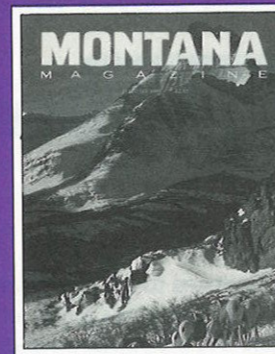


MONTANA

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COVER—Bighorn sheep and Mt. Wilbur, Glacier Nat'l. Park—Wayne Mumford

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Montana Magazine staff photographers use Kodak film.

William Hornaday's bitter mission

BY
DOUGLAS
COFFMAN

THE
MYSTERIOUS
JOURNEY OF
THE LAST
WILD BISON

It is all emerging now: an arcane tale of the Wild West, like some long-dormant seed responding to hidden stimuli, unfolding, releasing to the future a living vision of its past. This is the mystery, the tragedy and the hope, of Montana's wild bison—"gone forever," yet not quite really gone.

MICHAEL H. FRANCIS



ALAN & SANDY CAREY

BISON MYSTERY



JOHN REDDY

W

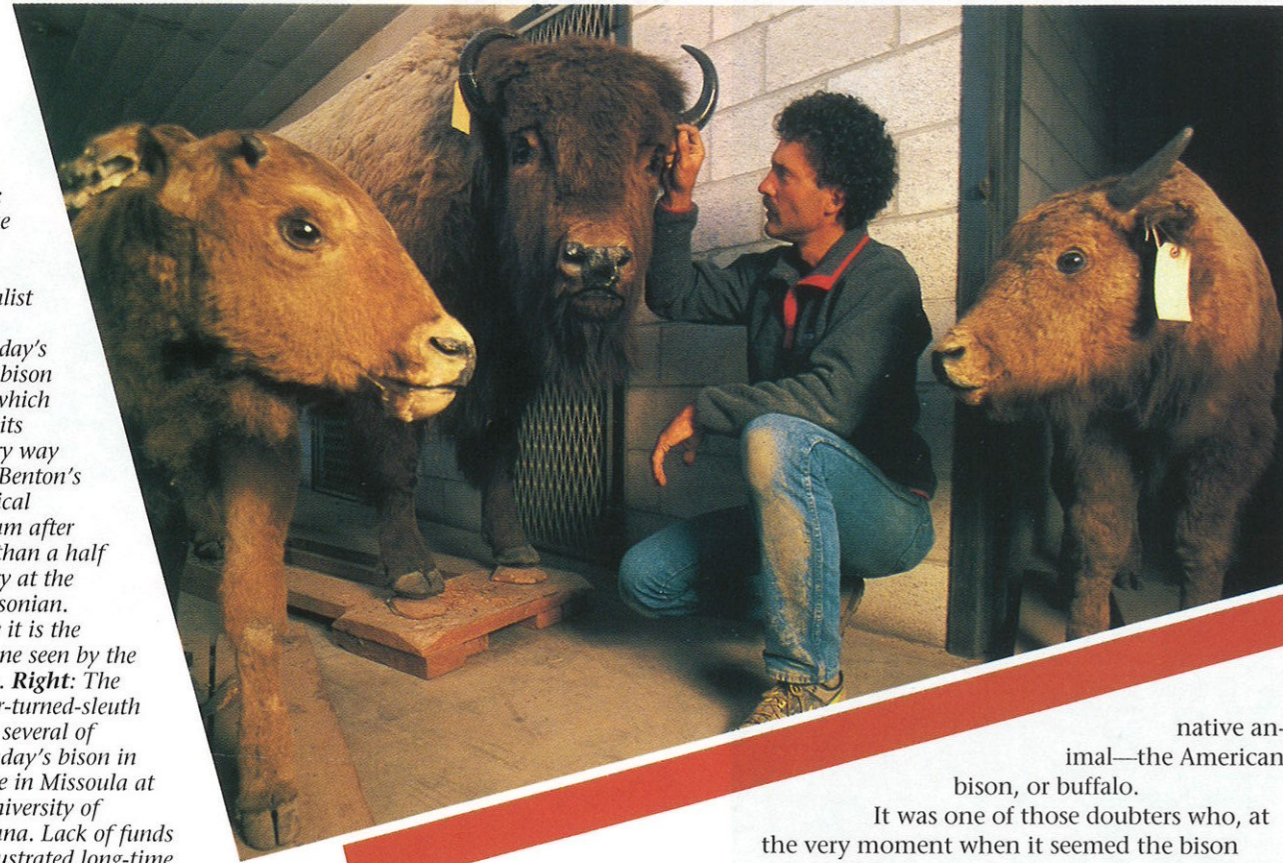
hat drew me in, put me on the mystery trail, was nostalgia for the buffalo days a hundred years ago. It set me prowling historical archives, peering into dusty storage vaults, scouting the old bison trails of eastern Montana's badlands.

It was the nostalgia that kept me searching for the materials from which I hoped to construct a novel of the bison. But as with all good mysteries, I did not understand at first, and the meaning of the nostalgia has revealed itself—like a resurrected flower—by slow degrees.

Paradoxically, the story begins at the end, more than a hundred winters past. It was the dawn of the open range in Montana Territory. Cattle were being pushed in from Texas and Wyoming to the south, and from Oregon to the west. It was the bright beginning for a booming livestock enterprise.

But there was an ending in Montana, too, or so it seemed. The cattle and sheep were filling up a colossal void that gaped as the land was cleared of bison and other wildlife. Even in those optimistic times there were those who trembled at what man had brought about: the near-extinction of the largest, most abundant

PAUL CARTER



Above: Lifelike detail of naturalist W.T. Hornaday's finest bison bull, which made its solitary way to Ft. Benton's historical museum after more than a half century at the Smithsonian. Today it is the only one seen by the public. Right: The author-turned-sleuth found several of Hornaday's bison in storage in Missoula at the University of Montana. Lack of funds has frustrated long-time plans to feature these specimens within a wildlife gallery or museum.

native animal—the American bison, or buffalo.

It was one of those doubters who, at the very moment when it seemed the bison must follow the woolly mammoth into oblivion, captured a living bison calf. The tawny April calf was only a month old when taken from its

Montana home. Yet it would become a powerful symbol for the millions of its kind slaughtered in the years immediately preceding its birth.

SHOCKED AND DISTURBED

The year was 1886 and the man was William T. Hornaday, then chief taxidermist of the U.S. National Museum in Washington, D.C. Hornaday warned of the coming extinction of the bison, and reported that his museum was caught without suitable specimens to represent the species. His urgent message provoked this response from Spencer F. Baird, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution: "I am greatly shocked and disturbed by your letter. The situation you describe is most serious. I dislike to be the means of killing any of those last bison, but since it is now utterly impossible to prevent their destruction we simply must take a large series of specimens, both for our own museum, and for other museums... You must go west as soon as possible, find out definitely where specimens can be obtained, and collect...at least twenty skins of males, females and young, ten or fifteen skeletons and pick up about fifty skulls."

