

# My Charlie

By Nancy Cooper Russell



from *GOOD MEDICINE* by Charles M. Russell. Copyright 1929, 1930 by Nancy C. Russell. Reprinted by permission of Doubleday & Co., Inc.

**C**HARLIE Russell was what they call a good mixer. The gay times he was having in the big town interfered with his work, so in October, 1895, he decided to visit a friend in Cascade and fill some orders for pictures.

There was great excitement at the Roberts' home, where I lived, as a distinguished guest was expected. Charlie Russell, the cowboy artist, was coming for a visit. He knew a great deal about Indians, cowboys, and the Wild West. The Robertses had known him since he landed in Helena in 1880.

Just about supper-time, there was a jingle of spur-rowels on the back steps; then, Mr. Roberts brought his cowboy friend into the kitchen, where Mrs. Roberts and I were getting the supper on the table.

Charlie and I were introduced. The picture that is engraved on my memory of him is of a man a little above average height and weight, wearing a soft shirt, a Stetson hat on the back of his blonde head, tight trousers, held up by a "half-breed sash" that clung just above the hip bones, high-heeled riding boots on very small, arched feet. His face was Indian-like, square jaw and chin, large mouth, tightly closed firm lips, the under protruding slightly beyond the short upper, straight nose, high cheek bones, gray-blue deep-set eyes that seemed to see everything, but with an expression of honesty and understanding. He could not see wrong in anybody. He never believed any one did a bad act intentionally; it was always an accident. His hands were good-sized, perfectly shaped, with long, slender fingers. He loved jewelry and always wore three or four rings. They

would not have been Charlie's hands any other way. Everyone noticed his hands, but it was not the rings that attracted, but the artistic, sensitive hands that had great strength and charm. When he talked, he used them a lot to emphasize what he was saying, much as an Indian would do.

Charlie was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 19th, 1864. As a small boy, he loved to hear about the pioneer life that had broken through and was supplanting the frontier with man-made civilization. He was interested in the stories of the fur and Indian traders and the outfitting of boats that crawled up the Missouri River to Fort Benton, Montana. The levees of his home town

This biographical sketch on the life of Charles M. Russell was written by his widow, Nancy C. Russell, and was used in the book, "Good Medicine," a collection of the artist's pungent letters to his friends. All of the letters glow with the humor and philosophy of Russell and all are illustrated in his incomparable way. Nancy, who became Mrs. Russell in 1896, was given credit by the artist as well as by everyone who knew him for recognizing the true worth of his artistic achievements and for asking and getting more realistic prices for them. Before his marriage, Russell frequently gave away gems of art which are now virtually priceless, or painted a picture to buy a round of drinks for his friends.



**This is the way Helena, Montana Territory, looked about the time that Charlie Russell, 16-year-old greenhorn from St. Louis, first saw it. In this sketch of her husband's life, Nancy Russell tells about the arrival at this roaring mining camp of "Kid" Russell and Pike Miller, his employer for a brief time.**

**The photograph at the beginning of this article is a rare one, taken at the time Nancy and Charlie were married in 1896.**

had an irresistible fascination for the lad and he planned to run away and turn Indian fighter. School had no charm for him. He played hookey and the hours he should have been in school, he spent at the river front watching and talking with all sorts of men, unconsciously starting to build the foundation for his life work.

After several unsuccessful attempts to get West, he was sent to a military school at Burlington, New Jersey. He was made to walk guard for hours because book study was not in his mind. He would draw Indians, horses, or animals for any boy who would do his arithmetic in exchange. He loved American history, especially that of the country west of the Mississippi River. The teachers gave him up because he could not be made to study books—but pioneer life—yes, it was absorbed wherever he touched it, and made such an impression that it never left him.

When the military school failed to hold him or teach him application, he returned home. His father decided to try another way, so one day he said, "Would you like to go West, Charles? A gentleman I know is going to Montana and I was thinking of letting you go with him. You will stay but a few weeks, I imagine, until you will be glad to get back home and then go to work in school."

So, early in March, just before Charlie's sixteenth birthday, he started with Pike Miller by way of the Utah Northern Railroad and stage coach to Helena, Montana.

