



Charlie Russell's Montana

He was the West's greatest painter.
Now you can explore the sweeping
landscape that inspired him

By Caroline Patterson

■ Drive U.S. 87 between Great Falls and Lewistown, Montana, and you will see a landscape as unforgettable as any in the West: a cloud-flecked bowl of blue sky, the wide green plains, and the distant purple mountains—the Highwoods, the Little Belts, and the Snowys.

A magnificent landscape and strangely familiar, too, for it inspired one of the greatest artists of the American West: Charles Marion Russell. Today, Russell's works can fetch millions. But Russell started out as a humble cowboy, exchanging drawings for drinks. And his work's strength derives from the cowboy Montana he knew so well.

Over his lifetime, Russell completed some 4,500 oils, watercolors, sculptures, pen-and-ink sketches, and illustrated letters. They depicted the Native American tribes and buffalo who were the prairies' original inhabitants; the arrival of explorers and fur trappers; and, most memorably, the cowboys of the open-range ranches, where Russell himself worked.

Today's Montana is vastly changed. Tepees have been replaced by missile silos, Native American trails by highways driven by "skunk wagons" (Russell's name for cars). Still, the land's essential beauty abides. Trace Russell's path through

PAUL BOUSQUET, ABOVE; EDWARD MCCAIN

Montana prairie—
here, near Utica—
stretches wide as it
did in Charlie
Russell's day. His
studio (above left)
is open to visitors.





PAUL BOUSQUET (2)

A redbrick reminder of Fort Benton's proud past, the Grand Union Hotel has been elegantly restored. Below, guests begin a ride at Circle Bar Guest Ranch.



Montana and you will come to understand, and love, the landscape that shaped his life and art.

Kid Russell comes to the Judith Basin

Charles M. Russell's port of entry into cowboy life was Utica, Montana, situated in the lush Judith Basin. In the 1880s, Utica was headquarters for cowboys working the basin's huge herds of open-range cattle—a town that, in the words of one resident, was “wild and woolly and full of fleas.”

The tenderfoot was in his early teens and dyslexic; after a short, dismal schooling, he left his well-off

sell sent a postcard-size painting to Helena ranch owners depicting the carnage. Titled *Waiting for a Chinook* (the warm winds out of the southwest that would melt the snows), the painting featured a single starving steer with wolves lurking in the background. The painting helped establish Russell's reputation.

Today's Utica is a sleepy town, but there are places that draw your attention. The Utica Museum details lives of famous residents, including Russell and Calamity Jane, and shows relics of Utica's cowboy past.

On a gravel road 13 miles south of town, the Circle Bar Guest Ranch fea-

For Kid Russell, Lewistown was the place to kick up his heels and exchange sketches for drinks in local saloons.

family in St. Louis for a Western adventure. He took a job as a sheepherder—then got fired because he lost the sheep. He wintered for two years with mountain man Jake Hoover, then worked wrangling cattle.

It was here that Russell became an artist. During the terrible winter of 1886–87, when snow and cold killed nearly 90 percent of the herds, Rus-

tures 60 quarter horses, an elegant log lodge, and hiking and fishing. Come September, true Russell fans willing to pony up \$1,700 can join the annual guided historical Russell Trail Ride. “There's something special about covering the same ground that Russell did over a hundred years ago,” says Sarah Stevenson, owner of the Circle Bar. “It's like actually riding into the canvas.”

Lewistown and Fort Benton

Head northeast from Utica on U.S. 87 and you'll be following part of Montana's officially designated C.M. Russell Auto Tour, which matches Russell's paintings with towns and landmarks in the Judith Basin. Soon you'll reach Lewistown, nestled along Big Spring Creek at the foot of the Judith.

For Kid Russell, as he was called, Lewistown was the place he came to kick up his heels, and, it is said, exchange paintings and sketches for drinks in local saloons. It's still one of the most interesting, authentic towns in Montana. The downtown appears much as it did in the early 1900s: Brick buildings feature sandstone carved by Croatian stonecutters. Along Main Street you'll find jewelry stores that carry the locally mined brilliant blue yogo sapphires. And just outside of town, the Charlie Russell Chew-Choo offers 3½-hour round-trip rides to the small town of Denton and back.