As I soon learned, Hornaday set out quickly to discharge his duty, even amid persistent reports that it was already too late, the bison were all gone. In early May of 1886, a scouting party under Hornaday's direction headed north out of Miles City, Montana Territory. They were bound for remote lands of the Missouri-Yellowstone Divide, known as "The Big Open." There Hornaday hoped to locate the last of the wild bison.

A few days after arriving on Phillips Creek, west of present-day Cohagen, Hornaday's men caught the bison calf. Hornaday was quite taken with the orphaned animal. He reported that, "We found him in a barren hollow between two high buttes, as lonesome looking a waif as ever was left to the mercies of a cold world... To all of us he was a genuine curiosity... His thick, wavy coat was of a uniform, bright sandy color, and 'Sandy' he became from that moment."

Sandy's capture, and sightings of other bison between Little Dry and Sand creeks, proved the existence of a small remnant herd in The Big Open. Though a few straggling groups of bison held on in secluded parts of Texas, Wyoming and Colorado, this small band of perhaps 35 animals was all that remained in Montana outside Yellowstone Park.

When he emerged from the wilderness in late May, Hornaday wrote immediately to his institution initiating plans for a full-scale collecting expedition to The Big Open that fall. He felt certain that the coveted bison skins could be obtained—with considerable difficulty—in the season when the wool and hide is prime.

Accompanying Hornaday on the train ride east was the feisty bison calf, Sandy, still in good health thanks to a willing milk-cow.

Back at the Smithsonian, Sandy became an instant celebrity. Tethered on the lawn of the National Museum, he entertained visitors and seemed to thrive for a time. But in spite of the care lavished upon him, Sandy succumbed to city life which, Hornaday said, "proved too rich for his blood." On July 26, 1886, Sandy died.

In the fall, Hornaday returned to Miles City with an assistant from the University of Kansas, W. Harvey Brown. There the "Smithsonian Institution Buffalo Outfit" was provisioned by the War Department, at Fort Keogh, and quickly outfitted for an extended hunt. On September 26, Hornaday and Brown—along with three trusted buffalo hunters, an Army cook and military transport—left Miles City traveling north across the Yellowstone River, into the high plains beyond.

For three months the small band of horseback hunters searched across hundreds of square miles, from the middle reaches of Big Dry and Little Dry creeks, westward as far as the Musselshell River. Hornaday described the land as "a wild and rugged butte country, scored by intricate systems of great yawning ravines, steep-sided and very deep, and badlands of the worst description."

GRUELING PURSUIT

Circumstances soon forced the hunters into a grueling, relentless pursuit. The bison Hornaday wanted were few and scattered over a vast territory. When not grazing, or when disturbed, these animals often hid in the heads of deep ravines on the upper reaches of the divide. They had become wary from constant hunting pressure, and were as elusive as any deer or elk, yet many times as strong and as swift. Even when flushed from hiding, they often out-paced their pursuers for 10 miles or more before they could be brought down.

Facing such circumstances, and with winter threatening, it is remarkable that Hornaday's party managed to kill any bison at all. Yet, in just a few weeks, they had secured hide and skeleton from 10 specimens. Ultimately, their efforts would net many more bison as well, but none grander than one taken near the end of the expedition.

On the morning of December 6, as the hunt-

On July 26, 1886, Sandy the baby bison died, succumbing to city life which, Hornaday said, "proved too rich for his blood."

ers awaited the arrival of the transport to return them to Miles City, Hornaday and one of the men decided on a final hunt. Leaving their snug camp on what is now McGinnis Creek, they rode into an area that had already proven lucky. As hoped, the men flushed "three buffs," fired in a volley, then were off and running. After a rough chase brought a wounded bull to bay, Hornaday wrote, "...we again overhauled our prize, on the side of a hill, near the crest... Thirty yards away from him I pulled up, and gazed upon him with genuine astonishment. He seemed to me then...the grandest quadruped I ever beheld, lions, tigers, and elephants not excepted.

"It was an opportunity of a lifetime, such as falls to the lot of few men whose business it is to reproduce animal forms. I determined to make one or two outline sketches of him just as he stood.

"He seemed to me like the very last one of his race, that he knew it as well as I... With the greatest reluctance I ever felt about taking the life of an animal, I shot the noble beast through the lungs...and his last breath led me to exclaim fervently: 'Thank heaven! It's over, at last!'"

At 68 inches high, this rangy old bull was the largest specimen collected. Hornaday carefully measured the warm carcass, estimating the animal's weight at between 1,600 and 1,700 pounds. Four old bullets found in the carcass proved that others had sought the hide of Hornaday's "finest bull."

By the end of the hunt, Hornaday claimed a total of 24 bison for his museum. He also obtained scores of dried bones and skulls, remnants of the grim commercial slaughter

that had ended only a few years earlier. Hornaday was staggered by the massive waste of bison which preceded his hunt. He knew that 10 years earlier there had been an estimated half-million buffalo within a 150-mile radius of Miles City. At the close of his hunt, there remained alive only 10 or 15 straggling bison on The Big Open range.

BITTER IRONY

A compassionate man by nature, Hornaday was bitterly aware of the irony of his work. Although some might envy his task, fate had left him the job of hunting down the last of the wild bison in order to preserve their hides for posterity. Still, he felt duty-bound to complete

his work, and so he did, with utmost skill and determination.

Had legendary good luck not also prevailed, though, the entire collection would certainly have been lost, and Hornaday's classic account of the buffalo—*The Extermination of the American Bison*—might never have been written. As it happened, the expedition reached the Yellowstone just in time, loaded to the wagon bows with the precious cargo. On December 20, the party made safe crossing to Miles City just hours before the onset of blizzards brought in the "Hard Winter" of 1886-87.

So it was that Secretary Baird, in the Annual Report of the Smithsonian for 1887, could proudly tell of the accession of "a splendid series of [bison] skins of all ages and sexes." In light of the near-extinction of the species, Baird considered the collection to be of "almost priceless value."

Though Hornaday's achievement during the expedition is perhaps unsurpassed in the annals of zoological collecting, he did not rest upon his return to Washington. With a team of assistants, he began at once preparing six of the finest bison specimens to represent the species. Among those honored were the yellow calf, Sandy, and the huge old bull, which became the centerpiece in a grand display.

PRIMAL MASTERPIECES

Through 1887 and into 1888, the taxidermists labored to produce a masterpiece. From the precise field measurements, Hornaday constructed mannequins. These were posed armatures of wrought-iron, wood and jute over which were modeled, in clay, the forms of the bison themselves. The prepared hides were then artfully fitted over the forms and stitched closed. The results were among the most lifelike then produced in any museum.

Hornaday also took a new approach to the presentation of his "habitat group." Within a huge glass and mahogany display case, he positioned the bison in a scene recreating their natural environment. Even sod, sagebrush and wild grasses had been sent from Miles City to complete the realistic detail. The bison exhibit was opened to the public in the spring and soon became immensely popular.

