her she began to run. She had such a long start of me that I had to run pretty fast and a long ways before I could get near her when she saw that I was about to come up with her she made back for the herd. I got almost near Enough to her to rope her. But my horse was almost winded. The other two Boys were behind but had been cutting across so that their horses were pretty fresh so I hallowed to them to head her off from the herd and rope her. Aus Cordova took after her and had not run her but a short distance until he threw his rope on her. It caught over one horn and one foot and threw her down. But in falling she got out of the rope, and turned over so her head was in the opposite direction from what she was going when roped. I was right behind Cordova and had my rope ready to throw her head was toward me and she was just in the act of getting up. I was coming pretty fast and as I passed her I threw my rope on her and never slackened my speed and when my horse came to the End of the rope he pulled her as much as 15 ft. (I suppose you know how much a horse can drag by the horn of the saddle.) Before she had time to get up Aus had a rope on her hind feet and we stretched her out. Put a large pair of hobbles on her and let her up. She was strictly on the fight we left her as soon as we could for we did not want to worry her any more than we had to, for fear she would die.

We handled this one so easy that we thought we could handle any of them with ease but in this we were mistaken for the 3d one we roped took the conceit out of us. This one was an old cow and a large one. We got pretty close to her before she started and by riding fast we came up with her in about a mile. I came up with her first threw my rope over her head and having a long rope, I
car[e]lessly let to[o] much of my rope out at once and my horse run over the rope. There I was with one End of the rope on the Buffalo and the other around the horn of my saddle. fortunately for me the Buffalo run straight a head consequently the rope pulled straight between his fore legs, and instead of throwing my horse it threw the Buffalo. in an instant she was up again and came right back again for fight as she came for me I spurred my horse forward she hooked at me as I passed her and run straight back while I run straight ahead she came to the End of the rope and broke the rope she began to run away but Decordova was right behind me, and she had not gone more than 100 yards before she had another rope on her.

She got a side run on him and pulled his saddle over on the side of the horse and he had to jump down on the ground. he ran out of reach of the Buffalo pulling his Colts as he ran the rope was just looped over the horn I ran up and took the rope off of his saddle and put it on mine, (But before I had time to take his rope off the cow made a pass at the horse she came at him at full speed as soon as she got close Enough, the horse which was a strong one Blazed away at her with both feet and gave her such a Kick that she passed him without doing him any injury) And she run for me, and I run to one side. She run across the rope and when she came to the End of the rope She fell with her head under and we soon put a pair of Hobbles on her and let her up. She was on the war path, She would start for us the same way she did before she was hobbled and would fall down.

We roped 7 in all But do not think it nessary to tell the adventures we had with Each one for I think perhaps that you can get the desired information you want by what I have written after we had Hobbled them we got the Gentle ones and drove them to where the Hobbled ones were but they were so stubborn that they would not drive. they would fight the Gentle ones and fight us to[o] if we attempted to drive them And as we had used all of the means that Lay in our power to get the Buffalo and failed. We thought Best to abandon the idea of trying to drive them in 11 we felt pretty sore about having to leave them after having done so.

11. "Buffalo" Jones' hopes to capture and domesticate grown buffalo had never met with success. On one occasion he said: "They would not live in captivity. If they could not find an embankment over which to break their necks, they would crush their skulls on stones. Failing any means like that, they would lie down, will themselves to die, and die. . . . Finally I found I could keep only calves under three months of age. . . ."—Zane Grey. The Last of the Plainsmen (New York, 1908), p. 52.
much hard work. Had put in about 18 hours a day, had run the Buffalo almost 3000 miles and it had seemed to us at times that we were sure to get them. We would be with in a 100 yards of them for hours. They would turn around and look at us and then start on again. Sometimes they would start to run around us when we would get too close, we would have to stop and let them quiet down, for fear that they would turn and run back. They would generally take about 175 mile circuit. . . . [line illegible from wear]

In traveling back and forth across the country they invariably kept the same course almost in the same tracks unless something frightened them. Some of the Buffaloes feet were wore out the bottom part was all gone and still they would go, and when they got frightened they did not know that their feet were sore. They went north almost to the Kansas line and possibly over the line. Buffalo generally runs to the wind when any one frightens them suddenly. They always turn their head to the storm in winter, when grazing generally graze to the wind, and keep bunched up close together. The calves are red when they first come and continue so until the latter part of the summer. Then they begin to grow darker. Buffalo shed their coat the same as cattle and about the same time in (the spring). They are the homeliest looking you ever saw look ragged, pieces of wool or hair hanging down, some places shed off and some not. But when they are entirely shed off they have a handsome coat of hair, would be called a dark blue apparently.

Buffalo look clumsy. They are the quickest animals I ever had anything to do with. Especially the calves. I used to haul calves in the wagon to different places. When I would go into the towns everyone wanted to put their hands on them. I told them not to put their hands on them. But some of them wanted to say that they had had their hands on a Buffalo calf. But before they got their hand out of the wagon they was sure to get it kicked. Buffalo when they go to water in the summer when it is hot they jump in all over and roll around like a hog in the mud, get as muddy as can be. Buffalo in this country always graze upon the level and on Buffalo Grass.
Fredric Remington's Sketch of C. J. "Berea" Jones Roping a Buffalo Calf.
JOHN JAMES INGALLS

(1833-1900)

United States senator from Kansas, 1873-1891, and president pro tempore of the senate. This sketch, by Paul Renouard, was a full-page feature in Harper's Weekly, July 7, 1888, several weeks after the Ingalls-Voorhees debate.