



DOME ON THE RANGE Sweat lodge frames look like natural formations on the wind-whipped prairie at the top of Ulm Pishkun. Purifying ceremonies were held in these structures, marking the spiritual significance of a site long considered sacred to Plains Indians. Photo by Matt Long

For hundreds of years, bison perished at this sacred site, giving life to Great Plains Indian tribes



Where the Buffalo Fell

BY BRUCE AUCHLY

The gravel trail that leaves the Ulm Pishkun State Park visitor center disappears into a wind-blown prairie.

Even though it's early autumn, meadowlarks still sing, while grasshoppers flit among the tan- and dun-colored grasses. Sweeping down from the distant Rocky Mountain Front, the wind blows without pause. Within a few minutes the world of minivans, Happy Meals, and text messaging is left behind as the path begins to wind gradually uphill, toward the sacred ground. With each step it becomes easier and easier to imagine what it must have been like, a thousand years ago, to wait at the base of the cliff ahead. To wait for the buffalo to come tumbling down....

It's sunrise, and you and several other hunters are waiting here, spears in hand, stone skinning knives at the ready, listening for the sounds of buffalo.

On the rise above, out of sight, the rest of

the band has been working, prodding, moving a herd of bison to just the right spot, 200 yards from the edge of the cliff.

As the ground at your feet begins to tremble, you know they are finally moving the great beasts forward. Up there on the high prairie, a swift "buffalo caller," disguised in a buffalo robe, has begun to run slowly ahead of the herd, leading the unsuspecting grazers to the deadly edge. He moves more quickly, and the buffalo pick up speed. Those that veer to the sides are scared back into the stampede by band members who appear suddenly from behind piles of stones, shouting and waving blankets.

You look up from the base of the pishkun to see the buffalo caller pause at the cliff's edge before leaping off—to a shelf just a few feet below, where he tucks himself under a sandstone ledge.

Behind him the lead animals have seen the edge and try to turn, but the momentum of hundreds in the stampeding herd, blinded by the sun ahead, carries them forward, over the edge, plunging in a frenzy of hooves, horns, dust, and fur onto the rocks 50 feet below.

There, you and the others rush forward with your spears and bows to finish the hunt. As those of this region have done for hundreds of years, you have come to this sacred site to ask the buffalo to give up their

lives so that you and your people might continue on with yours....

Ulm Pishkun State Park exists to protect and interpret a place where, for hundreds of years, Plains Indians gathered herds of bison and then stampeded the animals off what is commonly called a buffalo jump.

Pishkun comes from a Blackfeet Indian word loosely translated as "deep blood kettle." At 1 mile long, this pishkun located a few miles west of the town of Ulm is considered one of the largest in North America.

An appreciation of the pishkun's significance starts in the park's impressive visitor center. A vividly furnished exhibit hall transports visitors back hundreds of years to a time when human life on the Great Plains revolved around the buffalo. The facility also houses a state-of-the-art classroom as well as a gift shop selling Native American crafts, wildlife books, and tribal music CDs.

Occasionally, such as during winter weekdays, a single visitor can be alone at the center and the park. But most days Ulm Pishkun is buzzing with school groups, tourists, and special events such as the annual Native American Cultural Fair. Though Ulm Pishkun State Park celebrates a historic site of death, it is today a place very much alive.



NEAL STANLEY MISHLER

SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE

In the early 1990s, Montana State University faculty and students set out to determine the archeological significance of the pishkun. Those field laboratories uncovered significant cultural deposits, which led to a better understanding of how Indians used the site to obtain bison for food, clothing, and shelter.

For example, scientists now believe that the bison harvest took place during the cooler months, from early fall through early spring. Plains Indians probably spent days

slowly herding bison atop the bluff. Then, in a rush, they stampeded the woolly animals over the pishkun's precipice.

At the bottom of the cliff, other members of the group finished off the wounded animals with arrows and spears. Archeologists believe that the earliest hunters merely stripped the flesh off dead bison. But starting in roughly A.D. 500, as indicated by carbon-dated stone tools and fire pits, it appears the meat was processed into pemmican, a mixture of pulverized jerky and dried wild fruits held together by melted fat.

Scientists carbon-dated three projectile points found during the MSU dig. The oldest point dated to about A.D. 1000. Hundreds of other points were not dated but came from an archeological period stretching from A.D. 300 to 1300.

Many questions about the pishkun's use remain unanswered. For example, no one knows how many people took part in stampeding the buffalo off the cliff.

One archeologist has said there had to be several dozen at least, and he wouldn't be surprised if hundreds participated.