When they arrived there, the streets were lined with freight outfits. He saw bull teams, with their dusty whackers, swinging sixteen-foot lashes with rifle-like reports over seven or eight yoke teams; their string of talk profane and hide-blistering as their whips, but understood by every bull, mule-skinner, or jerk-line man. The jerk-line man would be astride the saddled nigh-wheeler, jerking the lines that led to the little span of leaders. These teams were sometimes horses and sometimes mules, and twelve to fourteen span to a team, often pulling three wagons chained together, all handled by one line.

It was also ration-time for the Indians in that section, so the red men were standing or riding in that quiet way of theirs, all wearing skin leggings and robes. They did not have civilized clothes. The picturesqueness of it all filled the heart and soul of this youthful traveler and he knew that he had found his country, the place he would make his home; but he did not know what a great part he was to take in recording its history for the coming generations.

In Helena, Mr. Miller outfitted, buying a wagon and four horses, two of them being Charlie's. With their load of grub, they pulled for the Judith Basin country, where Miller had a sheep ranch. The wagon trails were very dim and rough and they had a hard time crossing the Crazy Mountains, as one of their horses played out. But they did arrive—a very weary outfit. Charlie said that the trip settled it with him

so far as driving a team and wagon was concerned. Thereafter, pack and saddle horses were his favorite way of traveling and he never changed. He often said to me, "You can have a car, but I'll stick to the hoss; we understand each other better."

He did not stay with Miller but a few weeks, as the sheep and Charlie did not get along at all well. When they split up, Charlie didn't think Miller missed him much, as he was considered pretty "ornery."

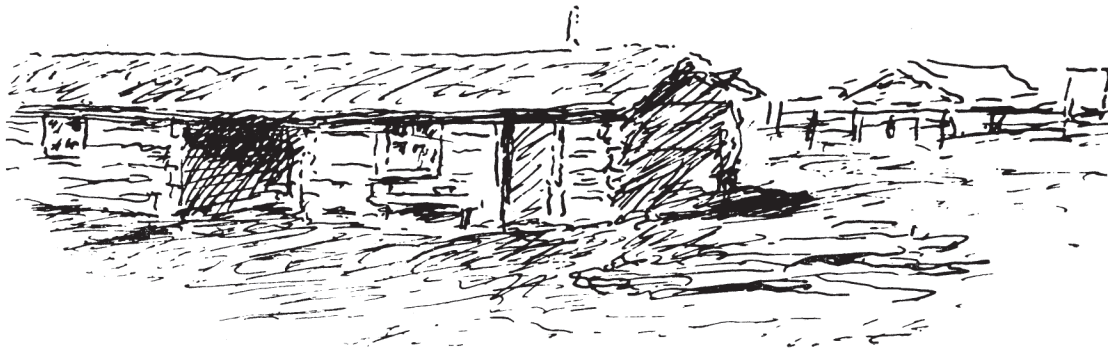
He took his two horses and went to a stage station where he had heard they needed a stock-herder, but word of his dislike for the sheep job had gotten there ahead of him and they were not

ought to feel pretty good to the inside of a kid like you."

So Charlie threw in with him. The man was Jake Hoover, hunter and trapper, and a lifelong friend to the boy he met there on the trail. Hoover's manner of life suited young Russell, who longed for the open country and its native people.

Jake advised him to get rid of his horses, as they were big team horses and one a mare. Jake said this country was no place for a lady-horse; if she took a notion, she would leave and take every other horse with her.

In a few days, he met a bunch of Piegan Indians and traded for two smaller horses, one a pinto, that he



willing to trust their horses with him, so he did not get the job.

Leading his pack horses and carrying a very light bed, Charlie pulled out for the Judith River, where he made camp and picketed his horses. He had a lot of thinking to do. As he unrolled and started to make his bed, a man's voice from out of the shadows said, "Hello, Kid! What are you doing here?"

Half scared, he turned to find a stranger sizing him up.

"Camping," he answered.

"Where's your grub?" the stranger inquired.

"Haven't any."

"Where you going?"

"To find a job."

