

The Wide and Colorful Range of Fred Renner



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Fred Renner

ONLY THE PERSPECTIVE OF HISTORY can evaluate the full measure of Fred Renner's impact on the world's rangeland resources and on the lore and history of the American West. Before that happens, however, members of the Society for Range Management should be apprised of the distinguished achievements of the man who is one of the Society's founding fathers, its second president, and one of its most generous benefactors.

Whether or not historians will agree with my contention that the value of his contributions is immeasurable, they cannot dispute the obvious fact that right now—at this point in time, if you prefer that tired cliché—Fred Renner is a very wealthy man: rich in deserved accolades, rich in memories, and rich in friends and in the reputation he has accumulated during his long and distinguished career as a rangeland conservationist and as a documentarian of the life and works of an American legend.

As do all of us, I have encountered more than a handful of rich folk in my lifetime, forgettable and unforgettable. As long as what they have was acquired legitimately and ethically, I have nothing but admiration for the rich, regardless of whether they've lassoed their loot by design, determination, accident, good luck, or any combination thereof.

None of the well-heeled I have encountered, however, do I admire and respect more than Fred Renner. Now crowding

About the Author: John Chohlis has had a long and colorful background in range management, journalism, ranching, and animal husbandry. He is a Charter Member and past Director of SRM. He worked for the SCS in the late 1930's and early 1940's; was editor of *Western Livestock Journal* for many years; served as administrator of Linkletter Enterprises ranching investments; served a 3-year term on the editorial board for *Rangeman's Journal*; and, after a 9-year association with Ralston Purina Company, retired as Director of communications, Chow Division, in December 1978. He still pounds a typewriter to keep himself occupied in retirement.

Editor's Note: In 1971 Fred Renner offered a cash gift to SRM to be used for the establishment of the Frederic G. Renner Award. This award was to be given annually for significant and outstanding accomplishments in the field of range management and to carry an honorarium of the annual interest from the \$10,000 fund. The first Renner Award was given in 1972 to Peter V. Jackson III at the 25th annual meeting of the Society, held in Washington, D.C. Subsequent recipients have been: 1973—August L. Horman; 1974—Francis T. Colbert; 1975—Martin H. Gonzalez; 1976—A. Perry Plummer; 1977—Joseph H. Robertson; 1978—C. Wayne Cook; 1979—E. William Anderson; and 1980—Harold F. Heady.

83, Fred is as gruff and ready and as sharp and cutting as he was the day I met him on a stretch of desert sand and sage in eastern Oregon over 40 years ago.

Fred Renner didn't become a rich man by design. Determination, a little luck, plus a few happy accidents are why he and his wife, Ginger, are enjoying the great good life and desert sun in Paradise Valley, Arizona, (a haven for aching bones whose owners have got it made)—a far different climate than Washington, DC, where Renner spent the bulk of his 40-year career as a professional conservationist. He was Chief of the SCS Range Conservation Division when he retired in 1961, the same title he had in 1939 when he initiated me and half-a-dozen other Junior Range Conservationists into the Soil Conservation Service on that stretch of Oregon desert.

AS A CAREER RANGE CONSERVATIONIST, Renner has received several "Distinguished Service" citations for his outstanding contributions to improving management and



Fred Renner, left, with his parents and older sister, Bessie. As a young boy Fred and his sister used to visit Charlie Russell's studio and at an early age started collecting Russell postcards. Nancy Russell was a friend of Fred's parents before she married Charlie.



Fred Renner studying soil erosion and plant growth in the early years of his career with the U.S. Forest Service and Soil Conservation Service. After working hours was when he found time to look for and record information on Russell art items.

productivity of the world's grazing land resources. Monumental, however, have been his contributions to the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the American West's greatest artistic chronicler, a man whose life work constitutes a legacy of incalculable value to Western historians and mind-boggling value to collectors of Western art. In 1976, the Trustees of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City honored Renner with its Gold Medal award for his outstanding contribution to Western Art. The determination which made that contribution possible crystallized in 1935 when Renner journeyed to Pasadena, California, to visit Nancy Russell, the widow of his boyhood idol, Charles Marion Russell. Because his parents and the Russells were friends, Renner had trespassing and watching privileges in Charlie's log cabin studio in Great Falls, Montana, Fred's birthplace.

