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From Bison to Cattle: The Ecology of the Southern Plains 1500-1750

Jenni Tiftt-Ochoa

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Introduction

By the mid-nineteenth century, as many as twenty million North American bison had been exterminated from the Great Plains regions. The North American bison population went from over sixty million head in the era before European contact to less than two thousand head in the late nineteenth century. Historians, anthropologists, and scientists throughout the past century have studied this drastic population decrease. There has been extensive research regarding the effects of the railroad and United States military on the near extinction of the North American bison, but far less is known about the impact of the Spanish Empire on this species that was so fundamental to the survival and continuity of Indigenous states and societies. Archaeological literature, primary documents detailing daily mission life, and financial records helped to identify the effects of Spanish Missions on bison migration during the 17th century when the east Texas mission system was built and became fully operational. These documents shed light on the drastic shift in bison migration during this period and suggest that the mission system may have played a role in altering these migration patterns. This study identifies how the Spanish Empire's east Texas mission system altered bison migration through the construction of large cattle ranches and the inadvertent destruction of the ecology of the Southern Plains. This project contributes to research that focuses on the intersectional space of the Spanish Empire, borderlands history, Indigenous history, and the environmental impact of human activity. Understanding the effects of the east Texas mission system on the migratory patterns of the North American bison will help us better understand the relationship between the Indigenous peoples of the southwest and the European imperial powers. Through careful examination of the structure of the mission systems, the interaction with indigenous states, and the role cattle played in the ecological changes of the Southern Plains, this study will investigate what caused the rapid

and permanent change in the migratory patterns of the North American bison. The first part of the paper will be dedicated to looking at the history of the Southern Plains and the historiography of both the area and the ecological changes that resulted from European contact more broadly. The paper will then use primary documents to study the geography of the missions and the impact of the European animals that inhabited the ranchos belonging to the missions. The ecological changes wrought by the European cattle also changed the way the Indigenous people interacted with the environment. Documents in the archives of Frays Benito Fernandez and Mariano De Los Delores help examine these altered interactions and provide additional information about the effects of human activity on the environment in the 17th century.

Historiography

The influence of the Spanish Empire's East Texas Mission System on the migratory patterns of bison on the Southern Plains during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been largely overlooked in historical scholarship. Historians researched and published scholarship on the ecological changes that resulted from European contact and covered a broad area, ranging from the New England colonies in the American northeast to the islands of Hawaii in the Pacific, but largely left out the Southern Plains. Research was devoted to environmental history in general and the influence of cattle on the ecology of these areas in particular.

Scholarship has been published about the influence of Europeans on the ecology of North America, albeit not the Southern Plains. One such set of scholarship is William Cronon's book *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*.¹ Cronon addressed the ecological devastation of New England during the colonial period. He was careful to not

¹ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

only describe the ecological changes, but to also analyze the relationships between both the colonists and the Indigenous people and their relationships with nature in order to determine the causality of the changes.² Cronon was able to give his readers a glimpse into the farming methods of Indigenous people and European colonists and how these methods affected wildlife and the land. He used county records, correspondence, almanacs, and ethnohistories to support his argument.

John Ryan Fischer also focused on the theoretical components of ecology, while simultaneously giving additional background and context on the framework of environmental history.³ Fischer argued that cattle changed the environment and culture in the west and expanded the traditional idea of the west beyond the arid deserts of the Great Basin and focused on California and Hawaii. Fischer compared the ways in which cattle and European incursion caused environmental changes in different areas of North America. His study was focused on different geographical areas, but is a useful as a comparison on the same general thematic concept. The next pieces of scholarship shifted focus from the ecological changes by Europeans to the changes wrought by Indigenous groups.

Scholars have argued that the life cycles of the bison were interrupted and permanently altered by Indigenous groups. Robert Michael Morrissey addressed the importance of bison to the lives of Indigenous people in the Midwest.⁴ He argued that bison were so numerous as to be uncountable in the early 17th century, but began to noticeably wane at the end of the 17th century. This problematic trend was also happening in the Southern Plains during roughly the same time

² Cronon, 15.