One thing is certain, however. Pishkuns were essential for early Indian survival. Buffalo were simply too big and too fast to kill any other way.

Yet driving bison off a cliff was difficult, dangerous, and unpredictable. Buffalo, which weigh up to one ton, likely crushed many hunters waiting at the cliff base.

Beginning in the early 1700s, when horses brought to the New World by Spanish conquistadors made their way to the Great Plains, Indians began to hunt bison more effectively from horseback. For more than a hundred years after the arrival of the horse, Ulm Pishkun and other buffalo jumps throughout the region fell into disuse.

Then, in the 1890s, Ulm Pishkun was quarried for sandstone, some of which ended up in Helena churches. In the mid-1900s, people began to see worth in the millions of ancient buffalo bones buried up to 15 feet deep at the pishkun's base. Between 1945 and 1957, up to 150 tons of phosphorus-rich bones were removed and used for fertilizer and to make munitions. The site, long



JEFF HENRY/ROCHEJAUNE PICTURES

BURIED TREASURE Archeological digs at Ulm Pishkun resemble this excavation at Wahkpa Chu'gn, near Havre, another monumental buffalo kill site. At Ulm Pishkun, scientists found bones 15 feet deep and stone tools dating back to A.D. 500.





STEVEN ANRIE

considered holy by American Indians, was further desecrated by souvenir hunters digging for arrowheads.

An attempt to mine more bones in the late 1950s was foiled by Earl Monroe. The local rancher leased the state land and made it off limits to mining and scavenging. In the early 1970s, the lease was obtained by the Montana State Historical Society, which transferred it to Fish, Wildlife & Parks to designate as a state monument.

And there things sat for 20 years, a desolate patch of prairie that attracted little interest other than for an occasional arrowhead hunt or teenage kegger.

Fortunately, a few local visionaries began lobbying to clean up the site and turn it into something the state could be proud of. After MSU scientists confirmed the pishkun's archeological significance in the early 1990s, FWP began to expand and consolidate the park's land base. Through a series of land swaps and purchases, the park grew to its present size of 1,424 acres.

BULL IN THE LOBBY

Ulm Pishkun State Park entered a new era in 1999 with the completion of a 6,000-square-foot visitor center.

CLIFF HANGER Before horses came to North America, Indians stampeded bison off Ulm Pishkun (above) to obtain food, bones, and skins. The animals were lured to the cliff edge by a "buffalo caller," who ran ahead of the herd and then jumped onto a short shelf a few feet below. Though live bison no longer roam the region, Ulm Pishkun State Park celebrates the history of the great animals and the people they supported, attracting students, scientists, and vacationing families (left).

JEFF HENRY / ROCHEJAUNE PICTURES



"The emphasis of the center is to tell the story of Ulm Pishkun from the Native American perspective," says Doug Monger, FWP State Parks Division administrator. "That's also why the park relies heavily on Native American speakers and interpreters."

In the building's lobby, visitors are welcomed by a full mounted bison bull, which they are invited to touch. The center's main feature is an interpretive hall furnished with murals, models, and artifacts that tell of the bison and the people whose lives depended on the plains grazer.

Upon entering the hall, it's springtime to the left and winter on the right. In all directions are bison, grazing. Ahead, where a cliff juts from the wall, visitors listen to recordings of Blackfeet Indians reading from the book *The Buffalo Jump*. A tepee, bison hides, and other displays provide a glimpse into what life here was like not that long ago.

The center's gift shop offers additional

Indian and buffalo cultural and educational items. Beadwork, sweetgrass bundles, traditional Indian music, and history books are all for sale. Proceeds help support the park's interpretive displays.

Though certainly the park's starting point, the visitor center is in truth merely a speck on the sweeping landscape outside. A network of hiking trails allows visitors to experience that vastness of prairie and sky.

"Part of the park concept is to provide people an opportunity to walk through the prairie that existed back then," says park manager Connie Jacobs. "We had people stepping over the crews building the trails, they wanted to hike so bad."

Hiking offers an intimate way to understand and observe the landscape and pishkun, but those less inclined to walk can reach the top by vehicle. A gravel road winds from the visitor center up past a lively 5-acre prairie dog town to near the cliff. A paved walk makes a short loop past four sweat





LIZ LEWIS

lodge frames to a dirt path leading to the pishkun edge. There, visitors get a view of the sacred ground below, where bison were converted to food, clothing, and shelter. To the south is the Missouri River and behind it the Highwood and Little and Big Belt mountains. To the southwest is Square Butte, one of the most magnificent examples of these isolated landforms in Montana.