Recalling his 1935 visit to Mrs. Russell, Renner says, "Over the years I'd come across many of Charlie's illustrations in books and magazines, and had taken photographs of others. When I mentioned these to Mrs. Russell, I got the shock of my life. There were quite a number she knew nothing about. In my innocence, I had assumed that either she or Charlie had kept a record of everything he had done. This was 9 years after Charlie died. There was no such record.

"That's when I resolved to get a description, and if possible, a photograph of every Russell creation I could find—painting, water colors, drawings, sculptures, even his illustrated letters. I was convinced that Russell's art was important enough to justify such a record." As a consequence of his Pasadena resolution and 44 years of unrelenting search (he's still at it), Renner has records and photos of more than 3,900 Russell originals.

The passing years have not diminished the vividness of Renner's most gratifying experience in his 44-year quest—acquiring his first Russell originals. "I was visiting John How-

ell, a rare-book dealer in San Francisco in 1938," he recounts, "and he told me about a small Russell collection owned by a Dr. Hagner in Washington, DC, right in my own back yard. Something happened and I didn't call Dr. Hagner. I'm sorry I didn't, because 2 months later I read about his death in the evening newspaper.

"I waited about two months," he continues, "then called Mrs. Hagner. I learned she had several Russells and that she was interested in selling the collection because she was moving to an apartment. I made her an offer and she accepted. The collection included a pen drawing, four bronzes, one small water color, and one magnificent water color called *Meat for the Wagons*. That's the painting I loaned to the U.S. Information Service in 1959 when they organized an American art show for exhibition in Russia. I had mixed emotions about that honor and, frankly, I was mighty relieved to get it back. I still own it, by the way. And it's still my favorite Russell."

RENNER'S RELENTLESS QUEST FOR RUSSELL'S WORKS has yielded a substantial number of surprises, disappointments, and discoveries. He's lost count of the thousands of miles he's travelled chasing down leads in North America and abroad. He recalls one trip with his first wife, Maxine, who died in 1970. "It was in the early forties," he says, "over 16 thousand miles. We went to 41 towns in Montana alone, crossing and re-crossing our tracks so many times as new leads developed that my wife said I was the perfect example of a fanatic which she defined as 'someone who redoubles his efforts after all hope is lost'."

Not surprisingly, Renner's own collection of Russell originals, despite being depleted by donations to the Montana Historical Society, to the Charles M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, and to his sons, is the largest and most representative now in private hands. He also owns an impressive collection of books, gallery catalogues, pamphlets, ephemera, and magazines containing Russell illustrations—not to mention the most complete collection of Russell prints in existence. Renner's eminence in the world of Western art and his contributions to the Russell legend are all the more remarkable because a large share was achieved during his Civil Service career when his Russellmania was a spare-time hobby, albeit it's been a full-time profession since 1961.

To avoid getting stung, most art collectors develop a "buyer beware" sensitivity. Once in a while, though, their spookiness gets done in by the excitement of an apparent find. Recounting one such experience when he and Maxine made a special trip to Montana to call on a lady who had four Russell watercolors she wanted to sell, Renner says, "I recognized them immediately. They had been published in a 1904 novel called *Hope Hathaway*. After quite a little negotiating—I don't like to haggle with a lady—we agreed on a price and I wrote the lady a check and was about to hand it to her when Maxine said, 'Aren't you going to take them out of the frames and examine them?' I did it to humor her, and she did have a good laugh because they turned out to be prints worth 20 dollars at the most."

