The Market Hunters:
Demand, Depletion, Devastation

An Excerpt from
Hunting the American West:
The Pursuit of Big Game for Life, Profit, and Sport 1800-1900
By Richard C. Rattenbury

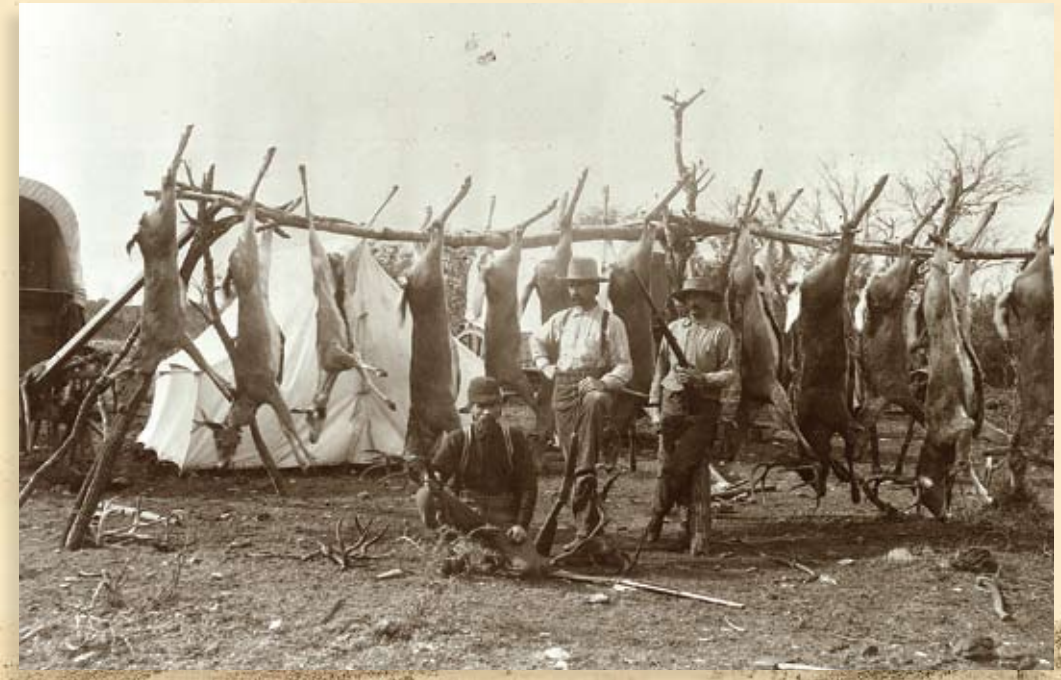
Market hunting—the systematic harvesting and processing of selected wildlife species for trade and profit—flourished over most of the trans-Mississippi West throughout the nineteenth century. The strict commercial practice began among Euro-American fur traders on the Upper Missouri and Rocky Mountain frontiers in the 1810s, but it had been carried on in a less intensive manner by Native Americans for several centuries earlier. Market hunting proved catastrophic to many big-game populations in the West, and it contributed directly to the cessation of nomadic, Native American life on the Great Plains. Perhaps its only positive consequence could be found in the instigation of a belated—but ultimately effective—wildlife conservation movement at the end of the century....

THE MARKET HUNTER'S LEGACY

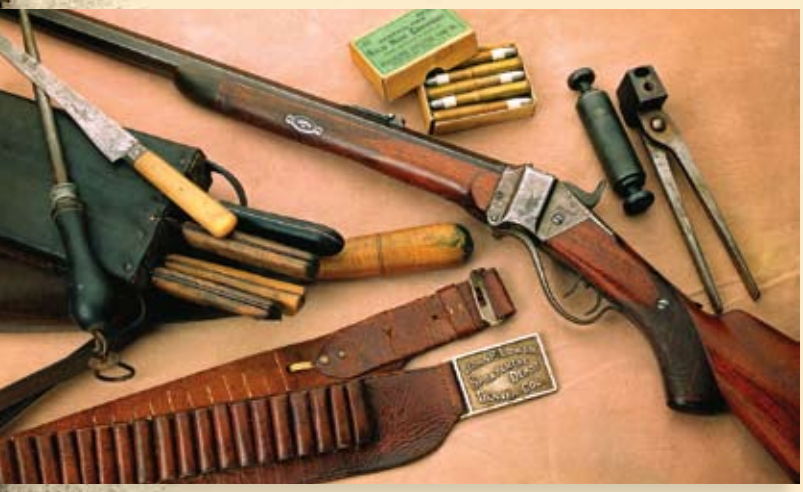
Between 1870 and 1900, professional market hunters in the West slaughtered literally millions of wildfowl and game animals for profit. While the subsistence hunter or the sport hunter might slay two or three deer or a pair of buffalo on a single outing, the market hunter often killed as many as a dozen deer or fifty buffalo. Pursued year-around, the commercial harvest of meat and hides not only eliminated natural surpluses, it also dramatically reduced active breeding stock. Western wildlife populations fell markedly as railroads linked once-remote hunting grounds with eastern markets eager to process raw materials and satisfy epicurean tastes. By 1900, when the federal Lacey Act finally curtailed rampant commercial hunting, many big-game populations in the West had declined precipitously.

