

The National Bison Association Winter Conference was in Denver from January 21st to the 24th.

Although my wife Gail and I have attended the NBA summer conferences for some years, this was our first winter conference.

It is an impressive event.

This was my first meeting as your Regional Director. Thank you for electing me.

I have been thinking about what to write in this report for a couple days. It seemed to me that a report on seminars and dinner menus might be boring. So, on Sunday I asked our neighbor, Joe, if he thought it would be interesting to write about characters that we met at the conference. Joe said, "Sure, but it might get lengthy. As far as I can tell, everybody who raises bison is a character."

Colorful and interesting characters do abound in the buffalo business.

Wednesday afternoon I attended my first Board meeting. So did Dave Hunter DVM. Dave is the newly elected director for Region 1. Region 1 includes 8 states from Arizona to Alaska. Dave is the lead veterinarian for Turner Enterprises. Gail and I met Dave several summers ago when the conference was near Yellowstone. At that conference, attendees enjoyed lunch and a tour at a nearby Turner ranch. Dave was as approachable and helpful as are the veterinarians in our MNBA. DR. Hunter is helping to organize an International Bison Health meeting in Saskatoon this summer. I believe the dates are June 25 to 28.

Wednesday evening there was a Welcoming Reception in the ballroom. Gail and I sat at a table with Leroy, Erlice, and Paul. They are from the Crow Reservation in south central Montana. I was surprised to learn that the Crow have occupied their reservation since 1868. It is huge. The fifth largest reservation in the US. The Crow people reintroduced bison to their land 50 years ago. The herd has grown to over 1000 bison. Currently the herd is basically unmanaged. Excess animals are harvested and the meat is provided to members. Tribal leaders have decided to increase the numbers in their herd dramatically. They intend to improve the management of their grasslands. They can do a lot. The reservation is over two million acres. Leroy is the herd manager. Erlice, a young woman educated in grassland management will design the grazing plan. They intend to build a processing facility on the reservation.

Thursday morning I had coffee with Moritz Espy. Moritz is the manager of the 777 Ranch near Rapid City. Many of the fantastic scenes in the movie, "Dances with Wolves" were filmed on the 777. The 777 is owned by Mime Hillenbrand. Mime has generously sponsored numerous grazing and bison handling seminars. I have attended several. That is how I met Moritz. Among many other talents, Moritz is a grand story teller. Working a large bison ranch and guiding movie people has given Moritz wealth of great material.

Thursday was filled with educational sessions on bison handling, grass management, social media tools, pen design, and many other topics. I wish I could have been in more than one place at a time.

As you would expect, every delicious meal was built around bison.

Thursday, again in the ballroom, Gail and I sat at a table with the three people responsible for designing the meal. I don't give too much thought to meal design. These three culinary experts put great effort into designing not just the main elements of our meal but into the crucial finer points. One woman had designed a unique peach salad dressing; another developed the brown sauce that went with the bison meat. Both were excellent.

The first session on Friday was by Jon Emanuel, executive chef and master butcher. Meat cutting and the cooking of special cuts are topics I would like to know much more about. Those topics are especially important to those of us who deal directly with bison meat consumers.

I took a front row seat. A professional looking man took the chair next to me. He seemed familiar but I could not place him. He had a medical symbol on his sweater. I asked if he was a veterinarian. He replied that he worked in the vet department at Texas A & M. We chatted on and off during the demonstration. We both enjoy meat cutting and meat preparation. He did not raise bison himself but he knew a lot about bison. When I asked why he was at the conference, he replied that one of his students was giving a report on bison genetics. My classmate was Dr. James Derr. I had in fact seen and heard him at a Dakota Territory Conference several years before. Dr. Derr is the geneticist who is well known for his work detecting cattle genes in bison. I had many questions for him then and again later after his student, Dr. Lauren Dobson, gave a "Bison Genome Update" to the full conference. Dr Derr is an incredibly good teacher. He is terrifically knowledgeable yet easy to talk with.

On the topic of meat cutting, the Graeses have a session on "Bison Carcass Breakdown" scheduled for the afternoon of April 17 during the Minnesota Buffalo Association Annual Conference. The conference is from April 17 to 19 at Northland Bison in Rice lake Wisconsin. Put that on your calendar.

Friday dinner was an awards banquet. Gail and I again sat with a table of people we did not know. A couple from North Carolina, a couple from Missouri and a young man from Utah. All of these folks were interesting but especially the man from Utah, Jeremy Shaw. He works for the State of Utah as the Park Manager for Antelope Island. Antelope Island is the 26,000 acre island in the Great Salt Lake. The bison herd was established there in 1893. Jeremy invited us to visit him and his buffalo. We are going there in March.

Bob Jackson spent 30 years as a back country ranger in Yellowstone Park. His work was seasonal and during those same years, he built a 1,000 acre bison farm in southern Iowa. Bob had a display at the NBA. He was there to promote his philosophy and methods for raising bison. Bob is adamant that bison should spend their lives in undivided family groups. Calves are weaned by their mothers. He leaves breeding bulls with the herds year around. Bob works to improve the quality of his soils on a growing grass savannah. He raises his bison naturally without medication or handling. He pasture harvests only mature animals after a prayer of respect.

I have a list of about eight more people I would like to write about. Maybe another time.

I will mention one more interesting character, Bud Koeppen. Many awards were given out during the banquet. The one I enjoyed the most was the "Member of the Year" award that went to Bud. Bud is always there, always helpful, always in a great mood. Bud was overcome with emotion when Gail Griffin called his name for the award. I know he was overcome because Bud was speechless. Imagine that.

Best regards. Tom Barthel, Region 5 Director