



Charlie and the Ladies in His Life

by Ginger K. Renner

"The evening garments of a female in this camp wouldnt pad a crutch," wrote cowboy artist Charles M. Russell from New York City to his good friend, Bill Rance, back home in Great Falls, Montana.¹ Later, writing from Long Beach, California, to another Montana friend, Charlie remarked, "a man that tyes to a lady down hear after seeing her in bathing aint gambling much."²

On yet another occasion, Russell recorded what is probably his ultimate assessment of women: "A woman can go farther on a lipstick than a man can with a Winchester and a side of bacon."³ A careful analysis of this statement reveals a grudging admiration for the capabilities of women, but the impact of the remark is hardly laudatory.

Pithy, perceptive—sometimes chauvinistic—statements such as these from the pen of the cowboy artist probably added weight to the generally accepted view of Charlie Russell as a "man's man." The repetition of these slightly derogatory phrases led the public to believe that Russell was a man who had limited regard for women.

The general assessment that placed Charles Marion Russell into a masculine milieu was further augmented by his published works of art. Most of these works, the publication of which established his reputation throughout the country, dealt with violent or dramatic action, subjects that not only appealed to men but usually involved them—cowboys roping, a cowboy trying to stay aboard a wildly pitching bronc, Indian warfare and buffalo hunts, hunting big game, and the like. In those few published works in which Indian women appeared, they usually played only a subordinate role. The public's perception of Russell's masculine orientation was expanded by Russell's own short stories. Of the forty-three of his stories



MHS Photo Archives

Russell at Bull Head Lodge in 1926 with (from left) his Aunt Louise, Josephine Trigg, and Nancy Russell.



Russell's grandmother, Lucy Bent Russell, had a considerable influence on her grandson's life, providing an atmosphere where learning, business, and religious principles coexisted with stories of her brothers' adventures in the West.

published in *Trails Plowed Under*, only one concerned women, and that was a one-page satire on "fashions." It was almost unknown that Russell was also turning out a considerable number of paintings that featured Indian women.

An examination of Russell's artistic output reveals over 300 oils, watercolors, drawings, and models that used women as their primary subject. No other artist in the western American genre has ever produced such a body of work.

In consciously, or unconsciously, relegating Russell to a totally masculine orientation, the public has failed to acknowledge or examine the "feminine" side of Charlie's life. Little attention has been paid to the women with whom he was associated and to the women who influenced, molded, and affected both the man and the artist. Even less investigation has been made into the large number of works he created in which women were the only or the dominant element.

1. Letter from C. M. Russell [CMR] to Bill Rance, New York, March 1, 1916, in F. G. Renner, *Paper Talk* (Fort Worth, Texas: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1962), 74.

2. CMR to George Speck, May 18, 1923, in Renner, *Paper Talk*, 103.

3. C. M. Russell, *More Rawhides* (Great Falls, Montana, 1925), 13.

4. David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954), 171.

AN EXAMINATION INTO the influences that women had on Charlie Russell's life should begin with his paternal grandmother, Lucy Bent Russell. The Bent family had played more than supporting roles in the drama of American history. Lucy's grandfather, Silas Bent, was one of those intrepid rebels who had tossed the tea overboard in Boston Harbor, forever changing the history of the world. He went on to command Boston's "Tea Party Regiment" during the Revolutionary War. Lucy's father, also Silas, was appointed Deputy Surveyor for the Louisiana Territory by Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin. In 1809, Governor Meriwether Lewis appointed him Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and he was one of the signers of the first charter of the town of St. Louis.

Independent-minded, politically astute, with a sense of adventure, and with no small amount of entrepreneurial abilities, the Bents were to make significant marks on the pages of western American history. Their exploits, and those of their associates, were to become a vital part of the Bent-Russell family's folklore, influencing the imaginative mind of young Charles Marion Russell.

Lucy Bent's brothers, Charles and William, established Bent's Fort on the Santa Fe Trail in partnership with Ceran St. Vrain. Bent's Fort, the largest trading and outfitting center in the vast and remote southwest territory, was a unique establishment. The brothers, having been raised in a socially and financially advantaged family, introduced into daily life at the isolated fort many of the social amenities to which they had been accustomed in St. Louis.⁴ Bent's Fort enjoyed a reputation for its good food, fine wines, and a highly unlikely asset, a billiard table in a second floor lounge.

Some of the West's most renowned trappers, scouts, and traders worked, at one time or another, for William Bent at the fort. They included Kit Carson, who eventually became Charles Bent's brother-in-law, Jim Beckwourth, Lucian Maxwell, "Old Bill" Williams, and "Uncle Dick" Wooten. Both the myths and the true stories of how these men helped to open the West added to the tantalizing tales that later fueled the fires of Charlie Russell's westward yearnings. The retelling of their adventures probably came about during the annual—and sometimes oftener—trips that William or Charles made back to the States—to St. Louis—to take buffalo robes and to pick up trade goods and supplies.

5. Mary Joan Boyer, *The Old Gravois Coal Diggings* (Festus, Missouri: The Tri-City Independent, 1952), 8-9.

6. Copy of Lucy Bent Russell's will, in the author's possession.

7. Boyer, *The Old Gravois Coal Diggings*, 10.

Lucy Bent had the same kind of independent mind and entrepreneurial capabilities that had carried her ancestors and her remarkable brothers into the pages of history and on their march to the western frontier. In 1826, at the age of twenty-one, Lucy became the wife of James Russell, a widower who was twenty years her senior. Russell had come to St. Louis from Virginia and had purchased 432 acres of land located west of the city limits, where in 1820 he had built a spacious, gracious home named "Oak Hill." At various times called a "plantation," the property resembled a small fiefdom, with orchards, vineyards, meadows, gardens, slaves' quarters, barns for horses and livestock, and most important, an extensive outcropping of coal. A few years before James and Lucy were married, he had begun to supply coal to the city of St. Louis, greatly enhancing the family's economic position.⁵

When James Russell died in 1850, Lucy Bent Russell, aged forty-five, took over the management of the family's extensive business and real estate holdings. Exhibiting some of the same entrepreneurial characteristics that marked the careers of Charles and William Bent, Lucy expanded the family's involvement in business and with the help of her son, Charles Silas, and her son-in-law, George W. Parker, she greatly enhanced the family's financial position.⁶ In an age when women were seldom involved in business activities, Lucy actively worked to develop the mining of fireclay from the Oak Hill property. In a short period of time, the Parker-Russell Company had become the largest operation in the United States devoted to the manufacturing of fireproof materials.⁷

Lucy Bent Russell was the "lodgepole" of a growing family. Her children—Julia, John G., Charles Silas, and Russella Lucy—lived either on or close to Oak Hill. Julia married Trumbull G. Russell (no kin), and John G. and Russella married brother and sister, Pauline and George W. Parker, further complicating, yet tying closer, the extended family.

