CHARLES MARION RUSSELL
by Robert L. Gale
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The life of Charles Marion Russell (1864-1926) falls into four parts but is really one unit. First he was a good-natured, ornery truant from school who liked to draw and model; then he was an awkward cowboy who sketched and carved in his spare time; next he was a happy-go-lucky bachelor artist who sporadically returned to his cowpunching cronies; and last he was a professional painter, illustrator, sculptor, and writer who retained authenticity and purity even as his canny wife Nancy managed matters so that their income became commensurate with his miraculous ability and fecundity.

With fidelity went modesty. Charles Russell often said that God had given him his talent, that nature provided the schooling, and that therefore he had no cause to boast about the results. The talent was undeniable. He could model figures out of beeswax or clay without looking at his hands. From memory, he could paint men and horses he had known decades before, in action and with features which old-timers could identify. And he could accurately record in writing the speech patterns of wranglers, nighthawks, and rawhides long since vanished. His school was the old Montana Territory of the 1880's and early 1890's, shortly after Custer's Last Stand, during the brief heyday of Montana cattle-trailing and cow towns, and while Blackfeet, Bloods, Crows, Piegans, and Sioux were still a visible if diminishing threat. And his production defies belief: three thousand or more paintings, illustrations, and sketches, about a hundred sculptured pieces, and over forty stories and
essays (Yost and Renner, Bibliography, p. v; C. M. Russell Bronzes, passim).

People who knew Russell said that one thing better about him than his paintings, sculpture, and anecdotes was his personality. He was keen in all his senses, sincere and loyal to friends, humor-loving, and profoundly wise. These traits are reflected in old photographs of him—especially those taken in his later years.

Charles Marion Russell was born on March 19, 1864, in St. Louis, Missouri. He had an older brother and an older sister; later there were three younger brothers. His father was a wealthy, kind man in the coal and fire-brick business. His paternal grandmother's four brothers had been fur traders; one of them, William Bent (Noyes, In the Land of Chinook, pp. 88-92, 98-99), built Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River in what is now Colorado. (Unless otherwise specified, biographical facts are from Adams and Britzman, Russell; McCracken, Russell Book; and Renner, Russell.)

Little Charlie liked horses, dogs, and tales of the West, loved to daub figures out of mud and to draw, and so loathed school that he often played hooky. His perplexed parents shipped him off to a military academy in New Jersey, after Christmas 1879; but he mostly sketched and collected demerits there, and lasted only one term. What he wanted was to go to the West—to see for himself the fabulous land and people out there, before it was too late.

In March 1880, Russell got his wish. His parents, hoping to cure him of his fantasies, arranged for him to accompany Wallis “Pike” Miller, a Montana sheep-ranch owner on his way back from St. Louis to his Judith Basin spread. After a comfortable railroad ride to Ogden, Utah, then a rough narrow-gauge leg up Idaho, the two arrived at Red Rock, in Montana Territory. A memorable stagecoach trip of a hundred and fifty miles took them to Helena, where street scenes etched themselves in-
eradicably on Kid Russell's phenomenal memory. They proceeded by wagon and horses another two hundred miles, past some real, live Indians, to snowy Judith Gap in central Montana. It was now mid-April.

Russell hated tending woollies, and Pike Miller disliked his ornery aide. So after a couple of months, Charlie applied for a horse-tending job at the Utica stage station, failed to obtain it, and began to wander aimlessly up the Judith River trail. Out of the woods, as though in a story, rode a grizzled old hunter-trapper named Jacob "Jake" Hoover. The two hit it off, and Russell gratefully accompanied Jake to his two-room cabin on the South Fork, where the pair lived for the next two years. While Jake shot deer and elk for market in nearby towns and camps, young Russell did chores, and observed and sketched their stunning natural surroundings.

This idyllic chapter ended when Russell answered his mother's importunate letters and paid a visit back home early in 1882. But it was only for a few weeks, since by this time Montana was his home. Late in March, he boarded the railroad for Billings, spent most of his savings in its rowdy saloons, and then got a job as a night wrangler on a thousand-head cattle drive winding the ninety miles to the Judith Basin (Boyer, Gravois Coal Diggings, p. 18). Though he later returned to Jake Hoover and his cabin, young Russell was restless and soon joined the Judith spring roundup as a nighthawk. He valued his daylight freedom as much as his pay: he had purchased more sophisticated art materials in St. Louis and wanted to use them steadily.

At this time, Russell was probably ambitious to become a skillful cowboy, not a professional artist. He regularly gave away paintings and sketches which anyone admired. All the same, his experiences during the roundup are of more importance in the history of Western art than in that of the Western longhorn. So his next job—nightherdng for a cattle baron through the summer and then on a four-hundred-mile drive from
Utica to the railhead connecting with Chicago—ultimately advanced his reputation as an artist but not as a cowboy.

After unsuccessfully homesteading at Pigeye (Pagel) Gulch, not far from Utica (Garst, *Cowboy-Artist*, pp. 94-96), Russell continued for some years to combine art work with intermittent cowpunching. And thus he witnessed the domestication of Montana. The buffalo virtually disappeared, shepherders competed ever more successfully with cow owners, camping areas became squalid towns and cities, and swift vigilante “justice” gave way to slow “law and order.”

International fame came to Russell in an odd way. The bumper spring of 1886 was followed by a hot, dry summer, and then by one of the coldest winters in Montana history. The whole region was strangled in ice from November until March. Herding for an outfit out of Helena, Russell chanced to paint on a piece of collar-box cardboard a 2”x4” watercolor of a gaunt, starving steer standing in the snow and about to fall prey to nearby coyotes. Entitling his sketch “Waiting for a Chinook”—a chinook being a thawing wind—Russell sent it in lieu of a written report to the herd owner (Shelton, *Russell*, pp. 85-86). The eloquent picture was made into hundreds of thousands of postcards, which were sent around the world as a Montana weather and livestock report. During the first half of 1887, notices of the fine work of the young cowboy-artist appeared in Montana newspapers, and soon it was inaccurately hinted that he might go to Philadelphia, or even to Italy, to sharpen his painterly skills.

In 1887 a Chicago firm first lithographed a Russell painting. That winter the artist spent in Helena. But the next fall (1888) he rode his faithful horse Monty over the border into Alberta, Canada, and accepted the courteous welcome of some Blood Indians located there. He stayed six months with them and absorbed much of their lore and history. He was christened Ah Wah Cous (meaning “Horns That Fork,” i.e., Antelope—Lin-
derman, *Recollections*, p. 141), was friendly with an Indian maiden named Kee-Oh-Mee (also Keeoma), and considered going native permanently. But, though his respect for Indians now became firm and deep, he headed back toward his own home at Judith Basin early in 1889. He happened to cross the path of a train of freight wagons along the Benton Trail bound for Missouri. After working his way with their wagon boss, jerk-line men, and bullwhackers a hundred miles or more, he broke off to join the Judith roundup in May.

Russell had published an illustration in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1888, and another in *Leslie’s* in 1889. A year later appeared his first “book,” *Studies in Western Life*, an attractive portfolio of twenty-one color pictures. Still, he continued to drift about in Montana: first to Lewistown, where in February 1891 he garnished the door of a bank vault with the depiction of a mounted cowboy, for $25; next to Great Falls, where he saw fit to decline a selfish bartender’s offer to pay him $75 a month, over the winter of 1891-92, for all of his easel work (Price, *Memories*, pp. 142-43; Shelton, pp. 117-19), later up to Chinook (winter 1892-93). Great Falls alternated with Cascade (winter 1893-94), where a well-to-do old Helena friend Ben Roberts and his wife had moved. By this time, Russell had really said goodbye to the dogies, in Chicago, where he picturesquely accompanied a herd late in 1893. On his way back to Montana he stopped in St. Louis and picked up a commission from a rich manufacturer for many paintings. Honoring this order spelled the end to Russell’s cowpunching career.

In 1895, Russell visited his ailing mother in St. Louis shortly before she died in June. Late the same year, at the Robertses’ Cascade house he met attractive little Nancy Cooper (1878-1940). She was seventeen, the child of divorced parents in Kentucky, had been left by her stepfather in Helena, and was now living with the Roberts family (Austin Russell, *Russell*, pp. 109-12; Garst, p. 143; Shelton, p. 125). After love at first
sight and a humorous courtship, Charlie and Mame, as he called her, were married in September 1896 in the Robertses’ home, then honeymooned a hundred yards away, in a shack owned by Ben and soon doubling as Russell’s studio.

The cowboy-artist fancied that he was settled in his ways. But his determined young bride, fourteen years his junior, aimed to keep him out of saloons, away from his improvident old cronies, and at his easel and modeling table as much as possible. Russell worked steadily, sold his best paintings through a friend named Charles Schatzlein in Butte (but never at this time for more than $25 apiece), and was commissioned in 1897 to do a few illustrations for some Eastern publications (one being Emerson Hough’s Story of a Cowboy). But still Russell seemed not to be getting ahead financially. So after their rocky start in Cascade, the couple moved to Great Falls, where Schatzlein visited them and advised Nancy to take charge and insist upon higher prices. Thereafter, the Russells’ fortunes improved. Nancy doubled and tripled prices. Charlie’s father came to meet his new daughter and, quickly approving, provided funds for a better house (Fourth Avenue North, site of the present Russell Studio and Gallery). And the artist planned his first bronze—a medallion of an Indian face—illustrated another book, and published a second popular portfolio (Pen Sketches).

