

## **TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Donald Beard

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

**DATE:** April 12, 2023

**LOCATION:** Quitaque, Texas

**SOURCE MEDIA:** MP3 audio file

**TRANSCRIPTION:** Trint, David Todd

**REEL:** 4151

**FILE:** AmericanBison\_Beard\_Donald\_QuitaqueTX\_12April2023\_Reel4151.mp3

**David Todd** [00:00:02] Well, good morning. I am David Todd, and I have the privilege of being here with Donald Beard.

**David Todd** [00:00:08] And with his permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas at Austin.

**David Todd** [00:00:33] And I would like to emphasize that he would have all rights to use recording as he sees fit as well.

**David Todd** [00:00:40] And I wanted to make sure that that's okay with Mr. Beard.

**Donald Beard** [00:00:46] Good morning, David. Yes, that's absolutely fine. I'm looking forward to this. This is a pretty neat opportunity and project that you're working on. So, yeah, let's, let's get going.

**David Todd** [00:00:57] Okay. Well, thank you very much for your help here.

**David Todd** [00:01:00] It is Wednesday, April 12th, 2023. It's about 10:20 a.m. Central Time. My name, as I said, is David Todd, and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas, and I am in Austin. And we are conducting an audio interview with Donald Beard. This is a remote interview. He is based in the Quitaque, Texas area.

**David Todd** [00:01:31] And, by way of introduction to him, he is the superintendent of Caprock Canyon State Park for Texas Parks and Wildlife. And the park has many features to it, but one of its aspects is that it serves as the host for the state bison herd. So he has had a number of years of experience with the buffalo from that sort of conservation aspect. As well, he is the owner and operator of Caprock Bison Company, a firm raising a commercial bison herd, which gives him a view of the production side of buffalo.

**David Todd** [00:02:13] So, today we will be talking about Mr. Beard's life and career to date, and especially focus on what he has learned about bison, about their decline and their recovery and their use in education and ecological purposes and for commercial production as well.

**David Todd** [00:02:32] So I thought, with that introduction, we might just jump into asking you about your early years, and if there might have been some people or events in your young life that might have influenced your interest in animals and parks and maybe even bison in particular.

**Donald Beard** [00:02:52] Sure. Yeah. I've actually been thinking about this a lot, and there are several people that have influenced me over the years. And I guess family is a big thing for me. And my grandfather, my grandparents, had a little farm south of Fort Worth. I used to run around there chasing rabbits and doing all the, you know, catching fish and all the cool things that you can do as a child. So, that was a huge influence on me at that point.

**Donald Beard** [00:03:23] But, in addition to that, my mother, she worked for a college in the Dallas / Fort Worth area, and this was back in the seventies, when I grew up, in the mid-seventies probably. And she worked in the Physical Education Department and they had some really cool classes that you could take. And so, like backpacking, kayaking, swimming classes, any kind of outdoor stuff that you could think of. It was pretty awesome.

**Donald Beard** [00:03:57] So, we used to go on all these backpacking trips when I was a child. And I would be surrounded by all of these instructors, and most of them were women. Of course, my dad was there and there were other men there. But, a lot of these women had influence on me when I was young.

**Donald Beard** [00:04:14] And that was, that was pretty amazing. Looking back on it now, of course, I didn't realize it then, David, but looking back on it now, I could see that I had these strong women that were influencing my growing up in the wild. And it just it, it's, talking about diversity and inclusion, I mean, we were doing that back in the seventies, I guess. It was just such a neat experience to be able to have that opportunity to go backpacking and learn from these people and all of the great things that they brought to the table.

**Donald Beard** [00:04:51] We did some really cool trips in the mountains and in the woods in Arkansas, just all over the mainly the southern and western part of the country. Yeah, that was pretty awesome to be able to experience all that, for sure.

**David Todd** [00:05:04] So, it sounds like there were a series of these trips, backpacking and kayaking and so on. Are there any that just pop out in your mind as being really significant?

**Donald Beard** [00:05:19] We did a backpacking trip in New Mexico and I think it was around Sierra Blanca, around that area. And we climbed a mountain and, you know, to a 10- to 12-year old kid, it was climbing the highest mountain in the world, basically. But, it was such an awesome trip to be able to do that and be able to just go and reach the summit of that mountain. And, you know, some of the kids, the college kids that were in the class, didn't make the final ascent. And so, for me, being able to do that was pretty awesome.

**Donald Beard** [00:05:58] That one really sticks out because we had such an awesome time. We got snowed on. We saw all kinds of wildlife, even some bears. So yeah, that one really sticks out in my mind, for sure.

**David Todd** [00:06:11] That's a great trip, it sounds like - from bears to mountaintops.

**David Todd** [00:06:18] Well, it sounds like you were exposed to some teachers in your own family. But were there any teachers or professors, or classmates that is, maybe in the midst of school or college, that might have also encouraged your interest in wildlife and parks?

**Donald Beard** [00:06:40] Well, not so much wildlife and parks, but yes, I have to smile at this question, because there was a teacher in my high school, and his name was Ron Franks, Mr.

Franks. And we took a class called Outdoor Education. And it was, I mean, we took it because we thought it was going to be a blow-off class. You know, I mean, we didn't really take it seriously in the beginning, but we got in there and we learned some really cool stuff. We were able to do some things. I think we even went on a canoeing trip down the Brazos for that class and this was in high school, you know.

**Donald Beard** [00:07:17] And it's sad because we don't really have those opportunities for high school kids, that I'm aware of anyway. I'm sure that there's some out there. But, that was like a class where we all got together and we all did things. We learned gun safety. We learned how to build fishing rods. We learned, you know, I mean, all these ... we were exposed to all kinds of different parts of outdoor education. It was really a neat experience.

**Donald Beard** [00:07:43] And he was such an amazing (still is), an amazing man. And it's just absolutely he imprinted a lot of what I do nowadays came from him and he probably doesn't even know it. But it was just an awesome experience to be in his class.

**David Todd** [00:08:05] That's great. You know, this combination of the activities, you know, whether it was canoeing or building fishing rods or learning about gun safety, but also, I guess also picking up some notes about character and values, just sort of what he imprinted on you personally.

**Donald Beard** [00:08:24] You bet. I mean, there were some, he was good about giving life lessons. And it was a mentorship, now, not necessarily a teacher-type, more like a mentorship-type atmosphere and I really, really learned a lot from him.

**David Todd** [00:08:43] Well, and then outside of this sort of formal schooling, was there anything in the media, you know, books or films or TV shows, that might have gotten you enthusiastic about work and life in the outdoors, parks, nature, you know, with wildlife.

**Donald Beard** [00:09:03] Right. So, as I mentioned, I grew up in the seventies. And I had an older sister. So, we watched a lot of the Brady Bunch and Gilligan's Island, and those shows. She was in charge of the remote control most of the time. But there is one show in particular that stands out to me, and anybody over 50 will remember the show, and it was Grizzly Adams. Loved that show. Couldn't wait to watch that show every week. And that was the mountain man, you know. Jeremiah Johnson was a movie that came out probably about the same time.

**Donald Beard** [00:09:37] And that type of exposure, which was something I really looked for. I loved that mountain man mystique. And amazingly, years later, my wife and I were married and I got to know her father. And he was definitely a mountain man, born in the wrong century. So he kind of brought that full circle. So, all of that. Anyway, Grizzly Adams is the movie or the show that I watched that really was ... that, and just popped in my head, that Wild Kingdom, Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom. Loved that show, without a doubt.

**Donald Beard** [00:10:22] And actually, when I was a kid, I'm just kind of rambling now, thinking about this, when I was a kid, one of the things I wanted to be was a marine biologist. Why a marine biologist? I don't know. But that was what I wanted to be. And I didn't make that because I'm not so good on boats in the ocean. But I did do the wildlife biology stuff, so I kind of was able to fulfill what I wanted to do as a kid. And anyway, that's, that's kind of where I'm at on that.

**David Todd** [00:10:51] It's always fascinating. You know, there's often a seed or a root in your childhood, I think, that carries you through into adult life. And it's always nice to hear what people had as kind of a goal or a dream when they're young.

**Donald Beard** [00:11:10] You know, and a lot of times, David, you don't realize it, until you start really thinking about it. And opportunities like this where people ask you questions. You know, some of these things I never really even thought of before, you know, since I was a child, but now are just like, yeah, that kind of makes sense now, you know? Interesting.

**David Todd** [00:11:29] Yeah. Yeah. Well, I'm glad to hear this.

**David Todd** [00:11:35] Well so, tell us about, as you grew up and engaged with adult life, you came to work for Texas Parks and Wildlife and I believe you started working at Caprock Canyon State Park in 2009. Can you tell us how you got started there?

