

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE WORKS OF WILL JAMES:

HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE MYTHOLOGIZING OF THE AMERICAN
COWBOY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ART HISTORY

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

2016

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A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

BY

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents, whom would have loved to see this moment;
to my parents; and to my daughter, Addison, you could not have come at a more perfect
moment in life.

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincerest gratitude to my thesis committee. I am indebted to Byron Price, my thesis chair, professor, and mentor. Without his guidance, wisdom, understanding, and encouragement I would have never completed this thesis. His vast knowledge of western artists, history, and, of course, Will James, astounds me on a daily basis and for that I am extremely thankful. Thank you to Alison Fields for her knowledge of western art and history and her never-ending support, and to Robert Bailey for his encouragement and understanding. I express my greatest appreciation to the staff at the Yellowstone Art Museum, Big Horn County Historical Museum, and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West for their assistance in my research. Thank you to A.P. Hays for allowing me access to his Will James collection, to artist Rick Bean for images of his handcrafted saddle, and to Ian Tyson for use of his lyrical composition. Finally, I am eternally grateful to my family and friends who have supported me from the beginning, and to those I've met along the way. Thank you for believing in me and understanding my insanity was only temporary. To Casey, thank you for your never-ending encouragement and support. Most importantly, thank you to my parents for everything. Without the endless words of wisdom provided by my parents and Casey, this thesis may have never come to pass.

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Abstract

The life of Will James is one of mystery. His works, however, tell the story of a life he was meant to live. Born Joseph Ernest Nephtali Dufault in 1892 in Saint-Nazaire-d'Acton, the boy grew up yearning to be a cowboy. Dufault headed to western Canada in 1907 to fulfill his dream. By 1910 he had crossed the Canadian-United States border into Montana and changed his name to Will James. During his travels James managed to steal cattle, survive jail and a hospital stay, and attend art school. These events, and the people he encounter along the way, played an important role in his decision to become a full-time artist and author.

The individuals in the literary, artistic, and entertainment industries prior to James's arrival laid the groundwork for the artist to extend and update the iconic cowboy imagery. Pining for the Old West, Will James illustrated the American cowboy before the effects of barbed wire and the automotive revolution took place. In his depictions the cowboy almost invariably accompanies the horse and cattle. To James the three were indispensable to his way of life. His drawings and paintings not only served as illustrations for the books and short stories he wrote but also helped shape and extend the historical, cultural, and mythological perceptions of the cowboy-hero in American culture.

The life and works of this forgotten legend have endured through avid collectors, artists, and historians. Marginalized to the far corners of western American art, Will James's work endures, inspiring a new generation and creating a love for the Old West.

Introduction

Born Joseph Ernest Nephtali Dufault, on June 6, 1892, in the Québec parish municipality of Saint-Nazaire-d'Acton, the boy who would later take the name Will James grew up yearning to be a cowboy. In rudimentary childhood drawings he portrayed a romanticized view of life on the open range that foreshadowed his later work on the subject as an illustrator and easel painter. Exposed to stories of cowboy life and the North American West, Ernest Dufault left Montreal in 1907 for western Canada dreaming of punching cows for a living. On the grasslands of Alberta and Saskatchewan the youngster had his first real encounter with cowboy life. In 1910, believing that he had killed a man in a barroom shooting, Dufault fled Canada for the United States. He found cowboy work in Montana and went by several aliases before settling, for reasons now unknown, on William Roderick "Will" James.

By the time Will James became a cowboy in the early 1900s the effects of barbed wire and the expansion of farming in the American West had broken up most of the large-scale nineteenth-century ranching operations into stock farms and had pushed "straight riding outfits" into environmentally marginal regions. At the same time, the emerging automotive revolution began to impact roundups and the role of horses on the range. Over time, ranchers on all but the largest and most remote spreads did away with their chuck wagons, way of life, and traditions they embodied.

As the open range shrank and horseback work declined, an increasing number of cowpunchers were forced to look for other work. Will James pursued the life he had come to love until a bucking horse accident in 1919 forced him to consider another career path. Up to this point, James had dabbled in art but had never considered making

a living at it. His fellow cowpunchers were entertained by his drawings of range work, and a few encouraged him to develop his artistic talents. Such encouragement led James to enroll in the California School of Fine Arts. During his four month stint at the school, James enrolled in classes, such as drawing, where he soon realized he would rather draw animals than people.

Constantly in need of money, James submitted some of his cowboy drawings and stories to *Sunset Magazine* in 1920 under the title *A One-Man Horse*. The seventeen-page article launched James's career as an author and illustrator. In time he succeeded in placing his work in some of the most popular periodicals of the day, including *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Youth's Companion* and *Scribner's Magazine*.

Despite rapidly changing conditions on the range, James's fledgling artistic and literary efforts focused on the horseback traditions of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cowboy and life on the "big outfits." By extending and updating the iconic cowboy imagery of such artists as Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, from the perspective of an "insider" (much as his idol Russell had in the 1880s), James kept the idea and evolving reality of cowboy life alive and compelling during the first half of the twentieth-century. His drawings and paintings served not only as illustrations for the books and short stories he wrote but also helped shape and extend the historical, cultural, and mythological perceptions of the cowboy-hero in American culture. Ironically most of his fans lived in urban areas.

I first encountered Will James's life and work in a 2011 exhibition at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. It soon became clear to me that this

often forgotten cowboy-artist merited more serious art historical attention than he had thus far received. I also recognized that the story of James's transformation from a wandering youth of French-Canadian ancestry to an American cowpuncher and, later, beloved artist and storyteller bore striking similarities to the experiences of Charles Russell, the St. Louis-born, Montana cowboy artist with whom he became friends. Both men's experiences as cowboys deeply informed their art and writing. Both were consummate and widely published storytellers. Several of James's books became national best sellers and one, *Smoky the Cowhorse*, received the Newbery Medal for children's literature in 1927.¹ His fictionalized autobiography, *Lone Cowboy*, became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection three years later and two other James novels, *Smoky the Cowhorse* and *Sand*, later were adapted into successful motion pictures.

Although Will James died at the age of fifty in 1942, his books and art endure. Most of his stories are still in print and several American museums and numerous private collectors now own his work. James has been inducted into both the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's Hall of Great Westerners and the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. The Will James Society, founded in 1992, also keeps his memory alive. Although James, has been the subject of a pair of biographies: Anthony A. Amaral's *Will James, The Last Cowboy Legend* published in 1980 and William Gardner Bell's *Will James: The Life and Works of a Lone Cowboy*, in 1987 his distinctive contributions to the art of the West do not command the popular attention they once did.

To demonstrate the impact of James's art and illustration on the mythologizing of the American cowboy, I will first establish the artistic and literary underpinnings of

¹ William Gardner Bell, *Will James: The Life and Works of a Lone Cowboy* (Flagstaff: Northland Press, 1987), xi.

the mythical cowboy-hero as they developed before and during James's life. I will also explore the impact of Wild West shows and rodeos, musicians, mass media, and even U.S. presidents on the evolving image of the American cowboy before 1910, the year James began to contribute to the mythology of the cowboy.²

In his 2003 book, *Western Places, American Myths: How We Think About the West*, author Gary J. Hausladen notes that “from the beginning, the western formula included three basic components: (1) the cowboy as a hero; (2) the frontier experience as a storyline; and (3) the West as a landscape or setting.”³ Will James's art embodied all three of these components and through visual analyses of representative drawings, sketches, and oil paintings, I will not only trace the trajectory of James's art and argue the artist's influence on the image of the cowboy-hero in the first half of the twentieth-century but also will discuss his work as personal revelation.

For serious students of the American West, Will James's writing and art remained vibrant beyond his lifetime and continued to impact not only art and literature, but also music and film. His books and paintings have informed the movie cowboy portrayals of such actors as William S. Hart, Tom Mix, Harry Carey, Gary Cooper, and John Wayne, among others. James has also stimulated the melodies and lyrics of such singers and composers as Ian Tyson, David Buttolph, David Raskin, Leith Stevens, Daniele Amfitheatrof, and Herman Hand. Film adaptations of James's books also relied in part on the author's art for costuming, set design, location, and mood. Although Will James is no longer a household name, his lingering impact can still be felt in the work

² David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Cardiff, Wales: Welsh Academic Press, 2001), 34.

³ Gary J. Hausladen, *Western Places, American Myths: How We Think About the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), 297.

of contemporary artists of the West, including members of the Cowboy Artists of America and the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.

In addition to research on Will James in secondary sources, I have drawn from a number of pertinent primary sources, including the important collection of letters, drawings, and paintings compiled by Virginia Snook and housed at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, Montana. I also consulted the Will James holdings in the Big Horn County Historical Museum in Hardin, Montana, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and the Autry National Center in Los Angeles California, among others.

Chapter 1: Constructing the Cowboy of Legend

Will James's biographer, William Gardner Bell, notes that the word 'cowboy' was originally applied to herdsmen in Texas in the 1830s.⁴ Thanks to writers, artists, musicians, and showmen, by the end of the nineteenth-century the cowboy was transformed into a heroic symbol of America's frontier experience. For much of the twentieth-century, the mediums of film and television ensured the image of the cowboy-hero made a greater and longer lasting impression on American popular culture than mountain men, scouts, gunfighters, and other frontier types, and for many defined the Euro-American West. This chapter will discuss the temporal development of the mythology of the American cowboy-hero and the cultural factors that contributed to his legend.

When and where a cowboy, real or imagined, was observed and the details of his attitude, attire, gear, and surroundings were important to the perception that observers developed about him.⁵ Texas historian, Joe B. Frantz, believed that "the American cowboy exists on 3 distinct levels—historical, fictional, and folklore."⁶ Within these levels the myth and reality of the cowboy often became blurred.

From its first use, the term "cowboy" embodied both positive and negative connotations. First and foremost, writer Russell Martin notes, cowboys "were laborers, lower-class boys who, beginning in the 1850s, were hired on to work in a saddle on the

⁴ William Gardner Bell, "Unraveling the bumpy ride of cowboy artist and author Will James' real life and his reputation," *Wild West* 16, no. 2 (August 2003): 62.

⁵ Richard W. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 47.

⁶ Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 15.

back of a horse.”⁷ Thanks to the violent and unrestrained behavior of a relative few drovers who delivered herds of Texas cattle to Kansas railheads during the immediate post-Civil War era, cowboys as a group gained an ill-deserved reputation in the press for mayhem and violence. Writers such as Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham capitalized on such stories, adding melodrama, sensationalism, and improbable plots to the mix in cheap dime novels that invariably portrayed cowboys as villains.

By 1878, however, the image of the cowboy began to ride the road to redemption, thanks largely to the efforts of frontier scout and showman, William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody. With the help of Buntline and Ingraham, Buffalo Bill became a dime novel hero, who also came to life on stage in a series of melodramas set in the American West. A former cowboy and trail driver turned actor, John Baker “Texas Jack” Omahundro played one of Cody’s sidekicks in these plays, which portrayed cowboys in a positive light for the first time.⁸

In 1883, Cody incorporated real cowboys into his Wild West show, casting them as fun loving heroes of the range who fought Indians, protected settlers, and tamed wild horses. Colorful posters featured their bravery and horsemanship while illustrated programs elaborated on their look, character, and heroism. (Fig. 1) Cody’s show was presented and perceived as authentic and educational as well as entertaining.⁹ His success spawned many imitators and by the 1890s more than fifty similar Wild West

⁷ Russell Martin, *Cowboy: The Enduring Myth of the Wild West* (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang Publishers, Inc., 1983), 26.

⁸ Lonn Taylor and Ingrid Maar, *The American Cowboy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983).

⁹ See *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* for an example of a program. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Company, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World: Historical Sketches and Programmes* (Chicago: The Company, 1893).

spectacles were touring the United States and Europe, each one reinforcing the audience's perceptions of the American West and its cowboy-hero.¹⁰

William Levi "Buck" Taylor, billed as "The King of the Cowboys," starred in Buffalo Bill's Wild West for several years. Beginning in 1887, pulp writers capitalized on Taylor's celebrity, turning out a series of popular dime novels featuring his exploits and marking the transformation of the cowboy from villain to hero in print.

Meanwhile, Theodore Roosevelt, a young New Yorker, penned an account of his life as a rancher and hunter in Dakota Territory in a series of articles published in *The Century Magazine*, and later compiled in the book *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888). Roosevelt characterized the real cowboys he had worked with in a predominately positive light. He admired their adeptness in hunting and ranching, and the strong mind, body, and spirit that accompanied these skills. Roosevelt used his observations of these men to transform himself from a Leatherstocking Appalachian frontiersman to a more resolute, saddle-working authentic cowboy. (Fig. 2)

With the death of William McKinley in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt, then vice-president of the U.S., became President. Three years later he was elected in his own right. The politician's ranching connections, his writings on the subject, and the regiment of "Rough Riders" he led in Cuba during the Spanish American War caused supporters and detractors alike to call him the "cowboy president," a title he proudly embraced. One informed observer concluded that "Roosevelt completed the transformation of the cowboy's image begun by Buffalo Bill."¹¹

¹⁰ Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 42.

¹¹ Murdoch, *The American West*, 69.

In contrast to the crude, one-dimensional cowboys served up as villains or heroes by the likes of Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham in the 1880s, the formulaic novels of Owen Wister and Zane Grey that appeared after 1900 added dimension, detail, and seriousness to the fictional version. The literary cowboy's association with herding cattle had long since disappeared and the formulaic figure that had emerged instead combined Eastern civility and good judgement with Western toughness and individualism. Wister's 1895 *Harper's Monthly* essay "The Evolution of the Cowpuncher," and 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, cast the cowboy as nature's nobleman and linked him to both Arthurian knighthood and Southern chivalry.¹² Zane Grey's novels, typified by *Riders of the Purple Sage*, published in 1912, added the image of a lonely, misunderstood but honorable gunman to the mythical cowboy persona. Cowboys were now, according to British historian, David Hamilton Murdoch, "outsider[s], unable to fit into civilized society."¹³

The popularity of the western formula unleashed by Wister and Grey attracted many imitators. Middle-class American readers began to devour cowboy tales, often served up with full color illustrations in such magazines as *Harper's New Monthly*, *Colliers*, *Scribner's*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The publishers of cheap "pulp" magazines lured readers with the same formula that had fueled dime novels—lurid covers and plenty of action.

By the 1910s Wild West shows had seen their heyday and were being challenged in the entertainment arena by the sport of rodeo where working cowboys

¹² Historian Ed Ainsworth believed when Wister wrote *The Virginian*, "he was paving the way for modern painters to respond to the newly aroused interest in the cowboy subject." Artists began depicting their version of the West and its cowboy-hero in similar fashion to Wister's hero. Ed Ainsworth, *The Cowboy in Art* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1968), 44.

¹³ Murdoch, *The American West*, 28.

demonstrated their range skills of roping and riding before a local audience. Larger cities such as Cheyenne, Denver, and Fort Worth soon began using annual rodeos to attract tourists and promote local business. In time rodeo events became standardized and professional athletes dominated the ranks of competitors. Marshall W. Fishwick, author of an influential essay on the development of cowboy mythology, penned in the 1950s that rodeo had done more to glorify the American cowboy than any other factor, and had “made more cowboys into passing heroes than any other imaginable public spectacle.”¹⁴ (Fig. 3)

Like literature, music and folklore played an important role in romanticizing cowboy life and impacting the way cowpunchers were imagined. Working cowboys sang to soothe restless cattle at night or to entertain their comrades around the campfire during roundups and drives. Richard Slatta, a longtime historian of range culture, pointed out that singing among cowhands, “was commonplace, and because the cowboys often wrote the lyrics, the songs reveal a good deal about their values and character.”¹⁵

In 1889, N. Howard “Jack” Thorp, a sometime New Mexico cowboy and rancher, gathered songs and poems of the range for nearly two decades before publishing a modest collection of 23 tunes titled *Songs of the Cowboys* in 1908.¹⁶ Two years later, musicologist and folklorist, John A. Lomax, issued a more famous anthology, *Cowboy Songs*, which comprised a multitude of poems, prayers, and ballads,

¹⁴ Marshall W. Fishwick, “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology,” *Western Folklore* 11, no. 2 (April 1952): 86.

¹⁵ Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas*, 111.

¹⁶ Freda Moon, “In New Mexico, on the Cowboy Trail of Jack Thorp,” *New York Times*, September 26, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/28/travel/in-new-mexico-on-the-cowboy-trail-of-jack-thorp.html?_r=0.

including those Thorp had discovered. The authentic voices of the range contained in these collections offered a glimpse of cowboy life that was often tinged with humor or pathos and spoke to the emotions, motivations, aspirations, and dreams of songwriters, singers, and listeners alike.

By this time, however, the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley were composing popular tunes that had little connection with working cowboys but everything to do with the romantic image constructed and fostered by William F. Cody, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Theodore Roosevelt. The same might be said of the cowboy image portrayed in early motion pictures by silent film stars such as “Broncho Billy” Anderson, William S. Hart, Tom Mix, and later by the rise of “Singing Cowboys” such as Ken Maynard, Bob Steele, and Gene Autry, among others.¹⁷

From the time cowboys became a staple on the western American landscape, artists and illustrators also found them a compelling subject. Images of cowpunchers and trail drivers began appearing with regularity in the post-Civil War pictorial press. Artist-correspondents, who both wrote and illustrated stories on the development of the West, often, included drawings of cowboys in their reports of the booming cattle industry. A few such artist-writers, including Rufus F. Zogbaum and Frederic Remington, became specialists on the subject.