So important was Hornaday's work, and so inspired, that G. Brown Goode, head of the National Museum, was moved to comment. In his report for 1888, Goode praised the finished habitat group as "a monument to the American Bison...a triumph of the taxidermist's art." It almost seemed as if Hornaday had prepared his bison for a return to life, so real was the overall effect of his creation. It was even said that a visiting Sioux Indian commented that he believed the bison moved around in their enclosure at

night, because their tracks were plainly visible.

Hornaday expressed a similar view of his bison artistry in an article published the year after the hunt. "Perhaps you think a wild animal has no soul," he wrote, "but let me tell you it has. Its skin is its soul, and when mounted by skillful hands, it becomes comparatively immortal."

Hornaday continued his seminal work in taxidermy for some years before taking a position as head of the New York Zoological Park, in 1896. There he entered into serious work with living animals. He designed and directed the zoo in Bronx Park, and pursued a distinguished career in wildlife conservation. During this period, Hornaday was instrumental in establishing the country's first bison preserve—the Wichita—in Oklahoma.

SANCTUARY

In 1905, Hornaday's bison work again leapt forward. He became the first president of the American Bison Society, a group dedicated to saving the bison from extinction. The idea and impetus for the organization actually came from a nature writer, Earnest Harold Baynes. Baynes succeeded in uniting Hornaday and a group of prominent citizens and conservationists in the goal of saving bison. In 1908, with the assistance of Montana Senator Joseph M. Dixon, the support of Congress, and the backing of President Theodore Roosevelt, the group founded the National Bison Range at Moiese, Montana.

After 1908, the Bison Society established several other preserves. Only then could it be assured that the total extermination of the bison had been averted. Although fenced-in and closely managed, bison had at last gained the protection of fine breeding sanctuaries, where their health could be maintained and their numbers increased.

In spite of good reasons for optimism, it is doubtful that Hornaday ever put aside his grief at the passing of the wild bison. After he died, in 1937, his habitat group continued to reward countless Smithsonian visitors with its compelling view of primal America. In his 83 years, Hornaday had created something of great value to the nation and to coming generations of people and bison.

Looking further, I found that it was not until the midpoint of the century that eternity was disturbed. In 1955, the Mammals Division of the National Museum began a modernization-of-exhibits effort. Soon the Hornaday Bison Group fell victim to progress. It was replaced by another exhibit, with fresh bison specimens from the National Bison Range of Montana.

THE MYSTERY QUICKENS

But here our mystery quickens. While dis-

mantling Hornaday's old group, in 1957, museum workers unearthed a sealed metal box hidden beneath the bison in the floor of the display. Inside was an article from *The Cosmopolitan* entitled "The Passing of the Buffalo." Handwritten across the cover page were these words:

"To My Illustrious Successor,

"Dear Sir: Enclosed please find a brief and truthful account of the capture of the specimens which compose this group. The Old Bull, the young cow and the yearling calf were killed

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES, NEG. # 74-12338



by yours truly. When I am dust and ashes I beg you to protect these specimens from deterioration and destruction. Of course they are crude productions in comparison with what you produce, but you must remember that at this time (A.D. 1888, March 7.) the American School of Taxidermy has only just been recognized. Therefore give the devil his due, and revile not. "W.T. Hornaday, Chief Taxidermist, U.S. National Museum"

Learning of the message, I was intrigued by the fact that Hornaday had such strong feelings for the mounted bison. And I wondered about the reaction of the museum staff to their surprising discovery. Had an effort been made to

Hornaday holding the leashed bison calf, Sandy, caught in Montana's "Big Open." This was taken in June or early July, 1886, after Hornaday returned to Washington from his spring scouting trip to Montana. Sandy died July 26th.

fulfill Hornaday's plea? If so, where are the historic specimens located today?

I was also puzzled about the sort of man who would conceal a message he knew would be read only after his death. Were his the trivial motives of self-importance and sentimentality, or the worthy ones of a true seer? Further investigation has moved me toward the latter view, and the research has revealed mysteries within the mystery.

Reviewing Hornaday's written works—scientific publications, popular books on wildlife conservation, and accounts of his own exploits as big-game hunter and taxidermist—I found a certain solidity to the man. There was a definite direction in his life's work which is manifest in his writings. Although he was a zealous sportsman, Hornaday clearly tempered his love for adventure with a respectful reverence for the world of nature. He rued the wasteful slaughter of wild animals, and worked vigorously to prevent their decline. Above all, I learned, he was a serious professional, one who gave full attention to the details of his important work. In this con-

text, it is hard to see the placement of the concealed message as anything less than a carefully considered act.

Such was the case, according to Dr. Henry W. Setzer, a former curator of mammals at the National Museum. Setzer was present, along with the museum's director, when the hidden message came to light in the 1950s. Opening the box, the men felt as if they had found buried treasure, and they pondered Hornaday's note. "We were awed," Setzer told me, "to find that Hornaday had the foresight to charge his successors with the care of those specimens. He realized that perhaps they were the last wild bison which would ever be taken. It was a matter which we all took very seriously."

Eventually I learned that an effort was made to place the Hornaday mounts in safe-keeping. And Hornaday must have known that such would be the case, regardless of his mysterious message. As Setzer told me, "the Smithsonian never gives anything away 'willy-nilly'."

Why, then, even as it became clear that bison extinction had been averted, had Hornaday left the message where it was? Why had he not

told someone about it? Perhaps he had become concerned with something beyond the fading specter of bison extinction, I reasoned. But what was it, then, about this bison group that was so important? For nearly two years now, that question has kept me on the trail of Hornaday's nostalgia and the last of the wild bison.

Early on, I was astonished to find that Hornaday's elusive bison mounts have vanished almost completely from public view. Determining their whereabouts was a difficult matter. In time, though, I learned that the mounts had been shipped back to their state of origin in 1958. They were displayed for a while in the University of Montana fieldhouse, in Missoula, until a chronic shortage of funds forced their retirement.

From there the trail breaks up. It is not clear, at this writing, just what happened and why. Some of the mounts apparently went directly to storage in Missoula. Others were placed in the care of the State Historical Society, in Helena, and the Museum of the Rockies, in Bozeman.

THE FLASHLIGHT REVEALS

With a persistence exceeded only by Hornaday's original effort, I eventually located all six members of the historic bison group. Most of them now fall prey to dust and damage. Only Hornaday's finest bull, which made its solitary way northeast to Fort Benton, is seen by the public today. There, in the Museum of the Upper Missouri, he appears just as Hornaday sketched him in the field on December 6, 1886.

Since examining the remains of the other group members, I feel that none of the aging specimens portrays the historic plight of the species better than Sandy, the orphan calf. When I finally found him again, 101 years after his capture, it was only with the aid of a flashlight.

In Missoula, in a far corner of the nation's crowded attic, I suddenly found my quarry. The first smelly glimpse through the plastic sheeting told me that. Closer inspection revealed Sandy's bright eyes and thick wool coat—now tattered, yet much the same color Hornaday described. But time is costing dearly. Rodent droppings and insect shells in the wooly hides foretell their ruin. Neither Sandy nor his once-famous brethren will last another hundred years without proper care.