“WHERE ARE THE BISON?”

One thing visitors won't see at Ulm Pishkun is a live bison. Though the state park pays tribute to the shaggy prairie denizen, FWP officials say its focus is on interpreting the history of when millions of bison roamed the region, not providing a zoolike setting

for people to see a few tame beasts.

“Where are the buffalo? That's the main question we get here,” says Jacobs.

The short answer, which does not satisfy many visitors, is that FWP is not in the business of raising bison.

“It would be a huge undertaking,” explains Dave Todd, the department's regional parks manager. “Having bison at the park would involve fencing, disease problems, and liability issues. For instance, how would we let people get close enough to see the animals without risking someone getting hurt? There's also the concern that to fence in a few bison as exhibits would demean the animals and diminish the park's significance.”

Still, visitors want to see the genuine article. One solution may be for a local park support group to take responsibility for the lumbering ruminants. The All Nations Pishkun Association recently leased 920 acres of state land adjoining Ulm Pishkun State Park on the west.

In addition, association officials Brad Hamlett and Lyle Heavy Runner have personally leased 360 acres of state land north of the park.

“Our goals are to preserve the land, improve the grasses, and introduce a small herd of buffalo,” says Hamlett.

Park and association officials say they continue to discuss ways live bison could become part of the Ulm Pishkun experience.



