From killer to caretaker: How and why Charles Jesse Jones brought buffalo to the Kaibab Plateau

By **Gabriel Pietrorazio**
Published: Monday, October 16, 2023 - 4:25am
Updated: Monday, October 16, 2023 - 7:20am

Download mp3 (7.21 MB)

Coverage of tribal natural resources is supported in part by **Catena Foundation**

Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries
Charles Jesse "Buffalo" Jones stands underneath a tree.

“A one time hide hunter named Charles Jesse ‘Buffalo’ Jones, left his home near Garden City, Kansas,” said Peter Coyote. “And headed southwest toward the Texas Panhandle — where 10 years earlier, he had taken part in the wholesale slaughter of the buffalo herds on the southern plains.”

This Emmy Award-winning actor lends his narrating abilities to acclaimed documentary filmmaker Ken Burns’ latest project: “**The American Buffalo**,” which debuts Oct. 16 on PBS. It’s a two-part, four-hour documentary series on this iconic species and the Indigenous communities that share a traumatically intertwined history spanning hundreds of generations on this continent.

As many as 60 million buffalo once roamed North America before unregulated hide hunting ran rampant. It would fuel a booming robe business by skinning their hides and leaving the rest behind. Buffalo — a culturally significant natural resource for Native Americans — were also slaughtered in an attempt to starve tribes and drive them from the Great Plains, thus clearing the path for a transcontinental railroad throughout the 19th century.

More than 300 buffalo were left in the wild by 1884.

And Charles Jesse Jones participated and profited during this enterprise that almost eradicated them — until he suddenly had a change of heart, deciding to save the species instead.

“It’s why I’ve spent my entire professional life with public broadcasting. We don’t go in telling you what we already know,” Ken Burns told KJZZ. “We’re sharing with you a process of discovery, and one of those is this very interesting, complicated figure of ‘Buffalo’ Jones.”

Back then, he raised $1,000 to outfit an expedition to the Texas Panhandle where Jones hoped to find some of the last wild and free-roaming buffalo among the southern herd. He located and lassoed 18 calves, bringing them back home to Kansas. This happened right after the “Great Die-Up,” a harsh winter killed hundreds of thousands of cattle across the Great Plains and effectively ended the practice of open-range grazing.

“The winter of 1886-87 is what leads Theodore Roosevelt to exit the cattle business,” said William Hansard. He’s a digital collections specialist for the Theodore Roosevelt Center at Dickinson State University in North Dakota. “And it’s that same winter that leads ‘Buffalo’ Jones to start hybridizing buffalo and cattle to survive.”

Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries

A rare spotted buffalo in the Grand Canyon herd was documented in an American Bison Society report from the 1920s.

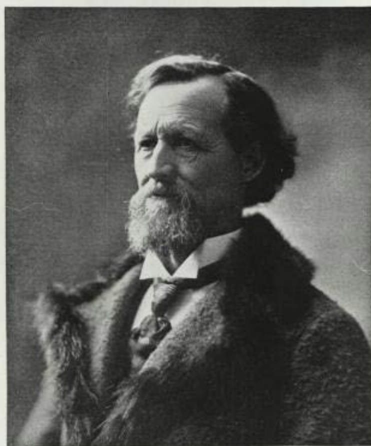
Seeing wild buffalo unfazed by similar weather inspired Jones to mate them with Scottish Galloway beef cattle to domesticate a hardy hybrid. And he called them cattalo. Attempts to grow founding herds with cattalo was commonplace during that era, but mostly proved to be unsuccessful.

His experiment initially had mixed results, as Burns' documentary outlines: "Too many cows died in calving. Too many calves were stillborn or sterile to make it commercially profitable." Despite those setbacks, Jones still built a budding business: the 'Buffalo' Jones Catalo Company.

A "brilliant self-promoter," Hansard said: "He was very, very good at hyping himself up." He even latched onto his public ties with Roosevelt to advance his influence.

Ringing high-profile public endorsements from Roosevelt solidified his popular persona, given Jones' wild game background from traveling to Africa and taming lions with lassos. In fact, 'Buffalo' Jones had been even tapped to serve as Yellowstone's first game warden under Roosevelt's administration in 1902.

So, Jones capitalized upon his rising stardom to become a bona fide buffalo conservationist in the process. There's even an advertisement citing a quote attributed to his dear friend, Roosevelt, which claimed that 'Buffalo' Jones' work with wild animals "is beyond anything ever recorded in the annals of time. My hunt sinks into insignificance compared with it."



Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries

Charles Jesse "Buffalo" Jones

“As far as I can tell, Theodore Roosevelt never wrote those words,” said Hansard. “This is somebody who, once he had that ability to milk a certain connection, was going to and he did a very good job of it.”

And hyping up his approach to conservation. Burns’ documentary expresses that Jones would “have much better success and a greater impact on the future of the species by selling his bison to zoos and wealthy families interested in having their own private herds.”

His ambition eventually brought him to the Arizona territory in 1904.

