Legend maker| Charles M. Russell's historical perspective in his published stories and essays

Raphael Cristy

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University of Montana
LEGEND MAKER

Charles M. Russell's Historical Perspective
In His Published Stories and Essays

by

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An examination of the published stories and essays by Charles M. Russell raises questions about their historical context. This thesis examines Russell's historical viewpoint as depicted in the characters and events of his writings.

The most useful grouping of these stories fits them under four basic subject headings, Indians, Wildlife, Cattle, and Modern Times. With the primary focus of attention on Russell's published works, his personal correspondence is considered only as it sheds information about the people and issues otherwise under discussion.

Many of his letters have been published and others are accessible through museums and private collections. Several published biographies of Russell as well as autobiographies of his friends and contemporaries provide information which clarifies the accuracy of people and circumstances depicted in Russell's stories.

Many of Russell's written pieces appeared first in weekly newspaper sections distributed throughout Montana. Valuable background information related to his writings has also appeared in these historically-oriented newspaper sections. These pieces reveal as much about Russell's audience as about his stories. Other periodicals, especially Montana, The Magazine of Western History provide much information demonstrating the depth of Russell's stories. Many unpublished manuscripts and letters shed further light on Russell's topics and characters. The James B Rankin collection in the archives of the Montana Historical Society has been especially useful.

The perspective embodied by Russell's stories reveals the swift changes within the trans-Mississippi West throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century up to Russell's death in 1926. Russell's stories provide sharp social criticism, especially regarding the negative impacts of western expansion on Native American people and environmental degradation. Russell's skills as a humorist focused primarily on the foibles of his closest friends while providing well-crafted and authentic details that express much about the development of the American West. Russell's writing techniques suggest some influence from America's humorous folklore traditions. Serious or comic, Russell's stories reveal accurate human perspectives of a vital time in American history.
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Foreword

between the pen and the brush there is little
difference but I believe the man that makes
word pictures is the greater — C. M. Russell

Charles M. Russell (1864-1926) generated international
popularity for his fine art that depicted nineteenth
century life in America's trans-Mississippi west. In
addition to his well-known paintings, sketches and
sculptures, Russell also wrote and published several
dozen stories and essays that demonstrated his unusual
genius. Most of these works first appeared in Montana
newspapers and several regionally distributed books.
Since his death in 1926, a few published volumes of his
illustrated letters have expanded public appreciation
for Charlie Russell's personality and wit. Both the
published stories and the letters reflect Russell's
exceptional skills as a storytelling humorist and raconteur.
Russell's published stories demonstrate an especially
acute perspective of the American West, yet they have
been overlooked by both literary and historical commentators
in the decades since they first appeared in print.

The lack of serious consideration for Russell's
published works may be based on their form. At face
value, his writings displayed an unsophisticated charm
with seemingly uneducated rural language and droll humor
that belied their accuracy of detail and content. On
reconsideration, however, many of Russell's stories show a keen awareness of the rapidly evolving American West as it shifted from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. The historical focus in his tales ranged from the 1820's to the 1920's. Russell used several different narrative formats and provided important information for the historian and social scientist. What seemed to be light hearted folklore at first glance, actually personified some pivotal phases of the fast-changing west. The array of Russell's published works show a subtle sense of the magnitude of change that he witnessed during his lifetime in the American West.

Russell's casual writing style grew directly from his oral storytelling delivery. Numerous first-hand accounts testify to the memorable impact of Russell's storytelling in cow-camps, saloons, bunkhouses and ranch parlors. More than a decade after Russell's death, one fellow open-range cowboy recalled,

> At camp and elsewhere Charlie Russell was always the center of attraction. ... Russell always had a meal time story and the boys circled around him as close as possible, eating with legs crossed, plates on knees.

After years of telling his stories aloud, Russell committed some of them to paper in the colloquial slang of unlettered rural people, thus preserving the informal storytelling process of nineteenth century Montana. Russell's own letters and other biographical accounts
show that he used this same vernacular style when he spoke informally and when he told stories. Several accounts indicate that he told aloud many more stories than he ever published. Apparently, when the mood suited him, Russell created amusing tales spontaneously. A few versions of Russell's unpublished stories have survived in the narrative accounts of his friends like Frank Bird Linderman.  

Within his Montana region, Russell's reputation as a popular storyteller at least equaled his local reputation as a fine artist. Concerning the wider significance for his 'formal' writings, only Robert Gale, Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Pittsburgh, has given significant critical attention to Russell's published writings. In a literary critique published for the Boise State University Western Writers Series, Gale suggested that people might

... read Trails Plowed Under before dismissing this neglected classic in favor of works by authors perhaps known more widely.

In Russell's posthumous anthology of stories and essays, Trails Plowed Under, the value of many pieces has been obscured by arbitrary groupings under the nonrestrictive sub-headings "OLD WEST," "MANY TRAILS," "MAVERICKS AND STRAYS," and "WIDE RANGES." A more rewarding arrangement of these stories, especially for understanding the historical concepts and social values pervading the
narratives, would be under the topic headings, Indians, Wildlife, Range Cattle and Modern Times. By using these groupings, readers would have an improved chance to appreciate Russell's historical perspective as well as the interplay between his humor and social commentary.

Russell's Indian stories contain an abundance of social commentary, both blunt and subtle. The majority of the Indian tales maintain a serious tone. Conversely, the majority of the stories in the other categories tend to emphasize humor. Nevertheless, Russell's humorous yarns also deliver significant historical information.

Russell's comic works shared many characteristics with those identified as the "frontier humorists of the old southwest," (referring to the ante-bellum geography between Georgia and the Mississippi River). Writing in Georgia Scenes in 1835 as an early practitioner in the art, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet commented that the purpose of the frontier humorist

"...was to supply the chasm in history which has already been overlooked - the manner, customs, amusements, wit, dialect as they appear in all grades of society to an eye witness."

Storytellers like Russell and his old southwest counterparts used similar tricks of the trade, recreating the sense, in print, of people telling stories aloud - the "Mock Oral Tale" with the "Framework" opening and closing using the first narrator's voice. And, most important, was the accurate use of the local vernacular
for comic effects which exploits

   a conviction that Americans long found hilarious - that there is no necessary relationship between a man's learning and his knowledge or even his wisdom. 1

Like his predecessors, Russell was not a professional humorist and wrote "for amusement rather than for gain."

And, as Russell did several generations later, the southwestern frontier humorists

   were quick to seize upon the comic aspects of the rough life about them and graphically sketched the humorous and colorful local happenings, the oddities in rustic pioneer character and the tall tales that were going the rounds of the locality. 11

Creating humor out of everyday life, these writers consistently used "real incidents and real characters," 12 rather than fabricate entire stories. Consciously or unconsciously, Charlie Russell used some of these well established techniques in his written versions of the stories that made him a sought-after storyteller with socialite art patrons as well as common cowboys.

   Despite these similarities to traditional folk story techniques, however, Charlie Russell's comic yarns did not fit many models or molds. As Gale noted,

     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 Henry James. 13

Similarities existed with folklore themes and even other contemporary writers, but Russell's story sources were
quite specifically local. One critic altogether missed the abundance of historical origins in Russell stories by stating, "most of them seem to have come straight out of folklore, just as Charlie claimed they did."\textsuperscript{14}

In 1903, Russell began to travel annually with his wife, Nancy, to sell his artworks. At social gatherings in cities like New York and Los Angeles, he impressed groups of accomplished celebrities and high society urbanites with his yarn spinning, but only if someone could get him to talk. When Russell did not sense a mutual understanding and appreciation for his western story subjects, he felt reluctant to perform. Will Rogers added an Introduction to Russell's collection of stories, \textit{Trails Plowed Under}, writing as if he were speaking directly to his old friend Charlie (who had just died), and recalling his own response to the painter's stories.

\begin{quote}
Why you never heard me open my mouth when you was around, and you never knew any of our friends that would let me open it as long as there was a chance to get you to tell another one. I always did say that you could tell a story better than any man that ever lived.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

While slow to start, Russell's enthusiasm for storytelling carried considerable momentum when the right circumstances prevailed. As one of Russell's family stated,

\begin{quote}
And I swear to God he never stopped talking spinning yarns. Lots of 'em were in \textit{Trails Plowed Under} and in his letters ... He was an articulate son-of-a-gun.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Russell struggled to write and once complained to
his friend, actor William S. Hart, about writers' block, stating that he was "average on talk," but if handed a pen and paper, "Im deaf an dum."\(^{17}\) In 1906, Russell published "A Savage Santa Claus," in a special Christmas section of the *Great Falls Tribune*. Then, in 1907, 1908, and 1909, *Outing Magazine* published five of his more serious stories.\(^{18}\) From 1916 through 1921, Russell published twenty more stories in the special newspaper sections distributed to weekly and daily newspapers throughout the state by the newly-formed Montana Newspaper Association (MNA).\(^{19}\) At four stories per year, his editors found that motivating Charlie to write was "like pulling teeth."\(^{20}\)

Through the final five years of his life (1921-1926), Charlie Russell published most of his forty-seven stories and essays with the MNA in two locally distributed books, *Rawhide Rawlins Stories* and *More Rawhides*.\(^{21}\) In 1927, a year after the author's death, Russell's widow, Nancy republished all the *Rawhides* stories (except one) with nine other tales in a single volume, *Trails Plowed Under*.\(^{22}\) Back when the first *Rawhide Rawlins* book appeared in 1921, Montana was experiencing a severe economic depression and drought.\(^{23}\) At the time of publication, Russell told a Great Falls newspaper reporter,

> These are hard times for a lot of folks ... If this book is going to give anybody a laugh and make him forget his troubles for a while, I want the price low enough so that people to whom a dollar means a dollar will feel that they're getting their money's worth.\(^{24}\)
Charlie Russell purposely priced the "Rawhide" books at one dollar. Clearly, he wanted "a lot of folks" in Montana to know these stories.

Russell had no distant, national audience in mind when he constructed his humorous stories to embarrass specific close friends. His comic exaggerations made characters who were too ludicrous to claim a positive mythic status, but instead seemed more like buffoons. As mythic models, Russell's clownish anti-heroes more closely resembled the coyote-like figure known in Blackfeet and northern Rocky Mountain Indian traditions as "Napi," the ribald and bumbling demi-god. Charlie Russell, "an old trickster" according to writer Bill Kittredge, created both amusing and serious local legends from unusual events happening to specific people. And in the process of legend-making, Russell dramatized regional history and supplied cultural vitality to a national perspective of the American West.

Historian Richard White has commented on the distinctions between folklore-oriented "mythmakers" and historians.

Mythmakers usually draw from history; they use real people or actual incidents. They have no compunctions, however, about changing details, adding characters, and generally rearranging events in order to make the meaning of their stories clearer. ... Historians and mythmakers thus both seek to order the past in a way that conveys meaning. Both tell stories. But historians,
also by the code of their craft, cannot reorder facts or invent new ones. Historians are thus more cramped and constricted than mythmakers in their attempts to explain what the past "means."26

Russell's humorous local legends shared many of White's "mythmaking" characteristics, including his eagerness to distort information about actual events for comic effect. Freed from the ambition and restraint of strict historiography, Russell's legend-making stories informally delivered cultural and historical information that has enriched and informed subsequent generations. White has articulated the value of this process to historians.

Myths themselves thus become historical sources reflecting the values and concerns of the period and people who produced them.27

Russell's published stories provided non-participants a chance to savor some cultural and historical events peculiar to nineteenth century Montana life. Russell did not simply limit his literary attention to the seemingly idyllic earlier times in Montana, however. His broad spectrum of narrative subjects also enabled readers to feel the constant motion of transitional change within impermanent social conditions. In the final grouping of stories, Russell portrayed some of the conflicting forces then at work in many parts of the American West during the early twentieth century. By reading about Russell's specific Montana people, we observe human responses, representative of those found in the American
West, to such challenges as new technologies, racial disharmony, gender differentiation, wilderness degradation and economic stress. In Russell's writings, whether his subjects were typical or unique in the trans-Mississippi West, his specific people and events convey a larger historical perspective.

By using colloquial speech patterns and brief oral tradition story formats for his writings, Russell relinquished chances for serious literary or historical consideration in favor of amusing his contemporary western friends. Nevertheless, with an acute regional focus, Charlie Russell's stories have provided useful information in their accuracy of details and situations. Russell's tales serve serious readers as a lens for viewing and interpreting the transition of the American West from sparsely populated semi-wilderness into a western version of modern civilization.

The purpose of this essay is to explore the ways Russell's published stories inform readers about the history of the American West. Whenever Russell's personal experiences reveal information helpful to interpreting his literary orientation and purpose, they play a part in this thesis. Many of Russell's statements in his correspondence to family, friends and business associates provided more forceful opinions than he chose to express for publication. Citations from Russell's letters as
well as documented statements by his contemporaries also figure into this exploration as they illuminate the content or context of his writings. Biographical issues seem inseparable from this discussion of Russell's stories. Mythologist Joseph Campbell said it with his observation:

The folk tale is the primer of the picture language of the soul.\textsuperscript{28}

* * *

\textsuperscript{28}
Foreword Notes

Charlie Russell and many of his quotable contemporaries routinely made spelling, punctuation and grammar errors in their informal correspondence. No extra notation, such as the abbreviation "sic," appears in these citations to denote their frequent original mistakes. Except for editorial clarifications within parentheses ( ), each quotation is cited as originally written.

10. Ibid. p 192.
12. Ibid. p 28.

14. Jan Harold Brunvand, "From Western Folklore to Fiction in the Stories of Charles M. Russell," Western Review, A Journal of the Humanities, (Silver City, New Mexico, Western New Mexico University, Volume 5, #1, Summer, 1968) p 47. This essay cited no source for any claim of Russell's that his stories were pure folklore (hereafter, Brunvand, "Folklore/Fiction").


16. Fergus Mead, letter to James B. Rankin, 1938, MHS collection #162, Box 3, folder 3-12.


19. The Montana Newspaper Association (hereafter, MNA), founded by W. W. Cheeley, Percy Rabin, and O. F. Wadsworth, published a four-page editorial and advertising newspaper section, with special emphasis on historical Montana subjects, in Great Falls from 1916 through 1942. An estimated 100-120 local daily and weekly newspapers subscribed to this service, out of 174 existing (in 1928) Montana newspapers. Original editions, as well as microfilm samples of most copies of these sections reside at the Montana Historical Society Library, Helena, Montana.


21. Charles M. Russell, Rawhide Rawlins Stories, (Great Falls, Montana Newspaper Association, 1921), seventeen stories, with Foreword (hereafter, Russell, Rawhide); Also, More Rawhides, 1925, nineteen stories/essays, with Preface (hereafter, Russell, M. Rawhides). Three stories published in MNA inserts were not reprinted in these Rawhides books.


27. Ibid. p 616.

Section One

Indians of the Transitional West

More than any of his other yarns about cowpunchers, trappers, hunters and gamblers, Charlie Russell's Indian stories reflected strong social and cultural observations. Russell's writings about Indians merit close attention because they have provided the clearest expression of his sense of the negative human impact of the transformation of the trans-Mississippi West from frontier wilderness to modern "civilization."

Russell's stories also challenged Montana settlers' racist assumptions about Indians. Of Russell's friends and contemporaries, only a few people such as "Teddy Blue" Abbott and Frank Bird Linderman, shared his positive views of Indian people. Russell added blunt social commentary to his Indian stories to inform his Montana audience; comments which are especially informative for later generations. The serious tone of most of his Indian stories has provided modern readers a balancing contrast with his humorous treatment of other story topics.

On the title page of a copy of George Bird Grinnell's history of the Cheyenne Indians, The Fighting Cheyenne, Russell painted an illustration and wrote,

The Red man was the true American They have almost gon but will never be forgotten The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood a stain that time
Russell's strong sense of admiration for the Cheyenne and other Indian people began with his own family. His great uncles, the Bent brothers founded Bent's Fort in south-eastern Colorado in 1834. Charlie's great-uncle, William Bent, married the daughter of a Cheyenne chief and one of their sons, George Bent, provided primary information for Grinnell's Cheyenne books. According to historian Bernard DeVoto, "The Bents were the fairest manipulators of Indians in the history of the mountain trade and maintained an elsewhere unheard-of standard of honor in dealing with them." Russell was aware of the Bents' positive interactions with the Cheyennes and other Indian tribes. He summed up his own sense of the injustice in white/Indian conflicts in a brief essay written near the end of his life: "We stole every inch of land we got from the Injun but we didn't get it without a fight, and Uncle Sam will remember him a long time."

Charlie Russell saw the gradual disappearance of the Indians as a tragic transformation of the western frontier. Like most Americans of his time, Russell believed that Indian tribal and racial identities would soon disappear—killed off by military force or starvation or by Federally-mandated assimilation into American society. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he believed
such a fate was unjust.

Two of Russell's letters expressed his dismay with the changes forced on the Indians by misguided government paternalism. He told Harry Stanford,

... the only real American ... dances under the flag that made a farmer out of him once nature gave him everything he wanted. now the agent gives him bib overalls hooks his hands around the plow and tells him it's a good thing push it along maybe it is but they're having a Hell of a time proving it. ... nature was not always kind to these people but she never lied to them.

In a letter to U.S. Senator Paris Gibson, Russell used his dry wit to make a case against assimilation.

Speaking of Indians. I understand there is a man back in your camp Jones by name who has sent out orders to cut all the Indians hair if Jones is stuck to have this barber work done he'd better tackle it himself as no one out here is longing for the job the Indians say whoever starts to cut their hair will get an Injun hair cut and you know that calls for a certain amount of hide ...

