A Winter on the Plains, 1870-1871—
The Memoirs of Lawson Cooke
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I. INTRODUCTION

The region between the Smoky Hill river in Kansas and the Platte river in Nebraska was one of the major buffalo ranges of the Great Plains until the middle 1870’s. The central water course of the region is the Republican river, and the buffalo between the two extreme rivers are often referred to as the Republican herd. Further, the Upper Republican country of Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado was one of the finest buffalo ranges environmentally.

Though the Republican is often dry, or nearly so, in late summer and is frozen over in winter, it is fed by dozens of smaller spring-fed streams which provide an ample water supply. The stream valleys, often meandering through higher divide country, gave shelter to the buffalo when needed, though for grazing they preferred the unsheltered and usually waterless divide. The major streams were the three forks of the Republican in Colorado; Beaver and Sappa creeks in Kansas; and Frenchman, Stinking Water, Medicine, and Driftwood creeks in Nebraska, as well as many other smaller streams.

Because of the water and shelter, as well as the ready supply of game, the Upper Republican country was also favored by the Indians—particularly the hostiles. While the two Union Pacific railroads were being built across Kansas and Nebraska in the late 1860’s, bands of Cheyenne and Sioux regularly raided construction crews and then returned to their retreats along the Republican and its tributaries. For several years the region provided them a haven from the military, for they easily evaded the few expeditions sent in pursuit.¹

Gen. Eugene Asa Carr’s noted Republican river expedition, which

¹ Theodore R. Davis, “The Buffalo Range,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, New York, v. 38, no. 234 (January, 1869), pp. 147-163. Davis accompanied Custer on his march from Fort Hays to Fort McPherson in 1867, and it is likely that his information on the Upper Republican country is based upon his observations of that time.

culminated in the Battle of Summit Springs on July 11, 1869, virtually cleared the region of hostiles. Though these same Sioux and Cheyenne, as well as the friendly sedentary tribes of eastern Nebraska, continued to visit the Upper Republican on seasonal buffalo hunts for several years, the way was cleared for the arrival of the professional buffalo hunter, the frontiersman and the homesteader.  

Daring hunters had entered the area prior to Carr’s campaign, but it was not until after 1869 that the slaughter of the Republican herd began in earnest. By 1873 the number of buffalo and their range had dwindled drastically and by 1875 bordered on extinction, though wandering animals were occasionally killed for another decade. Large numbers of buffalo were killed by the frontiersmen and homesteaders who settled in the Republican watershed. But this was mainly subsistence killing. Buffalo meat and hides were the mainstay of their particular frontier economy for several years, for the first years of sod crops were poor, and for several years what crops grew were devoured by the grasshopper hordes. Occasional loads of meat and hides were taken to the settlements along the Platte where they were sold for cash or traded for supplies.

Of the professional buffalo hunters, the majority were from towns along the Kansas Pacific, rather than from the Nebraska stations. To reach the Republican from the Platte, hunters had to follow the two or three circuitous military trails across exceedingly rough country, while the land between the Kansas Pacific and the Republican provided few geographical handicaps for teams and wagons.

Compared to those on other major buffalo ranges, the hunters of the Republican herd have left few accounts of their experiences, and the reminiscences of the settlers tell us little more than that the professionals were there. The following short memoir by Lawson Cooke, though not of major importance to the lore of the buffalo

4. That buffalo hunters were active in the region prior to 1869 is implied by Lt. Col. Thomas Duncan, who did not recognize the site of the Nelson Buck survey party massacre, in present Red Willow county, Neb., “as it is a common occurrence to find old camps in the Republican country, where broken-down wagons, broken tools and useless camp furniture are abandoned.”—Thomas Duncan, “Report,” Fort McPherson, Neb., October 26, 1869 (National Archives, RG 2702), microfilm at Nebraska State Historical Society.
6. Charles L. Youngblood, Adventures of Chas. L. Youngblood During Ten Years on the Plains (Booneville, Ind., Booneville Standard Company, 1882); Frank M. Lockard, History of the Early Settlement of Norton County, Kansas (Norton Champion Press, n.d.). Though the most of Youngblood’s hunting career was spent in southwestern Kansas, he did make several early trips into northwestern Kansas. Many of the early pioneers of Norton county were professional buffalo hunters and their experiences are related throughout Lockard’s book.
range, is one of the few extant by a professional buffalo hunter in the Upper Republican country. Unlike the majority of professional hunters who concentrated on killing for hides with meat as a sideline, Cooke and his partner were interested only in buffalo meat and wolf pelts; at least he makes no mention of curing hides. He is also one of the few contemporary writers to differentiate between coyotes and wolves. Though written nine years after his winter on the buffalo range, it has an immediacy often lacking in accounts written many years later.

