AN ECHO FROM THE PAST

BISON

Hunting the bison today is but a shadow of what once was – but in his presence you still hear the thundering hooves!

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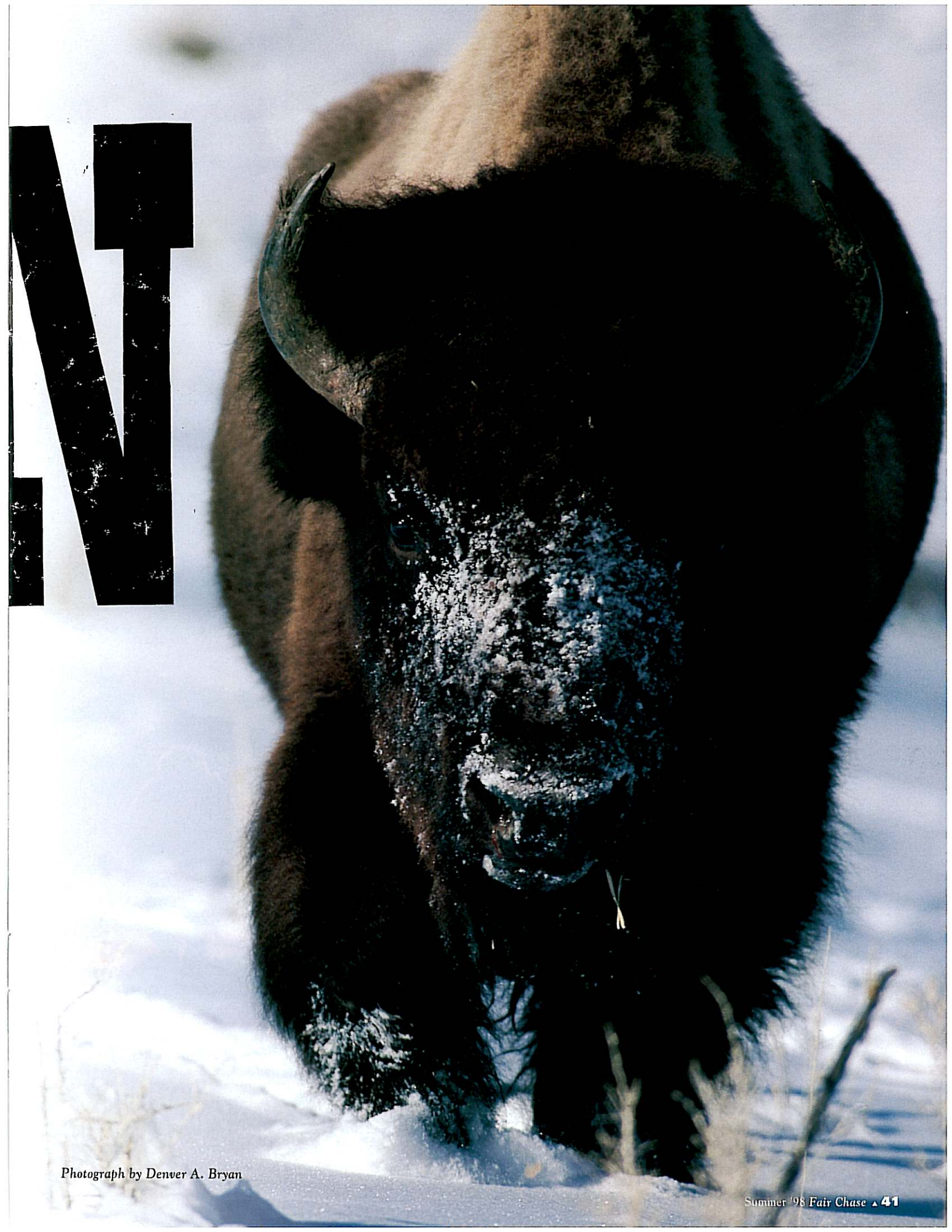
The American bison is an awesome animal. A big bull stands nearly as tall as a horse, and weighs well over a ton. Heavy through the shoulders and distinctively hump-backed, he is one of the largest of the world's wild bovines, fully a quarter larger than Africa's famed Cape buffalo, larger than the Asian water buffalo. Only the legendary gaur, the Asian bison, is distinctly larger. With his woolly coat he is able to withstand the most brutal Great Plains winters. A herd animal, he uses his numbers to paw through the deepest snows to find grazing. Wolves will follow the herds and pick off the young, but the mature bison has no natural enemies, and he remains unchanged since long before man the hunter came onto the world's stage.