**Donald Beard** [00:11:55] So, this is a very long story and I'll give you the abridged version of it. But, basically, when I graduated high school, I went to college and was studying computer science, and that was in the eighties when computers were just, you know, I mean, it was a big thing. But, I didn't finish college at the time for various reasons. And, but, I did find a job working as an alarm installation technician. So, I would install alarm systems.

**Donald Beard** [00:12:28] And I rose up in that organization and became very adept at the alarm industry. And that became, you know, that was kind of my career for years. And I even started my own business and had my own alarm installation company, where I did everything from access control, you know, automatic doors to cameras, to sound systems to all kinds of stuff. I worked out at the Kennedy Space Center doing security installations and maintenance out there.

**Donald Beard** [00:13:06] And anyway, that was all great until 9/11 happened, and it basically killed my business. And you're thinking, well, that doesn't make sense. A security business probably should have boomed during 9/11, but most of my business was based, at that time, was based on new construction and new construction just died overnight after the attacks. So, my business just went out the door basically overnight.

**Donald Beard** [00:13:32] And at the very same time, well, we had been married for about a year, and we were trying to start a family and decided that, you know, if I'm going to be a dad, and I'm going to have kids, and I'm going to want them to go to college, I need to set a good example.

**Donald Beard** [00:13:49] Timing was everything and it worked out perfectly. I was able to go back to school. I was just going to go get an associate degree. It turned out, next thing I know, I'm enrolled at Tarleton in the wildlife management. I got a bachelor's degree and was able to take my business experience, my business management experience, and now with my new wildlife degree and come right into park management. It was a perfect fit.

**Donald Beard** [00:14:18] I didn't start at Caprock. I actually started at Falcon, Lake Falcon down on the border with Mexico. I spent two years down there working for Falcon State Park before I came to Caprock. And like you said, I came to Caprock in 2009, and I had basically never heard of it before I came.

**Donald Beard** [00:14:38] But, it was very interesting how that happened. We came up to see it, my wife and I came up to see it, and we just absolutely fell in love with it. And, you know. I think within a matter of weeks we'd interviewed and got the position for the job. It was just absolutely meant to be that we were supposed to be here, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [00:15:03] So, what was that first impression of Caprock Canyon? It's a pretty dramatic landscape, isn't it?

**Donald Beard** [00:15:10] Well, it's certainly not what you'd expect to see in the Panhandle of Texas. You know, like I said, I had heard of it just because a friend of mine had been camping it before. But basically, I didn't know anything about it. And so, I told my wife, "Let's just go check it out and see", you know. So, we drove up here and the landscape is okay, coming here, nice typical Panhandle stuff. Then you get in those canyons and you see the dramatic drops, the thousand-foot elevation drops within the park, and these red bluffs and the green cedars and all. You know, it just, it kind of reminds me of an old John Wayne Western, you know, the Utah Badlands or something.

**Donald Beard** [00:15:56] And so it was just amazing, and an interesting story, one night we were staying in a little rental house for the weekend and went out. We were sitting around the house and a thunderstorm came through. And the thunder was rolling through these canyons like I had never heard before, and I've only heard it once or twice since I've been here. But it just rolled and rolled through these canyons. It was the most awesome thing and, you know, with us just sitting up talking about that and hearing that and then the experience we had meeting the great people here in this community. You know, over that weekend, we were exposed to some really great folks and a nice church.

**Donald Beard** [00:16:35] And just we were longing for that. Being down on the border with Mexico, beautiful area, great people, but it's a different culture. And, you know, so we were kind of outsiders down there.

**Donald Beard** [00:16:48] So it just, it was just a perfect match and it worked out really well. As they say, the rest is history.

**David Todd** [00:16:58] Wow. Well, it sounds like you've settled in there.

**David Todd** [00:17:01] And one of the features about Caprock, of course, that's of interest to us is that it's the home to the state bison herd. And I thought we might just try to get acquainted with the history of the bison in the Panhandle. And, you know, if you have any kind of insights about how grasslands and bison might have co-evolved, I mean, I've heard that that the grasslands sort of depended on the buffalo for the grazing and the trampling and the wallowing. But I don't know a lot of detail about that, and I was hoping maybe you can kind of get us acquainted.

**Donald Beard** [00:17:43] Sure. Well, in my view, the whole ecosystem in the plains, the Great Plains of North America, stretching from Mexico to Canada, basically, it's a symbiotic relationship.

**Donald Beard** [00:17:57] And, when it was fully functional and working as a functioning ecosystem, it, they all, everybody depended on everybody, the Native Americans, the bison, the grasslands, everything. Everybody depended on everything. You know, the bison had to

have the grass, obviously, to survive. The grass needed that high-intensity, short-duration, long-rest periods to evolve.

**Donald Beard** [00:18:29] And by that, what I mean is, is these herds would come through by the thousands. You know, you may have 10,000 animals in a herd, and if you can imagine, 10,000 4-legged mammals, just walking. Nothing else. Just walking through an area are going to cause some ground disturbance. Then, you throw in the fact that they're going to be eating the grass, grazing, and then they're going to be defecating, you know, pooping, and urinating and all the other things going on.

**Donald Beard** [00:19:01] Well, by the time that herd would walk through there. That's if they not even stop, just walking through. By the time those 10,000 animals left, it would be a muddy mess. I mean, just a horrible mess.

**Donald Beard** [00:19:15] But, that's what this ground needed, because they would come through there. They would, they would eat the grass. The first ones would eat the grass and the next ones come through, eat what's left. And then they're dropping seeds in there. They're fertilizing it and they're stomping it in and planting it. And then they'd walk off.

**Donald Beard** [00:19:33] And they wouldn't come back for a year, or two years, or whatever. And that allowed time for all of that to recover. And it would thrive. That's how this grassland would thrive.

**Donald Beard** [00:19:48] And then, of course, the Native Americans depend on the bison for their sustenance, for everything. And so, yeah, it was a complete, in my mind, a symbiotic relationship that made the ecosystem function.

**Donald Beard** [00:20:02] And we are missing that, of course. But yeah, that's, that's how this area, the plains, evolved through that way.

**David Todd** [00:20:12] Boy. It sounds so interconnected and interdependent. That's interesting.

**David Todd** [00:20:19] Well, so, I guess part of this story of the bison on the grasslands was its, the buffalo's, near disappearance in the 1870s, I guess it was. And can you give us some of the high points of what happened, why that was the case?

**Donald Beard** [00:20:40] Sure. So, from what I understand, we had somewhere between 30 to 60 million bison roaming the Great Plains, in its height, in the height of the population. And I think the population started declining well before the 1870s, probably early 1800s, maybe even before then. But as normal populations go, they will ebb and flow.

**Donald Beard** [00:21:06] But what happened is, it was a multitude of things. And there's different theories and different beliefs and whatnot, but it was a multitude, in my mind, of different reasons for the population crashing the way it did.

**Donald Beard** [00:21:25] And one of those was Western expansion. You know, I mean, we were moving west, and in order for us to move west, and we had this fertile farmland, and we wanted to raise our cattle, so we needed to get rid of the bison.

**Donald Beard** [00:21:41] The government had the idea that the Native Americans they needed to be removed. And one of the ways was to remove their food source. So those were definitely reasons for it.

**Donald Beard** [00:21:55] But I believe the main reason for the population crash was the Industrial Revolution. So, as the Industrial Revolution started, and you would have all of these sweatshops back East where you'd have these big steam machines in these buildings, and then there would be little machines off of that, well, they needed belting material to run those little machines. And the bison hides made excellent belting material.

**Donald Beard** [00:22:23] So the commercial side of the population crash was for the hides. It was for the hide trade. And most of those hides end up as belting material for these machines back in the East, for the Industrial Revolution. That in my mind, that was the ultimate cause.

**Donald Beard** [00:22:45] But all of these other factors, and disease was another factor. Disease was definitely a cause for the decimation, as well. Like I said, we were bringing in these European cattle with these bison and never been exposed to any of the diseases that the cattle could carry. The cattle had built-in resistance or immunity, but the bison didn't. So, you know, we lost a lot of bison just from disease, from the European cattle.

**Donald Beard** [00:23:12] So, I mean, it took all of these things for the culmination of the population crash.

**Donald Beard** [00:23:18] But, you know, it happened, as far as time goes, it happened pretty, pretty fast.

**Donald Beard** [00:23:25] And then by, I think, 1895, when there was a census done, there was just over 500 animals left in all of North America. Just crazy to think about how we almost lost these animals, and how we could go from 30 to 60 million down to 500. That's just amazing to me to think of.

**David Todd** [00:23:48] Boy, what a rapid decline.

**David Todd** [00:23:53] So I've heard that one of the ways that the bison's recovery got started was through the efforts of a couple who lived not too far from you in the Panhandle, Molly and Charles Goodnight. And do you know much about the story of their work to save some of the vestiges of these bison herds?

