

SKULL SESSION



By MIKE MCCLEARY of the Tribune

Randy Kraft, owner of Bismarck's Scuba One, holds a buffalo skull recovered earlier from the bed of the Missouri River.

Buffalo relics often elusive treasure hunt

By PETER SALTER, Tribune Staff Writer

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Three divers and their captain spent a late morning in early April — the best time, they say, because icy water runs clear — probing the rock-and-sandy river bed south of Garrison Dam. Crump's discoveries were valuable, a new weight belt runs more than \$100, but not what they were looking for.

These men were skulling: scuba diving the Missouri River for buffalo skulls as old as the day the animals stormed free.

And what lured them to this stretch of river — edged to the east by a gentle sandy bank and broken on the west by a hard 200-foot cliff — unfolded thousands of years earlier.

Not accidentally, one or two or 100 animals at a time may have plunged down the cliff. "They would drive bison over the cliffs," said Ralph Thompson, local historian and amateur archaeologist. Before bows and horses revolutionized the buffalo hunt, prehistoric Woodland people hassled and herded



Divers surface after combing the floor of the Missouri River for buffalo skulls.

animals toward steep drop-offs, called buffalo jumps today.

Usually, hunters waited behind rock cairns for the grazing animals before leaping out, spooking the bison and pushing them toward the cliffs. Waiting near the bottom, other hunters finished off and butchered the crippled animals.

It's not known whether the 200-foot cliff was a buffalo jump, Thompson said, or if the skullers'

(More on SKULLS, Page 10A)

Skulls: Divers search for relics

FROM PAGE 1A

stretch of river is a skeletal graveyard for more natural reasons. "There's a lot of stories about bison fording the river and not making it," he said. "There'd be floods in the spring. Probably an awful lot of bison died in the river."

Still, it's a river where the buffalo lay. That's why, with Randy Kraft trying to guide his Scuba One pontoon around rocky low spots in the river, Crump, Rolf Sletten and Russ Hennigh stripped down and suited up in rubber, nylon and neoprene.

Fifteen minutes and up to \$2,000 in gear later, Crump pulled his pre-heated gloves from a six-pack cooler steaming with hot tap water. Hennigh and Sletten reinspected equipment before jumping in.

Even in clear water the divers disappear at the bottom, between 15 and 20 feet beneath the boat. Diver-down flags, buoyant and roped to the divers, were the only indications they were under.

But bones don't wave flags. Sometimes, Kraft said, only the tip of a worn horn pokes through sand;

often, the current has flipped and buried the skull to the nub of its base.

And with the current pushing divers toward an occasional rock or uprooted tree, there's often only one chance to stop and dig.

Skulling is an imprecise science. More often, Kraft said, divers find what fishing parties leave behind: Tackle, poles, downriggers, anchors, "a tree with these lures lined up." Underwater, they see what anglers want to take home: Unstartled walleye, schools of catfish, sturgeon.

Skullers find signs of other divers. "I probably find more scuba gear than anything else of value," Kraft said.

Finding complete skulls is rare, Crump said. Unearthing teeth, bones and fragments is more common. When the output of water from the dam is boosted, the swift-flow peels back a layer of riverbed and exposes more bones, Kraft said.

There's a subtle — but rich — market for buffalo skulls. An older, well-preserved buffalo skull could easily demand upwards of \$300,

said Glenn Amiot, a dealer and self-described "buyer of horns" from Minot.

As buffalo ranching booms in North Dakota, so does the supply of bison byproducts. A fresh, boiled-out skull is worth from \$100 to \$200; a painted skull's price tag climbs to \$400.

The supply of antique buffalo skulls is tight, Amiot said, because most people who unearth one will likely keep it. Still, buyers and sellers of horns will come together. "Antique skulls are still going to be worth money, but you've got to find the right person."

The Missouri held that morning at 35 degrees. Hennigh and Sletten were back in the boat in 20 minutes, carrying nothing but memories. Crump surfaced early with the weight belt — one he thought he recognized — after his tank mysteriously ran out of air. He dived back in with a new supply.

The skulling mission — as predicted by Kraft — yielded no skulls. Crump uncovered the closest remnant to the past with the dark, worm-ridden vertebrate.