Photograph by Denver A. Bryan

This, perhaps, is the bison's undoing. He is a creature of the wide open plains, and he never learned fear. His enemies were drought and desert, and his friends were grass and water over the horizon. He has close relatives, too; the European bison or wisent is virtually indistinguishable from the American breed. By the early years of this century the last major population of European bison had retreated into Poland's forests, and was nearly destroyed during World War II. Today the European bison exists in small private herds and preserves scattered across western Russia and eastern Europe—not unlike his American cousin. It is not known whether the European bison ever approached the numbers of his New World cousin. Perhaps, but not within the time of mankind. Within known history his numbers have been small. As we know, this was not the case with the American bison.

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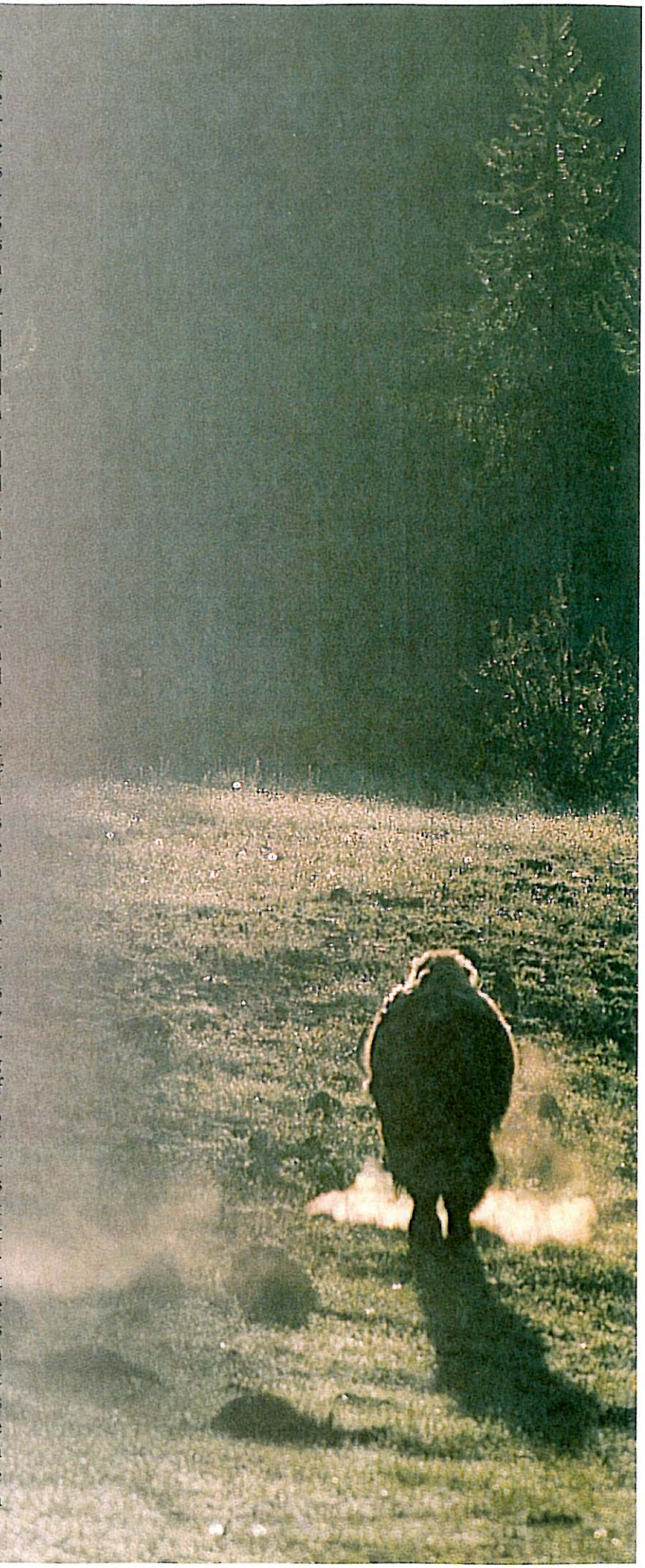
Just 140 years ago as many as 60 million bison roamed the Great Plains. He was the most numerous large mammal the world has ever seen, second in numbers only to man himself. Although our *Records of North American Big Game* now has its own history of some three-quarters of a century, and listed therein are many spectacular bison, we simply do not know how big the horns of this animal might be. Our records list only a smattering of heads that have survived from the 19th Century, and these few are from that century's last decade, long after the time of the bison was past. This does not denigrate the great bison listed in our book, but think of it like this: The few bison records that exist from the 1890's were taken from a remnant population of a few hundred animals. Those that are hunted today are taken



