**William’s Wheel of Fortune Narrative and Vocabulary**

**Intro:** Bent’s Fort began as a trading post in the southern plains on Cheyenne and Arapaho homelands during the 1830s. Although the fort began during the era of the fur trade, it did not center on beaver. The beaver fur trade had nearly ended by that time because the animal was overharvested and near extinction. The number one trade item at Bent’s Fort was the buffalo robe. People who visited Bent’s Fort were either from regional Native American tribes or were traders and merchants from the United States and Mexico traveling between Santa Fe (then Mexico) and Independence, MO along the Santa Fe Trail. At the time William Bent began managing the operation, buffalo was plentiful. Josiah Gregg who visited Bent’s Fort in 1846 wrote that the prairie was “everywhere alive with herds of buffalo.” For a time hunters didn’t have to go far to find them. Alexander Barclay, the post clerk stated, “‘Our chief dependence here is on the Buffalo for meat which are generally to be found within fifteen to thirty miles of the fort’” p. 86 Beyreis. The location of Bent’s trading post was ideal. Situated among the shortgrass prairie in the southern plains, Cheyenne and Arapaho members were close by to hunt and process the buffalo into large, warm robes to be exchanged for other useful goods like fabrics, cookware, tools, and food staples. Buffalo robes along with other trade goods were bundled and put on wagons for distribution to the northeastern U.S., Mexico, and beyond. However, just like beaver populations during the beaver fur trade, buffalo populations would soon begin to suffer on account of changes in the environmental, political, and economic landscape.

**Lesson**

William and his family witnessed many changes in the era of westward expansion. While the Santa Fe Trail was a route for traders and not immigrants, nevertheless, it had significant impact on the natural resources and rhythms of Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho ways of life. William’s son, George, who grew up during this time writes “Emigration to California and Oregon began about 1842, and even as early as 1845 the Indians were beginning to grow restless under this heavy movement of whites through the heart of their hunting grounds. Then came the discovery of gold in California and the great rush across the plains in ‘49. By this time grass, wood, and game had been so nearly destroyed on the Oregon Trail up the Platte that large trains of emigrants began to use the Arkansas route; thus the Cheyennes and Arapahos who live and hunted in the country between the Platte and the Arkansas found themselves caught between two great streams of white emigration. The buffalo began to decrease with alarming rapidity and the tribes foresaw the hungry years to come. Famous groves of cottonwood trees where the Indians had camped in winter for generations disappeared in a single season; the Big Timbers of the Arkansas themselves began to go, and in all the valleys for miles away from the river the grass was eaten down into the ground by the emigrants’ hungry herds” p. 95-96.

Historian, David Beyreis offers even more context to buffalo decline based on the competition for natural resources. As you read the next two paragraphs taken from the book *Blood in the Borderlands,* underline the factors leading to fewer buffalo. Beyreis writes, “Environmental factors put greater pressure on the bison herds of the southern plains and undermined Bent’s trading operations. Besides fire and wolf predation the bison faced pressure from the horse and cattle herds that accompanied the wagon trains. These animals competed with the herds for the grass, water, and wooded river valleys the bison relied upon for shelter during the regions’ cruel winters. Diseases jumped from emigrant cattle to the herds and led to more deaths. The severe drought that began in 1849 and continued until 1862 exacerbated these factors. Without rain, grass withered, and rivers ran dry, dramatically limiting the carrying capacity of the region’s prairies. The southern plains were driest at a time when the region was at its most crowded.”

Reflecting on the power and influence of the Comanche nation just to the south of Bent’s Fort, Beyreis observes, “As [the Comanche] became wealthier, their population grew as did their demand for meat and hides. The arrival of traders like the Bents and St. Vrain accelerated the pace of Comanche hunting; now they also hunted to satisfy the demands of American markets. Indians hunting for these markets disproportionately targeted cows for slaughter, since their hides were lighter, more pliable, and more easily converted into the robes sought by white traders. Such hunting patterns curtailed the normal reproductive rhythms of the herds. The arrival of other tribes on the southern plains, including the Delawares and Shawnees moving west from Indian Territory, increased the number of hunters in the region, and hunters from New Mexico added to the number of animals killed each year.”

Back in 1833, William Bent likely thought that buffalo were so numerous that his trading of robes would not significantly impact their populations over time. Historical accounts cannot confirm the exact number of buffalo robes that were traded from Bent’s Fort. However, in 1868, Ceran St. Vrain, one of the fort’s proprietors told Harper’s New Monthly Magazine that “There have been more than forty thousand robes sent out from that post as the result of one year’s work.” The decline of buffalo during the sixteen years of trading at Bent’s Fort’s did not appear to be dangerously severe. Yet, by looking back and considering the impact on the environment and the movement of people through the plains, we see more clearly that the buffalo robe trade worked as an early arm of westward expansion. It contributed to the near extinction of the buffalo fifty years later when demand grew to be far greater than supply.

Assign “William’s Wheel of Fortune Activity Page” to examine other decisions which William made during his management of Bent’s Fort and their outcome. There are no right or wrong answers. Consider holding small group discussions that provide logical and historical reasoning regarding each statement.

**Vocabulary**

**Westward expansion –** movement of mostly Anglo settlers into the western territories of the United States in order to benefit from the land and its resources

**Trains of emigrants –** a line of many wagons carrying people long distances

**Platte and Arkansas –** rivers to the north (Platte) and south (Arkansas) of Bent’s Fort

**Rapidity –** moving with great speed

**Undermined –** to lessen or restrict

**Predation –** the preying of one animal on another

**Exacerbated –** to make worse

**Disproportionately –** being out of proportion or a proper relation in size

**Cows –** in this context, a female buffalo

**Curtailed –** reduce or restrict