DEDICATED ART COLLECTORS have much in common with dedicated fishermen: they never forget the big ones that got away. Thumbing through old newspaper accounts of the 1919 Calgary Stampede, Renner learned about a Russell painting which was bought by the citizens of High River,

Alberta, and presented to the Prince of Wales.

"The Prince was the Duke of Windsor when I learned about it," says Renner. "It was an oil painting titled *When Law Dulls the Edge of Chance*. I wrote the Duke and asked him if he would be willing to sell it and received a polite 'thank you' saying that the painting was not for sale. I should've stayed glued to the Duke because 10 years later the painting turned up in the hands of a New York art dealer and was immediately snapped up by a wealthy patron of the Whitney Gallery of Western Art in Cody, Wyoming.

"But that was a minnow compared to the whale that got away when Nancy Russell died in 1941," Renner continues. "The administrators of her estate put up her entire collection for sale. Because it had been advertised only in small weekly newspapers, as required by California law, collectors and art dealers and museums were not aware that the collection had been put up for sale. Except one. The entire collection was sold for \$40,000 to C.R. Smith, then president of American Airlines, an avid Russell collector who learned about it from one of his people in Los Angeles. Today that collection would be worth over \$7 million. One thing for sure, it would've sold for a hell of a lot more than 40 thousand had more people known about it."

Author of *Charles M. Russell* (Abrams & Company, New York City), the book which Russellphiles consider the most authoritative ever written about the works of the legendary artist, Renner says that writing it was a labor of love because it is woven around the largest single collection of Russell originals, the Amon Carter Museum Collection in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Mr. Carter began collecting Western works of art in the early nineteen-thirties," Renner explains. "But it wasn't until 1953 that Mr. Carter's became the finest and largest in the world. That's the year the Mint Collection came on the market. The Mint was an old-time Great Falls saloon which was owned by Sid Willis, one of Charlie's very close friends. Sid wanted his collection to stay in Montana and he offered it to the state for \$125,000," Renner continues. "But the state

wasn't interested. Mr. Willis sold his collection to the Knoedler Gallery in New York for \$175,000 and 10 days later, the gallery sold it to Mr. Carter for \$225,000."

IRONICALLY, RUSSELL WAS PAID only \$3,000 for a painting that later became the highest-price Russell on record. In 1914 he was commissioned to do the painting for the Montana Club, a private club of copper mining millionaires living in Helena. The oil painting, *When the Land Belonged to God*, was purchased in 1977 by the Montana Historical Society for \$450,000. The Montana State Legislature had appropriated \$300,000 toward its purchase; the balance was raised by the sale of 100 replicas of Jim Bridger's rifle at \$1,500 per copy. The rifle also is owned by the Montana Historical Society.

The most Charlie Russell was ever paid for an original work was \$30,000, the commission he received from Los Angeles oil tycoon E.L. Doheny of "Teapot Dome" fame. What Doheny got for his \$30,000 was two oil paintings, each 30 inches high and 21 feet long, to grace the walls of the library of his Los Angeles home. Russell completed the Doheny paintings during 1926, the year he died and, prophetically, labeled the fee Doheny paid him as "dead man's prices." The Doheny paintings are now on display in the memorial library his widow had built at St. John's Seminary in Camarillo, California.

Long acknowledged as THE ranking authority on the life and works of Charles M. Russell, Renner's "dossier" on Russell's works makes it virtually impossible to dispose of a stolen Russell. Moreover, with the astronomical figures Russell originals now command—most of the major ones are now in museums—no respectable art dealer or collector or museum will touch one unless it's authenticated by Frederic G. Renner.