None, however, gave more serious attention to the cowboy than Remington, not only in illustrations, but also in easel paintings. The artist’s first published cowboy image appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* magazine in February of 1882. The crude original sketch, which had to be redrawn by staff artist William Rogers, portrayed a scene

¹⁷ See “Western and Cowboy Songs,” *The Library of Congress*, Accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.loc.gov/collections/songs-of-america/articles-and-essays/musical-styles/popular-songs-of-the-day/western-and-cowboy-songs/>.

emanating from Remington's visit to Wyoming. It appeared, however, under the title "Cow-boys of Arizona—Roused by a Scout."

Over time Remington displayed a fondness for painting horses and equestrian figures and often traveled west in search of new material. Throughout his career he rendered American cowboys from the point of view of a knowledgeable outsider, who, though never ridden for wages himself, observed real cowboys in action, and helped mold their enduring image as both heroic and fatalistic. Among the numerous cowboy figures Remington depicted during his career none appears to have been more influential to other artists than his iconic portrayal of bronco busters. (Fig. 4)

Remington's cowboys were often exposed to life threatening situations. In his mammoth 1889 masterwork, *A Dash for the Timber* (Fig. 5), for example, cowboys on horseback flee a hoard of pursuing Indians, who are obscured by a cloud of dust. One of the cowboys is already wounded and, assisted by a comrade, struggles to stay in the saddle. The chase is nip and tuck and the outcome is in question.

In many of Remington's works cowboys appear as tragic figures. His oil painting, *The Fall of the Cowboy* (Fig. 6), for instance, displays the artist's ability to express, through color, mood, and draftsmanship, the closing of the open range and demise of cowboy life brought on by the barbed wire fences. *The Fall of the Cowboy*, accompanied Owen Wister's influential essay "The Evolution of the Cowpuncher," published in 1895 in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. *The Last Cavalier* (Fig. 7), another of Remington's illustrations in the same work, reinforced the author's portrayal of the cowboy as a knight-errant in the Arthurian mold.

By the 1890s, however, Remington's trademark romantic realism was giving way to Impressionism and an earnest desire to abandon illustration for easel painting. Slowly but surely he abandoned hard-edged narratives for more atmospheric, introspective, and moody scenes. Evocative nocturnes comprised some of his best canvases, some of them mourning the passing of the Old West and others reflecting the artist's concern for his own mortality.

In addition to creating vibrant paintings, drawings, and sculptures of western subjects, Remington was himself, a gifted and influential writer. In works such as "In the Sierra Madre With the Punchers" (1894), "Cracker Cowboys of Florida" (1895), *Pony Tracks* (1895), and *Sundown Leflare* (1899), his prose as well as his art helped shape the image of the cowboy-hero and enhanced his reputation as a truthful reporter of life on the frontier.

Another artist of Remington's generation, Charles M. Russell, had begun to come into his own as a painter and sculptor before the former's death in 1909. Russell saw the West differently from his eastern counterpart. Born in St. Louis, he lived in Montana from the time he was fifteen and was a working cowboy for nearly a decade before finally deciding to pursue art as a profession. Early in his career Russell looked to the illustrations of Frederic Remington for inspiration and created his own variations of some of the latter's published illustrations. As his work matured, Russell based most of his easel paintings and drawings on personal experiences, stories he heard from others, or plucked from his own fertile historical imagination. From the beginning, the "Cowboy Artist," as Russell became known, rooted his work firmly in the past and salted it with humor, pathos and symbolism that was often disarming and unexpected.

With time and experience, Russell, too, became the master of the dramatic cliffhanger, leaving the viewer to decide the outcome of the given scene.¹⁸ In his painting *Wild Horse Hunters* (Fig. 8), for example, a cowboy who has roped a mustang in rough country struggles to avoid being jerked down, his fate dependent on the thin lasso that connects him to his quarry.

A lasso's failure creates the predicament for the fallen cowboy and his mount in another Russell canvas, *The Broken Rope*. (Fig. 9) The fortunes of a horse and rider again hang in the balance, this time at the sharp horns of a maddened steer, as another cowpuncher arrives on the scene with pistol drawn.

Charles Russell also was a consummate oral tale-teller and, like Frederic Remington, was an author as well as an artist. His writings, both fiction and non-fiction, appeared in newspapers, magazines, books, and illustrated letters. The best of his stories were compiled into two books *Trails Plowed Under* and *Good Medicine*, both published after his death in 1926.

The image of the cowboy created by art, literature and performance in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries inspired many artists, including Will James, who headed west to ride the range. The spirit, example, and friendship of Charles Russell proved particularly important to the Canadian, especially as he began to pursue a career as an artist. James and Russell eventually became good friends and exchanged illustrated correspondence and visits in the year before the latter's death in 1926. James took up Russell's mantle as a "cowboy artist" and storyteller, portraying twentieth-century range life for a new generation.

¹⁸ Predicament paintings are scenes which leave the outcome to the viewer's imagination. Following in his idol's footsteps, Will James would take on this style of paintings as well.

Figures-Chapter 1: Constructing the Cowboy of Legend



Figure 1- Buffalo Bill's Wild West Company. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World: Historical Sketches and Programmes*, 1893.



Figure 2- Artist Unknown. *Theodore Roosevelt Full Length Portrait Standing Alongside His Horse Wearing a Cowboy Outfit*, 1910. Photographic print. Library of Congress.

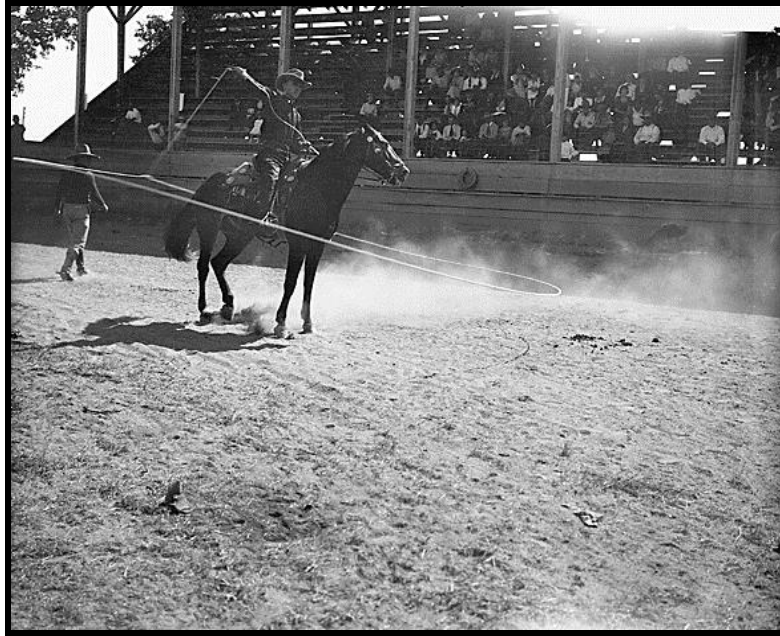


Figure 3- Erwin E. Smith. *Rodeo Performer Swinging a Wide Loop Around Himself and His Mount in Front of the Grandstands*, 1910-20. Nitrate negative. Amon Carter Museum of American Art. E.E. Smith Collection.



Figure 4- Frederic Remington. *The Broncho Buster*, 1895. 1907 Cast Bronze. Amon Carter Museum of American Art.



Figure 5- Frederic Remington. *A Dash for the Timber*, 1889. Oil on canvas. Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Amon G. Carter Collection.



Figure 6- Frederic Remington. *The Fall of the Cowboy*, 1895. Oil on canvas. Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Amon G. Carter Collection.



Figure 7- Frederic Remington. *The Last Cavalier*, 1895. Oil on board. Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Lawrence H. Kyte, Jr.



Figure 8- Charles M. Russell. *Wild Horse Hunters*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Amon Carter Museum of American Art. Amon G. Carter Collection.



Figure 9- Charles M. Russell. *The Broken Rope*, 1904. Oil on canvas. Amon Carter Museum of American Art.

Chapter 2: Making a Hand

Although American historian Frederick Jackson Turner had declared the western frontier of the United States closed in 1890, to many of his countrymen the region still represented the mythological contact zone between “savagery and civilization.” More recently, historian Carlos A. Schwantes has written that Americans at the turn-of-the twentieth-century still thought of the West “largely in terms of a land waiting to be won in classic nineteenth-century fashion.”¹⁹

Certainly many artists saw the region in those terms and continued to look back to the Old West for subjects and inspiration. Most of them portrayed the Trans-Mississippi as a timeless land—full of beauty, wonder, and romance on the one hand, and violence, lawlessness, and danger on the other. Their work was largely at odds with the modernization, urbanization, and industrialization that transformed the West as it did other regions of the country.

By the time Will James crossed the international boundary between Canada and the United States in 1910 the hand of “progress” was unmistakable, even in Montana. Yet, in the remote corners of the West, at least a few ranches still ran cattle by the thousands and employed traditional crews of horseback cowboys to look after them. A keen observer, James absorbed the complexities of the rapidly changing world around him and, much as his idol Charles Russell had done a generation before, looked to the past for artistic inspiration. According to author William Gardner Bell, James managed, in both image and word, to “evoke an ideal, part truth, part myth...an imaginative

¹⁹ Carlos A. Schwantes, “The Case of the Missing Century, or Where Did the American West Go After 1900?,” *Pacific Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (February 2001): 18.

conception derived from historical reality.”²⁰ His works reimagined cowboy life and the West before barbed wire and automobiles. His was a decidedly romantic and nostalgic view, disguised as reality by the authenticity of costume, gear, and landscape that would appear in his paintings and drawings. James developed a deep and abiding understanding of the western range of his adopted country. He drew figures with honesty and fidelity, but occasionally embellished scenes to create more interesting compositions. James understood that the nineteenth-century cowboy no longer existed, yet he was also aware that at least a few old timers still rode the range and were handing down the traditions of the past to the next generation.

Following in the artistic footsteps of Russell and Remington, James became one of the most influential western artists and writers of his generation, and, between the 1920s and 1940s, both built upon and extended the artistic legacy of the American cowboy. His real-life experiences help to authenticate his art for an audience that had come to expect the romantic and heroic rather than historical and cultural reality. Between the death of Charles M. Russell in 1926 and the post-World War II generation of western artists, James helped keep the cowboy alive and viable in both art and literature.

In 1914, during his days as a drifter, James was caught stealing cattle and served five months in jail in Ely, Nevada, and another year in the Nevada State Prison in Carson City. During his incarceration, the *Ely Record* recognized James’s talent at portraying ranch scenes and predicted that he would be able to “do first class work”

²⁰ Bell, “Unraveling the bumpy ride,” 4.

with “proper training.”²¹ In August 1915, James applied to the Nevada parole board for a reduced sentence. His application included a page containing three sketches collectively titled, *The Turning Point*. (Fig. 10) The small vignettes also bore the individual titles, “Past,” “Present,” and “Future,” and represented James at various stages of life. A cowboy on horseback roping a steer depicted the artist’s “past,” and a drawing of a solitary prisoner seated on a stool in a prison cell, his “present.” The third panel, titled “Future,” portrayed a cigar-smoking James, palette in hand, standing at an easel painting. The bottom right corner of the page bore the artist’s signature and the statement: “Have had ample time for serious thought and it is my ambition to follow up on my art.”²² Although these drawings signified a change in James’s perspective on life and his outlook on the future, it is unclear if his artistic expression of remorse and renewal influenced his release from prison. Nevertheless, after seventeen months behind bars, he was set free on April 11, 1916.

Although there was still plenty of illustration work in the western book and magazine market during the early decades of the twentieth-century, relatively few easel painters regularly pursued cowboys as subjects. In the 1920s, this modest fraternity included William Herbert “Buck” Dunton, a member of the Taos Society of Artists in New Mexico and a pair of native Californians: Edward Borein, a former vaquero, who pursued his art in the seaside resort of Santa Barbara, California, and Maynard Dixon, who was ranch-raised in the San Joaquin Valley and now made his home in San

²¹ Cheryl A. Fox, “Will James,” *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 145.

²² Will James, *The Turning Point*, 1915, Carbon pencil. “Papers of Will James,” Collection no. NC579 series 8, *Special Collections and University Archives, University of Nevada, Reno*, Accessed January 23, 2016, https://knowledgecenter.unr.edu/digital_collections/exhibits/will_james/early_years.aspx.

Francisco. Other prominent artists who continued to mix illustration with easel paintings of the cowboy west included N.C. Wyeth, W.H.D. Koerner, Frank Schoonover, and Frank Tenney Johnson.

Will James, who led the nomadic life of a cowboy during his early years in the U.S., and at one time or another called Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas home, no doubt encountered the published work of at least some these artists, if not their originals. Whatever influence they may have had on the creativity of the young artist, however, paled in comparison to that of Charles Russell. A longtime admirer of the Montana artist, James first visited Russell's Great Falls studio around 1917, seeking advice and encouragement. Although Russell praised his visitor's draftsmanship, he was too preoccupied with his own work to give him much time. Nevertheless, a friendship took root and in the years that followed the pair exchanged illustrated correspondence and enjoyed occasional visits together, especially after Russell began to winter in Southern California in the early 1920s.

James, meanwhile, moved to Reno, Nevada, in July 1919. While casting about for work, the cowhand and aspiring artist encountered Glenn D. Hurst, a local rodeo promoter, who offered him fifty dollars to produce an advertising poster for the upcoming show. The commission, the first work that James had ever sold, depicted a mounted cowboy turning the leaders of a stampeding herd of longhorns.²³ The souvenir program accompanying the event referred to James as a "The Cowboy-Artist," and called him "a so-far undiscovered genius of the range who might one day rank with Russell and Remington."²⁴

²³ Bell, *Will James*, 42.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Later that year James's fortunes continued to change after he suffered a severe concussion and lacerated scalp while breaking horses in Nevada. The accident that sent the unfortunate bronco buster to the hospital and sidelined his occupation as a working cowboy unwittingly launched his career as a writer and illustrator. Impressed by some of James's sketches, a fellow hospital patient encouraged him to attend art school and provided a letter of introduction to Joseph Henry Jackson, the associate editor of California's premier illustrated monthly, *Sunset Magazine*, published by the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Upon his release from the hospital James promptly enrolled in the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco intent on becoming an illustrator.²⁵ The experience proved a mixed blessing. Though he met many accomplished Bay Area artists, including Maynard Dixon and Harold von Schmidt, James bridled at the demands of the school's curriculum and formal methods of instruction. With Dixon's encouragement James quit attending classes after only a few months of instruction to pursue a career in illustration. Both Dixon and Von Schmidt assisted their colleague in his quest, providing contacts with publishers and suggesting useful materials for drawings and paintings. Dixon, for example, sent *Sunset Magazine* twelve of James's drawings and Von Schmidt suggested that editor-in-chief, Charles K. Field, run a series of captioned illustrations on the ex-cowboy and his art. These connections, and the letter of introduction from his fellow hospital patient, resulted in James's first published drawing, *A One-Man Horse* (Fig. 11), which appeared in the January 1920 issue of *Sunset*. The caption introduced James as an untutored cowboy-artist of "surprising

²⁵ Founded in 1871, The California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco is one of the oldest art schools in the United States. At one time or another faculty included Ansel Adams and Dorothea Lange.

talent with accurate knowledge of his subjects,”²⁶ and promised to publish more of his work.²⁷ True to its word, the magazine carried James’s work in each successive month of the year. Most of the appearances were single page, stand-alone subjects that varied from cowboys to wildlife and each was accompanied by a short caption elaborating upon the scene. In the June and December issues, however, James’s work accompanied poems written by others. The November issue presented a more ambitious, multi-page portfolio of drawings by James under the title: “Keno the Cow-Horse: A Life-Story in Pictures.”²⁸

The readers of *Sunset Magazine* had mixed initial reviews of James’s work. Two letters, in particular, refer to James’s illustrations in the January and February issues. Although a fan from Bakersfield, California thought that the artist knew “his subjects,” another reader, calling himself “Doughboy,” from Nashville, Tennessee, believed that James needed “some tutoring in his art.”²⁹

After leaving art school, James had returned to range work, this time as an adjunct to his art. In Santa Fe, in 1921, the cowboy-artist met a knowledgeable and affluent collector and patron of the arts, Wallace Springer, who with his brother Ed, owned the CS Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico. Springer hired James as a cowhand

²⁶ Will James, “A One-Man Horse,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 1 (January 1920): 51.

²⁷ Will James, “A New Cowpuncher Artist,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 1 (January 1920): 86.

