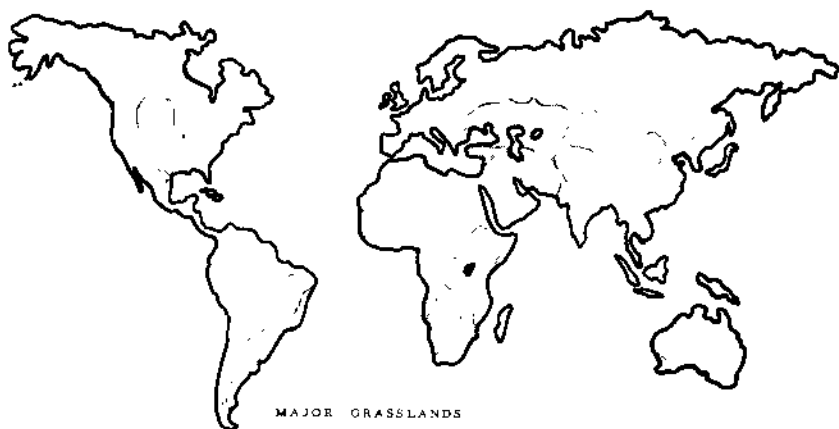


HISTORY  
AND  
GEOGRAPHY  
OF THE  
PLAINS

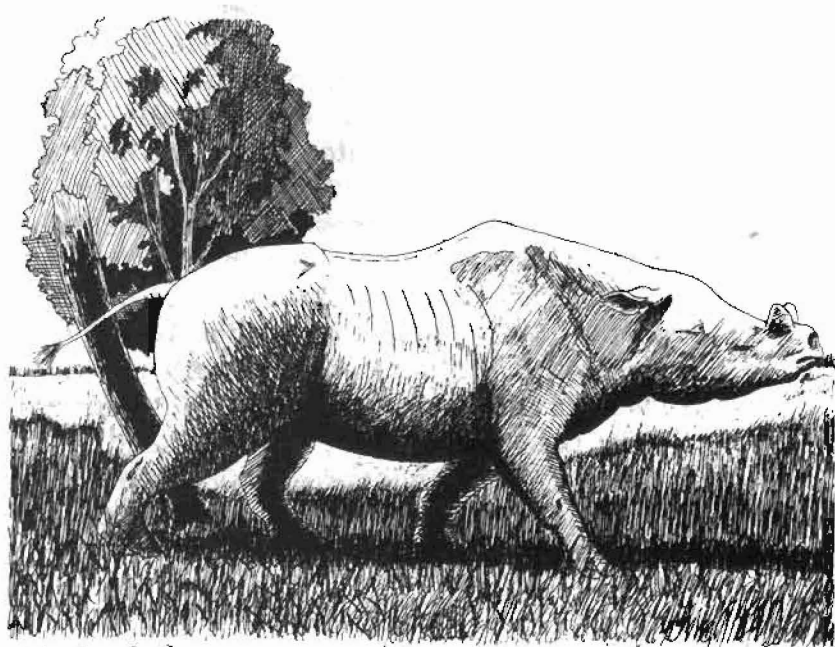
## THE GREAT PLAINS

There are four major grasslands in the world--the Pampas of South America, the Savanna of Africa, the Steppes of Eastern Europe and Central Asia and the Great Plains of North America. The Great Plains is a strip of land 400 miles wide lying just east of the Rocky Mountains. It stretches all the way from Mexico 2500 miles north into central Canada. Parts of ten states and three provinces--North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba--are in the Great Plains. Early explorers called this area the Great American Desert and thought it would be of no value. Time has proven them wrong. The Great Plains is not the world's largest grassland, but it is the most productive, most developed, and most important to the world as a whole.