**Donald Beard** [00:24:21] I do, actually. And it's an amazing story. And it's not the only story. There are a handful of stories that are very similar that happened all through North America. And that is the reason why we have bison today, is because of these, basically, ranchers and conservationists decided that we needed to do something.

**Donald Beard** [00:24:41] So these five or six people across North America, just took it upon themselves to save bison. And now all bison alive today come from one of those five foundation herds. So it's just amazing to think of that, that these people had the forethought, or whatever it was, to do this. And that's mainly the only reason we have bison today, even Yellowstone. You know, I mean, Yellowstone was just about decimated as well.

**Donald Beard** [00:25:10] So yeah, Charles and Mary Ann, they were one of the few, they were one of the only, I think there was a couple others but one of the only in the Southern Plains.

And then, as far as I know, this herd, the Goodnight herd, which is what we have Caprock Canyon State Park, is the last of those foundation herds that's still in existence, that is still as they were when the Goodnights had them.

**Donald Beard** [00:25:39] All the others have been, you know, assimilated with other herds and other animals from different foundations. So, the Goodnight genetics, are the last known Southern Plains herd, and the last true foundational herd that I know of. They're pretty amazing animals for sure.

**Donald Beard** [00:26:00] But yeah, so they started these animals in 1878 is when Goodnight started this herd. And it was at the urging of Mary Ann, or Molly. And she would hear the gunshots, during the day, of the hunters hunting the animals. But they wouldn't kill the calves because there was no commercial value in the calf. So, they would let the calves either starve to death or be killed by predators.

**Donald Beard** [00:26:28] So, she would hear these calves at night time, you know, basically crying for their moms, you know, bawling, wanting, looking for their mothers. And that got her going.

**Donald Beard** [00:26:40] And so, she convinced her husband to go out and capture some animals. And they started the herd.

**Donald Beard** [00:26:46] And, like I said, those are the descendants, or the animals that we have in the park, are the descendants of those animals that they captured in the wild in 1878.

**David Todd** [00:27:00] Boy that's a long line from the 1870s, 150 years, practically, till now.

**David Todd** [00:27:11] And I understand that that some of the Goodnight genetics, some of those animals, of course, are at Caprock, but that they were also important in recovering the populations at Yellowstone and some other parks. Is that right?

**Donald Beard** [00:27:27] That is correct. So, Goodnight, he never brought any other bison in to the herd. So, the genetics are just like they were in the 1870s. But, he did sell some. You know, when he had extra animals, he sold some, whether it be for meat or for breeding or whatever.

**Donald Beard** [00:27:44] And, one of the things he did is he made a deal with the United States government back in 1902. And at that time, there were approximately only about 20 animals left in Yellowstone. So, he took a couple of bulls, three bulls, actually, and had them shipped and sold them to Yellowstone National Park. So, the Goodnight genetics are very prevalent, well I don't know about very prevalent, but they are prevalent in the Yellowstone herd. And, along with a few other private producers and foundation animals, they are responsible for saving the Yellowstone bison as well. You bet.

**David Todd** [00:28:25] Boy, from the Southern Plains all the way up to near the Canadian border. That's impressive.

**David Todd** [00:28:34] So, aside from, you know, saving this foundational herd of bison, I understand that Mr. Goodnight also did some experimenting and seeing if bison and cattle could be hybridized, crossbred in some way. Are you familiar with that, that experiment that he ran?



**Donald Beard** [00:28:57] Sure. So, some of the readings that I've ... and he kept good notes, so there's some pretty decent documentation. He kept notes on the animals he had, what he did, and how he crossbred them, and those types of things.

**Donald Beard** [00:29:11] So, so bison and cattle generally will not crossbreed on their own. They're two different species. And if they're in the same pasture, they will be on opposite ends of the pasture, for the most part. Now there's always exceptions, and if the animals are raised from calves with each other, they'll tend to imprint on each other a little bit. But, if you're running bison and cattle separately, or together, they will separate themselves.

**Donald Beard** [00:29:39] So it was not as simple as just throwing them together and letting them crossbreed. He had to do some work to get it done, and he did. And he tried different things. And he found out that sometimes if they are bred, you know, male to female, or female to male, or whatever the hybrid might be, the offspring could be sterile. The offspring could, you know, had a high chance or high probability of not surviving.

**Donald Beard** [00:30:06] So, it was not a real simple experiment. But he did, he was able to make it work. And he did raise some hybrids. He called them cattalo.

**Donald Beard** [00:30:17] And, but he found out real quick that the result was not what he anticipated. Bison have a smaller backside. They have huge heads and smaller backsides. And unfortunately, those, well, unfortunately, I guess those were the traits that were passed on to the hybrids.

**Donald Beard** [00:30:35] So you had these hybrids that were big-headed, and small on the back end. Well, the back end is where all the good meat is, so it wasn't economically feasible. So he stopped pretty fast.

**Donald Beard** [00:30:49] But, you know, the damage had pretty much been done. And he wasn't the only one to do it. There were others. There's others, you know, several of the herds did the same thing. Everybody was kind of looking for, you know, the better animal.

**Donald Beard** [00:31:01] So we are left with traces of those genetics. And Dr. Derr down at Texas A&M, has recently done a report, and he's tested more bison than anybody in the world. And it turns out that probably all bison left in the world today have trace amounts of cattle DNA in their genetics.

**Donald Beard** [00:31:24] And what that means, we don't know. It could be good. It could be why they're alive. It could be that those genetics have provided the resistance to disease and allowed them to live. You know, so we don't know what - if it's a good thing or a bad thing.

**Donald Beard** [00:31:38] But we know that there are some trace genetics.

**Donald Beard** [00:31:42] And it's not that these are hybrids. The bison that we have today are definitely bison and the amount of genetics from the modern-day cattle, and I'm not a geneticist, I'll be the first to tell you that, but the amount of genetics that are left from the modern day cattle are just very, very minute.

**Donald Beard** [00:32:00] So, it's still bison. We still have bison. But they do have traces of cattle genetics in their DNA.

**David Todd** [00:32:12] So, maybe you can bring us up into more of a current-day situation. In the 20th century, I guess this is in the 1990s, the JA Ranch, which I guess had inherited the Goodnight herd, decided that they no longer cared to have them busting through their fences. And I understand that Wolfgang Frey realized that this was a really valuable sort of natural resource and from what I understand, approached Texas Parks and Wildlife and there was a whole interesting decision-making process that, where the state decided to adopt these animals. And I was curious if you understand all the ins and outs of that process.

**Donald Beard** [00:33:07] Well, that was way before my time, but I mean, as far as historical documents, I've done a lot of reading and talked to several people. Andrew Sampson, Andy Sampson, was the executive director of Texas Parks and Wildlife at the time, at that time, and he was very instrumental in the state taking the bison. And we owe him a huge debt of gratitude for that. I've had many conversations with him about it, and there were some others. You know, C.L. Hawkins was a ranger here and he was there at that time. And so I have had plenty of conversations.

**Donald Beard** [00:33:43] Well, first, let me tell you a little, little story that I read, I came across one day. In reading some of the historical documents, I found some letters written by Mary Ann Goodnight. And to me, this was just one of those moments it was like, wow, it's just a huge wow.

**Donald Beard** [00:34:02] So this letter was written, I believe, in 1911, and she was writing this letter to one of her best friends out of Fort Worth. And in that letter, she talked about her buffalo. And she said that her dream was that one day, this is 1911, mind you, her dream was that one day the state would take these animals and make a park where all the people of Texas come see them.

**Donald Beard** [00:34:29] And to me, that was like, you know, there it is. I mean, that's her vision and that's what we're doing now, you know. So, it's, it was just amazing that the vision that she had and the fact that we really didn't even know that vision until we ran across it again and we're doing it. So it's, it was pretty amazing to me. I love that letter. I've got a copy of it and it's just the neatest thing ever.

**Donald Beard** [00:34:57] But, so back to the Goodnight side of things. So, so Goodnight, Charles Goodnight died in that 1929. And he had long left the JA Ranch, and the bison at that time were kept on his private ranch in what's now Goodnight, Texas. So, it's on the northern rim of the Palo Duro Canyon. And occasionally, as bison do, they get out. Occasionally, the bison would get out and go back down into the canyons. And he would go back and get them. And then, after he died, his ranch manager, Cleo Hubbard, would go back and get them and bring them back.

**Donald Beard** [00:35:40] Eventually, everybody got too old, so when they escaped, they were just left in the canyons.

**Donald Beard** [00:35:46] Now, there's another little theory that talks about, you know, if you talk to some folks at the JA, they say that those bison have just always been there in those canyons. And that could be, too. And there could have been some that were never brought back up.

**Donald Beard** [00:36:02] But bison are very herd animals, so if the Goodnight animals left, once they left Goodnight's ranch, they would go down and find those other herds and they would have mixed. And, you know, so, I mean, those animals all would have been the same. Some of them were kept getting at Goodnight ranch, some were down at the JA Ranch. That's a theory. I don't know if that's the case or not.

