

Rock of Ages



For hundreds of years, the ancient sandstone pillars at Medicine Rocks State Park have conjured feelings of inspiration, awe, and spiritual wonder

By Brett French



It's a place where "the spirits stayed and the medicine men prayed," this site of unusual formations of sandstone jutting 50 feet above the surrounding sage- and pine-sparkled prairie.

It's a place where visitors can imagine other-worldly voices in the sound of wind sighing through pine boughs and floating among cathedral-like rocks. In an increasingly noisy and jarring world of car alarms, diesel engines, and blaring TVs, Medicine Rocks State Park in eastern Montana's Carter County still speaks in the hushed tones of ancient times.

Millions of years ago, a gentle freshwater river flowed through this country, cutting a path from today's Miles City southeast into an estuary of a prehistoric sea near what is now Camp Crook, in northwestern South Dakota. The river may have looked much like a larger version of today's Missouri as it moved across the landscape, depositing sandbars over a 5-mile-wide swath.

Slowly the sand built up in underwater dunes roughly 50 feet thick. Under the pressure of their own weight, the dunes compacted into stone, which thousands of years later were shaped by wind and rain into the unique pillars, arches, and other shapes of Medicine Rocks State Park. Eventually, the river's flow slowed, allowing salt water to creep upstream from the estuary. Geologists know this because atop the Medicine Rocks sandstone is a layer of crusty, gray sand riddled with burrows made by marine worms.

By dating pinhead-sized teeth of early mammals from the Torrejonian Age, they also know Medicine Rocks was formed 61 million years ago.

Ed Belt, a retired geology professor from Amherst College in Massachusetts, spent several summers studying the geology of Medicine Rocks. He considers it one of the most remarkable deposits in North America. "You have to go a long way to find a sand deposit of a similar age," he says. "And even then, you won't find thick sand and such a large concentration like you have at Medicine Rocks."

Indian holy site

American Indians didn't need geologists to tell them Medicine Rocks was extraordinary. The Arikara, Assiniboine, Mandan, Gros Ventre, Sioux, and Cheyenne all camped near Medicine Rocks at one time or another. The Sioux Indian name for the unusual stone columns is *Inyan-oka-la-ka*, or "Rock with a Hole in It." Many of the sandstone structures are perforated with holes of various sizes carved out by relentless winds that sweep across the prairie. In one local account, Walter H. Peck wrote that he talked to Charging Bear, a Sioux Indian who said Medicine Rocks was a place "where the spirits stayed and the medicine men prayed." Though Indians no longer camp in the area, the site still contains old tepee rings, stone and bone artifacts, and baked clay cookware.

Warren White, 72, grew up in Ekalaka, 14 miles south of the park, and is curator of the town's Carter County Museum. Old photographs adorning the walls of the museum show Ekalaka picnickers dressed in their Sunday best posed in wagons, buggies, and Model Ts next to the fantastic rock formations nearby.

White recalls an old-time rancher who lived in the area in the late 1800s who told him stories of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne tribes using Medicine Rocks as a sacred site. "I've heard the stories ever since I was a kid," he says. "Medicine Rocks is considered sacred ground."

There are many such "medicine rock" sites across the West, says Renee Sansom Flood, an American Indian writer living in Billings. Flood says most sites were used for vision quests, but the rocks also would have provided shelter from storms and lookout posts

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for spotting enemies and buffalo.

According to Conrad Fisher of the Cheyenne Tribal Historic Preservation Office in Lame Deer, Medicine Rocks was also a place where tribal members stopped on the way from the Yellowstone River Valley to the Black Hills in summer and early fall. Among the attractions were medicinal plants, and seashells used for decorations.

"The story I grew up with is that Medicine Rocks was the site of an annual religious gathering," says Brice Lambert, who publishes the *Ekalaka Eagle*. Lambert, who remembers childhood visits to tepee rings now within the park boundaries, says one of the area's biggest attractions to those traveling the semiarid country was its year-round springs. A pump now taps the springs to bring fresh water to the park's entrance, where locals fill jugs and bottles.

Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first to write about Medicine Rocks when he visited the area during a hunting trip in 1883. He described the formations in *Hunting Trips of a Ranch Man*: "Altogether it was as fantastically beautiful a place as I have ever seen; it seemed impossible that the hand of man should not have had something to do with its formation."