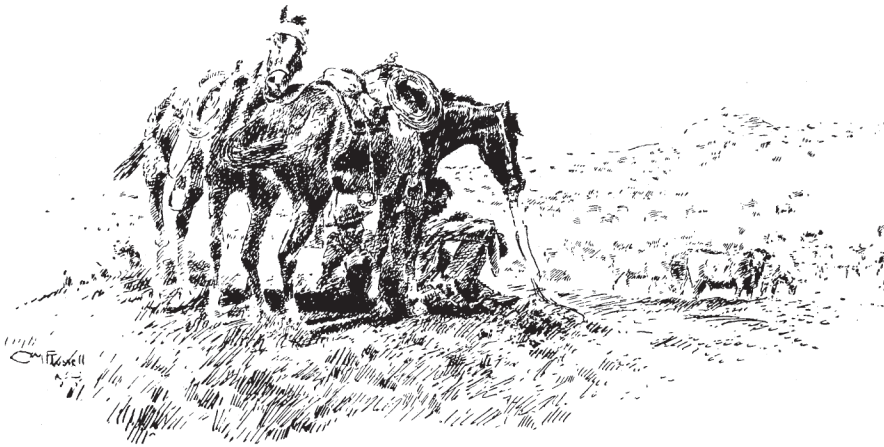
"Where you from?"

On being told, he said, "You better come over and camp with me; I got a lot of elk meat, beans and coffee. That

named "Monte." They were kids together and, when Monte died in 1904, Charlie had ridden and packed him thousands of miles. They were always together and people who knew one, knew the other. They didn't exactly talk, but they sure savvied each other.

Charlie lived with Jake about two years. They had six horses; a saddle horse apiece and pack animals. They hunted and trapped, selling bear, deer and elk meat to the settlers, and sending the furs and pelts which they got in to Fort Benton to trade.

In the Spring of 1881, Charlie's father sent him money to come home. To acknowledge it, Charlie wrote a letter in which he said, "Thanks for the money, which I am returning. I can't use it, but some day I will make enough; then I will come home to see you folks."



By the Spring of 1882, he had saved enough to return to St. Louis, where he stayed about four weeks. He could not resist the call to Montana, so he came back with a cousin, Jim Fulkerson, who died of mountain fever at Billings two weeks after they arrived.

Again alone, with four bits in his pocket and 200 miles between him and Hoover, things looked mighty rocky. He struck a fellow he knew and borrowed a horse and saddle from him until he could get to his own; then, started for the Judith Basin country.

There was still a little snow, as it was early in April, but after riding about fifteen miles, he struck a cow outfit, coming in to receive a thousand dogies for the Twelve Z and V outfit up in the Basin. The boss, John Cabler, hired him to night-wrangle horses. They were about a month on the trail and turned loose at Ross Fork, where they were met by the Judith roundup.

Charlie was getting back to Hoover and the country he knew, but he'd had a taste of the cow business and wanted more. The Judith roundup foreman had just fired his night-herder and Cabler gave him a good recommend, so he took the herd. Charlie said it was a lucky thing no one knew him, or he never would have gotten the job.

When old man True asked who he was, Ed Older said, "I think it's 'Kid' Russell."

"Who's Kid Russell?"

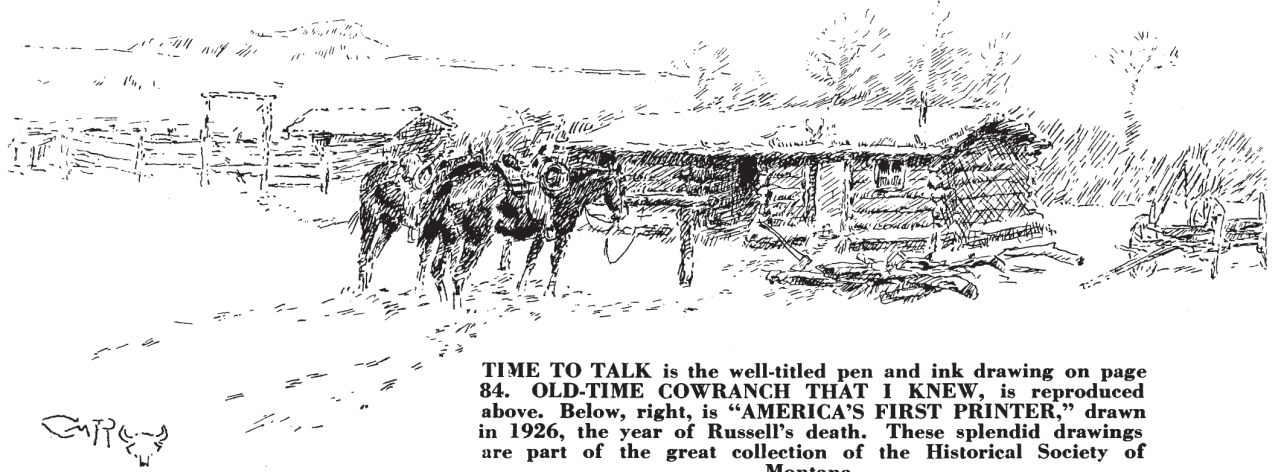
"Why," says True, "if that's 'Buckskin Kid,' I'm bettin' we'll be afoot in the morning."