²⁸ Will James, “Mothers,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 2 (February 1920): 45; “The Leppy,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 3 (March 1920): 45; “Insult Added to Injury,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 4 (April 1920): 47; “Man and His Ways,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 5 (May 1920): 47; “Was You Looking for Bear?,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44, no. 6 (June 1920): 47; “The June Trail” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 45, no. 1 (July 1920): 47; “When a Feller needs a Friend,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 45, no. 2 (August 1920): 45; “Playing with Fire,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 45, no. 3 (September 1920): 45; “A Friend in Disguise,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 45, no. 4 (October 1920): 45; “Keno, the Cow-Horse, A Life Story in Pictures,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 45, no. 5 (November 1920): 38-42.

²⁹ “Readers, Gentle and Otherwise,” *Sunset The Pacific Monthly* 44 no. 3 (March 1920): 13.

on the CS with the understanding that he could also pursue his art. Not long after James joined the Springers, a visitor, Burton Twichell, the Dean of Students at Yale University, became enamored with some of the cowboy's art. Twichell arranged for James to attend the Yale University School of Fine Arts on a scholarship. Although he attended classes for only a few weeks in 1921, the experience broadened James's worldview and Twichell provided him with invaluable contacts with several East Coast publishers.

After returning west, James reverted to his footloose ways, leaving the CS and moving from ranch to ranch across the West, sketching incessantly during his free time and giving away much of his work to friends and acquaintances. Without knowing it at the time, he was creating a loyal audience for his work.³⁰

In 1923 James sent an illustrated article: "Bucking Horses and Bucking-Horse Riders" to *Scribner's Magazine*. Maxwell Evarts Perkins, a member of the *Scribner's Magazine* editorial board, and Joseph Hawley Chapin, head of the art department, saw both talent and potential in the artist and solicited more stories and drawings. Satisfied with the results, Charles Scribner's Sons offered James a contract in 1923 for a self-illustrated book, *Cowboys North and South*.

During the next two decades James would write and, or illustrate more than twenty novels and anthologies of short stories on cowboy life, virtually all of them based largely on his own life experiences. From the beginning most of his writing and art was aimed at children, although many adults enjoyed his work as well. James's illustrations never failed to visually enhance his vernacular style of storytelling.

³⁰ Some of James early works eventually found their way into museum and private collections. Virginia Snook, who acquired the most notable such collection eventually gifted it to the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, Montana.

James, like Remington and Russell before him, was usually classified as an illustrator rather than an “artist.” Such labels never bothered Russell and probably did not trouble James either. He maximized his considerable abilities as a graphic illustrator and used them to his full advantage to convey action and emotion through the detail, accuracy, and vigor behind every sketch, drawing, and painting.³¹

James, like Russell, understood cowboys from the inside out and celebrated their strength, courage, and individualism in his work. But at their core, James’s cowboys differed markedly in look from those portrayed by Charles Russell. The rowdy and freewheeling horsemen that often inhabited Russell’s work are largely absent from Will James’s paintings and sketches. Although James’s cowboys are as fearless and ready for action as any painted by Frederic Remington, they rarely resorted, in text or image, to the sort of theatrics and fatal gunplay that characterize some of Remington’s work. James felt such scenes distorted and obscured a “true” perception of the West and the cowboys he knew firsthand.³² More often than not, the cowboys James depicted were loners, much like himself, who said little but knew their business and were consummate horsemen. By romanticizing his own experiences and the stories he had heard from others, James personalized and tailored his own version of the cowboy-hero—enough traditional action to keep readers and viewers interested combined with the melancholy reflection, loneliness, and mystery that characterized his own life. Will James biographer, A.P. Hays, explains in his book *Will James: The Spirit of the Cowboy*, that “James wanted the world of the cowboy to be appreciated for its realities and its values

³¹ Anthony A. Amaral, *Will James, The Last Cowboy Legend* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1980), 168.

³² A.P. Hays, *Will James: The Spirit of the Cowboy*, ed. J.M. Neil (Casper: Nicolaysen Art Museum, 1985), 42.

as he understood them.”³³ In order to express such truths, James’s works rarely depicted more than one or two human figures, and even when more inhabit a scene, the cowboys always stand out from the rest.

Simplification and crisp draftsmanship were also hallmarks of James’s art. Whether text or illustration, his work always told a story, and provided his audience with a clear understanding of cowboys and their horses. “James’s preoccupation with horses,” author William Gardner Bell later observed, “is readily evident, for almost every sketch, no matter how central the emotional and human theme, includes the horse.”³⁴ The artist not only rendered equines accurately but also with compelling style and grace and a viewpoint that encouraged viewers to imagine themselves as part of each scene.

Horses were also a regular feature of the illustrated letters that James exchanged with patrons and publishers over the years.³⁵ (Fig. 12a and 13a) He borrowed the practice from Charles Russell, who, as they became better acquainted, was always willing to lend his knowledge, affirmation, and encouragement to his up-and-coming protégé. Russell encouraged James to paint as well as draw and urged him to continue to focus on cowboys, horses, and cows. He took Russell’s advice.

James’s surviving illustrated letters often depict a man and horse, and, more often than not, the central figure in such depictions is James himself.³⁶ In a letter penned to Charles M. Russell, on April 11, 1920, James showcased a pen and ink drawing

³³ Ibid., 76.

³⁴ Bell, *Will James*, 38.

³⁵ William Gardner Bell, “Letters from the Lone Cowboy: A Sampling of Will James’s Letters to Maxwell Perkins,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 34, no. 4 (Autumn 1984): 19-20.

³⁶ To James, the horse is a cowboy’s means of transportation and his principle tool, and, therefore, should properly be recognized as such.

titled, *I'm Riding an Artistic Steer, and Doing My Best to Put the 111 on His Shoulders*. (Fig. 12b) The loose pen strokes suggest that James sketched the illustration spontaneously with a keen eye for detail and an innate understanding of structure and anatomy. James's illustration and caption reinforce the text of his missive and suggest some of the difficulties he faced as an artist and illustrator. The steer's expression and body contortion in mid-action expresses the difficulty of the task before the artist and suggests distress, confusion, and uncertainty, all qualities James expresses in the text of the letter as well. The cowboy's countenance is one of intense concentration as he hangs on for dear life with both hands. The phrase "trying to put the 111 on his shoulders" in the caption refers to James's desire to make his mark on his profession, much as a rough rider's spurs often left scratch marks on the hide of a horse or bovine.

The Ponies Still Want to Play with Me (Fig. 13b), a 1924 pen and ink illustration accompanying a letter James penned to Charles M. Russell four years later, is more humorous and cartoon-like than its predecessor. Again, the drawing foretells the text of the letter, in which James seeks encouragement and praise. In this illustration the horse has already gotten the best of the cowboy-illustrator, who is engaged in a tug of war with his mount. The saddle's fenders and stirrups flop upward as James's hat flies off in the excitement. This drawing is more rudimentary than its predecessor, suggesting that James sketched with haste. As another of James's biographers, Anthony Amaral, has noted "James drew directly, without preliminary sketching, and with immediate results in his mind."³⁷ Although the quality of this illustration does not measure up to that of his 1920 letter, it nevertheless communicated James's predicament at a glance.

³⁷ Amaral, *Will James*, 29.

Even without supporting text, James possessed an innate ability to tell a story pictorially and communicate metaphorically. The artist's 1926 carbon pencil sketch, *A Boy Looks Through the Rails of a Corral at a Bronc Rider* (Fig. 14), for example, tells of the former cowboy's yearning to be an accomplished artist in the mold of Charles Russell. Rather than distracting viewers with a background to his scene or excess detail in the rendering of his figures, James keeps the focus on the underlying concepts of his story—admiration, desire, longing, and the passing along of tradition from one generation to another. By overlapping the figures in the drawing, James emphasizes the connectedness of the high riding cowboy, his bucking horse, and the on-looking youngster. The dust that obscures the action and the oversize corral rails that separate the boy from the objects of his admiration are symbolic of the formidable obstacles that will face the boy if he hopes to attain the skill of the rider he so intently observes. The corral also encloses the cowboy's sphere of activity and perhaps portends the eventual disappearance of his occupation from the range. Dressed in the working gear of the typical cowboy of the era, the boy mimics the attire of his bronc riding idol. Clothes, however, don't yet "make the man." The boy leans into the railing intently watching the rider's technique as he grips the reins with one hand and wields a quirt with the other.

A.P. Hays, a longtime student of the artist and his work points out that by "using pencil, as opposed to ink, Will James is able to make a stronger, more powerful depiction of his action scenes."³⁸ The consistent and overall shading of the illustration helps give balance and solidity to the scene.

The dramatic moment the artist portrays is seen not only through the eyes of both the on-looking boy but also the viewer, who observes the action over the

³⁸ Hays, *Will James*, ed. J.M. Neil, 68.

youngster's shoulder. At the same time, such a scene provides a somewhat selective view of ranch life, where tame horses and quiet were the norms and such action packed moments, such as the one depicted were few. The fiction of the scene also alludes to the artist's own constructed past and fabricated childhood experiences.

The initiation of a tenderfoot and the rough side of cowboy humor is demonstrated in the carbon pencil drawing, *A Good Joke, in Words or Action, is the Cowboy's Staff of Life*. (Fig. 15) Created for James's 1928 novel *Sand*, the story of a man who leaves the city life behind to become a real cowboy, the image depicts a "city slicker" who finds himself the butt of a cowboy prank that causes his horse to buck unexpectedly.

Each of the figures is significant to the action and humor of the scene. The central figure and focal point is the neophyte cowboy whose mount has been made to buck by the serpentine lasso thrown under his belly by the grinning cowboy obscured by dust in the background of the picture. The inexperienced cowboy, with back bowed, clinches his horse in an effort to stay on. Clearly taken by surprise, the horse and rider in the foreground watch the scene unfold while maintaining their composure, although the tension and apprehension are palpable.

The artist unifies his composition with repeating curves: in the rope, the bucking horse's body and neck, mane and tail, the rider's humped over position in the saddle, and his flying bridle reins. The rigidness of the leftmost horse, as it skids to a stop helps balance the fluidity of its bucking counterpart. The cloudless sky, minimal landscape, and sparse vegetation in the scene are mere stage settings and do not compete with the drawing's dramatic central narrative.

Again, the anatomy, actions, and emotions of the horses and riders in this scene demonstrate that James was a close observer of horses and horsemen. In works like these it also becomes evident that horses were central to Will James's notions of the "true" American cowboy-hero. Although automobiles and trucks were increasingly important to ranch work in the West, James believed horses were still a vital part of that image and that bronc riders occupied a special place in the pantheon of cowboy heroes. As author Cathy Luchetti observed in her 2004 book, *Men of the West: Life on the American Frontier*, "without tame horses, range riding vanishes, and without bronco busting, there are no tame horses."³⁹

Writer Alan Burdick also explained that "to tame the West, James seems to suggest, one first had to tame the animal beneath you,"⁴⁰ and oftentimes taming an animal could be frightening for both man and beast. To James, "bronco busting" represented the epitome of masculinity—skill, courage, determination, and restraint. He believed these qualities made the man, the cowboy, and the profession.

The cowboys in James's stories, however, sometimes expressed sorrow for taking away the freedom of the mustangs they broke and the injuries to horses that sometimes occurred during the breaking and training process. However, they also knew that untamed *caballos* were always in demand and in danger of capture and that once trained the wild mustang became a useful and valuable tool for the cowboy. As the main character of his novel *Sand* expressed it, bronco busters "enjoy every part of breaking a

³⁹ Cathy Luchetti, *Men of the West: Life on the American Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 83.

⁴⁰ Alan Burdick, "Fleeting Visions of the Old West," *American History* 45, no. 2 (June 2010): 40.

horse, and enjoy seeing that fighting instinct die out of the horse's eyes to be gradually replaced by a show of trust and then friendship.”⁴¹

In the 1926 carbon pencil drawing, *The Cowboy Took off the Foot Ropes* (Fig. 16), from the book *Smoky the Cowhorse*, two cowboys work as a team as they prepare to break a fresh bronc. As one carefully mounts the hobbled and prostrate animal, which has been saddled, the other removes a lariat that binds its back legs. The men's facial expressions are focused on the tasks at hand and anticipate the bucking action to come. Confused and frightened by his treatment at the hands of the punchers the horse prepares to retaliate with some wild bucking as soon as his bonds are loose. Again the artist leaves the outcome to the viewer's imagination.

The carbon pencil drawing, *Bronco Buster* (Fig. 17) visually demonstrated the qualities James believed a “top hand” possessed, as well as his belief in the significance and centrality of the profession in the world he created in his novels. Created in 1928, the crisp pencil drawing is vigorous, well thought out, and precisely drawn. The symbiotic relationship between horse and rider is clear, compelling, and expressive. The figures are rendered in sensuous, beautifully executed lines that belie the violent ballet of the scene. The viewer can sense the tension and strength in the musculature of the horse as it hurtles through the air and in the upper torso of the cowboy as he grips the bridle reins and raises his quirt to strike another blow. The twisting contours of the horse convey the violent, jerking motion of the bucking. The artist has created a suspenseful, exciting, and dangerous scene unencumbered by visual distractions.

Unlike most artists of his day, Will James still honored the pastoral ideal and featured cattle as a prominent part of the cowboy's occupation and way of life.

⁴¹ Will James, *Sand* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), 284.

Although most of the western American art of his day tended more toward gunplay and romance, bovines regularly inhabited James's paintings and stories. They appear in quiet, contemplative scenes as well as more active settings, usually in connection with range activities such as drives, roundups, branding, and roping.⁴² In James's work cattle invariably appear in the company of horses and are a reminder that, on a ranch in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, both were indispensable.

James's carbon pencil drawing, *Room for None but Experienced Men* (Fig. 18), from his novel *Sand*, alludes to the difficulties of working wild range cattle—helter-skelter stampedes, fighting animals, bucking horses, difficult terrain, even gunfire. The self-assured cowboy, aboard an alert cow horse in James's drawing is the artist himself, who sits erect in the saddle, and seems capable of handling any such challenge.

The cowboy chases a steer that has broken away from the herd. The steer, the horse, and the cowboy are all rendered in detail. To add to the excitement of the action the “herd quitter” charges directly toward the viewer, all four hooves off the ground, the cow horse and his rider in close pursuit. The gestural action heads the cow and the horse in opposite directions. The curvature of the bovine's horns counterbalances the cowboy's arm and helps harmonize the drawing. The facial expressions of the horse and steer are distinctive, and the artist effectively captures the muscle tension throughout their bodies. A herd of cattle stands in the background, held by a second cowboy. The cattle roundup extends across the drawing past the framing on either side of the central action. The cattle on the left side of the scene provide balance to that of the horse and

⁴² See Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993) for a discussion of various cattle ranching cultures in North America.

rider on the right. The horse and rider watching the herd pay attention to their responsibility, taking no notice of the foreground action.

Like James's bronc riding scenes, *Room for None but Experienced Men* demonstrates the realities, and, oftentimes, the excitement and danger that come with the cowboy profession. The artist creates a visually appealing illustration with the contrasting shading, lines, and gestural activity. The shading contrast, structure, and detail of the three central figures in the illustration draw the viewer's eye and help make the artist's point in his caption.

The focus of *He Cut Out a Fine, Fat but Odd Colored Yearling* (Fig. 19), an undated pen and ink drawing, is on a horseback cowboy who has separated a calf within a corral and is driving him into another pen. Behind this foreground action stands a small group of cattle facing away from the action. Both the cowboy and the horse he rides have determined expressions and together they make a formidable team. They take their time, however, so as not to disturb the other livestock. The composition simply, yet knowingly, portrays another small part of a cowboy's daily routine, always a priority to James.

James altered his method of drawing depending upon the medium he chose. With pen and ink, for example, his work appears rugged and spontaneous but lacks definition. His pencil work, by contrast, often achieves more subtle shading and more depth and perspective than do his ink drawings.

In James's day, next to his horse, the cowboy's most important tool was a catch rope. The skill with which he wielded a lariat was another measure of his competence and one means of providing the cowboy with job security. Roping a bovine by the head

("heading") or catching its back feet ("heeling") required skill, precision, and concentration. Roping large cattle on the range or in an arena was a dangerous undertaking and required a well-trained horse and rider who could adjust to rapidly changing circumstances. Accidents were common. Lariats broke, putting out eyes and breaking teeth, fingers crushed between a lasso and saddle horn often required amputation, and horses and riders were sometimes killed when jerked to the ground by their fleeing quarry.

Not surprisingly, dramatic or humorous scenes involving ropes and roping were prominent in James's oeuvre. Two drawings from 1926, neither traditional roping scenes, demonstrate James's love for depicting ropers and roping. Although there are usually two elements in every depiction of roping: the roper and the roped, in these two scenes, *Even the Old Texan's Loop was Spoiled by Bearpaw as it Started to Sail...* (Fig. 20), in charcoal, and *Smoky Wondered What a Rope was Doing Up There* (Fig. 21) in carbon pencil, James concentrates on the ropers and their mounts. The objects of their quest lie outside of the picture frame and are left to the viewer's imagination.