RENNER'S RECORDS HELPED RECOVER Will Rogers' collection of Russell paintings which were stolen from the

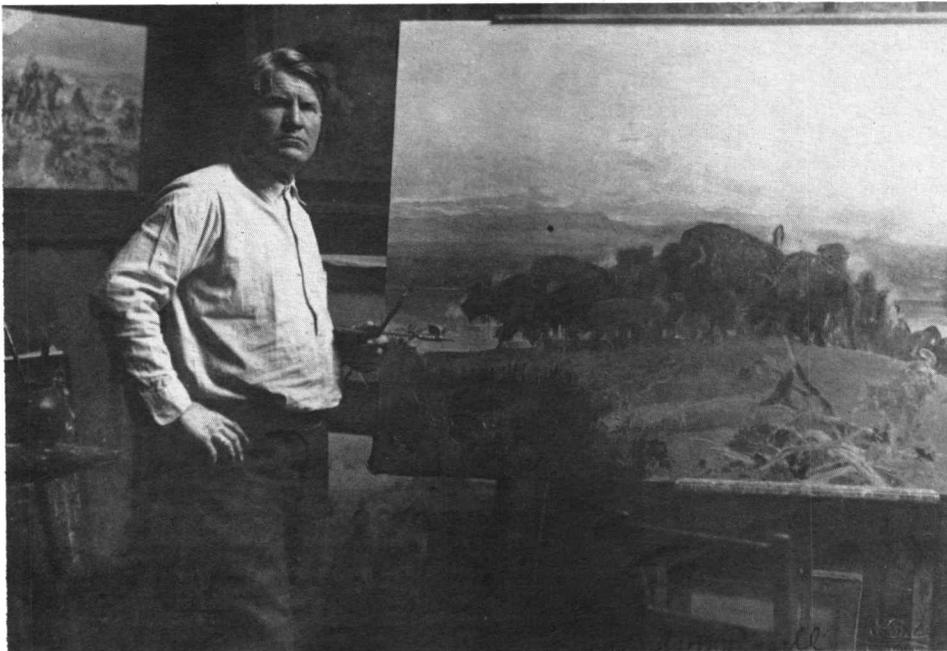
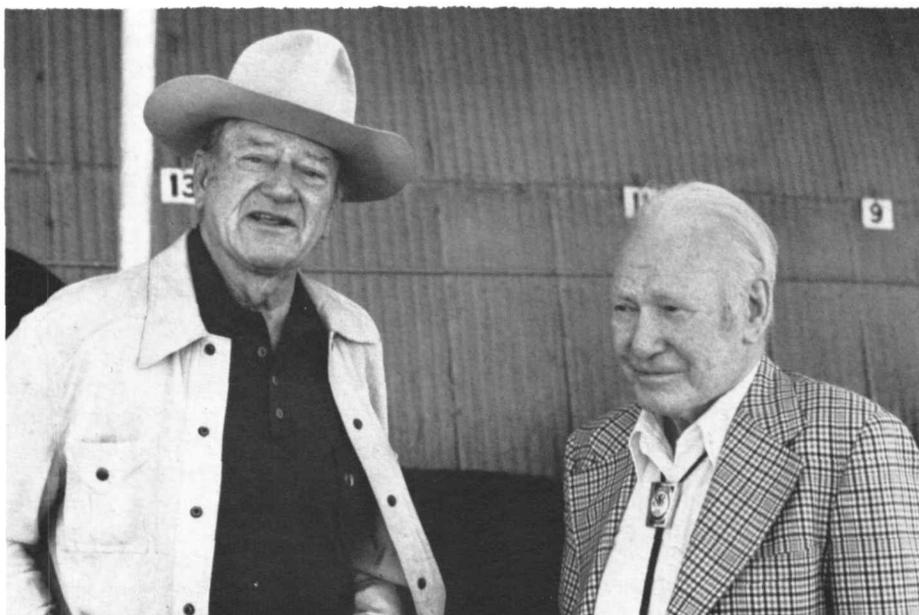


Photo courtesy of the Montana Historical Society

Charlie Russell standing beside his best-priced work: "When the Land Belonged to God."



