

The Last Buffalo

660 words

"Now, boys, is our time for fun." That's what the hoity-toity artist said when he saw a herd of buffalo Comstock, the rancher, had spotted along the Republican River.

The artist Albert Bierstadt was on his way back from California when he and the newspaper man traveling with him stopped at the Oak Grove Ranch and decided to try his hand--not at hunting buffalo but painting them. Comstock and his men armed themselves with rifles; Bierstadt packed his brushes.

He wanted an angry bull, "so mad he'll bellow and tear up the ground," Bierstadt told Comstock.

That level of rage would take some doing, Comstock thought, but he aimed to please. He put Bierstadt and that easel of his up on a knoll high enough to see the prairie Comstock was proud of, the land where he'd chosen to live.

Comstock said he and his son and a neighbor named Eubanks would create the scene Bierstadt wanted. He'd pick out a bull and wound 'em, then get him hot-blooded.

All these years later, this whole business sounds beastly; but it is, after all, 170 years later. Besides, it was being done in the cause of art.

Eubanks shouldered his rifle from a draw near Bierstadt, should the beast decide not to sit still for the portrait. Once that bull was fierce, Comstock figured to steer him out toward that knoll where he'd attain eternal life as a work of art.

Worked. The bull spit and bellowed as predicted, and charged Comstock, who was aboard a horse so expert he could circle the bloody animal and still aim the beast toward the artist.

But the story goes that Comstock played it just a bit too close and, got himself *beside* the beast where that bull couldn't see him. Just like that, that buffalo raised his shaggy head like a dying king and looked straight up the rise at the artist, then started pawing and snorting.

Bierstadt took off running faster than he ever thought he was able. That insane bull made short work of the easel, then took off after the artist.

No one can prove this, but what Comstock claimed was that Bierstadt ran so fast his swallow-tail coat flowed out behind him so straight and hard the whole gang could have played a couple hands of euchre right there on the table that fancy coat became.

Finally, with that bull right there taking aim at that artist's behind, Eubanks' rifle cracked and that buffalo went down. For years, Comstock told people that the artist Alfred Bierstadt fell over, wiped out but saved from "a fearful death."

That's the end of the Oak Creek Ranch story. But there's more.

In 1998, the U. S. Postal Service created commemorative stamps to celebrate American art. One featured a massive painting wide as the prairie by none other than Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*. You may have seen the stamp.

And there's more. In 1897, that famous Bierstadt painting was put up for sale at the Chicago Exposition. It sold—now hold your breath--for \$75,000.

You really ought to see it. You'll know right away it's not Comstock riding the majestic white horse; it's something like a half-naked cigar-store Indian deliberately chosen and outfitted to make rich Easterner art buyers drool.

And if you get a chance to look close sometime, you'll see the landscape's not the prairie either. Siouxland has Spirit Mound, but otherwise nothing close to mountains like those in the background.

Any art teacher will tell you Albert Bierstadt knew how to paint sprawling American landscapes, and he also knew how to sell what he committed to canvas.

What about Comstock, the rancher, you ask? --that man never forgot the story, and was more than happy to tell it, the whole truth, right up to his grave. Well, maybe not the whole truth either, you know?