Mormon cattleman Edwin D. Wooley, and Ernest Pratt, the son of a U.S. Forest Service supervisor, gave him a wagon tour around the North Rim. Seeing a space “so wild and remote that civilization could never intrude,” inspired Jones to set up a refuge. Upon returning from his scouting trip, he convinced then-President Roosevelt to establish the Grand Canyon National Game Preserve, where a wild buffalo herd would be formed, a year later.

Part of that agreement granted Jones, Wooley and Pratt the right to form a development company to pursue privately financed cattalo breeding projects on a separate ranch in the neighboring House Rock Valley near Vermilion Cliffs National Monument. His first buffalo shipment arrived by rail in southern Utah in 1906. It was a 175-mile trail drive to reach the new preserve on the Kaibab Plateau.

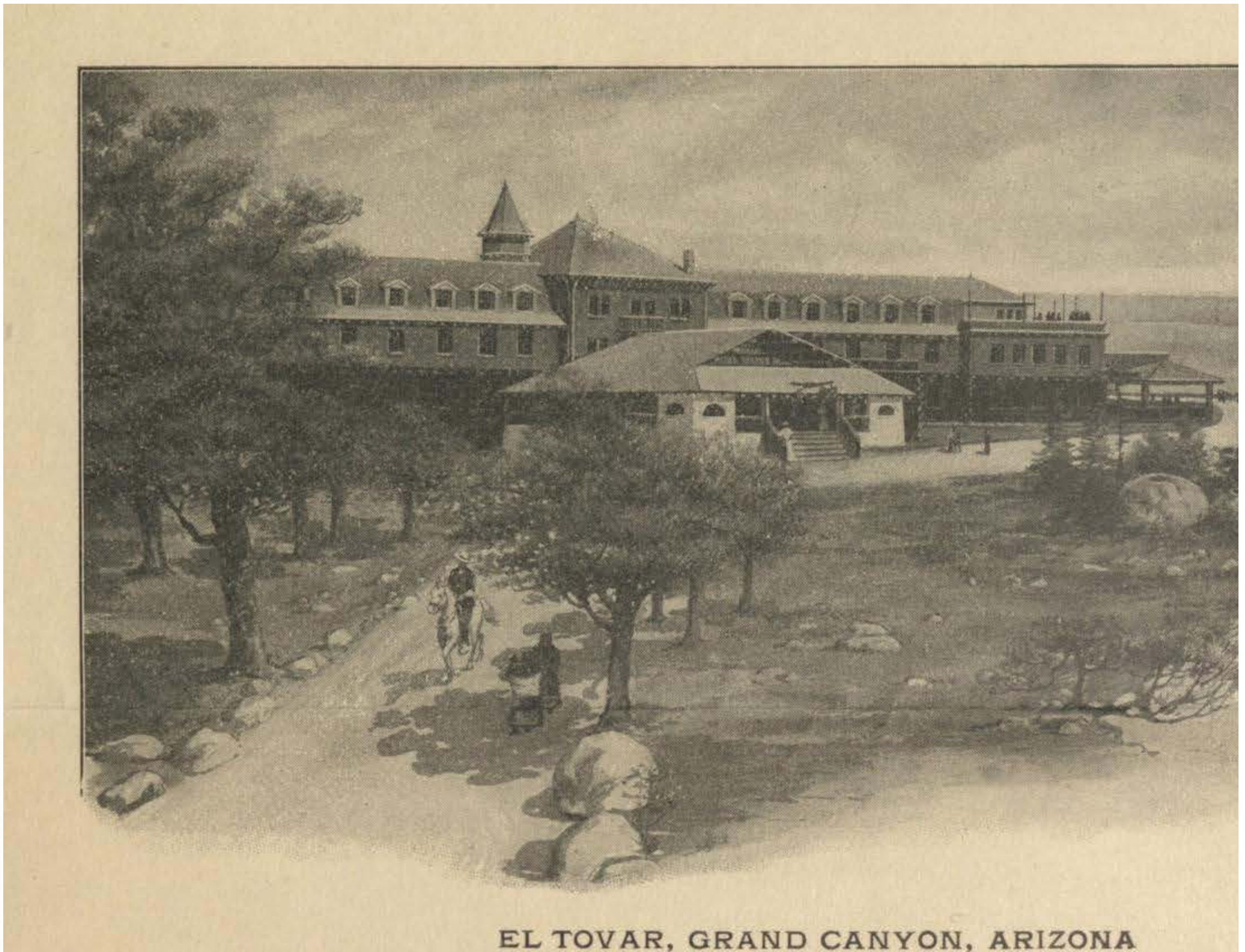
A central figure from a complex era of conservation, Jones is lumped in with the likes of Smithsonian taxidermist William T. Hornaday, William Frederick Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, and Roosevelt. And Burns insists these men, “speak to the possibility of evolution.”

At the same time, Burns said early efforts to restore buffalo were built on an assumption that Native communities were too primitive or incapable of saving the beasts themselves. They were also fueled by an ideology known as “White Man’s Burden,” a combination of white supremacy, eugenics and nationalism.