So you see the kind of a reputation he had. He was spoken of as "that ornery Kid Russell," but not among cowmen. He held their bunch and at that time they had about four hundred saddle horses. That same Fall, old man True hired him to night-herd beef, and for the most part of eleven years, as he says, he sang to their horses and cattle.

In the Winter of 1886, there was a bunch wintering at the O H Ranch. They had pretty nice weather till Christmas. When the snow came, there was two feet on the level. The stage had to have men stick willows in the snow so they would know where the road was. Those willows, on parts of the road, were standing in May.

There was good grass in the Fall. The country was all open—no fences. The horses went through the Winter, fat, since they could paw, breaking the snow's crust and getting through to grass. A cow won't; they are not rustlers. They would go in the brush, hump up and die; so the wolves fattened on the cattle.

Charlie was living at the ranch. There were several men there and among them was Jesse Phillips, the owner of the O H. One night, Jesse had a letter from Louis Kaufman, one of the biggest cattlemen in the country, who lived in Helena. Louie wanted to know how the cattle were doing. Jesse said, "I must write a letter and tell Louie how tough it is." Charlie was sitting at the table with Jesse and said, "I'll make a sketch to go with it." So he made a little watercolor about the size of a postcard and said to Jesse, "Put that in your letter."

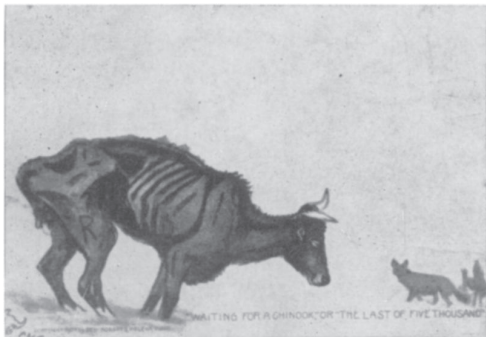


**TIME TO TALK** is the well-titled pen and ink drawing on page 84. **OLD-TIME COWRANCH THAT I KNEW**, is reproduced above. Below, right, is **"AMERICA'S FIRST PRINTER,"** drawn in 1926, the year of Russell's death. These splendid drawings are part of the great collection of the Historical Society of Montana.

Jesse looked at it and said, "Hell, Louie don't need a letter; that will be enough."

The cow in the picture was a Bar R cow, one of Kaufman's brand. On the picture Charlie wrote, "Waiting for a Chinook and nothing else."

That little watercolor drawing made Charlie famous among stockmen and was the wedge which opened up the field of history in this part of the West for him. He still did not know he was about to graduate from this School of Nature, to take up his life work.



This is probably the most familiar of all Russell works, and was originally done to illustrate to a cattle owner the fact that his herd of 5,000 had perished in the terrible winter of 1886-7.

In 1888, he went to the then Northwest Territory and stayed about six months with the Blood Indians. They are one branch of the Blackfeet tribes. He became a great friend of a young Indian, named "Sleeping Thunder." Through their friendship, the older men of the tribe grew to know Charlie and

wanted him to marry one of their women and become one of them. The Red-Men of our Northwest love and think of Charlie as a kind of medicine man because he could draw them and their life so well.

He learned to speak Piegan a little but could use the sign language well enough to get along anywhere with any tribe of the plains that he ever met, as the sign talk is universal among the American Plains Indians. Whether with white man or red, with a lump of wax or a few tubes of paint, he drew, painted and modeled, all his spare time, just for the satisfaction of recording what he saw and to entertain his friends. Still, he did not dream of the great work ahead of him.