In 1903 Russell was able to make an old dream come true. He built a log-cabin studio, adjacent to the Fourth Avenue house. After his death, Nancy wrote that this studio became Charlie’s favorite spot on earth (“Biographical Note” in Russell, Good Medicine, p. 24). It was also the scene of some of his greatest artistic accomplishments in the next several years.

But to accelerate success, Russell and his wife had to invade the East—with great reluctance so far as he was concerned. Late in 1903, they took the train to New York City andFortunately met Will Rogers on the way. From their hotel on West 42nd Street, the Russells sought to conquer Manhattan; but
Frederic Remington so dominated the field of cowboy, Indian, and cavalry illustrations that their efforts were largely in vain at this time. Nancy did sell a few pictures to Leslie’s and Outing, and Russell modeled Smoking Up, which became his first bronze statue. Four months later, the couple were home again in Montana.

Late the next year Nancy dragged her obedient husband back to New York, which he once called “this big camp where the lodges hide the sun and its peeples rube sholders but do not speek” (Good Medicine, p. 100; see also Russell, Paper Talk, pp. 42, 71). On the way, they stopped in St. Louis and were gratified to see some of his paintings in the Fine Arts Building of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Nancy sold several pictures in New York this time; moreover, Russell, with ample time on his hands, modeled three of his finest sculptured groups—The Buffalo Hunt (or The Buffalo Runner), Counting Coup, and The Scalp Dance (or Blackfoot War Dance)—which when cast were displayed at Tiffany’s. He also contracted to illustrate two more books.

Shortly after the northwestern Montana town of Apgar was settled in 1895, Russell began vacationing there. A little later, he bought property on beautiful Lake McDonald nearby and soon built his famous Bull Head Lodge, so as to share the diminishing wilderness with Nancy, paint outdoor scenes there, and entertain guests—including Eastern greenhorns (Cobb, Exit Laughing, pp. 404-10).

Material progress was now rapid. From 1903 on, the largest calendar-printing firm in the world—Brown and Bigelow of St. Paul, Minnesota—contracted with Russell for numerous paintings at $500 to $2,000 each (Austin Russell, p. 208; Garst, p. 172; Shelton, p. 159). The resulting inexpensive color prints made the artist nationally revered. More trips to New York followed, with Nancy demanding—and receiving—dizzily higher prices. In 1907, Russell assembled a one-man show in Brooklyn.
Two years later, his paintings were featured in the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, held in Seattle. But his *annus mirabilis* was 1911. In April he held a one-man show at the Folsom Galleries, Fifth Avenue, which the New York *Times* previewed ecstatically. In July he was commissioned to paint a twenty-five-foot mural for the House of Representatives in Helena, Montana, for $5,000; he decided to depict the meeting of Lewis and Clark with the Flathead Indians at Ross’s Hole. Then, in the same busy year of 1911 appeared his illustrations, along with those of Remington, for a new edition of Owen Wister’s popular novel *The Virginian*.

There was to be no let-up for a decade. In 1914 the leather-faced cowboy-artist, with Western hat, self-rolled cigarettes, Indian sash, heeled boots, and mellow drawl, personally opened a successful exhibition of his paintings in the Doré Galleries, Bond Street, London. In 1915 and 1916 six of his shows were held in major American cities. In 1917 appeared the syndicated newspaper series *Back Trailing on the Old Frontiers*, with spellbinding illustrations by Russell. He was now internationally known, had with his wife formally adopted a little boy (their only child), was regularly wintering with Nancy in California, and was hobnobbing with members of the well-heeled Hollywood set.

Nancy pushed her tiring husband hard. She liked money and the things it buys. More and more, he preferred to rest, reminisce, and spin yarns with old friends. As he put it, “She lives for tomorrow, an’ I live for yesterday.” He once jokingly accused her of charging “dead men’s prices” for his work (Adams and Britzman, pp. 141, 184). For example, she sold his *Salute to the Robe Trade* (1920) for $10,000; six years later, early in the year of her husband’s death, she contracted for Russell to do a two-panel painting for the home of a rich man in California for the unheard-of sum of $30,000. It was probably at Nancy’s behest that back in the early 1920’s Russell resumed
writing his flavorful semi-autobiographical Western short stories and vignettes, a few of which had appeared earlier in Outing. These were collected as Rawhide Rawlins (1921), More Raw-hides (1925), and Trails Plowed Under (1927).

Nancy had long wanted a lavish home in Pasadena, California. Charlie agreed, and construction began. The pueblo-type mansion was to be called “Trail’s End.” But the trail for Charles Marion Russell ended too soon. Sciatic rheumatism had plagued him for some years. Then a goiter operation, in July 1926, weakened him further. He died of a heart attack, in Great Falls, on October 24, 1926. It is said that mournful Indian tom-toms were heard, almost at once, in the hills.

Russell gained immortality in Western aesthetic history not as an author, authentic and lively though his stories and essays are, but as a painter, sketcher, illustrator, and sculptor.

The best way to study Russell’s paintings and sculpture is to visit the following: the Russell Gallery, Great Falls, Montana; the Mackay Collection and the Russell Room of the Montana Historical Society, Helena; the Whitney Gallery, Cody, Wyoming; the Gilcrease Institute, Tulsa, Oklahoma; the Norton Gallery, Shreveport, Louisiana; and especially the Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. Lesser Russells are also in other galleries and in private hands.

Those interested in books with illustrations of Russell’s art are advised to consult publications by the following editors: Lanning Aldrich, Frank Getlein, Harold McCracken, and Frederic G. Renner (see Bibliography for details). Other books, as well as innumerable magazines, regularly include reproductions of the cowboy-artist’s best works.

Russell pictured life in the Old West with considerable variety and in scenes swirling with vitality and color. He was at his best when depicting cowboys and other range men, Plains Indians, horses, cattle, buffalo, and bears.

Noteworthy is his handling of subordinate elements in the
foreground (dust, brush and cactus, bleaching bones, camp sites, and untidy streets), in the middle distance (gullies, ravines, washes, slopes and plains, and shattered rocks), and especially in the background (prairies, trees, rivers, bluffs, uplands, broken buttes, sky, clouds, and sun and moonlight).

At his best, Russell is unique among Western painters in capturing the dramatic moment at the height of suspense, with the outcome uncertain. He paints the buffalo about to fall victim to the intrepid Indian's unerring arrow. Or will the shaggy beast escape? Russell shows the grizzly crippled by the mounted hunter's rifle but lumbering forward, still dangerous, and the horse terrified. He paints Indians about to clash, horse against horse, lance against tomahawk, arrow against rifle. Who will win? One of Russell's most famous paintings depicts a line of cattle driven by whites stopped by an Indian with reinforcements demanding toll for crossing his land. What will the outcome be?

Like Ernest Hemingway's best fictional moments, Russell's pictorial narratives often catch events in that fatal lull just before the climax. Like Sam Peckinpah's most memorable movie frames, Russell's best pictures slow the motion to an agonizing freeze while the audience, captivated, wonders what will happen next, when the heartbeat picks up again.

Russell's eye is clear, his hand and focus steady. In an un­canny way, this consummate craftsman so plans his lines and colors that the spectator's attention moves about and then returns to the central subject. In a manner suggestive of Charles Schreyvogel but better, Russell occasionally has a centrally involved character in a painting look—even aim—at the spectator. If the action is sweeping past us, the important foreground figures are more sharply delineated than those in the background or at the sides, though we are obliged to glance at them as well. Jack Schaefer uses this technique in the medium of fiction. In a few pictures, background figures are so hastily washed in
that they seem partly transparent, with hills and horizon behind them showing through. It is as though we see the figure with one eye and the landscape behind with the other.

The overwhelming message in most of Russell's pictures is nostalgia—violence with it, to be sure, but sadness at the passing of the good old days. As it is in Willa Cather's most representative fiction, the Western past is celebrated in Russell's paintings as a time when nature was less sullied, when Indians thanked the sun; as a time before railroads, sheep, plows, and barbed wire came. Like Cather again, Russell had an uncanny ability to strip off the excrescences of contemporary civilization and see the land the way it used to be. It teemed with wild life ranging those unraped thousand hills.

Russell signed his work with his name or initials, and also, from 1887 or so, on, with the outline of a buffalo skull—perhaps to stress the past in a dry way. Another even more subtle signature was the rubbing into his best pictures of the very flavor of the genuine—Hemingway's "gen"—whether he was using a specific Montana mountain range for background, or Indian beadwork or a friend's beef brand closer to the spectator. The result is never photographically glossy, but rather Western art with the very smell of the past.