In the action-driven *Even the Old Texan's Loop was Spoiled by Bearpaw as it Started to Sail...* (Fig. 20) two horseback cowboys travel from the left side of the frame. The horses gallop in full stride as the cowboys focus on what lies ahead, giving the viewer the sense of anticipation. As the cowboy riding in front prepares to fling his lasso at the direction of his gaze the viewer's attention is directed toward the tent on the right side of the frame. In the background just beyond is a hill that leads the viewer's eye back to the men and horses. Both the tent and the hill add to the mystery and tension of the scene. The use of charcoal as a medium allowed James to create

variations in line thickness giving more depth and shading to the drawing than either pencil or pen and ink would provide.

James's illustration, *Smoky Wondered What a Rope was Doing Up There* (Fig. 21), provides the viewer with a sense of anticipation, yet lacks the action of the previous drawing. The caption describes the scene from the animal's perspective. Uncertain and apprehensive, Smoky moves in a slow trot rather than a gallop, unsure of what is to follow. His rider appears more deliberate and focused as well.

Cowboy life was more than roping and riding. Ranch hands spent much time in mundane pursuits such as repairing fences and oiling windmills, often far from towns or even the ranch headquarters. Drifting punchers, like Will James, camped out more than most and understood the burdens and hardships that came with a transient lifestyle.⁴³

In the pen and ink drawing, *Well Here's Where We Camp Tonight* (Fig. 22), executed for the coming of age novel *Big Enough*, published during the depths of the Great Depression in 1931, James conveys the lonesomeness and solitude life between jobs. Accompanied by a mount and pack horse, a young cowboy out on his own for the first time, locates his camp among surrounding trees and hills that will shelter him from the wind. Standing in profile, and holding the bridle reins in one hand, the beginner places his saddle on the ground. The profile view of the cowboy allows the viewer to see his clothing and regalia, including a holstered pistol. Hooked to the right side of the saddle is a coiled lariat, alluding to its importance in a cowboy's life. The horse closest to the cowboy stands quietly, facing and making eye contact with the viewer, its tail whipping in the wind. A second horse, which packs the cowboy's bedroll, provisions, and other necessities, grazes nearby waiting to be relieved of its burden. By including a

⁴³ Burdick, "Fleeting Visions of the Old West," 40.

packhorse in the scene, James suggests the long distances that drifting cowhands often traveled looking for work.⁴⁴

James presents the scene without shading and definition. The vigorous application of pen strokes gives the scene a spontaneous, informal feel while the roughness and abruptness of the lines convey an uneasy mood. Gestural pen strokes also convey clouds and suggest wind. Although the hills within the image indicate distance, the lack of contrast and shading contribute to the drawing's overall lack of depth.

Saddling a fresh mount, even a tame and trained one, was often an occasion for difficulties. When viewed as a stand-alone illustration, this theme underlies James's 1928 carbon pencil drawing, *The Only Person He Could See Was Moran Saddling a Horse* (Fig. 23), from the novel, *Sand*. The size, rigid stance, and attitude of the horse in the scene convey tension and the possibility that the animal may object to the saddle.

Under the nervous gaze of the horse, the cowboy in the image appears concerned by something outside the picture plane as he grasps the saddle blanket. The tension of the scene is palpable and the viewer is left wondering if the cowboy will have reason to draw his pistol to dispatch an unseen threat. This form of viewer involvement, present in many of James's drawings, plays on the mythology of violence associated with the cowboy. Although the text makes it clear to the reader that the cause of the tension in the scene is a character named Tilden, the artist cleverly heightened the drama in the illustration, allowing it to stand on its own.

Some of Will James's best portrayals of cowboy life in word and image occur in his last book *The American Cowboy*, published in 1942, the year of his death. This

⁴⁴ Oftentimes cowboys could afford only one personal horse. More often than not, the horse the cowboy rode belonged to his employer.

handsomely illustrated volume addresses not only the history and iconography of three generations of genuine western cowpunchers, but also discusses the character and significance of their legendary counterparts. Readers follow the development of the West as it gradually changes from a dangerous frontier to a settled landscape shared by ranchers, farmers, and townspeople.⁴⁵ Despite the rapid pace of change, James was optimistic that working cowboys would always persevere, if not in reality, in the imagination. His own illustrations helped ensure the latter.

Some of James's illustrations in *The American Cowboy* were, however, reminiscent of earlier works from the brushes of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell. The figure and action of James's illustration, *Smoky Wondered What a Rope was Doing Up There* (Fig. 21), for example, resembles Russell's equestrian watercolor, *Centerfire Man on a Bronc*, from 1916. Likewise, the composition of the undated pen and ink drawing, *It Took Time to Gather and Deliver a Herd to Any Shipping Point* (Fig. 24), for example, perhaps owes a debt to Remington's 1904 painting *Trailing Texas Cattle* (Fig. 25), published in *Collier's Weekly*.⁴⁶ Although neither artist had been a part of a long drive to market, James had driven cattle on the range and knew firsthand some of the physical and emotional rigors involved.

The line of cattle depicted in *It Took Time...* extends diagonally from the left foreground into the right background. With a few broken pen strokes the artist suggests clouds of dust that help obscure the distant animals. The herd and the cowboys that accompany it proceed at a slow, tired walk across an almost barren landscape, evoking the monotony that usually attended long drives. The crudity of the sketch compared to

⁴⁵ Will James, *The American Cowboy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942).

⁴⁶ Frederic Remington, "Trailing Texas Cattle," *Collier's Weekly* 34, no 7 (1904): 16-17.

the precision, subtle shading, and lyrical quality of his earlier drawings is indicative of the impact of prolonged alcoholism on James's work.

James again drew from personal experience for the undated pen and ink drawing, *When a Running Iron Makes Brands Change Hands* (Fig. 26), in *The American Cowboy*. As a young cowhand he had gone to prison for changing brands on cattle, so he was personally familiar with the topic. His composition also undoubtedly references Russell's well-known oil painting *The Cinch Ring*. (Fig. 27) In James's version, the cowboy prepares to alter a brand on a steer using a metal saddle cinch ring held between two sticks. Wary of being caught in the act, he scans the horizon where an unidentified rider has appeared. James succeeds in creating tension in his scene without resorting to the drama and action that characterizes Russell's work.

The pen and ink drawing *Took Care to See that Their Cattle Summered Well* (Fig. 28), again, from *The American Cowboy*, provides a romantic pastoral counterpoint to the spirited action and nefarious activities that were sometimes a part of range life. In this idyllic work a cowboy sits in the shadow of his saddle horse, surrounded by cattle grazing the grassy plains. Preoccupied with some unseen object in his hand, perhaps a book, the cowboy appears oblivious to the two unidentified riders who appear on a hillside in the far distance. The horse and calf in the scene are mutually curious of one another, while a distant longhorn, perhaps the calf's mother, looks on with interest as well. Because this work is more detailed and measurably better in execution than many others in this same book, it may have been completed during a rare period of sobriety in the last years of his life.

The debilitating effects of alcoholism had begun to take their toll on the quality of James's work by 1937, when he was first hospitalized for the disease.⁴⁷ Two years later, when the author-illustrator submitted his story, *The Dark Horse*, editor Whitney Darrow of Scribner's voiced concern in a letter to Earl Snook, owner of a Billings, Montana art gallery and a close friend of the artist. "Bill's⁴⁸ illustrations were terrible," Darrow wrote, and "a book without his own illustrations would not amount to anything."⁴⁹ As his pen and pencil strokes became less steady James's horses and riders, once the epitome of muscle and motion, began to look skinny and stiff. Scribner's compensated for the lack of quality where they could by recycling old illustrations.

For most of his career, illustrations brought Will James's books and short stories to life and sparked the imagination of countless readers. Art critics, however, have largely ignored James's work, viewing it as derivative, text-driven, and cartoonish. Yet the cowboy-artist was a consummate storyteller whose words and images helped ensure that the romantic myth of the cowboy-hero survived into the mid-twentieth-century and beyond. Although his stories and illustrations validated each other, most of the latter were sufficiently narrative to stand alone. Void of modern trappings, his drawings and paintings are evidence of his passion for the old cowboy way of life. As William Gardner Bell put it, "James refused to admit that the open range and authentic cowboy life had substantially disappeared before he arrived on the scene."⁵⁰ His audience seems to have wanted to believe that too.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Will James*, 98.

⁴⁸ James's closest friends sometimes called him "Bill" rather than "Will."

⁴⁹ Bell, *Will James*, 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

Figures-Chapter 2: Making a Hand

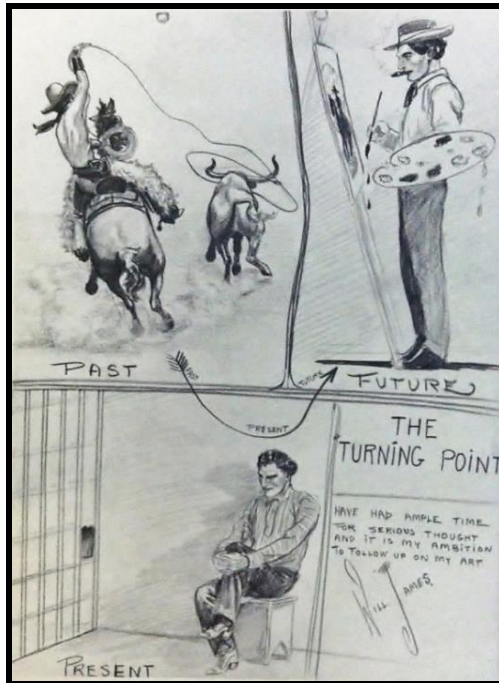


Figure 10- Will James. *The Turning Point*, 1915. Carbon pencil. University of Nevada-Reno, Special Collections Department.



Figure 11- Will James. *A One-Man Horse. Sunset*, *The Pacific Monthly*, January 1920, Vol. 44 No. 6. *Sunset*, *The Pacific Monthly*.

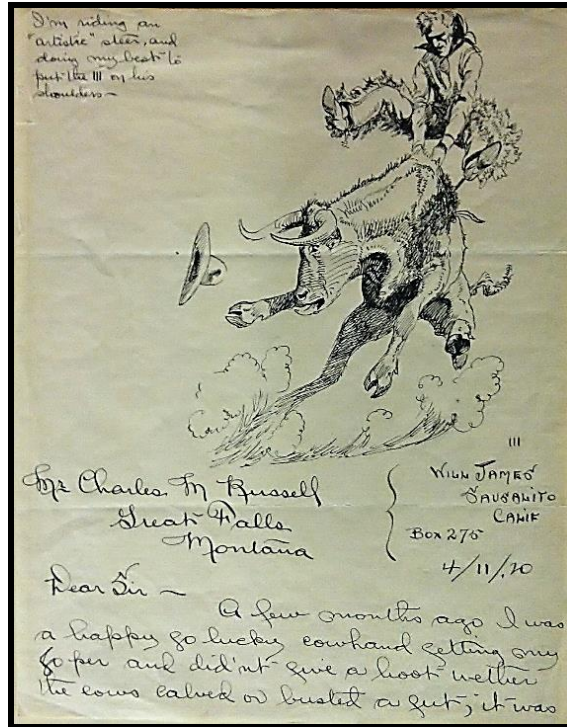


Figure 12a- Will James. *Letter to Charles M. Russell*, April 11, 1920. Pen and ink. Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Gift of William E. Weiss.



Figure 12b- Will James. *I'm Riding an Artistic Steer, and Doing My Best to Put the 111 on His Shoulders*. Detail from *Letter to Charles M. Russell*, April 11, 1920. Pen and ink. Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Gift of William E. Weiss.

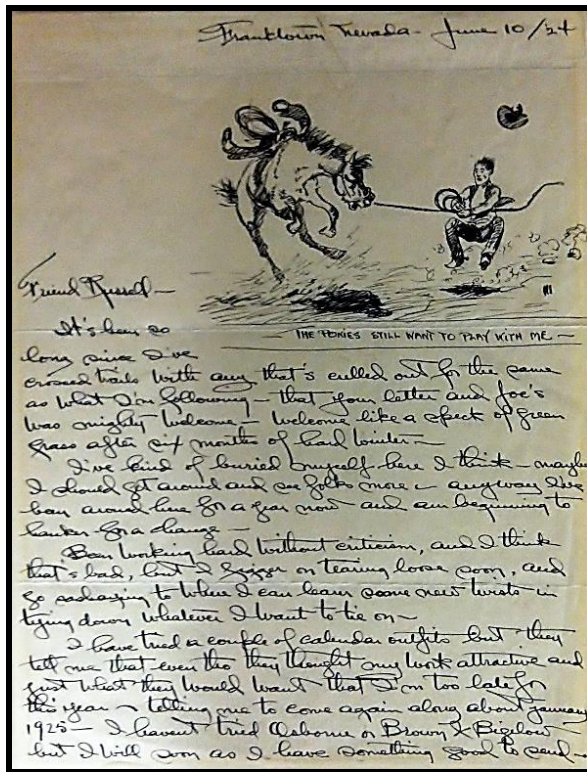


Figure 13a- Will James. *Letter to Charles M. Russell*, June 10, 1924. Pen and ink. Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Gift of William E. Weiss.

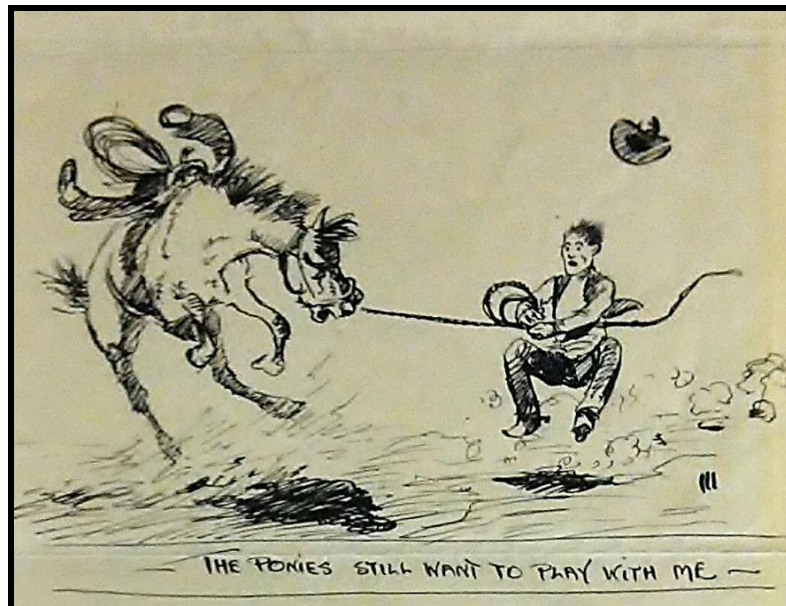


Figure 13b- Will James. *The Ponies Still Want to Play with Me*. Detail from *Letter to Charles M. Russell*, June 10, 1924. Pen and ink. Buffalo Bill Center of the West. Gift of William E. Weiss.



Figure 14- Will James. *A Boy Looks Through the Rails of a Corral at a Bronc Rider*, 1926. Carbon pencil on paper. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.

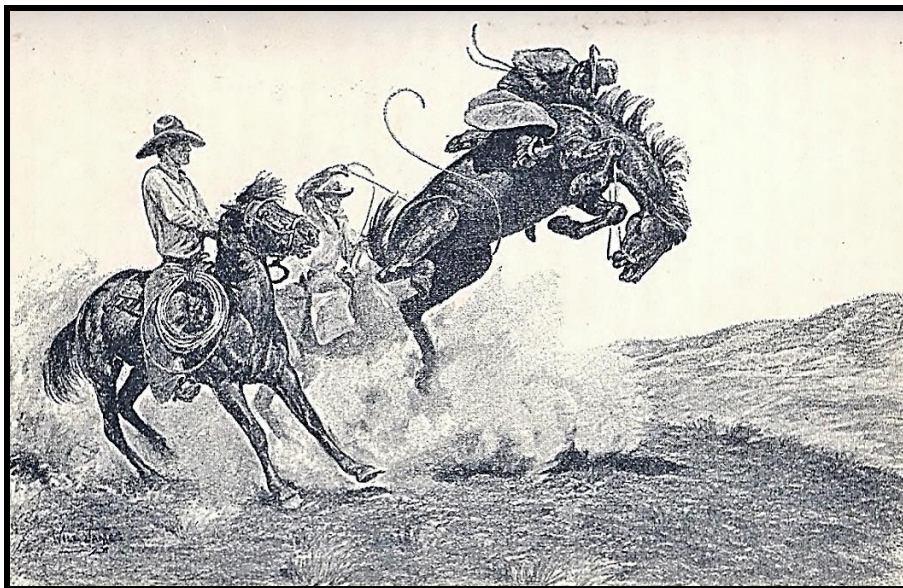


Figure 15- Will James. *A Good Joke, in Words or Action, is the Cowboy's Staff of Life*, 1928. Carbon pencil. From *Sand*, 1929. Charles Scribner's Sons.

