

Charles M. Russell

1864 – 1926



Charlie Russell was born on March 19, 1864 in St. Louis, Missouri. Seventy days later, the Montana Territory was created. Sixteen years later, Charlie met the land in its last stages of wildness.

Montana's fledgling conservation movement was struggling when, in March 1880, the 16-year-old artistic genius stepped off the stage in Helena. Charlie soon found his way to the Judith Basin where he was taken in by hunter, trapper and life-long friend Jake Hoover.

Consistent with the themes of his later artistic works, the young man's attention was not captivated by what Montana was becoming, but what it had been.

One day, working as an open-range cowboy for 40 dollars a month, Charlie ran into fellow cowboy Teddy Blue Abbott. As they conversed, Teddy Blue remarked, "God, I wish I'd been a Sioux Indian a hundred years ago." Charlie replied, "Ted, there's a pair of us. They've been living in heaven for a thousand years, and we took it away from 'em for forty dollars a month."

At one point Charlie commented that "civilization is nature's worst enemy. All wild things vanish when she comes ..."

Charlie's art is a treasure and we are endowed with images of what he loved about this land we proclaim the "Last Best Place." When his widow Nancy dedicated the book *Good Medicine*, she began with a quote of Charlie's: "The West is dead! You may lose a sweetheart, but you won't forget her."

We didn't forget because Charlie's genius was expressed in sketch and on canvas and there is no doubt

about what he wanted us to remember. In the introduction to *Good Medicine*, Will Rogers wrote, "He loved nature—everything he painted God had made. He didn't monkey away much time with the things that Man had made. He would rather paint a naked Indian than a fully clothed white man."

Even the poets recognized Charlie's genius lay in his ability to capture fleeting moments that were capable of inspiring others to continue the struggle to restore the natural world. In "The Gift," musician/poet Ian Tyson wrote:

God made Montana for the wild man,
for the Piegan and Sioux and Crow
But He saved His greatest gift for
Charlie,
Said, "Get her all down before she goes –
You've gotta get her all down,
'cause she's bound to go.

We are all familiar with the old cliché that a picture is worth a thousand words and what Charlie M. Russell's genius captured for us speaks clearly across the ages.

It has now been a century since Charlie painted his masterpiece, the iconic buffalo crossing the Missouri River titled "When the Land Belonged to God."

Today, the Montana wildlife conservation ethic has brought us to the cusp of restoring wild bison to the Montana landscape. We are on the brink of getting that done in part because Charlie's artistic genius will not let us forget—not ever.

"Civilization is nature's worst enemy. All wild things vanish when she comes."

– Charles M. Russell
