



*Buffalo In Winter*

oil on board, 1912, courtesy C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

### BUFFALO IN THE BASIN

The rolling hills, nutritious grass and good water of the Judith Basin attracted vast herds of buffalo. Indian tribes from all directions hunted the abundant wildlife here.

The rapid destruction of the buffalo started when the trade in hides for leather began. Until the 1870s, the buffalo trade dealt with “robes,” the scraped and tanned hide of the cow buffalo. As making a robe took a lot of time, the harvest of buffalo was sustainable. When the market for untanned hide reached \$3 to \$4 a piece, professional hunters and skinners efficiently decimated the herds, removing only the skins. The hides were shipped to Eastern markets on the steamboats from Fort Benton or on the railroads that had just entered the Territory.

By 1883, the prairies were no longer black with buffalo. There was little public outcry as vanishing buffalo made way for growing cattle herds. The Indians, deprived of their way of life, could not believe the buffalo were gone. At first, they thought the herd was still to the south.

An industry sprang up that collected the bones strewn across the prairie for use as phosphate fertilizers.