Every devotee of Charlie Russell's paintings has his special favorites. Five paintings might well be on any such list, no matter how short.

*Indian Women Moving* (oil, 1898) is taut with quiet drama. Three Plains women, with a wolfish dog in the right foreground leading them—another, for balance, is at left foreground—are moving to our right, which is a direction of motion habitual in Russell. One woman is a gray-haired, wrinkled hag. Another is hooded and impassive. The third, with sparkling earrings and jetty hair well braided, packs a precocious-looking infant in a cradleboard beneath a richly colored robe. The maternal element here is echoed in the delicate head of
a little colt at the left of the Indian mother’s mare. The woman’s well-packed travois reveals domestic efficiency. In the distance at the left more mounted horses follow. Far to the right is the hint of a river. In front of a vastly distant horizon are ranges of mountains. The sky is a uniform pale blue except for the faint yellow of dawn to the right.

When *Blackfeet and Sioux Meet* (1903) looks as though it had been hastily painted on the spot in water colors which then became a little blurred when dust from the action settled here and there on the work. Such was not quite the case, since the picture presents an early episode of inter-tribal strife perhaps recounted to Russell during his stay with the Bloods of Alberta. The painter’s angle of vision is in front of and below two enemy Indians vectoring toward each other and heading directly at us. The older, on the left, with fur bonnet, painted shield, and rifle, is about to be engaged by the younger, on the right, who has an arrowless bow in his left hand but a viciously cocked tomahawk in his right. The older Indian has evidently just fired but missed, and is flinching slightly. In a split second the younger may faint with his axe and then do deadly work. Meanwhile, behind the duelists all is dusty confusion: two riders resemble jousting knights of a still earlier epoch, another is falling, one has his lance poised negligently almost upright, another is about to loose a deadly arrow at an unseen target, while one stirrup of a riderless horse swings senselessly. The lightning hooves are all but audible.

*Jerked Down* (oil, 1907) is one of Russell’s finest cowboy-action paintings. It shows a range man who has just lassoed a steer by the horns, only to have his wiry mount jerked down — three legs bucking — when another steer gets tangled in the line. The man refuses to jump clear, however, and is riding the neck of his pony while a nearby friend whirs his rope in an attempt to aid and a far cohort comes charging up on a dappled gray from the left to offer assistance also. The taut
line directs our attention to the roped steer, its tail lashing, its tongue out, its horns defiant; but the pictorial focus is on the endangered cowboy. We look longest at details concerning him: his slanted hat, contorted neckerchief, striped shirt, gun butt and belt, reinforced pant seat, gorgeous saddle and blanket, and spurs. As in a skillfully photographed movie sequence, the central figure is made to stand out vividly; it resembles a veined, intricately mounted Indian gem. In 1964 the United States Postal Service chose Jerking Down to put on a stamp commemorating the centenary of Russell's birth.

Wagon Boss (oil, 1909) is classically simple. In center left, a canny horseman rests in the saddle. He is looking right, as his sturdy horse does, down a hill. He is expertly surveying his long, serpentine train of plodding oxen interlaced with sequences of wagons chained together in trios, as it rounds the bend in the middle distance. The whole procession has just left a fortified settlement by a river also serpentine—in front of a range of buttes. The boss's rifle is at rest across his saddle. A deeply worn wagon trail curves toward us in the right foreground. A bullwhacker may be about to turn the lead animals back into it. Sagebrush almost conceals a rattlesnake and a discarded whiskey bottle—proof that danger lies ahead but that civilization is coming. The predominant yellows, oranges, and browns are partly blurred by steady dust, while our attention is called back again and again to the brilliantly detailed central figure, with his red saddle blanket and his blue pack. Only W. H. D. Koerner could paint such a challenging scene as well as Russell.

Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross' Hole (oil, 1912) may well be Russell's masterpiece. It is certainly his largest painting (24'9"x11'7½"). It is a busy but essentially simple depiction of Flatheads galloping lustily forward and to the right. They have approached from their village in the left distance, pitched in front of sunlit hills, which are
themselves nearer than range on range of distant mountains
under ironically pleasant clouds, also touched by the sun. The
Indian leaders are hauling up in the very center, pointing to
the far right, where, at first almost unnoticéd, are the fabu-
lous explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, Clark’s
faithful slave York, and calmly gesturing Sacajawea, the party’s
female interpreter. The foreground is full of heavy buffalo
glass in which a goat skull rests and three worried Indian
dogs strike three distinct poses. The glories of this September
panorama are the magnificently delineated Indian horses, bal-
anced by the mist-shrouded hills and the more remote snow
slopes to the right. Russell’s daring message here is that these
beautiful natives, authentically caparisoned, are peacefully wel-
coming the early authors of their ultimate doom. It is also
perhaps that the spreading land, mountains, and sky should not
be bargained for, no matter how eloquent the sign language.
The tallest man-made item in the picture is a proudly held
medicine bow. It will fail. Of the many pictures of Indian
gallops which Russell painted, this is both the most tensely coiled
and the saddest. It is surely an intentional irony that the
two painted objects nearest the Speaker of the House of Rep-
resentatives, behind whose desk in the Montana State Capitol
this mural is located, are a dead skull and a snarling dog.

Five more candidates for any list of Russell’s best paintings
are Buffalo Hunt No. 26, Lewis and Clark on the Lower Co-
olumbia, The Medicine Man, When Horseflesh Comes High,
and Toll Collectors.

Buffalo Hunt No. 26 (oil, 1899) is simply pounding with
action: a right-moving herd harassed by a mounted Indian
lancer, with two comrades also pursuing from the left—one
so well prepared that he has an extra arrow between his teeth.
As usual, the horses are better painted here than the aesthet-
ically less rewarding buffalo. Hunting action is also intense
in the distance, while the foreground is notable for a camouflaged rattler in a bush.

*Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia* (1905) is Russell’s most sumptuous watercolor. It depicts the explorers’ meeting with the Chinook Indians at Gray’s Bay, on the Columbia River, November 1805. The Indians are resplendent, proud, curious. The white party is confident, alert, pleasant. The positioning of the various vessels results in wondrous symmetries, as does the use of the misty, milky pinks, greens, and lavenders. This almost magical picture would require Francis Parkman’s pen to describe in suitably poetic prose.

*The Medicine Man* (oil, 1908) presents a striking portrait of the aging, dignified, stoical spiritual leader of a band of Blackfoot braves, women, youths, babies, and dogs. The tribal members have broken camp and are walking their patient mounts through autumnal prairie vegetation toward better hunting. The picture is large enough (29¾” x 48”) to permit Russell to include fine details, especially in the main figure.

*When Horseshell Comes High* (oil, 1909) is Russell’s most dramatic pictorial last-stand narrative. As a string of stolen horses moves in the middle distance off to the left, a determined posse, or perhaps the original owners of the galloping loot, charges in, at least five strong, at two thieves. One thief, young and with short hair, has put down his beautifully equipped horse and is shooting opponents out of their saddles. But the other outlaw, a quickly sketched half-breed, mounts his rearing steed, and will soon wheel and head for the forest to the left. In the furiously active painting, the outcome is unclear; but in real life the white outlaw was fatally wounded, and the Indian was caught and hanged.

*Toll Collectors* (oil, 1913 – also called *Deadline on the Range* and *Taking Toll*) presents a confrontation between the cowboy leader of a strung-out herd of cattle and an Indian resolutely gesturing what the payment should be for trespass.
Each adversary has his back-up men. The opposing bands are in beautiful pictorial balance, with even their colors chiming from one side to the other. Rusty sunlight and alkali dust suffuse all. Nature in the distance is clean and remote.

Other lovers of Russell’s paintings would nominate other favorites, and scores of unmentioned titles are almost as good as the ten identified and commented on here. Russell has immortalized much of the infinite drama of the Old West on canvas and paper. His pictorial legacy to us is priceless.

In addition to paintings, Russell also offered his ever more admiring public many illustrations, usually in black and white, to accompany the books of others or to pictorialize memorable historical events of America’s receding frontier days in the West and Southwest. He also provided line drawings to flesh out his own writings. Sometimes these pictures were of the bread-and-butter sort, for example, to go with books by Bret Harte, Emerson Hough, Stewart Edward White, and Teddy Roosevelt. Much better are Russell’s pictorial contributions to the 1911 edition of Wister’s Virginian. Not bad are the many illustrations accompanying Carrie Adell Strahorn’s Fifteen Thousand Miles by Stage and the few for Bertha Muzzy Bower’s once-popular Chip of the Flying U.

Spectacular illustrations by Russell are featured in the Montana Newspaper Association’s 1917 series called Back Trailing on the Old Frontiers, nationally syndicated, and vivifying historical frontier events and episodes from Coronado to the closing of the Montana frontier. Some of the artist’s fifty-two meticulous pen drawings (each 19 3/4”x27 15/16”) are awe-inspiring in their handling of details, shading, proportion, sweep, and wordless drama. The best are those depicting Pierre Radisson’s return to Quebec with a flotilla of fur-laden Indian canoes, the La Vérendrye party’s “discovery” of the Rocky Mountains (in truth, the Indians never lost them until later), a peaceful Mandan village, John Colter’s race from Blackfoot
captors, a small Indian party before Bent's Fort, and Joseph Slade's brutal killing of Jules Reni.