Charles Silas, Lucy's third child, married Mary Mead, daughter of silversmith Edward Mead, whose reputation for fine work was well established in St. Louis. Following a long honeymoon in the East, Charles Silas and Mary Mead Russell bought a home on Olive Street in St. Louis, but by the time Charles Marion Russell was five they had moved to the Oak Hill property.

It was at Oak Hill, surrounded by the accoutrements of a socially and culturally advantaged family, that Charlie Russell grew up. Sitting at his grandmother's table, Charlie probably heard exciting tales from that remarkable woman about his ancestors, particularly his great-uncles, the Bent



C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

Mary Mead Russell encouraged her son's interest in and the development of his art. She was an artist herself and was probably responsible for the first showing of Russell's artwork in St. Louis.



brothers, who had left behind the cultured life of the West's gateway city to go farther into the frontier to seek their fortunes.

Charlie's mother, Mary Mead Russell, was a handsome woman, artistically inclined, and, like her mother-in-law, a devoted Episcopalian. She may have brought a commitment to the arts into this family that was already successful in business and investments. She painted well enough to have some of her works included in amateur exhibitions in the St. Louis area. She must have been a source of encouragement and perhaps even instruction to her children. It is quite possible that Mary Mead Russell's involvement in the local art scene had some influence on the inclusion of one of Charlie's paintings in the St. Louis Art Exhibition of 1886.

Mary Russell's children were all exposed to a study of the Bible and the moralistic literature of the period. Many of the ideas and the philosophy of life that Charlie Russell expressed in the letters he wrote during his mature years show unmistakable signs of this early indoctrination.

Although it has not yet been found, it is difficult to believe that there was no correspondence between Charlie and his parents during the first years he spent in Montana. The family was too closely

knit, too committed to one another for them to have not written to each other. The pattern of their lives, in later years, when Charlie and his wife Nancy took in members of both of their families or when they entertained fathers, cousins, brothers, and sisters and other relatives for extended periods, documents deep and continuing familial ties. Limited research of Russell's early years in Montana leads one to believe that he returned home to St. Louis on a regular basis.

A quite remarkable grandmother and a devoted mother left marks on the cowboy artist. He was at home, if not always at ease, in society of all levels, partly because of the principles and ideals taught him by these capable women.

THE NEXT WOMAN WHO came into Charlie's life and made a significant impression on him was a girl from another old and well-established St. Louis family. Laura Edgar, the young woman who was to become Charlie's "first love," was living in the Judith Basin during the summer of 1880 when Russell first rode into that special region.

William B. Edgar, Laura's father, had come west in 1878 to establish a sheep operation. First investing in the Deer Lodge area, he soon decided to move his operations to the newly opened Judith Basin district. In the summer of 1879 he brought his wife and daughter out for the first time. Traveling upriver from Bismarck on the steamer, *The Helena*, they tied up at Fort Benton, where Mrs. Edgar discovered the first of many limitations of life on the Montana frontier. Her fine furniture, carefully shipped with the idea of bringing some of the comforts and refinements of St. Louis life to this remote and unsettled region, was left under a tarp on the Fort Benton docks while the family took an oxen-drawn wagon on the three-day trip to their home in the Judith Basin.⁸ There, they lived in a tent while a log cabin was being built on the property, a short distance east of what would become the town of Utica. Just as the first snows came in the fall they were able to move into warmer quarters. It is assumed that they retrieved the furniture from the Fort Benton docks.

In the spring of 1880, Charlie Russell rode into the Judith Basin. He had come to Montana with the blessing of his family who had decided that a sum-

mer in the wilds of Montana might bring an end to their young son's romantic dreams of a life "out West." Little did they realize that when Charlie entered the big sky country of Montana he would be going "home."

Charlie's first employment with the Miller-Waite sheep operation was short-lived. By the time he took up residence with hide and meat hunter Jake Hoover, in Pig-Eye Basin, the Edgars were well established in the Judith area.

It is likely that the Russell and Edgar families knew each other in St. Louis. Both families moved in the same social circles and both were involved in mining operations. Charlie and Laura also shared a second cousin, Childs Carr. Whatever the social involvement back home, Charlie apparently was welcomed at the Edgar ranch. Charlie was sixteen that far-ago summer and Laura (Lollie to family and friends) was twelve. They were youngsters in an isolated and primitive land. At some time during the first years that Charlie lived in Montana he was accepted into the Edgars' home, and it was probably during this time that the two young people fell in love.

At the Edgar ranch, Laura watched the young artist work on what must have been his earliest commission. As Laura later wrote, "It was in our home he did his painting that brought him in real money. It was a large poster for a General Supply house in Helena. It had a central picture of a stage coach with six horses coming down a mountain road. All around were small pictures to show the different articles a cowboy or ranchman might need. Some I remember—a freight train of three covered wagons with 6 or 8 yoke of oxen, a cowboy with elaborate chaps and hat coiling a rope, a farm wagon with work team. There were several others, but I have forgotten. I watched the painting with great interest and well remember Charlie's joy when a letter accepting it arrived containing also a substantial check."⁹