And in Jones’ case, money.

“And that’s as troubling as anything, but they’re also saving buffalo,” said Burns. “So you just look at this motley crew, and have to say, ‘Yeah, that’s the way it is.’”

From boom to bust, Jones eventually ran into financial trouble and decided to get out of the buffalo-saving business altogether after departing from the North Rim — only four years before his death in 1919. But before he drove out his remaining herd from the Kaibab Plateau, he allowed an associate, James Owens, to hand-pick what he believed to be 17 purebred buffalo since Jones was “financially embarrassed.”



Special Collections at the University of Arizona Libraries

Charles Jesse Jones penned correspondences on this letterhead while staying at the iconic El Tovar along the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1907.

Ironically, all of his hard work trying to restore this species in Arizona, could’ve been suddenly erased.

An American Bison Society report published in the 1920s expressed concern that this herd of buffalo would be slaughtered in the event of Owens’ death since he was “well along in years” after Jones transferred them into his possession. That same report offered a recommendation: “It would seem to be a wise move for the State of Arizona to acquire these buffalo which have become fully established; as they will be worth many times their cost by furnishing additional attraction for tourists.”

Shortly thereafter, Owens sold the herd that grew to 100 buffalo to Arizona for $10,000 in 1926. The Arizona Game and Fish Department began managing the species. Two new herds later emerged at the Raymond and House Rock wildlife areas in the coming decades around the 1940s.

Approximately, 74 buffalo belong to the Raymond herd that roams between Winslow and Flagstaff — while another 36 animals reside among the House Rock herd, north of the Grand Canyon, in Coconino County. And both of these herds are fenced inside the boundaries of their respective wildlife areas.

Eventually, the National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service stepped up to collaborate with the state agency to manage these animals that were originally raised by Jones, now more commonly known as the Kaibab Plateau herd today.

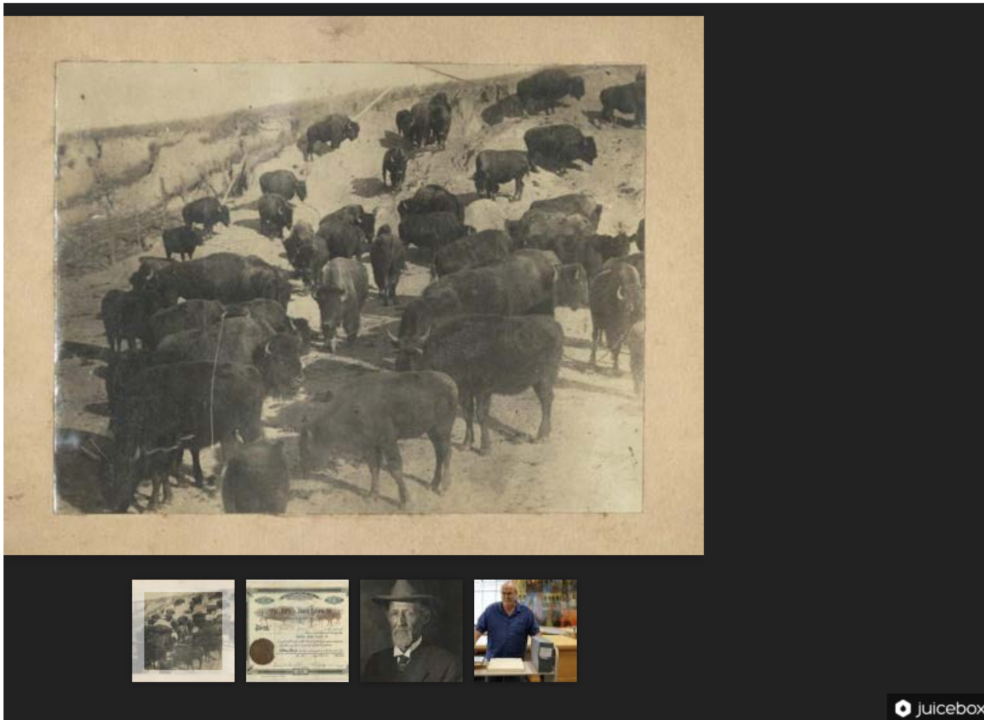
Grand Canyon wildlife program manager Greg Holm at the National Park Service has studied their descendants for more than a decade. And ‘Buffalo’ Jones’ cross-breeding efforts to birth cattalo led to the North Rim having “one of the more unique herds genetically speaking in the country," according to Holm.

Now, it’s Arizona’s oldest and largest free-ranging buffalo herd. It tallies in the hundreds, with these massive beasts trotting between the Kaibab National Forest and Grand Canyon National Park, as Holm said, “because of what ‘Buffalo’ Jones did, they still exist.”

EDITOR'S NOTE: Audio from "The American Buffalo" documentary film in this story is courtesy of PBS.

More stories from KJZZ

- **Back from the brink of extinction: A conversation with Ken Burns on 'The American Buffalo'**
- **More tribal natural resources coverage**



Fronteras Tribal Natural Resources Arizona History