**Donald Beard** [00:36:19] But anyway, so, but eventually they all did go down to the JA and were left alone, back in the 1930s, probably, until 1996, when the state decided to take them over. And that's when, that's when, we sent some folks down there to try and find them and figure out how we were going to capture them and bring them up.

**Donald Beard** [00:36:44] And for me, something else that's really interesting is they didn't know where they were going to take them and put them. They talked about a bunch of different places to put this herd. And it wasn't until some of the leaders and community members here in Quitaque, Texas actually took a trip down to Austin and said those bison need to come to Caprock. That's when a decision was made to bring them to Caprock. So, it was the community that had the huge, the largest input on where and how they got here. And we owe them a debt of gratitude and a big thanks for that.

**Donald Beard** [00:37:21] But, anyway, so yeah, we went down and captured ("we", like I said, it was before my time). The state went down and captured them, brought them back up to Caprock, and that's where they had been held in the pens behind the maintenance center from 1996.

**Donald Beard** [00:37:35] And then, the next part of that story is, is after I get here, but we'll discuss that in a minute, I'm sure.

**David Todd** [00:37:42] Well, you know, there's one chapter in there that that I hear was pretty complicated, I mean, to, first of all, find those bison. Not a simple thing. The JA is a big place, and uneven terrain. And then I gather to dart them and test them and brand them and vaccinate them and move them - a pretty challenging thing from what little I've heard. Is that pretty accurate?

**Donald Beard** [00:38:16] It is. And this is back in the nineties, and not a lot of work had been done on bison. There were definitely bison producers around the country. So, there were definitely commercial herds. But as far as this type of project, there wasn't a whole lot that had been done. So, you know, it was a new frontier, especially for Texas and Texas Parks and Wildlife.

**Donald Beard** [00:38:38] So they did the best they could. And yes, they went out and they tranquilized them and brought them in that way. You know, they might have made it a little harder on themselves. But, like I said, that's the way they did it. And yeah, it was a challenge. But, and they were able to capture, I think, about 36 or so animals in the wild. And a few of those didn't make it to Caprock. They perished for one reason or another. But yeah, eventually, over a period of time, I think there were 32 animals that started the herd here at Caprock.

**David Todd** [00:39:17] And then, so this is 1996, I guess, when they're brought to Caprock. And during that time, I guess you all needed to learn how to feed them and manage them and pen them in. And my understanding is that the fellow you mentioned just in passing, Mr. Hawkins, was involved with that. And I was curious if you can tell us any stories about those

days of trying to build up the herd, and keep it where you can monitor them, and keep them fed, and so on?

**Donald Beard** [00:39:56] Yeah, so there were definitely some issues with the herd when we first received them. They were typically older animals and they weren't having a lot of calves, so there was not a lot of recruitment in the herd.

**Donald Beard** [00:40:15] And after some genetic studies, they realized that because those animals had been a small population for so long, there had been some inbreeding. Now, with bison in the wild, there will be inbreeding. So, it's not the same as like cattle. There is some built-in inbreeding in bison populations, so they can handle some, but there was just too much. And so, it was discovered through some researchers that if we didn't do something, we didn't work on the genetics, the herd was probably going to die out. So, we had to do a lot of hard-core work, intensive management, on his herd.

**Donald Beard** [00:41:02] And so, from '96 till 2009 or '10, they were basically managed, you know, like cattle. They were kept separate. The bulls were kept on one side and the cows were kept on another. And, you know, we selected who was doing the breeding and they worked on different types of things. So, so, basically, from the time that they were captured until, you know, 2009 or so, they were basically treated like cattle. And they had to. I'm not saying anything bad or negative. That's just the way it had to be done in order to improve the genetics.

**Donald Beard** [00:41:45] And, you know, remember I told you about some animals going to Yellowstone. So, one of the things that we decided to do ("we", again, I'm saying "we", but this is well before me), one of the things that the department decided to do was to try and find some new genetics to bring in. But, we have this problem now of we've got these genetics that are unique, not found anywhere else in the world. So, we didn't want to lose that uniqueness, so we couldn't just bring any animals in.

**Donald Beard** [00:42:16] So, and like I also said, Goodnight sold a lot of animals. So, they set out, went out on a search and started trying to find some animals that had Goodnight genetics that they could bring back in. They really didn't have a lot of luck because all the animals had been assimilated in the other herds.

**Donald Beard** [00:42:33] But, the Yellowstone animals - now, that's a different story. So, we sent some animals to Yellowstone in 1902, and in the probably the mid-30s or so, 1930s, some animals came out of Yellowstone. Now, we couldn't go and get the animals from Yellowstone because of a disease called brucellosis that affects those animals. That's the last place in the United States where that disease persists. It's the greater Yellowstone area. So, there's a quarantine for bison in there.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:05] But, what had happened is, before brucellosis became a factor, some animals were brought out of Yellowstone, taken to a ranch over in New Mexico, and basically had been forgotten about.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:17] So, they did some testing on those animals and the genetics were similar enough that we were able to bring some animals over and put them in the herd.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:27] And it absolutely improved our genetics, without a doubt.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:31] So, by the time I got here in 2009, 2010, all of that had pretty much been worked through, which allowed us to move to the next phase of things.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:40] But before then, they had to intensively manage those animals as cattle to improve the genetics. And so that's that was C.L.'s job and a few other people. There were some other folks that did, had part of that as well.

**Donald Beard** [00:43:56] But yeah, so that's, that's the management before I got here and they did what they had to do to save those animals. And it's just an awesome thing they did.

**David Todd** [00:44:09] Well, you've been kind of to give us some of the background in the years before you arrived at Caprock, because it sounds like this is a, you know, a multi-decade story. So, thank you for that.

**David Todd** [00:44:24] You know, as you came to work at Caprock Canyon State Park and manage it, how do you think the herd has sort of fit in with the history and ecology of the park and then the Panhandle area, I guess, just in general?

**Donald Beard** [00:44:42] Yeah, well, this, this land that we're in here in Quitaque is basically the heart of Comancheria. So the Comanche people, this is one of their strongholds. Quanah Parker - he was the last great Comanche chief. He. He fought with the U.S. Government all through these canyons in the Red River Wars.

**Donald Beard** [00:45:08] I mean, this was Native American ground zero for thousands of years. Matter of fact, we have an archeological site in the park that has shown man hunting bison for over 10,000 years right here in this park. So bison and man have been together in this area for a long time. So it is deeply ingrained in the culture and in the ecosystem. Everything, every part of life in the Texas Panhandle, bison has a strong say in it, for sure.

**Donald Beard** [00:45:49] And it shows up, you know, I mean, there's team mascots and whatnot and different things. But yeah, it's, the bison would have historically wintered in these canyons, as did the Comanches or any of the tribes. All of the tribes would have. Before the Comanches, it was the Apaches and so forth.

**Donald Beard** [00:46:13] But, yeah, so man and bison have been co-mingling in this area for a long time, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [00:46:25] Long history.

**David Todd** [00:46:27] Well, so, now you've got a public park with people driving and walking and biking throughout your land there. And I'm curious how you manage this wild animal, you know, a large, wild animal and then inquisitive, roaming people. How do you figure out this way to sort of balance and find some co-existence between the two?

**Donald Beard** [00:47:01] Well, let's first talk about how that even happened, because that that's a pretty interesting story in itself.

**Donald Beard** [00:47:08] So, like I mentioned, I was at Falcon State Park and I interviewed for Caprock and had been named superintendent, but I hadn't moved up here yet. But I got a call from Walt Dabney, who, at the time, was the division director for Texas State Parks, and

he called me. He said, "Donald, I hear you're moving to Caprock." And I said, "Yes, sir, I am." He said ...

**Donald Beard** [00:47:31] And Walt Dabney, if you've never met Walt, he's, he's a colorful individual. He was chief ranger at Yellowstone National Park, worked for National Park Service for ... he retired from National Park Service, and came to work for Texas. So, he was very familiar with Yellowstone and the bison and the different aspects of managing those types of environments.

**Donald Beard** [00:47:55] So, he called me. He said, "We need to get those bison out where these people can see them. This, what we're doing is not right. You know, we've got them fixed now. We need to put them out where people can see them. It's a, they're a treasure."

**Donald Beard** [00:48:06] So, I kind of took that as a mandate, you know? When the boss calls you and says, we need to do something, I'm like, okay, let's do it.

**Donald Beard** [00:48:14] And, you know, I hadn't had hardly any experience with bison before moving here. I had managed a little bit, done some ranching work, managed a few ranches, and one of them actually had some bison on it. But, my extent of managing those bison was throwing out some feed for them every now and then, and that was about it.

