One Night on the Old Missouri Trail

Some call it the West's "golden age." I got to be convinced. Back then there was no Sioux City, no Iowa, no South Dakota, no Nebraska--what was here was the confluence of three rivers, one of them named after a young white adventurer who happened to die in a camp just off these hills.

One of those river, the Missouri, was a I-29, an interstate that carried just about everybody who was anybody in our world. Those who didn't ride on water, walked or rode horseback. Few who passed here stayed back then. Those who did tried hard to get along.

Our own original white man, Theophile Bruguier, who came all the way from Montreal, was a businessman with a penchant for language. The man picked up Sioux language as if he were born to speak it, and earned first nations' trust firmly enough to marry two of the chief's daughters, then start in to populate these river hills with--count 'em--13 kids.

Maybe that's it. Bruguier and that host of buckskin men didn't try to convert the Natives, just tried to get along. The Great Sioux Wars was a long and bloody chapter of the story, but wasn't the whole book, the whole story of the West. Once upon a time, the Missouri River Trail, a nearly endless snaking path over the hills and through the woods was here for centuries before Sioux City, all the while carrying human traffic in all shapes and colors and sizes. Getting along too--most of the time.

Law? For the most part, there was only what those fur-trappers created by the muskets they carried. No cops, no government. If you wanted to live, you had to get along the way Theophile did.

But then people think much about life expectancy. Surviving was enough of a challenge to keep you busy, and there was all that space around you, all
those hills like an emerald island in an endless sea of grass. The West's golden age, some say.

Just imagine. Once upon a time, a gang of mountain men walked the highway once called the Missouri River Trail--big-name celebrities, heroes of dime novels: the righteous Jedediah Smith, Mike Fink, King of the River, and a gaggle of adventurers heading up river on the hunt. There they were, up on our hill, where that statue of War Eagle guards the mouth of the Big Sioux. Imagine that--maybe twenty men buckskin and coonskin hats, some on horses, some walking, a train of pack mules behind, all of it right here in our front yard.

It's fall, sweetest time of year in Siouxland--warm days, cool nights; and they're headed north, knowing full well winter'll be on 'em soon enough. They're green, but they're not stupid. They know what's coming. They're on their way to the mouth of the Musselshell River. That they have a long way to go doesn't mean they're not home.

What did they know? Not much really. Jedediah Smith says that when they didn't find any buffalo, they got to thinking all those promised bison had gone south for the winter--snow-birds. So when they got to the Musselshell and started to build the winter camp, Jedediah took a couple of ace shots with him and, he says, "were indeed very successful, for we killed all the small game of the vicinity," mostly antelope and deer. They were well provided for a long winter. Bring it on.

And then, he says, a most amazing phenomenon. When winter set in, as if out of nowhere buffalo showed up, not a snow-bird among 'em, countless buffalo "pouring from all sides into the valley of the Missouri," crossing over the river on the ice. "We therefore had them in thousands around us and nothing more required of us than to select and kill the best for our use whenever we might choose."
Was it cold? Good night, yes--unrelenting bone-rattling cold. Were the men hungry? Not a chance. Listen to Jedediah's words. In our little encampment shut out from those enjoyments most valued by the world we were as happy as we could be made by leisure and opportunity for unlimited indulgence in the pleasure of the Buffalo hunt and several kinds of sport which the severity of the winter could not debar us from.

The days of the Missouri River Trail right here through Sioux City's hills, those are the days some call "the West's Golden Age."

Maybe so.