In 1870 perhaps seven million buffalo still roamed the Great Plains and Rocky Mountains. By 1900 there were certainly fewer than 150 free-ranging stragglers outside of national reserves, zoos, and a few privately held herds—in all amounting to little more than 1,400 animals. Pronghorn, which numbered perhaps five million animals in 1870, did not exceed 20,000 throughout the West thirty years later. The elk population, ranging from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean and numbering several million head in 1850, declined to barely 50,000 a half-century later—and nearly all of these sheltered in and around Yellowstone Park. Writing in 1912, William T. Hornaday estimated that the western mule deer population had declined eighty percent over the previous forty years, while the once-common bighorn sheep numbered fewer than 10,000 animals. Other big-game species, in particular the grizzly bear, also experienced substantial declines during the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

The phenomenon of profligate commercial hunting found its basis in the confluence of traditional American hunting habits and attitudes, rapidly changing demographics, and the new technologies



{ **Irwin Brothers, photographers. *Market Hunters' Camp*. Silver gelatin print, 1896.** The practice of market hunting for profit flourished throughout most of the nineteenth century. Here, "Pink" Irwin, Ed Irwin, and Dave Jones pose in their field camp near Junction City, Texas, with the carcasses of thirteen whitetail deer and a single coyote. The party is equipped with Winchester rifles, a pair of wagons, and a commodious wall tent. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries. }



{ **Top: Photographer unknown. [*Market Hunters*]. Cabinet card, circa 1885-1890.** This rough-cut quartet of commercial hunters strikes a studio pose with their armament; (*from left*) a large-frame Whitney-Kennedy repeater, a Model 1876 Winchester, a Model 1873 Winchester, and a Marlin-Ballard No. 5 Pacific single-shot. Image courtesy Herb Peck, Jr. Collection.

Bottom: Although they did not specialize in buffalo alone, many commercial hunters in the West—men like James H. Cook—appreciated the dependable shooting qualities of the Model 1874 Sharps rifle. Accompanied by a cartridge belt, skinning outfit, and reloading tools, this specimen in caliber .40-90 Sharps Necked features a full-octagon barrel with standard sights, double-set triggers, and custom, checkered stocking with a pistol-grip butt and an unusual, keyed forend with a horn tip.
Image courtesy Blue Book Publications, Inc. }

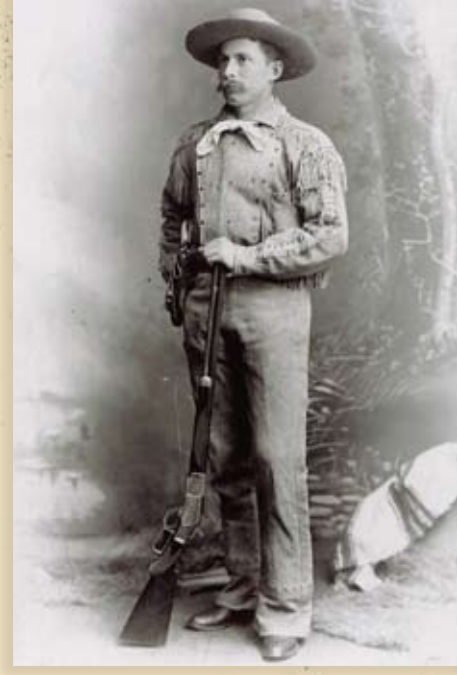
that impacted the West between 1865 and 1890. American views of nature's bounty—and the license to capitalize on that bounty—stemmed from a variety of sources. Perhaps primary among them was the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in man's dominion over nature. This was coupled in Gilded Age America with a philosophy of free-market, democratic commercialism that typically sanctioned the exploitation of natural resources for profit. As William "Billy" Dixon wrote of his career as a professional buffalo hunter: "It was deadly business, without sentiment; it was dollars against tender-heartedness, and dollars won." Thus, in concert with fur trapping, the market hunting of selected big-game species became a significant extractive industry in the West.