Then what of the great taxidermist's art? Is it not to be immortal, as Hornaday once suggested? Are the priceless specimens to be forgotten and destroyed after only a century? Do these last bison not hold some hidden, unguessed message which we may yet discover?

If asking such questions has exacted a price in time and energy, answering them has proven even more difficult. The specimens, after all, are

only hollow shells of bison—the residue of history and a talented man's handiwork. Yet, in that first simple encounter with Sandy, I was struck with the vitality of the wild creature itself: The tiny hooves and nubbin horns, alert turn of the head, expectant eyes. I realized that Sandy's very image is kinetic; it contains the power to transform.

Attempting to understand what Hornaday felt—what wisdom he hoped to convey regarding the world of the wild bison—is, of course, a matter of interpretation. I infer, though, that he was a man of extraordinary vision. His broad experience with wild animals had impressed upon him the fact that natural history had by no means completed itself when civilization intervened. Indeed, he realized that the natural systems of the Great Plains are ancient ones, still very much in the process of unfolding. What better model with which to represent that natural history than an entire bison family, complete with young calf?

If we would glean just one ancient secret from Hornaday's crumbling artistry, then, it must be this: These bison are yet alive. In their own mysterious way, they embody the eternal wild creature sprung from the land, sustained through millennia upon the rich grasses of the plains, yet evolving into something else.

As spirit-beings, the Hornaday bison portray a boundless prospect of nature's peace and perpetual abundance. It is a prospect within which our narrow views of history and of progress pale to irrelevance. Within their aura of suspended animation, we may grasp at once the folly of the past, the terror of the future, and the undiminished hope of a natural realm, still near at hand.

In this way, the cryptic note found in the floor of the display is a prophetic one. It articulates a skilled artist's hope that the heirs of those who nearly destroyed the bison will one day gain a vision of its wild majesty. Grasping that might spark revival, inspire wild resurrection in the native grassland home.

THE BIG OPEN

All along, I believe, the mystery of the wild bison has been a struggle toward that view. Perhaps our yearning for other aspects of the 'Old West' is part of that same struggle: Back...or ahead...to what has been lost, or nearly lost, but never really understood. Perhaps the nostalgia exerts its

pull upon us all. If so, it must surely draw us out of ourselves, out of our comfortable idea of civilization, toward something larger, something eternal.

Inevitably, it drew me out to the land, to the plains of Montana where the buffalo drama played out a century ago. The Big Dry—The Big Open of the Missouri-Yellowstone Divide—this is the place to see and to experience, if we wish to learn the secrets of the arid lands.

It is clear now, the reason for my coming, and I see that it was no mere coincidence. No coincidence, either, that a man who knows and loves the land would become my traveling companion. Ever since 1988, this economically-displaced rancher has made a home in the former "buffalo-range metropolis" of Jordan. His name is Jack Drew.

Since losing his cattle, then his ranch, Jack finds seasonal work on other ranches, or works as a hunting guide. He tries to stay busy. Even when sitting home, he is busy with his sculpting. Not Herefords...bison. In this as well, there is no co-

An ancient secret gleaned from Hornaday's crumbling artistry

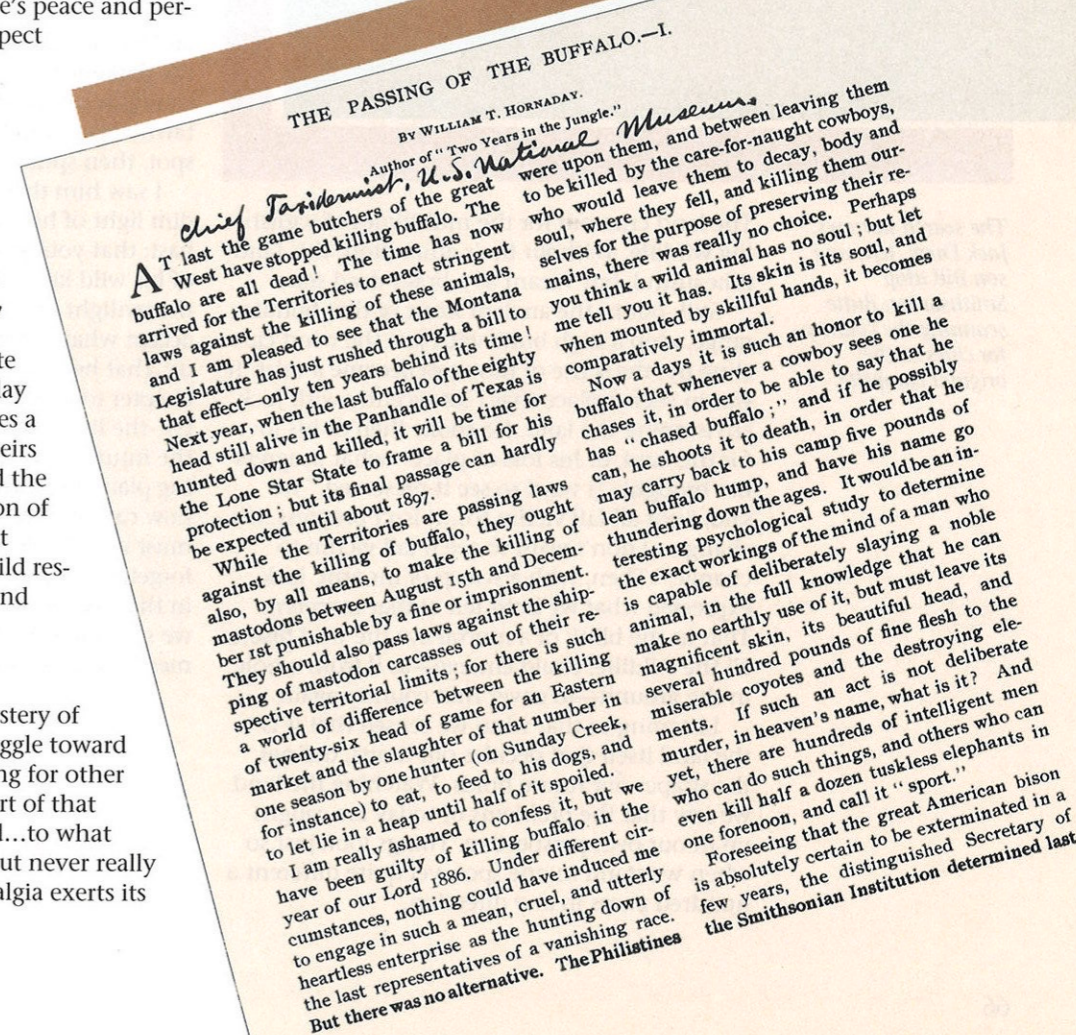


SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES, NEG # 19661

Hornaday at about age 40. He was 32 years old when he was sent to Montana.

Below: Copy of Hornaday's message found concealed in the floor of the Smithsonian bison group in 1957.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES, NEG. # 44711



THE PASSING OF THE BUFFALO.—I.

BY WILLIAM T. HORNADAY.
Author of "Two Years in the Jungle."

