"A cold wind blew across the prairie when the last buffalo fell...a death wind for my people."

-Sitting Bull, 19th century

Indians had hunted the buffalo for thousands of years before the Europeans ever set foot on the North American continent. And they did so, taking only what buffalo they needed for food, shelter, and their culture.

By 1832, no buffalo lived east of the Mississippi, most them wiped out by early pioneers.

By 1889, excluding about 600 bison in Canada, only 256 wild, free-ranging buffalo remained in the western United States. And by 1900, only 20 wild buffalo remained, living in the remote backcountry of Yellowstone National Park.

The western fur trade necessitated the establishment of trading posts in the West in the early 1800s, marking the beginning of the bison's demise. Traders wanted buffalo robes and tongues to meet the growing demand for them on the East coast. Buffalo robes were fashionable and the tongues were considered a delicacy. Whereas Indians had always hunted buffalo to meet their own needs, now they also killed the animals in return for goods including guns, tools, tobacco, coffee, whiskey, trinkets, and sugar.

When beaver fur went out of fashion in the 1830s, buffalo robes filled some of its void. In 1840, the American Fur Company, based in St. Louis, shipped 76,000 robes to market; by 1848, this number increased to 110,000. Even with the increased trade in robes and tongues, and some increase in the number of Indians hunting bison, little impact was made on the size of the western herds.

Gone with the buffalo was a way of life for the Plains Indians. With the loss of the bison, the Indians lost both their spiritual and cultural identities. Many of their most important social and religious customs ceased to have meaning. They were subjected to starvation and disease, confined to reservations, and their children sent to boarding schools to learn the language and ways of the European Americans. The fall of the last buffalo had indeed been a death-wind for the Plains Indians.