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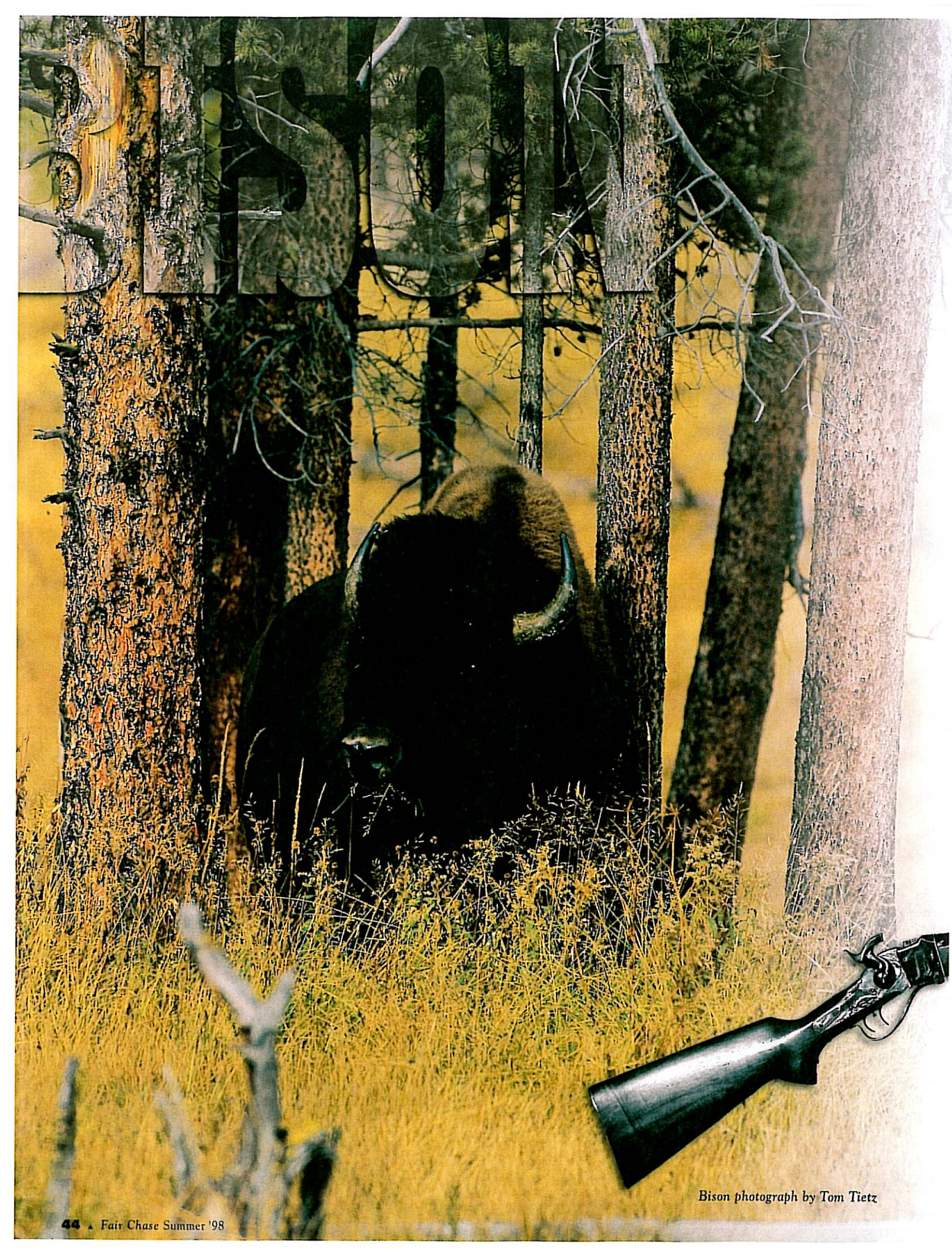
The bison is a huge beast, and although hunting him is rarely difficult today, he is a most impressive trophy. This South Dakota bison was taken by the author in mid-winter, when the hair is wonderfully thick.

Photograph by Tom Tietz



Bison photograph by Tom Tietz

from a still-remnant population of a few tens of thousands. What might the best bison horns have looked like when there were 60 million to choose among?

I suppose it doesn't matter, since we cannot turn back the clock—but wouldn't you like to see those mighty herds of bison stretching to the horizon? I'm a native Kansan, and I've never driven or bird-hunted through the Flint Hills or the endless plains to the west without imagining the time of the buffalo.

In paleologic time they were there for a very long time, and even in time as measured by man it seemed they would be there forever. But by both measurements they were gone in the wink an eye. Lewis and Clark first made the East aware of the great herds of bison, although their extent remained long unknown and little believed. By the 1850's the existence of vast numbers of bison was both known and believed . . . but man's impact on the great herds was still small.