Chief Taxidermist, U.S. National Museum

At last the game butchers of the great West have stopped killing buffalo. The buffalo are all dead! The time has now arrived for the Territories to enact laws against the killing of these animals, and I am pleased to see that the Montana Legislature has just rushed through a bill to that effect—only ten years behind its time! Next year, when the last buffalo of the eighty head still alive in the Panhandle of Texas is hunted down and killed, it will be time for the Lone Star State to frame a bill for his protection; but its final passage can hardly be expected until about 1897.

While the Territories are passing laws against the killing of buffalo, they ought also, by all means, to make the killing of mastodons between August 15th and December 1st punishable by a fine or imprisonment. They should also pass laws against the shipping of mastodon carcasses out of their respective territorial limits; for there is such a world of difference between the killing of twenty-six head of game for an Eastern market and the slaughter of that number in one season by one hunter (on Sunday Creek, for instance) to eat, to feed to his dogs, and to let lie in a heap until half of it spoiled. I am really ashamed to confess it, but we have been guilty of killing buffalo in the year of our Lord 1886. Under different circumstances, nothing could have induced me to engage in such a mean, cruel, and utterly heartless enterprise as the hunting down of the last representatives of a vanishing race. But there was no alternative. The Philistines

were upon them, and between leaving them to be killed by the care-for-naught cowboys, who would leave them to decay, body and soul, where they fell, and killing them ourselves for the purpose of preserving their remains, there was really no choice. Perhaps you think a wild animal has no soul; but let me tell you it has. Its skin is its soul, and when mounted by skillful hands, it becomes comparatively immortal.

Now a days it is such an honor to kill a buffalo that whenever a cowboy sees one he chases it, in order to be able to say that he has "chased buffalo;" and if he possibly can, he shoots it to death, in order that he may carry back to his camp five pounds of lean buffalo hump, and have his name go thundering down the ages. It would be an interesting psychological study to determine the exact workings of the mind of a man who is capable of deliberately slaying a noble animal, in the full knowledge that he can make no earthly use of it, but must leave its magnificent skin, its beautiful head, and several hundred pounds of fine flesh to the miserable coyotes and the destroying elements. If such an act is not deliberate murder, in heaven's name, what is it? And yet, there are hundreds of intelligent men who can do such things, and others who can even kill half a dozen tuskless elephants in one forenoon, and call it "sport."

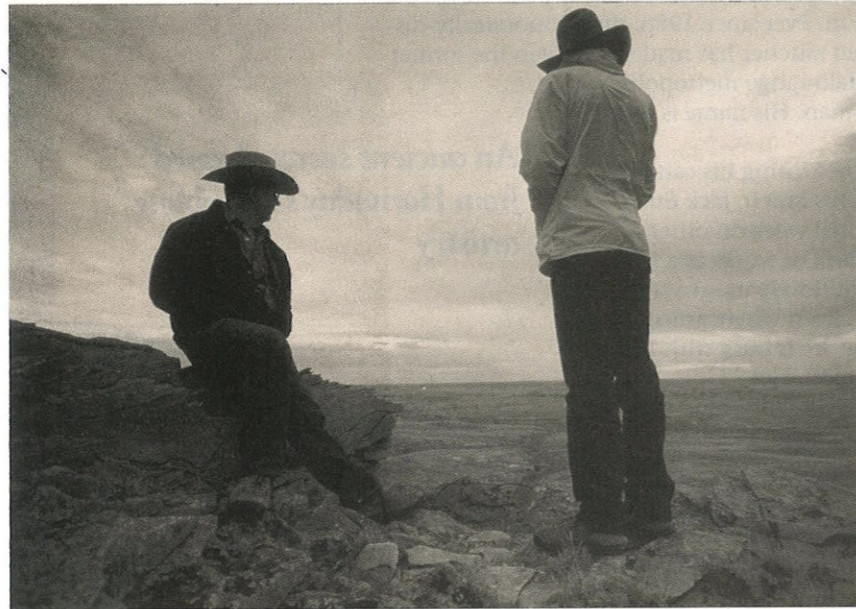
Foreseeing that the great American bison is absolutely certain to be exterminated in a few years, the distinguished Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution determined last

incidence; the winds of change blow first and strongest at the dry edges of the land.

As Jack and I have seen in our travels together, the buffalo range today is put to the uses of progress. In The Big Dry, though, the lasting imprint of civilization is sparse. Much of the land retains the natural character and starkness which jarred Hornaday a century ago. It is still the land where the fading bison trail points the road ahead.

And there is contrast, too, in The Big Dry. There is beauty—as much as the heart brings to it—but there is plowing and there is emptiness.

PAUL CARTER



The search narrows. Jack Drew, left, and son Bill atop Smithsonian Butte scanning the country for clues to the original campsite.

The land cries out for the multitudes of vanishing wildlife. Without their animation, this land is beautiful, but vacant as a brain-dead stare.

Still, out in the ancient heart of that buffalo range, atop a high butte with just the wind circling by, the sense of time can become a mist. It was in such a place that I sat recently with Jack, envisioning the land. He spoke then of his love for the land, of his loss of place—what progress has brought. “I want to see it preserved,” he said, “not all fall victim to...it isn’t progress, it’s change...I don’t want to see it fall victim to change.” Then, with a sweep of his arm, Jack expressed what we both felt at that moment: That in the blink of a mortal eye the wild bison, all the wildlife, could emerge—as if from a hole in the ground—to cover that country again.

Listening to that wind we sensed that it is the land itself that decides our limits, defines the shapes our future holds. Watching the land we saw that the problems of today are caught up in our own perspective. Things look just so when we stand in one spot, yet quite different a hundred paces in any direction.

So it was that by the late 1880s it seemed impossible to many, including Hornaday, that the bison could be saved from extinction. Yet the impossible has long since come to pass; bison numbers now total nearly 100,000. As the old impossibilities fade away, a vision of wild rebirth takes its place upon the old frontier. Like a shaggy beast itself, it joins among the most hopeful of our current impossibilities.

NIGHT THOUGHTS

Late November 1989, found me again in The Big Dry country with my friend, Jack Drew. A dusting of snow came that night at the snug camp that had sheltered Hornaday and his men a century before. Lying on the ground, watching the wintry stars among the clouds, I wondered if Hornaday slept in this same spot. Did he grasp the greater meaning of his work on such a night as this? Perhaps his ghost would have a knowing smile for these two souls—the rancher and the writer—who followed his trail to the very site where he worked the skins of the last wild bison. Perhaps it would ease his heavy heart, I thought, if he could know that people a century away still seek the power of life to bring itself full circle.