Settlers first arrived in the region in the early 1880s, following Texas cattle drives into the free rangelands of eastern Montana. The names and dates of cowpunchers moving through the area can still be seen carved into the rock formations' soft sandstone. One artist attracted to the area, a shepherd who may have lived in a rock cave around 1905, carved in the sandstone a profile of a woman's head that is still visible.

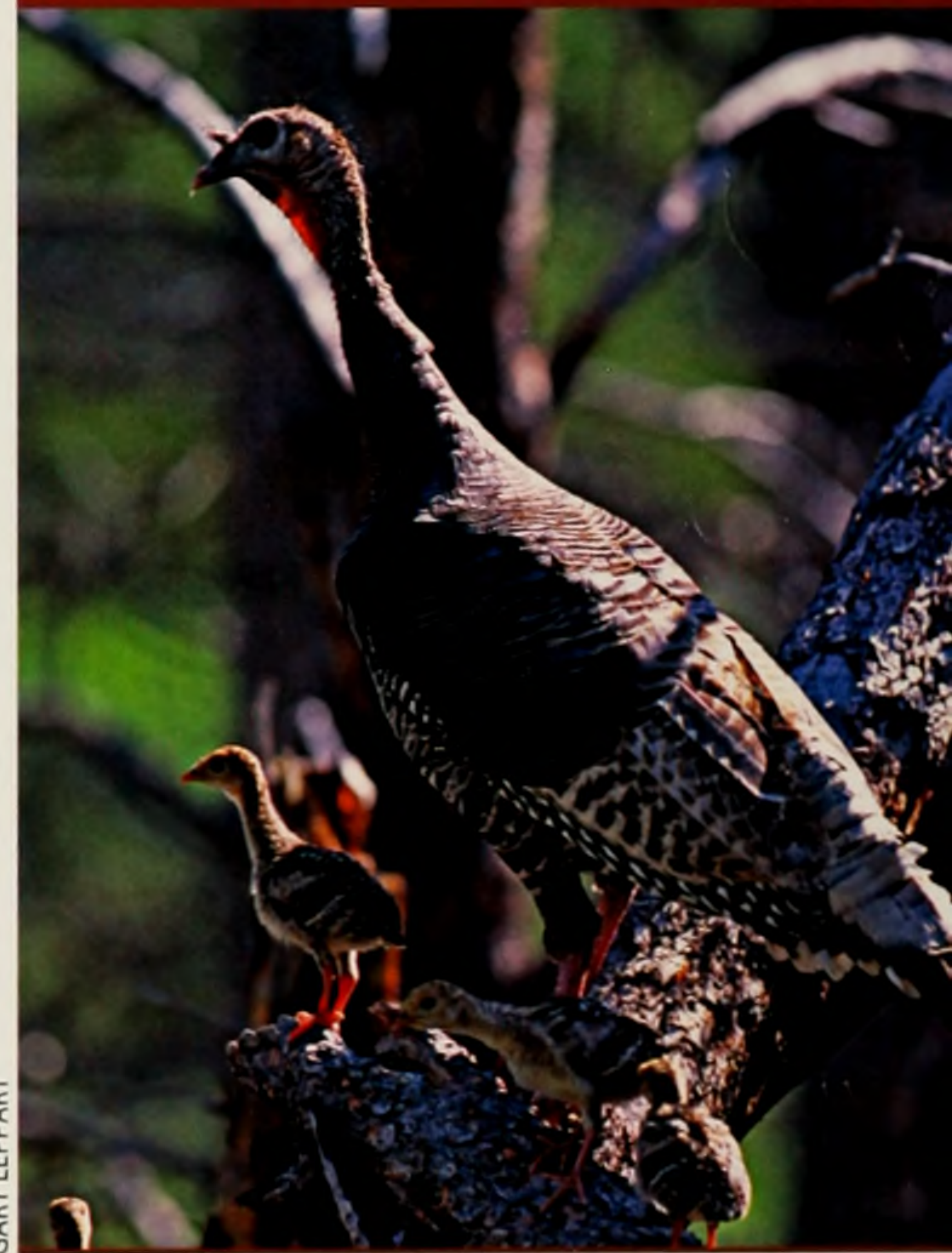
It's now illegal to autograph or otherwise deface the rocks. However, as Lambert notes, "That's not to say it's not still done." Fortunately, most visitors now are either deterred by the law or understand why it's wrong to disfigure these historic—and for some Indians, religious—rock structures.