When two Westerners meet they talk about Western art, which is what John Wayne and Fred Renner were doing when this picture was taken in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1978.

Will Rogers Ranch home, a State Park in Pacific Palisades, California. "Charlie and Will were great friends," Renner recounts, "and Will owned six of Charlie's paintings and several bronzes. State Park officials called me the morning after the paintings were stolen—the thieves didn't take the bronzes—because they didn't have a photograph or description of any of the paintings. Fortunately, I did. The photos and descriptions were used in police bulletins. Not long after, the paintings were found in Las Vegas, Nevada, when police raided an apartment on a drug abuse tip. They found the drugs and the Russells."

Renner does a brisk business authenticating Russell originals. In 1977, of the 108 that he was asked to authenticate, 36 were fakes. In 1978, 43 of the 87 Russell "originals" that were sent to Renner for authentication turned out to not be. Last year, of the 83 Russells he was asked to examine and authenticate, 25 proved to be fakes.

Frequently asked how he distinguishes a fake from an original, Renner responds, "When you really know the works of a particular artist and know the different techniques he used at various stages of his career, there is no question. It's like walking into a roomful of people where you see two men who look almost exactly alike. If one of them happens to be a good friend, someone you know intimately, you know which one he is immediately."

ALTHOUGH IT HAPPENS WITH LESS FREQUENCY these days, Renner's authenticating activities have yielded some rare finds, the last one in 1975 when he received a slide in the mail. "When Ginger and I projected it on the screen what we saw was a highly romantic scene showing a young girl and lady who was obviously her mother in the rear of a birch bark canoe. A fierce-looking Indian was approaching the canoe from the rear. Well, Charlie had never seen a birch bark canoe in his life and the Indians resembled Iroquois and Mohawks, tribes that Russell had never been near. We were sure the picture was a fake.

"Fortunately, the people who owned the painting decided to bring it to Washington anyway," Renner continues. "They

showed up one Sunday morning with the painting. When we unwrapped it and looked at it, I looked at Ginger, who looked at me. It was a Russell original. Not only that, I recognized the girl in the painting. Her name was Laura Edgar, Charlie's first sweetheart. She was a St. Louis girl (Charlie was born in St. Louis) whose folks owned a ranch in Montana's Judith Basin, which is where Charlie met and fell in love with her. But the romance was short-lived because her parents shipped Laura back to St. Louis. They weren't about to let her marry a cowboy and a drifter."

Newer members of the Society for Range Management may not know that the Society's official emblem, *The Trail Boss*, achieved its "official" status at the beginning of Renner's term as president in 1949. Renner's relentless tenacity yielded worldwide attention to the Society and to range conservation in 1961 when the U.S. Postal officials succumbed to Renner's repeated urgings to issue a "Range Conservation" commemorative stamp on which the *The Trail Boss* served as the illustration. First Day Cancellation ceremonies were performed during the Society's 14th annual meeting at Salt Lake City, Utah, in February of 1961.

Asked why the Society had never acquired *The Trail Boss* original, a pen-and-ink sketch, Renner replies, "Well, it's owned by the Kimbell Foundation in Fort Worth, and before Mr. Kimbell acquired it, an unscrupulous art dealer had tried to have it converted into a watercolor. It was badly done, but even in its present condition," he adds, "I think it would be great if the Society owned the original. But it's going to take a philanthropic gesture or a fund-raising drive to get it done."

Whenever Fred Renner gets to reminiscing or reflecting about the past, which isn't very often, a benign smile lights up his ruddy face as he contemplates the golden harvest of his 40 years as a career rangeland conservationist and the fruits of his long and unrelenting quest for the original works of Charles M. Russell. Savory and satisfying though it is, the contemplation is over in the few seconds it takes Renner to wrap up his kaleidoscopic life, "It's been great," he observes. "Just great. Charlie once said, 'Any man who can make a living doing what he enjoys is damn lucky.' For me that goes double."