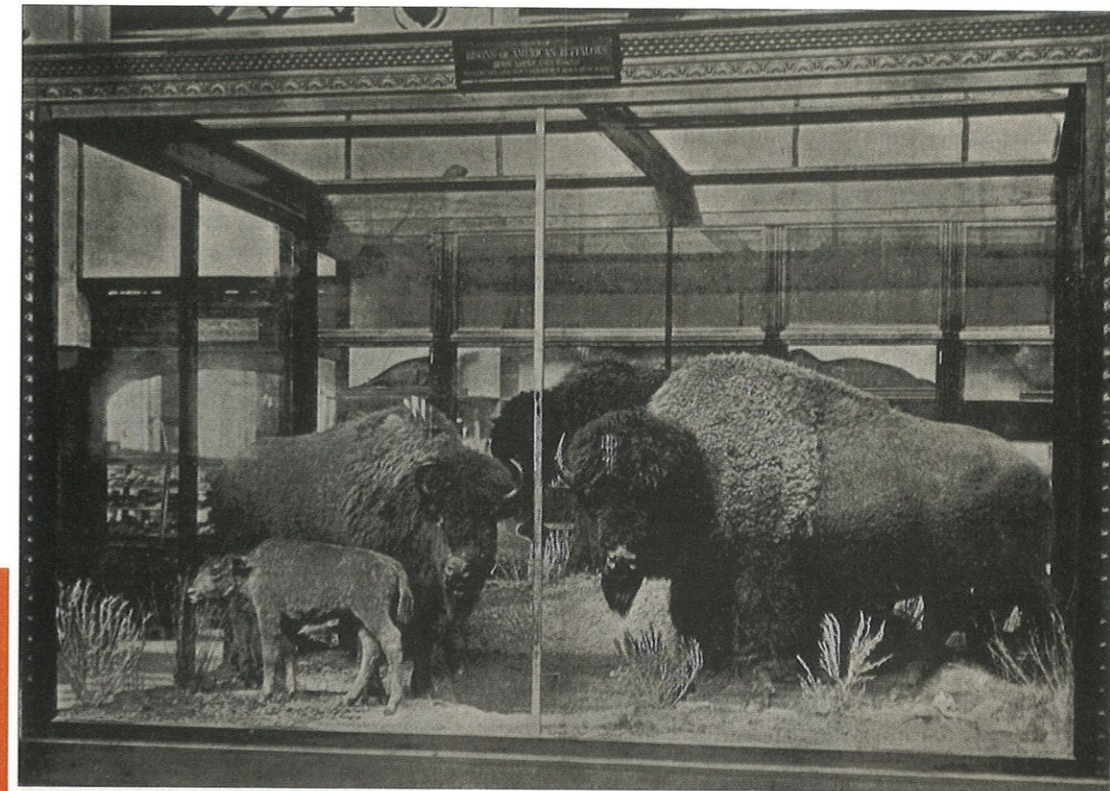
“Nostos...algos...nostalgia,” I thought. “A return.”

Gradually our little fire of cedar died to coals, then to ashes. The night wind moved gently by, and the aurora sent its luminous strands across the darkened sky of the buffalo range. My thoughts returned along the mystery trail to the tawny bison calf born long ago near this very spot, then spiraled outward with the wind.

I saw him then, the sandy yellow calf, in the dim light of his storage room. And I did see the past: that young life cut short like the millions of his wild kind, shot down, bloating, rotting in the twilight of an empty plain. But it is hard to accept what our history and our literature tell us: That he is of “a dream and a forgetting, a chapter forever closed.” For I feel his immortality—the living dynamic that would merge with the future to recall his range upon the beckoning plain. Only the ideas which confront him now can prevent that...or make it real. So we all must wonder: Is he as they say, “of the great forgetting?” There would be something terrible in that. When we look into his glassy eyes, will we see “forever” shining, or just a fading glimmer from a sad and dismal past?

BISON MYSTERY

BISON Under Glass



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION ARCHIVES

Creatures snatched from the jaws of the bison trade

If all goes as planned, Hornaday’s fondest personal wish will be fulfilled: These bison, shown here in their glass and mahogany case at the Smithsonian, will finally be together again at Ft. Benton’s Museum of the Upper Missouri. The new display should duplicate exactly the one at left.

“A SCENE FROM MONTANA SIX OF MR. HORNADAY’S BUFFALOES FORM A PICTURESQUE GROUP

A BIT OF THE WILD WEST REPRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

SOMETHING NOVEL IN THE WAY OF TAXIDERMY REAL BUFFALO-GRASS, REAL MONTANA DIRT, AND REAL BUFFALOES.”

—Washington Star, March 10, 1888

The headline at left appeared in the Washington Star on March 10, 1888. The curiosity of the reading public was whetted as the article described a revolutionary display of mounted bison about to be unveiled in the museum’s Hall of Mammals. The concept for this new departure in taxidermy originated with the display’s creator, Chief Taxidermist, William T. Hornaday.

Public and professional acclaim for the exhibit quickly demonstrated the ability of large habitat groups to capture the public imagination, and to educate the growing urban populace in the natural history beyond the cities. Soon, such artistic groupings were in use in museums across the country.

The Hornaday bison group held a prominent place in the Hall of Mammals for nearly 70 years.

When the display was taken down in the late 1950s, the old bison specimens were still in excellent condition, if slightly faded. They were then remanded to Montana for safe-keeping.

In Montana they did not regain the status that they had at the National Museum, but the Hornaday bison were seen for a time by the general public. Ultimately, a chronic shortage of funds for their long-term care became a serious problem. Stop-gap measures were taken to seal the specimens in plastic film and provide for their safe storage. But as the mounts were shuttled from one location to another, damage was inevitable. Some of the specimens finally wound up in unheated buildings where drastic temperature changes have hastened their deterioration. The historic Hornaday specimens are now all but forgotten in Montana, and in at least two recent books on the history of the

future.

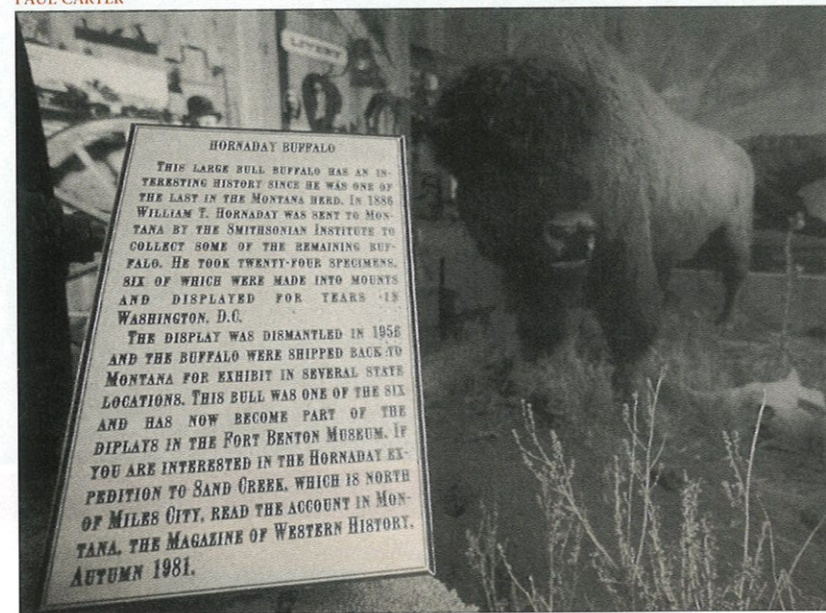
Speaking with the authority of experience, William T. Hornaday once called Montana "a land of many surprises." Even Hornaday might be genuinely surprised today, though, if he knew that the specimens he snatched from the jaws of the bison trade may come to light...and to life...once again.