After Russell's death, Will Rogers wrote this memorable paragraph in the introduction to "Trails Plowed Under," a collection of the artist's favorite stories: "At first we couldn't understand why they moved you, but we can now, They had every kind of a great man up there, but they just didnt have any great Cowboy Artist like you. Shucks! on the luck, there was only one of you and he couldn't use you both places."

In the Spring of 1889, he went back to Judith to his old job of wrangling. The captain was Horace Brewster, the same man who had hired him in 1882, on Ross Fork. All these years there had been the mixing with, studying the habits of, and drawing all the different types of men and animal life.

Living with a trapper, he got close to the hearts of the wild animals. He saw them in their own country; got to know their habits. Knew them with their young and saw their struggle against their enemies, especially Man.

But the West was changing. Stage coaches and steamboats carried the white people west, while the freighters with bull, mule and horse teams, played their great part in bringing what we call civilization to this Northwest country.



Charlie was here to see the change. He did not like the new; so started to record the old in ink, paint and clay. He liked the old ways best. He was a child of the West before wire or rail spanned it; now civilization choked him.

Even in 1889, when the Judith country was becoming well settled and the sheep had the range, he resented the change and followed the cattle north to the Milk River, trying to stay in an open range country.

In the Fall of 1891, he received a letter from Charlie Green, a gambler, better known as "Pretty Charlie," who was in Great Falls, saying that if he would come to that camp, he could make \$75.00 a month and grub. It looked good, so Charlie saddled his gray, packed Monte, the pinto, and took the trail. When he arrived, Green introduced him to Mr. K., who pulled out a contract as long as a stake rope, for him to sign.

Everything he modeled or painted for one year was to be Mr. K.'s Charlie balked. Then K. wanted him to paint from early morning until six at night, but Charlie argued there was some difference in painting and sawing wood. So they split up and Charlie went to work for himself. He joined a bunch of cowpunchers, a round-up cook and a prizefighter out of work. They rented a shack on the south side. The feed was very short at times but they wintered.

Next Spring, he went back to Milk River and once more lived the range life. But it had changed. That Autumn, he returned to Great Falls, took up the paint brush and never rode the range again.



*Mosquito Season in Cascade.*



The daughter of Ben Roberts, Mrs. Charles Sheridan, presented this interesting pencil sketch depicting the early married life of the Russells, to the Montana Historical Society in 1954.

We met in October, 1895, and were married in September, 1896. With \$75.00 we furnished a one room shack there in Cascade, where we lived one year. There was little chance to get orders for pictures in such a small town, so we moved to Great Falls, where Charlie could meet a few travelers and get an occasional order.

Charles Schatzlein, of Butte, Montana, was one good friend. He had an art store, and gave Charlie a good many orders, making it possible for us to pay our house rent and feed, but, as Charlie said, "The grass wasn't so good."

One time Mr. Schatzlein came to visit us.

"Do you know, Russell," he said, "you don't ask enough for your pictures. That last bunch you sent me, I sold one for enough to pay for six. I am paying you your price, but it's not enough. I think your wife should take hold of that end of the game and help you out."

From that time, the prices of Charlie's work began to advance until it was possible to live a little more comfortably.

In 1900, Charlie got a small legacy from his mother, which was the nest egg that started the home we live in. After the cottage home was finished and furnished, Charlie said, "I want a log studio some day, just a cabin like I used to live in."

.....CONTRACT AND AGREEMENT.....