The first white person to settle the region was Claude Carter. In 1884, his wagonload of logs bogged down near Russell Creek. Carter unloaded the logs and decided the site would be as good a place as any to build a saloon. From these modest beginnings grew the small town of Ekalaka, known mostly today to deer and turkey hunters who stop on the way to nearby Custer National Forest.



CARTER COUNTY MUSEUM

HISTORIC VISITORS Right and below right: American Indians considered the sandstone formations of Medicine Rocks sacred. They visited the site for hundreds of years, often while traveling between the Yellowstone River Valley and the Black Hills. Later, early Ekalaka residents (above) picnicked at the formations. Current residents living in Medicine Rocks State Park include mule deer, antelope, and Merriam's wild turkeys (below).



GARY LEPPART

Public ownership

For decades Medicine Rocks was privately owned. The county took ownership during the 1930s after the owners forfeited tax payments. In 1957, the Carter County Commission transferred ownership of 320 acres to the state of Montana. Originally, the land was managed by the state Highway Department, which graveled the roads and built picnic tables and fireplaces. The state Parks Division began to manage Medicine Rocks in 1965 when the site became a natural reserve.



GARY LEPPART



CHUCK HANEY

Museum that, for the first time in its 40-year history, they held the museum's annual summer picnic in Ekalaka rather than at Medicine Rocks State Park.

After meeting with local residents, FWP officials proposed an alternative to the entrance fee, and in 1993 the Montana legislature eliminated the access fee by creating a new park category. Medicine Rocks became one of 15 "primitive" parks—no fees but also no garbage pick-up, requiring visitors to pack out refuse they bring in.

Though all Montana state parks are popular with local residents, Medicine Rocks is especially so. Many locals consider the park part of their heritage, and it's one of the few amenities in Ekalaka, population 410. What's more, nonresident tourists rarely find their way to Medicine Rocks. "We're not on a major road to anywhere," says Brice Lambert, "so you don't necessarily stumble onto it."

Marvelous shapes

Those who do, however, are in for a treat. Foremost are the rocks themselves. For thousands of years, wind and rain have carved the soft stone structures into hundreds of shapes, both fantastic and strangely recognizable. Kids delight in seeing "hidden" shapes. There's an elephant's head, an enormous skull, gigantic mushrooms, and spires resembling an ancient church. If you didn't know better, you'd swear one lone sandstone pillar was the chimney left standing after a house burned down.