At Fort Benton, not too far from The Big Dry country, planning is underway for the restoration and display of the historic Hornaday bison group. In a cooperative project of the Museum of the Upper Missouri and the Bureau of Land Management, a new visitor center will soon be erected commemorating the Wild and Scenic Upper Missouri.

According to John Lepley, the curator of the museum, construction of the new center is slated for 1992. The facility will house a variety of

Ft. Benton's solitary bull will be head of his herd once more.

PAUL CARTER



HORNADAY BUFFALO
 THIS LARGE BULL BUFFALO HAS AN INTERESTING HISTORY SINCE HE WAS ONE OF THE LAST IN THE MONTANA HERD. IN 1886 WILLIAM T. HORNADAY WAS SENT TO MONTANA BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE TO COLLECT SOME OF THE REMAINING BUFFALO. HE TOOK TWENTY-FOUR SPECIMENS, SIX OF WHICH WERE MADE INTO MOUNTS AND DISPLAYED FOR YEARS IN WASHINGTON, D.C.
 THE DISPLAY WAS DISMANTLED IN 1958 AND THE BUFFALO WERE SHIPPED BACK TO MONTANA FOR EXHIBIT IN SEVERAL STATE LOCATIONS. THIS BULL WAS ONE OF THE SIX AND HAS NOW BECOME PART OF THE DISPLAYS IN THE FORT BENTON MUSEUM. IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN THE HORNADAY EXPEDITION TO SAND CREEK, WHICH IS NORTH OF MILES CITY, READ THE ACCOUNT IN MONTANA, THE MAGAZINE OF WESTERN HISTORY, AUTUMN 1981.

Awaiting his long-lost companions—Ft. Benton's lonely bull stands just the way Hornaday sketched him in the field in 1886.

American bison they received only barest mention.

INTEREST REKINDLED

Today the Hornaday bison stand at a crossroads of history. In the 1980s and 1990s, rising public concern for the decline of the natural environment, along with the growing need to develop sustainable agricultural economies, is rekindling interest in the wildlife resources of the Great Plains.

The Hornaday bison specimens are actual vestiges of North American natural history. As such, they remain one of our last and best tangible reminders of the immense productive potential of the arid plains. As symbols of a bountiful past, such remnants give hope to the

interpretive exhibits portraying the natural and cultural history of the region. If all goes as planned, among those displays will stand the Hornaday bison group, in a grand re-creation of the Smithsonian original. In fulfillment of Mr. Hornaday's fondest personal wish, the last of the bison would be joined with the old bull of their former herd, which had already led the way.

BISON MYSTERY

CAMP on the Big Porcupine

We sensed the search narrowing, yet the camp's location eluded us.



L.A. HUFFMAN PHOTO FROM MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, HELENA

On November 18, 1886, W.T. Hornaday, the leader of the Smithsonian Institution's Expedition for Buffalo, was stuck in camp. An array of animal specimens collected on a side-trip to the Musselshell River needed preparation. There were deer, sharp-tail and sage grouse, geese and a variety of smaller birds, but no bison. Work on those heavy hides would continue later.

The load of wildlife carcasses had been brought by wagon to the expedition's base camp near the head of the McGinnis Fork of Big Porcupine Creek. There, the laborious job of preparing and preserving the skins, and "skeletonizing" each specimen, could be properly done.

Although they would rather have been out hunting, Hornaday and assistant, W. Harvey Brown, faced their task. "I was literally compelled to remain at camp and work on the specimens," Hornaday complained. "The three cowboys went off to hunt, of course, [then] Brown...and I took absolute possession of the tent and held high carnival."

MOST ROMANTICALLY SITUATED

The camp on the Porcupine was laboratory and home to the six members of the expedition from about November 5 until the end of the hunt, in mid-December. This home on the range was a spot which met their every need. "Our camp...was most romantically situated," Hornaday wrote, "and as for the necessities of camp life it was almost perfect." Near the site

In 1901, Hornaday and photographer L.A. Huffman hunted The Big Open together in the vicinity of Hell Creek north of Jordan on the Missouri River. Huffman's photo shows the same type of tent used in the 1886 hunt, a similar ranch wagon and similar terrain. That's Hornaday bridling his horse, "Fan."

Just when we were ready to search elsewhere, fate gave the key a turn and unlocked the mystery.

The author and companion Bill Drew were closer than they realized to Hornaday's Big Porcupine camp even while they pored over topo maps. The stock pond behind them turned out to be the "deep pool of delicious water" that Hornaday had described in 1886. The naturalist pitched camp 200 yards from the pool.

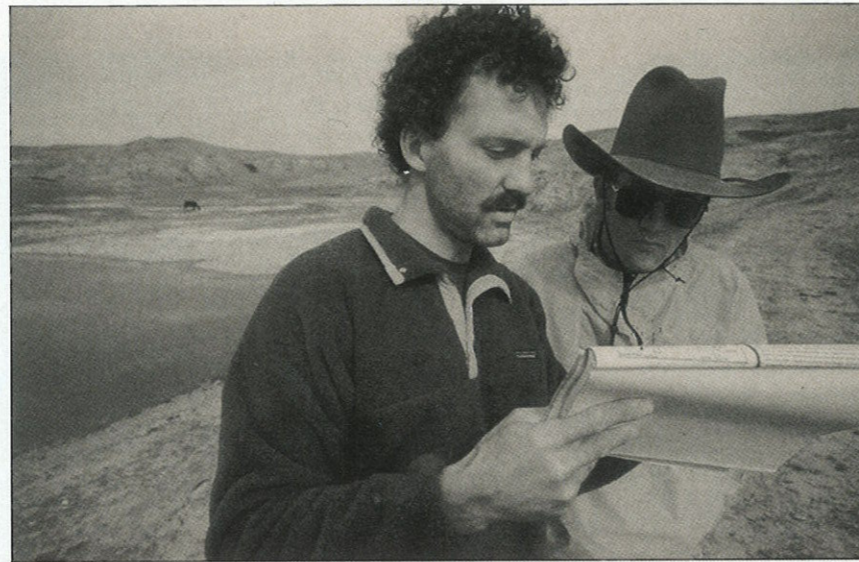
was a "deep pool of delicious water, without alkali and inexhaustible in quantity. Two hundred yards from the pool of water we pitched our tent...close to the southern face of a perpendicular bluff that formed a semicircular wall around us, and like a sheltering wing protected us at all times from the cold winds that swept across the bleak level of the High Divide.

"In front of our tent was a beautiful bit of smooth ground of an acre in extent... On this convenient ground we used to feed our ten

dition. Hornaday never revisited the site. When he died, in 1937, his written accounts of the last buffalo hunt were all that remained of the camp on the Big Porcupine.

