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# FIELD NOTES FROM THE EDITOR



by Mark A. Gonzalez

## In the Aerie of the Golden Eagle



It was already well past five o'clock on a late fall afternoon. A cool shadow was starting to spread across the eastern flank of Bullion Butte, stretching toward the Little Missouri River. The day, the entire week, had been marvelous for fieldwork. With the last few scribbles of notes, I would conclude my week's work, pack up, and begin my trek home for Bismarck. Before climbing into the truck, I wanted to drink in all the sensations of this place from withered seed heads to the golden ash draws to the sandstone cliffs of Bullion Butte and into the crisp, blue sky. And in that cloudless sky, a Golden Eagle circled lazily on the updrafts coming off Bullion Butte. No doubt, it was scanning the nearby prairie-dog town with voracious intent. The sight of that majestic bird took me back to my first trip to Bullion Butte....

It was 3:15 on another Friday afternoon, long, long ago. If it had been an ordinary Friday, I would have been watching the clock, waiting impatiently for the school bell to ring at 3:30, when my classmates and I would burst through the door and onto a sun-drenched playground outside Roosevelt Elementary School. But this was an extraordinary Friday, the one before the Memorial Day weekend and the last day of the school year. My dad, Dr. G, and his best friend, Dr. J, had taken their four oldest boys, then aged 5 through 8, out of school a couple hours early. We were bouncing along in Dr. J's 1966 Suburban, appropriately dubbed the "Prairie Rambler." We were following a rutted two-track jeep trail deep in the heart of the Little Missouri Badlands. Bunch grasses—blue grama, green needlegrass, little bluestem—tickled the undercarriage of the Suburban. Crushed sagebrush lent its aroma to the springtime air. Vesper Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, and Lark Buntings skittishly darted from the wheel tracks. Birds of prey soared overhead. When we crossed woody draws, the ebullient calls of Spotted Towhees (Rufous-sided Towhees back then), Lazuli Buntings, and Field Sparrows burst forth from the shrubbery. Spring rains had filled wheel-track depressions with water, and we giddily splashed through each mud hole, sure that the next would swallow us up like African quicksand in a Tarzan movie. A mud hole and the fertile imagination of an eight-year old made for high adventure.

Dr. J and my dad were sitting in front, us boys were sprawled over sleeping bags in the back cargo compartment. The car windows were rolled down, and a fine mist of dust continuously wafted in and settled on occupants and cargo. The cargo shifted continuously like popping popcorn as we bounced, jolted, crept, and crawled across the badlands. On we inched in our modern-day Conestoga toward the east flank of Bullion Butte. We were in no particular hurry, as the process of getting there was half the fun.

When we arrived at a point where the gentle slope of the pediment meets the steep flanks of Bullion Butte, Dr. J parked, and we clambered out. The dads set up camp, while us boys discharged enough energy to power a Saturn V rocket engine. We ate beans and fire-roasted hotdogs, the sort of stuff that dads can cook when pressed into duty. Long shadows grew from the base of Bullion Butte and crept ever farther across the stream-chiseled landscape. The setting sun cast shadows and spells on the landscape. We built up the fire and settled down to listen to my dad's recitation of some cowboy poetry and Robert Service poems—the Cremation of Sam McGee was our campfire favorite. Bats came out of their daytime dormitory and fed on the moths and bugs attracted to our campfire. Nighthawks foraged overhead, emitting booms with their wings as they pulled up from steep dives. The nighttime sky shimmered with countless jewels of twinkling light. The day's excitement made sleep difficult, but gradually we drifted off while a chorus of coyote yelps and howls broke the silence of the clay hills.

Sunrise came far too soon for us boys. Dr. J was first up, he always was and still is whenever we go camping. He was singing something horribly—a really painful but effective form of reveille. Flapjacks, bacon, fried eggs, and beans brought order and contentment to the morning. At last, we laced up boots and began our ascent of Bullion Butte.

Dr. J started in front but soon lagged behind. He couldn't help but stoop to admire every prairie bloom that he encountered—penstemons, evening-primroses, vetches, wild prairie roses, and other late spring flowers. True love of prairie is an acquired taste; Dr. J had acquired the taste long ago. Dr. G dawdled too, as he captured people, vistas, flowers, and geologic oddities on film. Our hike soon brought us to the top of Bullion Butte. We gazed at the badlands sprawled hundreds of feet below. The wind stirred clothes, hair, and some primeval niche within our souls. Collectively, we shared a simple feeling—it sure feels good to be alive!

We crossed the east plateau and approached the inner

gorge of the horseshoe-shaped butte. When we were only a few strides from the rim of the inner gorge, we were startled by a great swoosh and a high screech, then immediately saw a Golden Eagle, roused from its tranquil perch below the rim of the butte. It soared a quarter mile across the gorge and settled on the sandstone cliff on the west end of the butte, from where it watched us. Dr. J, an ornithologist, recognized the bird's behavior and immediately deduced that there had to be an eagle's nest below the rim. We got down on hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the butte. Sticking our heads over the sandstone edge, we gazed in wonder at an enormous raft of tangled sticks not more than 20 feet below us. Perched in this raft were three down-covered eaglets surrounding the eviscerated remains of a rabbit. It wasn't a reaction a boy would admit to readily, but my eyes welled with tears while watching these helpless eaglets—mere days, and maybe only hours, old—cry out for the care and protection of their parent.

We reluctantly cut our observation short to allow parent and eaglets to reunite. We circumnavigated the horseshoe rim of Bullion Butte. About half-way across, we intersected a game trail that led off the rim over a landslide and into the heart of the inner gorge. Intrepidly we followed the game trail to explore this marvelous echo chamber within Bullion Butte. We should not have been so intrepid, for no sooner had we started through the maze of sandstone slump blocks than we encountered a den of newly awakened rattlesnakes, shaking off the deep somnolence of a long, winter hibernation. With adrenaline-charged leaps, we scampered past this danger and continued on with our hike.

That adventure on Bullion Butte left an indelible memory on my young and impressionable mind. I have relived the chorus of coyotes, the company of campfire bats, the recitations of favorite poems, the spell of lingering Dakota sunsets, the euphonious and ebullient songs of prairie birds, the kaleidoscope of blooms in the sea of prairie grass, though I have never since seen such helpless eaglets or an active eagle's nest from so close. Not surprisingly, this and other outdoor adventures sowed the seeds that would lead to a career as a field geologist. How could I ever think of life within a sterile operating room or a cherry-paneled law office, when there could be bunch grass carpeting my office with wind and sky for walls and ceiling? Ultimately, the memories of this and other Dakota adventures beckoned me to return to the land I shall love forever. Whenever I am within eyesight of Bullion Butte, I think fondly of Dr. J, his boys—my childhood pals, my dad, and my brother...

I was reluctant to climb into the truck and begin the drive to Bismarck. I watched the Golden Eagle soar until my neck tired of gazing upward. Quite possibly, this bird was a descendant of one of those helpless, down-covered eaglets that I had seen more than 30 years ago. I'm sure it was pulled inexorably to the isolated cliffs of Bullion Butte, just as I've been pulled back to my sparsely populated home state. Could there be a better place for a Golden Eagle? Could there be a better place for a kid? And what grown man doesn't have a little kid left inside himself?