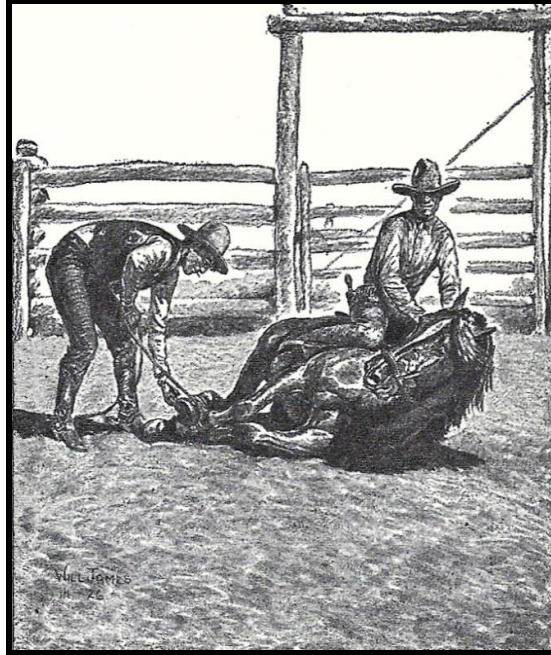


Figure 16- Will James. *The Cowboy Took off the Foot Ropes*, 1926. Carbon pencil. From *Smoky the Cowhorse*, 1926. Charles Scribner's Sons.



Figure 17- Will James. *Bronco Buster*, 1928. Carbon pencil. From *Sand*, 1929. A.P. Hays Collection.



Figure 18- Will James. *Room for None but Experienced Men*, 1928. Carbon pencil. From *Sand*, 1929. A.P. Hays Collection.

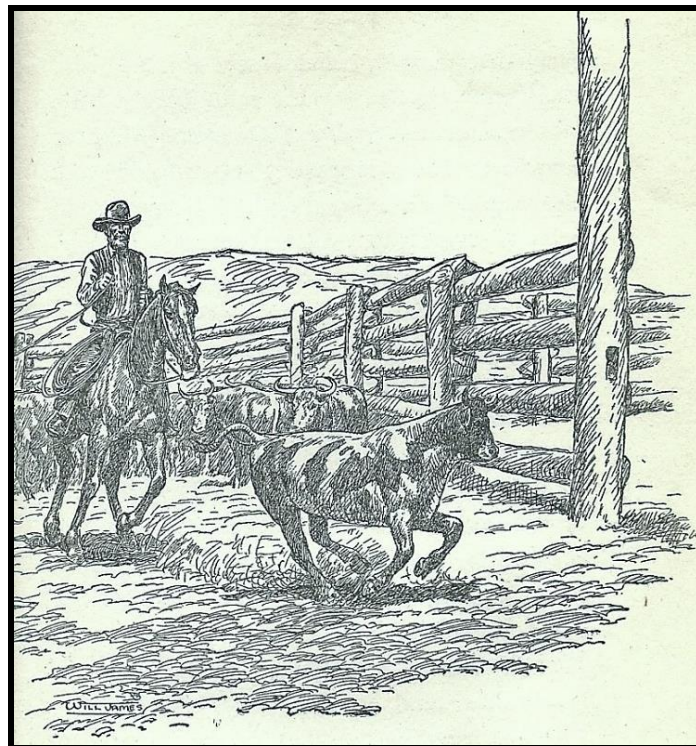


Figure 19- Will James. *He Cut Out a Fine, Fat but Odd Colored Yearling*, n.d. Pen and ink. From *Look-see with Uncle Bill*, 1938. Charles Scribner's Sons.



Figure 20- Will James. *Even the Old Texan's Loop was Spoiled by Bearpaw as it Started to Sail...*, 1926. Charcoal on paper. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Bequest of Charles D. Tandy.

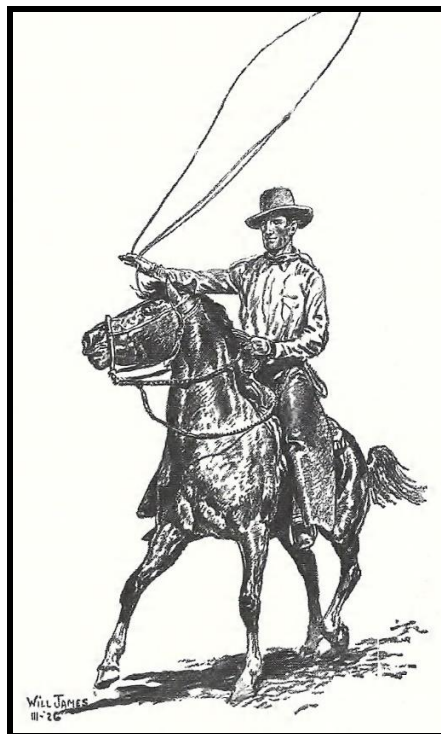


Figure 21- Will James. *Smoky Wondered What a Rope was Doing Up There*, 1926. Carbon pencil. From *Smoky the Cowhorse*, 1926. Charles Scribner's Sons.

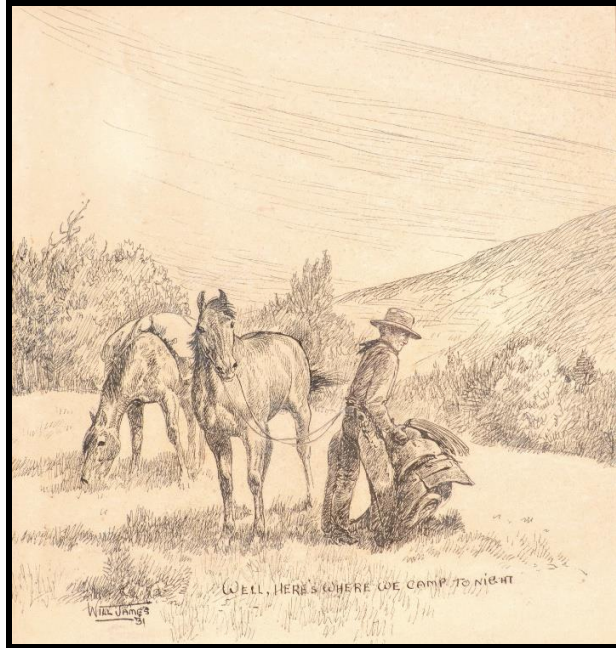


Figure 22- Will James. *Well Here's Where We Camp Tonight*, 1931. Pen and ink. From *Big Enough*, 1931. Private Collection.

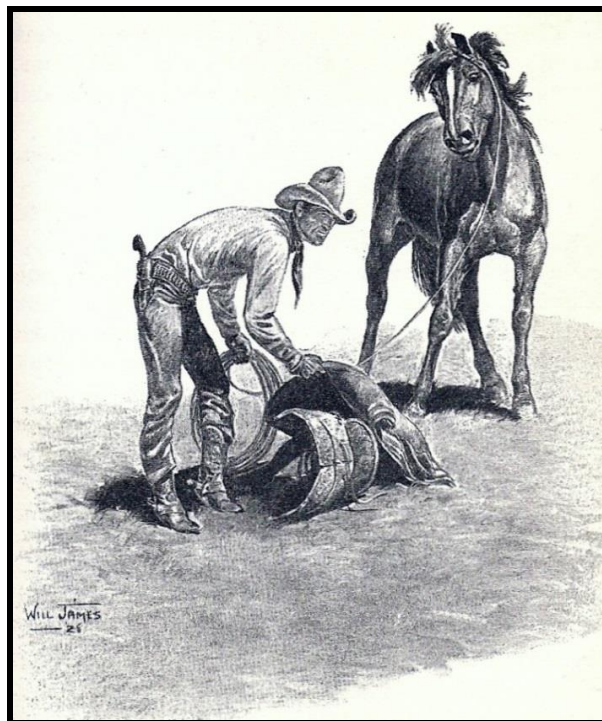


Figure 23- Will James. *The Only Person He Could See Was Moran Saddling a Horse*, 1928. Carbon pencil. From *Sand*, 1929. Charles Scribner's Sons.

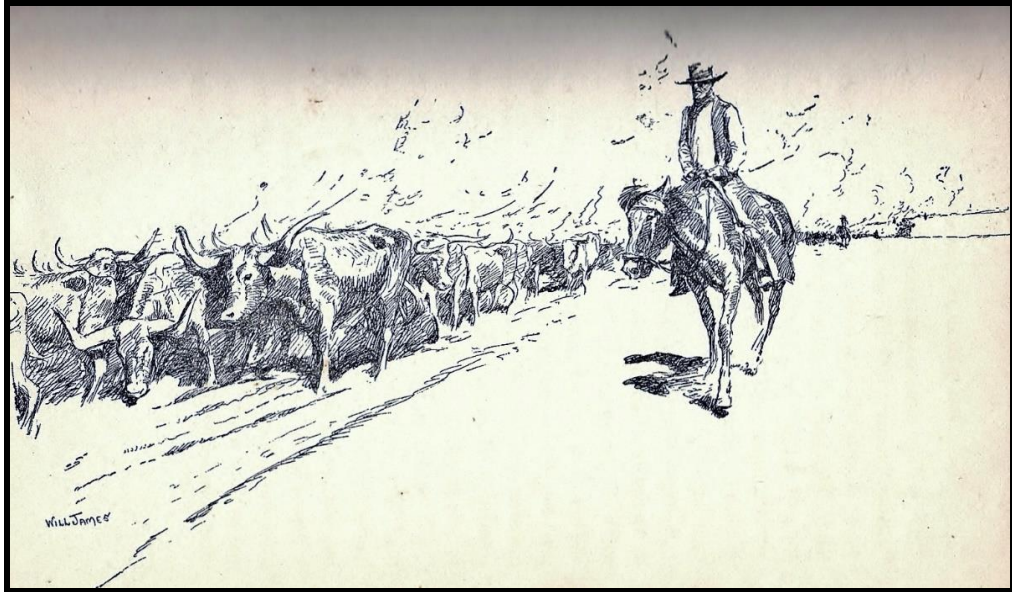


Figure 24- Will James. *It Took Time to Gather and Deliver a Herd to Any Shipping Point*, n.d. Pen and ink. From *The American Cowboy*, 1942. Charles Scribner's Sons.

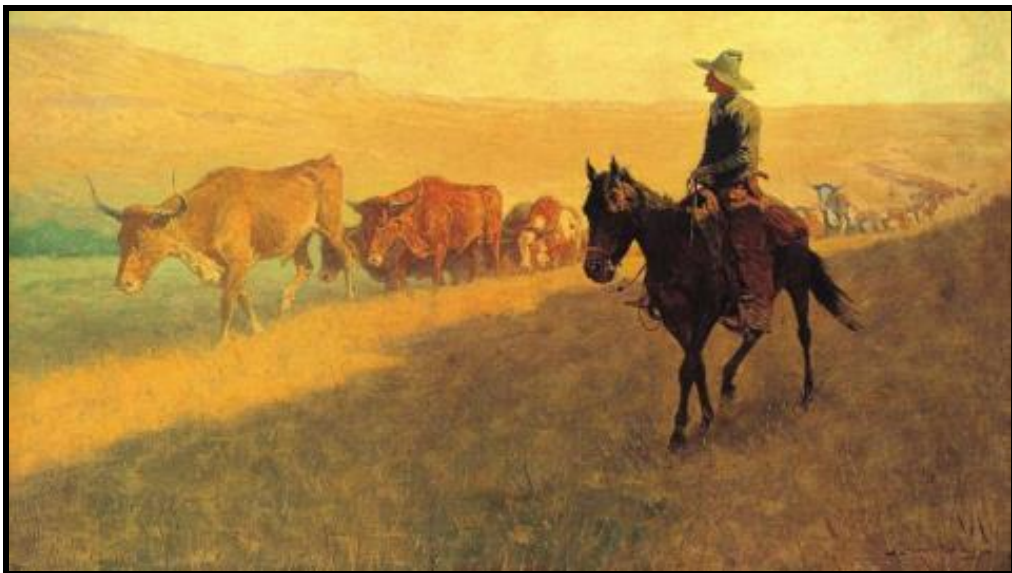


Figure 25- Frederic Remington. *Trailing Texas Cattle*, 1904. Oil on canvas. Buffalo Bill Center of the West.

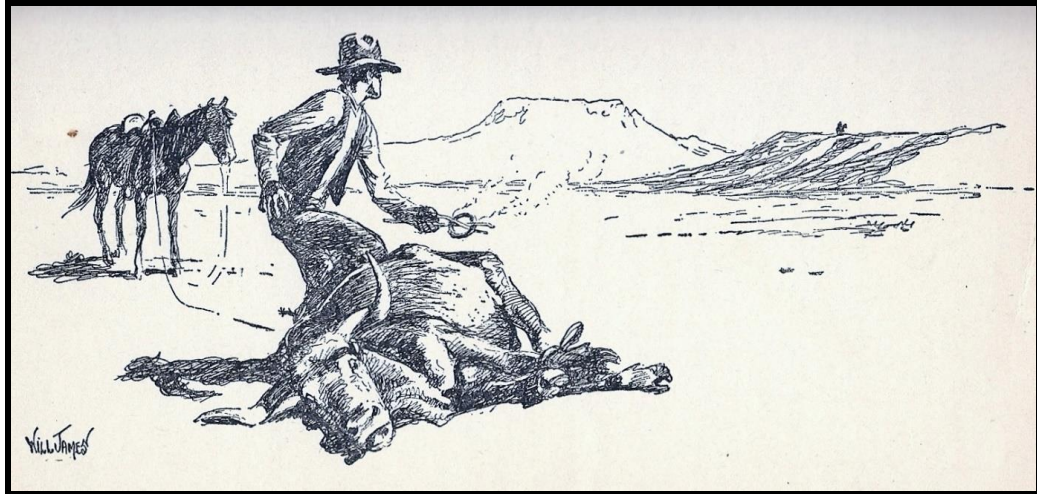


Figure 26- Will James. *When a Running Iron Makes Brands Change Hands*, n.d. Pen and ink. From *The American Cowboy*, 1942. Charles Scribner's Sons.



Figure 27- Charles M. Russell. *The Cinch Ring*, 1909. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

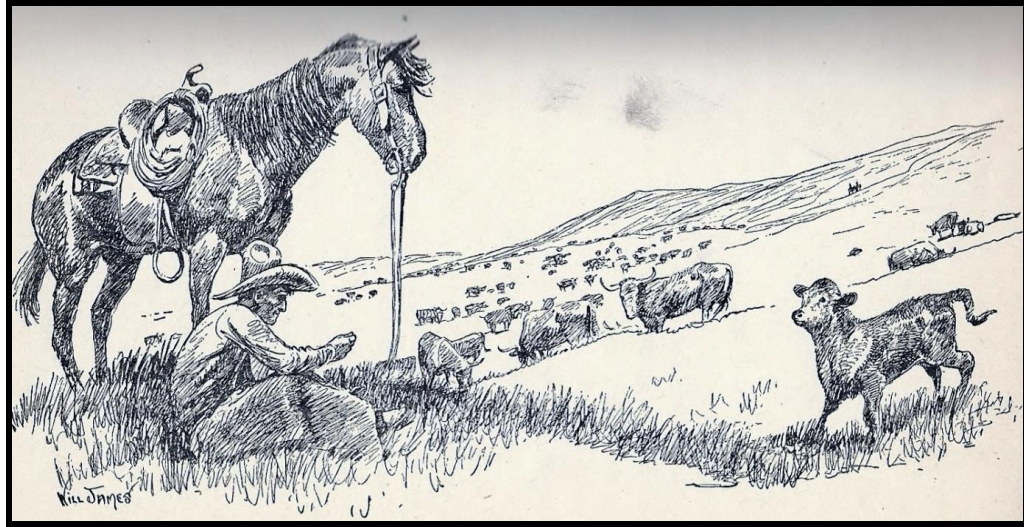


Figure 28- Will James. *Took Care to see that Their Cattle Summered Well*, n.d. Pen and ink. From *The American Cowboy*, 1942. Charles Scribner's Sons.

Chapter 3: Painting a Dreamscape

Most historians, critics, and artists of the twentieth-century considered Will James to be more illustrator than artist. Although his pencil and pen and ink illustrations drew as much praise as his writing during the course of his career, James's oil and watercolor paintings were little known or appreciated, especially compared to his drawings. Furthermore, they were overshadowed by the canvases of William H. Dunton, W.H.D. Koerner, William R. Leigh and a few other artists and illustrators of the West active in the 1920s and 1930s.⁵¹

James began painting in oil in Sausalito, California in 1920, applying the pigment in smooth thin layers in a rudimentary fashion. While he received only minimal formal training during his brief attendance at art school, he found plenty of inspiration from western artists, past and present, particularly Charles M. Russell. While it is true that James's technical prowess as an artist was not on par with Russell, Frederic Remington nor most of the academically trained painters of his day, historian Alan Burdick points out that James's "paintings were more than adequate for what ... [he] intended them,"⁵² that is, mostly magazine illustrations, book frontispieces, and dust jackets.

Illustration or not, James invested every oil painting and watercolor with the same historical and cultural commitment to the cowboy that he did in his pencil and pen and ink illustrations. Derived from sketches that were usually made from memory rather than observation, James's oils explored most of the same subjects and themes as did his

⁵¹ Artist W. H. Dunton, a member of the Taos Society of Artists, specialized in cowboy and wildlife subjects during the 1920s and 1930s. His creations were more modern in conception and execution than James's.

⁵² Burdick, "Fleeting Visions of the Old West," 40.

drawings and illustrations, sometimes with unexpected beauty. The dearth of oil paintings suggests that James recognized his shortcomings as a self-taught easel painter and that he lacked the interest and/or training to improve his technique.