Little is known of Lawson Cooke beyond what he tells us in his memoir. If we are to believe him (and we have little choice), he was employed on the construction of the Union Pacific, Eastern division (later the Kansas Pacific), at least from June, 1867, until its completion on August 15, 1870. Soon after, he returned to Kansas and spent the winter buffalo hunting along Prairie Dog and Sappa creeks, probably in present western Norton and eastern Decatur counties. In the spring he returned to Denver.

Of his stay in Denver nothing is known, though the Denver post office advertised in July, 1871, that they were holding a letter for "L. Cooke." He had apparently left there by 1873, when the first city directory was published, though an L. P. Cook was listed as living in the city.7

It would appear that Cooke returned to Kansas, for on March 9, 1882, a Lawson Cook (without the "e") was arrested in Wyandotte county for selling "intoxicating liquors unlawfully." His case was appealed to the district court and was the first such case to be tried before it. He was found guilty early in July, and he at least considered appealing to the state supreme court. He was arrested again, however, on July 11. The Wyandotte Gazette commented: "The wanton disregard of all law, order and decency, as shown by Cook and a few others is bearing fruit, and we will be sadly disappointed if there is not a verdict of guilty to record every week, until these holes are closed."8

So Lawson Cooke (or Cook) disappears from history, though it is hoped that some reader may be able to provide further data on his life. Cooke's reminiscence appeared in the syndicated pages of the Hebron (Neb.) Journal on November 13, 1879. It is one of the few such syndicated stories of the era which gives the name of the

author, most of them appearing anonymously. As the author, he was listed as Cooke, and this spelling is followed here, though it appears as Cook in the story. Editorial changes have been limited to dividing some of his longer paragraphs.

II. LAWSON COOKE’S STORY

In the fall of 1870, after the completion of the Kansas Pacific railroad to Denver, I concluded to have one winter’s hunting on the plains. In pursuance of this object I went from Parks Fort (now Trego) a small station situated about half-way between Kansas City and Denver. The fort was named after Thomas Parks, a railroad contractor on the Kansas Pacific, who was killed by Indians near this place. I was well acquainted with him, and helped to lay him out after his body was recovered. If I recollect correctly, I counted seventeen arrow, spear, gunshot, and tomahawk wounds he had received. He was not scalped, and [he] killed eight Indians before succumbing. One cartridge was still left in his Winchester rifle.  

At the time of which I am writing the plains were a vast feeding-ground for countless herds of buffalo; but of late years they have almost entirely disappeared. On reaching Parks Fort I formed the acquaintance of a young Ohioan named Leonard. As he had just arrived, having come on a hunting expedition like myself, we struck up a partnership, and concluded to hunt together. My tenderfoot friend had brought a small armory from the States with him. A Winchester rifle, a needle-gun, a bowie-knife, three different-sized revolvers, and a big box of assorted cartridges, composed a portion of his warlike accouterments. After arranging a programme for the winter’s campaign, we bought a horse each, and a cart and harness, together with a stock of provisions.

Finally, everything being in readiness, we hitched up our horses tandem fashion, and struck out almost due north. The first night we made Brush creek [in present western Graham county], and camped. As it was yet dusk, we shouldered our rifles, and strolled down the creek in search of game. After traveling half a mile we reached a grove of trees taller than the surrounding ones. Each tree contained one or more of what appeared to be the nests of some

9. Parks Fort was located in Sec. 31, T. 11 W., R. 24 S., in present Trego county; it was also called Trego Tank. On November 20, 1874, a post office was established at present WaKeeney and named Trego. Cooke apparently means the former site.—Snell letter.