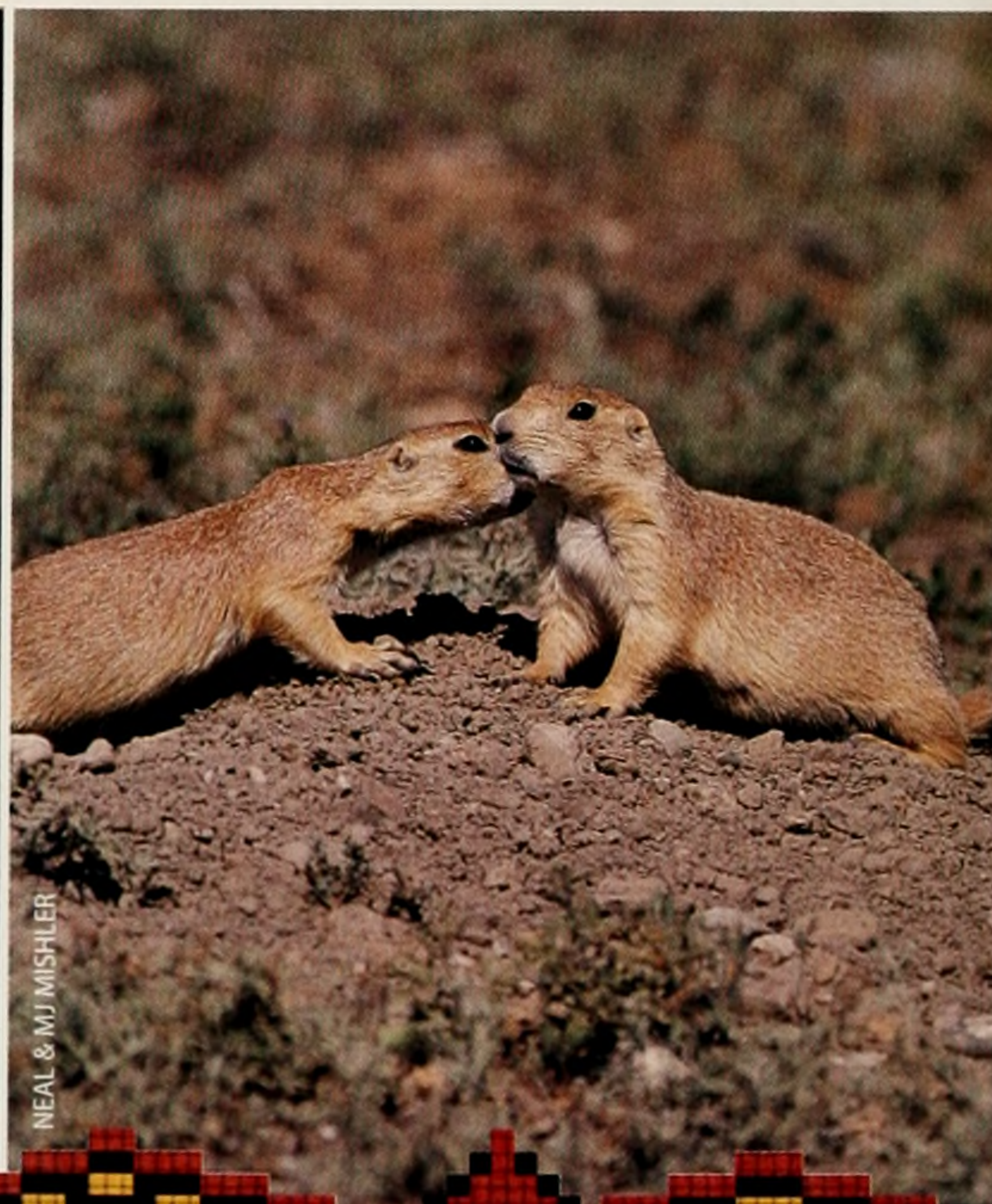
CHUCK HANEY



CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

MUSEUM QUALITY Visitors entering Ulm Pishkun's state-of-the-art visitor center are greeted by a mounted bull bison (top) just asking to be touched. Near the interpretive hall, a circular gallery (above) identifies the dozen-plus Plains Indian tribes of the region. In the hall (left) visitors can enter a tepee, listen to Indian recordings, and touch leather dressings to better understand what it was like to live on the prairie hundreds of years ago.

LITTLE DOGS Atop the pishkun sits a prairie dog town, where these “petit chiens,” as French explorers called them, whistle and bark as they scamper from hole to hole.



NEAL & MJ MISHLER

Local Group Supports Park

State parks rarely survive without local support, and Ulm Pishkun is no exception. The All Nations Pishkun Association was formed in 2001 to help raise funds and awareness for the park. Currently, the group consists of a 12-member board of directors and a board of advisors composed of Blackfeet elders from Canada and the United States. The association works with FWP on hosting special events, and it is discussing with park staff the possibility of housing live buffalo.

The group is also working to build a "friends-of" base to raise money and is actively applying for grants. The association recently received a state cultural grant to conduct a tepee-making class in cooperation with the Great Falls school district. Instructors from the Blackfeet Reservation oversaw the construction of several tepees now used at the park.

If its track record is any indication, the association will likely succeed in its goal of raising more funds and adding projects. The group was recently honored by the Museums Association of Montana as representative of the "significant and sustained contribution to the work of museums in the state of Montana." (Though Ulm Pishkun is officially a park, it is also considered a museum.)



LIZ LEWIS

EVENTS AND EDUCATION

The absence of living, breathing buffalo has not hurt Ulm Pishkun's attendance, however. Last year roughly 14,000 people—about half resident and half nonresident—visited the state park.

Many visitors come for the special events, such as this year's Native American art show, a concert by Blackfeet singer-songwriter Jack Gladstone, and a weekend of traditional hide tanning.

In September, as it has each year since 2000, the park holds an atlatl contest. Atlatl competitors come from throughout the West to see who can throw spears the most accurately using the 8,000-year-old flinging device.

The biggest event of the year, the Native American Cultural Fair, gets underway in late September. Held in conjunction with the Montana Tribal Tourism Alliance, the fair is a whirlwind of activity and demonstrations celebrating Native American culture, history, and traditional games.

Though the events attract crowds on weekends, it's the park's educational value that draws people day in and day out. Last

Bruce Auchly is an FWP information officer at Great Falls.

year, says Jacobs, more than 1,600 kids from school, church, and youth groups visited the park to learn about American Indian culture and the significance of the buffalo. In addition to the education that goes on in the exhibit hall and during trips to the pishkun, a large and brightly lit classroom in the visitor center gets constant use from teachers and students. On most weekdays, visitors will see yellow school buses parked in front of the visitor center.

That's a welcome sight for folks like Karen Schaeffer. A Great Falls resident, member of the Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa-Cree, and park volunteer, she and her husband, Mark, hope Ulm Pishkun State Park will continue to attract visitors, especially more Native Americans. She says she wants others to enjoy the park and learn the rich history of the site and the people who used it for hundreds of years.

And she also wants others to experience the calming effects of an afternoon spent hiking around the prairie, with mountains in the distance and the only sound the wind blowing across the grass.

"It's so calming out there," Karen says. "If you could bottle that peace, everyone would want some." 🐃

**Ulm Pishkun
STATE PARK**

Hours: Memorial Day through September 30: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week. Remainder of the year: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., closed holidays.

Location: 10 miles south of Great Falls on I-15, at the Ulm exit, then 3.5 miles northwest on the county road.

Activities: Hiking, wildlife viewing, picnicking, and archeology. Interpretive displays, hands-on exhibits, gift shop, and special events.

Park information: (406) 866-2217, or on the Internet at fwp.state.mt.us/parks.

R. D. (DICK) GARNEAU