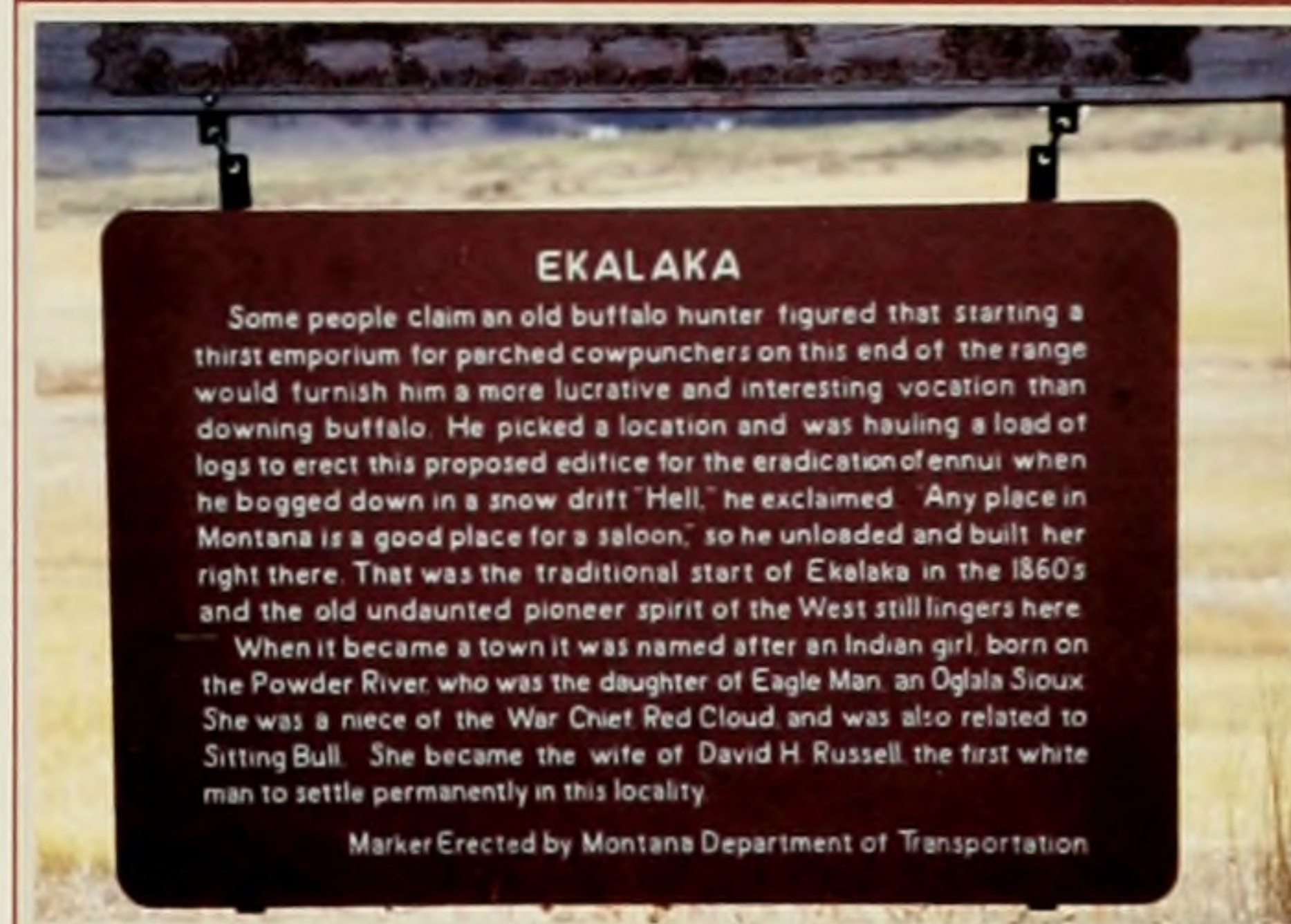
In addition, the rocks form natural stone bridges, overhangs, and caves, making parts of the area resemble a smaller version of southeastern Utah's arches region.

In addition to the stone "animals," real wildlife abound in and around the park. Tiny rodent tracks crisscross the sand at the base of stone pillars. Turkey vultures and golden eagles soar on thermals overhead. In nearby pine-covered ridges, Merriam's wild turkeys move warily into openings to peck at insects and seeds. Mule deer, pronghorn, sharp-tailed grouse, and more than a dozen species of grassland songbirds are common.

The park landscape also attracts climbers and explorers such as Sue Cook and her family, of Ekalaka, who are attracted to the rock holes, ledges, and other hidden spots.

"It's really neat to crawl around in those

MEDICINE ROCKS STATE PARK



CHUCK AND GAIL ROBBINS

IF YOU GO

The most important thing to know about Medicine Rocks State Park, other than its beauty, is that it's really out there, nearly to South Dakota's Black Hills.

Directions: To reach the park from Miles City, head 85 miles east on U.S. Highway 12 to Baker, then another 25 miles south on Montana Highway 7. The park is 14 miles north of Ekalaka.

Open: The park is open around the clock, year round.

Facilities: Campsites, toilets, water, picnic tables. Pets are allowed.

Activities: Camping, photography, picnicking, hiking, wildlife viewing.

For more information: Call the FWP regional parks office at Miles City, (406) 234-0900, or go on-line to fwp.mt.gov.

caves," says Cook. "You always find something new. I almost hate to take my boys there because I can't get them to leave."

Who can blame kids for wanting to hang around the rocks a bit longer, especially late in the day, when the temperatures start to cool? On a late summer evening, the lowering sun leaks light between the clouds on the western horizon. A steady wind blows a haunting, ragged tune through flutelike holes in the rock formations.

As the sun sets, a dark royal purple rims the bright orange horizon. With nightfall pushing nearer, a half moon slowly appears through a notch in the rocks to the east. An owl hoots. Then all is quiet but for the sound of the Medicine Rocks formations themselves, still speaking as they have for thousands of years in their ancient, otherworldly voice. 🐾