10. “Tuesday, June 18, 1867, Thomas Parks, contractor, and three other men were killed by Indians on the grade about where Wilson is now. Parks was a partner of Vincent J. Lane, of Kansas City, Kan. Mr. Lane declined to contract further because of the danger, and it was but a short time after he retired that Parks was caught.”—Adolph Roesigk, “Railroad Grading Among Indians,” Kansas Historical Collections, v. 8, p. 387.
gigantic bird. Curious to ascertain what kind of nests they were, I climbed up one of them, and found it composed mostly of bark, and in the inside, wrapped in an old blanket, was a small skeleton. We had run across an old Indian burying-ground. It is still the fashion of some tribes of Indians to bury their dead in trees.

Next morning we harnessed up our novel team, and in the course of an hour reached Solomon river. The stream is broad and shallow, and its banks are devoid of timber. Toward evening we arrived at Prairie Dog creek, fifty miles from Parks Fort. As there was considerable game in the neighborhood, and plenty of wood and water, we concluded to make this our camping-ground. For two or three days we were busily engaged in building a residence—a kind of roofed cellar. We killed a few buffalo, and used their hides for shingles. We had barely become comfortably settled before we discovered a better-looking camping place, about three miles distant. So we vacated our first house, and commenced building a log-house. This we loopholed, banked up with dirt, and roofed as before.11

Business now commenced. Whenever we killed a few buffalo, we cut off the hams, took out the humps and tongues, and hauled them to camp. These were cut up, salted in brine, and finally smoked and dried. The balance of the carcass was slit here and there, and strychnine placed in the cuts. This was intended to accommodate the wolves and coyotes. Our baits were looked after every morning, and occasionally we had from one to six wolves.

After a few weeks, game becoming scarce, we took a trip over to Sappa creek, seven miles north, with the intention of staying there a few days. The first day of our arrival we killed seventeen buffalo, and, as usual, poisoned the remains. The following morning we found twenty dead wolves and coyotes. By the time we had them all skinned and pegged out it was time for supper.

As I was gathering up sticks with the intention of starting a fire, my partner called my attention to some fellow on horseback coming over the divide from the Republican river. Just as he got within plain view, another and another followed, until finally we counted eight of what proved to be Indians. They came down the creek and went into camp about half a mile down the stream from us. As discretion was the better part of valor, we built no fire, and consequently, went supperless to bed. I don’t think either of us slept much. At the first gleam of daylight we saddled up and made a

11. The site of the Cooke and Leonard hunting camp was probably in western Norton county, though their hunting range probably extended into Decatur county as well.
hasty retreat back to our castle. We never returned for our wolf-pelts; and whether our red brethren appropriated the spoils or no, deponent sayeth not.

Buffalo, antelope, black-tail deer, beaver, otter, wild turkey and jack-rabbits were abundant. On one occasion, there being a little snow on the ground, we found the tracks of a band of deer, which we followed. They had crossed and recrossed the frozen creek several times, and, in making one trip over the ice, it proved treacherous, and in I went. As the day was intensely cold, my compulsory bath was rather uncomfortable, and although I made good time to our cabin, I found both my feet were badly frozen. This accident rendered me somewhat of a cripple, and confined me in doors for several days.

In the course of a week, the confinement proving irksome, and my partner reporting fresh deer-tracks, I wrapped my feet in gummy-sacks and we sallied forth. As the creek-banks were lined with willows, he took one side, I the other. Before going far I espied an old bull-buffalo, evidently taking a kindly interest in my maneuvers. Although he was nearly 400 yards away, I fired, and he fell. In going toward him I slipped another cartridge into my rifle.

When within about five yards I noticed he was a pretty lively-looking corpse, but, ere I had time to ruminate, he up and charged. Instinctively I pointed the rifle at his head and fired. The old fellow merely shook his cranium, but delayed not. I dropped my rifle; then commenced one of the most interesting races ever beheld. I was a little ahead, with the bull a good second. After retaining my slight lead for about seventy-five yards I heard my partner, on the opposite side of the creek, yelling with laughter and hallooing, “Go it, Cook—go it!”