**Donald Beard** [00:48:33] So I didn't know a whole lot, but the first things I did was take it upon myself to start learning. And I got in the National Bison Association and some other conservation agencies and started meeting people, and going to different places, and visiting their ranches. What it takes to manage bison and learn how to work them, learn what type of fencing. So, I spent a good year or two just doing that.

**Donald Beard** [00:48:59] But, at the same time we were trying to figure out how we could get those bison out to where people could see them.

**Donald Beard** [00:49:06] So, we finally did, and in 2011 we were able to release them out into the front prairie, which gave them about a total of about a thousand acres that they were able to roam on. So, it didn't put them in the main part of the park, but it gave them, you know, access to some public property where people can be. So, that was the first step.

**Donald Beard** [00:49:28] And then, we immediately started on the next step. And it was in 2014 when we were able to finally release them into the park. So, they've been out for almost, almost ten years now, nine and a half years, whatever. So, they've been out in the public, into the park for nine and a half years, roaming through the canyons, walking along the trails, going through the campsites. I mean, they can go pretty much anywhere people can go.

**Donald Beard** [00:49:55] So, it's been such an amazing transformation on both the park and the bison. That's the part that really amazes me. If you look at pictures from the bison when they were kept in those paddocks in the back, in the maintenance area - and they were well taken care of, there's nothing wrong with the way they were managed - but the difference between those animals then, and the animals now, it's transformational.

**Donald Beard** [00:50:23] They were turned out and able to roam and turned back into bison again. And they have absolutely thrived. Our population, like I said, there were 32 that were originally captured. When I got here in 2009, there were about 80. So,, from '96 to 2010,

basically we increased from 30 some odd animals to 80. Now we have over 300 animals and we have, that's our maximum. We surplus 75 to 100 animals a year.

**Donald Beard** [00:51:00] So, I mean they are just, I mean, they have just blossomed. Just, they're thriving. They look so much healthier. And they look like bison. And it's just amazing to see, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [00:51:15] So, just having, you know, more country to cross and to have a bigger herd seems to have contributed to their health?

**Donald Beard** [00:51:26] I 100% believe that. I really do. And like I said, it's not, it's not anything against past management. It's just strictly that they're able to roam. They're able to be bison again. You know, they're not just stuck in a 200-acre paddock. Now they have 12,000 acres and they can do bison things again.

**Donald Beard** [00:51:46] You know, they can go down to the lake and go, go for a swim, swim across the lake or, you know, whatever, you know. Drink out of a stream, whereas opposed to just a galvanized stock tank, you know, So I mean, they have reverted back to bison.

**Donald Beard** [00:52:02] Now it's, and I was actually worried about that, to be honest with you. When we first turned them out, I had some concerns. You know, like I said, they had been drinking out of a galvanized stock tank. Were they going to walk down to the lake and get stuck in the mud or drown or whatever? I didn't know.

**Donald Beard** [00:52:20] But, no, it's been perfect for them. They, everything that ... bison is ingrained in them.

**Donald Beard** [00:52:26] They are far from domesticated. You know, I've never met a domesticated bison. I've met some bison that have been trained. I've met some commercial bison. I've been around some, you know, I know a lady that has trained a bison she could ride. But, that animal is still a wild animal. And you have to respect the fact that there's still wildness in them, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [00:52:51] Well, I guess that's a segue to how you manage the human side of this equation. You know, you've got this, you know, fascinating wild animal that people, I'm sure, are just curious as can be to get close to. But there's probably a safe distance, and then, maybe not a terribly safe distance, maybe a risky distance. And how do you sort of balance those two important visitors to the park, the bison and the people?

**Donald Beard** [00:53:27] Well, you said it. I mean, you got to manage both of them. You know, the visitors that come in the park, you just have to assume that they are not familiar with bison, which most people are not.

**Donald Beard** [00:53:40] So, and back up a little bit. So, you have a carrying capacity: that this park can handle so many bison based upon so many, you know, so many acres and so much grass. So, you have an actual carrying capacity of animals.

**Donald Beard** [00:53:56] But, you also have to throw in the population of visitors as well into that capacity. So, it's what I call the "social carrying capacity".

**Donald Beard** [00:54:09] So, and it's not a simple formula that you can work out. And we're still trying to figure out what that social caring capacity is. But, you know, let's say this park can handle 300 head of bison, which is probably fairly close. But then you throw in, you know, anywhere from 75 to 100,000 visitors a year, that is going to decrease the number of bison you'll want to keep, because once you get to a certain point of bison and a certain point of people, we have noticed that your Incidents increase.

**Donald Beard** [00:54:45] And not necessarily, you know, people getting hurt, but it just incidents in general. It could be anything. It could be, you know, property damage, it could be near-misses or whatever. But, you just start to see more of these things happen when you have a higher number of bison and a higher number of people.

**Donald Beard** [00:55:06] So, we have to manage somewhere to where, you know, the number of bison and the number of people can coexist without those problems occurring. And that's where we're trying to figure out where that number is. And it does change.

**Donald Beard** [00:55:19] And that's the other thing with bison. And, you know, you mentioned the distances between, you know, safe distance and a not-so-safe distance. That's absolutely true. But, what is fascinating is that distance changes. It changes almost constantly, depending on what is going on with those animals. I mentioned they're wild animals. They are strung, they are prone to stress. And if that animal is stressed, they have what's called a flight zone around them. It's a bubble. If you look at it, think of it like a bubble.

**Donald Beard** [00:55:54] And if you're, if this bison is out in the pasture, and is grazing on grass and nobody's messing with it, everything's perfect, and the birds are chirping, the sun is shining, that bubble is very small. So, in other words, you can walk, you know, not that you'd want to walk, but you can get to a certain distance, and it's not going to bother that animal, because you haven't gotten into that bubble.

**Donald Beard** [00:56:19] However, if there's a wolf, or there's a bunch of people, or, you know, you're trying to pen it up and work it, that bubble now has become big. It's become very big. And if you get in that bubble, you will know it.

**Donald Beard** [00:56:33] So, you have to know the animals. And, of course, we don't expect people to know them. And that's why we use the 50-yard as kind of a minimum.

**Donald Beard** [00:56:44] But yes, so that bubble changes depending on how much stress they're under. It's very fascinating to see how these bison react to different things.

**David Todd** [00:56:56] Well, and it sounds like these bison, despite the risk, maybe because of the kind of tantalizing threat there, they've become a real lure, a real draw, to people that come up to Caprock Canyon State Park and see the bison. What do you think about the role of these buffalo in ecotourism for the park and for Quitaque and, you know, the surrounding communities?

**Donald Beard** [00:57:29] So, it's huge, without a doubt. I mean, Quitaque has been named the official bison capital of Texas. So, we are, you know, we're known for bison, and it's simply because of this herd at the park. If you drive through the town, you'll see murals on buildings and a lot of bison represented in those murals. We have the Bison Cafe. I mean, bison is a huge part of this community.



**Donald Beard** [00:58:03] And, you know, I'm not saying it's the only reason this community is here, because this has been historically a ranching and farming community. And there's still a ton of ranching and farming, and that is a big part of what the economy is here.

**Donald Beard** [00:58:18] But, the economy has definitely been increased because of the bison herd, for sure. When I first got here, the first year I was here, I think there was 36,000 visitors in 2009. And we peaked at just over 100,000 visitors. We kind of settled back down to around 80,000 now, which is a pretty good spot. But yeah, so the visitation has just exploded.

**Donald Beard** [00:58:49] And every one of those visitors has to drive right through the town of Quitaque to get to the park. So, it's, without a doubt, has increased the ecotourism within the park or within the community.

**David Todd** [00:59:03] Oh, that's exciting.

**Donald Beard** [00:59:05] Well, it sounds like the bison, you know, have a long history in the U.S., and have got the buffalo nickel and so on. But, I understand that the bison was designated as the country's national mammal in 2016. And, I was curious if you know anything about the history of that and what sort of effect that might have on, you know, perceptions of the animal and of the park.

**Donald Beard** [00:59:35] So, you know, in the overall big picture of the world, that's probably not a huge deal. You know, being, having the bison named as the national mammal. But in the bison world it is. But, to me, the biggest part of that is the fact that people came together and worked on that who would not normally work together. People who may not see eye to eye, even in bison management, may not see eye to eye. You've got conservationists, you've got commercial producers, you've got Democrats, you've got Republicans, you've got, you know, everybody. Everybody came together and worked together.

**Donald Beard** [01:00:17] And to me, that's a huge encouragement. It's encouraging to think that we can still do that. And I wish that we could do that more. I wish that we could find the common grounds of things, and work towards improving our world on things that we can come together on. But, you know, that's my political soapbox.

