Russell's Oils Eye-Opener to the East

By WM. BLEASDELL CAMERON, Meadow Lake, Sask.

IN January CANADIAN CATTLEMEN mention is made by me of the circumstances under which a rough little painting, made in the ranch bunkhouse, brought temporary fame to Charles Marion Russell, later Montana's great depicter on canvas of the pioneer West. In, I believe, 1947, a writer in a New York magazine, who it is quite evident had no personal knowledge of Russell, had an article on the artist which as a tissue of misstatement and misrepresentation would be hard to match. Before continuing my own story of Russell, I wish to correct a few of this writer's ignorant misstatements and assumptions.

The first of these concerns the crude sketch above referred to (reproduced in my article and entitled "The Last of 5,000"), and the terrific winter of 1886, in which this writer gives full play to his vivid imagination in crediting Russell with having been "left in this wilderness, to 'winter' 5,000 cattle" for Chicago owners and he ends this choice bit of fiction by depicting Russell riding among the carcasses of the frozen cattle, "sobbing like a child, because he had failed" — presumably to prevent their perishing. As a matter of fact, since Russell was only one of a number of ranch hands, and probably the youngest, he couldn't have "failed", since responsibility for the "failure" (if such it could be called) was that of the foreman and manager — and the weather.

As for the "rip-roaring" stuff, that was merely an occasional phase of Russell's youthful days in the West. And the statement that "he was much of a drunkard and raised a lot of hell" in his youth is one that Russell, if he were still living, would have fiercely resented.

Again, I have a dozen of Charlie's letters to me, chiefly in connection with his work for "Field and Stream", and in none of them—any more than in his speech—did he refer to his paintings as "pitchers". He was not that crude.

I am moved to refute the attempt of the aforesaid writer to stamp Charlie Russell as a "tough hombre", because — apart from a few years in his tempestuous youth — he was always a sober, unassuming, kind and courteous gentleman. And while he had little if any formal education and his spelling was often atrocious, I fancy he didn't really miss it. Instead he had brains and he used them to educate himself.

The Russell Contract

Back in Cascade, after covering the northern states to the Coast as well as southern British Columbia, Russell met me with smiling and open-handed friendliness. I was more than gratified to learn that — Mrs. Russell agreeing — he had concluded to have his work brought prominently before the public, with added publicity from write-ups, through the medium of "Field and Stream" at the stipulated price of fifteen dollars each painting. I immediately drew up a Contract and Agreement in duplicate, to which Russell affixed his signature. Under it I wrote my name, "on behalf of myself and for 'Field and Stream'," and Mamie, his wife, signed as witness. The original of this historic document is still in my possession and a photostatic copy accompanies this article.

To say that I was jubilant would be a gross understatement. That I, a stranger to the artist a few weeks before, should have been able to close such a contract with a man I was convinced would before many years be recognized as the most brilliant painter in his field, that of the pioneer West, seemed to me too fantastic. But I held in my hand the document, signed and witnessed, to confirm it, and the pride I felt in the accomplishment of the purpose that had brought me to Cascade was, I think, justifiable. I tried to control my exultation, but it wasn't easy. I wanted to whoop.

At the same time I had not, I believed, been entirely selfish. The benefits I saw resulting from our agreement would be shared by both parties. If it was true that he would receive from his magnificent work a mere trifle, on the other hand, through the pages of "Field and Stream", he would become known to thousands who had never before heard of him or had the chance to put the stamp of authority upon his genius. As a result there would be an immediate and mounting demand for his canvasses and steady rise in their value, until I could envision them taking their place among the other great American works of art. That my belief in the future of Russell's work was well grounded is borne out by the fact that for years before he laid down his brush his larger paintings had been bringing him sums running into five figures. In the winter of 1925, the last year in which he did any painting to speak of, his sales, I understand, amounted to $25,000.