³ John Ryan Fischer, *Cattle Colonialism: An Environmental History of the Conquest of California and Hawai'i* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁴ Robert Michael Morrissey, "The Power of the Ecotone: Bison, Slavery, and the Rise and Fall of the Grand Village of the Kaskaskia," *Journal of American History* 102, no. 3, (2015): 667–92.

frame. He explored the spaces that formed physical zones of power between Indigenous and European groups. In these areas, ecological and social divisions were created. Similar to the areas in the Southern Plains, these zones were especially noticeable in the borderlands regions of the Midwest. Morrissey's work is applicable to this study because of the connections it makes between the relationships of the Indigenous people and the declining bison population.

Dan Flores also addressed the subject of the waning bison population on the Southern Plains.⁵ He argued that the Indigenous people of the Southern Plains were predators and acutely aware of their role in the life cycle of the buffalo. Using mainly secondary sources, he explored the factors affecting bison population, Indigenous populations, and how the Indigenous people interacted with bison. Flores used the method of reverse extrapolation of US census reports regarding livestock in the 1910s to determine how many bison resided in the Southern Plains. He argued that 8.2 million bison were on the Southern Plains in the pre-colonial era. Flores' primary focus in this article was on the role of the Indigenous people in relation to the bison. Although he briefly mentioned European traders, the statements were in reference to New Mexican Hispanos. He did not use Spanish mission documents to support or oppose his arguments and instead formed his arguments using the secondary sources. He argued that the spread of European horses and mules caused devastation to the Southern Plains ecology.

Andrew C. Isenberg agreed with Morrissey's reasoning and also argued that the decline of the buffalo was tied to the alteration of the culture of the Indigenous peoples.⁶ He contended horses, rather than cattle, were the main reason for the drastic decline. He also made the point that there were thirty million bison in the 1800s. This fact is important because it is in stark

⁵ Dan Flores. "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850." *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 2 (1991): 465-85.

⁶ Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

contrast to the sixty million head of bison Rollings argued were present in the 1500s.⁷ This suggests a rapid decrease of fifty percent in the bison population over the course of three centuries. As will be discussed in this study, the incursion of the Spanish mission system onto the Southern Plains was a large part of this declining population in the bison. Isenberg's work is an important piece in proving the impact the Spanish empire had on the environment and bison populations.

While previous scholarship touched on the changes in ecology brought on by European incursion, bison depopulation in the nineteenth century, and the effects of colonialism on the ecologies of California and Hawaii, it largely neglects the role of the Spanish Mission system in the destruction of the bison's habitat and ecology of the Southern Plains. This study is different because it investigates the role of the Spanish East Texas Mission System in changing the ecology of the Southern Plains during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the framing of environmental history. It builds on the ecological changes mentioned in previous scholarship, but in a different area of the North American continent. The geography of North America is diverse and rich, as was the geography of the East Texas Mission System. The methodology used in this study is unique because it examines documents written by European leaders of the missions, but doesn't center on the Europeans. The Indigenous people, the cattle, and the land are the main players in this study, giving a distinctive point of view that has not been studied in previous scholarship.

The Southern Plains

⁷ Rollings, 34.

Using archaeological evidence, experts have estimated between 8.2 million and 60 million North American bison resided on the Southern Plains before European contact.⁸ The Southern Plains region is the area in the southwest that covers grasslands as far north as the Arkansas River in Kansas and as far south as the Mexican states of Durango and Coahuila. The Southern Plains were constantly in a state of flux, shifting from swampy tropical lands that were home to enormous reptiles in the Mesozoic era to an ice covered plain in the Pleistocene epoch.⁹ Donald Worster argued that native plants, animals, and people had a shared sense of interdependency that was built over the course of centuries.¹⁰ North American bison had developed set migratory patterns for millennia before European contact. These patterns ranged as far north as Alaska, down to the Arkansas River in current day Kansas, across to the Florida panhandle, looping up into Maine, and back into Canada and Alaska. There were separate herds of North American bison that remained south of the Arkansas River, ranging as far south as Tenochtitlán, the foundation on which current day Mexico City was built. The bison had a massive influence on the lives of Indigenous peoples in these areas. They were the primary source of food for Indigenous peoples living on the Southern Plains and the shift in their migratory patterns had a long-lasting impact on the Indigenous peoples.