His 1920 work, *Wild Bronco* (Fig. 29), for example, combines tension and anticipation with power and grace as the cowboy and horse vie for supremacy. With a motion that is both powerful and agile, the horse bucks into the air creating a multi-colored dust cloud in its wake. As the horse's body twists and turns near the edge of the view, the cowboy is dislodged from the saddle and, losing his hat, is flung in the opposite direction, one hand clinging to the reins and one foot still in the stirrup.

By removing exacting detail from the image and concentrating on color, composition, and form, James endows *Wild Bronco* a modern sensibility and poster-like qualities. The fragmented colors in the dust and ground contribute to the abstraction of the presentation and represent a departure in approach from the artist's earlier works. In so doing James successfully clothes the old cowboy mythology in a new and appealing style fit for its time—the Roaring 20s.

In *The Stampede*, an easel painting produced the following year, James returned to a more representational style reminiscent of the work of Remington and Russell and their devotees. One of James's more violent and action packed paintings, *The Stampede* (Fig. 30), conveys a sense of panic and chaos and taps into a familiar cowboy theme explored by numerous artists in the previous half century. Although the cause of the stampede is unknown, its ramifications are clear. As part of the chaotic herd plummets over the edge of a cliff to certain death, a brave, bareheaded cowboy brandishing a pistol in the center of the canvas singlehandedly attempts to save himself and the rest of

the longhorns from a similar fate. Taking a cue from Charles Russell's so-called "predicament" paintings and the cliff hanger serials of the silent movie era, James leaves the fate of his protagonist unresolved and up to the viewer to ponder.

More detailed than *Wild Bronco*, *The Stampede* succeeds admirably in conveying the chaos, danger, and unpredictability implicit in arresting the progress of a rapidly moving herd of frightened livestock. The muscularity and tension James displays in the horse, cowboy, and almost every steer is remarkable. Such work demonstrates James's innate ability as an artist that, on occasion rivaled that of his contemporaries.

James uses earth tones throughout the painting to highlight the herd and portray the landscape. His application of color in *The Stampede* is rudimentary at best, however, and is largely overshadowed by the frenzied action and danger portrayed in the scene. In so doing James convinces the viewer that dangers of the West are both true and ever present. By bravely facing danger and even death, Will James's cowboys are ever faithful to their mythical code of conduct.⁵³

James not only painted the life and times of range riders but also rodeo cowboys. Drawn from the ranks of working hands, the latter group and the sport in which they participated, were enjoying national popularity by the 1920s. Not surprisingly, James capitalized on the rise of the cowboy athlete in paintings such as *Cowboy Steer Wrestler* (Fig. 31), used on the cover of pulp magazine, *Action Stories* in 1922. Simple and eye-catching, James's vignette of a cowboy and steer was typical of the cover art of the pulp genre. The viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the central

⁵³ According to popular culture historian Marshall W. Fishwick, a cowboy is faithful "to his code, his horse, and his cattle to the end." See Fishwick, "The Cowboy: America's Contribution to the World's Mythology," 92.

figures, which are locked in a contest requiring strength and agility. The cowboy's blue woolly chaps keep the focus near the steer's head, where the primary action takes place. The curvature of the steer's horns mimics the chaotic twists of the animal, contributing to the compelling composition. The outcome is in question and is left to the reader's imagination.

Publishing works in a variety of print media allowed James to reach, entertain, and influence a large audience. In contrast to the previous painting, *Bull Dogger* (Fig. 32), created in 1923, portrays a more complete representation of the sport of steer wrestling, including a horse as well as the cowboy and longhorn. Again, the title suggests the focus is on the cowboy, or bulldogger, rather than the accompanying animals. The artist directs the action toward the viewer at the moment the cowboy has leaped from his horse and grabbed hold of the powerful steer's horns. The "dogger's" feet are still airborne as he attempts to secure his-grip on the steer's head. Although the contest between man and beast is still in doubt, with skill and luck, the cowboy will be able to dig his heels into the ground, arrest the animal's forward motion, and, twisting the bovine's neck, drop him on his side as quickly as possible.⁵⁴

The face of the bull dogger in James's painting resembles the artist himself. Coincidentally, the same year James produced *Bull Dogger* he also signed a contract with the publisher Charles Scribner's Sons to create, write, and illustrate a series of western and cowboy themed books. Given his new career challenges, his choice of subject in the *Bull Dogger* may have been at least partially personal and allegorical.

⁵⁴ Bill Pickett is credited with inventing the rodeo event known as bulldogging, or steer wrestling, while working for the 101 Ranch in the early twentieth-century. Soon after his creation he began receiving national attention. See "Rodeo star Bill Pickett born in Texas," <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/rodeo-star-bill-pickett-born-in-texas>.

In his illustrations and easel paintings James often chose to portray the physical and emotional interactions between cowboys and horses. More often than not the relationship displayed was one of calm and efficient teamwork. The violence and hostility that often accompanied the breaking and training of range horses, however, were the centerpieces to some of his most dramatic scenes, including the painting *Where the Bronco-Twister Gets His Name* (Fig. 33), completed in 1924.

The central action of the scene occurs in front of a double log-cabin and adjacent corral. Two cowboys were usually required to saddle a fractious bronc. One placed the saddle and pulled the cinch tight while the other twisted or bit the horse's ear to distract him until the rider could mount. James captures the moment just as the cinch is pulled tight and the horse begins to fight. Despite having his ears held by a "bronco-twister," the animal unexpectedly rears up with enough force to lift the cowboy off his feet, causing the latter's hat to fly off. What happens next is anybody's guess. A.P. Hays, a prominent collector of James's work, notes that "while man is often a participant, he is most generally subordinate to the action."⁵⁵ In the left middle ground of the painting, just beyond the rearing bronco and near the central "dog trot" of the cabin, two cowboys and another horse look on at the scuffle before them, alert to the action but not expressing noticeable alarm.

Although Will James followed in the footsteps of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell in the pitting man against bronc, his composition is both original and convincing. Although the horse has the upper hand for the moment, the pistol holstered around the cowboy's waist implies the potential escalation of violence and perhaps even a fatal outcome.

⁵⁵ Hays, *Will James*, ed. J.M. Neil, 42.

Where the Bronco-Twister Gets His Name is one of James's most vibrant and colorful oils. The scene is played out against a sunlit desert landscape, the mountains in the distance appearing dry and barren. James's crisp autumnal palette compliments the scene and helps capture the viewer's attention. In his choice of colors, James emulates the palettes of Russell and Remington, although without the same skill and subtlety of application.

Conveyed through his art and writings, James's knowledge of cowboy life was intimate and his portrayal convincing. His first novel, *Smoky the Cowhorse*, published in 1926, the year his idol, Charles Russell, died, won the Newbery Medal, and thrust the author-illustrator into the front rank of interpreters of the cowboy west, with children and adults alike.

Smoky and Clint (Fig. 34), a color plate from *Smoky the Cowhorse*, depicts the main characters of the novel in a moment of quiet reflection in the shade of a large rock formation. Partners in life, the two figures, man and horse, stand side by side, framed between two yucca plants and silhouetted against the western sky. As a cattle drive passes silently in the background, Clint rolls a cigarette and gazes into the distance. Looking in the same direction, beyond the viewer, his coal-black mount appears alert to the scene unfolding beyond the page.

James blends his colors throughout *Smoky and Clint* in an effort to create a more unified and casual presentation. Through the use of the color yellow, for example, the artist visually connects Clint's shirt with the grassy plains beyond. A dab of yellow is also added as a highlight to the saddle in between to reinforce the linkage. This strategy helps pull the viewer's eye deeper into the work. Draping the main characters in shadow

both accentuates and counterbalances the yellow shirt, which provides the viewer a definite point of interest from which to begin to explore the work. Although the painting may be cohesive and its colors effectively rendered, it displays none of the energetic style James's audience was used to seeing in the artist's work.

The cowboy, the horse, and the longhorn steer all symbolize and have distinct connections to the American West and to Will James. In the painting *A Sudden Liking to Bucking* (Fig. 35), completed in 1928, these three figures perform a range ballet on a dry and dusty stage. Once again the artist constructs a predicament that is bound to end badly for one or more of the participants. Chaos ensues when the steer that the cowboy has roped, circles back, putting horse and rider in jeopardy as the rope wraps around the cowpony's hips. As the harried rider struggles to maintain control of his bucking mount at the same time keeping hold of his lasso and the fleeing steer, it is not clear whether or not the cowboy's rope is tied "hard and fast" to the saddle horn or simply "dallied" around it after the loop was cast.⁵⁶ If the latter is the case then the rider can simply let go of his lasso and live to rope another day. If not, both horse and rider risk being jerked down and seriously injured. James, who understood the physics of such situations all too well, not only allows the viewer the pleasure of imagining the outcome of his prickly scenario, but also encourages an appreciation of the difficulty and danger that a cowboy faces when things go wrong in the saddle.

⁵⁶ The term "dally" from the Spanish "*dar la vuelta*," meaning "to take a turn," was a roping style prevalent among buckaroos in California and the Great Basin region. The free end of the line was held coiled in the hand until the cast was made. Once the loop found its mark, the free end was quickly wound around the horn and held until the animal at the other end could be secured. If the cowboy encountered trouble, he simply let go of the line. See Sammy Sisco, "Ropes and Roping," *The Western Horseman* 17 (November 1952), 12-13, 38-40.

James's composition compliments the action of the scene, which takes place in the center of the canvas, against a flat background of earth and sky. The body of the fleeing steer, the neck of the bucking horse, and the slack rope between form an oval that both leads the viewer's eye around the painting and emphasizes the cowboy's predicament.

The year 1929 was a prolific one for James. Charles Scribner's Sons published his new novel, *Sand*, which would prove one of his most popular stories, and reprinted *Smoky the Cowhorse* in a handsome Illustrated Classics Edition that included six color illustrations, illustrated color endpapers and a color pastedown of his oil painting, *Smoky and Clint* on the front cover.

In the 1929 oil painting *A Cow Outfit of My Own* (Fig. 36), used as both the dust jacket and a pictorial inset on the front cover of James's 1931 book, *Sun Up: Tales of the Cow Camps*, James again drew on the motif of a bucking horse and rider, this time to reflect upon the skill of a "top hand," who is learning first-hand what it is like to own and operate his own ranch in the sagebrush desert of the Great Basin. The rider's calm demeanor as his horse "swallows his head" is indicative of the qualities of strength and leadership he brings to the job. His balance in the saddle is secure as he wields his quirt and weathers the storm, his hat firmly in place and his feet securely in the stirrups. Despite the disturbance caused by the bucking horse, the large herd of cattle nearby remains peaceful. The artist's superb draftsmanship and the strong sense of perspective contribute to the power and restraint that characterize the scene and accentuate the strength and courage of the rider.

At the same time, James pays homage to the bronc in the picture. The artist once stated that “he had a lot of respect and admiration for the mustang horse... for they really belong, not to man, but to that country of junipers and sage, of deep arroyos, mesas, and freedom.”⁵⁷ *A Cow Outfit of My Own* lends credence to this statement. Here the animal is no mere drudge but rather a worthy, if challenging, companion to the cowboy, and exhibits some of the same characteristics. As writer Russell Martin states, and James often demonstrates, “the horse holds a cowboy’s foremost fascination. It is his proudest possession, his closest companion, the equine heart of his western world.”⁵⁸

The use of color within *A Cow Outfit of My Own* is true to the setting of the work, compliments its mood, and stimulates the emotions of the viewer in ways that James’s illustrations cannot. The cowboy’s white woolen chaps create a vivid focal point that stands in dramatic contrast to earth tones that dominate the rest of the painting. The weight of the “woolies” helps hold the cowboy’s legs in place as does the yellow rain slicker that the experienced rider has tied across his saddle pommel. Slickers situated in this manner also acted as a cushion and help prevent ruptures of the abdomen. The rich brown color and reflected light of the horse’s coat helps draw attention to the animal’s powerful leg and hip muscles. The cattle extending diagonally into the distance behind the horse and rider counterbalance the purple mountains in the distance and help keep the viewer’s eye focused on the bucking horse. In a similar manner, the distant peaks and blue sky above are balanced by the green-blue sagebrush in the foreground.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Bart McDowell, *The American Cowboy in Life and Legend* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 1972), 172.

⁵⁸ Martin, *Cowboy*, 175.

Saddling and riding a horse for the first time was often a memorable experience for both the cowboy and horse. This theme is explored in James's 1929 oil, *The First Saddlin', (or) Practicing at Home* (Fig. 37), a painting that once again demonstrates the artist's fascination with portraying contests between a horse and rider—man and nature—somewhere in the rugged West.

The breaking of range horses during James's tenure as a cowboy usually took place in a sturdy enclosure, in this case a picket corral. Both horse and rider appear fresh and equal to the task at hand. The cowboy wears a clean white shirt and assumes an erect pose in the saddle as he digs his spurs into the shoulder of the buckner. Wild and fit, the horse, with mane and tail flying, responds with a broad leap as a mounted cowboy looks on from outside the corral. The painting provides the viewer with an unobstructed view of the proceedings, which have been halted in midair.

James believed that viewers who sympathized with the horses in such paintings and thought them given rough treatment by their riders, were uninformed. In *Smoky*, he defended the practices he painted, and sometimes engaged in as a cowboy, remarking in the text: "to them that *only* sees a wild horse roped and rode and don't know the insides of the game, horse breaking might seem a little rough; but I'm here to say that it's not near as rough as it is necessary, and in the long run it's the rider that gets treated the roughest."⁵⁹

It is unknown whether or not James used photographs for reference in his works. He claimed to have completed most of his drawings and paintings in studio from memory. Whatever the case, James's familiarity with horse anatomy is readily apparent. According to his autobiography, *Lone Cowboy*, the artist not only observed the physical

⁵⁹ Will James, *Smoky the Cowhorse* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 78.

features of horses, but early on developed a feel for an animal's musculature by running his hands over its body.⁶⁰ Knowing that many viewers, including his fellow cowboys, would judge his work on its accuracy, James worked hard to make his work as true to life as possible. That meant attention to detail in all things, even down to the positioning of the reins and saddle as they move with the horse. The positioning of the cowboy's legs and feet, and the manner the latter fit in the stirrups is likewise portrayed true to form.

Although similar to that of *A Cow Outfit of My Own*, the palette James used in *The First Saddlin'* lacks the greenish blues of the sagebrush that make the latter work stand out. Nor is the cowboy's white shirt, silhouetted against the blue sky in *First Saddlin'*, quite as effective a central point of interest as the white leggings in *A Cow Outfit of My Own*. James's ability to convey action helped overcome his shortcomings, however, and his admirers embraced such paintings as the authentic products of untutored genius.

James's 1929 oil *Reached for the Top Pole* (Fig. 38) serves as a reminder that cowboys did not always stay aboard bucking horses, and, if not alert, were vulnerable to the unexpected moves such animals often made. The artist was equal to the task of depicting horse and rider in such situations. As historian Alan Burdick observes, James's cowboys often "are caught off guard and off balance, and are perfectly rendered in awkward poses or in wild, twisting motions."⁶¹ James conveys a reality in the overall image, yet he does so with exaggeration. As the horse bucks out of control the unseated but agile cowboy clings for dear life to the corral fence, one leg still in the

⁶⁰ Will James, *Cowboy in the Making* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 25-26. The first chapter of *Lone Cowboy* inspired the book *Cowboy in the Making*.

⁶¹ Burdick, "Fleeting Visions of the Old West," 40.

process of clearing the saddle. The horse's reins fly loose, forming an oval frame around its head. The end of one rein connects visually to the diagonal crossbar of the corral gate beyond. The rope, which is attached to the saddle pommel, swings upward in conjunction with the animal's movements, guiding the viewer's eye to the cowboy's hat which has flown off his head. The cowboy's hair and bandana also point in the direction of the hat. The violence and power of the scene is palpable. The cowboy's facial expressions are masked by his shoulder. A calm, static landscape beyond the corral balances the explosion of activity inside. Although the outlaw horse has won the day, the cowboy has survived a dangerous situation through agility and quick thinking.

Symbolizing a demon, the black buckler with white socks and a matching blaze marking on his head, dominates the scene. The neutral colors of the landscape, corral, and dust compliment the scene and accentuate the central action. Close observation reveals the red corner of the saddle blanket which is the same color as the cowboy's red scarf and helps visually connect horse and rider. Although James's superb draftsmanship and strong composition is again on display in *Reached for the Top Pole*, the work also demonstrates an improving color sense.

The 1929 painting *Rope Corral* (Fig. 39) depicts the daily ritual of changing horses during the roundup. Cowboys on large ranches typically maintained a "string" of several mounts which were held with the horses of other hands in a large body called the *remuda*. When it was time to select fresh horses for the day's work the animals were driven into a "rope corral" consisting of lariats either held by the cowboys themselves or attached to steel picket pins. Either provided a quick and efficient barrier while ropers then retrieved each rider's mount from the herd.