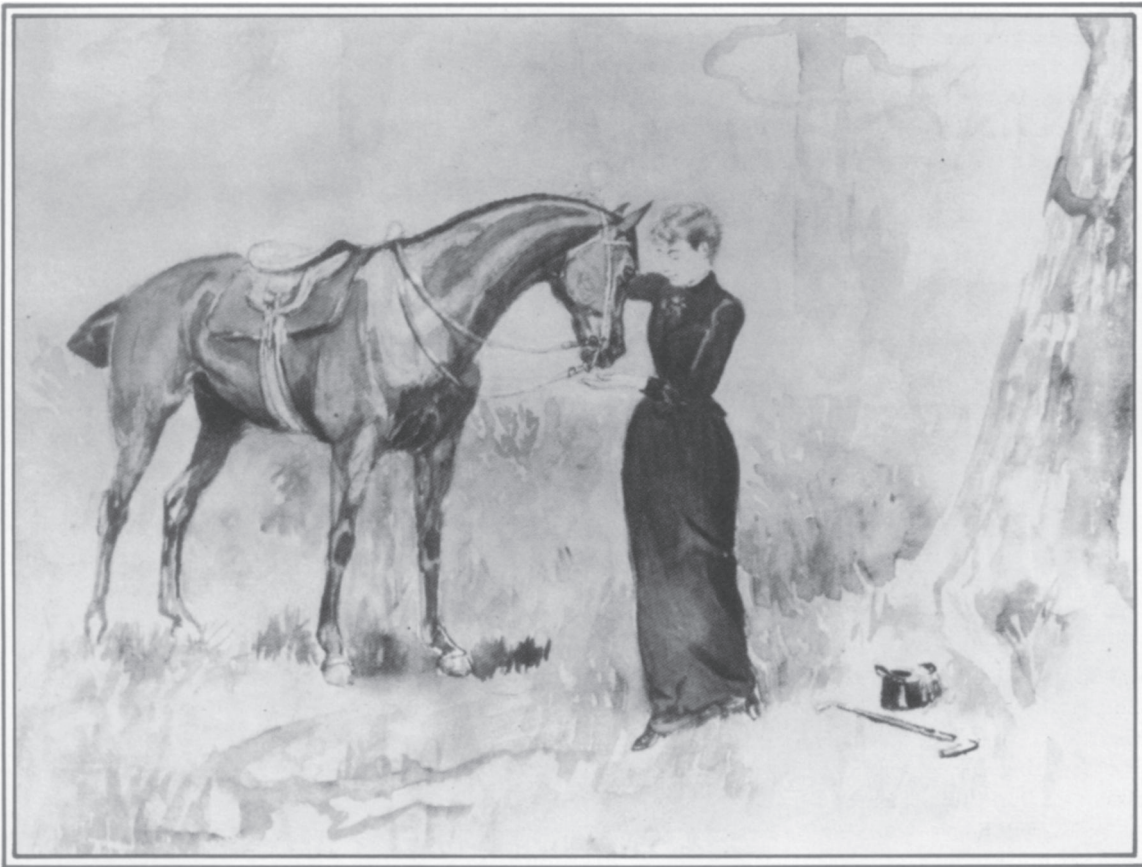
Lollie spent only two winters at the Judith Basin ranch, the first in 1879-1880 and the last in 1885-1886, her father's last year in the sheep business. In other years, she returned with her mother each fall to St. Louis to attend school. As the love affair developed, Lollie wrote to Charlie from St. Louis, letters that he treasured. Finch David, who as a young man worked with Charlie on the roundups in the Judith, wrote in later years: "He did think a lot of a girl and I think she thought a good deal of him. But the family moved away and they just did not marry. He told me about it one night when we was on herd together."¹⁰

8. Laura Edgar Whittemore to James Brownlee Rankin [JBR], March 31, 1938, James Brownlee Rankin Letters and Notes, 1936-1939 [Rankin Papers], typewritten transcript, in the author's possession of over 700 letters written to Rankin, a New Yorker who was collecting information for a biography of Charles M. Russell during the 1930s. These unpublished letters contained much new evidence about Russell's life. The originals are now in the James Brownlee Rankin Research Collection: Charles M. Russell, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

9. Laura E. Whittemore to JBR, March 14, 1938, Rankin Papers.

10. I. F. (Finch) David to JBR, March 16, 1937, Rankin Papers.





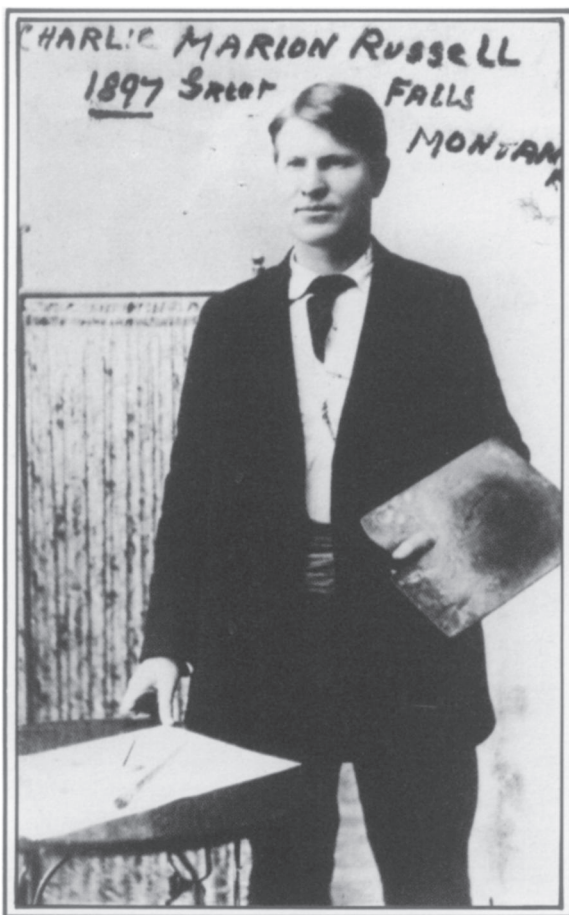
WOMAN WITH HORSE, WATERCOLOR, N.D.

Pat Price Baxter, Wayzata, Minnesota



EDGAR'S RANCH, SKETCH, N.D.





This photograph of Russell was taken in St. Louis in 1886 or 1887 when, Laura Edgar wrote, he was "22 or 23." Russell gave the picture to Laura to prove that he had serious and professional aspirations as an artist. The photograph has been incorrectly labeled as "Great Falls, 1897."

The importance Lollie had in Charlie's life was substantiated later by Judge James Bollinger of Davenport, Iowa. In 1937, Bollinger, who was Russell's close friend, admirer, and hunting companion, wrote to Nancy Russell, who was acquiring stories from old friends for a biography about Charlie: "Did Charlie tell you how he used to read her [Laura's] letters by cigarette light when he was riding night herd and carried them in his shirt pocket over his heart?" Further correspondence between Nancy and Judge Bollinger indicates that Charlie had told Nancy the same story.¹¹

By 1886, when William Edgar gave up on sheep raising and returned with his family to St. Louis, it was evident that the Edgars had taken a firm stand against any further involvement between Laura

11. Letters between Nancy Russell and Judge J. W. Bollinger, January-February 1937, Rankin Papers.

12. Laura E. Whittemore to JBR, March 14, 1938, Rankin Papers.

13. Judge Bollinger to Nancy Russell, June 15, 1937, Rankin Papers.

and Charlie. In the Edgars' eyes, Charlie was an itinerant cowboy with little or no possibility of providing the kind of life they desired for their daughter. Charlie, with some of the stubbornness he was to reveal many times over in his later life, did not give up so easily. Either in 1886 or 1887 he returned to St. Louis, certainly in part to press his plea for Lollie's hand. In 1938, Laura wrote that she had in her possession a photograph of Charlie taken in St. Louis when he was, in her words, "22 or 23."¹² The photo shows Russell dressed in "city clothes," his hair well cut, the tools of his artistic trade at hand. An oil palette is in his left hand, and his watercolor paper and brushes lie on a table beside him. It is apparent that he was presenting a picture of himself as an artist, and a diversified artist, at that—somewhat higher on the social scale than a cowboy. Despite this rather obvious pitch for respectability, the Edgar family remained obdurate.