**Donald Beard** [01:00:40] So, as far as the national mammal itself, it's like I said, in bison conservation, in the bison world, it's a huge thing. You know, I mean, it's right up there with the bald eagle now. So, yeah, it's helped out. You know, it's helped out all facets of bison, you know, whether it be for commercial, conservation or whatever. It's been a big, huge bonus, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [01:01:10] Well, so that the designation of the bison as a national mammal, I guess, has recognized its status. I was interested to see that you've had some roles with an international group, the IUCN. From what I read, I think you were appointed to the North American Bison Specialist Group. And, you know, given that this is an animal that roams, you know, from Mexico to the U.S. to Canada, I was curious if there's kind of an international component to understanding the bison and its conservation and restoration.

**Donald Beard** [01:01:50] You bet there is. So, the IUCN, which is the International Union for Conservation of Nature, that is the organization that comes up with the Red List, the threatened list. So, and like you mentioned, I sit on the Bison Specialist Work Group. But, there is a work group for everything out there. You know, there's people that look at, you know,

different types of birds or whatever. And they are just monitoring, it's just a monitoring organization that looks at these animals periodically and says, "How are they? How are they doing? Are they increasing or decreasing? Are they threatened near threatened? Are they endangered?"

**Donald Beard** [01:02:32] You know, we come up with this list. And it's not, it's not a government agency. So, there's no rulemaking authority there. We are just suggesting that, you know, this is where they stand and then it's up to the governments to decide what they want to do with that information.

**Donald Beard** [01:02:49] So, bison have been listed as near-threatened. So, they are not endangered. They have made a good recovery, nowhere near to where they were, but they will probably never get to that point again. So, it would be foolish to think that we could. But, there are about half a million bison in the world, or in North America now. So, that is very encouraging.

**Donald Beard** [01:03:13] And we do work with our neighbors to the north and south, on a continental scale. There is a continental conservation working group that I'm also a part of, and we look at all of North America.

**Donald Beard** [01:03:29] But, at the same time, there's also a European bison, the wisent. And they are doing the same thing over in Europe. It's a completely different animal. They're related but different.

**Donald Beard** [01:03:41] So, it's, it is truly a worldwide effort to monitor and conserve this species. And it's all, I'm very, very proud to be a part of that, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [01:03:53] Well, it sounds like there's a lot of collaboration, cooperation, which is just so welcome.

**David Todd** [01:04:01] You know, I was struck to learn a while back that that many of those 500,000 bison that you mentioned in North America, maybe 90%, I read in one place, are in production herds. And I was really intrigued that you wear two hats. You know, you look after the herd at the Caprock Canyon State Park, but that you also manage a commercial herd of bison on some private land. And I was hoping that you could sort of compare those two roles that you play, and maybe help us understand more about this commercial production herd that you're involved with.

**Donald Beard** [01:04:46] Sure. So, 90% is about what I've heard, too, as far as the numbers that are in production, private production. And, you know, there's people that say, "Well, that means they're commercial, they're domesticated." No, they're not. They're still bison. And, there's a saying that, basically what it says is, "Eat bison to conserve bison." And people are like, "What? What does that mean?"

**Donald Beard** [01:05:19] That's exactly what it means.

**Donald Beard** [01:05:19] Okay. So, there's an economy behind bison. Bison, for one, Native Americans have been hunting and eating bison for eons, and it is a very nutritious meat. It's lower in fat. Proteins are higher. It's better for you. It's, you know, it's a good alternative to beef. And don't get me wrong, I'll eat a big old beefsteak, too. But I love bison. Bison's really good.

**Donald Beard** [01:05:50] And if you are eating bison, you're helping that economy, the economy of commercialism, commercial bison.

**Donald Beard** [01:05:57] And let's just say that, tomorrow, bison were listed as endangered. If that were to happen, then all of these people that raise bison for meat could no longer sell that meat. They could no longer kill the bison for processing and put meat in the grocery store. So, there would be no reason, they're not going to keep those bison for, and feed them, if they're not going to be able to make money. Very few people will anyway.

**Donald Beard** [01:06:26] So, of those 500,000, about 450,000 of them or so would disappear overnight because there would be no economy behind it. So, the fact that they're not endangered, and the fact that we have a thriving, somewhat thriving, economy of bison production is very much a huge, huge part of conserving the animal. So, yes, if you eat a bison, you are helping to propagate the species of bison and you are helping to conserve the bison, without a doubt.

**Donald Beard** [01:07:05] So, that's, that is my theory on the production side of bison, which, like you mentioned, I do have a herd myself. I've got about 50 or so animals that I keep a few miles from the park.

**Donald Beard** [01:07:20] And my, my model is mainly for breeding stock. I don't ever want to get to the point where I'm breeding animals for a bigger hump or better horns. That's not what it's all about.

**Donald Beard** [01:07:34] It's all about, you know, the historical bison. Does this bison that I've got in front of me, that I'm raising, does it look like a bison? Does it have the features that bison are known for? And that's, that is my principle behind the ... and I don't do any selection. All of my selection is basically based upon reproduction.

**Donald Beard** [01:08:00] But, you know, so I'm not out there trying to select for bigger horns or more meat or whatever. It's raising bison to be the best bison they can be. That's what I'm after. And I do have a, you know, the ones that are not the top end of my list, those are the ones that end up in the meat. So, I do sell a little meat on the side, as well. But my main focus is probably the breeding herds, the breeding populations.

**David Todd** [01:08:29] And this is essentially a cow/calf operation. Is that right?

**Donald Beard** [01:08:34] Yeah, pretty much. So, bison, they take a little bit longer to mature. So, basically at two years old is when they're, when the cows are able to reproduce. And bulls, themselves, they go probably four or five years before they're really mature. They can sexually reproduce when they're yearlings, but you start to really see how that bull's going to be within that second year.

**Donald Beard** [01:09:05] So it's more of a calf/cow/two-year-old type operation than a cow/calf operation. I keep most of my animals until they're about two years old, and that's when we figure out which way they're going to go.

**David Todd** [01:09:19] Well, so, that's an interesting dilemma, I guess. So, you've got basically two crops of calves, often. You've got the one year old and two year olds?

**Donald Beard** [01:09:30] That's correct.

**David Todd** [01:09:32] How do you manage that?

**Donald Beard** [01:09:35] So, bison are very much a matriarchal herd-type animal. They, the more, the more different structure you can have in a herd, the better off you are. So, if you've got calves, yearlings, two year olds, adults, that's better for the animals. They thrive under those situations, I mean, as opposed to just having cows and calves. You know, you want to have different structures.

**Donald Beard** [01:10:04] And, you know, we do cull out different age structures as well. Occasionally, we'll cull out some calves or some older cows or whatever. So, we're not, I mean, we do cull at different age levels as well. It's not strictly just two year olds, but mainly two year olds.

**David Todd** [01:10:32] And among these bison, I understand that you see some distinctions, that they have a different character from one animal to the next. Is that right?

**Donald Beard** [01:10:48] They are very individual. Yes, without a doubt. You'll have some that are very inquisitive. You'll have some that don't want anything to do with you. You'll have some that are kind of pushy. You'll have some ... which I've got a pushy cow, who I've named "Karen". I don't typically name my animals, but I might get in trouble for that. But yeah, so we do have some that do different things without a doubt.

**Donald Beard** [01:11:15] And you get to know their personalities and you, if you spend a lot of time around them, you can kind of, you never can fully trust the animal. You never can read it or tell what it's thinking, but you start to read it a little bit, and you can kind of, you know, see what they're thinking maybe. I wouldn't put my life on it, but sometimes you can look at an animal and say, you know, this girl is going to go over here and do this because she's thinking this. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.

**Donald Beard** [01:11:43] But, yeah, you get to know them for sure. And it's very interesting. Just last night is a perfect example. It was a beautiful evening. I had a little extra time. So, I set up a lawn chair and just sat there in the back of my truck, in the herd, and just watched them for about, you know, 45 minutes to an hour.

**Donald Beard** [01:12:03] And, you know, you just ... some would come right over to me, just stand there and look at me. Some wouldn't. Some would do their own thing. You just start to learn personalities, you know. It's pretty interesting, for sure.

**Donald Beard** [01:12:17] Well, so, I imagine you've observed the herd at Caprock Canyon State Park. And of course, your own herd on your property. Do you see differences between the two, between the quote unquote, "wild" herd at the park, and then this more domestic, or at least commercial, herd at your property?

**Donald Beard** [01:12:47] Yes, absolutely. So, the herd at the park, we treat as wildlife. We are hands-off as much as we can be.

**Donald Beard** [01:12:55] Now, every bison herd in North America is managed, at some level, even the herd in Yellowstone. All bison are managed and have to be managed. They cannot freely roam like they used to. Even back in the days when the Native Americans were running

the plains, the bison were still managed, you know, by hunting them as a management tool. You know, burning the prairies is a management tool. So, they managed the bison even, you know, for eons. They've always been managed, at one level or another.

**Donald Beard** [01:13:28] So, yes, we do have to manage them, but we try to maintain them as wildlife in the park. So, you know, we let nature take its course as much as we can. We don't, you know, spend too much time with them doing things to them.