With the end of the Civil War and the coming of the railroad, the buffalo was doomed. Now there was unheralded westward expansion, accelerated by rail access. Those same rails could transport hides and meat and buffalo tongues back to a hungry East. There were fortunes to be made in buffalo, and all too many headed West to cash in. An incredibly short 20 years after the Civil War, and the buffalo were finished.

The great Kansas herds, the most accessible due to the railroad, went first. By the early 1870's they were gone. Then the "buffalo hunters"—quotes around both words, because bison are not buffalo and those who slaughtered them were not hunters as we know the term—turned south, eradicating the southern herds in Oklahoma and northern Texas in a few seasons. Then they turned to the northern bison, the last great herds. By the winter of 1884 it was over. A few survivors hung on here and there—along the Canadian border, in what became Yellowstone, and in the depths of the Black Hills. Theodore Roosevelt himself took one of the last South Dakota bison; you can read about it in his ***Hunting Tales of a Ranchman*** (1885).

By then the Great Plains were "pacified." Even if there were buffalo to return, there was no longer room for them. The last survivors in the breaks and badlands continued to be hunted for food, until finally protection came and our bison could begin the long road back from the brink of oblivion. The problem is that, unlike our whitetail, elk, wild turkeys, pronghorn, and so many other species that—with our help—have made a dramatic comeback, there is little room for the bison. He needs a lot of grass and space, and he's hard to fence in. Although there are many bison today, they are scattered in small private and public herds throughout their former range. And elsewhere.

There are bison farther east, west, north, and south than they ever occurred naturally—as far north as Alaska, as far south as central Mexico, and in the East as well. This is good, for it means there are bison somewhere close enough for most Americans to see, and we should all see this relic from a bygone era and remember how we destroyed him. It also means that there is more than adequate hunting opportunity, for virtually all of these small herds produce a surplus that must be harvested—and most hunters, just like me, have a desire to relive the days of the buffalo, if only for a few moments.

The problem is that, again, the clock cannot be turned back. There is no bison hunting like what was seen in 1870, and there never will be again. Starting in 1977, the Boone and Crockett Records Committee accepts bison from the lower 48 states only for records, not for awards, and only from states that recognize the bison as wild and free-ranging, and for which a hunting license or big-game tag is required. This eliminates from the records a tremendous amount of bison hunting on private lands and Indian Reservations. In many cases this is good; some of the private-land "hunts" are little more than an execution. In fact, in all cases this is a good rule, for the B&C record book is based on generations of high standards, and they must not be relaxed for just one species. But sometimes this is unfortunate, for there are some very large private herds that, perhaps, offer some of the closest approximation to what might have been.

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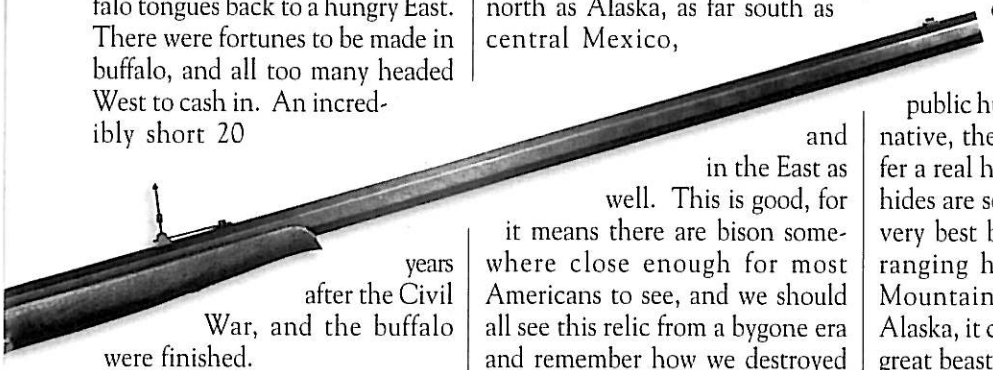
Regrettably, there are public hunts, too, that are little more than executions, with wardens or rangers pointing out the chosen animal. But there are very good public hunts, too. Although not native, the Alaskan bison can offer a real hunt—and of course the hides are second to none. One of very best bison hunts is the free-ranging herd in Utah's Henry Mountains. As is the case in Alaska, it can take days to find the great beasts . . . and the shot must be taken in a spot where the butchering and recovery is possible. These, and others, are good hunts, not unlike the hunt Theodore Roosevelt enjoyed when he tracked a grand old bull in the Black Hills. But that's not what bison hunting was really like.