Geographical Ecology of the Missions

⁸ Dan Flores used a mathematical extrapolation and US census data to argue that the Southern Plains could not have had more than 8.2 million bison prior to European contact. However, Willard Rollings argued that there were as many as 60 million bison when the Spanish arrived on the Southern Plains in the 16th century. Dan Flores. "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850." *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 2 (1991): 465-85. Willard Rollings, *The Comanche* (Chelsea House Publications, 2004).

⁹ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66-69.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 66.

The Catholic Church had two main goals in the New World. The first was to use its religion to save as many Indigenous souls as possible and the second was to add to their own coffers in the process. For these reasons the Vatican encouraged their priests to expand north from Mexico, following Indigenous groups into what is now Texas. All along the San Antonio River these men of the cloth founded missions and grew their influence through colonization efforts. The missions and missionaries were prolific and new missions were quickly built. There was considerable pushback by the Indigenous populations and by 1762 there were only five missions remaining near the Presidio of San Antonio de Béxar. Of the five, four fell under the guidance of Fray Mariano de los Dolores y Viana and the College of Querétaro.

Fray Mariano left a detailed archive of letters, memos, reports, and various other types of correspondence. Many of the documents used to support this study come from this archive. Instead of taking the documents at face value, this study read them against the grain. The authors are being decentered and the focus is put on the peripheral actors. These actors include, but are not limited to, the Indigenous people, the cattle, and the land itself.

The geography of the missions and their ranchos are important in understanding the impact European animals had on the ecology of this area. The missions were in close proximity with one another and had thousands of head of animals. These animals were cared for by Indigenous people and were not moved from one area to another, but instead were stationary, consuming the resources of the ranchos, leaving behind no resources for the bison when their migration took them through the areas populated by the missions. Archival records show large numbers of animals populated the missions in close proximity to one another. As this study will show, these missions and the animals belonging to them were the main cause for the shift in migratory patterns of the bison.

One of the first missions to be founded within the East Texas Mission System was Mision de San Antonio de Valero. It was established in 1718 on the San Antonio River. Mision San Antonio housed up to 275 Indigenous people.¹¹ It had fields of corn, chile, and beans that were maintained by the Indigenous residents of the mission. The indigenous people also cared for 100 oxen, 315 head of horses, 1,115 head of cattle, 33 head of draft stock, and 2,300 sheep and goats.¹² Four thousand fixed animals would have been a drain on the resources of the area. These animals did not migrate, nor were they moved from one pasture to another. Instead they stayed in the same area, consuming resources.

Three and half miles south of Mision de San Antonio de Valero was La Mision de la Purísima Concepcion. Fray Mariano's description of this mission included information regarding the resources needed to maintain the herds of cattle. He wrote, "[It is] due south with all the land and water needed for the fields and cattle."¹³ This mission housed 207 Indigenous workers.¹⁴ They cared for fields and over three thousand head of domesticated animals. These animals included 90 oxen, 310 horses, 610 cattle, and 2,200 goats and sheep.¹⁵ Seven thousand domesticated, stationary animals were pastured within a three and half mile radius of one another. Yet another mission was located within a few leagues of these two missions.

Mision de San Juan Capistrano was located nine miles east of Mision de San Antonio de Valero and a similar distance northeast of La Mision de la Purísima Concepcion. Perhaps due to

¹¹ Fray Mariano De Los Dolores y Viana, Fray Mariano de los Dolores y Viana to Father Guardian Xavier Ortiz, March 6, 1762. In *Letters and Memorials of Fray Mariano de los Dolores y Viana 1737-1762*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1985, p. 330-31.

¹² *Ibid*, 333.

¹³ *Ibid*, 334.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 335.