James once stated “the spirit of the wild horse is the same after years of riding as it was before he ever felt a rope.”⁶² Horses that had not been ridden for a while sometimes put up a brief fight during the saddling and mounting process before settling down to work. It is this moment of equine resistance that James records in the painting. The title of the work, however, refers to the rope enclosure that barely can be glimpsed in the distance between the two horses in the center and right margin of the work. The artist makes the point that this seemingly inconsequential barrier is as effective in its own way as the large log corrals pictured in his other works.

As the rearing horse in the center of the composition shies away from the saddle carrying cowboy approaching on foot, his action forces the mounted cowboy to pull up on his reins and swing out of the saddle to avoid the flailing hoofs of the captive animal. At the same time the rider’s right hand maintains a firm hold on the lead rope of a hackamore, which is “dallied” firmly around his saddle horn. His alert action steadies his own horse and helps keep it from being jerked down. A glance at the bronc’s head indicates the cause of the ruckus. The cloth placed over the eyes of the animal to help keep him calm during the saddling process has slipped, revealing his fate and precipitating his frightened response.

As with most of James’s works, the action of the scene overpowers the landscape. James places the cowboys and horses across the middle ground of the painting enabling the viewer to focus more clearly on the action in the foreground. In the left background there are additional cowboys, both standing and mounted. One saddles a fresh horse without any resistance from the animal. Together these figures help lend balance and interest to the painting.

⁶² James, *Smoky the Cowhorse*, 76.

In *Rope Corral* James has created a sense of heightened reality for the viewer. The artist's biographer, William Gardner Bell, once noted that in "James's works, the action, was sometimes exaggerated, yet it was dramatic, authentic, and believable."⁶³ James also led his audience to believe that cowboys led more eventful and rewarding lives than reality suggests. Yet there can be no doubt of the importance of the horse to cowboy culture and to Will James himself. If he sometimes over-indulged action and detail, he remained true to the spirit of the scene.

The Hiss of the Rope (Fig. 40), also painted in 1929 for James signature novel, *Smoky*, demonstrates another of the skills that cowboys of his era took pride in and often relied upon. The auditory nature of the title refers to the sound the cowboy's lariat makes as the loop tightens around its mark. The scene takes place within a log round pen used for breaking horses. Stretching across the middle ground, a group of unbroken mustangs gallop to the right. In the foreground stands a cowboy, his back to the viewer, attempting to "forefoot"⁶⁴ a horse using a fancy rope catch called a "houlihan."

To the left of the cowboy stands a worn wooden "snubbing" post with a saddle lying on the ground nearby. Once the catch is made the cowboy will wind the free end of his line around the post and reel the animal up close and secure enough to be saddled.

Wary of the snare headed in his direction though powerless to avoid it, the cowboy's quarry will soon bite the dust and the struggle between man and nature will begin. The markings and build of the central horse in the herd are distinctive compared to the other equines that accompany him. The connection between the horse's white socks and the snubbing post is clearly established by means of the white highlights on

⁶³ Bell, *Will James*, 72.

⁶⁴ After catching the forefeet of the horse, the roper trips, or "busts" the animal, often briefly stunning it. See Fay E. Ward, *The Cowboy at Work* (NY: Hastings House, 1958), 108.

the manila hemp rope and the cowboy's white shirt. In this work the lariat establishes a literal connection between a cowboy and his horse. This was also true in life as cowboys on some ranches were required to tame and train their own string of mounts.

The solid color of the ground and sky help focus the viewer's gaze on the action in the center third of the painting. To avoid the monotony of color in these areas, the artist's applies the pigment impressionistically to achieve a dapple effect that, if taken further, might have been resembled pointillism.

In a work that stands apart from most of his other oil paintings from the 1930s, James creates an overtly romantic mood in *Castles in the Sky*. (Fig. 41) Ironically, by the 1930s James's marriage to his wife, Alice, was unravelling due to his excessive drinking. He may have been recalling better days, trying to rekindle an old flame or perhaps simply responding to the popularity of the romantic cowboy of film, music or other forms of popular culture.

With their backs towards the viewer, a cowboy mounted on a white horse, symbolizing a heroic knight errant, gently embraces a cowgirl on the open range as he points out "castles" (resembling gazebos and cupolas) scattered among the clouds.⁶⁵ Adorned in a green riding habit with a split skirt, the young woman has dropped her bridle reins, surrendering control of her destiny to her companion, whose wide brimmed hat lies on the ground beside his horse in similar gesture. Both look toward a future together as the tails of their horses move in unison.

Will James was a far better draftsman than painter. Despite his lack of training in color theory, however, his best paintings showed just as much drama and detail as his

⁶⁵ The small architectural elements in the clouds of *Castles in the Sky* reference ancient Roman architecture. James may have possibly encountered this architectural style when visiting capital cities, large cities, or through the art and literature of his contemporaries.

drawings. His stories and illustrations both capitalized upon and contributed to the widespread appeal of the mythical cowboy. The similarity of style and pose in his paintings, notwithstanding, his best work conveyed raw emotions and physical action with energy and imagination. William Gardner Bell believed that James's drawings and paintings, much like Charles Russell's, "developed spontaneously from an innate ability complemented by personal rangeland experience."⁶⁶ Whatever the source of his imagination and talent, James was an important link between the era and work of Frederic Remington and Charles Russell and the post-World War II generations of Western artists.

Part of participating in the creation of a mythological story involves altering the original image and changing the way the audience perceives the subject. James's illustrations and paintings fulfilled that requirement by keeping his focus on the horseback aspect of cowboy life, while acknowledging the reality of mechanization and other changes visiting cattle ranches in the early decades of the twentieth-century. In like manner the representative style which he employed in his work was tempered by modern approaches to art, typified by graphic, poster-like qualities of some of his work.

Will James's paintings, perhaps even more than his drawings, sustained the illusion created by dime novels, wild west shows, and western films that the cowboy lived in a dangerous and violent dreamscape full of action and excitement. If he stretched the truth in his illustrated stories, he did so knowing that he fulfilled the expectations of his audience, both children and adults, who could not seem to get enough of cowboy life in the Old West, especially in an era of rapid systematization, economic depression, and world war.

⁶⁶ Bell, "Unraveling the bumpy ride," 62.

Figures-Chapter 3: Painting a Dreamscape



Figure 29- Will James. *Wild Bronco*, 1920. Oil on board. Private collection.



Figure 30- Will James. *The Stampede*, 1921. Oil on canvas. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.



Figure 31- Will James. *Cowboy Steer Wrestler*, 1922. Oil on canvas. Appeared as the cover illustration for the pulp magazine, *Action Stories*. A.P. Hays Collection.



Figure 32- Will James. *Bull Dogger*, 1923. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.



Figure 33- Will James. *Where the Bronco-Twister Gets His Name*, 1924. Oil on canvas. Gilcrease Museum. Gift of the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation, 1955.



Figure 34- Will James. *Smoky and Clint*, 1926. Oil on canvas. Appeared as the cover and dustjacket illustration to *Smoky the Cowhorse*. A.P. Hays Collection.



Figure 35- Will James. *A Sudden Liking to Bucking*, 1928. Oil on canvas. From *Smoky the Cowhorse*. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.



Figure 36- Will James. *A Cow Outfit of My Own*, 1929. Oil on canvas. Appeared as the cover and dustjacket illustrations to *Cowboy in the Making & Sun Up*. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.



Figure 37- Will James. *The First Saddlin'*, 1929. Oil on canvas. From *Sun Up*. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.

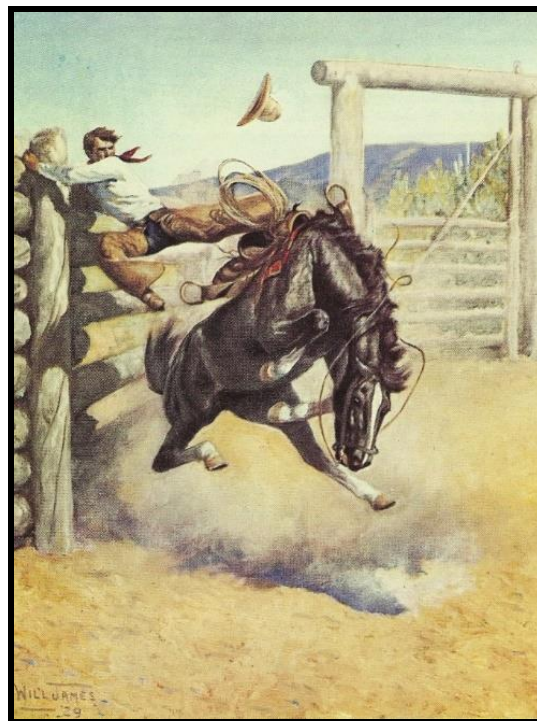


Figure 38- Will James. *Reached for the Top Pole*, 1929. Oil on canvas. From *Smoky the Cowhorse*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

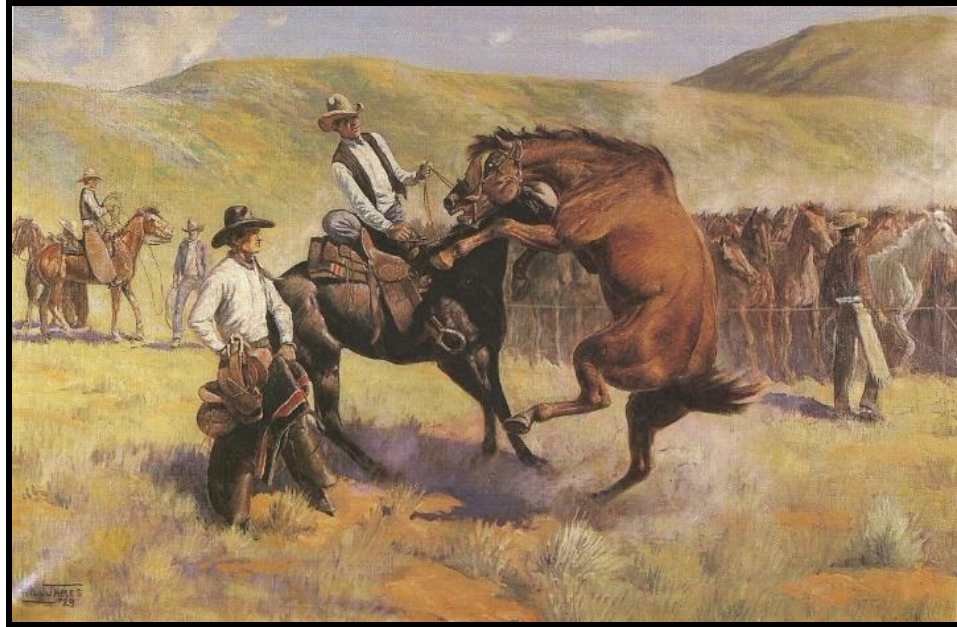


Figure 39- Will James. *Rope Corral*, 1929. Oil on canvas. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.

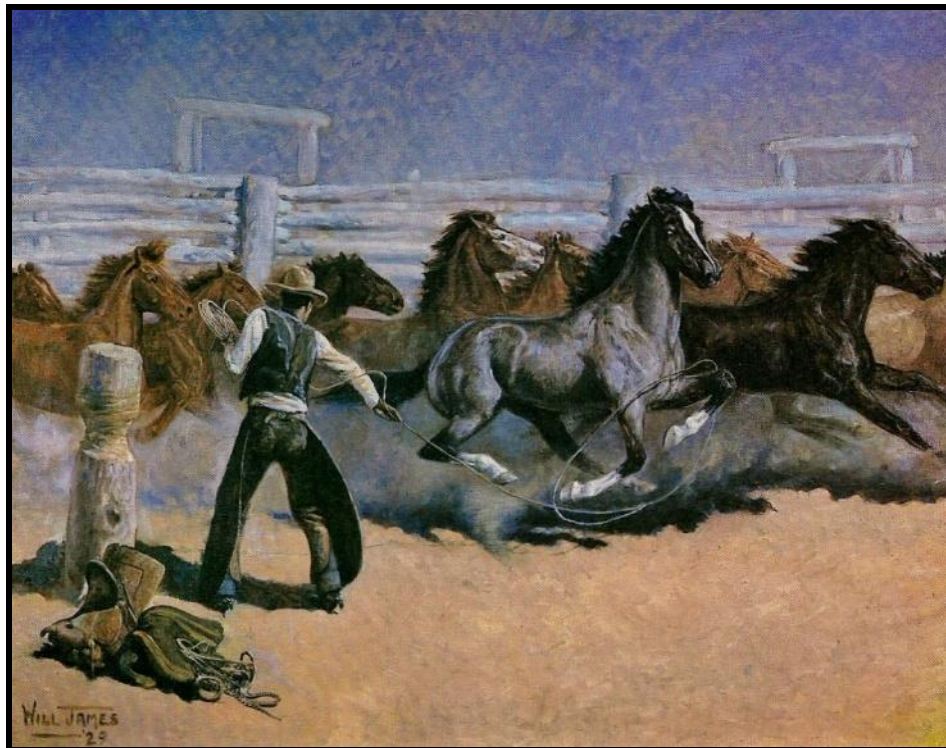


Figure 40- Will James. *The Hiss of the Rope*, 1929. Oil on canvas. From *Smoky the Cowhorse*. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.



Figure 41- Will James. *Castles in the Sky*, ca. 1930. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

Chapter 4: The Legacy of a Cowboy

Although the reality of ranch life in the American West evolved dramatically during Will James's lifetime, the cowboys who inhabited the books, drawings, and paintings he produced during the course of his career were cut from the same cloth as the cow punchers that inhabited the work of Charles M. Russell a generation before. James's biographer, William Gardner Bell, acknowledged the fortuitousness of the artist's timing in so far as the audience for James's art and stories was concerned, noting that his "writings and drawings caught the crest of a wave of interest in the American West."⁶⁷

Since Will James's death, his work has remained in print and continued to find an audience. The author and illustrator's life story has attracted more than one biographer, and according to Bell "occasional articles centering on Will James have appeared in various periodicals over time, suggesting that editors find enough appeal to justify the exposure."⁶⁸

Although his books and illustrations developed an avid following during his lifetime and have remained in print ever since, James's style and subject matter were never in vogue in fine art circles and galleries did not promote his work. Economic factors, particularly the Great Depression, also played a role, severely depressing the fine art market at the very moment that the artist's popularity was on the rise.

In recent years, however, collectors of western American art throughout the United States and Canada have shown a keen interest in James's work, and have increasingly competed for his drawings and paintings at auction. In 2011, for example,

⁶⁷ Bell, "Unraveling the bumpy ride," 62.

⁶⁸ Bell, *Will James*, xiii.

Will James's oil, *Wild Horses*, sold for \$130,000 at the High Noon auction in Mesa, Arizona, setting a new sales record for work by the artist.⁶⁹

Despite achievements that helped sustain his name within the art community, Will James is largely forgotten among the current generation of Americans. Even among western art aficionados his work has been marginalized by many. Several factors have contributed to his decline in public popularity. Foremost among these is the fact that much of his output was created to illustrate magazine articles and children's books. Moreover, he completed a relative few easel paintings, and little, if any, of his work was created with the art collector's market in mind.

Although James's children's stories and the art and illustrations that supported them were often sentimental and out-of-step with the social realism and documentary photography of the 1930s, their principal subject—the American cowboy—flourished on the silver screen and in pulp fiction. Sound recordings glorified his image as well and dude ranches encouraged visitors on vacation to play the hero. Such outlets helped shaped public taste and sustain the cowboy as a folk hero in the first half of the twentieth-century and beyond.

Several of James's books, including *Smoky the Cowhorse*, *Sand*, and *Lone Cowboy*, were made into films. *Smoky* alone inspired four screen adaptations including one by film makers in the Soviet Union in 1985.⁷⁰ James narrated the first version in

⁶⁹ Meghan Saar, "Wild Horses Run to the Top," *True West Magazine*, March 19, 2011, <http://www.truewestmagazine.com/wild-horses-run-to-the-top-2/>.

⁷⁰ *Smoky* was adapted into film three times in the United States with a namesake title in 1933, 1946, and 1966. In 1985 *Smoky* was adapted for a television movie in the Soviet Union titled *Dymka*.

1933. The *New York Times* critic who reviewed the film noted: “*Smoky* articulates in letters and art the nostalgia one feels when listening to the cowboy ballads.”⁷¹

James’s art and words were not only evident in the look and feel of the film, but also the lobby cards and posters that promoted them. A poster from the 1945 version of *Smoky*, for example, reflects landscape, costume, and action that can be observed in many of James’s artworks. (Fig. 42) However, the prominence of the female character on the movie poster compared to the black stallion, who is the real star of the tale, departs not only from the main storyline of the novel and film but also most of James’s artwork, which focuses on cowboys and their horses.

The books and illustrations of Will James not only inspired film makers, but subsequent generations of artists of the American West as well. James’s vigorous drawings of horses and cowboys and the stories that accompanied them continue to find an audience among young people long after his death.