Years later, Laura wrote that she was married in the spring of 1890 and that "Charlie left St. Louis the week before my wedding." Was he there to make one last plea for her hand? We will never know. But we do know that he vividly remembered her years later. Bollinger, again in correspondence with Nancy Russell, wrote of the hunting trip they had shared in 1922. Everyone had turned in but Russell, who was restless and not ready to settle down for the night. He spoke aloud to the men bedded down in the hunting cabin: "Who ever says he has forgotten about his first gal, I can't believe him. Some people call it 'puppy love'! [Bollinger indicated the scorn in Russell's voice over that term.] Well, not one of them can forget her—the reason they remember is because she is the nicest thing that ever happened in a young fellow's life. She cannot be forgotten!"¹³ Surely a man who would share with his hunting companions the most private and cherished memories of his youth had for many years carried with him the effects of that young and lovely woman.

Between 1889 and 1895, Russell portrayed Lollie in several poses. *Laura's Capture*, an oil done in 1894, is the most "romantic" of the group, encompassing all the terror of the Gothic themes of the Victorian period. A watercolor wash of a woman in English riding clothes standing beside a Thoroughbred on which is a sidesaddle is quite likely also of Laura. *Lollie*, a sentimental watercolor of a young woman dressed in glowing white with a threatening forest behind her, was for many years mistitled *Mame*, a nickname for Nancy Cooper Russell; but Charlie had painted the piece several years before

(Continued on page 53)

Women in Russell's Art



C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

BEAUTY PARLOR, WATERCOLOR, 1907



THE SUN WORSHIPER NO. 2, WATERCOLOR, CA. 1903

SUN WORSHIP IN MONTANA, GOUACHE ON PAPER, 1907



Amnon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



THE ROBE FLESHERS, WATERCOLOR, 1899

BLOOD CAMP ON THE BELLY RIVER, WATERCOLOR, 1899



Valley National Bank of Arizona, Phoenix



THE BATH, WATERCOLOR, 1896

REFLECTIONS, WATERCOLOR, N.D.



Robert K. Fletcher, Jr., Missoula, Montana

WOOD NYMPH, WATERCOLOR, N.D.



Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas



C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

WANDERERS OF THE PLAINS, OIL, CA. 1884

TRAILING, WATERCOLOR, CA. 1900



Wichita Art Museum: M. C. Natzger Collection



Gift of Maude Fortune and Florence Fortune, MHS

SQUAW TRAVOIS, WATERCOLOR, 1895

INDIAN WOMEN MOVING CAMP, WATERCOLOR, 1898



Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming



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THE TWINS, WATERCOLOR, 1898

HER HEART IS ON THE GROUND, WATERCOLOR, 1917



The Thomas Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma



C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

INDIAN MAIDEN AT HER TOILETTE, WATERCOLOR, 1899

INDIAN MAIDEN BRAIDING HER HAIR, WATERCOLOR, 1899



Eloise Webster DeCarlo, Mt. Prospect, Illinois



Sid Richardson, Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas

MARRIAGE CEREMONY, OIL, 1894

THE PROPOSAL NO. 2, WATERCOLOR, 1899





Bequest of Maude Fortune and Florence Fortune, MHS

INSIDE THE LODGE, WATERCOLOR, 1895

AFTER HIS FIRST HUNT, WATERCOLOR, 1898



Robert G. Ash, Edmond, Oklahoma



Harrison Blifloge Gallery of Western Art, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Indiana

WAITING, BUT MAD, OIL, 1899



Valley National Bank of Arizona, Phoenix

INDIAN MAID AT STOCKADE, OIL, 1895

he met Nancy. Laura Edgar remains with us today—young, virginal, and remote.

It must have been in a genuine state of depression that Charlie turned from the possibility of marrying his first love to accepting, once again, the vagaries of a cowboy's life in Montana. Even that life, for Charlie at least, had taken a turn for the worse. Homesteaders had moved into the Judith Basin, erecting fences and plowing up the native grasses. Sheep operations were crowding the remaining free grasslands, and cattlemen had to move farther north into the Milk River country. No longer would Charlie call the Judith country "home," the area about which he said, "Nature had surely done her best. No king of the old times could have claimed a more beautiful and bountiful domain."¹⁴

RUSSELL LACKED A SENSE of direction. At twenty-six years of age he vacillated between being an artist and returning to the security of the spring and fall roundups. When he did not pick up jobs, he drifted south to spend weeks with Jake Hoover or he holed up with other out-of-work cowboys, waiting out the long winters. During this period of indecision and temporary employment, Russell turned to the only female companionship available to a drifting cowboy. Many of his men friends commented in later years on the artist's penchant for discussing these women, known to us only as "Dutch Lena," "Maggie Murphy," and "Lil" and "Lou." According to Judge Bollinger, when Charlie had some money he "split it two ways—wine and women."¹⁵

Comments from old-time friends, such as Henry Keaton, Finch David, and Bollinger, indicated that Charlie loved to discuss and defend the virtues of these women. At a stag dinner party that Bollinger gave in Russell's honor, the artist publicly defended one of these women, expressing a genuine respect for her.¹⁶

One of these women merited such admiration that Charlie gave her a watercolor entitled *The Kindergarten* (ca. 1890). The painting depicts the interior of a tipi and a group of children seated on a buffalo robe, listening to stories from an old Indian man. The piece is replete with sentimentality and very well may indicate the regard the artist held for the recipient of this special gift.

Another woman of questionable repute was principally responsible for Russell having one of the great adventures of his life, one that he drew

upon for thematic material for the rest of his days. Charlie's trip to Canada during the late spring of 1888, which has been characterized as a lighthearted, boyish desire to see new country, was actually an escape from one of Helena's more flamboyant businesswomen, Josephine Welsh Hankins Hensley, better known as "Chicago Joe."

