Few animals conjure the power and symbolic presence of the North American bison. Whether painted on a tipi or an artist’s canvas, minted on a nickel, or seen grazing in Yellowstone National Park, the image of the bison is a familiar part of our shared heritage.

“The Bison: American Icon,” an exhibition that will be presented at the Norman Public Library, 225 N. Webster Ave., beginning next month, explores the meaning and significance of this iconic creature from the Plains Indian culture of the 1800s through the commercial and national symbol of the present. Along the way, “The Bison” charts the dramatic changes that occurred to the creature and its habitat, and to the people who depended on it for their daily existence.

The multi-piece exhibit will be on display from April 1 to May 15. The exhibit will be displayed in the library’s Lowry Room and Campbell Gallery Room, as well as a section of Norman City Hall, to the east of the library building.

It also will be a featured part of the festivities for two library events. From 6 to 8 p.m. Friday, April 8, the library will be featured in the Norman Arts Council’s 2nd Friday Circuit of Art, a celebration of art held the second Friday of each month at various locations in Norman. That is followed two days later by the library’s sixth annual Native American Festival, which takes place 1 to 6 p.m. Sunday, April 10.

Anne Morand, co-curator of the exhibit when it originally was developed by the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Mont., will attend both events to discuss the exhibit with guests in attendance. Morand now is the curator of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

The Norman Public Library is the only library to date that has been selected to host the exhibit during its tour throughout the country, and also the first location in Oklahoma to host it. The exhibition is due to appear at the Comanche National Museum and Cultural Center in Lawton in September.

“We at the Norman Public Library are thrilled to be able to bring this beautiful and important historical exhibit to the City of Norman,” said Norman Public Library Branch Manager Aiden Street. “We are honored to be the first place in Oklahoma to host this nationwide exhibit and are looking forward sharing it with our customers.

“The exhibition opens with a primary mystery: For thousands of years until the early 1860s, there were tens of millions of bison roaming the plains of North America. By 1890, there were fewer than 300. What happened? Centered on this question, “The Bison” explores the “before” and “after” of the bison’s dramatic decline. It also shows
how the bison’s seeming extinction was ultimately averted by conservationists. In charting this positive outcome, the exhibition explores the many ways that the bison’s identity was transformed yet again into a symbol of America and a popular image.

“The Bison: American Icon” has been made possible by NEH on the Road, a special initiative of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The exhibit was originally developed by the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, and co-curated by Anne Morand and Dr. Lynne Spriggs.

The exhibit is toured by Mid-America Arts Alliance through NEH on the Road. NEH on the Road offers an opportunity for communities of all sizes to experience some of the best exhibitions funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Mid-America Arts Alliance was founded in 1972 and is the oldest regional nonprofit arts organization in the United States.

For more information about the exhibit, go online to www.maaa.org or www.nehontheroad.org, or contact Julie Moring at the Norman Public Library, 701-2676 or jmoring@pls.lib.ok.us.

For more information about the Norman Public Library, call 701-2600 or go online to www.justsoyouknow.us/norman.

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