To many of these youngsters, Will James was THE cowboy artist, not Charles Russell or Frederic Remington as some might believe. Bob Scriver, a late twentieth-century Montana sculptor and member of the prominent artist group known as Cowboy Artists of America, remarked before his death in 1999, “when I was getting started, and with many other artists trying to break into the art field, all of us tried to draw horses like Will James and not Charles Russell.”⁷² In 1987 Gwendolyn Clancy interviewed painter and sculptor, Harry Jackson, one of Scriver’s contemporaries, regarding Will James and his influence on subsequent generations of western artists. Jackson, with his

⁷¹ A.D.S., “Smoky (1933) The Story of a Horse,” *New York Times* (New York, New York), January 1, 1934.
<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B00E0DF1E3DE23ABC4953DFB766838F629EDE>.

⁷² Hays, *Will James*, ed. J.M. Neil, 46.

typical hyperbole, called James “one of the finest draftsmen in all of Western civilization”⁷³ and went on to say that he believed that most people overlooked the freshness of the line, form, and volume of his drawings.⁷⁴ Both Harry Jackson and Bob Sriver also pointed out that many working cowboys they knew preferred the accuracy and spontaneity of Will James’s drawings to those of Remington and Russell. Despite the fact that James did not sketch or paint from life, his drawings emanated from an inner vision and imagination that many of his fellow artists lacked. Because James knew how to transfer truth as well as reality to paper or canvas his message transcended his lifetime.

In recent years Will James’s life and work have inspired a variety of artistic tributes. In 2013, for example, Idaho saddle maker, Rick Bean, built a fancy stock rig honoring the artist. (Figs. 43a, 43b and 43c) The master saddler endowed the leather of his masterpiece with intricate carvings in a Canadian maple leaf pattern in honor of James’s country of origin and added engraved sterling silver ornaments, in bas-relief, each based on one of James’s celebrated cowboy drawings.⁷⁵ A member of the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, Bean created this tribute as a work of art rather than utility. Bean and some of his fellow western saddle makers still build working rigs on saddletrees of the type actually ridden by the artist.⁷⁶

⁷³ Gwendolyn Clancy, “Interview of Harry Jackson on Will James,” (April 18, 1987. *HarryJacksonStudios YouTube page*. Uploaded April 23, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WIXYeaqnQ>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Sterling silver decorations trim the pommel, fenders, skirts, and cantle of the saddle.

⁷⁶ The type of saddletree that was ridden by Will James has become a popular style today, and many individuals and companies list the Will James Saddle as a style they make and sale. For example, see modern saddler, Jeremy Stead’s, website and work using the Will James rawhide covered Q.H. bars tree. <http://ranchsaddle.com/index.php>.

Music detailing the adventures, woes, and memories of western cow punchers has long enlivened cowboy life and has contributed much to the mythology of the range.⁷⁷ More than a few cowboys were musicians and singers themselves. In a passage of James's novel, *Smoky*, a group of cowboys sing around the campfire accompanied by a harmonica. In describing the scene, Clint, the main human character in the book, discusses the place of music in a cowboy's life.⁷⁸

It is not surprising to learn that the writings and art of Will James also inspired cowboy singers and musicians of a later day. James's own embodiment of the mythic cowboy was celebrated by Canadian cowboy singer-songwriter, Ian Tyson, in his 1988 song, "Will James." Among the lyrics was a reference to James's stirring equine draftsmanship and the power of his images:

The living of the cowboy dreams, or so it seemed to me,
The perfect combination of riding high and being free,
His heroes were his horses, and he drew them clear and true.
On every page they'd come alive and jump straight out at you.

His race towards the sunset was the high and lonesome kind.
Like a coyote always looking back, he left no tracks behind.
So I've memorized these pictures, boys. They're still the very best.
If whiskey was his mistress, his true love was the West.⁷⁹

Tyson's verse also explains that James not only admired cowboys and horses he wrote about and drew, but was himself a cowboy in both body and mind.

Beyond film adaptations of his work, Will James has been the topic of more than one late twentieth-century documentary film. In 1988, for example, his life was the

⁷⁷ Martin, *Cowboy*, 98.

⁷⁸ Will James, *Smoky the Cowhorse*, 164.

⁷⁹ Ian Tyson, "Will James," *All the Good'uns*. Lyrical composition. 3:25. Slick Fork Music, 1996.

subject of the Canadian documentary, *Alias Will James*, written and directed by Jacques Godbout. This film tells the story of Ernest Dufault, the French Canadian youth who reinvented himself as Will James in order to secure his future in the America West. It explores the relationship between myth and reality in the American West, and explains how James became the personification of these polar opposites. Godbout demonstrates James's ability to fabricate and positively utilize his cowboy visions "rather than be led astray by them."⁸⁰ In the film artists, writers, singers, and working cowboys describe the influence that James's writing and art had on their lives and work.

Gwendolyn Clancy's 1990 documentary biography, *The Man They Call Will James*, also provides an intimate view of a mysterious and intriguing man who created a life, lived it, and invited others to join him for the ride. The film explores the ways in which James's self-made cowboy legend helped shape the world's view of the cowboy and the American West through his stories and art. Clancy's film won a special Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum for historical excellence.

James's memory continues to be kept alive and venerated in the ranch country of the West, and especially in the regions where he worked as a cowboy in his early years. Montana, New Mexico, and Nevada, three states where James spent considerable time as both a cowboy and a writer, still honor his contributions to the lore and art of the West in myriad and sometimes surprising ways. The city of Billings, Montana, for example, named a middle school in his honor, while the Big Horn County Historical Museum in nearby Hardin, Montana preserves the cabins that were once part of his

⁸⁰ Mary Alemany-Galway, "Jacques Godbout's *Alias Will James*," *Cinema Canada Film Reviews* (December 1988): 28.

nearby Rocking R Ranch. In 2011 the museum and town began holding an annual working ranch rodeo called the Will James Roundup with proceeds going to restore and maintain James's cabins. Cimarron, New Mexico, another of James's favorite haunts celebrates the artist-author in the exhibits of the Aztec Mill Museum, which houses numerous James-related artifacts and art works. A local inn and RV park in the same community maintains a guest room named for Will James and decorated with memorabilia and reproductions of his art.⁸¹

James's memory is kept alive among artists and art collectors in Nevada at an annual Western Art Roundup, held for more than three decades in various communities around the state. Each year the artist exhibiting the "most high-spirited drawing"⁸² receives the Will James Award. Nevada is also home to the Will James Society, formed in 1992 by a cadre of enthusiasts dedicated to preserving the artist and writer's work and memory. Presently headquartered in Elko, Nevada, a town that the artist and writer once called home, the organization holds an annual meeting each fall in a different locale, featuring speakers and tours related to James's life and career. The Society also donates books by Will James to schools, libraries, and military bases in the United States and Canada.⁸³

Paintings and drawings in public and private collections reveal James as an artist whose work could be wildly uneven in quality, especially when his alcoholism got out of control, but which was always true to the subject and mood. Will James's art work

⁸¹ See Cimarron Inn and RV Park, Cimarron, New Mexico, <http://www.cimarroninn.com/room08.html>.

⁸² See Steven Field, "'Western Art Roundup' Celebration Returns to Winnemucca," *Buckaroo News*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.buckaroonews.com/2016/08/western-art-roundup-celebration-returns-to-winnemucca/>.

⁸³ See *Will James Society*, Elko, Nevada, <http://www.willjames.org/>.

also often suffers from poor reproduction, particularly in the reprinting of his books. Not only are the original images usually presented in a much reduced scale, the “paper stock,” according to one of his biographers, “was below par for art reproduction, the halftone plate work was average, and color reproduction was often out of register.”⁸⁴

In 1985 the Nicolaysen Art Museum, in Casper, Wyoming, mounted the first major exhibition of James’s works, more than four decades after the artist’s death in 1942. Based on the collection of Scottsdale art collector and gallery owner, A.P. Hays, who still holds perhaps the largest assemblage of Will James art and artifacts in private hands, the exhibition sparked renewed interest in James’s works and his life.⁸⁵ In the years that followed, the Hays collection, which includes books, photographs, cowboy apparel, and movie ephemera travelled widely to museums throughout the West. (Figs. 44 and 45)

Several museums in the West house significant holdings of James’s work in their permanent collections. The largest and most important of these is that of Virginia Snook, who acquired the Will James collection assembled by her father, who operated the Snook Art Company in Billings, Montana. The elder Snook knew the artist well and had boarded him from time to time when his health was failing. The Snook Collection is now located at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, Montana. (Fig. 46) Other museums that have important permanent collections of Will James art, correspondence, and artifacts include the Big Horn County Historical Museum in Hardin, Montana, Northeastern Nevada Museum, in Elko, Nevada, the National Cowboy and Western

⁸⁴ Bell, *Will James*, xii.

⁸⁵ Within a few years after the exhibition at the Nicolaysen Art Museum the resurgence in Will James emerged. Other museums began hosting exhibitions honoring the artist, and articles resulting from scholarly research have been published.

Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, the Western Folklife Center Wiegand Gallery in Elko, Nevada, and the Phippin Museum in Prescott, Arizona. Not surprisingly, relatively little Will James material exists east of the Mississippi River. A notable exception is the archives of James's publisher Charles Scribner's Sons, held at the Firestone Library of Princeton University, which houses correspondence, contracts, and other information related to his books and illustrations.

Since the death of Will James several biographies of the author-illustrator have appeared. The first, *Will James, The Last Cowboy Legend*, written by Anthony A. Amaral and published in 1980, sheds light on his subject's fabricated life and literary output but does not provide much discussion of his illustrations. Five years later A.P. Hays produced an essay on the artist in the catalogue, *Will James: The Spirit of the Cowboy*, which accompanied the exhibition at the Nicolaysen Art Museum. *Will James: The Life and Works of a Lone Cowboy*, William Gardner Bell's well-regarded biography, also appeared in 1985 and is perhaps the most important on the subject yet to appear. Bell's book and the Nicolaysen exhibition marked a resurgence in interest and a renewed appreciation of Will James's life and works, that continues today.⁸⁶

James's biographers helped establish his importance as a link between the first generation of artists of the cowboy and those that followed. Despite the quality of his best work and its presence in numerous museum collections, the power and resonance of James's art has yet to be fully appreciated by critics and collectors. Nor have its connections to its time and its impact on the cowboy myth been fully explored.

⁸⁶ The most recent full-scale biographical treatment of James is Jim Bramlett's *Ride for the High Points. The Real Story of Will James* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1998).

Will James was the quintessential cowboy of his time and had a hand, through his illustrated books and their film adaptations, in shaping the cowboy myth for a motorized, movie-going American society between World Wars I and II. The influence of his work could be felt from the backlots of Hollywood to the ranchlands of the Great Plains to the streets of New York. James capitalized on the tremendous appeal and fascination of western life and heroes in the 1930s, and as Los Angeles writer, Ed Ainsworth put it in his book *The Cowboy in Art*, “he awakened in millions of Americans and people of other nations a feeling of participation in that almost mythical world of ‘the West’.”⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Ainsworth, *The Cowboy in Art*, 78.

Figures-Chapter 4: The Legacy of a Cowboy



Figure 42- 20th Century Fox. *Will James' Smoky* movie poster, 1945. Yellowstone Art Museum.



Figure 43a- Rick Bean. *Will James Saddle*, 2013. Leather and sterling silver. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.



Figure 43b- Rick Bean. *Will James Saddle* (front view), 2013. Leather and sterling silver. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.



Figure 43c- Rick Bean. *Will James Saddle* (rear view), 2013. Leather and sterling silver. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Traditional Cowboy Arts Association.



Figure 44- *Will James: The Hays Collection*, 2009. Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum. PPHMConnectionCast YouTube Channel.



Figure 45- *Will James: The A.P. Hays Collection*, 2011. National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.



Figure 46- *Will James Exhibition*, 2013. Yellowstone Art Museum. Virginia Snook Collection.

Conclusion

The prevailing view of the mythical American cowboy evolved over more than a century, with literature, theater, art, film, and music each playing a role in its development. Prior to 1910, prominent writers and showmen such as James Fenimore Cooper, Ned Buntline, William F. Cody, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, Gilbert M. “Bronco Billy” Anderson, and William S. Hart and such artists as, Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell helped transform the image of the range rider from that of a violent brigand to one of an appealing hero. Although Will James did not create the mythology of the American cowboy, between the 1910s and the 1940s, he made important and lasting contributions to its evolution, influencing children and adults alike through his books and illustrations. Ed Ainsworth, a California-based newspaper columnist and a longtime observer of cowboy art and artists expressed the belief that “few other artists have ever exerted so profound an influence on a single topic in prose and pictures as did Will James.”⁸⁸

Fences had already closed the open range by the time James became a cowboy. Nevertheless, there were still plenty of open spaces in places like Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico where he could learn the trade from old timers who had witnessed the heyday of the cattle industry and longed for its return. As Russell Martin observed and these throwbacks to an earlier era demonstrated, “the cowboy was the last figure who had experienced the frontier and was therefore the last one who could openly pine for what he had known and lost. Inevitably, nostalgia became an integral part of the cowboy myth.”⁸⁹ Viewed through the lens of the twenty-first century American West,

⁸⁸ Ainsworth, *The Cowboy in Art*, 71.

⁸⁹ Martin, *Cowboy*, 392.

the work of Will James appears to have contributed to this sentimentality for the past, for he was certainly a romantic when it came to cowboys and horses. His art and his prose, however, also reflected the reality of his own experiences and a slice of the West as it appeared in his own time, at least on the larger ranches of the day.

Virtually self-taught as an artist, James made the most of his natural talent as a draftsman, gaining inspiration from fellow artists, such as Charles Russell, Maynard Dixon, and Harold von Schmidt, who understood and praised his work. They saw that his portrayals of range life, derived from experience and close observation, were true and honest, and that his footloose cowboy ways precluded his attaining a formal art education. In the final analysis, James's innate skill and naiveté proved more than adequate for the task of illustrating magazine articles and children's books.

In some respects, James's cowboys were stereotypical. They always wore broad-brimmed Stetson hats, boots, and spurs, worked the range without benefit of mechanization or modern conveniences, and always could be counted upon in dangerous situations. As one writer observed, all of James's cowboys were "built on a self-portrait: hawk-nosed, long-waisted, bowlegged."⁹⁰ To critics of his particular portrayal of the American cowboy, James responded that he had:

put all the cowboys I've seen and known along with myself in the same pot and all boiled down I got one character what covers over seventy-five percent of the range riders, far as that goes all of us makes the same mistake if you'd call it such. You can tell a Russell, Remington, Leigh, Wyeth or Dixon far as you can see 'em they all got one character same as I got mine—it's just how they see the cowboy—it's why some are truer than others.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Frederick Turner, *Of Chiles, Cacti and Fighting Cocks: Notes on the American West* (n.p.: Accessible Publishing Systems PTY, Ltd., 2008), 366.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

The artist, however, avoided sensationalizing cowboy life as did many of their counterparts in pulp fiction.⁹² His square jawed buckaroos did not carry side arms, loved the company of animals, and saw beauty in the landscape.

“Will James,” wrote biographer Anthony Amaral, “created one of the more popular, and probably, last cowboy legends,”⁹³ that of the lonesome cowboy and his noble steed riding the open range unimpeded by “civilization.” In James’s art and writing horses are at the heart of the cowboy’s world with cattle playing a strictly secondary role. Through his long association with horses, A.P. Hays observed, “James developed enormous knowledge of their movements, manners, and moods. This knowledge, couple with broad experience as a working cowboy, provided him with insight and understanding of cowboy life unmatched by his peers, past or present.”⁹⁴

In portraying the movement of equine and rider, the artist masterfully combined the realism and theatricality, which in turn, produced empathy for the animal and a strong, emotional, and lasting impact on the viewer. Part of James’s artistic gift was the ability to place the viewer within the same dimension as the scene unfolding before him. Although Frederic Remington was considered the quintessential equine and equestrian artist of his day,⁹⁵ no one knew western mustangs and cow horses better or could portray them with more fidelity than Will James. “By the end of the 1920s,”

⁹² Bell, “Unraveling the bumpy ride,” 62.

⁹³ Amaral, *Will James*, xi.

⁹⁴ Hays, *Will James*, ed. J.M. Neil, 45.

⁹⁵ See B. Byron Price, “Comes a Horseman: Frederic Remington as an Equine and Equestrian Artist,” in *Frederic Remington A Catalogue Raisonne II*, ed. by Peter H. Hassrick (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 103-147.

wrote one modern observer with truth, “James’s popularity had eclipsed that of both his great predecessors, Remington and Russell.”⁹⁶

Will James’s knowledge of horses and cowboys allowed him to create masterpieces of illustrated children’s literature during the Roaring ‘20s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Some of those who adored Will James’s books and illustrations as children eventually became collectors and promoters of his art and stories. A series of museum exhibitions, biographies, and documentary films in the 1980s and 1990s prompted a revival of interest in the cowboy artist and his work, and resulted in the formation of the Will James Society, to sustain his memory. Today, children and adults alike continue to be drawn to the author’s spare yet authoritative prose and the stylized illustrations that help reinforce and heighten the mood established by the text of his books and short stories. More than 70 years after his death Will James still rides the range of what some call the “West of the imagination.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Turner, *Of Chiles, Cacti and Fighting Cocks*, 366.

⁹⁷ See William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, 2d ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

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