In fact, in those very few post-Civil War years, bison hunting wasn't hunting at all. The buffalo of Alaska's Farewell and



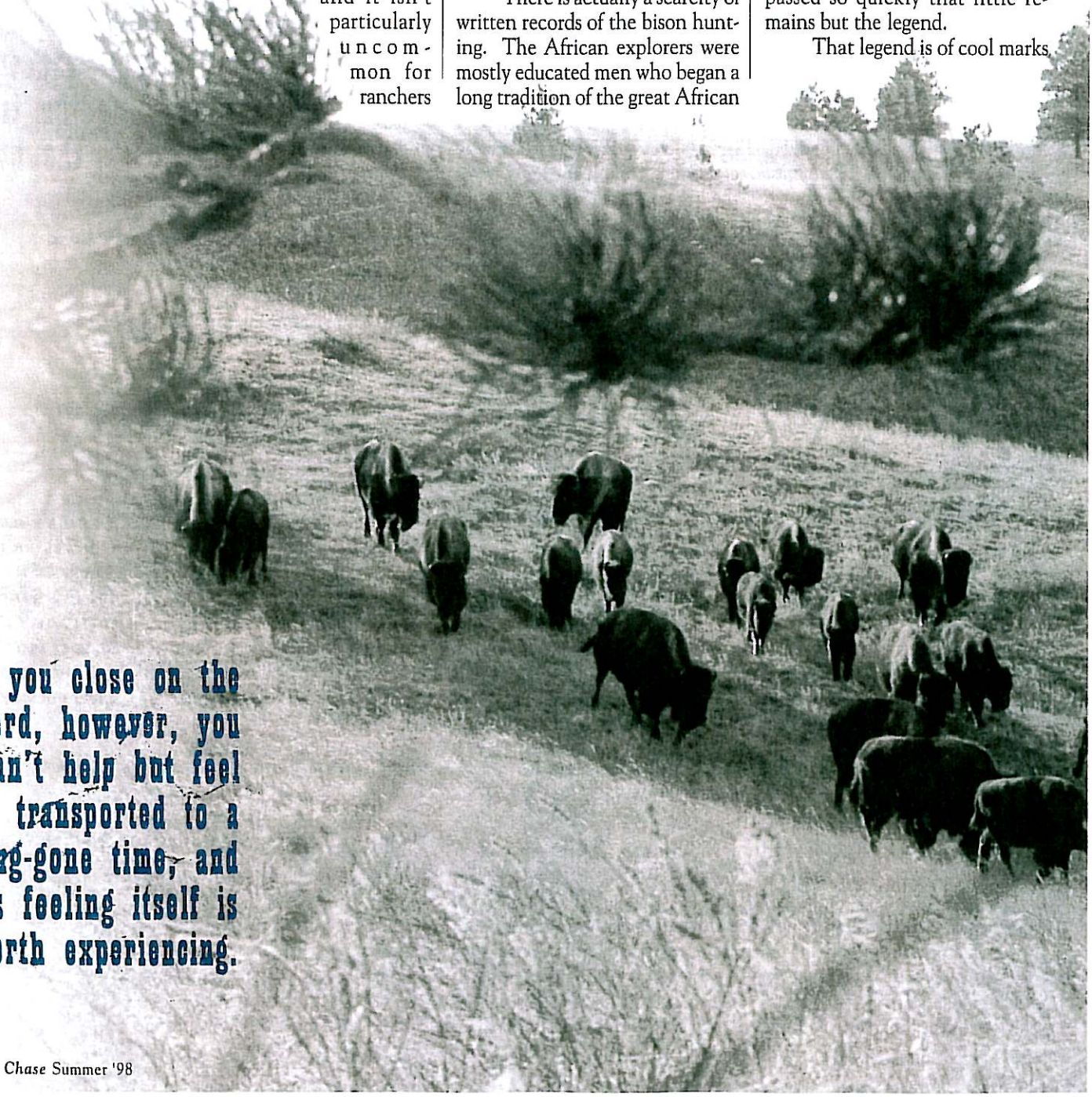
I USED AN OLD WINCHESTER LEVER ACTION ON MY BISON, BUT IF I WERE TO HUNT THEM AGAIN I'D USE A MORE CLASSIC BUFFALO GUN LIKE THIS REPRODUCTION SHARPS.

Delta Junction herds, of Utah's Henry Mountains, and even the Black Hills survivors that Roosevelt hunted are anomalies, creatures that by luck or circumstances or sheer will learned to live in wooded, broken ground. The bison is a plains animal, and the plains wrote his glory and his doom. Except for a very few, the bison never learned to retreat into the mountains or trees. Except for a few, they never even learned to fight.