**Donald Beard** [01:13:44] Whereas, with my herd, you know, I want them to be bison, but I have to manage them a little more frequently for different reasons or another. So they're a little bit more used to me, and they don't mind coming around me and standing around me when I'm in the tractor or in the truck or whatever. I still won't get on the ground with them, you know, walk around them. I don't do that.

**Donald Beard** [01:14:05] But, you know, they definitely are a little easier to work with. You know, they're kind of used to being worked, a little bit. It's not domestication, not at all. It's just they know it's not, that those, that that tractor is not going to kill them, or, you know, that that truck's not going to attack them and eat them. They know that now.

**Donald Beard** [01:14:28] So, but even still, if I open the door too fast or something, it'll still freak them out.

**Donald Beard** [01:14:35] But, yeah, they definitely are easier to handle than the park bison, for sure.

**David Todd** [01:14:41] I see. Well, and then, I imagine you have some proprietary, I guess, income models that you use with, with your business. So, I don't want you to disclose your business secrets, but can you tell me a little bit about how you're trying to run the Caprock Bison Company? I think you said that you're, you're focusing on breeding stock, but you're also selling some culls. Is that typically as a wholesale market, or do you sell quarters and halves and or, you know, down to chuck?

**Donald Beard** [01:15:23] Yeah. So, we're kind of playing around with all of that. I do sell. Like this year, I sold some animals that somebody else was going to turn into meat, you know. So, I didn't have to take care of all of it. But, I do take some and turn them into meat myself. And I do sell quarters and halves.

**Donald Beard** [01:15:42] And now, we're starting to tinker around a little bit with selling some packages. And everything is inspected. So, it's, you know, I can sell a pound of ground. It's fine. Or steak, or, like you said, a chuck roast or whatever. I can do that. I have that ability. But it's a lot more intensive once you start doing that. So, I don't really want to get too deep into that.

**Donald Beard** [01:16:06] But, I'm thinking about trying to keep some around here just to sell to people that I know or, you know, maybe find a place in town where I can put a freezer and sell some out of a freezer. I don't know if I'll ever get to that or not, but, you know, it's a possibility.

**Donald Beard** [01:16:23] But most of it is done on the quarters and halves. It's just so much easier that way, you know. It's, that way, I just, I don't have to worry about inventory as much or anything like that.

**David Todd** [01:16:39] Well, and it's not like you don't have other things going on. Between the park and this commercial herd, you're a busy guy.

**Donald Beard** [01:16:50] So, I think you mentioned earlier that you had, you know, when you were first trying to learn about bison, had joined the National Bison Association. I think you've since been active with the Texas Bison Association. What are you finding through those associations, you know, about your colleagues who are in this same industry? What sort of challenges and opportunities are they seeing?

**Donald Beard** [01:17:17] Right. So, yes, there is a National Bison Association, which is obviously national. And then there are several state and regional associations all through the country. And each one of them is basically tailored around a geographic area. And ours obviously is Texas. We have our own. It's a big state.

**Donald Beard** [01:17:35] And there are a bunch of great people in both, in all associations. The whole industry as a whole is just amazing. The people, you know, we have conferences a couple of times a year, so we get together and we get to talk. And I've made some lifelong friends through the associations and, you know, you just, you meet people and you share information.

**Donald Beard** [01:17:57] That's the other thing is there's a lot of people that are interested in learning bison that may not know much. You can pick up a phone, call almost any bison, commercial bison, person in the country, and they'd be more than happy to answer your questions. It's not like, you know, we don't want you in the business. You know, you might take some of our business. Like, "No, no, come on, there's plenty of room."

**Donald Beard** [01:18:19] You know, so we help each other out. We're there for each other. We do whatever we need to do. I saw an ad on Facebook the other day. One of our friends, I think, is in Colorado, and they're building fences and they needed some help. And a bunch of people from around the country decided to come help them build fences. So, I mean, it's not just answering questions, it's physically getting out and helping.

**Donald Beard** [01:18:39] You know, it's, we do what we can to help everybody succeed. And it's pretty awesome. Some great people, without a doubt.

**David Todd** [01:18:48] So do you know much about sort of the downstream aspect of the business? I mean, do you send bison to feedlots? Do you have to use special slaughterhouses? Do you have special, you know, certification and inspection requirements that are different from cattle?

**Donald Beard** [01:19:07] It is different from cattle. And there are different, there are varying ways of doing business. So, there are some bison feedlots. There, there are people doing that. There's people that are grain-finishing bison. And there are people that are grass-finishing bison. And, you know, and all of them are fine. You know, you're raising bison, and you're still getting a product that people want. So, as long as you're selling your product and people are buying it, you're doing it right, I guess. You know, so, I'm not saying any way is better than the other way.

**Donald Beard** [01:19:40] Me, personally, what I do is I don't use a feed lot. I typically don't even really finish my bison out in a traditional way. I promote my bison as "ranch-raised and

ranch-finished", so they live as bison their whole lives, until we load them up and take them to the processing plant. And that's kind of my goal and that's just my way of doing things. Not that it's better than anybody else's, but, you know, so far, it's worked. The meat coming out of these animals is pretty dang awesome. And people seem to enjoy it. So, yeah, as long as as long as I've still got a customer base, that's the way I'll do it.

**Donald Beard** [01:20:28] It's ranch-raised, ranch-finished. You know, I'm not saying they're grass-fed. I don't feed them grain, but they do get some occasional ranch cubes, range cubes that have some grain in them. But, you know, that's just kind of the way I do it.

**Donald Beard** [01:20:41] And as far as the inspection goes, there are, and I'm so confused about all this, because once you start getting, you know, getting in all that, you're getting the government agencies involved. You got state and federal, and then you've got the USDA, you got APHIS, you got all this alphabet soup of agencies. And they all have their finger in it one way or another.

**Donald Beard** [01:21:04] But we are a state-inspected product, so we work with the state of Texas, not the U.S. Government. So, but it allows us to do everything that the USDA inspection does. We sell all our animals here in Texas. We don't worry about crossing state lines. And, you know, it's just a lot easier to be done that way.

**Donald Beard** [01:21:26] But it still has to be separated from cattle. So, when they go the processing plant, there's a kill day for bison that's separate from cattle. So, on the day that they do my bison, they don't do any cattle. It's just bison. They have to keep them completely separated.

**David Todd** [01:21:44] This is so interesting. I should, a little self-disclosure: I'm in the cattle business. So, I'm very curious.

**David Todd** [01:21:53] So, let's go back in history just a little bit and talk about the bison in pre-history. I was struck that apparently at Lake Theo, there on the park, there are some remains of ancient bison. And I was curious if that's been something that has intrigued you and that you could share any stories about.

**Donald Beard** [01:22:21] So, it's not an archeological site that you might go visit and see. So, it's, you know, it's not like you can go see all these bones sticking out of the creek bed or anything like that. It's all buried. All that you can see is a Texas historical monument that identifies it.

**Donald Beard** [01:22:46] But, the museum in Canyon, the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum in Canyon, they have a ton of artifacts from that site and others. So you can see some of it there.

**Donald Beard** [01:23:00] Yeah, it's very fascinating, without a doubt. And like I said earlier, I believe it's over 10,000 years that they've dated man hunting bison in the park through that site. They've found some Folsom points which dates it back that far. And we haven't really made this public, but we recently have found a new kill site in the park, that's, I think, it's about 2500 years old. So, it's, you know, it's very, within the last year, it has been documented. So that's very exciting as well. We're working through some aspects of that before we make it too public.

**Donald Beard** [01:23:36] But, yeah, so, it's very cool. We have a ton of archeological sites in the park, and people are still finding stuff. I had somebody bring an arrowhead to my office a few months back and dropped it off. Now, that's not what you're supposed to do. If you find anything in the park, you need to leave it where it is, take a picture of it, document it, and then let us know where it is. But these people didn't know that, so they just brought it to the park, which I respect, the fact that they even brought it to the park. I don't know how many of them have walked away from the park, but yeah, there's still all kinds of stuff to be found out there for sure.

**David Todd** [01:24:15] Well, that's great. It shows what sort of deep roots the bison have in that area.

**David Todd** [01:24:23] So, just looking towards the future, I understand, I think you said that Caprock is at capacity at around 300 animals and that y'all are, you know, you've got this new challenge of maybe more bison than you can accommodate. And can you talk about some of the concerns that you run into with having maybe more bison than you can have space for? And, I understand that there's some efforts to create some, or interest in creating some satellite herds. It'd be interesting to hear about that.

**Donald Beard** [01:25:00] Sure. And that's correct. You got to, you have to be careful on how many bison you have. As park superintendent, I'm responsible for managing the entire park, not just the bison herd. So, as much as I love the bison herd, I also have to make sure that we do not degrade the ecosystem by overgrazing. So, we have to keep all aspects of the herd in the park in check and make sure that everything is functioning as much as it can as a functioning ecosystem.