¹⁵ *Ibid* 335.

the close proximity of these three missions and their need for natural resources, Fray Mariano expressed concern for this mission's resources, writing, "The mission has sufficient land but not enough for all the cattle and horses."¹⁶ San Juan Capistrano was home to 203 Indigenous people. Unlike the two previous missions, cotton was a main crop and source of profit for this mission. In order to increase the trading power of Mision de San Juan Capistrano, efforts were made to increase the rate and volume of the production of cotton.¹⁷ In addition to the cotton, Indigenous people cared for fields of corn, beans, and chile as well. The mission was also home to an undisclosed number of oxen, 1,000 head of cattle, 3,500 head of sheep, and 500 head of horses.¹⁸ This brought the number of domesticated European animals to at least twelve thousand within a ten-mile radius. However, these are just three of the more than twenty missions in the East Texas Mission System.

Mision de San Francisco de la Espada was located less than a mile south of Mision de San Juan Capistrano and about nine miles from both the Presidio and Mision de San Antonio de Valero.¹⁹ This mission was unique in that it did not have a church because of a lack of "good stone."²⁰ However, that dearth did not pose a problem when it came to constructing buildings on the rancho. The rancho had "a stone house with all the needed furniture for the families who live there and take care of the 262 head of cattle, 4,000 sheep, 145 tame horses in 11 herds, and 9 donkeys."²¹ The rancho housed more than two hundred Indigenous people in three rows of stone

¹⁶ Ibid, 336.

¹⁷ Ibid, 336-337.

¹⁸ Ibid, 338.

¹⁹ Ibid, 338.

²⁰ Ibid, 339.

²¹ Ibid, 340.

houses. The fact that the stones were used to build shelters on the ranch before they were used to build a church demonstrated both the importance of the ranchos in the mission system and how the priority was placed on financial rather than religious gains. A mission without a church but with a thriving population of over 4,000 domesticated European animals and 200 ranch hands makes one question the priorities of the Catholic Church.

The rancho at Mision de San Francisco de la Espada was named Rancho de las Cabras. It was located 30 miles southeast of current day San Antonio, near present day Floresville. The location of Rancho de las Cabras was moved from its original location because the cattle were causing a disturbance with a group from the Canary Islands. The cattle were overrunning the lands and fields of the Islanders.²² As a result of the encroachment, the Islanders began killing the cattle that were eating their crops. It is apparent from these documents that the resources were waning and the cattle were hungry. The missions owned the cattle, but were unable to provide the resources they needed, so they had to be moved to a new location. The cattle were not only a drain on the resources in the area, but also were a source of contention for the Indigenous people, changing the ecology of the Southern Plains and altering the landscape. With such a drastic change in the ecology of the Southern Plains, it is unsurprising that the bison would need to alter their migratory patterns in the hopes of finding necessary, life-sustaining resources. It was a cyclical pattern, as the bison altered their migratory patterns due to a lack of resources and an altered ecosystem, the landscape was altered even further, causing more disruption to the environment. An example of how much the land changed as a result of

²² Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana, Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana to Viceroy Archbishop Juan Antonio de Vizarron, November 24, 1739. In *Letters and Memorials of the Father Presidente Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana 1736-1754*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1981, p. 33.

European contact can be seen in the description of the lands by Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana.

Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana was a Spanish born priest hailing from Beran, Spain. He was a Franciscan missionary who spent eighteen years in the East Texas Mission System.²³ During his time as a missionary, he went on several exploratory missions, hoping to find converts amongst the Indigenous villages. In a letter to Viceroy Pedro Cebrian Conde de Fuenclara, written on May 16, 1745 he described the peoples and the lands of Bahia Espiritu Santo.²⁴ According to his descriptions, he had traveled across a wide expanse of land. His journeys took him to the northern part of the Colorado River, roughly 210 miles northeast of the Presidio of San Antonio. He followed the Colorado River south to Bahia de Espiritu Santo, or the Espiritu Santo Bay, near the Guadalupe River.²⁵ He made it a point to tell the Viceroy that the lands looked to be very fertile and would grow wheat for many years. In reference to the Indigenous people, Fray Benito wrote that he wasn't concerned about hostile tribes. He went on to write that the rapid disappearance of the bison from the regions south of the Colorado River had prompted the hostile tribes to leave the area in search for bison. "...now that the large herds of buffalo cannot be seen in that country as compared to what the other Indians are fortunate to have still."²⁶ It was on these plains of Bahia Espiritu Santos where the bison had previously roamed that the Mision Espiritu Santos was located.