## AGE OF MAMMALS

Twenty million years ago strange creatures roamed on a Miocene savanna. This chapter of evolution was called the Age of Mammals because of a tremendous increase in species and numbers. An outstanding record of this epoch can be found in the Agate Fossil Beds in western Nebraska. Here Miocene fossil mammal bones are abundant and are remarkably well-preserved, with numerous complete skeletons. The most common mammal in the area was the Diceratherium, a two-horned rhinoceros. This speedy animal, smaller than a shetland pony, grazed the plains in large numbers. Today visitors to the Agate Fossil Beds can hike to an area of exposed fossils for a firsthand view of the ancient bones.



*John Crawford*

## GEORGE MCJUNKIN

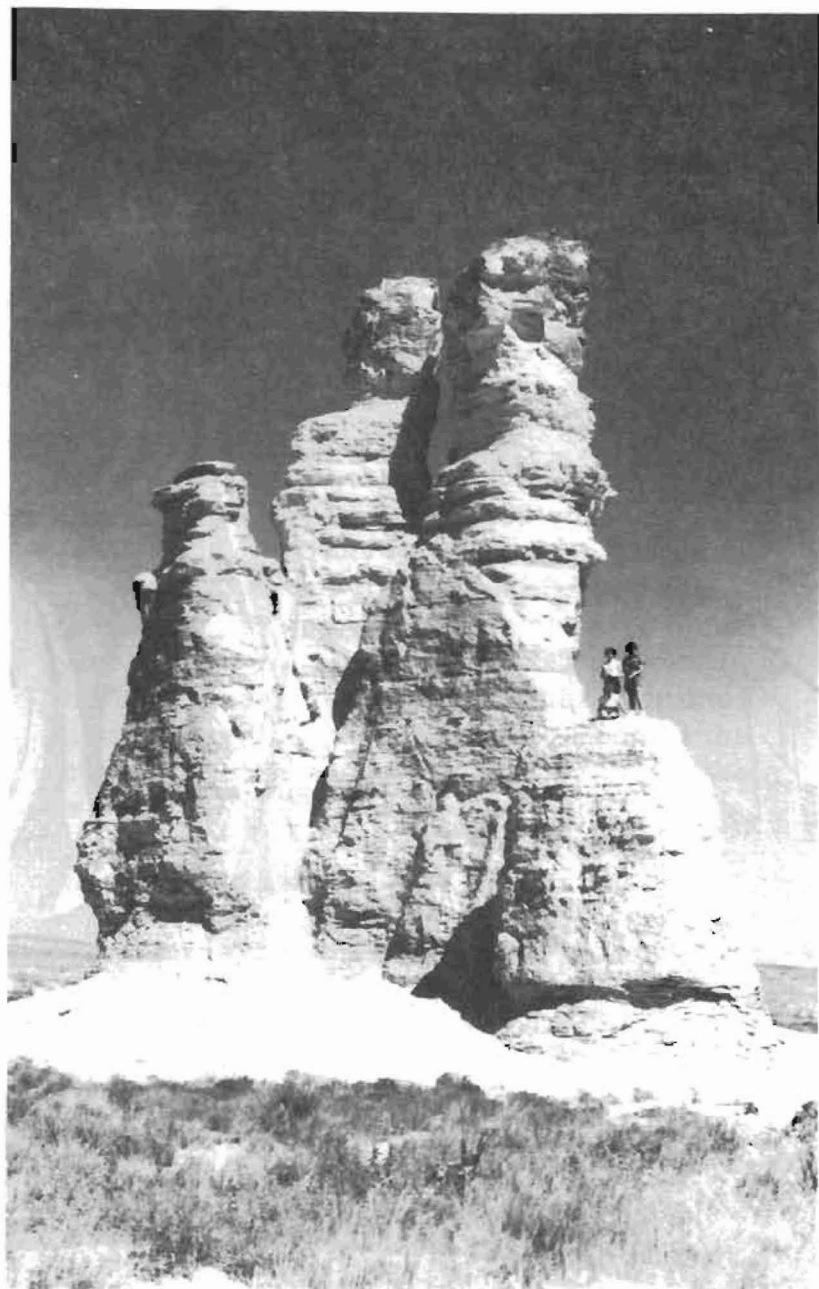
As has happened so often in archaeology, it took an accidental find by an amateur to revolutionize scientific thinking about American Indian origins. In 1926 a black cowboy named George McJunkin was out searching for a lost cow near Folsom, New Mexico, when he noticed a layer of bleached bones in a deep gully. Scrambling down 20 feet into the arroyo he discovered the fossil bones of an extinct bison. But a more significant discovery was the man-made flint spear point embedded in the clay soil nearby. Contrary to scientific ideas of his time that held that Indians had only recently arrived in the Americas, McJunkin's discovery proved that ancestors of American Indians had migrated here during the last ice age, ten thousand years ago or more. Later discoveries at Lindenmier, Colorado, and Clovis, New Mexico, supported this conclusion.