Charlie Russell's sentiments opposed the Indian policies of the Federal government. And his ideas grew out-of-step with the attitudes of Montana's local white communities. Robert Sutherlin's newspaper, The Rocky Mountain Husbandman, published in White Sulphur Springs, near the Judith Basin where Russell worked as a cowboy in the 1880s and '90s, stated that the Indians would have to remain on the reservations or face extermination. They must be assimilated and their tribal structure and way of life destroyed, the Husbandman preached in editorials
from 1882 through 1886. An especially rabid editorial appeared in another Judith region newspaper, under the title "The Red Devils," and stated,

During the past summer small lodges of Bloods, Piegans and Crows have been prowling around the Musselshell, Judith and Missouri valleys, killing stock and stealing horses ... the property and belongings of white settlers ... There should be no further favoritism shown the thieving red devils by the military authorities ... The Noble (?) Red Man will speedily realize that if he desires to exist on this sphere he must remain on the grounds set aside for his exclusive occupation. This is as it should be, yet the big-hearted, philanthropical, goggle-eyed, heathen-converters and Indian civilizers of Yankeedom cannot understand it and will probably resist.

In contrast with these prevailing attitudes and policies, Russell gently confronted local racism, as shown in his letter to Sen. Gibson.

the subject of conversation was the Indian question. The dealer, Kicking George, was an old time sport who spoke of cards as an industry...The kicker allowed an Injun had no more right in this country than a Coyote. I told him what he said might be right, but there were folks coming to the country on the new rail road that thought the same way about gamblers and he wouldn't winter many times till he'd find the wild Indian would go but would only break the trail for the gambler.

Hatred for Indians in western regions lingered into the twentieth century and, in Montana, it focused with special intensity on the small wandering bands of Chippewa and Cree Indians who collected in squalid camps on the outskirts of Helena and other towns. Russell joined efforts by Helena political activist/writer Frank Linderman
and Great Falls newspaperman William Bole to help the destitute Indians who were suffering during an especially severe period of winter cold. In the face of vivid hostility to these landless Indians, Russell instigated a local relief fund beginning with a candidly impromptu announcement in the Great Falls Tribune.

It doesn't look very good for the people of Montana if they will sit still and see a lot of women and children starve to death in this kind of weather. ... Lots of people seem to think that Indians are not human beings at all and have no feelings. These kind of people would be the first to yell for help if their grub pile was running short and they didn't have enough clothes to keep out the cold, and yet because Rocky Boy and his bunch are Indians, they are perfectly willing to let them die of hunger and cold without lifting a hand. I know that the majority of people in the state are not that way, however, and if they are called upon they will be glad to help the Indians out.

With the efforts of Linderman, Bole, and others, Russell helped rally sufficient aid for the destitute Indians to survive the tough winter. In subsequent years, Russell quietly supported Linderman's unrelenting and ultimately successful efforts to secure an official reservation for the Chippewa and Cree tribes on the former site of Fort Assiniboine near Havre, Montana.

Charlie Russell understood the necessity for the Indians' practical adaptation to the dominant European-American society. Nevertheless, in his Indian stories, Russell consistently expressed his admiration for the least assimilated Indian, the traditional warrior, forced
to live within a reservation but cooperating in few other ways with white authorities. Nevertheless, there was nothing too "goggle-eyed" in Russell's vision of Indians. He showed a serious awareness of the lethal violence often associated with old nomadic tribal ways. In his story, "The War Scars of Medicine-Whip," Russell started a narrative about a deadly clash between Blackfeet and Sioux warriors with a look at the battle instigator.

That old savage is the real article, an' can spin yarns of killin's and scalpin's that would make your hair get up like the roach on a buck antelope.

Although he used the racist language common to nineteenth century Montana, Russell loaded a negative term like "savage" with an ironic sense of admiration. His use of "savage" in several stories suggested the inverse meaning, much the way he used "gentlemen" when referring to the hunters who annihilated the wild buffalo. Charlie Russell clearly appreciated the unassimilated warrior's independence and loyalty to his native culture.

I admire this red-handed killer. The Whites have killed his meat an' taken his country, but they've made no change in him. He's as much Injun as his ancestors that packed their quivers loaded with flint-pointed arrows, an' built fires by rubbin' sticks together. He laughs at priests an' preachers. Outside his lodge on a tripod hangs a bullhide shield an' medicine bag to keep away the ghosts. He's got a religion of his own, an' it tells him the buffalo are comin' back. He lights his pipe an' smokes with the sun the same as his folks did a thousand winters behind him. When he cashes in, his shadow goes prancin' off on a shadow pony, joinin' those that have gone before, to run shadow buffalo. He's
seen enough of white men, an don't want to throw
in with them in no other world.  

For Charlie Russell, the forced assimilation of
Indians into an alien way of life was a futile exercise
destroying a valuable culture. Few people in nineteenth
century America challenged the assumption that Indians
would be better-off trying to live an imitation of the
supposedly 'superior' European-American lifestyle. Most
Americans believed that "it was necessary to obliterate
all vestiges of native cultures" and make Indians into
an imitation of white people.  

Even the most compassionate
Indian sympathizers, so bitterly scorned by the "Red
Devils" editorial, advocated the sacrifice of Native
American cultures and religions and believed that
Christianity alone could save Indians from total
destruction.  

Russell disagreed and expressed plenty
of compassion for anyone who resisted or fell victim
to the western frontier regions' transitional momentum.

Although Charlie Russell portrayed Medicine Whip's
situation on the reservation in realistic terms, he was
not trying to write documented history. Nevertheless,
the details of characterization, setting and narrative
style seem consistently authentic. Canadian historian
Hugh Dempsey noted the plausibility of Russell's story
about Medicine Whip as Blackfeet oral history despite
the absence of any "Medicine Whip" (or other Indian names
associated with Russell stories) among registered (American)
Blackfeet or (Canadian) Blood\textsuperscript{23} tribal name records.

...he could have listened to the tales of the past, and he may even have heard tales from the Blackfoot leader himself. Whether or not Medicine Whip ever existed, the adventure Russell recounted could easily have been told to him, as he said, while he was in camp along the Bow River\textsuperscript{24}

In another mixture of fact and fiction, Russell's narrative titled "The Trail of the Reel Foot"\textsuperscript{25} portrayed an early frontier transition when white fur trappers first were active in the West. Subtitled "A Montana Trapper's Story," "Reel Foot" first appeared in 1916 in the four-page insert sections supplied to smaller Montana daily and weekly newspapers by the Montana Newspaper Association (MNA).\textsuperscript{26} Russell based his story on accounts of a Ft. Pierre, S.D. half-blood Indian, "Clubfoot George Boyd", whose frostbite-amputated feet left snow tracks that confused a band of Gros Ventre warriors in the winter of 1864-65.\textsuperscript{27}

In Russell's story, the encounter between the white and Indian cultures became complicated by the fur trapper's completely reversed clubfoot. "His right foot's straight ahead, natural; the left, p'intin' back in his trail." Russell crafted a humorous scenario out of the irony of Indian confusion with unusual footprints in the snow. At first the humor seems based on a patronizing attitude to Indian superstition which attributed the opposing footprints to "two one-legged men travelin' in opposite
directions," Later, when the Sioux warriors saw Reel Foot's actual physical defect, they respected his condition as an honorable wound, probably suffered in battle or torture, and abstained from killing this white intruder. The Sioux cultural attitude respecting human disfigurement was completely different from the ridicule and disgust typical in Russell's audience. Russell's narrator, Dad Lane articulated that unsympathetic attitude in a joke. "I never do look at him without wonderin' which way he's goin' to start off." In contrast, the Sioux values about disfigurement spared Reel Foot's life. Russell's presentation of the humanistic nature of dangerous Indian warriors in a humorous context contradicted white stereotypes of blood-thirsty Indian 'braves.' This encounter between nomadic warriors and a partially disabled fur trapper dramatized the wide gap between Indian and white cultures early in the evolution of the pre-industrial wilderness frontier.

Another frontier transition issue, inter-racial marriage between European-American men and Native American women generated considerable controversy in proper white society. Russell dealt directly with the sensitive topic in his story, "How Lindsay Turned Indian," This narrative may also reflect some autobiographical elements. While still working as a cowboy in 1891, Russell had written to a friend concerning an earlier opportunity to marry
an Indian woman.

I had a chance to marry Young (L)ouse's daughter he is blackfoot Chief It was the only chance I ever had to marry into good famley but I did not like the way my intended cooked dog and we broke of(f) our engagement

Russell's sense of humor deflected attention from his serious consideration of an inter-racial marriage which was in opposition to white social standards of his time. Back in 1888, Charlie Russell returned to the Montana cattle ranges, still unmarried, after a summer near a Blood Indian encampment outside High River, Alberta. He never mentioned having a romantic relationship with an Indian woman in any other published story or letter, leaving his personal history open to extensive popular speculation. Nevertheless, Russell's other discussions of inter-racial romance between Indian women and white men reflected a special tolerance.

Charlie Russell had friendships with white men married to Indian women, including James Willard Schultz, Charles E. Conrad, E.C. "Teddy Blue" Abbott, and Granville Stuart, as well as less prominent men like Jack Griffin. Many white men in inter-racial marriages experienced a diminished stature in white culture, starting with the fur trade era of the 1820s and continuing in the years since Russell's death. DeVoto commented about the mountain men who took Indian wives. "These are the ones whom the settlers hated the most, alleging against them every villainy that could
be alleged against Indians. In 1937, a Montana woman gossiped in a letter to a Russell researcher, "I think I told you I saw James Willard Schultz in Great Falls at the Rainbow (Hotel). He impressed me as the sort of man who would love his Indian wife the best because he would like the servility." Active white hostility directed at inter-racial marriage subsides very slowly in Montana.

In the opening words of "Lindsay," Russell's narrator, 'Dad Lane' mentioned his disagreement with the typical negative social stigma for these inter-racial marriages. "Most folks don't bank much on squaw-men, but I've seen some mighty good ones doubled up with she-Injuns." Charlie Russell was fully aware of typical white attitudes about mixed marriages between Indian women and white men (who were often defamed with the label, "squawman"). He created the 'Lindsay' story to answer white negativity toward romantic inter-racial relations.

"Lindsay" first appeared in Outing Magazine in 1907. When it reappeared in 1927, in Trails Plowed Under, Russell had changed a pivotal moment in the story. In this newer version, Lindsay gained acceptance with the Indians by lighting the chief's pipe with sunlight focused through a magnifying glass. Hugh Monroe ("Rising Wolf") supposedly experienced the same situation. James Willard Schultz included a profile of Monroe in many of his books,
including descriptions of Monroe's pipe-lighting trick that enabled him to become the first white man to live among the Blackfeet. Russell used Hugh Monroe's experiences as the model for some of "Lindsay." In Russell's story, the introduction of alien European technology pushed the Blackfeet into another frontier transition, as white and Indian cultures overlapped and inter-married.

In his periodic contacts with Native Americans, Russell accumulated information which appeared in his artworks as well as his stories. Russell spoke with cautious modesty of his own direct experiences with Indians. "My Indian study came from observation and by living with the Blackfeet in Alberta for about six months. I don't know much about them even now; they are a hard people to savvy." Russell's narrator for the essay, "Injuns," known only by the name "Murphy," warned, "If I told only what I know about Injuns, I'd be through right now." While living through the frontier transformation into white-dominated modern times, Russell recognized the complex and conservative Indian social relationships that did not readily embrace outsiders.

In the transitions of the final quarter of the nineteenth century, white domination of the northern plains eliminated the buffalo and brought famine to Indian communities. Reflecting these changes, Russell
introduced the issues of food and starvation at the beginning of his Indian story, "Finger-That-Kills Wins His Squaw." The story's main character appeared when some cowboys, including the narrator, deliver a herd of government cattle for distribution to the Blackfeet,

There's an old Injun comes visitin' our camp, an' after he feeds once you can bet on him showin' up 'bout noon every day. If there's a place where an Injun makes a hand, it's helpin' a neighbor hide grub, an' they ain't particular about quality - it's quantity they want. Uncle Sam's Injuns average about one good meal a week; nobody's got to graze this way long till a tin plate loaded with beans looks like a Christmas dinner.

Here Russell accommodated the typical racist assumptions shared by his white Montana audience, suggesting that Indians are 'helpful' or willing to work only when the time comes to put away food. Then he presented the blunt verbal picture of people suffering starvation at the whim of the government. Russell used humor to make his audience more receptive to disturbing information that they were normally unwilling to consider, detailing harsh transitions in the lives of Indian people.

More troubling than food shortages, "Curley's Friend" told a story of an attempted massacre. Russell's narrator, "Curley," forcibly interrupted a fellow cowboy's systematic shooting of a group of Bannock Indians. Russell's hero should not be too compassionate for the Indian victims, however, or he might have been labeled a "big-hearted, philanthropical, goggle-eyed, heathen converter" by
Russell's audience. So Russell had Curley start his own story with a disclaimer that probably seemed open-minded for Montana in the 1880s. "'I ain't no Injun lover,' says he, 'but I'm willin' to give any man a square shake.'"^50

Curley's good deed saved his own life later when the leader of a Bannock war party recognized him and spared his life on a day when four other whites in the area died in battles with these warriors. When finishing this tale, Curley negated a popular anti-Indian cliche of the nineteenth century." 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."^51 Through the process of informal story-telling, Russell manipulated popular assumptions and attitudes about Indians to subtly place his divergent ideas in the minds of his audience.

Throughout American frontier transitions, the unjustifiable killing of Indian people both by military and civilian intruders wrote an unflattering history "in blood," according to Russell's Fighting Cheyenne inscription, "a stain that time cannot grinde out."^52 Russell could have gained inspiration for this murderous yarn from a grim story in the 1924 Montana Newspaper Association insert sections, titled, "Horse Prairie Cowboys' Private Cemetary."^53 The article told a more appalling version of the Curley scenario, minus the life-saving
hero. According to this unsigned newspaper piece, cowboys on Montana's southwestern ranges, when caught-up in horse and cattle reprisal raids with the local Bannack Indians, began occasionally killing their opponents - men, women and children - and dropping the bodies in an abandoned mine shaft. Hiding the grisly evidence prevented all-out war with the sizable Bannack tribe as well as the chance of a stern reprimand by the local law officers.

If Charlie Russell gained inspiration for his pro-Indian yarn from this newspaper account, he did not absorb the journalist's flippant attitude about the murdered Indians.

The cowboys returned the fire with the result that all of the Indians including the squaws were soon in shape to be "snaked" (roped and dragged behind a horse) to the graveyard. ... and to this day the old shaft is the sepulchre of a dozen or more Bannack braves, as well as a few squaws and papooses.

Since the narrator, Curley, appeared in this account only, it would seem consistent with Russell's other stories that this yarn most likely gained inspiration from a personal rather than a printed source. Whether "Curley's Friend" came directly from Russell's imagination as a response to atrocities in the "Bannock Outbreak" of 1877 -'78, or was heard from a real storyteller named Curley, Russell purposely brought his audience face-to-face with the unpleasant 'dark side' of frontier transformation into so-called civilized society.
Not every Russell story about Indians portrayed them as heroes or victims. "Mormon Murphy's (Misplaced) Confidence" detailed an incident in which an Indian killed an innocent white man and was, in turn, killed by the story narrator, 'Dad Lane.' In the final sentence, the narrator revealed that the unnamed Indian was part of the Nez Pierce tribe under Chief Joseph who were fleeing across Montana for Canada in 1878. Dad Lane's dead partner was Mormon Murphy, a man said to be "good-hearted till he's foolish, an' so honest he thinks everybody else is on the square." The Indian feigned friendship with a bogus handshake to shoot Murphy. Only Dad Lane's intuitive caution and fast reactions saved him from a similar fate.

Russell's narrator expressed no awareness or sympathy for the harsh treatment suffered by the once-peaceful Nez Perce people. He made no comment about their especially desperate circumstances, including having just fought several bloody battles to escape from pursuing army troops under Generals Howard and Miles. Dad Lane simply understood that "that damn snake" murdered "the best natured man I ever knowed, (who was) always wearin' a smile an' lookin' at the bright side of things." Only Dad Lane's concern about retaliation prevented him from taking revenge on the dead Indian and skinning the body from head to toe.

Charlie Russell's positive attitude towards Indians, expressed clearly in his other stories, seems absent
here. There was, nevertheless, no hatred for all Indians expressed by Russell's narrator. Dad Lane has killed an Indian in self-defence, but despite his anger and sorrow for the loss of his friend Murphy, he did not condemn the entire race. He made sense of the incident with words about the dead warrior being part of Chief Joseph's Nez Perce band. Russell knew that his audience had more awareness than usual for the plight of these Nez Perce people, making further social commentary unnecessary. Russell's primary message in "Mormon Murphy" seems to be that naive friendliness offered to people being pushed to extreme efforts of self-preservation can be fatal.

"Dunc McDonald" was a more lighthearted adventure story and may be Russell's only Indian yarn featuring the main character's actual name. Duncan McDonald was the son of a Scottish fur trader and a Nez Perce woman, and ran a trading post for many years on Montana's Flathead Indian reservation. McDonald was a self-educated intellectual, a good storyteller who wrote some valuable oral history accounts for a Montana newspaper of Chief Joseph's Nez Perce break-out.

Charlie Russell heard Duncan McDonald tell this buffalo hunt story at the Ronan buffalo roundup of 1909. That year a newspaper photographer from the Toronto Globe attended the roundup of some of America's few surviving
wild buffalo for shipment to Canada. This newspaperman paid special attention to Russell and McDonald.

Friday, May 20 ... We sit around a large campfire all evening, telling stories and talking .. The star performer was Charlie Russell, the ex-cowboy and present artist of western life. He is fine and voluble, constantly talking and full of stories. May 22 ,, Duncan McDonald came along and regaled us with Indian stories & reminiscences of his own for upward of two hours. It was most interesting & we had quite a discussion over the relative standards of morality of the white and red men. He is well read & bright, though somewhat stolid, as befits men with red man's blood. .. May 23 We had beefsteak & onions, after that a lot of Indian lore from Duncan McDonald & bed at 11.

At this buffalo deportation roundup, Russell must have heard plenty of buffalo hunt stories, including the one he chose to re-tell in 1925 under the title "Dunc McDonald" in More Rawhides. In McDonald's story, the white man's crude flintlock firearm provided one shot only and young Dunc barely survived the fury of a mortally wounded buffalo. Russell used the rural voice of narrator 'Rawhide Rawlins' rather than quote directly from McDonald's own slightly stilted and formal style of speech. McDonald spoke neither in the French/English patois then typical of many other mixed-blood people in the Northwest nor the pidgin English of tribal people struggling with a foreign language. A reporter who heard McDonald retell this story quoted him as saying, "A fellow thinks fast in that kind of predicament." By contrast, Russell wrote, "... Dunc ain't slow slippin' his hold." By
having old 'Rawhide Rawlins' tell the yarn, Russell maintained the narrative continuity of his other stories and held his audience with their familiar speech patterns.