However, I imagine Mrs. Russell was the managing financial partner in the team. She had a keen business sense, something Russell himself lacked. He was too generous. He would willingly expend himself, without compensation, to do a good turn for a friend — in other words, paint him a picture. But I'm inclined to think that, for the valuable residential property they acquired in Great Falls, the credit is due chiefly to Mrs. Russell.

One of Russell's earlier paintings hangs in the Provincial Government Library at Edmonton, a picture of Indians off their horses examining the grass on the open prairie, presumably for traces of an enemy. The title would probably be "Tracking". This picture is not large and the Government, I believe, secured it for $1,100.

On this second visit, I spent two weeks in Cascade, two of the most enjoyable weeks in my experience. I saw a great deal of the Russells, and I was always welcome to drop in and discuss the future and listen to Charlie's original comments and highly diverting chatter. I climbed the hill overlooking the village and took a snap showing Russell's tiny cabin in the foreground. I also took pictures of Russell himself, Mamie and his "Monty" horse, a pinto pony of which he was as fond as if it had been a human being. I used to wonder, if he were obliged to part with one or the other, which he would keep, Mamie or Monty. And as a result of these visits at Cascade the friendship between Russell and me took

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root and grew steadily stronger, until it ended after close on thirty years. A mutual liking had developed between us which pleased him as much as it delighted me.

Russell didn't balk at admitting that, in his earlier days in the West, he had been "a wild young man". I recall his telling me once of a wild night in Great Falls. "I didn't know when or where I bedded down, but I woke in the mornin' with an awful head and I threw up somethin' that looked like a dead mushrat." (They were always "mushrats" — not muskrats — to the old-timers.)

He had sworn off these occasional "busts" — the natural outlet for his exuberant youthful spirits — before I met him, doubtless as the result of his marriage. If he kept liquor in the house I can't recall him ever offering me any, although I was not then an abstainer, or seeing him take a drink himself.

Russell confiided to me a number of things. One I remember was the difficulty he found in mixing his paints. I told him that was something he need have little trouble in remedying. There were a dozen good artists in St. Paul, none of whom was capable of turning out such work as he, with his native ability, found no difficulty in doing, but any one of them in a very short time could teach him all he needed to know about mixing colors. I don't know whether or not he ever acted on my suggestion or just continued to make discoveries for himself by the old and well-known rule of trial and error, but I have no doubt that he had learned all he had to know about blending colors long before they ceased to concern him.

Great Falls Friends Honor the Artist

One of the most admirable traits in Russell's make-up was his passion for fairness. If you did him a good turn, he could never be satisfied until you had been repaid in full. A good example of this is shown in the following incident:

He naturally had a host of friends and admirers in Great Falls and when they learned of his approaching marriage they clubbed together and bought him the finest set of silverware to be found in the city for a wedding present, and that in Charlie's view meant that he must give them something suitable in return as a mark of his appreciation.

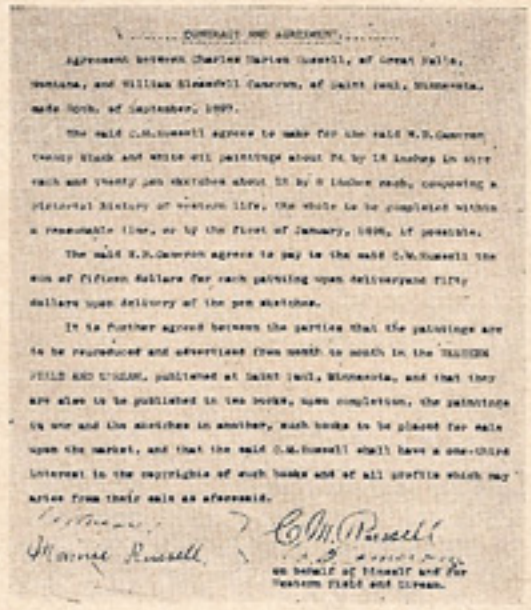
So the bridegroom-to-be painted two pictures, which I saw in Great Falls at a later date. In the first he was shown seated in cowboy working clothes on a packing case, before a rough board table in an interior that looked decidedly tough. A thick mop of tangled, straw-colored hair crowned his scalp and a week's growth of beard his prominent chin. He was vigorously transferring the contents of a fire-blackened frying pan at his elbow from the table to his mouth. It is scarcely necessary to add that the place was in the riotous disorder of a bachelor's hangout.