Russell devoted countless hours of his spare time, in an unparalleled example of artistic generosity, to the pictorial decoration of letters to personal friends. The results sometimes resemble illuminated medieval manuscripts, except that the texts are often grotesquely—and, let us hope, purposely—illiterate (Renner, ed., *Paper Talk*, p. 9; Linderman, p. 129). At any rate, the pictures are priceless. For example, imagining a dire future, Russell sketches himself getting shot by a rival lover. On the other hand, he draws a peace pipe properly lit and waiting to be extended to the recipient of his letter, on condition that he will bring his family and come camping. Russell limns himself at California beaches—hat, tie, sash, heeled boots, smile, and all—pointing humorously at an assortment of ugly bathers. An alarming number of stark black-and-white sketches render sudden death in and just out of Western saloons, and are sent on to survivors of the deceased with terse verbal reports. Among the liveliest pictures are delicately wrought ink-and-color shots of bucking broncs. Funnier but equally skillful are sketches of dudes on dude ranches in the West and of the horsy set over in England, which land also inspired Russell—partly because of homesickness, perhaps—to send back to American friends fanciful renditions of long-defunct knights dressed in what Russell regularly called "cloths [clothes] made by a blacksmith" (*Good Medicine*, p. 84; see also Russell, *Rawhide Rawlins*, p. 26, *Trails Plowed Under*, p. 28, and *Paper Talk*, pp. 57, 112).

Some pictures explain and even get in the way of the text. Others are uproariously funny caricatures, but never bitter ones. Still others are elaborate headings which sometimes work around and through Russell's printed letterhead—with name, address, and horned buffalo skull. The best of these illustrated letters are perfectly proportioned, carefully colored, lavish gifts to
friends. Even the quickest of them reveal care and a generous hand. Some show exquisite composition. Many were framed and hung on walls by their appreciative recipients.

Russell was almost as good a sculptor as he was a painter. He modeled in mud, beeswax, and clay as early in his career as he sketched and painted. Many friends, in reminiscing about the artist, have commented on the beauty and eloquence of his long, tapered fingers. Photographs of him often show his sensitive hands, rare surely in an ex-cowboy.

To while away some time and to remind himself of home, Russell in New York in 1903 modeled *Smoking Up*. It became his first bronze casting, and a copy was given to Teddy Roosevelt. Russell’s next three groups, completed in New York a little later, are more complex and effective. They are *Counting Coup* (1904), *Buffalo Hunt* (1904), and *Scalp Dance* (1904).

Most of the so-called original Russell bronzes — that is, those cast during his lifetime — are of animals without human beings; there are also quite a few Indian figures and a few Indian heads, several cowboys on horseback, and many miscellaneous pieces. The horse would seem to be Russell’s favorite animal, if his sculpture is any guide; after that come bears, then buffalo, and coyotes and wolves. Many other statues were cast from Russell’s models after his death. In addition, numerous models, usually in plaster or wax, have been preserved. Among such works, animals are by far the most frequent. There are also a few Indian subjects.

From the beginning, Russell was adept as a sculptor. His first groups, already mentioned, are among his most superb; but many fine ones are later, and about half of his dated works were created during the last decade of his life. In fact, more than a dozen are dated 1924, 1925, and 1926. His hand did not lose its cunning until the very end.

It is hard to make a selection from among Russell’s bronzes, but surely the following are top-notch. *Counting Coup* (cast
in 1904) and Buffalo Hunt (1904) show Indians on horseback in dramatic action. The first is notable for being attractive from any angle. (Russell in Trails, p. 44, praises Indians for keeping oriented in trackless open country: “The Injun looks all ways an' sees all sides of everythin’. ” So did Russell.) The group shows a mounted Indian about to spear a fallen foe but soon to be tomahawked from behind by another enemy. The lines of motion flow magnificently. The two horses, each with three hooves in the air, are touching each other. Buffalo Hunt is equally active but more simply conceived. An intent brave, well delineated, is riding after two roughly bunched buffalo and is aiming a second arrow into the already wounded flank of the nearer. Smoking Up (1904), The Weaver (1911 — sometimes called The Bucker and the Buckeroo), and Where the Best of Riders Quit (1920) all depict cowboys on wildly contorted mounts. Mountain Mother (1924) shows a grizzly bear climbing a tree trunk but looking back to scold her two cubs. Sleeping Thunder (1902) and Scalp Dance (1904) offer contrasting views of Indians. The first, a splendid character study, offers a well-modeled head of the proud Blood chief with whom Russell stayed in Canada during the winter of 1888-89. The second, unique in Western art, is of a pair of dancers, one on his left foot and holding his trophy high, the other on his right foot and with his gruesome axe pointed earthward. Finally, two mystical, allegorical groups are outstanding. The Spirit of Winter (1926) shows a brooding figure staring out from hollowed eye sockets toward a wintry blast while three gaunt beasts beneath it howl defiance. In The Secrets of the Night (1926), on the other hand, Russell presents a serene medicine man squatting and staring ahead. Perched on his right shoulder and evidently whispering into his receptive ear is a wide-winged owl.

Russell was not so good a writer as he was a painter, illustrator, or sculptor. But that undeniable fact should blind no
one to the rich excellences of his short stories, semiautobiographical anecdotes, and essays. At their best, they have the twang and tang of Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and Will Rogers. They are usually better than the writings of Bill Nye, James Whitcomb Riley, and Irvin S. Cobb, to all of whom he has been compared. The main virtues of Russell’s writings are the same as those which distinguish his best art work: authenticity, detail, suspense, and humor.

Russell wrote three books: Rawhide Rawlins Stories (1921), More Rawhides (1925), and Trails Plowed Under (1927). The first contains seventeen items plus a foreword. The second offers eighteen more pieces, all new, and a preface. A year after her husband’s death, Nancy Russell issued Trails Plowed Under, which reprints sixteen of the seventeen stories from the first book. Wisely omitted is “Johnny Sees the Big Show,” about a Montanan who visits England and France during World War I. Also reprinted are all eighteen pieces from the second book, and eight new items, plus “The Ghost Horse,” which as “The Olden Days” had appeared in Twelfth Annual Roundup: 1919 (Great Falls, 1919). Trails Plowed Under thus contains forty-three tales, essays, and anecdotes. Russell can be poignant, gripping, informative, and side-splittingly funny. Many of the fifty-odd illustrations he provided to accompany his text are suitably artistic, while often the text itself comprises a subtle, indirect accompaniment to many of his most famous paintings.

His narrator is often Rawhide Rawlins, an old cowpoke. But many of the pieces are merely introduced by Rawhide, who then quotes other, more experienced narrators whom he has heard tell. A few pieces are straight essays by Russell himself without any fictive filters. Once, strangely, Rawhide recalls what “Kid Russell” (Trails, p. 195) told him ‘way back when. Taken together—and sometimes even separately—the pieces in Trails Plowed Under have as complicated a set of
narrative stances as are to be found in Mark Twain, or even in Henry James.

The basic verb tense is a sometimes monotonous present. The reader soon gets used to it, however, and may even gain a sense of immediacy by the device. The pace of these stories is fast, and since they average only about four pages of text apiece, there is no time for boredom. The slang and contractions are consistently handled, are easily mastered, and they salt the natural flavor of the work. Technical jargon is kept to a minimum and is casually defined where necessary.

Russell’s tone is a subtle combination of romantic and realistic. Russell shows us the people—mostly men—of a given locale at work and at play. Without quite realizing it, the attentive reader begins to understand what the Old West was like, with its range men, cattle and horses, bears and wolves, Indians both friendly and ferocious, cow towns, trappers and hunters, and drinkers and fighters. All of this is realistic. But since the West that Russell depicts here is old, nostalgia glows around its edges somewhat romantically. As in his best paintings, a wistful melancholy creeps into his written work.

Surprisingly, Russell does not give us word paintings of his background scenery. He could have done so if he had wished; but perhaps he felt that his paintings, well known and treasured by this time, could act as a backdrop for his written episodes. So he concentrated on dialogue and action, and could forget the settings. He is thus in the best Western tall-tale tradition, which stresses ink-quick character sketching and delineation of plot.

*Trails Plowed Under* is divided into four stated categories of stories and essays: “Old West,” “Many Trails,” “Mavericks and Strays,” and “Wide Ranges.” But these mechanically imposed divisions are meaningless, since most items under one class might as easily have been placed elsewhere. In reality, the forty-three pieces are of four distinct types: humorous an-
ecdotes involving white men (twenty-two items), tales of Indians (nine), informational essays (eight), and serious stories about white men (four). Many of the humorous sketches are trivial, but each has a fine point. The Indian material is often both factual and gripping. The informational essays are detailed and educative, and sometimes they have a haunting *ubi sunt* tone. The straight anecdotes concerning white hunters and cowboys seldom exemplify Russell the writer at his best.