Joining with these long-standing beliefs and attitudes were critical changes in national growth and advancing technology. Between 1850 and 1900, the United States more than tripled in population, expanding from about twenty-three million to nearly seventy-six million—with consequent increased demands for everything, including the meat and hides of western wildlife. Concurrent with this dramatic expansion, major transcontinental railroads and dozens of feeder lines penetrated throughout the West, making even remote wilderness areas accessible to market hunters. And, during these same five decades, firearms design moved apace, providing hunters with refined single-shot and repeating, breech-loading rifles. Although these latter developments in transportation and arms technology would produce a short-lived golden age for sport hunters in the West, they also spelled a dark age for western big game species now easy prey to voracious commercial hunters.

Thus, the second half of the nineteenth century may be seen as a period of rapid and radical ecological transition in the West—an era in which the supremacy of the wilderness and natural abundance yielded inevitably to the supremacy of burgeoning civilization. The professional market hunter certainly hastened this transition—one that spelled the demise of Native American Plains cultures and their displacement by the range-cattle industry, dry-land agriculture, and ever-increasing Anglo-American settlement. And the market hunter inevitably hastened his own demise as well through the profligate slaughter of the very resource on which he depended. Little wonder that commercial hunting became an increasingly maligned occupation in its own time.

As early as the 1870s, numerous voices were raised against professional hunters and their patently destructive practices. Some even went beyond a mere condemnation of the relentless devastation. Richard Irving Dodge, for example, felt obliged to denigrate both the market hunter's livelihood and his lifestyle:

> Within the last few years hundreds of men, too lazy or shiftless to make a living in



{ **Photographer unknown. *James H. Cook*. Cabinet card, Cheyenne, Wyoming Territory (?), circa 1885.** Among the more diligent of the West's professional market hunters, Cook shipped his products to cities east and west and realized handsome profits. He poses as a successful and well-heeled frontiersman in stylish bib-front shirt with ivory-stocked Colt Single Action Army revolver and deluxe Model 1873 Winchester rifle with checkered stock, pistol grip, and shotgun-pattern butt. Nebraska State Historical Society Photograph Collections, RG3484, PH1. }

civilization, have found a congenial mode of life on the plains....These are the professional hunters.

In season or out of season they kill everything that comes in their way. If the animal is unfit for food its skin may bring a dime or two. Once in two or three months they will go to the nearest railroad town, sell off the peltries they have accumulated, buy a little flour and bacon, a bag of salt, and a few beans. The balance of the money is either lost at a faro bank or spent in a roaring spree, after which they return to the wilderness. These men think only of today. The game have no respite or opportunity for recuperation, and must soon disappear.

Only a few years later, sport-hunter and budding-conservationist Theodore Roosevelt remarked in *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*: "The ranks of the skin-hunters and meat-hunters contain some good men; but as a rule they are a most unlovely race of beings...and the sooner they vanish the better."

Yet hunting for profit still was not universally disparaged. Three years prior to Dodge's condemnation, David Cartwright published *Natural History of Western Wild Animals and Guide for Hunters, Trappers and Sportsmen*, wherein he defended both the practice and the character of its practitioners:

> A vast number of people count the [professional] hunter's occupation as dishonorable, fit only for roughs and idlers. The business, as a business, is not dishonorable. It cannot be unless it is dishonorable for one to buy, sell, or use for wearing apparel, or for any mechanical purpose, or for the food markets the furs and pelts of animals, the skins, bones, horns, hoofs, and sinews, and the palatable flesh of many of those animals.
>
> The hunter need not be a rough or an idler, and, indeed, if he is a successful business man he cannot be either. The rugged constitution necessitated by the exposures and hardships of such a life as his is the only sort of roughness which is in any way demanded by the business. A skillful hunter will find, in any gamey country, enough to keep himself busy.
>
> Given a man of strength, of physical powers, courage, endurance, a close observation of the habits of the animals hunted, a skill in the methods used for their capture, ability to live in the woods without getting lost, a good camping outfit, and with all these a liking for the business, and the result is monetary success. For the frontiersman, thus qualified, it is emphatically money in the pocket.

Neither could a successful commercial hunter the likes of James Cook entirely denigrate the role he had played. In his 1923 memoir, *Fifty Years on the Frontier*, he observed: "I was brought up to believe that a...hunter is as much to be respected as anybody....When, now, I hear the old-time hunters spoken of as game butchers or game hogs, I cannot help resenting the accusation."

Clearly, it remained for others, articulate and activist hunter-naturalists like George Bird Grinnell and Theodore Roosevelt, to initiate a radical change in American attitudes and laws regarding the long-term conservation of western big-game species and their wild habitat.