The bison is not a docile beast. Buffalo ranchers today have a terrible time keeping them within fences, and it isn't particularly uncommon for ranchers to get seriously hurt—occasionally killed—while working with the great, shaggy beasts. And yet there are very few accounts of bison charges from the old days, despite the fact that much of the shooting was done with inadequate blackpowder arms. This is in stark contrast to the vintage writing about hunting African buffalo, which was spiced with hair-raising escapades from the very beginning. Part of this, I think, stems from the fact that most bison hunting was done in very open country, where the game was always clearly visible and there were no surprises.

There is actually a scarcity of written records of the bison hunting. The African explorers were mostly educated men who began a long tradition of the great African hunting literature. This is largely lacking from our era of exploration. A few, like Alfred Mayer and Colonel Richard Dodge left accounts. Some, like Wild Bill Hickok and Buffalo Bill Cody, were popularized by the dime novels of the day . . . but you need more than a few grains of salt to swallow that genre! Mostly, I fear, our buffalo hunters were uneducated and often unsavory characters who made a living in a hard, dirty, bloody, and unsavory business. Chances are that many who could write saw nothing romantic enough to record in what they were doing . . . and their time passed so quickly that little remains but the legend.

That legend is of cool marks.



When you close on the herd, however, you can't help but feel transported to a long-gone time, and this feeling itself is worth experiencing.

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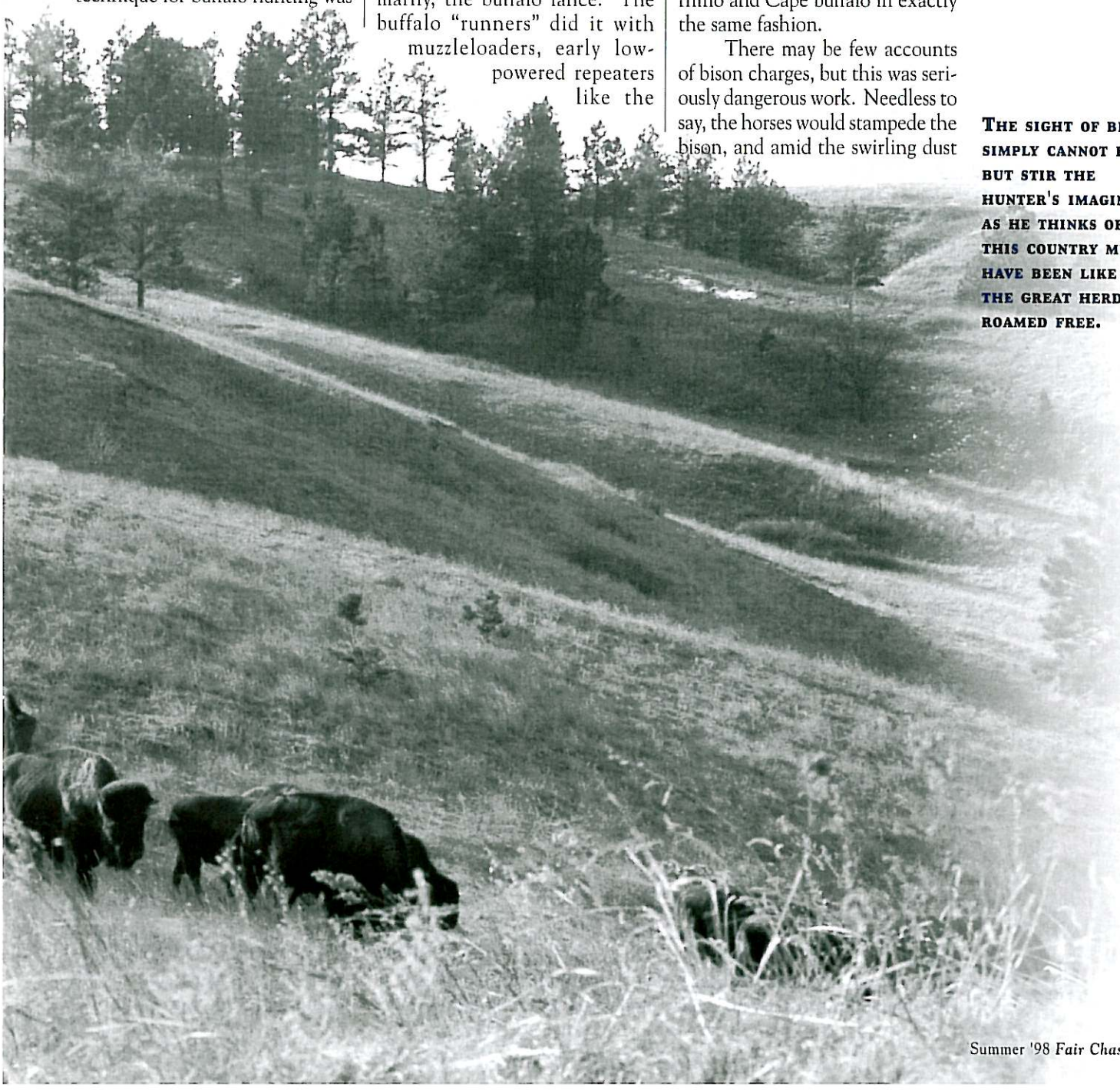
men standing off from the herd with big Sharps rifles and dropping beast after beast with well-placed shots. Indeed that took place—but this was in the latter years of the buffalo hunting. In fact, the great Kansas herds were nearly eradicated before self-contained cartridges came into common use. Much of the buffalo hunting was done by a far different technique.