Chicago Joe started in the hurdy-gurdy, or dance hall, business in Helena during the 1860s. By 1887 she not only owned considerable business property in Helena, but she also presided nightly over a highly successful variety theater, the Coliseum. Chicago Joe had hired a young Canadian, Phil Weinard, to portray an Indian in a one-act play entitled "Montana in '64." Russell, coming off the fall roundup in 1887, became friends with the actor, and the two of them spent much of the winter together. Weinard became romantically involved with Chicago Joe's niece, Mary, and determined to marry her. Chicago Joe, although the prototype of the "tough lady with the heart of gold," nevertheless drew the line at one of her relatives marrying an itinerant actor.

Russell and Weinard, with the help of a gambling friend known as Long Green Stillwell, contrived to slip out most of Mary's clothes and belongings through a back window over a period of several weeks in preparation for a quick, secret wedding and an even quicker departure from town. When the wedding finally took place on May 16, the spring runoffs were so high that Weinard could not chance having his new bride fording the swollen streams on horseback. He sent her by train, entrusted to his family in Minneapolis, and he, Charlie, and Stillwell struck out across country to Alberta. So Charlie's visit to the High River country, where his involvement with and friendship for the Blood Indians led to some of the great works of art he produced in subsequent years, was initially a flight to safety from the ire of a Helena madam, Chicago Joe Hensley.¹⁷

CHARLES M. RUSSELL could be called a "late bloomer." He had struck out for the frontier West with a youthful zeal and a taste for adventure, and on the range he had developed a bravado that carried him through many difficult periods; but not until he was approaching thirty years of age did he acquire any genuine maturity. By then, he had determined that becoming an artist was his primary goal in life, and



14. *Great Falls Tribune*, January 13, 1903.

15. Notes on C. M. Russell by Judge Bollinger, n.d., Rankin Papers.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Phil Weinard to JBR, January 4, 1938, Rankin Papers.



MHS Photo Archives

Nancy Cooper Russell, or "Mame" as Russell called her, successfully promoted her husband and his work, acting as his business manager and agent, setting up gallery exhibits, and making certain that Russell's artwork was known in major art centers across the country.

he longed for a female companion of whom he could be proud and who would be accepted by his family. Even in the wild years when he was an itinerant cowboy, Russell knew that his cultural heritage had a claim on him. He wanted a woman with whom he could build the stable life he was finding more and more desirable.

As he said many times himself, Charlie was a lucky man. Never was he luckier than when he met the young, pretty, and unattached Nancy Cooper. Although she had little education, Nancy was highly motivated. No other woman had the affect on Charlie's life that Nancy did. She was lover, companion, supporter, business manager, a consummately successful public relations expert, a goad, and an understanding friend. She made a comfortable home that allowed him to create a vast body of artwork. Nancy was also capable of entertaining groups of Charlie's friends and companions, often under the most trying of physical circumstances, particularly at Bull Head Lodge in Glacier National Park, where they spent a good

part of each summer. She endured when their resources were low and she made him proud with her handsome appearance when times were good. It was Nancy, in large part, who was responsible for creating those good times. Both Charlie and Nancy possessed complex personalities, and they were opposites in many ways; yet, they complemented one another and were, as Charlie said many times, "partners."

They had their problems over the years, as most married couples do, but a letter Charlie wrote to Nancy in 1919 described how he really felt about her:

Dear Mame it's a week tonight you left and it seems like longer to me. I want you to stay til you get all rested. the longer you stay the glader I'll be to see you. . . maybe I'v fallen in love the second time but it's all right if its the same woman and it is.

And a week later:

Dear Mame Its two weeks tomorrow night you left and I hope your rest has made you ten years younger caus you'l need it to stand the hugs you'l get when you meet me. I'l admit it must seem funny after being married over twenty-two years [to] start writing love letters, but it dont seem like I ever wanted you like I do now. . . well I guess I'l bed down. There is one girl I know that I wish was here. Your loving husband¹⁸

As always, he signed the letters "C. M. Russell"!

It is difficult to overemphasize Nancy Cooper Russell's importance in the artist's life. One can speculate, of course, about what would have happened had Charlie and Nancy not met and married. Had that been the case, it is doubtful that Russell would have created the prodigious body of artwork he did, a life's work that is truly one of our most cherished national treasures.

CHARLIE RUSSELL HAD charisma. He attracted women as well as men, and he enjoyed some remarkable relationships with them. Over the years there were many women who liked, loved, and adored him. One who had a very special relationship with him was Josephine Trigg. "Miss Josephine," as Charlie always addressed her, came into his life when she was a teenager. Their friendship, which over the years made her part of what might be considered Russell's extended family, continued through her brief marriage to W. T. Ridgley and remained a loyal and respectful relationship until the end of Charlie's life.



MHS Photo Archives

This photograph of Charlie and Nancy Russell was probably taken around 1900 in Glacier National Park. They were married on September 9, 1896, when Charlie was thirty-two and Nancy was eighteen. Charlie often said that he was a lucky man to have met and married Nancy. She gave him love, companionship, encouragement, and a stable family life—all elements that contributed to Charlie's artistic productivity. Without Nancy, it is probable that Russell would not have produced the more than 4,000 works of art that he completed during his career.



Josephine played an active part in the artist's life, sharing summer vacations at Bull Head Lodge and spending time with Charlie and Nancy in Southern California. It was Josephine who produced the beautiful calligraphy for Charlie's verses and Christmas cards and for the placecards he painted for dinner parties. They remembered each other on all special occasions with letters and cards; during the last two months of his life Charlie sent her a charming letter, beautifully illustrated in watercolor, for her birthday in August. It was also Josephine who recognized the historical and artistic value of the large body of work Russell created and gave to the Trigg family, protecting it and at her death leaving it to the City of Great Falls so that many could enjoy it.

Charlie Russell was involved with many different kinds of women during his life, but throughout his artistic career he was inspired by many more. By far, the majority of these were Indian women, who offered him infinite variety for his creative moods. He painted them in a straightforward,

documentary manner, much as Catlin and Bodmer had done a half century earlier. In *Indian Squaw*, probably painted around 1890, Russell presented a full, frontal view of a young woman, standing on a pegged-down buffalo hide, her fleshing tool in her hand. Less concerned with her personality or character, Russell concentrated on the details of her costume.

The artist also used Indian women as objects of exotic intrigue, such as in the oil, *Keeoma*, done in 1896, where the cowboy artist continued the tradition of Ingres's *Odalisque*. In the intimacy of her skin lodge, bedecked in brilliant fringed and beaded garments, Keeoma languidly stirs the air with an eagle feather fan.

Russell repeatedly portrayed his own romantic dreams through his subjects. In *Keeoma No. 5*, *Reflexions*, *Lollie*, *Wood Nymph*, and *Meditation*, the women are young, beautiful, pensive, and isolated in the scene.