"My last long visit with Charlie," commented McDonald in a 1931 interview, "was when I undertook to help move the Pablo herd of buffalo to Canada." In the sixteen years between 1909, when Russell received this story from McDonald, and 1925, when he wrote it down, variations developed between the two versions. An incident not mentioned in McDonald's 1934 account appeared in Russell's version as a poetic moment of Indian hand sign language, stating, "The old man signs that the gun is loaded, and one ball is enough for any good hunter. The wolf hunts with what teeth he's got." (emphasis added) McDonald appreciated Russell's knowledge and skills with signing. "Charlie was a great student of the sign language." said the eighty-two-year-old man, "and with his death passed the greatest white expert on the subject."

Like many aspects of the transitional western frontier that Russell enjoyed, Indian sign language was disappearing from everyday use by the 1920's. Russell's basic attitude about most frontier changes became obvious when he began "Dunc McDonald", with this sentiment: "Like all things that happen that's worth while, it's a long time ago."

The grim side of buffalo hunting appeared in Russell's story, "Dad Lane's Buffalo Yarn." Russell's 1880 arrival
in Montana enabled him to see the final open range herds of wild buffalo before their nearly complete annihilation in 1883.  

Before Dad Lane told his yarn, the lead-off narrator, Long Wilson, described how the professional buffalo hunters did their bloody work, killing dozens of animals at each spot.

Then this cold-blooded proposition in the waller settles down to business, droppin' one at a time an' easin' up now an' agin to cool his gun, but never for long till he sees through the smoke the ground covered with still, brown spots ... 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."  

A story of buffalo destruction was not Russell's main purpose, but merely a preliminary statement to Dad Lane's description of survival with an Indian partner who had a dual identity. Raised with white people, this Indian used the anglicized name 'Joe Burke.' Just under the surface of his white man's clothes and language, however, resided his Indian identity, 'Bad Meat.' Although his translated name seems negative, Bad Meat proved himself a good partner. When the the two men fought for their lives with a war party, the Indian shed his 'white' clothes.

When it's light, I'm surprised at Bad Meat's appearance. Up to now he's wearin' white man's clothes, but this morning he's back to the clout, skin leggin's, an shirt ... He notices my surprise an' tells me it ain't good medicine for an Indian to die with white men's clothes.

Bad Meat helped Dad Lane survive both the battle
and near-starvation on a burned-over range. By the end of the story, Dad Lane was very glad for the Indian's traditional mind and abilities. Russell showed that Indian companionship and know-how had the highest value in absolute life-or-death situations. No doubt Russell wanted his white Montana contemporaries to understand this survival value in the face of assimilation policies then in force on Indian reservations.

Dunc McDonald and Joe Burke/Bad Meat provided examples of transitional characters in Charlie Russell's stories. They manifested the increasingly blurred distinction between the lives of Native and European-American peoples. As Russell put it at the end of his essay, "Injuns," "A few more generations an' there won't be a full-blood American left."  

The ultimate cultural bridge between the Indian and European American worlds in Charlie Russell's stories was not a human but rather a horse. Russell's story "The Ghost Horse" directly connected the days of the Indian's buffalo range and the white man's cattle business. The horse hero also connected Charlie Russell personally with the buffalo hunting culture of the plains Indians.

Russell wrote this story from his own experience and gave it to the students at Great Falls High School to put into the annual yearbook. It appeared in Roundup Annual for 1919 with the title, "The Olden Days."
writing style in this narrative lacked all of the rural 'cow camp' slang that Charlie expressed in his other stories. Apparently, he wrote this yarn in 'contemporary' English to communicate directly with his younger audience.

Russell's story followed the life of a horse that was raised by the Crow Indians to be a buffalo runner, stolen by the Piegan Blackfeet, and sold to a cowboy who was the author himself. Russell's narrative focused primarily on the Indian days, including the raid by the Piegans that nearly caused the death of the horse and earned it the negative title ''Ghost Horse.'" When it finally became the cowboy's property, the horse encountered the newly dominant culture of the cattle herds.

Near the story's end, the narrative shifted slightly so the reader can see everything through the horse's eyes. Tied outside a saloon, the horse witnessed a fatal gunfight. This wise horse comprehended an important human value not appreciated by many of Russell's white contemporaries. "Paint knew then that the white man was no different from the red. They both kill their own kind." Russell's viewpoint, as seen through the horse's mind, found no moral difference between Indian battles for territorial sovereignty and the white man's barroom shoot-out.

The final paragraphs of the story summed up the life of the Ghost Horse, the "paint" horse that Russell
called "Monty." Russell's description, without the help of a fictitious narrator, highlighted a frontier urban transformation as the pinto and his cowboy master, along with another horse and rider, passed into the new town of Great Falls.

... and their ponies, which knew no lights but Nature's, jumped the great shadows made by the arc lights at the street crossings. They passed rows of saloons, dance halls, and gambling houses... Both men were dressed as cow hands, and the only difference in their clothes was a bright colored, French half-breed sash, worn by the light-haired man.

Russell brought the horse which was familiar only with Nature's lights into the garish urban frontier. The Ghost Horse lived in both Indian and white cultures and saw them as different but morally equal. Charlie Russell's atypical red sash appeared for the only mention in all of his stories, a fragment of mixed-blood Indian life, linking Russell with Indians and setting him apart from whites. As the cowboy and his buffalo-culture horse arrived in Great Falls, Russell's writings on the evolving frontier also arrived at the threshold of a new phase.

The Indian stories of Charles M. Russell provided a strong sense of his values regarding the impact of European-American culture and technology on native individuals. To attract and hold the attention of his audiences, both the ones he addressed in person and those he spoke to from the printed page, Russell used the common language and racial assumptions of his own times. The
harsh racism expressed by some of his narrator-characters
drew Russell's white audience into range for hearing
his genuine sense of human equality. In the opening words
of "Finger-That-Kills Wins His Squaw," Russell's narrator,
"Squaw" Owens made just such a maneuver.

... "That story that Dad Lane tells the other
night 'bout his compadre getting killed off,
sure shows the Injun up," says "Squaw" Owens.
"Injuns is born bushwackers; they believe in
killin' off their enemy an' ain't particular
how it's done, but prefer gettin' him from
cover, an' I notice some of their white
brothers play the same way. You watch these
old gun-fighters an' you'll see most of 'em
likes a shade the start in a draw; there's
many a man that's fell under the smoke of a
forty-five -- drawn from a sneak -- that ain't
lookin' when he got it.

I've had plenty experience among Injuns, an'
all the affection I got for 'em wouldn't make
no love story, but with all their tricks an'
treachery I call them a game people.

"Squaw" Owens cultivated the attention of Russell's white
Montana audience with a wary attitude toward a supposedly
inferior and devious race. Nevertheless, his comparisons
actually describe a ground-level sense of racial equality.
Russell could not have expected his turn-of-the-century
white audiences to love Indian people and their cultures,
but he gave them this role model of "Squaw" Owens who
manifested at least some grudging respect. Disguised
by the narrators' bluntly racist language, Russell's
Indian stories provided entertaining propaganda, that
celebrated the validity of the endangered cultural life
of the American plains Indians.
Charlie Russell's assorted tales about Indians reflected his deep concern for the human impact of the transitional western frontier. While tolerant of intermarriage between Indians and whites and friendly with many mixed-blood people, Russell regretted the loss of the buffalo-based Indian societies. He spoke out against the cultural damage caused by government mandated assimilation. While attempting to entertain with his stories, he did not shirk the unpleasant issues of Indian suffering due to the land theft, starvation and murderous violence that stained the supposedly glorious accomplishments of America's westward expansion. Without dwelling with emotional hand-wringing on the injustice of the Indian peoples' circumstances, Russell has provided subsequent generations with an honest perspective, on an individual level, of some of the consequences of accelerated social change in the American West.

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Section One, Notes


8. Ibid. p 175.

9. the General Allotment Act of 1887, also called the "Dawes Act," states "... and every Indian ... who has voluntarily taken up ... his residence separate and apart from any tribe of Indians therein, and has adopted the habits of civilized life, is hereby declared to be a citizen of the United States ..." *United States Statutes at Large*, 1885-1887, Volume 24, 49th Congress Session II, p 388, 2/8/87.


19. Ibid. "Dad Lane's Buffalo Yarn," p 42.


22. Ibid. p 3.

23. The American Blackfeet and Canadian Blood tribes share a language and much culture. Charlie Russell used both terms when referring to the Indians he visited near High River, Alberta in 1888.


29. Ibid. p 19.

30. Ibid. p 18.
31. Ibid. "How Lindsay Turned Indian," p 133.


33. Russell was joking about the food as Blackfeet Indians traditionally avoided eating dog meat. Note "The War Scars of Medicine Whip" Trails, p 185.

34. Dempsey, "Tracking," Montana, summer 1989, pp 2-15. Finch David, recalled that Charlie Russell chose to return to white society, telling Finch that while he liked being around Indians, "it was too damn long between meals to suit him." Letter: Finch David to James B. Rankin, 3/16/37, MHS collection #162, Box 2, folder 2-6.


36. DeVoto, Missouri, p 376.

37. Cassandra Phelps, letter to James B. Rankin, 2/5/39, MHS #162, Box #3, File 3-5.

38. Russell, "How Lindsay Turned Indian," Trails, p 133.

39. "First Trial In Montana; Plaintiff Called The Presiding Judge A 'Squaw Man,' And Tragedy Was Narrowly Averted ... court, jury, lawyers witnesses, and spectators became involved in a rough-and-tumble fist fight." (unsigned article), MNA distributed 6/9/24, MHS microfilm: Fergus County Argus, Lewistown.


43. James W. Schultz, letter to James B. Rankin, 12/18/36, MHS collection #162, Box 4, File 4-1. This letter merely documents the Schultz/Russell friendship. Monroe lived on the Blackfeet reservation, close enough for visiting. Russell may have gathered his information directly from Monroe or indirectly from
Schultz. Russell could have read the Montroe interview in the Ft. Benton River Press, February 19, 1890, or any one of the three M.N.A. profiles of 'Rising Wolf" on 11/10/19, 4/19/20, or 9/22/24 (MHS microfilm).


47. Russell, "Finger-That-Kills," Trails, p 121. Charlie may have heard other storytellers' versions or personally met the Piegan/Blackfeet war chief, Meek-i-appy (known to whites as Cut-Finger) whose loss of fingers and near death in battle closely resembled "Finger-That-Kills." Russell might also have learned the story when Robert Vaughn published a version in his regional history - memoir, Then and Now or 36 Years in the Rockies 1864-1900 (Minneapolis, Tribune Publishing Co., 1900), pp 141-142. Vaughn was a good friend and patron of Charlie Russell and hired the young artist to illustrate his book.

48. Ibid. p 122.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid. p 64.

52. Russell, Good Medicine, p 127.


54. Ibid. Someone rewrote the 1938 versions to reflect a less mirthful attitude toward the Indian victims.

55. Russell, "Mormon Murphy's Confidence," Trails p 69. First published in Outing magazine, 50:5 in August, 1907 as "Mormon Murphy's Misplaced Confidence." The word "Misplaced" disappeared when Russell reprinted the story in More Rawhides, 1925, with no other changes.

56. Ibid. p 70.
57. Ibid. p 71.

58. Ibid. p 69.


60. Russell, "Dunc McDonald," Trails, p 15.

61. Russell may not have known McDonald very well. This story states that Dunc's people were the Blackfeet (page 15). While McDonald had friends among the Blackfeet people, this Scottish-Nez Perce man lived all his life on the Flathead reservation among the Salish and Kootenai. Either Russell or some editor made a mistake (no original manuscript).


63. Dick West, "Duncan McDonald Nearly Lost Argument," MNA distributed 7/23/34. McDonald's version of the story varied from Russell in style and a few details. Numerous interviews and profiles of McDonald appeared in the M.N.A. sections, which sometimes referred to him as "the sage of the Flathead." ("Romantic Tales ..." by H.T. Bailey, 12/31/26). M.N.A. writer, Walter E. Taylor cited a more distorted version of the story Russell retold, and announced that McDonald's "buffalo story has taken its place among Flathead legends." "Flatheads Add New Legends ...", MNA distributed 1/1/40 (2).


65. Dick West, "Duncan McDonald ..." MNA distributed 7/23/34, MHS microfilm.


67. "Duncan MacDonald Was Only '49er at Meeting," (unsigned) MNA distributed 8/17/31. MHS microfilm.


69. "Duncan MacDonald Was Only 49er at Meeting", (unsigned) MNA 8/17/31, MHS microfilm.


73. Russell, "Dad Lane", *Trails*, p 42.

74. Ibid. p 47.


79. Ibid. p 100.


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Section Two

Life and Death Issues in Wildlife Stories

Charlie Russell told and wrote numerous stories about human interaction with the wildlife of sparsely settled nineteenth century Montana. By the time he published most of these stories, between 1916 and 1925, wildlife in much of the trans-Mississippi west no longer lived in the abundant numbers Russell had witnessed on his 1880 arrival in Montana Territory. Russell's wildlife and hunting stories reflected his awareness of issues such as killing wildlife for human survival, the annihilation or recovery of certain species, the possibilities for humor related to human survival in the wilderness, and the responsibility of humans in environmental and animal destruction.

One of the most striking transformations in the shift, from unregulated wilderness to modern communities in Montana, involved the dramatic depletions of wildlife species. Granville Stuart, Charlie Russell's one-time cattle boss on the DHS ranch, later recalled the swift disappearance of abundant wild animals.

It would be impossible to make persons not present on the Montana cattle ranges realize the rapid change that took place on those ranges in two years. In 1880,... Thousands of buffalo darkened the rolling plains. There were deer, antelope, elk, wolves, and coyotes on every hill and in every ravine and thicket. ... In the fall of 1883, there was not one
buffalo remaining on the range and the antelope, elk, and deer were indeed scarce. The depletion of animal species noted by Stuart took somewhat longer in Montana's mountains, enabling Russell to witness firsthand some of the wilderness abundance. In one of his first pieces written for Montana newspaper readers, Russell described his earliest experiences as a St. Louis teenager living with a hunter/prospector named Jake Hoover. Russell recalled a pristine mountain oasis, teeming with wildlife, guided by a female force called "Nature."

Shut off from the outside world it was a hunter's paradise bounded by walls of mountains and containing miles of grassy open spaces more green and beautiful than any man-made parks. These parks and the mountains behind them swarmed with deer, elk, mountain sheep and bear, besides beaver and other small fur-bearing animals. The creeks were alive with trout. Nature had surely done her best, and no king of the old times could have claimed a more beautiful and bountiful domain.

Russell's personal letters and other writings frequently expressed his reverence for undisturbed flora and fauna, when referring to "Ma Nature" and the "old lady."

Charlie Russell witnessed the reduction of many wildlife species at close hand, but his personal interaction with wildlife was relatively benign. Despite his apprenticeship with Hoover, a professional hunter/traper, Russell chose not to participate directly in killing animals. Some friends like Finch David described how Russell might join willingly in the skinning and butchering
of game killed by others, often taking time to observe and sketch the muscle and bone structure for later artistic compositions. Con Price recalled that even though Charlie enjoyed eating meat as much as anyone, Russell had said, "when it comes to the killing I don't want to be there."\(^5\)

Charlie Russell understood that Mother Nature is not always gentle to humans. His stories about bears reflected the violent reality of wilderness animals and the need for humans to kill for survival. His greatest bear story appeared first in a special section of Christmas stories in the *Great Falls Tribune* in December, 1906, under the title, "A Savage Santa Claus".\(^6\) In this yarn, two gold-panning prospectors took shelter from a winter blizzard in a seemingly abandoned cabin on Christmas Eve. An enormous Grizzly bear interrupted their slumbers but lost his life in a close-quarters battle with the well-armed humans. On Christmas day, following the nighttime battle, the prospectors discovered the skeletal remains of the cabin's original owner as well as his 'cache' of gold dust.

In Russell's perspective, survival in the less civilized American West sometimes meant taking advantage of marginal opportunities, especially when hunger overruled food selectivity. This story showed that killing to supply food might happen by accident. After their battle, the prospectors in this story ate part of the bear to augment
their limited diet of beans and flour, despite the unappetizing flavor of the meat.

He's an old boar, an' it's pretty stout, but a feller livin' on beans and bannocks (frying pan bread) straight for a couple of weeks don't kick much on flavor, an' we're at a stage where meat's meat.

Even though Russell's narrator, "Bedrock," and his partner, "Beaver," killed the bear in a self-defense emergency, they did not hesitate to consume the unpleasant meat. Following this kill-or-be-killed, eat-or-be-eaten confrontation, Beaver, joked that the bear brought no Christmas gifts for their smelly stockings other than meat and gold.

In addition to telling an entertaining holiday story for Montana newspaper readers, Russell also expressed indirectly several wildlife values that were remarkably close to those held by many Native Americans. He portrayed the bear as being similar to humans, including its choice to spend the winter in a cabin. And despite the bear's lethal violence, Russell's characters referred to him as "Santa Claus." Ethnohistorian Calvin Martin has noted that North American Indian folktales frequently describe animals in human terms, including such anthropomorphic qualities as living in houses. By calling this cabin-dwelling grizzly bear "Santa Claus," Russell provided a humorous aspect to an otherwise seriously violent story.

The second element of Indian values in "A Savage
Santa Claus" involved the bear's gift of himself to the hunters. Despite the violent battle, Beaver's statement made it clear that the bear had presented two gifts. 
"... he brought plenty of meat an' showed us the cache, for we'd never a-found it if he hadn't raised the lid." Martin noted that, according to many traditions, "animals, in the Indian cosmology, consciously surrendered themselves to the needy hunter." Russell was communicating to his Montana story audience the high value of game animals' consenting involvement in a legitimate process of killing for survival and food.

