



Missing in Action

► **DISAPPEARANCE** of the bison we are accustomed to regard as a purely American tragedy—or as a tragedy very narrowly averted. Our grandsires slew them on the Plains by millions; our fathers saved a few scores or maybe hundreds of them; we see them now somewhat precariously on the increase.

But there is another species of bison, very similar to our own, that very few Americans ever saw or even heard of; and the last remnants of this species, native to Europe, have by now probably been wiped out, hapless victims of war.

The European bison, usually called the wisent, once ranged widely over the Continent and in adjacent parts of Asia. In the centuries just before the dawn of history it seems to have been regarded as a divine being, for the bearded, curve-horned winged human-faced bulls of ancient Mesopotamia appear to have been modeled originally on this animal.

Throughout ancient and medieval history, the wisent was a prime prize for hunters in the wilder parts of Europe. As wilderness dwindled and farmlands and cities increased, so went the wisent, until at the beginning of the present century there were only two sizable herds left. One, of somewhat over a thousand head, lived on the wooded slopes of the Caucasus mountains. The other, only about a third as numerous, was carefully kept on a wooded estate on the Baltic plain—within what were once the boundaries of Poland.

During the turbulent times that followed the first World War, the first herd utterly disappeared, and the second was cut down to a few dozen specimens. Nobody knows the story of the wisent hunts

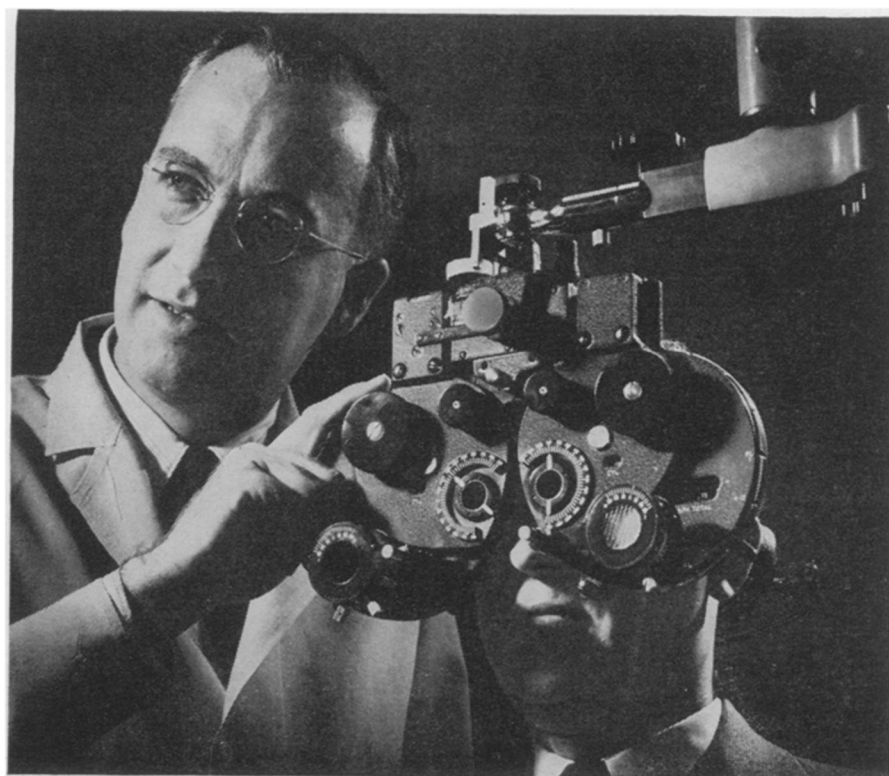
of those desperate days. Certainly, though, they were not the sport of kings and nobles; they were the meat-getting forays of hungry men with weapons in their hands. When the belly pinches hard, conservation lessons are easily forgotten.

The present war has surged back and forth over the range of the surviving herd in the northern country. Starvation tenfold worse than that of World War I has scourged the Baltic lands again and again; it would be unreasonable to expect any edible animal to be left alive in the forests there.

There were, in addition to these two herds, a few scattered specimens in European zoological gardens and in the private parks of noblemen. Attempts had been made to breed these animals, but for the most part these had not been very successful.

Probably one of the first postwar undertakings of zoologists, when there is again leisure for scholarly things, will be a census of what few wisent may be left alive. It will be a melancholy business.

Science News Letter, May 12, 1945



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