

RUSH COUNTY: WHERE THE BUFFALO ROAM

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This is really the 26th article I have written to commemorate the Rush County Bicentennial. The last three articles were misnumbered.

The topic this time is the history of the North American Bison in Rush County. For simplicity sake we will refer to bison as buffalo. Most references to bison use the word buffalo.... buffalo nickels, buffalo wings, buffalo grass, buffalo chips, buffalo wallow, Buffalo Bill Cody. Some of us are “buffaloed” from time to time, but not many have been “bisoned.”

To begin with, there were few, if any buffalo in Rush County in 1822. In Dr. John Arnold’s History of Rush County 1888 there is no mention of a population. Dr. Arnold mentions an abundance of deer. He mentions panthers and wolves; but no buffalo. One early story about a local buffalo occurred in 1851. According to historian Jean Green, a man named Pierce Guffin from near Mauzy brought a buffalo for exhibition to the first Rush County Fair. That fair location was in Rushville on South Jackson Street near the old Lower Cemetery.

When Indiana became a state in 1816, only the southern one-third of the state was populated. Many of the early trails had been used by Native Americans, but those trails or traces were originally created by herds of buffalo traveling to salt licks. Thanks to the buffalo, settlers had some semblance of a trail to follow when trying to reach other new settlement areas like Rush County.

In 2016, to commemorate the Indiana Bicentennial, 23 buffalo were released at the Kankakee Sands Preserve in northwest Indiana. In 2022 the herd at Kankakee numbers near 90.



Today we have two buffalo farms in Rush County. The first farm that I visited was Rushwood, owned by Jack and Linda (Hinchman) Clarkson. Jack graduated from Rushville High School in 1949. There were 49 in his class. After graduating from Butler University, and while still in Indiana University Law School, he was elected Prosecutor of Rush County. Jack served as Rush County Republican County Chairman for 20 years. He credits a lot of his political success to “Poud” Howell, Arthur Wilson, and Manley Abercrombie.

Clarkson has been awarded three Sagamore Of The Wabash awards. He claims the buffalo at Rushwood belong to Linda.

Linda Clarkson grew up around horses and other farm animals. Her father was State Veterinarian Lowell Hinchman. As a kid she delivered newspapers by horseback in Glenwood. She mentioned... "I always got the paper on the porch." Linda attended eight years of school at Glenwood, graduated from Rushville, then attended Colorado Women's College. She owned a palomino called Tony Boy and during high school she participated in an all girl equestrian color guard. All five girls rode palominos. So, it's not too much of a stretch to understand why you see a horse, a llama, and 12 buffalo at Rushwood.

The largest number of buffalo that the Clarksons ever had was 28. They have raised breeding stock to sell to other buffalo owners. Usually they sell the bulls and keep the cows. Their herd bull for several years was Beauregard, but he died five years ago. The lifespan is about 20 years.

The Clarksons are members of the National Bison Association. There are 25 breeders from Indiana in the 2022 national register. Buffalo can trace their ancestors to two main types of lines.... woodland buffalo and plains buffalo. Woodland type are usually larger. The top of the hump may be six feet high, and the total weight could reach 2,000 pounds.

We need to remember that the depletion of the buffalo herds in the 1800s coincided with the transplanting of Native Americans to reservations by the Federal Government. For many Native Americans, especially the plains tribes, the buffalo were their lifeblood.

When the railroads crossed the country after the Civil War, "excursion" trains would take hunters to the buffalo herds. There the animals were slaughtered for sport. Buffalo Bill Cody was said to have killed more than 4,000 animals in two years. By the end of the "excursions", the buffalo herds had been diminished to less than 1,000. Native Americans felt they had a sacred right to protect the buffalo. An albino buffalo is especially sacred to Native Americans.

The second Rush County farm I visited was the Vaughan Buffalo Farm north of Carthage. Richard and Lee (Wittenborn) Vaughan raise buffalo and sell them for meat purposes. Lee is a Rushville graduate. After graduating from I.U. she taught Special Education at Greenfield Central for 36 years. She retired in 2019. Rich graduated from Evansville Memorial H.S. and I.U. He worked for Bristol-Myers for 32 years, and he is also retired.

Rich and Lee bought their farm in 1994. Buffalo graze 16 acres of their 64 acre farm. The Vaughans supplement the herd's diet with hay and mineral tubs. When a buffalo is used for meat consumption, the animal is butchered then processed by a firm at Mechanicsburg, Indiana. Normally the animal will dress out to about 50% of its live weight. Then the buyer has to decide how they want their meat processed. For example, 450 pounds might be divided thus: 150 pounds for ground meat and 300 pounds for steaks, roasts, jerky, and summer sausage. Buffalo meat is lean and high in protein.

The Vaughans plan to cut their herd from 24 down to 12. Pasture will not recover if overgrazed. Unless there is supplemental feed, each buffalo needs a couple of acres of pasture.

Buffalo are tough, quick and to be honest downright dangerous at times. The Vaughans have a buffalo cow named Crazy Horns. A person has to be very careful around her or she will become offensive for no apparent reason.

Dr. Bob Jackman, a veterinarian and former Indiana State Senator from Milroy, told me about a c-section he once did on a buffalo cow in northern Indiana. It was on a Sunday night in 1967, his first year out of Purdue Veterinarian School. "She was tough. Buffalo kick a lot," said Jackman. The operation was successful. The gestation period is a little over nine months for a buffalo cow. When there is a newborn calf, the entire herd will protect the newborn.

Want to get in buffalo business? It's not cheap. A yearling may cost as much as \$5,000, a bred two year old cow \$7,000-\$9,000, and a mature cow \$10,000.

Last but not least, here is a story related to the 2016 Indiana Bicentennial. A buffalo is featured on the Indiana State Seal, so each county was sent a buffalo statue by the state. It could be painted as each county wished. Well it seems that recently (June, 2022), someone absconded with the fiberglass buffalo in possession of our friends in Decatur County. According to newspaper accounts, no one seemed to know what happened to the statue. Most folks were "buffaloed" by the incident.