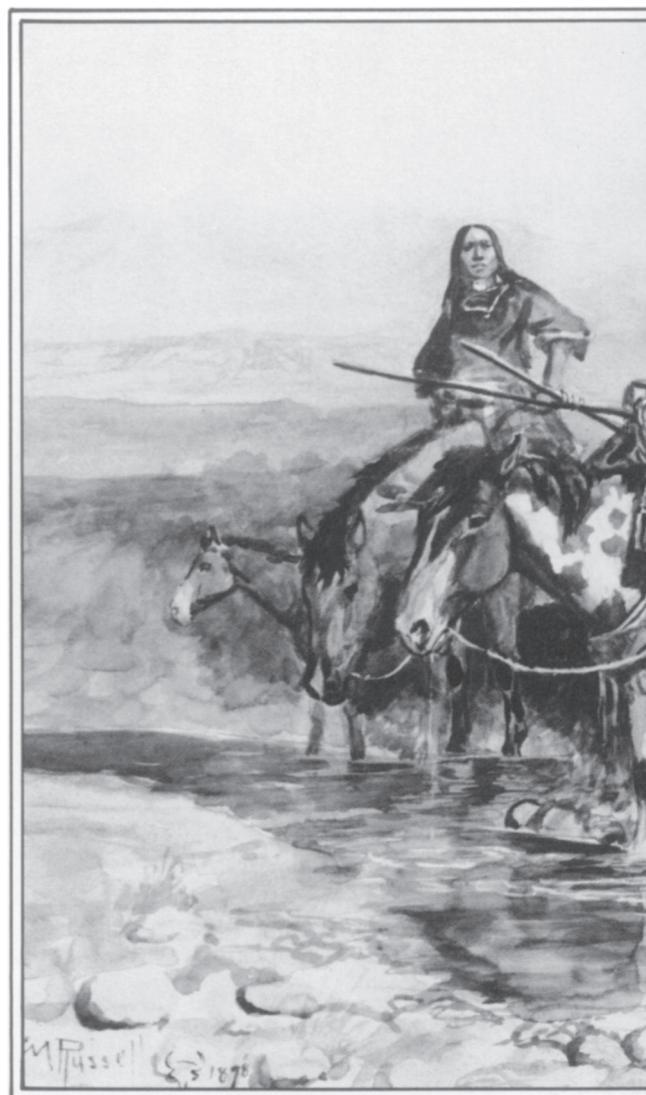
In the almost classical manner of the Greek earth-mother figures, Russell painted *The Sun Worshipper No. 2* and *Sun Worship in Montana*. Here the women are strong, fecund appearing in their

18. CMR to Nancy Russell, February 6, February 12, 1919, Britzman Collection, Colorado Springs Fine Art Museum.

anatomy, and awesome in their ceremonial stance.

Russell treated Indian women with poignant tenderness in such paintings as *Her Heart Is on the Ground* and *Mourning Her Warrior Dead*. The overt grief in these touching scenes is magnified by the lowering skies and the day's-end breeze, sighing around the rocky escarpments that serve as a bier.

In *Indian Maid at Stockade* (oil, 1895), the cowboy artist brought a unique interpretation to a portrait of a tribal beauty. The woman slouches against the silver-grey logs of the fort, flaunting not only her handsomeness, but her ornamentations as well. Russell imbued her with independence, self-assurance, and almost a touch of defiance, making the viewer aware of the woman's sense of self-worth. This is hardly the view of Indian women that most Montanans held when Charlie painted this remarkable portrait in 1895. Russell's interpretation of women in his art was empathetic, usually sensitive, and often complex. Never was that complexity more exemplified than in *Indian Maid at Stockade*.



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THE MAJORITY OF Charlie Russell's art depicting Indian women presented them in three situations: in camp, inside tipis, and moving camp. In Russell's paintings of life in an Indian camp, images of domesticity and tranquility dominated. In these scenes he emphasized the matriarchal side of everyday tribal life. Russell almost always portrayed women involved in activities that promote the welfare and comfort of the family and the tribe.

The artist's visits with the Blood Indians in southern Alberta in 1888 gave him first-hand information about these activities, and shortly after he returned to Montana he began a series of paintings, all of which depict one or two Indian women scraping, or fleshing, a pegged-down buffalo hide.

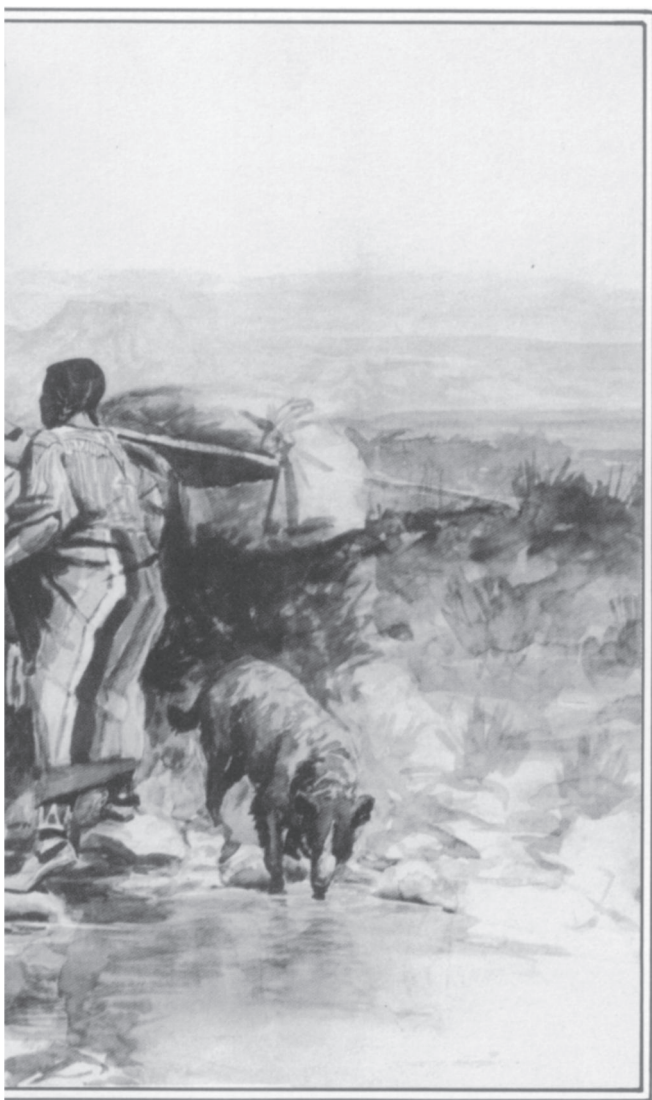
In these paintings, the tipis, in communal arrangement, form a partial background, while children, either singly or in groups, play quietly nearby. Often, Russell also included a camp dog close at hand and almost invariably the warrior husband, alone or with a male companion, sitting at ease at the entrance of the tipi, smoking and watching the progress being made on the hides. These components, in one compositional form or another, make up *Indian Camp No. 2*, done probably in 1889, followed by *Indian Camp No. 3*, *Camp of the Red Men*, *The Silk Robe*, *The Robe Fleshers*, and *Indian Camp No. 4*, all painted before 1900.