As with "Savage Santa," Russell's other bear stories consistently showed how, without the advantage of guns, individual humans are no match for Nature's power. In "Lepley's Bear," another story of Nature's unpredictable forces, Russell described an embarrassing incident when "Old Man Lepley" survived when disarmed only because the grizzly bear's mood changed. In "Hank Winter's Bear Fight", a grizzly badly mauled Hank. Only his partner Bedrock's last-second appearance and fast shooting saved Hank's life. Russell's narrator understood the vulnerability of a man facing a grizzly bear without a firearm.

I've heard about men fightin' bears with nothin' but a knife an' winnin', but if I ever get a chance to bet on that kind of fight I'll play the human with a copper. Nevertheless, simply having a gun proved insufficient for Hank. In Russell's story, two men with guns equaled
just one of Nature's more powerful creatures. The story of a life-saving intervention for a hunter caught by a grizzly bear must have intrigued Russell. He created at least four pictures of the subject.

In most Russell hunting stories, the hunters sought meat for survival. The Hank Winters story demonstrated how a relatively frivolous pursuit of one of Nature's most violent creatures could provoke a fatal counterattack. Russell's portrayal of Hank Winters seems sympathetic to Native American values uncovered by Martin among eastern Algonkian Indians living prior to contact with Europeans.

The single most important deterrent to excessive hunting ... was the fear of spiritual reprisal for indiscreet slaughter.

When that basic deterrent was absent, as with Hank Winters or the Indians studied by Martin who had been active in the fur trade, overkill of wild game has been the typical result. Russell showed the potentially mortal consequences of disturbing Mother Nature's unpredictably violent bears. He knew that over-killing wild game could lead to the annihilation of a species.

Even though Russell's bear stories demonstrated a sensitivity to right and wrong reasons for killing animals, he also showed an ability to make humor out of the death of both animals and humans. A standard humor format for Russell was the 'lie' story. In a gradiose lie called "Bab's Skees," 'Old Babcock' told how he
supposedly plummeted out-of-control on skis down Montana's Snowy Mountains until he landed on the back of a large bull elk. The bull quickly unloaded his rider and Bab's reckless downhill fall continued on through the herd so swiftly that he killed an elk cow in another collision. Later Bab salvaged something practical out of his near-fatal experience by taking home some of the meat. By his effective narrative style, Russell made Bab's nearly fatal descent and the killing of an elk seem humorous.

In Charlie Russell's world of storytellers, only a grand master could joke about death. David Babcock, or "Old Bab" as Russell called him, had cultivated his reputation as a notoriously entertaining prevaricator. He lived near Jake Hoover in the Little Belt Mountains region called "Pig Eye Basin" where Russell visited him often while staying with Jake. According to Rev. George Edwards, "Pioneer Presbyterian Minister," Bab enjoyed some wide popularity.

There was an old-timer, affectionately called "Lying Babcock" because he could tell tall tales and stretch the truth a little further than any other old-timer in the basin. That was his specialty. ...Lying was simply an amusing game the old-timers played like joshing and Babcock generally came out ahead at the game.

One of Bab's most popular lies involved telling how the Indians chased him into a dead-end canyon. Then Bab would pause in his tale until someone asked what happened next, whereupon he whispered the punch-line,
"They killed me b'God."\textsuperscript{20} In Russell's lie stories, the ultimate absurdity was to contradict nature so completely that humans could overcome Death.

Russell's classic humorous death yarn told how survival could be as simple as finding something to eat. In the story called "Dog Eater",\textsuperscript{21} an old prospector, named "Dog-Eating Jack," told about earning his odd name by having to choose between terminal starvation or eating his beloved dog and companion, named "Friendship." The prospector compromised, thus keeping both his life and his dog, by removing and cooking the dog's tail. The watery soup he made with it sustained the two of them until the prospector made a lucky shot, killing an elk. In Russell's treatment, the agony of slow death by starvation combined with the discomfort about eating a pet revealed a comic side to death in the wilderness.

This story has earned critical praise as "the funniest of (Russell's) humorous anecdotes."\textsuperscript{22} Another critic has determined that "the plot as well as the style of "Dog Eater" is also probably taken from oral tradition."\textsuperscript{23} Actually, this story demonstrated Russell's blending of a storytelling style with local anecdotal history. Someone known as "Dog Eating Jack" lived in Choteau County, around Fort Benton, Montana, in 1885. His name appeared on a list compiled in the 1940s\textsuperscript{24} of a few of the 60 or 70 locally notorious nineteenth century characters
with especially colorful names. The others included "Gamblers Ghost," "Liver Eating Johnson," "Sweet-Oil Bob," "Seven-up Pete," "Stink-foot Bill," "Fred, The Rattler," "Antelope Charlie," "Old Horse Eye," and "Old Tomato Nose." Most of these names included no explanation for their origin. For "Dog-Eating Jack," however, the writer stated simply that the old-timer "became lost and lived on his dog."²⁵

Russell's story details and narrative style could have been influenced by local folklore or simply were his own invention. In either case, this brief corroboration indicated that Russell's story about Dog-Eating Jack may be partly true. And, as Russell's many other historically based yarns showed, he anchored his story exaggerations with actual people and events. As a connoisseur of local history and folklore, Charlie Russell appreciated the old Dog-Eater's dilemma of choice between his own survival and sentimental loyalty to a domesticated animal.

Russell ridiculed attempts to domesticate Nature's wilder creatures. His story, "Broke Buffalo,"²⁶ was a light-hearted fable, reminiscent of Indiana humorist George Ade,²⁷ which demonstrated the consequences of trying to harness a buffalo for the buggy or the plow. In the manner of a parable, the two yoked-up buffalo proved too strong for the farmer to control and they
changed their plowing direction only when seasonal weather affected their migration instincts. A stated 'moral' at the end of the story, in the manner of Ade's little lessons, seemed unnecessary. Russell's most likely audience of cattlemen and their sympathizers must have found plenty of amusement with the greedy farmer as the butt of this joke about unnatural animal roles in the frontier west.

This Russell story could have served as comic relief after North America avoided the complete annihilation of a species. Russell found humor in the circumstances of "Broke Buffalo" at a time when the buffalo were beginning to recover from extinction. In 1925, as this story first appeared in print, the U.S. Government's new herd on the National Bison Range in Montana's Mission Valley was growing ever larger. And Yellowstone National Park already was selling surplus buffalo to limit the park herd's size. With buffalo becoming more available, westerners could joke about the strength and stamina of the formerly endangered bison.

Russell even found humor in the historic huge herds of bison and other animals of the trans-Mississippi West and used it in the closing segment of his mini-anthology of lie-stories, "Some Liars of the Old West." In this yarn, 'Milt Crowthers' stepped forward to win a wager negotiated between a traveling salesman and a local bartender named Coates about seeing as many as 100,000
buffalo at one spot. Under close questioning from the salesman, Crowthers claimed to have seen, on certain occasions, 200,000 antelope, "somethin' over a million" elk, and "about three million billion" buffalo. In the skeptical cross-examination from the out-of-town salesman, who became the 'sucker' for this huge lying joke, Crowthers explained that all those buffalo were just the preliminary bunch and "lookin' back, here comes the main herd."\(^{30}\)

The historically correct but somewhat smaller herd numbers must have been as incomprehensible to a non-western outsider as the inflated herd sizes Crowthers quoted to win the bet. Granville Stuart's 1880 diary noted in the Rosebud Valley of south-central Montana, "The whole country is black with buffalo."\(^{31}\) A few days later, sixty miles east of the Snowy Mountains near the Judith Basin, he noted, "Buffalo by the thousands in every direction."\(^{32}\) By the time of this story's appearance in print, however, most signs of buffalo were erased from the Judith Basin, and wildlife was so depleted that Russell commented to Granville Stuart, "where once great bands of antelope fed there's not even a curlow now."\(^{33}\) The irony of Crowther's lie story was that the actual buffalo herd numbers were simply beyond belief, so that exaggeration did little harm to his expression of the 'truth.'

Despite the flippant humor of "Broke Buffalo" and Crowthers' buffalo lie story, Charlie Russell genuinely
cared about these animals. In 1925, Russell wrote to his friend, Ralph Budd, then the president of the Great Northern Railroad, to advocate a day of remembrance for the buffalo which would be comparable to honoring the turkey on Thanksgiving.

The Rocky mountains would have been hard to reach without him; he fed the explorer the great fur trade wagon trains felt safe when they reached his range. He fed the men that laid the first (railroad) ties across this great west. There is no day set aside where he is the emblem. The nickel wears his picture (emphasis added) dam small money for so much meat. He was one of nature's biggest gifts and this country owes him thanks.

As indicated by numerous paintings, sculptures and even bits of poetry, Charlie Russell maintained considerable respect for the buffalo and regret for its near extinction. He made the buffalo skull his logo, a part of each artwork signature.

In the Russell wildlife stories, the extermination of some animals seemed unavoidable. Charlie Russell's sympathy for endangered wildlife, like the buffalo and antelope herds, did not extend to the wolf. In his story, "Bullard's Wolves." Russell's own narrator voice told how Bill Bullard roped two wolves which were sick from eating poisoned meat. Bullard's greed for two wolf bounties motivated him to drag the nearly dead animals behind his horse all the way back to camp. The disabled wolves, with eyes glazed and jaws snapping, bounced too close to Bullard's horse which then bolted out-of-control for
several miles back to the unsympathetic cowboys.  

During Russell's eleven years as an open range cowboy, stockmen systematically exterminated wolves from Montana and other western cattle grazing areas. Even as the few remaining wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains died at the hands of persistent hunters in the 1920s and 30s, local newspapers still characterized them as "The Most Despicable of Animals." Few, if any, of Russell's contemporary audiences would harbor any sympathy for the poisoned, strangled and dragged victims in the Bullard story. Granville Stuart summed up both the typical perception of wolves and cattlemen's callous nineteenth century responses to them.

The winter of 1881-82 ... predatory animals were quite troublesome especially the large gray timber wolf that surpasses any other animal in sagacity, fleetness of foot and powers of endurance. ... In the summer the cowboys frequently found a den and then there would be great sport roping them and shooting the awkward sprawling whelps with their six shooters. Charlie Russell the cowboy artist has immortalized this sport in one of his paintings.

In "Bullard's Wolves," Russell showed no particular appreciation for wolves, except as powerful agents of Nature which could cause problems for careless humans. Nevertheless, Russell did express some concern about the suppression of the wolves' smaller cousin, the coyote.

Man can't win much fighting nature when the coyote was plenty thair was feew gophers or rabbits now the hole west swarms with them.
Russell saw a practical need for coyotes, but registered no regrets about civilization's demands for exterminating wolves. Yet, while the Bullard story showed no mercy for wolves, Russell described how the poisoned and roped underdogs gave their tormentor one very bad ride.

In Russell's wildlife stories, the animals typically resisted human domination, but with the help of firearms, humans tended to win. Russell understood that the technological advantage had a double impact, affecting both native wildlife and Native Americans.

I believe if the white man had the same weapons as his red brothers, Uncle Sam wouldn't own only part of this country yet and we wouldn't need any game law.

Wildlife depletion, in Russell's stories, was a direct result of European-American arms superiority. Martin's studies showed that Russell accurately perceived a portion of a much more complicated set of circumstances.

European contact should thus be viewed as a "trigger factor" ... leading to the replacement of the aboriginal ecosystem by another. European disease, Christianity, and the fur trade with its accompanying technology - the three often intermeshed - were responsible for the corruption of the Indian-land relationship in which the native had merged himself sympathetically with his environment.

In a private letter to his friend, Frank Bird Linderman, Charlie Russell isolated the problem of environmental destruction as belonging to the insatiable "white man." Both Russell and Linderman enjoyed Indian
myth traditions of the northern rockies which attribute the earth's creation to a semi-divine agent called "Napi," sometimes called "Old Man." In Russell's interpretation, Napi's powers proved ineffective against the presence and actions of the alien European-Americans.

you spoke the truth when you said the old man had hidden manny beautiful things ... The men he made were satisfied with what lay on the surface ... but his caches would have lane till the end of time Had not another man come, one he did not make - a greater thief than all of his. It was nature's enemy the white man. This man took from under and more he stole from the water the sky. he was never satifside. It was he who raised the Old man's caches an still hunts the fiew that are left. When Napi saw the new thief he hid his face in his robe and left this world and I dont blame him.

Russell strongly expressed a broader view of responsibility for ecological destruction in a eulogy to fellow Montana painter Edgar Paxson that appeared in newspapers across Montana. In this indictment, the problem was not merely the "white man."

Civilization is nature's worst enemy. All wild things vanish when she comes. Where great forests once lived nothing stands but burned stumps - a black shroud of death. The iron heel of civilization has stamped out nations of men, but it has never been able to wipe out pictures, and Paxson was one of the men gifted to make them.

In Russell's more mature perspective, the enemy of Nature is not merely white European-Americans, but any representatives of civilization.

Charles M. Russell understood that artworks could preserve a memory of things destroyed by civilization.
He selected his own art subjects carefully and chose not to paint "fruit, flowers, automobiles or flying machines." He preferred subjects in the trans-Mississippi West that were disappearing or already gone under "the iron heel of civilization." Russell's choice of stories about human encounters with animals expressed his concern about human domination of wildlife and the natural environment. He especially enjoyed tales that demonstrated a fighting chance for disappearing wildlife.

Charlie Russell accepted the necessity of humans killing wild animals for safety and for food, even though he avoided direct participation in the task. He regretted the near extinction of the buffalo from western prairies, but not the annihilation of the wolf. He caught a glimpse of the huge animal abundance in the American West before it disappeared under the heel of western development. And the memory of nature's wealth merged in his imagination with a romantic nostalgia for earlier times. Russell's attempts to make sense of the human role in the destructive transformation of western wilderness mixed racial guilt with bitter denunciations of unstoppable civilization. Yet, Russell transcended his own disappointment and feeling of loss with a wry sense of humor that could even make fun of Death.

Charlie Russell could even craft a humorous story of Bill Bullard improving the former buffalo range for
domestic cattle by means of torturing dying wolves. Out of such a low point in the history of western wilderness transformation, Russell at least found humor in Bullard's discomfort. By publishing animal and wilderness yarns, Russell provided entertaining information for his fellow humans in the rapidly civilizing American West. Additionally, he provided slices of cultural history for generations to come.

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Section 2, Notes


2. Charles M. Russell, "Hunting and Trapping on the Judith With Jake Hoover," M.N.A., distributed June 18, 1917, M.H.S. microfilm *The Western News*, No original manuscript currently exists to indicate whether Russell himself was experimenting with writing such formal prose, or whether Russell's friend and editor, Percy Rabin adjusted Russell's normally rustic word patterns into this unusually correct style.


5. Ibid, p 96.


12. "Charles Lepley Dead; Helped Make Montana." (unsigned) MNA distributed 6/2/41, MHS microfilm, *Forsyth Independent*. This article about the death of John Lepley's nephew, Charles, stated that "Old" John Lepley was already in Montana Territory's gold camps.
by the time of Russell's 1864 birth in St. Louis.


Tom Gregory of Lewistown, Montana, recorded a similar incident about his own father's bear encounter in Russell's Judith Basin region which must have inspired the Hank Winters story. "The Miracle That Happened For Once," by Tom Gregory, transcribed by William Buchanan Jr., for the Montana Writers Project (WPA), June 27, 1941 #214.028, microfilm reel #20, Mansfield Library, University of MT, Missoula.

14. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


This absurd joke still circulates. A contemporary version won the lie-telling contest at the Phillips County Fair in Malta, Montana, according to Gordon Gregory's article, "Liars Rule the Day in Malta," Great Falls Tribune, 7/12/87, p B-1.

The original source is probably Jim Bridger, the mountain man, guide and story teller who lived in the Rocky Mountain West at least a generation before Russell arrived in Montana. Bernard DeVoto noted the Bridger story about "a flight up a box canyon which ended with the pursuing Indians killing the narrator," in Across the Wide Missouri, page 169. Story collections, such as B.A. Botkin's A Treasury of Western Folklore, have included some version of Bridger's great lie. Even though Russell credited Babcock with the story, the painter may have known of Bridger's earlier versions. Pat Morris's Man of the West mentions (page 103) that Charlie "read everything he could find on Jim Bridger," ... "Russell's ideal of what a real frontiersman should be."


23. Brunvand, "Folklore/Fiction" p 41, stated, "I found the story in the folklore section of the Library of Congress in the file of material collected in Idaho by the WPA Federal Writers Project in the 1930s with the variation that it was a cat's tail that was cut off and that the cat was only allowed to gnaw on the bone after his master had eaten the stew."

24. Montana Writers Project (WPA), microfilm reel 17, Great Falls Area Outline, p 52, Mansfield Library, University of MT, Missoula.

25. Ibid.


27. George Ade (1890-1920), Indiana humorist, most popular for his "fables in slang" books, of which Russell owned at least three volumes. These heavily ironic tales often described the follies of an unnamed main character in a style similar to "Broke Buffalo."


30. Ibid. p 194.

31. Stuart, Pioneering, p 110.

32. Ibid. p 125.


34. C.M. Russell letter to Ralph Budd, 11/25/26, Good Medicine, p 37 The Indian head five cent piece with a buffalo on the reverse side had not yet given way to the modern U.S. nickel.


36. Ibid. p 24. Bill Bullard was a cowboy friend of Russell's with a hot temper. Some Con Price stories told of Charlie's narrow escapes after another prank.


42. Martin, Keepers, p 64.


Section Three

Cattle Range Transitions

For eleven years (1882-1893), Charlie Russell participated directly in Montana's open range cattle business as a horse wrangler and night herder. In contrast with his Indian tales, Russell's stories of the cattle range era reflected only a few glimmers of social criticism. Range topics which were debated intensely in Montana during his cowboy career, such as water rights, irrigation priorities, the arrival of railroads, and the rivalry between cattle, sheep and farm interests, seldom received more than a suggestion in Russell's cattle stories. Range stock management and urbanization formed some story themes, but individual people provided the primary focus for these stories of transitional change in the nineteenth century trans-Mississippi West.