You will note that much of what vintage literature there is refers to the buffalo men not as "hunters" but as "runners." Until the availability of powerful rifles firing self-contained cartridges—in the early 1870's—the standard technique for buffalo hunting was to gallop a horse alongside and shoot at very close range. The Plains Indians were masters at this, and did it with both bow and, primarily, the buffalo lance. The buffalo "runners" did it with muzzleloaders, early low-powered repeaters like the Spencer, Henry, and "Yellowboy" 1866 Winchester, and with revolvers. The early African hunters, by the way, hunted elephant and rhino and Cape buffalo in exactly the same fashion.

There may be few accounts of bison charges, but this was seriously dangerous work. Needless to say, the horses would stampede the bison, and amid the swirling dust



THE SIGHT OF BISON SIMPLY CANNOT HELP BUT STIR THE HUNTER'S IMAGINATION AS HE THINKS OF WHAT THIS COUNTRY MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE WHEN THE GREAT HERDS ROAMED FREE.

and shifting bodies the buffalo runners would draw alongside to take their shots. There was danger from the chosen bison, for one-shot kills were rare. There was danger from the other bison. And perhaps the greatest danger was from the horse stumbling in a prairie dog hole. George Custer himself accidentally shot and killed his wife's favorite horse when the steed stumbled and shifted his aim, and of course he was nearly killed by the fall.

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Buffalo running was the favored technique until about 1875, when powerful breechloaders like the '74 Sharps began making their way onto the plains. By now buffalo hunting was a narrow profit-and-loss venture, with cartridges counted carefully. Buffalo running was not only dangerous, but it spread the carcasses for miles and made the skinning time-consuming. With better rifles, the hunters found they could stand off from the herd—not 500 or 600 yards, but a couple hundred—and take several animals from a "stand" before the herd finally stampeded.

Without question these men were great marksmen. At the Battle of Adobe Walls Billy Dixon is credited with knocking a Cheyenne off his horse at a half-mile. Their technique, however, was not exactly what you might think. We have a mental picture of the buffalo hunter—probably looking much like Tom Selleck in his "Quigley" attire—resting over his crossed sticks and making brain shot after brain shot. They probably didn't look—and certainly didn't smell—much like Tom Selleck. And the smart ones didn't even try brain shots.

The bison is a fairly placid, phlegmatic beast. He stampedes, and he charges, but he prefers to graze along at a leisurely pace. The buffalo hunters learned that they could place one of those big lead conical bullets through the lungs from a safe and comfortable distance, and the bison would continue to graze along until it fell over or lay down peacefully. They would often shoot several before the first one went down, and if the stand worked well the skinners could bring up the wagon and stay busy for hours in one place. It was not a pretty business, and it had no relationship to our modern sport hunting. It was borne out of a different era, a time of Manifest Destiny, shortsightedness, and political expediency. It is not a liberal myth that the demise of the bison was thought essential to conquer the Plains tribes; the Army, the railroad, the politicians, and the settlers were united in wishing to rid the plains of the bison and the Indians who lived on them. It's a wonder we didn't lose them altogether.

But we didn't. There will never again be 60 million bison, nor even one million, but there are many today. Enough that a bison hunt is easily arranged. Unless you are fortunate to draw a state tag, it is rarely inexpensive—but the cost is mitigated nicely by several hundred pounds of very fine meat! Even under the best circumstances a bison hunt is not a great hunt like most other North American hunts. Even where you must search for them bison aren't particularly hard to spot. Once spotted, they also aren't particularly hard to stalk. No, you can't walk up to a hunted bison herd, but you can usually get within rifle range without great difficulty. It is not like a stalk on a great ram or a fine buck or bull elk.

When you close on the herd, however, you can't help but feel transported to a long-gone time, and this feeling itself is worth experiencing. A mature bison bull, too, is a most awesome and impressive animal. You want to hunt him in winter, when his coat is at its fullest. Up close you'll be amazed at how thick and luxurious it is, and you'll understand why Americans of the horse-and-buggy era craved buffalo robes. The horns are not particularly large for so huge a beast . . . and you'll find that they are very difficult to judge.

