

Lin Enger

{IN HIS WORDS}

In 1883 my great-grandfather, a Norwegian immigrant, arrived in Dakota Territory to homestead 160 acres of rolling prairie. A year later, according to family legend, the last wild buffalo east of the James River wandered onto the newly broken soil of his farm. He shot the animal behind his sod barn as it drank from the stock tank. Or so the story goes. Like nearly all of our family legends, this one has to be taken on faith (my ancestors were not given to writing things down), but as a boy I was more than willing to do so, and ever since, I have been fascinated by the American bison, which at one time roamed through most of the North American continent, sixty million strong. As I grew older, my romantic attachment to the buffalo—that ragged behemoth of the plains—grew more complicated, especially as I learned how its demise was connected to the destruction of the Indian tribes that wandered those lands and, consequently, to my own family’s American beginnings.

One story in particular took hold of me.

In 1886, it came to the attention of William Temple Hornaday, curator of the National Museum in Washington, D.C.—now called the Smithsonian Institution—that in his natural history collection he had no specimens of the American bison that were not rotting or flea-ridden. He knew that the bison, having been decimated by commercial hunters, was well on its way to extinction but decided to organize an expedition west to kill as many of the animals as he could find in order to stuff them and preserve their memory for posterity. The irony of this task wasn’t lost on Hornaday: “Under different circumstances,” he wrote, “nothing could have induced me to engage in such a mean, cruel, and utterly heartless enterprise.” And in fact he would be instrumental during the next years in persuading Congress to protect the bison. But that fall he led the hunt himself, trekking into eastern Montana—into the high country between the Missouri and Yellowstone

Rivers—and managing to bring back to Washington, D.C., enough bones and hides to create the bison panorama that would stand on display until 1957. (The large bull that he shot himself would come to serve as the model used by the United States Mint for the buffalo nickel, first issued in 1913.)

I came across an account of the Hornaday hunt some fifteen or twenty years ago and knew immediately I would write about it. As a novelist, though, I'm interested less in exploring events themselves than in using them for my own purposes, and for a long time I didn't know what that purpose would be. Hornaday himself was a fascinating, paradoxical figure—a forward-thinking conservationist who was strangely unmoved by the atrocities committed against Native Americans in the name of progress. He understood what the bison meant to the plains tribes, which depended on the wandering herds for their sustenance, but his concern for the vanishing animal did not extend to a vanishing people. And yet I found myself unable to gain a foothold in his story until another, unrelated notion came to my rescue. For some time I had been thinking of writing a novel about a boy who sets off in search of his missing father. I had only that bare scenario—no setting, no characters, nothing else at all—but one day, out of the blue, it struck me that I could use this basic plotline to explore the ideas that Hornaday and his expedition represented to me.

Which is how I came to invent a family whose husband and father, for unknown reasons, disappears from their western Minnesota home one summer day in 1886. The novel begins right there, in the midst of the domestic strife following the disappearance of war-veteran Ulysses Pope. In time and place, at least, the story I've written—in which Hornaday plays a role, though not a central one—is set not far away from my own family's story. The Cheyenne, the Crow, the Lakota, the Blackfeet, all of the plains tribes, have been decimated and scattered, rounded up and forced onto reservation lands that are all but hunted out, nearly useless to them. The land is newly divided by iron rail lines, the prairie dotted with sod huts, and it is into this country that a man goes off alone, in pursuit of a need he can barely admit even to himself. Before long his sons and his wife set out on journeys of their own, determined to find him but afraid of what they might learn if and when they do.

In fact *The High Divide* is full of journeys. Through the young state of Minnesota and across territorial Dakota and Montana. Along and across

rivers—the Red, the Missouri, the Tongue, and the Yellowstone. Journeys by train and by oxcart. And old, remembered journeys into Indian Territory. For me it's been a journey, too, one I could not have predicted, beginning with early family legends and moving through a country and an era I have always loved toward moments in our history that never should have happened.