The variations in Russell's camp scenes are found in his use of different light sources, the

placement and numbers of tipis in the scene, the differences in the distance horizons, as well as the different personae in these quiet, familial episodes. There are sufficient varieties in these oils and watercolors to establish each one's individuality. In *The Brave's Return*, an Indian woman straightens up from her work to welcome her husband who has just ridden up to camp. In *Blood Camp on the Belly River*, a handsome woman leaves her tasks to light her husband's pipe.

All of the scenes are marked by a sense of contented silence, with the gentle, rhythmic scraping of the hides being the loudest noise. They are pastoral versions of what Russell saw as an Indian Eden.

It is difficult to separate the realities of daily life in the middle or late nineteenth century Indian camp from Russell's romantic viewpoint. It is also uncertain whether the young artist experienced such a way of life; but considering how many times



THIRSTY, WATERCOLOR, 1898

he recorded it, it was a vision that he greatly admired.

To present a more intimate view of Indian life, Charlie moved inside the tipi, into the fire-circle of these people who were his life-long friends. He wanted to record and preserve the memory of this way of life through his art. In these paintings, Russell placed his women in a protected, quiet, and comfortable environment. In his many paintings of lodge interiors, he portrayed women mothering and sharing the lessons of young children with their husbands or with a grandparent. Russell painted mothers involved in the early training of their sons, a responsibility that others have generally assigned to warrior fathers in the tribe.

Inside the Lodge, a watercolor from 1895, depicts a mother patiently watching her young, naked son trying out a first bow. In *The First Lesson*, the

mother helps to guide the boy's arrow, while his father watches with great approval. *After His First Hunt*, done in 1898, depicts the boy's success, as he stands proudly in the center lodge holding a jack-rabbit he has killed, his parents watching with pride. Again, in *Three Generations No. 2*, painted in 1899, the young mother guides the small son's efforts at pulling on the arrow, while the boy's father and a grandparent eagerly watch.

Russell portrayed other activities inside the tipi. Several of his oils and watercolors show Indians grooming themselves and each other. In *Preparing for Ceremonies*, done in 1897, *Indian Beauty Parlor*, a watercolor from 1899, and *Beauty Parlor*, from 1907, a young and always handsome woman is shown braiding her warrior's long hair. The husband sits at ease, admiring the results in a hand mirror. The woman's skill and pride in his physical beauty are apparent, as is the necessity for his being at his best when he steps outside the protection of the tipi. Other paintings on this theme include *Indian Maiden at Her Toilette* and *Indian Women in the Tipi*, in which young women are engaged in their own adornment, surrounded by the colorful accoutrements of their daily lives.

Russell employed a certain iconography in these intimate and pleasant interior scenes. Bearskins, complete with claws, and painted and decorated buffalo hides provide an exotic, primordial element. Willow backrests introduce an architectural as well as decorative accent to the composition. Russell made a pictorial metaphor out of a small fire, smoldering in the foreground. The fire, the center of the lodge, the source of warmth, and the means of cooking daily meals, represented for Russell the heat and warmth and life-giving sexuality of the young Indian women he painted in the intimacy of their lodges.

In a succession of paintings, Russell depicted a young woman lounging on robes and waiting, perhaps in anticipation of her warrior husband's return. The outcome, as in so many of Russell's paintings, is left to the viewer's imagination. But in the superb oil, *Waiting, But Mad* (ca. 1900), the artist acknowledged that life inside the tipi was not always placid and tranquil; there were tensions as well.

In nineteenth century Romantic art, literature, and even music, the pursuit and capture of young attractive women was a recurring theme. The subject held considerable fascination for Russell, and he used it in a number of works. In *The Proposal No. 1*, a watercolor completed in 1891, the artist placed an Indian couple on a rocky escarpment overlooking a distant valley. His depiction in these works of the woman's reactions conveys Russell's interpretation of the scene. She is shy and sub-





The Gund Collection of Western Art, Cleveland, Ohio

THE DREAMER, WATERCOLOR, 1898



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RETURN FROM THE HUNT NO. 2, OIL, 1901



Sid Richardson, Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas

missive; the young man is protective, confident, and in some instances aggressive. These attitudes continue throughout the series, which includes an oil painted in 1894, *Marriage Ceremony*, and *At the Spring* and *Waiting*, both watercolors done in 1896 and 1897. Russell continued the courtship theme in *The Proposal No. 2*, painted in 1899, and in *Hiwatha's Wooing*, done in 1903.

Ever the romantic, Russell was not concerned with what might be assumed to be the everyday realities of life for Indians. He conceived of these women in a never-ending summer. It has been said of some parts of the land that Russell painted that it had two seasons—winter and August. But ice, snow, wind, and bitter cold had no part in his paintings of women. They lived in the warm glow of a clear, sunny day.

ALTHOUGH RUSSELL'S FAVORITE theme was the buffalo hunt—he produced over seventy-five works in oil, watercolor, drawing, and bronze on the subject—his fascination with Indian women moving across the plains was his second favorite. His oils and watercolors of this event reveal his deep admiration for the resourcefulness, independence, and courage of the Plains Indian women. Repeatedly, Russell presented a young, stalwart woman, like a carved and painted figurehead on the prow of some majestic sailing ship, leading the women of the band across vast, rolling prairies. The tribes' nomadic life required that Indian women be able to take down a twelve- to eighteen-foot tipi, make a carrier out of its lodgepole supports, pack the family's possessions and food, gather up the extra horses, children, and dogs, and strike out across uncharted miles. Russell admired this accomplishment with the same intensity as he did the courage of Indian men riding into a stampeding herd of buffalo.