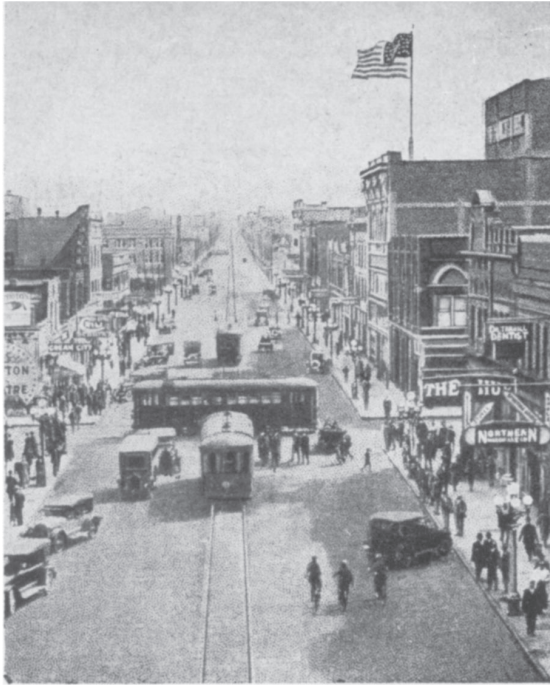
Agreement between Charles Marlen Russell, of Great Falls, Montana, and William Bleasdel Cameron, of Saint Paul, Minnesota, made 30th. of September, 1897.

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, composing a pictorial history of western life, the whole to be completed within a reasonable time, or by the first of January, 1898, 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 WESTERN FIELD AND STREAM, published at Saint Paul, Minnesota, and that they are also to be published in two 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*  
Mannie Russell. } C.M. Russell  
on behalf of himself and for  
Western Field and Stream.



Great Falls, Montana, about 1918.

That year, 1903, the studio was built on the lot adjoining the house. Charlie did not like the mess of building, so he took no more than a mild interest in the preparations. Then, one day, a neighbor said, "What are you doing at your place, Russell, building a corral?"

That settled it. Charlie just thought the neighbors didn't want the cabin mixed in with the civilized dwellings and felt sure they would get up a petition to prevent our building anything so unsightly as a log house in their midst. But way down in his heart, he wanted that studio. It was the right kind of a work-shop for him, but he was worried at what he thought the neighbors would say, so he said he would have nothing to do with it.



Charlie and Nancy on an outing.

He made no further comment, nor did he go near it until one evening, Mr. Trigg, one of our dearest friends, came over and said, "Say, son, let's go see the new studio. That big stone fireplace looks good to me from the outside. Show me what it's like from the inside."

Charlie looked at me kind of queer. The supper dishes had to be washed. That was my job just then, so Charlie took Mr. Trigg out to see his new studio that he had not been in. When they came back into the house, the dishes were all put away.

Charlie was saying, "That's going to be a good shack for me. The bunch can come visit, talk and smoke, while I paint."

From that day to the end of his life he loved that telephone pole building more than any other place on earth and never finished a painting anywhere else. The walls were hung with all kinds of things given him by Indian friends, and his horse jewelry, as he called it, that had been accumulated on the range, was as precious to him as a girl's jewel box to her.

One of Charlie's great joys was to give suppers cooked over the fire, using a Dutch oven and frying pan, doing all the cooking himself. The invited guests were not to come near until the food was ready. There was usually bachelor bread, boiled beans, fried bacon, or if it was Fall, maybe deer meat, and coffee; the dessert must be dried apples. A flour sack was tucked in his sash for an apron and, as he worked, the great beads of perspiration would gather and roll down his face and neck.

When it was ready, with a big smile, he would step to the door with the gladdest call the oldtime roundup cook could give—"Come and get it!"

There was a joyous light in his eyes when anyone said the bread was good, or asked for a second helping of anything. When no more could be eaten, he would say, "Sure you got enough; lots of grub here."

Then the coffee pot would be pushed to one side, frying pan and Dutch oven pulled away from the fire, and Charlie would get the "makins." Sitting on his heels among us, he would roll a cigarette with those long, slender fingers, light it, and in the smoke, drift back in his talk to times when there were very few, if any, white women in Montana. It was Nature's country. If that cabin could only tell what those log walls have heard!



The world knows about his paintings and modeling, but his illustrated letters are novel because of his spelling and lack of book learning. The perfection of his humor is not of books, but comes direct from the life in the West that he lived and loved.

The State University of Montana is not prodigal in giving honors, but Charlie justified himself as the greatest student and teacher of the West in his time and so won the fourth honorary degree of Doctor of Laws ever given by that University. Charlie said, "Nature has been my teacher; I'll leave it to you whether she was a good one or not." . . .



**Charlie and Nancy Russell are pictured here early in their marriage with the artist's favorite horse, Monty. Below is the bronze, WHEN THE BEST OF RIDERS QUIT, Historical Society of Montana collection.**