**Donald Beard** [01:25:38] So, yes, we do have issues every year because we're having 75 to 100 new calves a year. We have a surplus of animals. So, we've been pretty fortunate the last several years and have been able to be a part of a conservation auction where we auction these animals off. And, like I said, it's a conservation-minded organization. And so, most of these animals are ending up on other, they may be private production, but they're still conservation-based. So, they're going to good homes.

**Donald Beard** [01:26:10] That's not always going to be the case. And, as a bison conservationist, I know that we need several, probably a couple thousand head of bison to be considered a conservation success. We will never get that way on the park. So, as you mentioned, we are trying to figure out how we can do satellite herds to where we will have more of these animals, as a herd, on another location, whether it be, we're working with the Native American tribes, we're working with other government agencies, non-profits, you know, conservation, the Nature Conservancy, or wildlife conservation services, or whoever it may be. We're trying to develop partners and partnerships with these organizations to where we can increase the number of these animals elsewhere for a couple of different reasons.

**Donald Beard** [01:27:10] One, like I said, we need, just need more animals. So, you know, we've got all our eggs in one basket, so to speak. So, if a disease were to come through Caprock, it could wipe them all out and then we're done, you know? But, if we have satellite herds at two or three other locations, then we still have Goodnight animals and we still have a herd that we can manage and work to restore them back at Caprock. But, we just have to make sure that we look at our long-term options, and we want to conserve these animals for, you know, for millennia, for people in future generations to be able to enjoy, not just our generation, but down the road as well.



**Donald Beard** [01:27:58] You know, you touched on this before, so, you know, maybe you could just elaborate a little bit. I think that you see a real sort of core value in bison meat and other products related to commercial herds as being important in securing the future of bison as a general population. Can you just sort of fill in a little bit what you mean by that?

**Donald Beard** [01:28:32] Well. I'm not exactly sure where, what the question is here, but, basically it's just an economy. You know, there's a demand for bison. And, as long as there's a demand for bison, whether it be for hides, whether it be for meat, or whatever, then there is an economy that allows people to produce bison, and raise bison, and it keeps the numbers, the population numbers, higher because of that economy. And if the economy wasn't there, then there would be no reason to have that number of bison.

**Donald Beard** [01:29:17] Is that kind of where you were going with it?

**David Todd** [01:29:19] Yeah, I think that makes a lot of sense is that, you know, you can, I guess, protect bison just out of altruism...

**Donald Beard** [01:29:27] Yeah.

**David Todd** [01:29:28] Or public interest, but having dollars flowing.

**Donald Beard** [01:29:31] Yeah. And, if you think about it, bison is one of the only species that's managed like this. This is not the only one. The bison were saved from extinction by private producers. And, it's not, I mean, our federal government, our state and federal governments, do a lot of things for us. But, should we really depend on them to be the sole saviors of bison from here on out?

**Donald Beard** [01:29:59] You know, there are only so many state parks and national parks where they can put bison, and every one of them right now is pretty much full. So, you know, you're looking at a max of 40, 50,000 bison, and that's all that governments can handle.

**Donald Beard** [01:30:16] So, with private production, and private people and citizens, we are able to increase that, you know, up to 500,000. So, we're doing a great job saving this species. It's not necessarily the government's responsibility to take care of the planet. And sometimes we push it on the government. But, I think that, in general, we, as citizens, you know, we should to take on some of that responsibility ourselves.

**Donald Beard** [01:30:49] And in bison, that's what we're doing, based upon economies. But we're still doing it.

**David Todd** [01:30:56] I follow you. Yeah.

**David Todd** [01:30:57] So, I've heard this phrase "ecologically extinct" thrown around about bison, and the thought being that these animals still exist. Their genetics are largely intact. You know, you see these large furry humped animals with horns and so on, but they don't perform that role of managing the Great Plains by roaming across thousands of miles and millions of acres. And, and I was wondering if you have any kind of thoughts about how you get to that place, sometime in the distant future, probably, where bison are returned to that role that they once held?

**Donald Beard** [01:31:47] I don't know, David, if we can ever really get to that place again. You know, we have moved on. And it's not necessarily a positive for mankind now, but we have moved on from that place. We have decided that we want to live in those plains, and we want to farm those plains, and raise cattle in those plains, and have communities in those plains. And as long as we do that, I don't think there's any way that we can have fully functioning bison roaming these plants.

**Donald Beard** [01:32:27] We may have a population of, you know, take Yellowstone, for example, and there's a couple other places that are doing this as well. You have a population of bison that are acting that way, but even they are limited to that, what is it, 1.2 million acres that Yellowstone covers. And when they move outside of Yellowstone, then, you know, things happen, you know, good things and bad things, to the bison.

**Donald Beard** [01:32:55] So, I mean, they, I don't think we can ever get to a point where they are fully functioning as they once were.

**Donald Beard** [01:33:07] Now, it doesn't mean we can't have places like Yellowstone and the American Prairie Reserve. And, you know, I would love to see one down in the southern plains somewhere where we have set aside a few million acres. And maybe it's, you know, it includes communities that, you know, maybe we work out agreements somehow where they are roaming larger areas.

**Donald Beard** [01:33:31] But, they're always going to be managed, and they're not going to be able to roam from Mexico to Canada. I mean, it just, there's just no way that's ever going to happen. I think they're working on a Yellowstone-to-Yukon project where, you know, the hope is that one day they can restore bison to be able to roam from Yellowstone back into Canada, through the Yukon. And, you know, it might happen. It'd be awesome if it did.

**Donald Beard** [01:33:58] But, you're going to have a lot of communities and a lot of fences and a lot of roads and a lot of people that have, and each one of those people have different impressions and different mindsets and different thoughts on how it should happen. So, it's going to take a lot to get us there for sure.

**David Todd** [01:34:17] Yeah, I could see it being a reach, as you said, you know, roads and fences and communities. It's hard to turn the clock back on all the changes that have happened on the prairies.

**David Todd** [01:34:34] Well, so I think we're drawing close to a close here. And I wanted to thank you for taking all this time to go over all the different aspects of bison at the park and on your private lands. And I was curious if there might have been something that we inadvertently missed or skipped over that that you'd like to add before we close?

**Donald Beard** [01:35:00] Well, we've talked about a whole lot of things today, and I've probably talked in circles a little bit and maybe didn't make sense here or there, but I think we were just about everything.

**Donald Beard** [01:35:11] The one thing I did want to add to this is kind of the next phase of what my journey is. You know, so, so I was fortunate enough to come into this project when it was still being managed as it was in the beginning, and then transition it into turning them back into the park, and getting them out where the public. I was able to see that, both sides of that. So, I've seen a lot and it's been an amazing transformation.

**Donald Beard** [01:35:49] And I've kind of touched on this a little bit, that we're trying to do satellite herds and trying to, you know, we're at a limit in the park.

**Donald Beard** [01:35:55] So, I think the last part of my influence on this project is to hopefully get them to where we can take these Goodnight genetics, which are extremely valuable for bison conservation. They are extremely, I mean, they are a Texas jewel and a national treasure. I mean, they're just, the genetics are just amazing with these animals. My goal is to start getting them out back into the southern plains.

**Donald Beard** [01:36:27] So, yes, I would love to see some satellite herds and definitely working on that. But even just working with and yeah, it'd be great to work with Native American tribes in New Mexico and Oklahoma and Arizona, you know, southern Colorado and Kansas, these Southern Plains, and start working with them and helping to reestablish the Goodnight, the Southern Plains genetics, that we still have, back into the Southern Plains. You know, we're never going to get to where it's fully Southern Plains genetics in the Southern Plains. But, if we can start to include some of those genetics into those existing herds that they have, and put some of those genetics back into the Southern Plains, to me, is, that's a pretty cool, cool factor right there that I think would be pretty, pretty neat to see.

**David Todd** [01:37:23] I agree. I think that sounds like a great goal.

**David Todd** [01:37:28] Well, thank you so much for sharing some history and also some outlooks to the future. I really appreciate your time today.

**Donald Beard** [01:37:38] Well, it's been very interesting, for sure. It's been a bit thought-provoking on my side too. You've made me think of some things that I haven't thought of in a while, and I hope that I was able to elaborate on those, and without putting too many people to sleep.

**David Todd** [01:37:59] No. You did a great job. I wanted to thank you again, and I hope you have a good day and that our paths cross sometime. I need to come see Caprock and enjoy what you've built up there. So, thank you so much.

**Donald Beard** [01:38:12] Well, I hope you do. And if you do, please look me up, and I'd be happy to show you around and we can continue this conversation.

**David Todd** [01:38:20] I'd look forward to that. Thanks a lot.

**Donald Beard** [01:38:22] Thank you very much. And have a great day.

**David Todd** [01:38:24] Yeah, you too. Bye now.