

SAFE FOOD COMMITTEE REPORT: PLOW TO PLATE'S UPCOMING DOUBLE FEATURE

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by Adam Rabiner

Bisonhead was shot on location in 2015 in Yellowstone National Park with the Native American Tanner family. It is a short and quiet film, mostly visual—wintry plains and hills, a bison shot dead with a rifle and dragged away by its slayer leaving a trail of blood in the snow, the same bison lying in the back of a pickup truck having its teeth examined by a young woman wearing a pink blazer. The prairie wind howls, an instrument like a didgeridoo sadly wails, flowing water crests over a waterfall and roars, a snowplow rumbles steadily down a deserted highway, footsteps make a crackling crunch on a snowy path, but not that many words are uttered. Yet the movie packs an emotional punch above its weight. It's like a highly concentrated fruit juice. A little goes a long way.

After a few of these images, the following words, contextualizing the film, are posted on the screen in white print on a black background:

“The extermination of bison from their hunting grounds will force the Plains Indians to give up their nomadic ways and surrender to the reservation system. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone.”

1867, U.S. Military Colonel.

“Nearly 150 years later, a family of Ponderai Native Americans travel to Yellowstone to take part in the culling of wild bison in order to preserve their treaty hunting rights.”

“Yellowstone was once part of the Ponderai’s ancestral harvesting grounds. Today they are restricted to a small hunting zone outside the park.”

One of the longest stretches of conversation is when some of the Tanners discuss hunting strategies over a map of the area and realize their opportunities are limited by the fact that the bison are gathered on private land which is off limits to the Tanners.

A similar restriction is brought to bear in the subsequent scene. One of the Tanner elders is driving his car and about to enter an area when the driver of another vehicle leaving the area stops him to ask if she can help him with anything. When he says no, she doesn’t hesitate to tell him that the area is closed and off limits. When asked if she is a game warden, she replies, “Nope, I just live here,” to which Mr. Tanner replies under his breath after pulling away, “Well, don’t worry about it then.” The younger woman in the car laughs at his retort to a microaggression piled on top of generations of historical injustices.

After this annoying encounter, the older Tanner and his younger female relative pull up on some bison grazing on grass ringed by a fence with buildings in the back-

ground—a Yellowstone education center and a gift shop—and she films them with her phone. This scene is followed by one of a vanload of non-Native American tourists whose tour guide stops the vehicle for a photo opportunity. The guide explains that it will have all the elements of a classic Yellowstone winter picture because it has the three necessary components of snow, buffalo, and rising steam behind them. In the next scene, two buffalo with bells draped on their necks walk below the balcony of a residential condominium. The sense one takes away from these juxtapositions is that the Tanners, indeed the buffalo themselves to some degree, have also been relegated to tourist status.

As powerful as these images are, *Bisonhead* ends with a handful of words. “We can’t harass them, we can’t chase them. What do you think our ancestors did back in the day? (gentle laughter). Run them into a draw or run them over a cliff.” (more soft laughter). *Bisonhead* ends with the Tanners defiantly driving past a herd of buffalo grazing by the side of the road, honking the car horn to chase the buffalo as someone prepares a rifle. Then the film circles back to the opening shot of the felled buffalo and the hunter breathing heavily from the exertion to move it onto the truck. “What do the bison mean to us?” asks a voiceover as you watch a bison slowly walk away from the camera behind a snowy and wind-swept hill rise. “In one word, freedom.”

Our National Mammal tells the story of buffalo culling by the Montana Department of Livestock due to ranchers’ fear of brucellosis disease.

Bisonhead and *Our National Mammal* screening: Tuesday, February 14th, 2023 @ 7:00 p.m.