Missouri River

There are many pioneer cabin and homestead sites along the Missouri River in what is now the Charles M Russell National Wildlife Refuge and Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument. These deteriorating remnants are what's left of an era rich in the history of human endeavor and survival, with the ghost town of Rocky Point possibly being the most famed, and deservedly so. A rocky bottom with low water allowed migrating buffalo to cross the river at Rocky Point. Buffalo used this route for thousands of years.

With the discovery of gold in the 1860's it became a steamboat landing, and as cattle replaced buffalo, ranchers took advantage of this crossing where the river flows over a shale reef. Quicksand just above the reef made the crossing notorious and sometimes deadly for the herds.

In later decades, the settlement of Rocky Point became a refuge for buffalo hunters and then for outlaws and rustlers. Tales abound of vigilante justice, escapes across the river, outlaws masquerading as buffalo hunters, Indian battles and general lawlessness. When it rained the unbelievably sticky gumbo mud added to the mayhem. Present-day hikers foolish enough to brave the area after a rainstorm will add several pounds to their boots with each step. Intrepid all-weather hikers should adopt this procedure: stop every twenty feet and kick some of the sticky goo off your boots.

Exploration and expert map-reading skills are required to find the best views of the Missouri River in the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument and Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge. One can imagine these views with tepees on the banks, as Lewis & Clark saw. The tepees are long gone, but in some areas little else has changed.

Right and overleaf: Corral and cabin near the Missouri River.