²³ Fray Benito lived and worked in the East Texas Mission System from 1731-1749. He was in charge of the Mision de la Purísima Concepcion de la Acuña for sixteen years and later was named the Father Presidente of the Texas missions. Benito, 1.

²⁴ Benito, 48-54.

²⁵ Ibid, 48-49.

²⁶ Benito, 51.

Mision Espíritu Santos was an important mission to the Spanish. Spanish officials moved the location of the mission several times, each time as the result of pushback from local Indigenous people. Its final location was near the Guadalupe River in current day Goliad County.²⁷ It quickly grew and by 1735 Espíritu Santos was the largest rancho in Texas.²⁸ In her study about Espíritu Santos, Tamra Walter wrote, “Starting with only a few hundred head of cattle at Mission Valley, the mission herds grew to at least forty thousand head at the Goliad location of the mission during its best years.”²⁹ Historians and Texans alike consider Mision Espíritu Santos to be the first cattle ranch in Texas. It was owned and operated by the Spanish empire through the holdings of the Catholic Church. Correspondence in the archives from Fray Benito was to Viceroy and Spanish officials, not to Catholic officials. Mision Espíritu Santos was the largest rancho in the mission system and provided both food for the rest of the mission system, as well as goods to trade with the French and Indigenous tribes in the neighboring areas. It is not a coincidence that Fray Mariano remarked about the disappearance of large herds of bison within ten years of Espíritu Santos reaching its stride with forty thousand head of cattle. The strain on Bahia Espíritu Santo’s ecosystem because of the huge herds of cattle would have been immense.

Cattle Ecology

The changing ecology brought on by the introduction of the cattle to the Southern Plains forever changed the region. After the Pleistocene Era came the Holocene Era, more commonly

²⁷ Tamra Lynn Walter, *Espíritu Santo De Zúñiga: A Frontier Mission in South Texas*. (University of Texas Press, 2007), p. 18.

²⁸ C. Ramsdell, “Espiritu Santo: An Early Texas Cattle Ranch,” *Texas Geographic Magazine*, 13 (2): 21-25.

²⁹ Walter, 19.

known as the Human Era. It was during this time that the Southern Plains had evolved into an area of lush, protein rich native grasses with gently rolling hills and plentiful fresh water rivers. This rich environment provided sustenance to hundreds of species of wild animals, including bison, deer, elk, and antelope. These migratory species moved throughout the year, following the ebb and flow of the natural resources. They did not cause a strain on the environment. The domesticated European animals that were introduced into this environment were a much different story.

Much like their human counterparts, domesticated European animals were static and permanent. They relied entirely on the native grasses and water sources. Instead of following the seasons and finding plentiful feed in different parts of the Southern Plains, cattle would stay in one spot and consume all the resources until both the land and the animals were starved for nutrients. These differences were also apparent in the life cycles of the bison and cattle. As described by Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher:

“In the natural life cycle the buffalo ate the grasses, produced manure for new plant life, and in death returned nutrients to the earth. The cattle, however, after fattening on the plants of the plains, were transported long distances for slaughter at maturity. Their blood and unused remains were dumped in rivers, and their flesh went even farther afield. The natural cycle of life on the plains was thus broken.”³⁰

Bison contributed to their natural ecosystem, but cattle continuously took from their environment without giving back. The constant leeching of resources began to change the ecology of the Southern Plains, much as described by Fray Benito in 1737.

³⁰ Robert V. Hine & John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 320.

In a letter written to Father Presidente Miguel Sevillano de Paredes, dated August 8, 1737, Fray Benito described the havoc cattle had wreaked on the environment surrounding Mision San José.³¹ The cattle were hungry and had escaped from their corrals and got into the cornfields of the local Indigenous people. This in itself was an incident that could possibly have turned into a violent affair between the Indigenous people and the mission dwellers, but more interesting was the commentary on the reasons for the cattle's hunger. Fray Benito said the land was unable to provide the food necessary for the cattle to survive because of an overabundance of brush. He also wrote that the land was much more brushy and infertile than in had been in years past. The changing ecology on the Southern Plains affected both the migration of the bison and the lives of the Indigenous people.