As for the humorous items — in “A Gift Horse” an unnamed narrator, who sounds like Rawhide Rawlins, relays the main story in Charley Furiman’s words. It concerns a horse recommended to Charley as gentle but so vicious that he gives it to Con Price (a real-life friend of Russell’s) as a wedding present. Con soon tells Charley not to give another such or he will receive flowers in repayment.

“Bullard’s Wolves” depicts Bill Bullard’s efforts to drag by lasso a strychnine-poisoned wolf to camp, then a second such wolf by the other end of the same rope. All is well until they hit the sagebrush, which causes the quarry to leap on each side of Bullard’s horse and terrify it. The narrator generalizes here, as often happens in *Trails Plowed Under*: “ropes, like guns, are dangerous. All the difference is, guns go off and ropes go on.” This tale also features the use of an idiom common in Russell; we read, “Right then’s when the ball opens” (p. 23), meaning the trouble started.

“When Pete Sets a Speed Mark” is a silly piece in which Rawhide tells how Bill Skelton once described Pete’s fast foot-running, back about 1878, when his horse dumped him in front of a charging buffalo. The only thing to recommend the anecdote is the manner of its telling.

In “Bill’s Shelby Hotel,” Rawhide delineates the checkered career of Bill Ward, formerly of Des Moines, as he graduates from railroad hobo to McCartyville hotel worker to the winner — courtesy of a poker game — of a hotel in Shelby. His swarms
of flies, winter and summer, are so bad that the new railroad threatens to bypass the town. “Bob’s Skees” is equally slight. In it, Rawhide relays the account by Old Babcock (another real person whom Russell knew) of being snowed in near Swimmin’ Women back in ’76 and taking to homemade skis since he did not know how to make Indian-style snowshoes. Shushing downhill and over springy lodgepoles, he landed on a bull elk and concluded that “Injun webs is the best if you ain’t in a hurry” (p. 52). “Night Herd,” also brief, has Rawhide using a half-breed’s words to describe how his night-herding partner, identified only as Big Man, went to town supposedly for half the night while the half-breed was to watch the cattle. But Big Man got drunk, woke up in the town dump, and thought at first that all those broken tables and empty boxes surrounding him were steers.

“How Mix Went to School,” though a delight, does not belong in this collection, since it deals with the efforts of upstate New York parents to find a teacher sufficiently tough to control even the most unruly and pugnacious pupils. They finally hire an ex-boxer. Charlie Mix, a survivor of the ensuing educational experiment, told Rawhide about the pedagogue: “This gent’s head is smaller than’s usual in humans. There don’t seem to be much space above his eyes, an’ his smile . . . is scary. There’s a low place where his nose ought to be, an’ he could look through a keyhole with both eyes at once. His neck’s enough larger than his head so that he could back out of his shirt without unbuttoning his collar. From here down he’s built all ways for scrappin’, and when he’s standin’ at rest his front feet hang about even with his knees” (p. 66). Needless to say, this teacher beat his charges into literally singing his praises.

In “Lepley’s Bear,” Old Man Lepley tells the narrator how once while he was out hunting he dismounted, tied his horse to a cottonwood, and fired at a bear in a chokecherry bush.
When the bear, only wounded, charged, Lepley leaped on his horse and galloped off—and was thrown violently when his mount arrived at the end of its tether. The story is notable for containing examples of Russell’s curious and frequent habit of addressing animals as “Mr.,” in this instance “Mr. Bear” (pp. 75, 76), and for one very awkward example of his employment of the present tense: “When he [Lepley, after being thrown] wakes up he don’t hear harps nor smell smoke. It ain’t till then he remembers he don’t untie his rope” (p. 76).

“How Louse Creek Was Named” is even slighter. Rawhide explains that in the early ’80’s Pete stopped at a creek, disrobed, then put his shirt on one rock and pounded it with another, saying: “I’m damned if this don’t get some of the big ones!” (p. 77).

In “Johnny Reforms Landusky,” Rawhide rambles through a summary of the career of Johnny, once a Yogo Gulch cook and vinegar-pie baker, then a preacher in Landusky, in the Little Rockies. “He starts a revival there that’s a cross between Mormonism and a Sioux ghost dance” (p. 80). The town was so wild that it could be heard two miles away, and they held funerals at night under a white flag. Johnny took as his partner Dum Dum Bill, a horse rustler so skinny that when he was finally caught and hanged, “his end . . . [had to be] hastened by tuckin’ an anvil into the seat of his pants” (p. 81). “Safety First! But Where Is It?” offers exempla from Rawhide on the subject of safety. He once leaped from a runaway stagecoach—and was the only passenger to be hurt. But Bedrock Jim’s story is worse. His partner sought the safety of a cave when the two had wounded a bull elk—only to find a bear inside the cave. “Tommy Simpson’s Cow” is a foolish piece, in which a cocky Scotsman’s cow, brought all the way to Montana, is described as having three udders—for cream, buttermilk, and skim milk respectively. Russell’s accompanying cartoon is funnier than his prose here.
“Hands Up!” is, however, another matter. Narrated by Jack Shea, this story, which is notable for brilliant pacing, tells how an old cowman advises a worried fellow passenger to hide her $50 under the stagecoach cushion. Sure enough, a highwayman soon appears, stops the coach, and holds everyone up, whereupon the cowman whispers something to the robber, who promptly lifts cushion and fifty, and then disappears from sight. The others are outraged, not less so when the old timer rationalizes by saying that it’s everybody for himself. When they counter by offering to hang him, the cowman accommodatingly slips off his boots—to reveal $1,000 there, half of which he graciously gives to the penniless woman. They all pass the bottle, shouting, “Here’s to the gambler that pays his stakes!” (p. 115).

Rawhide then tells about “Mormon Zack, Fighter,” a Norwegian on the Judith River who likes nothing better than drinking and fighting. Russell often displays an almost Old-English word hoard, notably here when he uses a kenning to describe whiskey as “wet goods” (p. 117—elsewhere it is “joy bringer” [p. 151]). He shows off his Western-style humor here when he calls “This . . . the booze that made the jack-rabbit spit in the wolf’s eye” (p. 118—earlier, p. 85, it was “in the rattlesnake’s eye”). Preparing to winter in Bull Hook (now called Havre), Zack wants to be respected and also left alone; so he picks an honest fight with the biggest thug in town, and wins. “Zack belonged to his time [we are told], an’ it was his kind and not the reformers that made Montana. These last came with the tumbleweed” (p. 120). Perhaps the most rau­cous feature of this fine story is Russell’s description of Zack’s being stabbed in Benton: “the other fellow cheats by drawin’ a knife, an’ slippin’ it into Zack’s flank he walks clean ‘round him, leavin’ Zack with nothin’ holdin’ him up but his back­bone” (p. 119).

“Dog Eater” is the funniest of the humorous anecdotes.
Dog Eatin’ Jack once told Rawhide how he got his curious name. “It happens about ten winters ago. I’m ‘way back in the Diamond Range” (p. 130), he began. Snowed in and grubless, Jack was forced to chop off his faithful dog Friendship’s tail, which, when boiled with empty flour sacks to thicken the soup, was palatable and nourishing. Jack dutifully saved some for Friendship, who ate heartily. Both survived, and Jack saw to it that Friendship never went hungry again.

Very slight are “Broke Buffalo” and “A Ride in a Moving Cemetery.” In the first, Rawhide recalls a farmer who hitched a pair of buffalo to his plow, only to find that they plowed straight south in the fall and not north again until spring. “If he was fixed so he could spend his winters in Mexico and his summers in Canada, they’d just be the thing” (p. 146). In the second, Rawhide recalls Bill Roslin’s death. Down in California the two got drunk one night, hired a buggy and team for a joyride, but crashed into a railroad train. Bill died, and Rawhide was pitched forward into a moving flatbed loaded with tombstones. His first sober vision the next morning was quite puzzling.

The purpose of the next two sketches is to be not only funny but also informative. In “A Reformed Cowpuncher at Miles City,” Rawhide reports Teddy Blue’s reminiscences on the goodness of old Miles City cowboys, of whom Teddy was a fine, real-life example, known by Russell in his youth. “Bronc Twisters” is a vivid Rawhide recollection of old-time bronc riders, each one as “gritty as a fish-egg rolled in sand” (p. 165). For example, Charlie Brewster, a friend of Russell’s, was once nonchalantly “build[ing] a cigarette” (p. 167—cowboys also “build” lasso loops) when his wild mount galloped madly away, over a rimrock, and into a cottonwood top below. When located, Charlie asked his would-be rescuers for a light.

The last three funny items are “How Pat Discovered the Geyser,” “Some Liars of the Old West,” and “Highwood Hank
Quits.” The first vapidly tells how an Irish cowboy built a
hotel near a creek with a geyser and served subsequent guests
drinks enough to enable them to see geysers that were not
there. The second summarizes several marvelous tall tales of
the West, the best of which is Old Bab’s hypnotic account of
once being entirely cut off by hostile Sioux. What happened?
“They killed me, b’ God!” (p. 192). In the third, Hank is an
aguey old-timer who reluctantly quits bronc riding when his
wife, ordered to shout encouragement, does so only as he hits
the ground.