## CLIMATE ON THE PREHISTORIC PLAINS

When the first Indian hunters arrived on the plains, the environment was considerably different than it is today. Ten thousand years ago during the Ice Age the plains had a chilly and moist climate. Winds blew off the continental glaciers to the north cooling the plains and bringing enough rainfall to support lush vegetation in regions that are today desert. On the northern plains the lower areas were forested with spruce and pine while the higher areas were open and carpeted with abundant prairie vegetation. Farther south, the plains extended hundreds of miles in a vast sea of grass scattered with lakes and ponds and pockets of dense woodlands. West of the Rockies parts of today's Nevada and Utah were covered by Lake Bonneville, and even Death Valley was well vegetated.

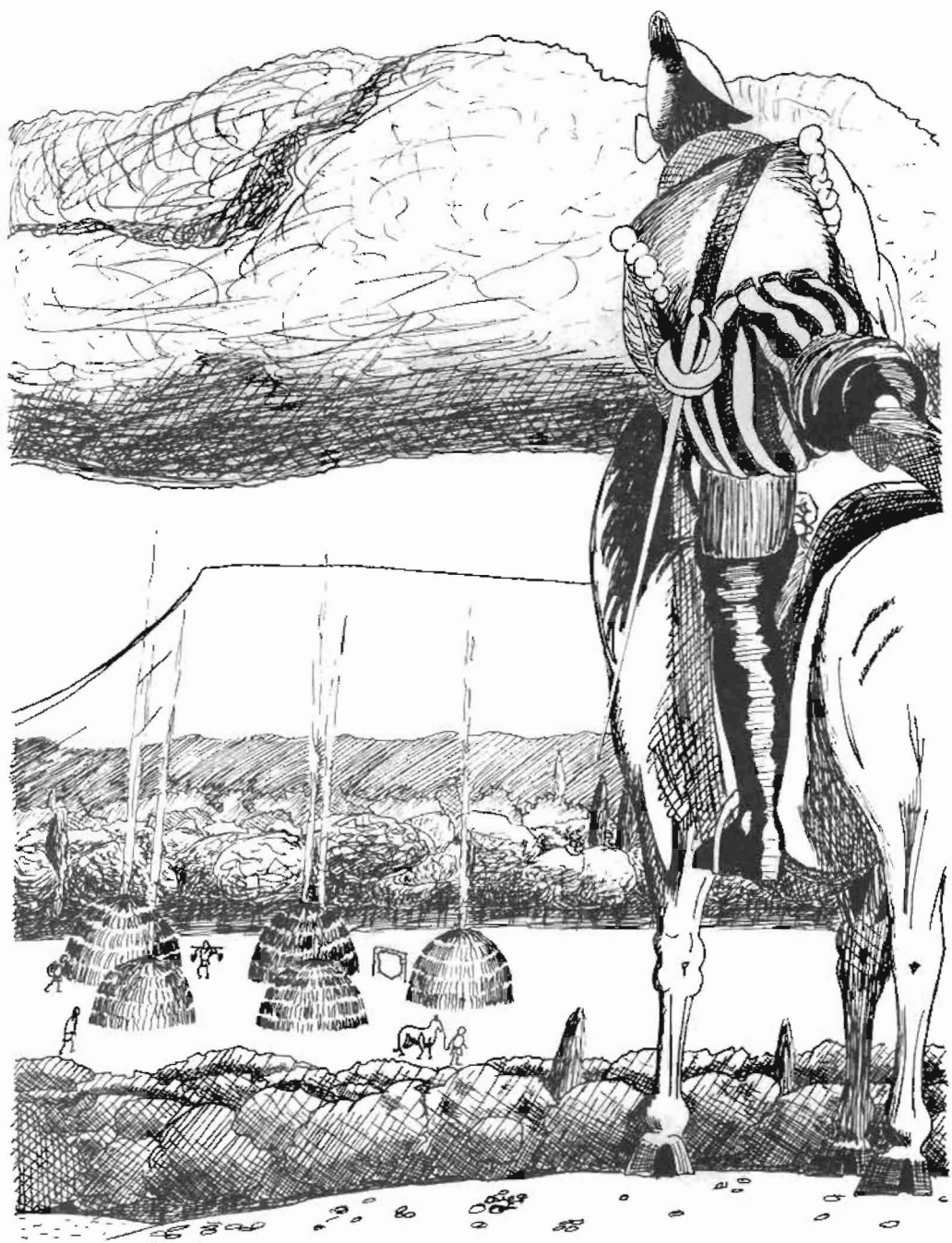
## CASTLE ROCK

One familiar landmark on the high plains is Castle Rock in Gove County, Kansas. It is part of the Niobrara Geological Formation in north central Kansas. Actually Castle Rock is misnamed. It isn't a rock, but a chalk formation. Composed of the fossils of marine life that inhabited Kansas when it was part of an inland sea and carved by the rush of the Smoky Hill River, Castle Rock rises seventy feet above the plains in a solitary spire. The area is dotted with yucca, cactus, sagebrush and desert flowers along with an occasional mudswallow, owl, lizard, or snake. Castle Rock--just one part of the varied geology of the Great Plains.



*photo courtesy Kansas State Historical Society*





*John Crawford*

## CORONADO

Rumors of gold brought Coronado and his conquistadors to the plains in 1541. Two Pueblo slaves had told the Spaniards that people known as Quivirans possessed gold and silver beyond belief. They said Quiviran chiefs traveled in boats with eagles of solid gold mounted on the prows. When asked if household objects in Quivira were also made of gold, the Indians assured Coronado that even the dishes of ordinary families were made of the precious metal. According