Previous to receiving this encouragement I had been doing my utmost to beat the buffalo. Presently my partner’s rifle cracked, and, glancing over my shoulder, I saw my antagonist was down, having evidently withdrawn from the contest. The moment I felt I was safe I began hobbling toward my partner, but he at once objected to my mode of locomotion, claiming it to be an utter impossibility for a cripple to make such good time as I had recently done. He ever afterward insisted that, with a little training, I would be the fleetest footman on the plains.

On another occasion Leonard wounded a young bull, which leisurely walked into the stream and lay down. As we were anxious to have him on dry ground, I was to poke him with a stick, and,
when he charged me, my partner was to shoot him down. After a good deal of punching, the animal came out to interview me. Unfortunately, after he got on terra firma, Leonard’s rifle missed fire, and I had another foot-race. We, however, only raced about fifty yards, when the buffalo, apparently stricken with remorse, withdrew from the contest, and returned to the stream. The next time I coaxed him out a sure shot laid him low.

About once in two weeks we loaded up our cart with an assortment of game, which I used to haul to the station and exchange for necessities we required. This [round] trip of 100 miles all alone, right through a hostile Indian country, was not a pleasant one. There was no trail, and, as the plains are of a very monotonous appearance, it was a difficult matter to keep the right course. I generally managed to make Brush creek the first night, and, after preparing supper, no matter how cold it might be, I had to put out the fire, as I was afraid it might attract the attention of neighboring Indians.

On one of my excursions, when I reached Brush creek the night was intensely cold, and I thought, Indians or no Indians, I’ll keep a fire this night. My blankets were stretched out near the fire, and I was dozing (sound sleep was out of the question), when I heard a crackling among the twigs and dry leaves. On looking around, about ten feet distant I saw a pair of shining eyes glaring right at me. My first impression was that it was an Indian crawling on his hands and knees, and I acknowledged a feeling of fear. On reaching for my rifle, I began to think it might possibly be only a wolf, and, if so, it was dangerous to fire off a gun at that time of night, not knowing who my neighbors might be, or their whereabouts. Finally, becoming satisfied it was a wolf, I drew a brand from the fire and threw it at the two eyes. With a snort and a rush, my visitor unceremoniously left me.

I have read accounts of buffalo bellowing and pawing the ground before making a charge; but I never heard one even moan, and they do not lose any time in pawing. I never heard of them attacking a man, unless badly wounded. Until a bull is 2 years old, his horns stand up erect, and he is then called a spike-bull. After this his horns commence curving toward each other.

The old patriarch bulls, who have outlived their usefulness, are run out of the harem and rove around disconsolate, either singly or in [small] herds. Buffalo sometimes exhibit astonishing tenacity of life. I have known them [to] get clean away with probably a pound
of lead in them. Occasionally the first shot will kill one “too dead to skin.”

The most noisy animal on the plains is the coyote. When about three of them congregate at dusk and begin warbling their evening hymn, instead of a trio you would imagine it was a grand chorus in which 500 voices participated. The music produced is about as melodious as what we are accustomed to hear rendered by that backyard artist, the Thomas cat. The coyote, although not endowed with superior musical abilities to the feline, has a greater compass of voice. As his song is not productive of sleep, I have often wished to conclude his serenade by gently caressing him with a club.

During the stormy weather we had ample time to cut up and salt what meat we had on hand. Although the winter passed pleasantly, it was a Robinson Crusoe-kind of existence. On Christmas day our big camp-kettle contained the breasts of three or four turkeys, a jack-rabbit, small pieces of deer and antelope, and a portion of buffalo-hump. I doubt whether there was a family on the continent which had such a variegated bill of fare.

My partner, who had a weakness for eccentric costume, during the winter made himself a cap from a badger’s skin, a vest from beaver pelts, and a pair of pants from the hide of a buffalo calf. He also seriously contemplated the manufacture of a coat from wolf-skins.

Buffalo-hunting is hard work, but there is so much excitement attached to it that the hunter does not feel tired until his day’s work is done and he finds himself five or six miles away from camp. Toward spring we divided our spoils and I returned to Denver. I never saw or heard of my partner since.