As early as 1884, Russell painted the primitive *Wanderers of the Plains*, utilizing a composition he employed many times in the following years in many variations and with greatly increasing skill. Russell painted so many scenes on this theme that they have been identified by variations of one title—*Indian Women Moving*, *Indian Women Moving Camp*, *Moving Camp*, numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4. Others are more individualized. *The Twins*, for example, shows a young woman leading a group mounted on horses and carrying a papoose on her back, while another child is slung in a cradleboard hanging from the saddle horn on another horse. In

Thirsty, the group has stopped at a small waterhole. One woman, off her horse, is offering a cup of water to her child in a cradleboard attached to her saddle. In *Trailing*, a woman, off her horse, points out to her companions a red cloth marker tied to a stick—they are on the right trail. In an oil painted in 1901, *Return from the Hunt No. 2*, Russell pictured the women riding away from the viewer, the travois heavy with meat and hides. A young boy, running along beside the group, holds up a jackrabbit he has killed for his mother to admire. Small as he is, he, too, has contributed to the family's welfare.

In the magnificently composed oil, *In the Wake of the Buffalo Runners* (1911), a young woman, papoose on her back, kneels on her saddle, stretching high to see the action of the hunters in the distance. Her young son, straddling the empty travois, braces himself on the horse's hips, while an older woman gestures excitedly over the action. They will wait, in safety on this ledge, until the dust in the valley settles, signifying the end of the hunt. Then they will move in to skin the great beasts and pack up the meat that will feed the tribe. It is a corporate enterprise: the hunters providing the kill, the women and children attending to the care and utilization of the bounty. Russell reminded us repeatedly that all of the members worked together for the enrichment of the clan.

Time and again Russell expressed his admiration for characteristics he found in the Indians' way of life. This is particularly true in the extensive series he did of women moving camp. In these works, Russell portrayed the generations moving together, holding together; the older members bringing wisdom and experience to the tribe; the younger women, skilled, agile, and fecund, producing and providing for the tribe; the children, protected yet being trained in the ways of the group, offering a promise for its future. In these paintings, Russell emphasized the purposeful existence and the continuing strength of the tribe.

Russell painted more than Indian women; he was also attracted to exotic and colorful women of other races. In *The Spanish Dance* (oil, 1892), three dark-haired beauties with fans and bright shawls provide the principal interest with a young and romantic version of the artist included in the scene. Perhaps inspired by a visit to Little Egypt's performance at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Russell did two wash drawings of svelte and sloe-eyed girls from the Middle East.

Commissions for book illustrations demanded a great number of paintings featuring white women, but his most forceful pieces, *Mothers Under the Skin* and *East Meets West*, juxtapose a white woman





C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana

MOTHERS UNDER THE SKIN, PEN AND INK, 1900



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against an Indian mother. By and large, the white women do not fare as favorably in Russell's art as do their red sisters.

Throughout the hundreds of works in which Russell concentrated on women, there appears a motif, an artistic icon or device, that is repeated too many times to ignore. For all of Russell's admissions that he was "no better than the next guy" and "had done some sinning in my time," he was a morally straight and very Victorian man. But consummate artist that he was, he enjoyed introducing whatever elements of sensuality he could into his compositions and still not offend his viewers' sensibilities.

The device he resorted to is both subtle and effective—an off-the-shoulder robe, revealing soft flesh and warm curves. In many of the paintings already cited this is a dominant feature, but the artist also used it in *The Bath* (watercolor, 1896) and in *Waiting for Her Brave's Return* (watercolor, 1897). In his masterful oil composition *Lewis and Clark Meeting the Mandan Indians* (1899), Russell has the young woman "upstaging" the explorers by plac-

ing her center foreground, so the viewer has to look over her shoulder to the congregation of men in the background. He carried this device over into other media, and the artist never used this motif more effectively than in his splendid bronze, *Piegan Girl*.

WOMEN PLAYED SOME major roles in Charles Marion Russell's life. His stories and letters contain pithy and often satirical comments that reveal a side of his personality that stood in opposition, if not in competition, with women. He wrote from New York to a Great Falls friend: "If clothing is a sign of civilization an paint spellen heathens Judging from she folks here Im among savages."¹⁹ And again from New York he wrote to his dear friend, Albert Trigg, "We took in a Suffereggte meeting the other night an a finer band of Hell raisers I never saw bunched."²⁰

Complex character that Russell was, however, he could also be quite poetic about women, saying,

19. CMR to Bill Rance, March 1, 1916, in Renner, *Paper Talk*, 74.

20. CMR to Albert Trigg, April 10, 1911, in Renner, *Paper Talk*, 42.

21. CMR to Nancy Russell, February 6, 1919, Rankin Papers.

22. CMR to Robert Thoroughman, April 14, 1920, in Renner, *Paper Talk*, 94.

23. C. M. Russell, *Good Medicine* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1929), 127.

24. CMR to Rube Collins, n.d., photocopy in author's possession.

25. Renner, *Paper Talk*, 64.



Sid Richardson, Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas

LEWIS AND CLARK MEETING THE MANDAN INDIANS, OIL, 1899

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"If the hive was all drones there'd be no honey. It's the lady bee that fill the comb with sweetness."²¹ And in a letter to old-time ranchman Bob Thoroughman, Charlie reminisced about the "regular" men of the old West—men whose character, courage, and way of life Russell greatly admired. He added, "Some of them had wives mad of the same stuff as thair husbands true unselfish wimen and mothers who shared equely all hardships of the man of thair choice and desurved realy more prase than thair husbands."²²

Most people are comfortable with the expression "Mother Nature." Charlie carried the feminine personification of places and events, time and experiences to an extraordinary degree. In a letter to his friend Judge Bollinger, he wrote: "[we knew] . . . far off places where young men and old boys shake hands with misery and pleasure. We know both these ladies and wont forget them."²³ Writing to Rube Collins, Russell observed, "The boosters tell me that Haver [sic] has grown to be a good and moral city. She may be lady-like now but when I knew her in her infancy she was anything but a good baby."²⁴ Newsman Dick Kilroy, Charlie's long-time friend, read in a letter he received from Russell in the summer of 1923: "You

need no book to help you remember the west you knew and loved. She was a sweetheart of yours and mine, a wild maid with maney lovers. . . . The West we knew, Dick, is an old woman now but we still love her."²⁵

The endowment of these feminine qualities to abstract ideas began in Russell's early years and intensified as the artist grew older. His love affair with all elements of the old West was a viable, throbbing commitment. And to Charlie Russell, all of the old West was female.

Russell was known for the vast number of loyal, loving, and dedicated male friends he treasured throughout his life. Their names are legion—Will Rogers, Will Crawford, Ed Borien, Maynard Dixon, Malcolm Mackay, William S. Hart, Philip S. Goodwin, Con Price, Charles Lummis, Brother Van, and many, many more. It is time to recognize that there were also a great many ladies in the life of the cowboy artist. *M*

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