In the second picture he sat at the head of a handsome dinner table, covered with a spotless tablecloth, with Mrs. Russell opposite him at the other end. His hair had been carefully trimmed and combed. He was clean shaven, dressed in a smart business suit, white shirt and suitable four-in-hand tie, and was expertly carving, with the appropriate tools, a beautiful roast turkey. And of course, ostentatiously displayed on the table, between himself and the bride, was the complete set of lovely silverware given him by his Great Falls friends.

I parted with Russell with reluctance and moved back to St. Paul in October, and after weeks during which I brought all my powers of persuasion to bear upon him, was able to convince the founder and publisher of "Field and Stream", John P. Burkhard, that I really was going to New York and taking with me such manuscripts as I thought worth putting into type. He could join me there and we'd get out the first New York issue of the magazine. John didn't want me to leave him. At the same time, he was most unwilling to exchange his native Minnesota for New York and but for my persistence I doubt he would ever have done so. But at length, seeing the greater possibilities in the publishing field in the metropolis — especially since we were now to have Russell's frontispieces — he gave in, and next day, with my precious bag of manuscripts, I hopped a train for New York, where John joined me a couple of weeks later. However, our ways parted after another year when Burkhard backed out of an arrangement I had negotiated with some difficulty to secure $5,000 in greatly-needed capital to help us put the magazine on its feet, and I quit in disgust. I declined frequent urgings to return and take full editorial control of the magazine. Burkhard was energetic and did not lack ideas, but as a business man he was a flop and I doubted if he would ever make a success of "Field and Stream". He never did make money for himself, but his widow, I believe, following his death, sold the magazine to its present publisher for a substantial sum. She was a Calgary woman who, during its St. Paul period, contributed outdoor sketches to "Field and Stream". She followed Burkhard to New York and married him.

I saw her only once — this after the sale — and I may be considered uncharitable in saying that she reminded me of the pioneer Hudson's Bay Company officer who asked that "one wife" be added to his requisition for trade goods coming to York Factory on the annual ship from London, and who receipted for her in these terms: "Received one wife in fair condition. She is certainly a rum one to look at but that may not hurt her for work."

I am not sure if Russell sent any more pictures to "Field and Stream" after I



AGREEMENT AND AGREEMENT

Agreement between Charles Marion Russell, of Great Falls, Montana, and William Blackwell Cameron, of Saint Paul, Minnesota, made this, of September, 1899.

The said C.M.Russell agrees to make for the said W.B.Cameron twenty black and white oil paintings about 24 by 18 inches in size each and twenty pen sketches about 12 by 8 inches each, comprising a pictorial history of western life, the whole to be completed within a reasonable time, or by the first of January, 1900, if possible.

The said W.B.Cameron agrees to pay to the said C.M.Russell the sum of fifteen dollars for each painting upon delivery and fifty dollars upon delivery of the pen sketches.

It is further agreed between the parties that the paintings are to be reproduced and advertised from month to month in the FIELD AND STREAM, published at Saint Paul, Minnesota, and that they are also to be published in the books, upon completion, the paintings in one and the sketches in another, such books to be placed for sale upon the market, and that the said C.M.Russell shall have a one-third interest in the copyrights of such books and of all profits which may arise from their sale as aforesaid.