Shared experiences of dangerous work and long hours in the saddle strengthened lifelong friendships and bonds of personal loyalty among cattle range participants. The process of storytelling tended to reinforce this interpersonal linkage which was typical of the cattlemen's era. The pattern of sharing stories among cattlemen also provided Russell with an opportunity to collect some exceptional bits of history and folklore from the brief frontier phase of the unfenced cattle range. In the foreword
to his first book of these tales, Russell wrote,

When I came to Montana, which then was a territory with no railroads, reading matter of any kind was scarce. Where there's nothing to read men must talk, so when they were gathered at ranches or stage stations, they amused themselves with tales of their own or other's adventures. Many became good storytellers. I have tried to write some of these yarns as nearly as possible as they were told to me.¹

The common pre-industrial pastime of oral storytelling flourished with the open range cattle business. Small groups of men found themselves isolated out on the prairie grasslands for weeks or months, living far away from other people and more stimulating entertainment. As one of Russell's range companions recalled,

(Charlie) could tell all kinds of yarns and that was something valued in a cow country. I can remember when the wagon was 265 miles from a post office so you can readily see we needed someone to entertain us. We have went for six months without seeing a decent woman and damn few of the others.²

Charlie Russell enjoyed history through the perspectives and experiences of individual people. He savored the spicy fragments and lively moments of personal histories. Russell's cattle range yarns offered especially revealing portrayals of his quirky contemporaries. As Phil Weinard, recalled,

"His greatest interest was in telling amusing stories about old timers, Cowpunchers, Bullwackers, etc. types of the old west."³ Russell's preoccupation with his cattle range days focused on the amusing people and personalities he encountered. For humorous and colorful material useful
in stories and artworks, he merely recalled well-known local characters like "Slick, Slim, Shorty, Bowlegs, Brocky, Pike, Bed-rock, Panhandle, Four Jack Bob, Jim the Bird, P. P. Johnson, Old Bench Legs and Fighting Fin." Writing to a friend who also remembered these frontier figures, Russell said,

This bunch John are almost extinct. ... many of them wore crime stains, but among them were good men not made good by law but because their guts lay above their short ribs. ... The memory of one of these dead friends good or bad means more to you and me than the boughten friendship of a million of these comelatelys.

Rather than comment directly about the disturbing transitions from untamed frontier life into civilized western society, Russell's stories dwelled on the colorful people of the range cattle period.

Charlie Russell and his cattle range contemporaries had a peculiar way of expressing their friendships. Instead of receiving a direct compliment, the favored friend often felt the impact of an insult, delivered in person and spiced with ridiculous exaggerations. As Judith Basin businessman Walter Lehman recalled,

They made up the worst stories on each other, and told them with a straight face in front of the whole crowd in some saloon.

Lehman's words of advice for a would-be Russell biographer helped clarify this personal element of Charlie's storytelling in the transient saloon culture of Montana's cattle range frontier.
... if you can catch his underlying humor
and not seem too coarse in the telling it
will be fine. After all, men did a lot of
things in those days and told a lot of things
which they knew were not so in order to get
a "raise" out of their victim in front of a
saloon crowd and so make him buy the drinks
for all hands.

Russell created spontaneous entertainment and honored
his closer friends through the telling of personal 'roast'
stories. And the insulting roast appeared as one of Russell's
favorite formats as he wrote cattle range stories for
the Montana Newspapers Association's weekly inserts, the
Rawhide Rawlins books, and Trails Plowed Under."

In the case of especially strong friendships, Russell
satirized some men more than once. He made Pete Van's
lack of swift personal mobility the focus of "When Pete
Sets a Speed Mark." Then in "How Louse Creek Was Named"," Russell maligned Pete Van in several altogether different
different ways, suggesting that Pete started his own cattle herd
by stealing unbranded 'maverick' calves. Russell's brief
story announced that Pete helped name a Judith Basin stream
"Louse Creek" when smashing his lice-infested shirt between
two stream boulders. Russell celebrated his friendship
with Pete Van by granting him the dubious honor of naming
the creek and then accused Pete of being ungrateful for
the privilege. Russell was also making humor out of the
common frontier embarrassment of body lice infestation." This back-handed tribute to a friend demonstrated the
irony of how a cowboy joke about lice could create a lasting

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name for a geographical site on the changing Montana prairie.

Charlie Russell made no claim to have invented the roast story format (nor any of his other story structures). Typical of his other yarns, Russell's roasts of close friends followed an existing folk tradition. Mark Twain noticed the art form of the roasting yarn (as well as the even-tempered-response of the victim) while residing with his favorite California storyteller in the gold mining camps of the Sierra foothills near Yreka.

I spent three months in the log-cabin home of Jim Gillis and his "pard," Dick Stoker, in Jackass Gulch ... Every now and then Jim would ...deliver himself of an impromptu lie - a fairy tale, an extravagant romance ... Jim always soberly pretended that what he was relating was strictly history, veracious history, not romance. Dick Stoker (the hero of these stories), gray-headed and good-natured, would sit smoking his pipe and listen with a gentle serenity to the monstrous fabrications and never utter a protest.

In his spoken and written roasts, Charlie Russell honored friends with his assumption that they could control their tempers in response to his outrageous jokes. The irreverent roast demonstrated deep respect for a friend's grit and emotional strength despite public discomfort, or in other words that he could 'take it.' Russell's deeper sense of connection with a roast victim and fellow survivor of western frontier transitions became clear in his eulogy for Pete Van. On the occasion of Van's death in 1918, Russell told the Great Falls Elks Club about the time Pete rescued him in a severe blizzard. Russell concluded
by saying,

It is the lonesome motherless places that tie men's hearts together in a way that time, distance or man's laws, not even death, can break ... discomforts pans out the good and bad in man. Pete always showed good in the pan.  

Strangers, known to Russell only by similar experiences of cattle range deprivation or the struggle for frontier survival, earned Charlie's immediate friendship. Special friends like Pete Van who proved themselves "good in the pan" became allies for life. Appreciation for loyal camaraderie pervaded Russell's depictions of the early frontier cattle range.

As an expression of this camaraderie, Russell's close friends certainly delivered strong roasts back in his face. Russell held an advantage over his selected victims, however, in his capacity to publish his joshing lies about them in newspapers and books. The roast of Finch David, the story of "Cinch David's Voices" appeared in Montana weekly newspapers, exaggerating David's uncontrolled shifts between his high falsetto and his ordinary speaking voice. "I never heered him sing,' says Rawhide Rawlins, "but if he ever did it wouldn't be no quartet; it's a whole choir."

Russell's roast of Finch David made fun of a physical disability. In Montana's transitional frontier culture, physical characteristics became an immediate badge of
identity, either positive or negative. Russell himself received the nickname, "Cotton-eye," from some of his cattle-range friends who noticed his grey-blue eyes.\(^{16}\)

Wallace Stegner understood this kind of barbed teasing as a remnant of the cowboy culture he witnessed when growing up just across the United States/Canadian border from Montana in southern Saskatchewan.

The folk culture sponsored every sort of crude practical joke, as it permitted the cruelist and ugliest prejudices and persecutions. Any visible difference was enough to get an individual picked on. .. An inhumane and limited code, the value system of a life more limited and cruder than in fact ours was. We got most of it by inheritance from harsher frontiers that had preceded ours - got it, I suppose, mainly from our contacts with what was left of the cattle industry.\(^{17}\)

Finch David was as much a part of that tough frontier cowboy culture as his pal, Charlie Russell. Finch may have accepted the teasing without questioning what Stegner called, "the code of the stiff upper lip."\(^{18}\) If Finch David considered the "Cinch David" story to be even slightly abusive or harsh, however, he showed no grudge against Russell when he told a newspaper writer,

\[
\text{I never heard Charlie Russell insult a man nor say anything to hurt another's feelings during all the years I knew him. ... He was one of the most considerate men I have ever known. }^{19}
\]

The gentle ridicule Charlie Russell practiced on Finch David expressed a connection with a long-time friend rather than a separation from a stranger or enemy. Subsequent generations, however, from Stegner's youth onward, have
found less humor in mirth that focused on a person's physical, mental, or cultural limitations than did Russell's cattle range contemporaries. For unknown reasons, Russell never re-published "Cinch David's Voices" in any of his books following the 1917 appearance in Montana newspapers. Apparently, by the 1920s, Montana had evolved into a place of modern people, values and practices that seemed alien to Russell, making some roasts like "Cinch David" seem less effective. As Russell commented to another cattle range friend, "we usto know every body but time has made us strangers." 20

Many of Russell's Nature stories (mentioned earlier) followed the roast pattern of friendly abuse. When he published "Bullard's Wolves," 21 Russell was continuing his tradition of pranks and practical jokes pulled on this cattle-range friend, Bill Bullard. "Lepley's Bear" 22 roasted a prominent cattleman/businessman living in the Fort Benton area. This yarn represented an exception to Russell's practice of telling stories focused on undistinguished working class people.

When admiration outweighed friendship in Russell's selection of story subjects, colorful tall-tale exaggerations disappeared from his narratives. The supposedly abrasive personality 23 of Charlie "Bowlegs" Buckley disqualified him as a typical Russell companion. Nevertheless, since Bowlegs had ridden to Montana up the long cattle drive
trail from Texas and served as foreman for the S. T. outfit around Big Sandy, Montana, he had earned Charlie Russell's respect. Bowlegs carried the reputation of a man who would be neither amused nor tolerant of a Charlie Russell roast.

Two incidents attracted Russell's literary attention - Bowlegs' death-defying horseback ride to escape an onrushing Cheyenne Indian war party and his demise in a card game shoot-out. Charlie described Bowleg's violent death in an illustrated letter to an old friend and published the escape yarn, titled "A Pair of Outlaws", in his final collection of short stories. Ironically, Bowlegs' life ended in a shoot-out with a half-blood Indian who had demanded equal barroom status to whites.

when (B)owlegs was playing poker he bought the drinks the breed asked if he didn't drink to(o) Bow legs told him he wasnt buying booze (for) Injuns and the ball opened Bow legs had on a over coat and (c)ouldent get his gun quick so he cashed in."

Russell's two 'Bowlegs' narratives demonstrated the variation in his writings between a raw, understated first draft summary and a longer, polished story. Considered together, the two pieces reveal a transitional shift of Indian roles, from tribal warriors threatening to drive out white intruders, to mixed bloods demanding full participation in white society. The tales about Bowlegs also showed how survival in earlier frontier stages might suddenly require great physical strength, quick reactions and unyielding determination. Bowlegs' uncompromising
nature saved him from the Indian attack out on the prairie. A few years later, however, the same personality asset entangled him in a fatal Indian/white barroom confrontation where tolerant compromise could have assured his survival.

Russell's stories celebrated friendly western people like Con Price, as well as tough characters like Charlie Bowlegs. Charlie roasted his friend and business partner Price in both "The Gift Horse." and in "Bronc Twisters." In the second yarn, Russell described Price's intentional dive from a bucking horse in a futile attempt for sympathy from a farmer's daughter. After genuinely injuring himself in the staged wreck, Price discovered that the young woman was not even home to witness the fall and soothe his pain. Cattlemen like Price and Russell resented the intrusion of farming 'nesters' into 'their' unfenced cattle ranges. Russell enjoyed the irony of a tough cowpuncher like Price eagerly risking broken bones for the slim chance of a romance with one of his range-land competitors.

From the final buffalo hunts in the early 1880s to the fenced control of land and water by small ranches and farms in the 1890s, the era of open range cattle herding lasted less than a decade in the Russell's Judith Basin region of Central Montana. Price noted that Russell "hated the change and followed the cattle north to the Milk River country, trying to stay in the open range country." One of the few references to Russell's own opinion of
the frontier transition from the open cattle range to confined farming and grazing appeared in his brief essay, "The Open Range."

There's mighty little open range left, barring the mountains - it's all under wire now. ... Most cow countries now are pastures. The old-time roundups of the old days are almost a thing of the past.\textsuperscript{31}

Russell's essay avoided nostalgic regret over the loss of the open range and simply recorded work details of range cattle management. In such passages as, "In old times, when they branded on the prairie ..." and "... I'm only telling about cow countries I know - different countries handled cows different ways,"\textsuperscript{32} he reflected a matter-of-fact attitude. The focus on ethnological details demonstrated his wish to preserve an awareness of their function. Russell never claimed to be the ultimate expert on range practices or other facets of the transitional frontier and expressed an awareness of his own limitations. "I've lived a long time in the West," his wife recalled him saying, "but I don't know it all yet."\textsuperscript{33}

For Russell, the open range cowpuncher embodied the same reckless adventure-seeking spirit as the independent fur trader, trapper, explorer and gold seeker of earlier frontier transitions. "The cowboy was the last of this kind, and he's mighty near extinct."\textsuperscript{34} Russell knew closely many ranch hands, rodeo riders and other cattlemen who continued the cowboy vocation into the 1920s. Nevertheless,
he preferred the earlier, nomadic variety who,

left tracks in History that the farmer can't
plow under. Good or bad, they were regular men
and America's last frontier men.\textsuperscript{35}

The earlier cowboy types, like those who worked with Russell
out on the fenceless prairies, seemed distinct from all
who came later. One Montana participant in the early cattle
range times made this clarification:

Every man in the old cow days was a type
by himself. He had lived alone and had had
to defend himself and to support himself
under all kinds of circumstances without
getting some one else's idea of what was
the thing to do in this case or that. It
made a man more individual in his ways and
speech and thought. His self-reliance and
independence grew because he was constantly
needing them. There were plenty of strange
characters among the cowmen, but there were
also a lot of noble and lovable men.\textsuperscript{36}

Charlie Russell accepted with great reluctance the
changes which followed the open range cattle era. By
historian Robert Athearn's definition, Russell certainly
qualified as a 'romantic' witness/participant in the
transformations of western frontier regions.

Rather than seeing the coming of the
farmer as the climax of an old tradition,
romantics preferred to focus on the
passing of the open range cattle business.
This, they said signified the disappearance
of the Old West.\textsuperscript{37}

In Russell's writings, the strongest sense of romantic
nostalgia for the open cattle range appeared in his story
"Longrope's Last Guard".\textsuperscript{38} Russell shared the cowpunchers'
high respect for the men who rode in the long cattle drives
up the Texas Trail to Montana and focused his appreciation in "Longrope." This story has received the strongest praise of any of his non-humorous writings. Robert Gale has written, "The whole story is masterly ... a poignant lament." Historian J. Frank Dobie called it "perhaps the finest story that has ever been written about cows or cowboys." 

Among all of Russell's stories and essays, "Longrope" most completely immersed readers in a romantic perspective, idealizing this segment of the range cattle era. As with most Russell stories, 'Rawhide Rawlins' narrated most of this essay/story in the present tense. Speaking in the 'historical present' to replicate oral storytelling, Rawlins told about the accidental death of Longrope in a thunder-storm stampede. Unlike most of Russell's other stories, however, "Longrope" lacked references to any other time or place besides that in the story. Finally, in the last paragraph the narrator stated, "It's been twenty years or more since we tucked him in with the end-gate of a bed-wagon for a headstone..." The story implied by omission that, in those twenty years, apparently the only change along the Texas/Montana trail was that the cows had rubbed down Longrope's grave sign. By the 1890s, the long cattle drives had ceased altogether, obstructed by fences and private ownership of water sources. A brief clarification at the close of Russell's narrative provided the sense of time passing but no indication of an evolving
American West.

The first half of "Longrope" described open range herding practices in the present tense, as if these techniques were still in use. By the 1907 publication of "Longrope," however, the presence of wire fences segmenting the Montana prairies for several decades made this essay information more historically interesting than practical. Russell's "Longrope" essay and story did not portray a passing phase of the western frontiering process. In this story the phase never ended. When reconsidered nine decades after publication, "Longrope's Last Guard" seems like a pure cultural artifact, somehow frozen in time. Russell's story revealed his nostalgic cowboy vision most clearly here, not with a complaint about post-frontier conditions, but more as an embrace of the nineteenth century cattle drive as the only significant reality in the West.

While Russell's "Longrope" yarn seemed to replay the Texas-Montana trail drive forever, his other stories showed a broader awareness of changes. In the narrative segment of "The Story of a Cowpuncher," a representative of the open cattle range encountered the challenges of the big city. Unfortunately for Russell's cowpuncher/narrator, his 'city dude' disguise fooled no one in Chicago. Everyone understood his western mannerisms and speech as signals of opportunity.

When I put on all this rig, I sure look human; that is, I think so. But them shorthorns know
me, an' by the way they trim that roll, it looks like somebody's pinned a card on my back with the word "EASY" in big letters.

When the barroom operators separated the range rider from both his senses and his bank roll, Russell's narrator directly understood how cities threaten simple westerners.

As for the impact of cities in western frontier regions, Charlie Russell never anticipated the extent or speed of urbanization in Montana. In a letter to Paris Gibson, the founder of Great Falls as well as U.S. Senator from Montana, Russell admitted,

In 1883 I night hearded horses where this town (Great Falls) stands. ... They were old men among us that spoke of it as a good beef country but there was nothing said of a town.

When he traveled to sell his artworks, Russell sent letters back to Montana friends expressing blunt opinions about large cities like Chicago. In this message to his Great Falls neighbor, Charlie wrote,

If I had a winter home in Hell and a summer home in Chicago I think I'd spend my summers in my winter home. There might be more people but there couldn't be more smoke. ... I suppose Great Falls will be like Chicago some day but I won't be there.

Within his lifetime, Charlie Russell had participated in the transformation of a grassy riverside cattle range into a small-scale Montana replica of Chicago. His half-joking solace was the likelihood of being dead and therefore absent from the final stages of urban degradation in his Montana home.

Awareness of a specific kind of urban blight appeared
in Russell's story, "Night Herd." In this roast of a Russell friend, the narrator lost consciousness after a bout of heavy drinking in the little cow-town of Big Sandy, Montana, only to wake up at dawn in what seemed to be the middle of the cattle herd.

"In the middle of the herd? In the middle of hell," says he. "I'm in the center of the town dump. The steers that I have been looking at are nothing but stoves, tables, boxes; all the discard of Sandy is there. The few that's standin' are tables. That spotted Seventy-nine steer that I know so well is a big goods box. Them spots is white paper..."

