

Letter From Montana

Dusty plains blanket this lonesome stretch of Montana, joined by a tarred seam and stitched with towns like Sweetgrass and Sunburst. Distant mountains and buttes nuzzle the soft clouds of an endless sky.

"Big Sky Country" each license plate declares. And with less than a million people scattered across the nation's fourth largest state, there's plenty of sky to go around.

They call this patch of land Charlie Russell country, after the acclaimed cowboy artist who captured its spirit on canvas. Bullets fly, bodies slump and horses bolt in *Smoke of a .45*. Arms aloft, a native Indian seeks spiritual guidance in an Invocation to the Sun. Charlie met his Maker back in 1926, but his log cabin studio still stands in the paved heart of Great Falls.

Great Falls, where locals breed beefy pickups and cruise along 10th ave SW, a neon strip of casinos and car dealers, motels and taco stands. First National Pawn promises instant cash for your stash. Montana Gun Works is a shrine to America's double-barreled love affair. Wooden chairs nestled by a wood-burning stove add a homey touch. Next to cards for a battered women's shelter are application forms for the National Rifle Association ("It's not what you get, it's what you keep.")

There's no charge at the Montana Cowboys Association Museum, conveniently wedged into one end of a roadside bar. Preserved behind glass are spurs and shot flasks, old timers' canes, a Pony Express mailbag, the skull of James Wilber, "Murderer", and the noose that hung Phillip Coleman, Jr. at Missoula.

Different history clings to the cliffs of Ulm Pishkun, just south of Great Falls. Herds of buffalo once thundered along these plains, forced down a drive path and over the cliffs by native Indians. The injured animals were then slaughtered, the meat cured to last throughout the winter.

That was long before the Lewis and Clark expedition pried open the American West, long before Indians traded a years' worth of furs for a few cents and watered-down whiskey at the American Fur Company's trading post.

Remnants of the trading post remain. A historical marker on Fort Benton's Front Street boasts that it was the "bloodiest block in the west," lined with saloons, cathouses and gambling dens. The town that hugs the Missouri River is quiet these days. Past dreams of becoming the Chicago of the plains died beneath a grid of railway tracks.

Paved roads and horseless carriages claimed the lives of other towns in Charlie Russell country. On a homemade painting by the side of route 87 a train puffs into a town humming with life. A plaque below commemorates a town and a time that is no more.

"This was the site of Verona, a small town of bustling activity during homestead days. The town consisted of a store and post office, two grain elevators, a livery stable, lumber company, repair shop, depot, restaurant, school and a number of residences.

"The advent of the auto and the paving of the road in 1934 spelled the demise of Verona, as well as other trading centers. In 1935 the post office closed and Verona died."

Virgelle still lives. One of Verona's neighbours, the town was once ruled by Virgil Blankenbaker, who named Virgelle after himself and his wife Ella. When you own the town's bank, general store, lumberyard and icehouse you get certain perks. After years of disuse the general store was converted into an antique store. The shopkeeper also outfits canoe trips down the Missouri. Guests sleep in upstairs rooms furnished with period furniture, or in one of three restored homesteaders' cabins.

Nothing has been preserved at the battlefield by the Bear's Paw Mountains. Watchful eyes burn in Charlie Russell's portrait of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce. His Indian name meant Thunder Traveling to Loftier Mountain Heights. After whites had claimed their Idaho land, Joseph and six other chieftains led their people on a 2000 mile trek. Months later they had reached the Bear's Paw Mountains in Montana. Hunted and hounded by the U.S. Army, they stopped to rest, just forty miles short of sanctuary beyond the Canadian border.

Cold and exhausted, the Nez Perce surrendered after five days of fighting in what was to be one of the last wars of the American West. Metal stakes, some braided with plastic flowers, mark the battle scene. Here was a rifle pit, there was where Looking Glass died.

The battlefield lies south of Chinook, a town named after the warm wind, an Indian phrase for "snow eater". Winds that eat snow also swallow sounds, sounds forever lost in the big sky: the fatal thunder of a buffalo herd stampeding towards a cliff; the last steps of a child in frozen moccasins; the desperate scratch of a homesteader's hoe.

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