Indigenous People on the Southern Plains

Various Indigenous groups had heavily depended on bison for centuries, but when the Spanish began their colonization into the western hemisphere the bison began to change their migratory patterns. This proved to be very problematic for Indigenous people across North America. Bison were the singularly most important food source to Indigenous peoples in the western hemisphere. Indigenous tribes would dry up to 4,000 pounds of bison meat to provide sustenance and nourishment throughout the winter months. Bison were a staple in the lives of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and the changes in their migratory patterns were devastating to the culture of the Indigenous people and their relationship with the ecology of the Southern Plains.

³¹ Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana, Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana to Father Sevillano, August 8, 1737, In *Letters and Memorials of the Father Presidente Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana 1736-1754*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1981, p. 28-30.

Spanish explorers encountered mounted bison hunters in the 1690s both traveling to and returning from Texas. Eventually the Indigenous people who depended on bison for food and shelter began to migrate north into present day Texas. When the Indigenous people began to migrate north, the missionaries followed. Some of these Indigenous groups were folded into the populations of the missions, but did not stop participating in bison hunts. These hunts were part of life for the Indigenous people and were accepted as such by the missionaries. The Spanish missionaries also encountered nomadic tribes who subsisted by following the bison as they migrated through the Southern Plains. As the missions, with their large stationary populations of people and domesticated animals, began to interfere with this migration the Indigenous hunters began to attack the Spanish missions.

In the archive of correspondence from Fray Benito, the experiences and narratives of these groups begin to come to life. Over the course of sixteen years, Fray Benito described his interactions with the Apache of Texas. He characterizes several groups as part of the overarching Apache tribe. Included in the central Apache tribe are the groups of Ypandes, Natages, Mescaleros, and Salines.³² Benito made the argument that there were divisions amongst these groups. The Ypandes were the largest group, with seven different sections that were each comprised of up to 40 members. The Natages were the most dominant group of Apaches. All of the groups joined together to hunt bison in the Salado River regions. Benito described the spring hunts that he personally witnessed in May 1745.³³ He said that there was a “great restlessness” amongst the Natages, Apaches, and Serranos before a hunt. This restlessness

³² Benito, 49-50.

³³ Ibid, 50.

continued if the hunt was not successful, but was abated if they had a successful hunt.³⁴ The restlessness that he described demonstrated the importance of bison in the lives of the Natages, Apaches, and Serranos. They depended on the bison and the introduction of the Spanish missions did not diminish their reliance. Through his descriptions of the bison hunts on the Southern Plains, the experiences of the Indigenous people start to become richer and more developed.

Spring hunts for bison were common on the Great Plains. They also explain why Indigenous people living in the missions left for several months and returned at the end of June.³⁵ The Spanish missionaries neither understood nor tried to understand the culture of their Indigenous counterparts. This lack of understanding left gaps in the interpersonal relationships of these two groups. Fray Benito gives a long litany of duties the Indigenous people living at La Purísima Concepcion were responsible for, but complains in his next correspondence that they are lazy and have no work ethic.³⁶ The main differences in the two documents are the time of year in which they are written. Benito praises the Indigenous people for their hard work and dedication to the tasks at hand in late November. It is logical to conclude that the Indigenous people returned to the missions during the winter months, seeking shelter from the elements and adequate foodstuffs to get them through the winter. Benito wrote that the Indigenous people must "...build their own temples, build their houses, cultivate the fields, guard the cattle, take care of the dams and acequias [irrigation ditches], and especially build the walls."³⁷ In another document from the same archive, but written in June, Fray Benito wrote of his frustration and

³⁴ Benito, 50.

³⁵ Ibid, 39.

³⁶ Ibid, 39.

³⁷ Ibid, 32.

discontent with the work ethic of the Indigenous people. He wrote they were lazy and would disappear for months and not return until late June. “The Indians try to free themselves from work by feigning sickness or by returning to the wilderness.”³⁸ However, it was Benito’s lack of understanding that caused his frustration, not laziness on the parts of the Indigenous people. Their custom was to hunt bison in the spring and their lives at the missions didn’t interfere with this tradition. This was not a singular event, either, but a pattern that happened across different Indigenous tribes and in different missions. It occurred in Mision Espada between April and June 1737 with the Tacames Indians. Fray Benito misunderstood the phenomenon and drew the conclusion that the Indigenous people left the missions due to their guilt. “There is no way to prevent fear that comes from known guilt and makes Indians flee from the missions.”³⁹ However, additional documents within the archive point to a much darker reason than guilt that was causing the Indigenous people to flee from the area.