As nineteenth century frontier cattle camps grew into modest towns, the problem of solid waste disposal also increased. Even little villages like Big Sandy had a community waste dump site nearby.

Individual homesteaders also faced problems with solid waste. Nannie Alderson settled in Montana during the time that Charlie Russell worked as a cowpuncher. In her book of reminiscences, she wrote, "Everyone in the country lived out of cans, and you would see a great heap of them outside of every little shack. But we always had a barrel for ours." Describing a creative use for this kind of imported urban refuse, Charlie Russell told his apprentice, Joe DeYong, about a bull-whacking freighter named "Roaring Tom Moor," who would "gather empty cans and dump them where he camped to make other bull outfits think he was living good." In rapidly changing western frontier regions, urban trash could seem like a status symbol.
Among Charlie Russell's roasting stories, "Highwood Hank Quits" held a special position. The author not only scorched his long-time friend and Great Falls neighbor, Henry Keeton, but gave "Kid Russell" a thorough roasting too. "Rawhide Rawlins," listed the damning evidence of Russell's desperate efforts to stay in the saddle while riding mean horses for the notorious "P" outfit.

Kid Russell tells me ... when he quit, his fingernails was all wore off an' there wasn't a hoss in his string that had any mane from his ears to his withers. There was spur tracks all over his saddle. He couldn't eat supper thinkin' of the hoss he had to fork the next mornin', and he never made no try at breakfast. His hands are so shakey ... that he has to get a friend to roll his cigarettes ... it takes a solid year to get the crooks out of his hands from havin' 'em clamped 'round the saddle horn.

By including himself in a roast, Russell fulfilled a widely known frontier requirement for self depreciating humor. In Russell's literary world, the roasting process exempted no one, including the author and chief practitioner. As Joe DeYong remembered Russell's own words, "Nobody is important enough to feel important."

The "Highwood Hank" roast showed the encroachment of women into ranch culture. In Russell's story, Hank tried to break some wild horses for his small ranch, despite already being the age of a grandfather. He ignored his wife's timid warning and twice ended in a heap at the horse's feet. While Hank faced the end of his bronc-riding career, a more difficult problem surfaced. Hank not only
shamed himself in front of his wife when he twice lost
to the horse, he also blamed her for the failure.

"You're a fine partner, sittin' there like
you're deaf and dumb. Any time I ever rode a
bronc before there's always been somebody
around to yell: 'Stay with him - hang and
rattle.' You didn't give me no encouragement.
Just lookin' at you scared me loose."\(^3\)

Russell's story showed Henry Keeton's life at an
embarrassing low point. Hank lost not only the satisfaction
of dominating wild horses, he lost his temper at the wife
who could not appreciate his bronco-busting efforts. As
Russell would articulate in his twentieth century stories,
the final stages of western frontier evolution brought
new roles for women. Hank's problems reflected an early
stage of the gender role confusion that bewildered many
nineteenth century western men adjusting to modern times.

The geographic scope of the Charlie Russell's cattle
era stories reached beyond Highwood Hank's Montana ranch
or Longrope's Texas-to-Montana trail. Russell's stories
stretched from eastern frontier school life of up-state
New York in "When Mix Went to School"\(^54\), all the way to
California with "A Ride in a Moving Cemetery."\(^55\) Russell's
only California-based story signaled the end of his
nineteenth century focus and a shift to modern times.

"Moving Cemetery" told how two very drunk westerners
smashed their horse-drawn buggy into a fast-moving freight
train near the town of Los Gatos. The survivor, supposedly
narrator Rawhide Rawlins, awakened several hundred miles
farther north, lying on a rail flatcar full of cemetery grave-stones. The disoriented narrator finally learned from a newspaper that his partner and horses had perished.

In many ways, this "Moving Cemetery" yarn resembled some popular literary devices used in the nineteenth century to portray the intrusion of the industrial revolution into pastoral America. Leo Marx explored similar themes in *The Machine in the Garden,*\(^56\) citing Nathaniel Hawthorne's reverie in Sleepy Hollow and Thoreau at Walden Pond, as both authors reacted negatively to a loud steam locomotive. The destruction of Huck and Jim's river raft by a monstrous steamboat, looming suddenly out of a foggy night in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* also served Marx as an example of destructive machines changing nature and natural people.

Russell's "Moving Cemetery" seems to provide a parody of Marx's 'pastoral heaven' literary ideal. Within fifty miles of the western coastal limit of North America, two delirious riders found an idyllic bliss driving the very best horses along the smoothest roads in California. Even though they had chemically induced their euphoria by means of "corn juice," these western men seemed sincerely carefree.

...the whole world right now looks so beautiful to me that there's no chance for an argument from religion or Teddy Roosevelt to the best brand of red-eye.\(^57\)

The impact of the totally unforeseen collision ejected Rawhide Rawlins from the horse-and-buggy world and scrambled his transportation metaphors with airplane and train images.
I recollect Bill reachin' for the reins, and
the next I know I've got a vague notion I'm in
an airship and can see clear to the Mexican line.
I'm wonderin' where I changed cars when the light
goes out. 58

Russell's representatives of the nineteenth century
hard-drinking, horse-and-buggy West collided with the
primary symbol of modern industrial society, the railroad.
The self-blinded westerners had no chance to survive in
such an encounter. The train never even slowed down with
the impact of the collision. Russell's "Moving Cemetery,"
could easily qualify as an end-of-an-era allegory. 59

Out of the swiftly evolving cattle era, Russell crafted
embarrassing legends to celebrate good people like Pete
Van. He assembled Longrope's historically correct but
romantically obsolete cattle drive. He rose beyond the
escapism of wishful nostalgia, however, by providing the
wake-up alarms of "Night Herd" and "Moving Cemetery."
Becoming sober in a small town dump-pile or on a gravestone
freight car might have been painful, but Russell knew
that failing to awaken could have meant a finish like
Charlie Bowlegs'. Wide-awake adaptation became Russell's
wisest theme in his cattle era stories. These stories
showed that, without adaptive change, a nineteenth century
western man would waste efforts on an absent girlfriend.
He could find himself blaming his own failures on a spouse
who neither encouraged victory nor sympathized with defeat
for a struggle that had lost its survival purpose. In
the end, even the pleasures of the best corn juice and finest horses proved to be no match for an unstoppable modern freight train.

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Section Three, Notes


2. Earl Talbot, letter to James B. Rankin, 1939, MHS #162, Box 4, Folder 6.

3. Phil Weinard, letter to James Rankin, 9/28/38, MHS #162, Box 4, folder 4-15.


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid. 1939.


9. Ibid. "How Louse Creek Was Named," Trails, p 77. The story first appeared in (undated) MNA inserts, October or November, 1916, with the narrator named "Bill Weaver." B.A. Alder asserted in a 1937 letter to James Rankin that it was Russell himself who was caught de-lousing his shirt with rocks and who gave the stream its undignified name. Rankin Collection, MHS #162; Box 1, Folder 1.

10. Mrs. Mattie Phillips, statement transcribed by Don A. Myrick, Montana Writers Project (WPA), 4/8/40, document #223.011, Microfilm reel #20. "Misc. Information." Not all of Russell's Judith Basin contemporaries thought Pete Van's reputation was amusing. This officially documented local gossip stated "Peter Van - a brother-in-law of William Skelton had a small band of cattle, but most of his activities were of a type that cannot be written up."

11. McCracken, Russell Book, p 110, 111. cites the recollections of an unnamed woman who as a young girl had witnessed Charlie Russell fully infested with body lice at the very location where he accused Pete Van of the same crime. This daughter of "Widow Oates" stated, "Many years later I read Russell's story 'How Louse Creek Was Named,' in his book Trails Plowed Under - and he no doubt got the idea from that little affair I witnessed as a girl. But it is really no particular reflection upon Russell, for nearly everyone got lousy now and then, in those days."

13. Charles M. Russell, letter to Great Falls Elks Club "Brothers", September, 1918, authorized copy, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, inventory # 973-11-4. Charlie Russell and Pete Van worked side by side in their early cattle range experiences. This letter mentioned how Van save Russell's life in a severe winter blizzard. "Years ago I was lost in a storm on Dry Wolf creek with a bunch of saddle horses. I was nearly in when Pete found me so weak and cold that Pete had to saddle a fresh horse for me and helped me mount. A few more hours would have meant the "cash-in" for me. Several riders were out but the storm drove them all back but Pete and if my big laughing friend had turned back I believe I would be across the big range waiting for him now."


15. Ibid. Also, Ted Owen oral history, transcribed by Ester Johansson Murray, 5/1/69, Billings, MT, MHS #OH 1967, pp 1-6. Owen stated, "The story about the runaway wagon that overturned and caught a fellow under the wagon box is based on a true story." In her version, it was Charlie Russell himself who refused to help Finch and his voices get out from under the wagon. In another version told to this writer by 90-year-old Joe Holland in Lewistown, MT, in 1987 the unwilling rescuer was David's neighbor, 'Lying' Babcock.

16. C.J. Ellis, letter to James B. Rankin, 1938, MHS #162, Box 1, Folder 14.


18. Ibid. p 130.


22. Ibid. "Lepley's Bear," p 75.


27. Con Price, letter to James B. Rankin, 5/16/38 MHS #162, Box 3, file 6. Price and Russell were partners in a cattle and horse ranch in Montana's Sweetgrass Hills.


32. Ibid. p 164.


34. Ibid. "Whiskey", p 34.

35. Charles M. Russell, letter to George W. Farr, 1919, MHS document # x680601.


44. Charles M. Russell, letter to Albert Trigg, 2/14/16, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana


46. Harry Stanford, letter to James Rankin, 3/3/38, MHS #162, Box 4, Folder 4-2. Stanford identified the narrator/main character of "Night Herd" as Belknap ("Baldie" or "Ballie") Buck, long-time friend of C.M. Russell, half-blood Indian and highly regarded cattleman in Alberta and Montana.


49. Charles M. Russell, pencil note to Joe DeYong, undated, National Cowboy Hall of Fame, DeYong Collection, 80.18, (Flood # 786), National Cowboy Hall of Fame archives, Oklahoma City, OK.

Recollections of Rawhide Rawlins," in MNA inserts distributed 12/10/17. MHS microfilm, The Harlowton Press. Henry Keeton met Russell in Utica when Charlie first came to Montana. The two were Great Falls neighbors in later times.

51. Ibid. Russell spoke of being "neither a good roper nor rider" in his introduction, "A FEW WORDS ABOUT MYSELF," in More Rawhides and Trails, p xix. Russell also joked about his riding in letters such as "Hello Will James", 5/12/20, Good Medicine, p 68.

52. Joe DeYong, "Modest Son of the Old West," Montana, Autumn, 1958, Volume 8, No. 4, p 96.


54. Ibid. "When Mix Went to School, p 65. First appeared MNA distributed on 4/1/18, MHS microfilm sample: The Medicine Lake Wave. The story described Charlie Mix's rural schoolboy encounter with a former prize-fighter who had become a (violent) school teacher. According to Russell, Mix ran the stage-coach stop at some time in Stanford, Montana. Years later Mix was a partner with a man named Johnson in a successful saloon in Neihart, according to Ralph Bemis in "The Old-Time Bartender -- A Lost Type," MNA inserts of 4/26/20, MHS microfilm sample: Fairfield Times.


58. Ibid.

59. Russell seems to be presenting a social allegory. His references to the carefully disguised fatality ("I ain't givin' his name, but we'll call him Bill Roslin. His father's a Chicago millionaire") suggest that Russell was retelling an actual event. If he were simply fabricating a parable there would be no reason for name sensitivity or for setting the tale in such a specific place as Los Gatos, California.
The ingredients in a real event may have presented an allegorical opportunity that was too good to ignore in a group of primarily Montana stories. It seems significant that Russell chose to put "Moving Cemetery" first in the sequence of stories in both the Montana Newspaper Association inserts in 1916 and in Rawhide Rawlins Stories in 1921.

* * *
Section Four

Struggling With Modernity

A machine is made
A horse is born
No four-wheel brakes
No screaming horn
But hooves make tracks
That wheels don't know
With saddle, cinch and latigo.1

In the early decades of the twentieth century, residents of the trans-Mississippi West attempted to keep pace with other more prosperous regions by accelerating urban growth and farm mechanization. Charlie Russell's stories containing twentieth century elements reflected the bewildering new customs and ideas that many nineteenth century Montana people encountered when moving into towns from farms and ranches. In a period of accelerated modernization, survival became a matter of adaptation.

Sixteen of Charlie Russell's forty-seven published stories and essays contained some reflection of twentieth century issues. Russell's stories portrayed nineteenth century westerners coping with railroads, horses devalued by automobiles and mechanical tractors, moralistic social reforms, stronger women, World War One, and domestic tourism. Russell found humor in his friends' efforts to cope with these modern developments. Through comic exaggerations, these modern Russell stories delivered a first-hand perspective of the transition of the American West into modern times.
Russell's 1880 arrival in Montana occurred just before steam-driven boats on the Missouri River lost their commercial viability to steam-driven railroads. These technologies enabled large numbers of white European-Americans to populate Montana and other western regions. Aware of the disruptive impact of steam transportation on the wilderness life of the American West, Russell told a New York newspaper interviewer in 1911, "If I had my way I'd put steam out of business." Coping with his anger about steam's impact on the West, however, Russell took advantage of the transportation opportunities and enjoyed himself in the process, sometimes passing long train trips telling stories for hours to friends and strangers.

Charlie Russell's 'modern' era story characters also showed some adaptability to rail travel. In his roast of Shelby hotelman, Bill Ward, titled "Bill's Shelby Hotel," Russell portrayed Ward's casual use of hobo travel techniques.

...when he gets to manhood he takes a dislike to work ... he just naturally steps underneath a freight train one mornin' with his bank roll an' takes a seat on the rods ... A few days later he lands in Shelby, where the citizens are surprised and delighted to see him separate himself from the rods. He's covered with dust an' resembles part of the runnin' gear. In this way he was able to hide out from the brakies.

Local citizens seldom welcomed tramps arriving illegally on freight trains. Russell's friendly character
assassination of Ward portrayed him as an opportunist who took advantage of the new Great Northern line.

The western communities in Russell's stories also made adjustments to the new twentieth century circumstances. In "Whiskey," Russell showed how even saloon beverages adjusted to shifting social forces. As the story's saloon keeper explained,

This ain't no cow-town no more. It's one of the coming farmer cities of this country, and the sellers of this rich land don't want nothing that'll scare away farmers, and I'm here to please the folks... there ain't a cross word in a barrel of (this booze)... All these gents you seg in here are pleasant without the noise.

This "whispering booze" accommodated the new farming community with a quiet saloon. And the timid new farming arrivals in Montana, conditioned by prohibition laws in other states, contributed to the unnatural silence with quietly furtive, alcoholic binges minus any loud vocalizing. For Russell's sense of the West, silent saloon patrons were as unwelcome as prairie land sales to farmers.

In some places entire towns adjusted by relocating just to accommodate the arrival of the railroad tracks. The 1907 construction of the Great Northern Railroad south-eastward from Great Falls into the Judith Basin bypassed a few upstart cow towns like Stanford and Geyser. These clusters of dusty shacks had to relocate or die. Russell portrayed one of these relocations in his roast of Pat O'Hare, titled, "How Pat Discovered the Geyser," 6
One afternoon when Pat's asleep the railroad sneaks in an' moves the town. The minute Pat opens his eyes he's onto their hole-card, and gettin' the wheelbarrow, he moves his hotel over to the new location an' has his dinin' room open for supper.

While teasing O'Hare for having a 'hotel' so flimsy that a wheelbarrow could relocate it in one afternoon, Russell reminded his audience of how suddenly these young western towns might change completely.

Even though Russell developed a tolerance for train technology, gas powered automobiles seemed to him like a manifestation of over-civilization. In another interview, Russell stated flatly, "There is too much civilization," and identified autos as the primary cause for the imbalance. The modern twentieth century automobile appeared only in Charlie's story about "Geyser." Russell's narrator stated, "When automobiles get popular, Pat who's always progressive an' up-to-date, buys one." On a casual ride with a friend to the next town, the car went out-of-control.

..after passin' what looks like Stanford as far as he could tell at the 80-mile gait they're goin', an' seein' they're nearin' Judith Gap, the friend asks, "What's your hurry, Pat?" "I'm in no hurry," Pat yelled, "but I'm damned if I know how to stop the thing. We'll have to let it run down."

Just as the collision in "Moving Cemetery" (mentioned in Section Three) seemed to suggest the clash between nineteenth and twentieth century cultures, Pat's runaway car in "Geyser" may have demonstrated Russell's attitude about the out-of-control mechanization of modern times.
Charlie Russell's favorite means of transportation and animal companionship, the horse, soon became the victim of modernization. The successful introduction of gasoline tractors, combines and other machinery into the big wartime wheat harvests put thousands of farm horses out of work and added to the growing herds of abandoned and unwanted horses on western prairies. In 1918, the state veterinarian of Montana estimated that 200,000 common range horses were crowding cattle and sheep from statewide grazing sites. In the same newspaper sections that were publishing Russell's stories, this state official advocated the establishment of horse slaughter houses and packing plants to ship horse meat to Europe for human consumption. Russell objected strongly to cattlemen and other friends about killing these range horses for food, pet feed and fertilizer. In the midst of Russell's published stories of adventures and whimsical roasts, an especially blunt personal statement appeared within the story titled, "The Horse."

I'm here to tell these machine-lovers that it will take a million years for the gas wagon to catch up with the hoss in what he's done for man. Today some of these auto drivers want to kill him off to make fertilizer out of his body. Mebbe I'm sentimental, but I think its a damned hard finish for one that has been as good a friend to man as the hoss.