to Dee Brown there is a legend that when Coronado and his men arrived in Quivira they galloped into the village waving their swords in triumph. So convinced were they that what they had seen were houses of spun gold, they refused to believe otherwise until they thrust their swords into the thatching and felt with their hands the texture of the woven grass lodges.

## ZEBULON PIKE

In 1806 Zebulon Pike set out from St. Louis to explore the southern part of the Louisiana Purchase. Pike and his party were to visit the Pawnee Indians, map the Arkansas River to its source, find the Red River and descend that stream to the Mississippi. Pike did ascend to the source of the Arkansas and then turned southward into what he thought was the Red River Valley. It turned out to be the Rio Grande. The Spanish found him there, escorted him to Santa Fe, and refused to allow the exploration of the Red River. They led him and his party east across Texas and freed them at the Texas-Louisiana border. Although Pike did not fulfill all of his mission, he did see much of the Great Plains country and wrote reports that were valuable to later explorers.

## STEPHEN H. LONG

The Lewis and Clark and Pike expeditions into the Great Plains were followed by a third in 1820, which was led by Stephen H. Long. It was originally called the Yellowstone Expedition because Long and his men were to ascend the Missouri River to establish military forts for protection of the fur trade and limitation of British influence in the northern Great Plains region. Congress changed the original plans by refusing to appropriate the necessary funds, so Long followed the Platte River to the Rocky Mountains and returned to the Mississippi by way of the Arkansas and Red Rivers. Long's party, numbering twenty men, was the best equipped that had yet gone into the plains, and the men who accompanied him were trained to make careful observations and keep accurate records. Only one of the accounts survived, but it has been a valuable source for historians of the Great Plains.