Russell’s tales of Indians are usually not humorous, though
his diction occasionally is and his narrative frames are often
oddly contorted. In “Dunc McDonald,” Rawhide relays Dunc’s
account of a Blackfoot buffalo hunt. Dunc was given an old
flintlock with one shot in it and no extras. He only wounded
his quarry and then had to hide in an outcropping until she
died. We read poignantly as an introduction to Dunc’s reminiscence, “Like all things that happen that’s worth while, it’s a
long time ago” (p. 15). On the other hand, “The Trail of the
Reel Foot,” which features Dad Lane as narrator, humorously
dramatizes the theories of “Ogallaly Sioux” (p. 18) when they
see crippled Reel Foot’s tracks in the snow: since each of his
feet is turned in the opposite direction, they think that he is
two one-legged men hopping along the same trail, one going
south, the other north—that is, until he mounts his horse.
Further, when he backtracks afoot, they are even more puzzled.

“Dad Lane’s Buffalo Yarn” is one of Russell’s most complex
narratives. It begins with Long Wilson’s reminiscences about
the old buffalo-hunting days, by the end of which the whites
had destroyed all herds. “These hide hunters ’re the gentlemen
that cleaned up the buffalo, an’ since the bone gatherers come
there ain’t nothin’ left to show that there ever was any” (p.
42). Then Dad Lane takes over, to share recollections going
back to ’62, near Writin’ Stone. His closest hunting companion
was a full-blooded Piegan Indian called Joe Burke by the whites but Bad Meat by his own kind, who regarded him as a renegade. Lane praises the phenomenal sense of orientation and direction of all Indians, including Bad Meat. "These people 're only part human an' this is where the animal crops out" (p. 44), he says. Elsewhere, in "Longrope's Last Guard," Russell comments on inexplicable "instinct," in this case, in animals: "I don't know what it is myself, but I've seen the time when I'd like to a-had some" (p. 199). In a biographical sketch of Russell, a friend recalled that at a party she once gave he instinctively disliked a fellow guest, who later was proved dishonest and went to prison (Mackay, "Russell," p. 35). After enemy Indians had set fire to the prairie, Lane and Bad Meat were in trouble, graphically described thus: "... the next day we strike the burnt country. As far as you can see she's black, with now an' then a smoulderin' buffalo chip that still holds the fire. It's a sorry sight; a few hours ago this country wore grass that'd whip a horse on the knees, an' buffalo fed by thousands. Now she's lifeless, smoked an' charred till she looks like hell with the folks moved out" (p. 46). That night, while Lane was asleep, the enemy attacked with sporadic rifle fire: "Mister Injun had an idee where I'm sleepin' an' is feelin' for me with his gun." Lane hated to admit to Bad Meat that the Indian's instincts had been sound: "... I cussed him up a batch. I'm in the wrong all right, but ain't in no humor to own up to it—'specially to an Injun" (p. 47). Lane and Bad Meat survived and after four days without food encountered a buffalo herd. Breaking out wolfskins, they disguised themselves, sneaked up on their dim-witted quarry, and soon were eating well again. Little did it matter that one wounded buffalo turned and gored Lane. "Barrin' [a common idiom in Russell] bein' covered with blood an' the bark peeled off me in places where Mister Bull drags me, I'm all right" (p. 50), he assures us. This entire piece is captivating.
"Curley's Friend" is similarly complex. Rawhide relays Curley's story about an Indian. Curley had a hay camp some miles out of Black Butte and employed a Bannock Indian named Sorry Dog. One day another Indian rode in from a hundred miles away to visit Sorry Dog and see Curley. Why? Well, it seems that three years earlier Curley and a few other white men were herding horses north from Nevada when some Indians stole most of them. Curley and vicious Jim Baker—"the killin'est man I ever knew" (p. 63)—pursued the thieves, soon silently catching up on them, whereupon Baker precipitately killed two of them and would also have gunned down all accompanying squaws but for Curley's determined intervention. The two whites patched up their ensuing quarrel, but all the same Curley was relieved to hear of Baker's demise. The rambling account now moves forward to explain the Indian's visit to Sorry Dog. A year after Baker's death, Curley was riding back to Black Butte when he was jumped by ugly Indians, led by one who thought he "looks nastier than a Healy Monster" (p. 63), suddenly turned friendly. His squaw had been among those whom Curley saved from Baker, and the man's gratitude was a guarantee of Curley's safe passage through Bannock territory. Curley concludes: "I heard that all good Injuns were dead ones. If that's true, I'm damn glad the one I met that day was still a bad one" (p. 64). He was Sorry Dog's visitor at Curley's hay camp later.

Dad Lane is the narrator of "Mormon Murphy's Confidence," in which, uniquely, Russell presents a bad Indian. Back in 1877, when Chief Joseph was warring against the American army, Lane and Mormon Murphy were approaching Benton one day. Murphy was always too trustful, and tragedy visited him in the territory of the Gros Ventres when an Indian rode up offering the raised hand of friendship. Lane noted that he pretended that he was right-handed but had his skin-covered rifle slung left through his belt. The Big Belly quartered his
mount past Lane, who shouted his suspicions to Murphy. The Indian then offered Murphy his right hand for a friendly shake; as the two gripped hands, the Indian jerked the white man forward, kicked Murphy’s horse to discommoder its rider, and shot the unsuspecting man by pulling his rifle trigger left-handed. He would then have gunned down Lane too except that the lever of his rifle had caught in its cover fringe. So Lane forestalled the Indian’s death dance with a single well-placed shot, then with streaming eyes buried his friend, stripped the dead Indian of horse, gun, and moccasins, and would have scalped him as well but for having to hurry from the scene.

This is Russell’s most skillfully narrated story. Segments of its central action would have made a splendid set of painted panels if the artist had been so inclined. The one illustration Russell did provide for the text is not very effective, since the action is too complex to be caught in one frame.

On the other hand, “The Ghost Horse” provides a beautiful prose frame for Russell’s painting entitled The Horse Thieves, since the central figure of the painting stole the horse hero of the tale in real life. The narrator here is Russell himself, and the action started forty-five years earlier, he explains. Paint, a short-backed, deep-chested colt, spent his first five years in a Crow village, until he was stolen by enemy Blackfeet. Calf Robe rode Paint off but was killed by pursuing Crows; so his mournful chief, Bad Wound, shot Paint to provide his dead comrade a strong mount in “the sand hills” (p. 95), that is, the next world. But Paint survived—to become known, therefore, as the Ghost Horse. Bad Wound later sold him to “a very young boy [Russell] and a man with a gray beard [Jake Hoover],” who lived near “a river called The Banks-That-Fell-on-Them [the South Fork of the Judith]” (p. 98). Renamed again, the hero became Monty, the “Pinto pack horse” of “the writer of this story” (p. 100), Russell tells us. His style here resembles that of Mari Sandoz in Crazy Horse: the
tale reads like a literal translation of an Indian legend. Also, aspects of Russell’s account remind one of J. Frank Dobie’s Legend of the Pacing White Mustang.

“Finger-That-Kills Wins His Squaw” is a sparkling story, told by Squaw Owens about his uncle-in-law, an old Blackfoot buck called Finger-That-Kills because of his deadly trigger finger. Owens was able to get the story verbatim from Finger, since the squaw man learned the Blackfoot tongue from what he was pleased to call a “Live Dictionary” (p. 122), that is, his redskin wife. It seems that years ago Finger was courting an Indian “as pretty as a painted wagon” (p. 124) but needed more horses to consummate the deal with her father. So he and some other hot young braves went afoot into Crow country to steal some ponies, only to be spotted while killing buffalo to stave off starvation. Finger was creased by an almost perfect shot, dropped face down, and was thought dead by a Big Belly who was distracted from scalping him by the sight of his gaudy brass rings. The victor could not slip them off, though; so he cut their fingers off, one after another—after another. But at that point, a Blackfoot relief party whooped in, and the Crows had to “crawl their ponies an’ bust the breeze” (p. 127—frequent idioms in Russell). Finger and his friends reassemble and soon steal enough Crow horses to assure multiple marriages back home. Owens then asked about the fingers. Sure, the Big Belly’s dull knife hurt a lot, Finger admitted; but the spared trigger finger has been fatally effective ever since, and many enemy “scalps have long dried in the lodge of the Finger-That-Kills” (p. 128).

This serio-comic work is incidentally graced by a memorable statement concerning Finger’s ingrained ability to read natural signs: “The only book he’s got is these old prairies, but it’s open to him an’ he knows every leaf in her; I tell you, fellers, she sure holds good yarns for them that can read her” (p. 123).