Russell experienced the change in the role of horses as a very emotional issue. Many like-minded western friends of his, such as Pat O'Hare, Pete Van and even Will Rogers,
welcomed the chance to own and drive automobiles apparently without feeling that they had betrayed the loyal horse. Nevertheless, there were others, like Charlie, who strongly opposed the horse harvest. One newspaper account told of a former Montana cowboy who tried to blow up an Illinois packing plant that was butchering horses for meat.¹⁵

On the cattle ranches that survived the competition with farmers for land and water, Russell saw ample evidence of the distasteful modern materialism that reinforced his distrust of the twentieth century. In a brief essay titled "Ranches" he wrote,

Most of the cow ranches I've seen lately was like a big farm. A bungalow with all modern improvements... there's a big garage filled with all kinds of cars... There's a piana that you play with your feet, and a radio, a Mah Jong set, and a phonograph. The owner, if he's an old-timer don't care for this. He'd rather camp in the bunk-house and talk to some old bowleg about cows that wore horns.¹⁶

Apparently, many modern cattle ranchers could embrace more of the recent developments of the prosperous 1920s than resistant nineteenth century men like Russell. He noted that some former cowpunchers adapted to the times with new careers in oil, the national parks or bootlegging.¹⁷ As for his own post-frontier cattle range adaptation, Russell's twentieth century career in fine art became an international success.

Charlie Russell improved his artistic strength with a mid-life victory over alcohol use sometime between
1906 and 1908, but he considered mandatory social reforms like prohibition to be a repressive waste of time. Cattle towns like Russell's Great Falls typically had offered amusements for the free-spending cowboy clientele that later-arriving residents found unacceptable. As the cattle industry domination ebbed in western towns, reform-minded citizens gained political control. William Rowley described this "struggle for modernity," stating,

Reformers regarded gambling houses, brothels and the ever-present saloon as a temporary disfunction of the passing frontier stage of society that must give way to order, progress and moral enlightenment.

Rowley found that the urge to reform and achieve modernity grew from a sense of economic urgency.

Some pragmatic western "boosters" saw the necessity of reforming western society and government to attract population, investment, capital, and generally insure future growth.

Russell and his audience resented both the reforms and the population increases which the civic boosters actively encouraged. In a long poem, "Here's To All Old Timers," dedicated to local author, rancher and art patron, Robert Vaughn, Russell finished with this blunt sentiment:

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.

As a powerful example of an old timer who needed no reforming, Russell told the story of "Mormon Zack, Fighter." Zack's life spanned the western transitions
from the Indian trade-goods days around Reed's Fort (Lewistown, MT), through the range cattle days, until the story's finish in bootlegger times in Havre, Montana. During that progression, Zack survived numerous serious fights including gunshot wounds and nearly being disemboweled in a knife fight. Russell finished his tribute to Larson with this sharp contrast:

Zack belonged to his time an' it was his kind and not the reformers that made Montana. These last came in with the tumble-weed.

Because tumble-weeds first appeared in Montana after the farmers began breaking the prairie sod, they represented 'nester' interference and cattle range destruction - the fruits of reform - to western people like Russell and his audience.

The prohibition laws banning alcoholic beverages became both the ultimate success and ultimate failure of the reform movement. Reform success came in Montana with the strong popular vote in 1916 supporting prohibition which took effect at the start of 1919. The failure of prohibition proved certain by the twenties with wide open defiance in towns like Havre and Butte. Russell incorporated the reality of that failure and the hypocrisy of the reformer's anti-drinking efforts into several of his stories. He described Bill Ward's experiences under prohibition where "no one drinks without hidin' in the cellar" and where life became "just one long game
of hide-and-seek.” In “A Reformed Cowpuncher at Miles City,” he roasted E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott for his wild, cattle era celebrations in Miles City and then satirized the hypocrisy of prohibition-era state lawmakers gambling and drinking on the train to the annual stockmen’s meeting. Russell also perceived the irony of how prohibition made Anglo Americans legal equals to Indians.

It used to be agin the law to sell an Injun whiskey, but the law has made Injuns out of all of us now.

Charlie Russell celebrated reform ironies in several of his twentieth century stories. Teddy Blue, who once consumed “cow-swallows of Miles City home-made liquid fire” made an unlikely main character for “The Reformed Cowpuncher at Miles City.” Russell’s Bible-inspired parable, “There’s Only One David” included this brief character inversion: “There’s a reformed preacher in this town runnin’ a stud poker game.” Charlie roasted his friend Johnny Rich and the ethics of reform in “Johnny Reforms Landusky.” This 'Johnny' had earned a reputation as a rough gold-camp cook, but Russell also granted him a "pious disposition" which inclines him toward missionary work .. he picks out the Little Rockies as the most promisin' district to begin reformin'. He starts a revival there that's a cross between Mormonism an' a Sioux ghost dance...

Russell made reformers seem comic by describing absurd behavior reversals and such ridiculous strategies
as attempting missionary work in a murderous mining camp like Landusky. The village of Landusky earned a reputation for being anything but "promising" for reform. In Russell's narrative, Johnny's social improvements included a death bounty, "a little less than they paid for a wolf," for certain citizens, requiring the victims' ears but forbidding scalping as uncivilized. Johnny offended some residents with tactless funeral sermons on such texts as "When Fools Go Forth to Fight" and offended others by refusing to be mayor on the excuse of being inept with a gun. Finally Johnny offended the entire town with his explosive cooking that killed and maimed several people, forcing his hasty departure under a passing freight train. Using exaggeration, Russell's modern stories gave progressive social manipulations a satirical thrashing.

An international perspective beyond domestic progressive reform surfaced in Russell's stories with references to World War One. When compared with the war, tiny Landusky seemed very tough indeed. In "Johnny Sees the Big Show," the Montana newspaper correspondent noticed a similarity between battlefield clashes and Landusky on a quiet day. As for the horrors of trench warfare with rats and vermin, "Johnny tells the French officer he never had no rats." The unreformable Mormon Zack bore scars on his body reflecting a violent history "that would make a lot of scraps the Kaiser lost look
And true to sentiments of an earlier age, Russell's story, "The Horse," seriously observed that thousands of horses, gathered from the western prairies, had died with the soldiers on European battlefields to help win "a machine-made hell."

Russell participated in the Montana war effort which emphasized Herbert Hoover's call for maximum food supplies for Allied troops - "Food Will Win the War!" Montana food administrator Alfred Atkinson spread this message statewide through many speeches and newspaper advertisements. Charlie contributed two paintings with accompanying rhymes for use as advertisements encouraging food conservation. "Hooverizin'" showed an older cowboy talking to his horse while cooking biscuits over an open fire,

I hate to take your grub, old hoss, but then
I'm leavin' meat and wheat for fightin' men;
And by your handin' in your oats to me
The both of us is Hooverizin', see?
We're squarin' up with Uncle Sam, our friend
Just kinder helpin' hold the easy end.

"Meat Makes Fighters" showed a stubble-whiskered, aging cowboy riding beside a herd of modern, white-faced Herford cattle, saying

"I ain't a-wearin' khaki,
cause I'm too old a stag,
But I'm a-handin' beef and hide
to them that holds the flag.
Cake and pie is good enough
when folks just eat for fun.
But beef and leather plenty
puts men behind the gun."
Russell's sincere but somewhat awkward poetic responses to the war challenge harmonized with the efforts of farm and ranch communities in many western regions. Athearn noted that, by participating in the food-for-war effort, many westerners who had been feeling

.. increasingly ignored if not denigrated by the rising industrial society now ... found a place in world affairs, broadened their views and thought of themselves as a factor in international business ...

Whatever his perception of global involvement, Russell did his part for the war cause by donating the use of two paintings his wife could sell for as much as $2,000 each.  

Russell's financial success in his sales of fine art rested on the efforts of his wife Nancy. By 1904, Russell had granted her the complete financial and business control of his art sales and subsequent business investments. By 1921, Nancy Russell was selling Russell's best paintings for $10,000 each. While Russell's circumstances were atypically successful, his actions and attitudes fit a pattern, noticed by historian Duane Smith, among nineteenth century westerners.

Men were willing to give women unheard-of privileges and a great amount of respect but hesitated to give them the vote.

Along with the drive for prohibition laws, voting rights for women surfaced as a major reform issue in early twentieth century America. Even though Russell appreciated
his wife's business success, he strongly opposed her
(or any woman's) opportunity to vote in political elections.

Russell's writings reflected a mixture of attitudes
about women. In his Indian story about "Lindsay," Russell
spoke of the dominant role of females, both in animals
and in humans, stating, "It's the women that make the
men in this world .."46 Then, in his modern era essay
titled "Fashions," Russell became sarcastic about female
superiority.

It's different today. Bobbed hair, short skirts,
low front and back - every rag she's wearin
wouldn't pad a crutch. ... I used to think that
men could stand more punishment than women, but
I was wrong. ... a woman can go farther with a
lipstick than a man with a Winchester and a side
of bacon.47

And in his contemporary "Ranches" essay, Russell expressed
doubt and resentment about how some modern women exercise
their power over a man.

But maybe the woman he's tied to is the new kind.
If she is, she's got paw whip-broke. She's out for
sheriff. She's that kind.48

This "kind" of woman dressed her husband in stylish golf
socks and knickerbocker pants that embarrassed him with
his old friends. She dragged him to Europe, "him and
his checkbook," but together they have never seen
"Yellerstone or Glacier Park."49

Charlie clearly meant the exaggerations in these
brief essays to amuse his friends with humor. Evidently,
the issues of coping with capable and forceful twentieth
century women still dismayed many nineteenth century western men. With the modernization of ranch life, some of the unresolved dilemmas facing "Highwood Hank" at the end of the range cattle era lingered into modern times for Russell and his audiences. Russell's essays spoke directly to their gender discomfort about being unable to resist changes in women's roles.

The issue of seeing America's national parks before traveling abroad grew into popular awareness following the war just as Russell was publishing his stories. Russell's writings carried evidence of a new element in the economy and culture of the American West - domestic tourism. Historian Earl Pomeroy documented the growing appreciation for the outdoor West of this post-war period, stating, "It seemed to gain most strikingly in the twenties and thirties. A nostalgically rural and western spirit stirred as more Americans went to live in the city..." 50

Some westerners responded to possible tourist commerce opportunities by creating new facilities. In roasting Pat O'Hare, Russell suggested the Irish bartender had inflated some grandiose ideas for a resort hotel to be built beside the geothermal site that gave the town its name.

'Havin' heard of the Yallerstone Park, an' thinkin' he's found another one, Pat starts, a few days after, buildin' a health resort, follerin' the plans of the Mammoth Hotel...' 51
This story reflected the modern western trend toward taking financial advantage of potential tourism sites, however unattractive they might prove to be. In Russell's narrative, the geyser attraction never showed more activity "than a keg of sour dough," except when Pat's "rest cure medicine" provoked a visitor to see northern lights at noon time, rainbows at night, an' total eclipses of the sun any time - to say nothin' of geysers of all sizes."52

The inevitable demise of Pat's Geyser Hotel came years later, according to a local moralist.

It has answered the call of the march of progress by being torn down and made into a community dance hall where the Finnish population disport gayly when filled up with their particular brand of poison.53

Progress might have been marching along with the structural demise of a failed tourist landmark, but Pat's beverage tradition apparently had a life of its own.

Tourism gained its greatest initial momentum from the railroads. Pomeroy noted that after the war, the rail companies which had been still exhorting potential settlers to look to a smiling land of Canaan switched to extolling "the 'Far West,' a fabled land, a story land, still a country of pioneers, still a frontier. Here are cowboys and Indians."54

Russell's audience and story characters resented the rail-encouraged immigration, but many enthusiastically adapted to the trains' new passengers. Russell made fun of the traveling customers, referring to Bill Ward's
hobo companion beneath a Great Northern freight-car as
"a noted tourist, Brakebeam Ben." Nevertheless, the
western greeting for railroad travelers that Russell
described in "Bill's Shelby Hotel" proved to be too intense
for encouraging repeat business.

In the old times the residents there
include a lot of humorists who have a
habit of stoppin' trains an' entertainin'
the passengers. Most of these last is
from the East, an' they seemed to be
serious-minded with little fun in their
make-up. The Shelby folks get so jokey
with one theatrical troupe that stops there
that many of these actors will turn pale
today at the mention of the place.56

These early attempts at the business of western hospitality
required some fine tuning. According to Russell, the
motivation for Shelby's tourism reform came not from
law enforcement but from a threat by the Great Northern
Railroad's owner, Jim Hill, to re-build the tracks and
completely bypass the boisterous town. The chance of
losing the railroad convinced the citizens, unlike any
moral or legal admonitions, to make the necessary behavior
adjustments for the successful exploitation of tourists.

In the new world of tourism, Bill Ward proved a
success while Pat O'Hare failed. Bill's story began with
a reference to his successful hotel in Great Falls and
his planned venture on Flathead Lake, but Pat's place
never progressed beyond being a saloon with rooms to
rent. Miles City favorably impressed Russell as being
a good place for out-of-town guests.
Although Miles has always been a cow town, it's earned the right to be called a city, an' they handled the visitors in the old welcome way of the West.

Mormon Zack survived tough western experiences without the need of reforming, but both Teddy Blue and Russell reformed and voluntarily gave up drinking. Johnny Rich survived both Landusky and the Great War, but the horses made an ultimate sacrifice to win the "machine-made hell."

The different outcomes of Russell's twentieth century stories showed mixed results. There was no single survival message. Adaptation to tourism brought both success and failure. Giving-in to the "new kind" of woman brought harmony but some resentment. The new railroad brought permanent farmers but also temporary visitors with money to spend. The new automobiles shortened distances but often seemed uncontrollable. No single dilemma was the main problem with modernization and no single response worked in all circumstances.

In stories that were shared more to entertain than to teach, Charlie Russell delivered valuable information. He created entertainment out of the real dilemmas of living people. Bill Ward's hotel patrons did frighten a theatrical troupe with a semi-violent celebration. Pat did move his hotel to be near the railroad. Even though Russell exaggerated in his stories, he also preserved life episodes of real people coping with late stages of a major cultural and economic transition. With the
availability of written versions of this successful local humor, later generations of readers begin to understand the circumstances and perceptions of both the storyteller and his audiences. Serious students and casual explorers of the nineteenth century may understand more of the impact of the modernization of the American West with these glimpses from an insider's viewpoint.

# # #


3. Wilford Johnson, letter to James B. Rankin, 1937, MHS collection #162, Box 2, File 13. Wilford described seeing Russell and E.C. "Teddy Blue" Abbott on a train to Miles City, witnessing Russell telling stories for five to six hours, non-stop, with Abbott occasionally inserting one of his own. Also, Lila Marchand Houston, letter to James B. Rankin, MHS #162, Box 2, file 9. She recalled descriptions by her brother, artist J. N. Marchand, of Russell's stories entertaining other passengers on his first long train ride, Montana to New York.


7. Ibid. p 188.


10. Ibid.

11. Athearn, Mythic West, p 40.


addressee/date unknown. "Charlie told them, 'I might have a horse out there on the range that nobody would know who he belonged to, and I would hate like hell to think I would never see him again only with a can opener.'"


15. "Roundup Planned For Wild Horses," unsigned article, MNA distributed 8/30/26, MHS: Fergus County Argus.


17. Russell, letter to Jim Thornhill, 1/23/24, Good Medicine, p 122.


21. Ibid.

22. Charles M. Russell, "Here's To All Old Timers," 1911, illustrated poem, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, also published in Good Medicine, pp 38, 39.


24. Ibid, p 120, A similar comparison between reformers and the tumble-weed appeared in a letter to Rube Collins, 6/20/17, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls.

25. Malone and Roeder, Montana History, p 204.


on the Stockmen's Meet As It Looked to a Reformed Cowman, by Rawhide Rawlins."


32. Ibid.

33. Most of Russell's Montana audiences would have heard about the bloody death of the town founder, Pike Landusky, in a fight with folk-hero/outlaw, Kid Curry. Many of the details of the Curry/Landusky fight as well as the town's tough reputation appeared in an MNA article distributed 9/20/20 (2) under the banner "Pike Landusky, Trapper, Woodhawk, And Gold Miner; Noted As A Fighter; Bullet From 'Kid' Curry's Gun Killed Him, from facts furnished by Teddy Blue, Gilt Edge, Montana." Also see F. Bruce Lamb, Kid Curry, The Life and Times of Harvey Logan and the Wild Bunch (Boulder, CO, Johnson Publishing, 1991), p 71.


36. Ibid. p 26.

37. Ibid, "Mormon Zack, Fighter," p 117. Frank Kelly recalled that Zack's scarred belly was so toughened that he could withstand strong blows. "We used to hit him on the stomach for the drinks. I was just a kid. I hit him with a neckyoke. He stuck his old stomach out and I whacked him." - Crossen, Western Yesterdays, p 52.


41. Ibid.

42. Athearn, Mythic West, p 57.

43. Russell, letter to James Bollinger, 2/16/19, Good Medicine, p 95.

44. "Sale of Russell Painting For Ten Thousand Dollars Sets New Mark For Montana Artist ..." (unsigned) MNA, distributed 5/25/21, MHS: Redstone Review.

45. Duane Smith, Rocky Mountain Mining Camps, The Urban Frontier, University of Indiana Press, 1967, p 248 Russell wrote to a Great Falls neighbor from New York, "We took in a Suffragette meeting the other night an' a finer band of Hell raisers I never saw bunched according to there argument men would have little to say in regards to government." Letter to Albert Trigg, April 10, 1911, C.M. Russell Museum.


49. Ibid.


52. Ibid. p 188.

53. Cassandra Phelps, letter to James E. Rankin, 9/25/37, MHS #162, Box 3, file 5.

54. Pomeroy, Golden West, p 213.


56. Ibid. p 39.

57. Ibid."Reformed Cowpuncher/Miles City,"Trails, p 154.
"I ain't no historian, but I happen to savvy this incident."

A discussion of the historical perspective in the published writings of Charles M. Russell would seem incomplete without some comparison of Russell's writings with similar works of his time. In some cases, Russell focused on comparable subject matter in the American West as other writers, but with an entirely different style and writing purpose. In other cases, where the style of writing seems similar, the focus of attention seems totally divergent between Russell and other authors.

At the end of his life, in 1926, a magazine writer called Russell "an unconscious historian." Occasional comments showed that Charlie Russell had glimpses of an historian's perspective. Without the time or interest for research and documentation, however, many of Russell's witty observations of larger historical issues remained simply his personal opinions.