Witness: Maurice Russell

C.M.Russell

W.B.Cameron

on behalf of himself and for Western Field and Stream.

left the magazine but I have no doubt he fulfilled his contract. But here is a list of most of those the titles of which I remember:

1804: Lewis and Clark meeting the Mandans;

The Ambush: Indians preparing to fall on an immigrant train;

The Old Trapper's Story: Listeners grouped about a campfire;

Surrender: Rustlers, hands raised, before the guns of cowmen;

Before the White Man Came: Mounted Indians watching a sea of buffalo, elk, deer and antelope below them;

Keeoma: Beautiful Indian girl fanning herself with an eagle wing as she lies before the fire in her lodge;

Battle Between Crows and Blackfeet: Terrific action and drama in deadly combat;

Turkey Calling: Negro boy with call luring bird in distance.

Russell Picture Postcards

A Great Falls publishing firm engaged Charlie to paint a series of pictures in color to be issued in the form of postcards, of which I have a few. In one, a couple of ladies, their skirts held high, in a small clearing, are gazing in terror at a small bristling animal in the foreground. "Good Heavens!" exclaims the larger woman. "A grizzly bear!" Porcupine, of course.

A second card shows a couple of old prospectors, one on either side of an open

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CHARLES RUSSELL
(Continued from Page 27)

space, hats off, bowing to a small striped animal nosing around the remnants of a hastily-deserted meal. The legend in this case is: "All who know me respect me." No Westerner needs an introduction to "Stripes".

In the third card, an individual who could not by any chance be taken for anything but a cowpuncher, seated spraddle-legged on the bald prairie in the rising sun, having just come once more into circulation, is regarding with marked attention and obvious misgiving out of his bleary eyes an object a short distance off which strongly resembles a coil of rope. On one side of him lies an empty bottle, on the other his Stetson. Nearby, patiently awaiting relief from his overnight burden, stands a saddled pony, "tied" to the ground by his loose bridle rein. His owner is directing a question to the coil of rope, in the evident hope of receiving a reassuring word — "Are you the real thing?" The answer is a prompt and unequivocal "Yes", communicated by the furious "R-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r!" of a suddenly-elevated tail.

Snakes, rattler variety, were common enough around Medicine Hat and in the Dakota "bad lands" in the bustling days when most everything happened.

Russell Oils Attract Great Crowds

In the summer of 1898 the Annual East State Sportsman's Show occupied for a week the Mechanics Building — a whole block — in the City of Boston, and I secured a booth for a "Field and Stream" exhibit. I wired Charlie Schatzlein at Butte for the loan of two magnificent large oil Russell canvasses in gorgeous color that I had seen in his collection the year before and they were promptly expressed to me. They proved to be one of the main attractions of the monster show and our booth was constantly besieged by swarms of visitors straining for a glimpse of the Russell canvasses. This event was splendid advertising, not only for Russell but for "Field and Stream" as well.

Being now at work in New York, I did not visit the West nor did I see Russell again until the summer of 1913, when I came upon him and Mrs. Russell in a Winnipeg street car. I was not only surprised but delighted and I deeply regretted that my duties as assistant manager and publicity director of the Winnipeg Exhibition — then in the middle of its annual session — did not permit me to see much of him on this occasion. However, I made up for this disappointment in later visits with him at his home in Great Falls, Montana.

Meanwhile I learned that he had an exhibit of his own at the adjacent Stampede and I have before me as I write a catalogue in which are listed the following: 17 Oils, 7 Watercolors, 9 Bronzes — 33 pieces in all — a remarkable collection, the work of one man, and evidence that he was no dabbler but an earnest worker at his art.

I have omitted earlier to say that the cowboy artist was as adept at modeling in wax or clay as he was in the use of a brush. Russell made a perfect wax model of a beautiful bay mare belonging to Marcus Daly, Montana copper king; then painted the model so true to her coloring that those who had seen the animal recognized her at once. I saw this lovely creation at the end of the cigar counter in the Hotel Butte, where she was a show piece under a glass cover.