“How Lindsay Turned Indian” is Squaw Owens’s response
to Dad Lane’s request for comments on whites marrying Indian women. Once while riding line near the Piegans, Owens encountered Lindsay, then eighty years of age. The two soon sat enjoying a chinook, and the old man started to reminisce. Born in St. Louis, he had been made restless by the wild tales told by colorfully attired cowboys passing through from the Southwest. So he ran away from his cruel stepfather, fell in with some French traders going up the Missouri River, then escaped their cruelty to join the Piegans, the chief of whom — Wounded Hoss — adopted him to replace two sons killed by the Sioux. His new people taught him the use of bows and arrows, gave him a black pony, and finally — in fulfillment of his dreams — let him participate in a massive buffalo surround. The lad helped kill a cow, lunched on raw liver, and made his momentous decision on the spot: “that’s been sixty-five years ago as near as I can figure. I run buffalo till the whites cleaned ‘em out, but that’s the day I turned Injun, an’ I ain’t cut my hair since” (p. 144).

This story is replete with tidbits of information on weather, Indian “medicine,” camping, smoking, weapons, and buffalo hunting. It is also enhanced by Lindsay’s poetic praise of what the Indians worship most, the sun: “The one [God] I can see an’ have watched work for many years. He gathers the clouds an’ makes it rain; then warms the ground an’ the grass turns green. When it’s time he dries it yellow, makin’ it good winter feed for grass-eaters. . . . Again, when he’s mad, my people say he drives the rain away, dryin’ up the streams an’ waterholes. If it wasn’t for him there couldn’t be nothin’ or nobody live. Do you wonder that we pray to him to be good an’ thank him when he is? I’m all Injun but my hide; their God’s my God, an’ I don’t ask for no better” (p. 134). This piece also offers typical Russell praise of women as men’s superiors: “It’s the women that make the men of this world . . . if a man’s goin’ to hell or heaven, if you look in the trail ahead of him
you'll find a track the same shape as his, only smaller; it's a woman's track. She's always ahead, right or wrong, tollin' him on. In animals, the same as humans, the female leads. . . . If you ever run buffalo, you'll notice the cow-meats in the lead. With wild hosses the stallion goes herdin' them along, snakin' an' bowin' his neck, with his tail flagged. From looks you'd call him chief, but the mares lead to the water-hole they've picked out" (p. 135). Many details of "How Lindsay Turned Indian" remind one of the writings of George Frederick Ruxton and Lewis H. Garrard.

"The War Scars of Medicine-Whip" could be called the text to accompany Russell's watercolor *Indians Attacking* or his watercolor *When Blackfeet and Sioux Meet*. In the story, the narrator asks Squaw Owens to talk about Indians he has lived with. He obliges by tracing his uncle-in-law Medicine-Whip's career. It was hard, to be sure, for Owens to pry the account out of the touchy old Blood. Four years earlier, the younger man had dropped into the chief's camp, which resembles the one depicted in Russell's oil painting *The Silk Robe*. At first, Medicine-Whip was named Sleeps-in-Blood because when he was an infant his mother had been butchered by Sioux, and he was soaked in her blood for hours until found. This was a good omen for a sanguine future. By age fifteen, sure enough, he was already a killer. Ten years later he earned his most impressive scars. Feeling "wolfy" (p. 181—one of Russell's favorite adjectives), he and some young cohorts approached their Sioux foes by mingling in the dust of a Sioux buffalo hunt, killed a few men quickly, but then were stood off by the defiant, taunt-shouting remnant. A particular insult so enraged the hero that he tied himself to his horse and charged alone into the enemy circle, counting coup fiendishly and then killing the sarcastic Sioux medicine man, though at the expense of being loaded with arrows. When he came to, his friends, who had charged directly behind him and completed
the destruction of the enemy, were congratulating him and then let him scalp the corpses of the two most defiant Sioux. Thereafter, Sleeps-in-Blood was called Medicine-Whip.

Russell’s informational essays, which form a considerable part of *Trails Plowed Under*, are serious in intent but often humorous in manner. “The Story of the Cowpuncher” offers a brief descriptive comparison between Spanish-looking cowboys from California and their so-called Eastern counterparts who have drifted up from Texas. Differences center on modes of dress, saddles, lassos, and chaps. A main distinction would seem to be that Californians are “strong on pretty” (p. 2).

Murphy is the narrator of Russell’s distinguished little essay entitled “Injun.” It is full of facts relayed from a point of view totally sympathetic to the Indians but in tall-tale Western diction. We learn about the brevity of Indian oral history, the fundamental changes in Indian life which Cortez’s horses brought, Indian buffalo-killing methods, and the profundity of the Indian’s hate of the white man. Russell summarizes facts proving that Indian weaponry was always unfortunately a step behind that of the relentlessly advancing whites: arrows were no match for flintlocks and armor; flintlocks in turn could not match the “britch-loader” (p. 28), which later could not match repeaters. The Indian naturally had to become “a bush-whacker” (p. 29)—and an adept one. Russell has Murphy conclude bitterly: “I believe if the white man had the same weapons as his red brothers, Uncle Sam wouldn’t [i.e., would] own only part of this country yet and we wouldn’t need any game law. I think the white man is the smartest man in the world but he’s no braver than others. . . . A few more generations an’ there won’t be a full-blood American left” (p. 29). In spite of such anguish, Russell can find place for humor. Indians, he explains, often had trouble collecting scalps among fallen whites, because “there are so many whites that’s baldheaded” (p. 28).
From “Injuns” to “Whiskey” is only a page. In “Whiskey,” Russell uses his word hoard to call hard liquor “a brave-maker” (p. 31), then continues by differentiating among types of whiskey. The new-fangled sort is too placid, is for refined sippers only, and makes them whisper as though at a funeral. It used to be illegal to sell fire-water to the Indians, but today—the 1920’s—Prohibition has made Indians of us all! (See also Paper Talk, p. 105.) Whiskey was important in winning the West: would-be explorers and exploiters recruited followers by going to St. Louis bars, buying drinks for the house, and telling tall tales; many listeners did not sober up until they found themselves hauling lines for fur-trading boats heading up the Missouri.

Russell wrote two splendid essays on horses, which were also his favorite pictorial subjects. In “Range Horses,” he discusses their independence ever since Cortez let them loose on this Continent, their front-striking and rear-kicking force, also their food, coats, drinking habits, ability to help each other, swimming propensities, and uncanny knack of finding shelter. “The Horse,” the second essay, is longer and even more laudatory. Russell notes the contributions made by horses in war-time and in developing the West. “The range hoss was God-made, an’ like all of His makin’, the best. These hosses cost the man that branded an’ claimed ’em nothing. They lived on the grass an’ water the Almighty gave ’em” (p. 107). Then the author offers his own humorous theory of evolution: the inferior caveman happened to capture the superior horse, which tolerantly gave man a four-footed advantage over his natural enemies. Ergo, progress and civilization. By comparison, “the gas wagon” will require a million years to catch up with the noble horse. Russell concludes with an eloquent expression of his outrage at the idea of rounding up unneeded wild horses for fertilizer and dog food: “Mebbe I’m
sentimental, but I think it's a damned hard finish for one that has been as good a friend to man as the hoss” (p. 110).

It is only a short ride to “Ranches,” an informative essay, which contrasts simple old two-room structures sporting a few tons of emergency hay outside with big farm-style ranches of present-day opulent owners in puttees and golf caps, and with hobbies and pianos. Their children are sent off to school, where they learn football, boxing, and how to dress scantily, but not how to survive in the beautifully challenging regions back home. For fun they traipse to Europe now. “Paw didn’t care to go, but ma was wearing the bell, so he trails along—him an’ his checkbook.” So they soon know the Alps more intimately than “Yellerstone or Glacier Park.” Rawhide’s conclusion is terse, bitter, and comprehensive: “The cow ranch to-day . . . is a place to make money to go somewheres else” (p. 160). This essay sounds like a unique blend of Henry James, Zane Grey, and Will Rogers.

Beyond the ranch is “The Open Range,” in which Russell offers straight reportorial reminiscence. Thinking of the old roundups, which are now a thing of the past, reminds him of his Judith Basin days: a thousand head of cattle, four hundred saddle horses, seventy-five-man crews, branding in the spring, summer herding, and cutting out steers and beef cattle for the fall trail to market. Sparks of memory here touch the frost of Russell’s approaching winter, and an august tone prevails. Contrasting humor is provided by the essay “Fashions,” in which the author presents another comparison of past and present, with the past once more winning all the points. Formerly a man took a chance when proposing marriage, since the object of his desires was too wrapped up for very close inspection. Now, however, in these flappery 1920’s, “. . . you don’t need no X-ray—the cards are face up on the table; scars, warts, or pimples, they are all in sight—all you got to do now is find out what brand of cigarettes she uses” (p. 161).
The final category of items in *Trails Plowed Under* is serious anecdotes involving whites. Even in these there may be touches of humor, but their aim is more sober. “A Savage Santa Claus” is clever, well-paced, and suspensefully varied. Bedrock tells how Christmas always reminds him of a winter back in the 1860’s, when he and Jake Mason, fellow miners out of grub, holed up in an abandoned cabin, cooked their beans, and bedded down for the night, only to be terrified when an enormous grizzly emerged from a ghostly-looking, dilapidated inner room and began licking their bean pot. They shot him and were soon enjoying steaks from his carcass. Looking into Mr. Bear’s bedroom the next morning, the two men found a dead miner, the previous occupant of the cabin, in which they soon discovered a thatched hole concealing a buckskin sack of gold dust worth $500. It was Christmas Day, and the hairy bear was the savage Santa Claus. The story is lit by glints of tall-tale humor and rollicking diction.