As Charlie Russell rode the Montana cattle ranges in the final years of his cowboy career, Frederick Jackson Turner formulated his influential frontier thesis about the nation's westward expansion into the North American continent. While Russell might have readily agreed with
Turner that the "Old West" or the western frontier seemed to be a dead issue by the early 1890s, he had his own explanation for the expansion process.

If nobody got drunk the east coast would be awful crowded by this time. Maybe the leaders of the exploring party didn't drink, but the men that went with them did. It's a safe bet there wasn't a man in Columbus's crew that knew what a maple-nut sundae was.  

Russell had a similarly flippant theory of European emmigration that also had a grain of truth imbedded in his rural way with words. "I'm pretty lame on history." he wrote a Great Falls neighbor from London in 1914,

but it's a cinch bet this gent (the Tower of London's headsman/executioner) was the cause of many a early home seeker in the new world. As an emigration booster he had Jim and Louie Hill beat to a fair you well.  

Escape from tyrrany and the lubrication of strong drink counted for more in Russell's analysis of Europeans in North America than economic conquest or manifest destiny.

Russell even showed an awareness of the Jamestown uprising by Opechancanough's warriors when 347 English colonists were killed in 1622. Ethnohistorian James Axtell has described the circumstance leading up to the massacre involving the encouragement of the "gullible" Indians to plant gunpowder to grow their own ammunition, followed by the bloody insurrection.  

Russell's version cast the Dutch as the white tricksters and included some sarcasm for the ill-advised farming techniques that Russell saw as ruining Montana's livestock grazing ranges.
I think it was these limburger eaters that told the red man to plant powder an ball Mr. Ingen put in this crop the sam as corn. but not beeing a up to date scientific dry lander his crop failed. the dutch like all good boosteres looked sorry an told him he hadent harrowed it under properly that by plowing deep and roling the soil would hold moister that it never had. the same as it did for our farmers last summer. did this stop the red man this plum failure of powder an ball crop (?) No he started raising Hair without irrigation ... right here trigg I get hazy on history...

His cattleman bias against the nineteenth century booster slogan of "Rain Follows the Plow" intruded on Russell's joke about the seventeenth century colonial era. Undisciplined historical views made Russell more of a social satirist than a social scientist.

Charlie Russell's historically-based yarns reflected more characteristics comparable to fiction writers than to historians. Three contemporary writers, George Ade, Alfred Henry Lewis, and Andy Adams published books in the years 1897 - 1913 when Charlie Russell first experimented with writing and publishing stories. The style and content in the works of these authors have several reflections in Russell's stories.

Russell's personal library contained at least three volumes of contemporary fables by George Ade including More Fables in Slang. The small town world of Ade's fables, with such elements as literary clubs, pompous colonels, and stingy farmers, shared little with Russell's western subjects. His controlled use of irony, however,
seemed to leave echos in Russell's descriptive prose.

In one story, Ade wrote,

Two or three Matrons, who were too Heavy for Light Amusements, but not old enough to remain at Home and Knit organized the Club. Nearly every Woman in town rushed to get in for fear somebody would say she hadn't been Asked. 10

One Russell passage showed a similar dry wit that withheld crucial information until the last moment.

One heavy man - the gent from Sun River Valley was lucky enough to |-|-| on his head, so he wasn't injured none. 11

More Fables also contained a story that must have attracted Russell's attention, titled "The Fable of the Inveterate Joker who Remained in Montana." Russell had earned the right in his younger days to be called an incurable Montana joker, but he differed with Ade's unnamed hero who finished at the end of a rope.

He did not Hang straight enough to suit, so they brought a Keg of Nails and tied to his feet, and then stood off and Shot at the buttons on the back of his coat. 12

Russell's stories contained two passages with similar solutions for unfinished hangings as well as an unsympathetic attitude for the victim.

If he's as light in pounds as he is in principle, we'll sling a boulder in his pants to give him weight. 13

As he hasn't got enough weight below his head to break his neck, his end's hastened by tuckin' an anvil into the seat of his pants. 14

Ade's brief little fables, complete with a sarcastic moral at the end, served as gem-like examples of finely
crafted humor. Russell's writing showed that he appreciated Ade's distilled irony more than his structures. Russell's stories demonstrated much more spontaneity and complexity. One of the hanging stories, "Hands Up!" involved a stagecoach hold-up, several plot reversals and strong character dialogue - all in just a few brief pages. Even with all those complications, Russell's story carried a plausible sense that his story source, Jack Shea, had told him about a real event with real people. Russell's stories, despite humorous exaggerations, tended to personify a realism that Ade never attempted. Ade's occasional use of slang, including an apology for it found in the Preface of another book owned by Russell, seems urbane and formal when compared with Russell's natural use of rural vernacular.

Alfred Henry Lewis's seven volumes of Wolfville stories featured a much more exaggerated use of rural slang.

It's only now an' then, ... that Injuns invades Wolfville; an' when they does, we all scowls 'em outen camp - sort o' makes a sour front so as to break em early of habits of visitin' us. We shore don't hone none to have 'em hankerin' 'round.

In spite of years spent in the West as a Dodge City real estate agent and a New Mexico newspaper editor, Lewis's sense of local vernacular seems overstated.

In the years that Lewis published his Wolfville books, from 1897 until 1913, he worked as a newspaper
reporter in New York. Charlie Russell mentioned having met Lewis among other celebrities when he returned from his first trip to New York in 1904. Russell's nephew reported that Charlie enjoyed the Wolfville stories, but apparently Russell chose not to emulate Lewis in the use of such words as "kyards" (cards), "hooman" (human), "fooneral" (funeral), "sech" (such), "thar" (there), "speshul malignant" (especially deadly), "towerists" (tourists) or numerous other examples of artificial misspelling. Russell also avoided Lewis's blatant racism that permeated Wolfville where, according to critic Abe Ravitz, "Chinks (Chinese), Greasers (Mexicans), Injuns and evangelists are treated with equal contempt."

Alfred Henry Lewis used the character called "The Old Cattleman" as his primary narrator. In a somewhat similar manner, Russell used the "Rawhide Rawlins" character as his narrator in twenty-four of his forty-seven published stories. Lewis tended to populate his stories with characters named "Faro Nell," "Cherokee Hall," and "Silver City Phillip," while only a few of Russell's characters bear similar names like "Highwood Hank," "Mormon Zack Larson," "Bedrock Jim," and "Squaw Owens." In most cases, Russell's character names referred to verifiable people. Wolfville characters and stories seem artificial. Bernard DeVoto wrote that "Wolfeville (sic) is just a set of painted flats against a canvas backdrop ..."
Far more realistic than Lewis's _Wolfville_ stories, Andy Adams' _Log of a Cowboy_ and other assorted stories have attracted the praise of critics such as J. Frank Dobie who called Adams, "the dean of all cowboy writers." Adams was five years older than Russell, arrived in Texas in 1882 and worked for ten years in the cattle business, including trail drives in Texas, the Indian Territories (now Oklahoma), and Kansas, before settling in Colorado. Undocumented Russell folklore attributes praise for Adams' stories by Charlie. And the New York Times quoted Adams' praise for Russell's painting accuracy which stated, "If he painted a naked cowpuncher swimming across the river you'd know it was a cowpuncher." Nevertheless, Adams may not have liked Russell's stories as much as his paintings. Charlie's characterizations involved much greater use of local vernacular than Adams. Russell's many roast formats, moreover, often created humor by means of grand exaggeration, a technique that Adams scorned. In referring to a story told by the character "Stubbs," Adams' biographer, Wilson M. Hudson stated, 

> Stubb's story is the exaggerated, wild and woolly kind that Andy heartily disliked when presented as true of the West.

Stubb's excessive fourteen page story seems more dry and literary than "wild and woolly" when compared with the wild exaggerations Russell's packed into two pages.
Another, more subtle difference between Adams' and Russell's techniques was in their choice of words. While Russell chose a more subdued course of vernacular portrayal than Alfred Henry Lewis, Adams took an even more formal route. Hudson explained that Andy's language is colorful and appropriate but not overdone or exaggerated. It is the language of cowboys and Rangers reworked and made smoother than it actually was. Though it has the ring of real talk, it could hardly be studied by a modern scholar as an altogether accurate and modern specimen of the language of the Southwest in the seventies and eighties. ... he has retained the idioms and figures and improved the grammar and connection.

Two examples illustrate the different styles used by Adams and Russell. Both featured a narrator's voice in the first sentences of stories about cattle stampedes. Adams wrote,

"Speaking of stampedes," said Runt, "reminds me of a run I was in and over which I was paid by my employer a very high compliment."

Russell's version said,

"Whoever told you that cattle stampede without cause was talkin' like a shorthorn," says Rawhide Rawlins. "You can bet all you got that whenever cattle run, there's a reason for it. A whole lot of times cattle run, an' nobody knows why but the cows an' they won't tell."

Russell's style seems the most realistically evocative of the three, filling the middle ground between the exaggerated overstatement of Alfred Henry Lewis and the
slightly stilted formality of Andy Adams. Since Russell could make high priced art so easily and struggled so hard to write, he lacked Adams' serious literary ambition. Charlie never attempted to put his yarns into a larger format as Adams did so successfully with *Log of a Cowboy*.

Russell seems to have enjoyed Mark Twain's works since he owned at least four. Nevertheless, Charlie never shared Twain's hostile attitude to Indians. American humor critic, Jesse Bier explained Twain's scorn for Indians as being disillusionment with romantic stereotypes.

The intransigent attitude was a counter-attack against romanticisings ... The Indian, unfortunately, became one of Twain's specific symbols for all the false emotion he came to loathe after having been seduced by lies."

A similar anti-Indian attitude inflamed the rhetoric of "humorist", Bill Nye, whose journalistic racism typified 'Good Indian = Dead Indian' newspaper editorial writing in the late nineteenth century West. Nye's outstanding characteristic proved to be the acidity of his supposedly comic prose.

As usual, the regular fall wail of the eastern press on the Indian question, charging that the Indians never commit any depredations unless grossly abused, has arrived. ... Every man knows ... that the Indian is treacherous, dishonest, diabolical and devilish in the extreme. ... He will wear pants and comb his hair and pray and be a class leader at the Agency for 59 years, if he knows that in the summer of the 60th year he can murder a few Colorado settlers and beat out the brains of the industrious farmers.
Newspapers in Montana, from Maiden to Cut Bank, expressed similar views, but Bill Nye made his expression of racial hatred outrageous enough to seem humorous to many westerners.

Charlie Russell owned a copy of at least one Bret Harte novel, *Trent's Trust*,. Despite Harte's popularity for his depiction of western slang, he used such lofty language for his condescending, non-western narrator that his works shared little in common with Russell. Charlie never attempted to use such verbosity as these word samples selected from Harte's most popular work, *The Luck of Roaring Camp*: "facetiousness," "ludicrous," "interdicted," "imperceptibility," "infelicitous," "lugibrious," or "tranquilizing," to name but a few. As for Harte's renowned use of California miners' slang, Twain asserted that Harte's style was bogus. Twain lived for a time with the California prospectors and claimed that Harte

\[
\text{learned how to fascinate Europe and America with the quaint dialect of the miner — a dialect no man in heaven or earth had ever used until Harte invented it. With Harte it died, but it was no loss.}
\]

Russell's use of local vernacular never charmed the book-buyers of Europe and America the way Harte's did, but Montana readers of newspapers and *Rawhide Rawlins* books enjoyed his portrayal of their dialect enough to launch the publication of *Trails Plowed Under* in 1927. *Trails*
has remained "in print," in hard-back format ever since. Charlie Russell made himself very familiar with a western novel even more popular than Harte's works. Russell filled his own copy of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* with preliminary sketches for a commission to illustrate a fancy 1916 edition. Austin Russell reported that "The Virginian offended" Charlie.

He didn't like the hanging of the hero's best friend, Trampas' faked-up song ("Why didn't he sing a real range-song?") and such details as the hero riding the same horse all the time, riding hard day and night and never once changing horses.

Austin also reported that Russell had little use for most of the two-gun westerns which were spawned by the huge success of Wister's trend-setting novel.

Just within Montana, Russell's friends and acquaintances produced an abundance of western writing, both fiction and non-fiction. J. Frank Dobie noticed the extraordinary literary output and stated that,

... cow people of Montana and the Northwest were more literate than those of Texas and the Southwest.

Many of the better books by Russell's friends and contemporaries were autobiographical narratives. Some, like E.C. "Teddy Blue" Abbott's *We Pointed Them North* required the assistance of a co-author to assemble the fragments of memory and make a presentable case for publication. Others, like *U-BET* by John Barrows or both *Montana Memories* and *Trails I Rode* by Con Price.
also featured stories about Russell and, in a few cases, included accounts of the same incidents as those rendered in several of Russell's tales. These anecdotes, and the personal correspondence between Russell and these authors, offer a useful perspective for understanding Russell and his writings. One local Montana memoir, *Riding The High Country*, by Patrick T. Tucker, has proved to be more fiction than fact, particularly regarding information about Russell. In all cases, these autobiographical works contrasted with Russell's stories in their style. None of them attempted to create the illusion of an oral storyteller by using a narrator's voice other than their own. And none of them used anything like Russell's understated irony or an overstated lie to alter a story's impact.

Only one Montana writer, Russell's friend Frank Bird Linderman, experimented with the use of the short anecdotal story to retell local events and create an oral-style yarn. Occasionally Linderman added a twist of his own, having one of his narrator voices speak with the French/English patois of the mixed-blood Metis.

Linderman also wrote in several other formats including novel length stories and longer poetry. University of Montana English Professor, H. G. Merriam called Linderman, "the foremost writer of Montana; one of the best story tellers I know." Linderman told and read aloud some
of his stories before public audiences in the years before
and after Russell's 1926 death. In a letter to a Russell
researcher, Linderman mentioned

Last night I talked, using my Russell
Recollections as a subject, and my audience
appeared to be enthused, many people coming
up to enquire "if the book could be purchased,"
etc.

Linderman developed but never published a manuscript
on his experiences with Russell, including several of
Russell's unpublished stories. Years after Linderman's
1938 death, Merriam edited the manuscript into Recollections
of Charley Russell.

Linderman's most enduring literary legacy was his
writing on Indians, especially his translations of oral
histories by Crow tribal leaders Plenty Coups and Pretty
Shield. In addition, he published four volumes of Indian
legends based on Chippewa, Cree, Blackfeet, Kootenai,
Crow and Gros Ventre traditions, two of which were
illustrated by Russell. Russell's friend from his cowboy
days, James Willard Schultz, wrote stories in somewhat
formal prose which were sympathetic to Blackfeet traditions.
Schultz enjoyed international commercial success, especially
with juvenile readers. However, neither Linderman nor
Schultz attempted Russell's narrative maneuver of having
a cowboy's voice tell realistic Indian stories.

Charlie Russell's peculiar narrative formats contrasted
with most other western writers. He used the traditional
'mock oral' story structure most frequently, plus occasional 'editorial' essays voiced in rural vernacular. He hid positive stories about Indians inside the voices of sceptical white narrators. He made humorous legends out of the misadventures of his friends. He celebrated the vitality of western wildlife, both animal and human. He seldom mentioned women and seemed uncertain about their involvement when he did include them in his stories. Violence among Indians or European-Americans seldom determined his story resolutions. He made entertainment from both grand and subtle lies. He captured on paper some of the pre-literary story traditions of the American West. And he ignored the well educated book-buying audiences for both history and literature to write stories directed at his intelligent but unsophisticated Montana friends.

Most significantly, Charlie Russell demonstrated the rapid alteration of the American West from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. The range of his storytelling perspective, from the 1820s through the 1920s, combined with the authenticity of details in his narratives, provide a wealth of understanding of pivotal North American cultural transitions for generations to come.

*   *   *

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Notes, Afterward


4. Russell, "Whiskey," Trails, p 33. The "maple-nut sundae" was a typical Russell reference to alternative refreshments in the wake of the prohibition laws banning all alcoholic beverages.

5. Russell, letter to Albert Trigg, 4/12/14, Good Medicine, page 99. James and Louis Hill were the early presidents of the Great Northern Railroad which aggressively recruited emigrants in Europe and England to finance rail construction by land sales to new settlers.


7. Russell, letter to Albert Trigg, 4/10/11, Good Medicine, p 133.

8. The Charles M. Russell Library, Dawson's Book Shop, Los Angeles, CA, February, 1941, catalog #152, prepared by Ellen Shaffer. Copy in National Cowboy Hall of Fame archives, Joe DeYong Collection, Flood #284. Russell resisted formal education and left the classroom forever at age 16, but continued to read actively. By the end of his life, Russell's library contained volumes by Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, Alexander Dumas, Charles Dickens, Stewart Edward White, Frank Bird Linderman, Theodore Roosevelt, and O. Henry, to name a few. This catalog stated that it did not represent all of Russell's books.


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22. J. Frank Dobie, letter to Joe DeYong, 4/11/34, National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, Flood #585, document number 80.18.


40. J. Frank Dobie, letter to James B. Rankin, 11/22/55. MHS #162, Box 1, folder 12.


47. Frank Bird Linderman, letter to James B. Rankin, 11/4/37, MHS #162, Box 2, file 20.


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Parks, Edd Winfield, "The Intent of Ante-Bellum Southern Humorists," page 7


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Russell, Charles M., letter to Great Falls Elks Club, Great Falls, September, 1918, Authorized Copy, C.M. Russell Museum inventory #973-11-4.

Russell, Charles M., letter to Albert Trigg, 2/14/16, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls.

Russell, Charles M., letter to George W. Farr, 1919, Montana Historical Society, document # x680601


Russell, Charles M., letter to Rube Collins, 6/20/17, C.M. Russell Museum, Great Falls

James B. Rankin Collection
Montana Historical Society (MHS) Archives
Helena, MT

James B. Rankin was Princeton-educated school teacher who aspired to be a Russell biographer. His widow donated his research files to the Montana Historical Society in 1980. Most of the files contain letters to Rankin responding to requests, published nationwide in newspapers in the mid-1930s, which asked for Russell information. Rankin never published a biography of Russell and supposedly destroyed his own manuscript.

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