A very big bison bull will have horns from about 16 to 18 inches in length, around the curve. Unlike most North American big-game animals, the final score doesn't reside so much in the length, but in the mass and how well it is carried through the horns. A really big bison may or may not have longer horns, but the basal circumference will be about the same as the length, and of course the thickness will hold up well through the length of the horn. That's all very well and good, except that this is the very devil to see on a bison. In this regard it's a lot like judging a muskox, an animal that I have more experience with than bison. On a muskox, the hair will almost always cover up the edges of the boss, so you have to take that on faith . . . and luck. On bison, even if you're unusually adept at judging circumference, you probably can't see the base of the horns in the thick hair.

In fact, with the prime winter coat that you really want to take a bison in, you often can't see much of the horns at all! What you can see is the general shape. You want horns that curve; straight horns may appear long, but you gain quite a bit of length along the curve. Most bison have a thick topknot of woolly hair on top of the skull, between the horns. If the horns have a nice curve and extend above that topknot, you're looking at good length. Then you have to see if the all-important circumference carries well through the horn.

The best thing is to try to look at a number of bison before you make a decision—preferably within a herd. This is not always possible with small, scattered herds. Sometimes the only option is to go on first impression, but with bison it's wise to compare as many animals as possible. With all animals there is a visual rela-

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tionship between body size and horn size. For instance, the antlers of a 160-point whitetail look a lot different on a 140-pound Texas whitetail than they do on a 350-pound Canadian whitetail. You need to have some idea of the deer's body size in order to properly judge antlers. Bison are much the same, except it's even more difficult. The horns of a young, small-bodied bull will have about the same relationship to the head as the horns of big, old bull . . . so look for body size first, and then start looking at horns. Bison with horns that come out from the skull and seem to turn upward with long, sharp tips are usually younger animals, while the older and bigger bulls seem to have more mass and curve than length. Like mountain goats, they are among our more difficult animals to judge—and very few of us will ever measure enough of them to become adept at it.

Shooting a bison is also not as simple as it sounds. They are huge and powerful animals; a body shot requires a big rifle and good bullet, but has the advantage of offering a huge vital zone. Because of the value of the meat, most guides will urge their hunters to take brain or neck shots. This is for two reasons. The obvious is that a head or neck shot ruins little meat, but equally important is that bison recovery is a big job, and it isn't simplified if the animal expires in the bottom of a gully or in thick timber! It sounds easy, but is actually extremely difficult . . . especially since, again, this isn't 1870 and few of us will ever shoot enough bison to get it right.

The neck shot is difficult because of the wild hair, and also because the spine drops low through the neck and then curves back up to join at the shoulders. It's easy to miss. The brain shot is tricky because all that thick hair obscures aiming points. Sometimes you can't even see the ears! The brain actually rests very high in the skull, and it's easy to miss, too. Which is exactly what I did when I shot my bison.

I was on the Pine Ridge Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, and game manager Richard Sherman talked me through it. It was really a very nice hunt; we looked at quite a few bison from a distance, and when we made our choice we crawled in fairly close. I was very steady, the presentation was good, and I had time to think the shot through and make sure I was holding on the right spot. None of this mattered; I still shot too low, and the bull gave little notice whatsoever. Well, that's not true. He merely shook his head, then launched into high gear. I was shooting a Winchester Model '71 in .348 Winchester, and I had expected it to be plenty of gun. Had I shot where I was supposed to it probably would have been. As it was, I put three more 250-grain Barnes bullets into the lungs as the bull ran . . . all with no apparent effect. He was with a little herd, and they ran up over a low hill and vanished. The rest kept going; my bull was in a grassy bowl on the far side, already going down when I got to the top.

When I walked up to him I was astounded at his size, and I recognized that I'd underestimated not only the size, but also the strength of this great animal. It was altogether my fault that I missed the brain shot, but, having done so, I didn't have nearly enough gun to properly finish the job! There are two approaches, and either is perfectly appropriate. You could use a scope-sighted "conventional" hunting rifle, relying on the scope to make absolutely certain of a first-round brain shot. Or you could use a large rifle with a big, heavy bullet. If I hunt bison again—and I probably will someday—I'd probably do it in a more traditional manner. No, you won't catch me riding alongside one with a cap-and-ball revolver! But I'd use a big single shot Sharps or Remington, and I'd feel the years fall away while I crawled up on those wonderful creatures, living relics from a bygone era. ▲▲▲

I MISSED THE BRAIN SHOT ON MY BISON AND USED THE LUNG SHOT FOR BACKUP. BY THE TIME I RAN OVER THE HILL THE HERD WAS GONE, AND MY BULL WAS GOING DOWN.