“A Pair of Outlaws” is equally skillful. Bowlegs, a cowpuncher, tells this one about himself. After a dance-hall fight in which he kills the owner, he must test his ability as a horseman, of which he has often boasted. His horse soon “pushes the country behind him” (p. 86—a common idiom in Russell) on the way out to camp, where he finds the friendly wrangler. We read, “…after tellin’ him my troubles, he bunches the remuda till I drop the loop on my top hoss” (p. 86). “After tellin’” is the first of more than a dozen dangling modifiers in *Trails Plowed Under*. Mounted again, Bowlegs must be armed; so the wrangler also gives him “all his catridges” (p. 86). “Catridges” is a common spelling in Russell, though in *Paper Talk*, p. 63, the spelling is “catriges”. Two hundred clattering miles later, Bowlegs must snare another mount to replace his “leg-weary pony” (p. 86). He sights some loose horses near water: “They’re all Injun stock, mostly mares, barrin’ one big, high-headed roan” (p. 86) with so many brands on his hide.
that "he resembles a brand-book" (p. 87) — indicative of a four-footed outlaw. Well, Bowlegs is another: this is his story of "A Pair of Outlaws." The roan, which Bowlegs captures and mounts — that's when "the ball opens" (p. 89) — carries him to freedom in a race so furiously fast that the pursuing Cheyennes are hardly a real threat: if their rifle balls hit Bowlegs, they "wouldn't break the hide" (p. 90). The story is a mixture of straight melodrama, tall-tale lingo, and clichés. Its purpose is to show the love of cowboy and horse.

"There's More Than One David" is a slight effort but one with suspense, as Rawhide recalls a latter-day David and Goliath. The Western David is a little sheepherder, and his "Goliar" (p. 173) is a gigantic town bully who scares people into offering him free drinks. He goes too far one day, however, when he tries a tin can to Shep's faithful dog. Shep charges into the street after the bully, who fires his six-gun at the smaller man's feet to make him dance. Shep, undaunted, seizes a handy rock, hurls it, and catches Goliar at the point of his chin. Not content with knocking him out, Shep grabs the bully's revolver and with it breaks his nose and jaw, and nearly tears off his ear. Rawhide concludes unsentimentally by reporting that "the last time I met him [Goliar] he's wearin' scars that's a map of the battle he had with David" (p. 176).

Finally comes "Longrope's Last Guard," a poignant lament, in which Rawhide begins with a disquisition on stampedes — their unpredictability, and their ferocity. Russell follows this exposition with an illustrative narration. Rawhide and his fellow cowpunchers were once down in Kansas approaching Dodge with seventeen hundred head. He and Longrope, an adept, likable Californian, are on first guard one night. Russell brilliantly sets his eerie stage: the cattle look comfortable, but they are too quiet. Longrope rides quietly along the line singing gently about Sam Bass. It is awesomely dark. Lightning suddenly spurts. And the Spanish longhorns explode to their
feet and charge straight out. Rawhide gallops to safety but in
the morning cannot find his buddy. "Somethin' tells me I
won't see Longrope, only part of him — that part that stays here
on earth when the man's gone" (p. 209). Soon Rawhide finds
the trampled corpse and fires six rapid shots to bring a mourn-
ful burial party. Russell narrowly avoids sentimentality as he
has an old hand explain, "Boys, Longrope is a prairie man,
an' if she was a little rough at times, she's been a good foster
mother. She cared for him while he's awake, let her nurse
him in his sleep." Rawhide concludes, with a bracing indiffer-
ence to grammar, that "It sounds lonesome, but he ain't alone,
'cause these old prairies has cradled many of his kind in their
long sleep" (p. 210). The whole story is masterly; especially
memorable are the description of the stampede and the pic-
torial, funereal finale.

One of Russell's most reliable critics has praised his writings,
in the following admirable sentence: "Perhaps they are prej-
udiced, but many people consider that Russell came closer
to capturing the authentic flavor of the country and people
he wrote about than any other writer of his time" (Renner,
"Rangeland Rembrandt," p. 27). Anyone who is tempted to
conclude prematurely that such a statement must be prepos-
terous is advised to read Russell's Trails Plowed Under before
discarding this neglected classic in favor of works by authors
perhaps wrongly known more widely.

Russell was an author in another sense. He wrote hundreds
of letters to friends and embellished his warm messages with
marvelous illustrations. Two books, Good Medicine (1930) and
Paper Talk (1962), together print 124 of his letters, with
almost no duplication (Paper Talk, p. 60; see also Linderman,
Recollections, for letters not in Good Medicine or Paper Talk).
Good Medicine is a finer art book, since many letters in it are
reproduced in color; but Paper Talk, though in black and
white, is professionally edited and annotated.
Together these books provide a generous sampling of Russell’s epistolary ability, if one may so demurely characterize uninhibited, warmly amiable, homely, zany, and ludicrously spelled letters. Russell must have been one of the world’s most generous letter writers, since he decorated most of his letters. He even drew pictures on their envelopes. On one stamped envelope, for example, is a cartoon of himself handing a mounted Indian the letter, with these printed words: “Take this to the Butte of many smokes [to] Chas Schatzlein Butte Mont” (Good Medicine, p. 149). It got there, all right, and was appreciatively saved. So were many other letters, whether they were sent to cowpunchers, ranchers, sheepmen, businessmen, bankers, artists, writers, actors, or simply miscellaneous friends.

Russell lavished the tall-tale technique of brilliant timing on the astonished recipients of this largess. For example, to accompany a wild sketch of a bronc bucking off its rider, he wrote: “There was a Twister at Haver [Havre] that hung up a bet of fifty Dollars that hed ride a certain hoss and fan him with his hat. He might of fanned him but he lost his hat an then got off to look for it” (Good Medicine, p. 56).

Some generous critics have termed Russell a poet. He was not. But his ludicrous doggerel is fun. To one friend he sent verses footing up to eleven stanzas, most of them illustrated in color. The effort begins harmlessly enough:

Here’s to all old timers, Bob,
They weren’t all square it’s true,
Some cashed in with their boots on—
Good old friends I knew.

Then he toasts different Western types—pioneers, miners, rustlers, “skinner[s] with a jerk line,” gamblers, stagecoach drivers, thieves, bullwhackers, and—comprehensively—all friends. But he ends with his most violent criticism ever:
Here's to Hell with the booster,  
The land is no longer free,  
The worst old timer I ever knew  
Looks dam good to me. (Good Medicine, pp. 38, 39)

Russell venomously hated all exploiters of his precious Old West, whether they were dirt farmers who turned the grass side down, skunk-wagon drivers, or real-estate “boosters” (Paper Talk, p. 68).

By contrast, perhaps the most poignant lines in his letters are the following, sent to an artist friend back in New Jersey: “The Red man was the true American They have almost gon. but will never be forgotten The history of how they fought for their count[r’y]y is written in blood a stain that time cannot grind out their God was the sun their Church all out doors their only book was nature and they knew all its pages” (Good Medicine, pp. xi, 127; see also Paper Talk, pp. 67, 71).

It is graceless—but fun—to point out that Russell spelled badly. One letter of 106 words contains twelve misspellings, while another of seventy-eight words has nine (Paper Talk, pp. 20, 108). His highest density of misspellings must surely be in the following concentrated little barrage, in which he calls condensed milk “som caned cow juce” (Paper Talk, p. 44).

Two of Russell’s letters stand apart from the rest. In one he describes the 1912 Calgary Stampede, of which he was a wide-eyed, boy-again spectator. In the other he confesses homesickness while he was in London in 1914 (Paper Talk, pp. 50-51, 59; once, he writes touchingly of “lonesumniss,” Paper Talk, p. 72). His most moving diction appears in his several similes and metaphors deriving from the trail.

Heres hoping the worst end of your trail is behind you  
That Dad Time be your friend from here to the end  
And sickness nor sorrow dont find you.

(Paper Talk, p. 120)
After we put on “a wooden over coat,” may we get safely to “the big range”—so hopes this gauche master of “ink talk” (*Paper Talk*, pp. 84, 89, 86).

It would be foolish to argue that Charles Marion Russell was a great letter writer, but I wish that he had sent me just one decorated missive. I would treasure it to the end of my trail. It would also be rash to compare the bulk of his fiction and essays with the best of the likes of Andy Adams, Mari Sandoz, Jack Schaefer, or Frank Waters. However, Russell’s writings are always absorbing, because of their sham-piercing humor and bright-sky authenticity. It is enough to add that his paintings, illustrations, and sculpture are the very best that the West has ever produced.
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