The enslavement of Indigenous people by the Spanish was outlawed in 1537, but continued on using different names for several centuries. Indigenous people were conscripted and forced to work in mines or do manual labor. The Indigenous people in Texas were not free from this worry. As the bison migration shifted northward, Indigenous tribes that previously had neither need nor desire to interact with the Spanish missionaries became dependent on their cattle and their resources. In return, the Spanish missionaries expected their fealty and pledges of labor. In a letter to Father Guardian Alonso Giraldo de Terreros dated December 4, 1745, Fray Benito explained the agreement that he had made with the Ypandes band of Apaches. In it he

³⁸ Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana, Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana to Governor Tomas Felipe Winthuisen June 1741, In *Letters and Memorials of the Father Presidente Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana 1736-1754*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1981, 39-40.

³⁹ Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana, Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana to Viceroy Archbishop Juan Antonio de Vizarron, June 8, 1737, In *Letters and Memorials of the Father Presidente Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana 1736-1754*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1981, p. 23.

details the promises he made to them about not having to work in the mines if they pleased him with their work output:

“We have assured them [the Ypandes] that they would have the liberty the Indians of the missions of San Antonio enjoy and they will not be forced to work as laborers nor in the mines with the condition that they maintain themselves by their work and sweat and do no stealing nor disturb the Spaniards or anyone else.”⁴⁰

In a short amount of time the Ypandes went from being a strong tribe with as many as 300 members to asking for their own mission in the East Texas Mission System and agreeing to provide manual labor in return for food and shelter. In previous years, the bison provided both food and shelter for the Ypandes, but as the animals migrated out of the area, the Ypandes had to turn to the Spanish missionaries to provide the same necessary products.

Conclusion

The Spanish empire encroached on the tribal sovereignty of the Indigenous people living on the Southern Plains in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Spanish missionaries used the labor of the Indigenous people to build missions and ranchos. They imported thousands of head of domesticated European animals onto the ranchos. These animals consumed the resources of the areas they inhabited. By consuming all the resources they pushed the bison out of the area. With no more resources available, the bison permanently changed their migratory patterns and also caused a permanent change in the ecology of the Southern Plains. The lush, fertile grasses that characterized the Southern Plains became filled with invasive underbrush.

The cattle that inhabited the Plains overgrazed the lands. Sheep and goats have a different

⁴⁰ Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana, Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana to The Lord Captain, February 1, 1746, In *Letters and Memorials of the Father Presidente Fray Benito Fernandez de Santa Ana 1736-1754*, translated by Father Marion A. Habig, O.F.M. San Antonio: Our Lady of the Lake University, 1981, p. 57-58.

composition in their formation of teeth and are able to graze much closer to the ground. This killed many of the native plants. With the destruction of the native grasses, European weeds were able to gain a stronghold on the prairies, causing further destruction to the ecosystem. The circle of life that was depicted by the bison returning nutrients to the grassy plains through decomposition also stopped. The cattle were shipped to various missions or traded via extensive trade networks. They were raised specifically to eat and very little of their flesh went back into the ground as nutrients.

The common misconception surrounding mission life during this era was that their main goal was to convert and save as many Indigenous souls as possible. However, through careful examination of the archives and documents, we see that producing goods and raising animals to be sold for profit was the main concern. The missions employed Indigenous labor to meet their production goals. Indigenous lives were turned upside down by the disappearance of the bison. As the East Texas Mission System replaced the bison with their own domesticated animals, they also began to replace the Indigenous need for bison to provide food and shelter with their own forms of food and shelter. However, the goods and services they provided came with strings attached. While it's true that hunters and railroads affected the migratory pattern of the North American bison on the Northern Plains, the introduction of cattle by the Spanish missions on the Southern Plains was a devastating effect that has been long overlooked.

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