The next instalment of Charlie Russell's story will deal in the main with the humor which bubbled from him like water from a cool, refreshing spring, driving out care and foreboding and letting the sunshine of cheer and good fellowship into countless thousands of darkened lives. The world is the better for his having lived.

(To Be Continued)

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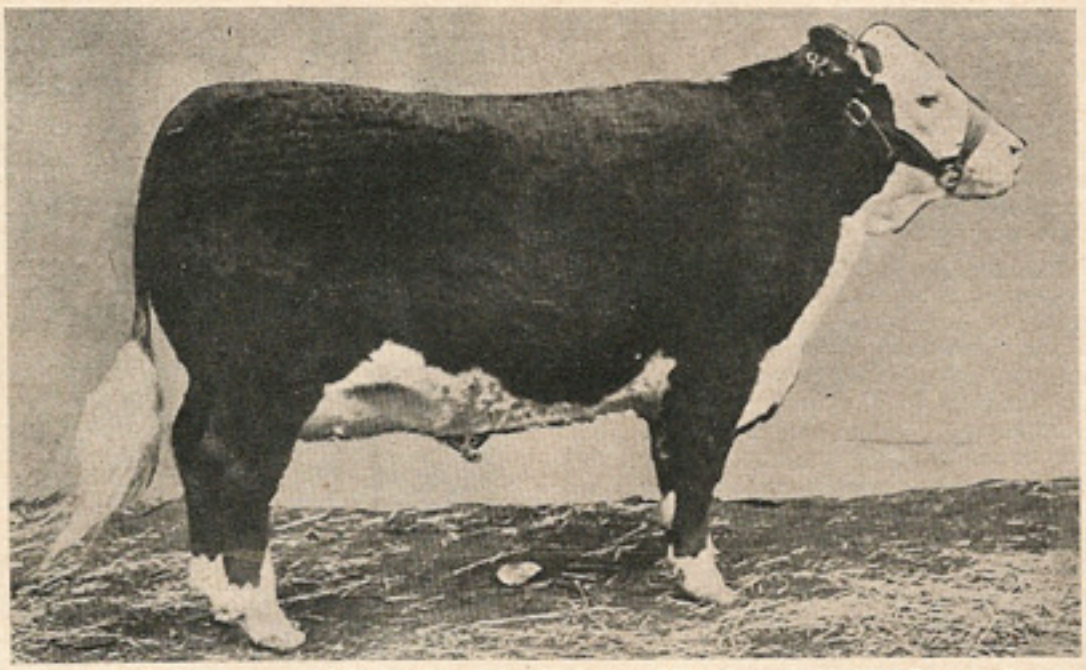

Nabob Otto, polled Hereford Steer, first prize junior yearling steer at the 1949 Toronto Royal.

Pioneer Cattleman Passes

One of the last links connecting Alberta's pioneer ranching days was severed with the death at High River of Herb Millar on January 19th. Mr. Millar arrived from the States with the first cattle ever placed on the famous Bar U Ranch there, in May, 1882. He was George Lane's right hand man for many years and after the death of Lane, Millar started a place of his own, but was prevailed upon by Pat Burns who had bought the Bar U property to come back and run the outfit for him. This he did for several years and then operated his own outfit near Macleod until 1946 when he retired to live at Nanton, and would have been 88 years old in March. He is survived by his wife.

Along with Johnny Franklin Herb Millar for years was recognized as one of the top broncho riders in the Canadian Northwest. He along with Franklin were Judges at the earlier Calgary Stampedes.

Funeral was held from United Church in High River January 23rd, Rev. Kemlo officiating, with burial in High River. Honorary pall bearers were: John Blake, W. S. Henry, John Glendenning, Lem Sexsmith, Guy Weadick, Frank Brazil, R. L. Macmillan, E. A. Cartwright. Active pall bearers: George Riley, W. E. M. Holmes, John Slade, Dunc Fraser, Bert Sheppard, Harry Brayne.

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