In 1988, I joined former Big Dry rancher Jack Drew, now of Jordan, to begin a systematic search for the site of the Big Porcupine camp. Hornaday's own published descriptions became our guide, and we followed the particulars like points on a treasure map.

PAUL CARTER



PUZZLES AND CLUES

horses...load and unload our wagon, spread out fresh buffalo skins and work on them. In the head of a deep gully close by...we made a very comfortable 'dug-out' to serve...as a kitchen... Half a mile below we found a few dry cottonwood logs that served us for firewood as long as we remained."

Even the prospect from camp was favorable. "From every direction save one there came down great precipitous gullies," Hornaday wrote, "and from our tent we looked due south down the rugged little canyon...to where the view was abruptly cut off by a lofty isolated butte. Strange to say, it was absolutely nameless...so we christened it 'Smithsonian Butte.'"

By December 15, winter was closing in and a detachment from Fort Keogh arrived at the Big Porcupine camp. It brought wagons to haul in the great load of skins and skeletons to Miles City. The members of the Smithsonian group must have bid fond farewell to the encampment which had been a virtual oasis during the difficult hunt, but of this Hornaday makes no mention.

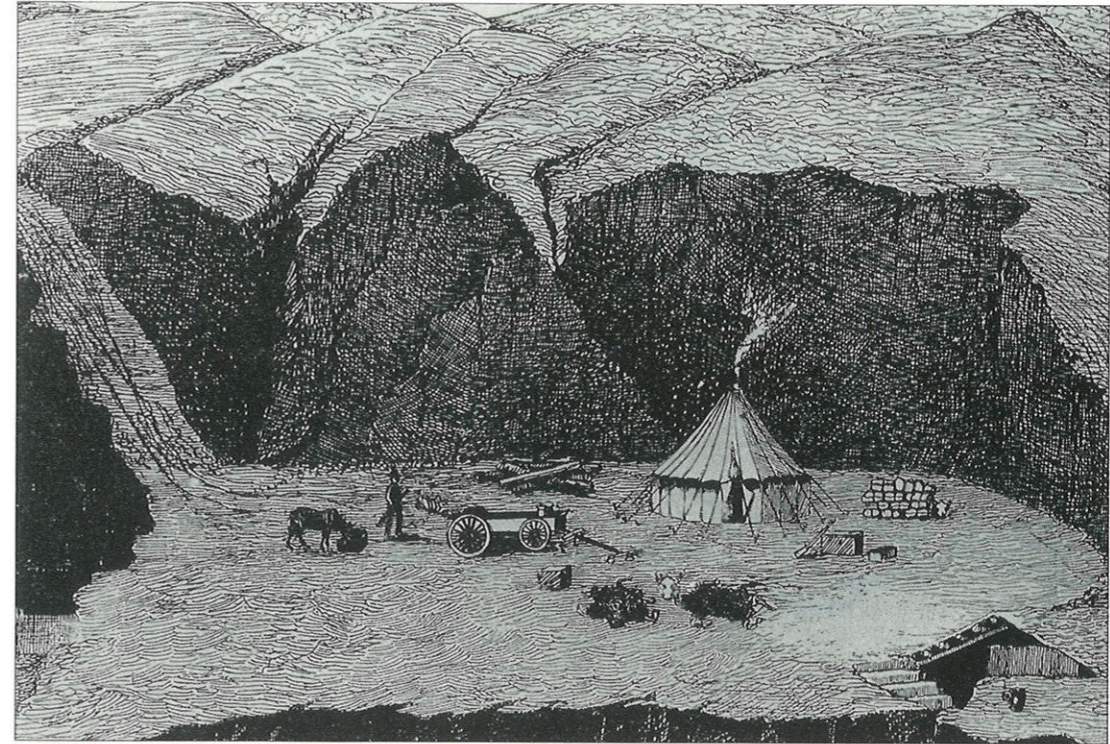
Thereafter, the camp lived on only in the memories of the surviving members of the expe-

In the course of three field-trips to the Missouri-Yellowstone Divide, Jack and I painstakingly isolated the clues and puzzled over their interpretation. Hornaday was correct in his description of the "intricate systems of great yawning ravines" that typify the divide area. "Sheltering wings" and "perpendicular bluffs" that mark the site were everywhere, it seemed.

With the help of Jack's son, Bill, we surveyed the general area more closely on our second trip. Although we sensed the search narrowing, the camp's location eluded us. On the third trip, in November 1989, Jack and I searched again. It was the same time of year that the Hornaday men had occupied the camp, and perhaps it was that which gave us both "the feeling."

Combing the ravines near the head of the Porcupine, Jack and I pressed our search. At one point Jack said casually, "What about this place, Doug?" But I was too intent on my 'topo' map to show proper interest. Still, we needed to be thorough, so we examined the spot more closely. Yes, it could be...but no, this or that feature didn't look quite right. So it went for the better part of an hour.

FROM THE COSMOPOLITAN, VOL. 4, #3, NOV. 1887, P. 231



A poignant reminder of buffalo steak and conversation shared.

Just when we were ready to begin searching elsewhere, fate gave the key a turn and unlocked the mystery for us. As we moved a hundred paces west for a slightly different vantage, the camp revealed itself just as Hornaday described, in all its detail. Even the crystal pool of water, now a stock pond, was in its proper place.

We cheered each other, then toasted the discovery with gestures toward the encircling bluff. Then we strode back into time, walking directly into the "Cook's Delight," Hornaday's kitchen dug-out. There, one flat stone from the old fireplace protruded from the ground—a poignant reminder of buffalo steak and conversation shared on the spot in those long-ago days of adventure.

But the true reward of our discovery came that evening of November 17, as we camped the night in the lee of the old oasis. It was 103 years to the day since Hornaday and his fellow hunters shared a campfire at the same spot.

MAY THE MEMORY LIVE ON

Next morning, Jack and I were treated to a chill golden sunrise that lit the view southeast toward Smithsonian Butte. We surveyed the area near and far, savoring the moment of triumph. In late morning we departed, leaving the old encampment undisturbed.

In the months since the discovery of the Porcupine camp, the Montana Historical Society has become interested in the site. Representa-

tives from their State Historic Preservation Office have compiled site data and recently nominated the Big Porcupine for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Hornaday, no doubt, would approve of the interest in his former campsite. In writing the memoir of the Smithsonian Institution Buffalo Outfit for *The Cosmopolitan* in 1887, he interjected: "May its memory live forever!"

Douglas Coffman first encountered bison as a young boy in his home state of Indiana. He lived in Montana for 10 years during the 1970s and '80s, teaching anthropology and environmental education. Since 1986 he has lived in Eugene, Oregon, where he works as a free-lance writer. Coffman's interest in the future of Montana's wild bison has recently gained attention in a new *Time* magazine series, "Hugh Sidey's America," Sept. 24, 1990.

To understand the modern sleuths' puzzlement, compare the photo on page 69 to engraving above—the engraving shows the camp for which our author searched. The photo on page 69 shows another camp entirely, with many of the same geographical features, such as the perpendicular bluffs, smooth ground extending from the tent, etc., that Hornaday wrote of in his diary.