



Home
on the Range?



“**T**hey were like a river,” says Jackie Legault, absently breaking off a small piece of homemade oatmeal cookie and handing it to her daughter, eighteen-month-old Chloe. The toddler is safely tucked in the back seat of the Legaults’ big farm truck, parked about fifty yards from a few dozen bison browsing on a hillside. We’re sitting smack in the middle of their Great Divide Bison Ranch in Saskatchewan, Canada, about a quarter-mile east of North America’s north-south Continental Divide and almost within shouting distance of the Canada-U.S. international border.

Jackie’s watching the bison quietly graze, doing what bison have always done—being born, cropping wild grasses, moving across the land with stolid, lumbering dignity. They are the continent’s largest land animals; plains bison can weigh up to eighteen hundred pounds, wood bison up to twenty-two-hundred pounds—a full ton. And at one time, some seventy million bison roamed the North American continent, ranging from Mexico to Alaska. For some ten thousand years, they were the continent’s reigning species, the major living element in its varied ecosystems. In free-roaming herds up to a mile wide and ten miles long, they migrated hundreds of miles in annual treks from summer grounds to sheltered winter areas, then back again. In the nineteenth century, pioneer wagon trains were sometimes forced to halt for days, waiting for one of the huge herds to plod past.

These days, though, North America’s bison are fenced in, mostly on sprawling ranches like the Legaults’ six thousand acres, some forty miles south of the small town of Ponteix. A couple of years ago, Kim Legault, Jackie’s husband, a fourth-generation farmer on these fields, quit growing grain, lentils, peas, and mustard. He sold his farm equipment and used the money to buy as many bison as he could. He now has more than four hundred animals, and he’s convinced he’ll someday do better financially with bison than he ever did growing grain.