From Lewistown, you can head back west on U.S. 87 to Stanford (the

... of *In Without Knocking*, depicting a wild confusion of horses and cowboys—friends of Russell's—entering a saloon). Then take State 80 northwest to reach Fort Benton. Set on the banks of the Missouri River, a favorite Russell subject, this lovely old town was a bustling port in the 1860s: Steamboats churned up the river, carrying the fur trappers, cattlemen, cowboys, and pioneers who would settle the state. Many of the buildings from that era remain, notably the 1882 Grand Union Hotel, which has been elegantly restored and reopened.

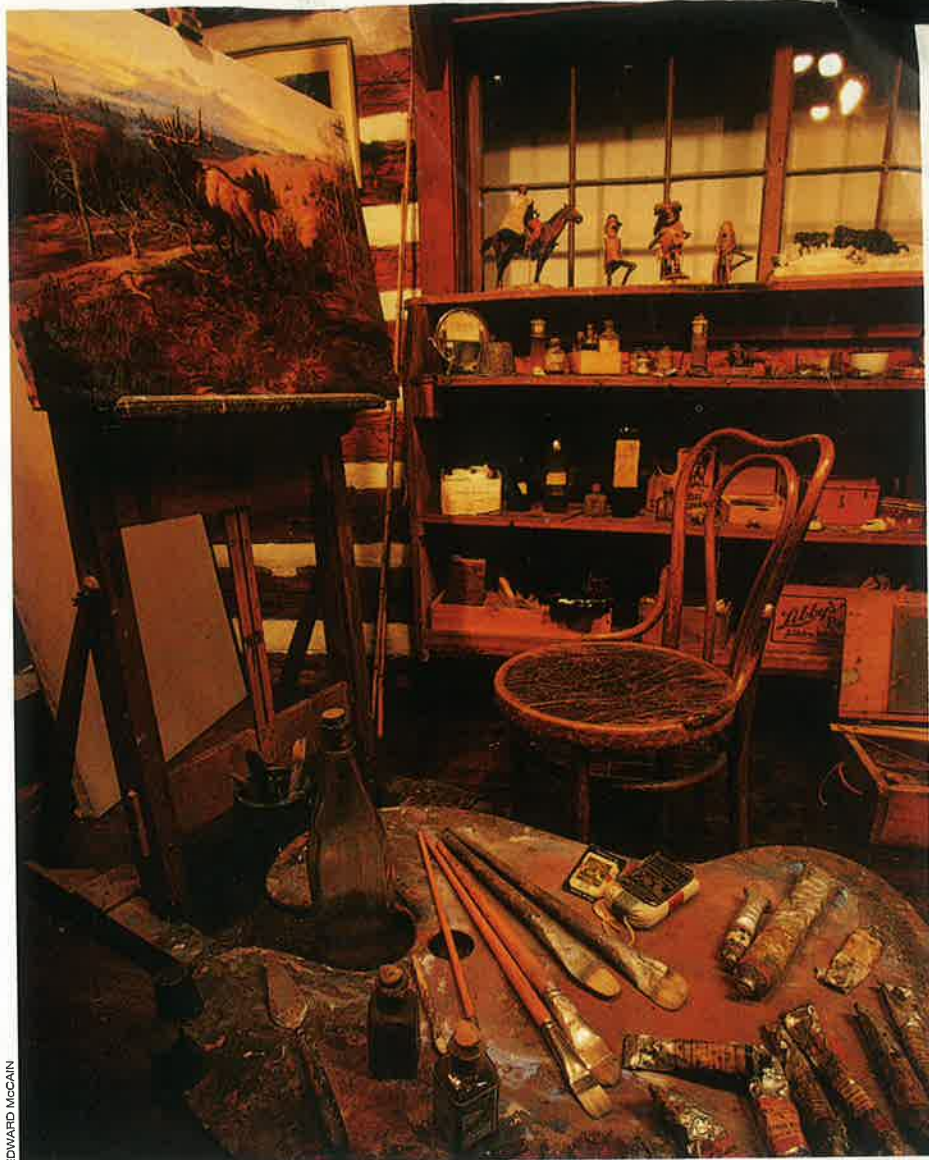
Success in Great Falls

From Fort Benton, it's a short trip southwest on U.S. 87 to Great Falls—which was, in a way, for Russell what Paris was to Picasso. It was here that he gained a wide audience for his work and, at the same time, became a striking public figure with his blond hair, blue eyes, buckskin shirt, and characteristic red sash.

Russell moved to Great Falls in 1897 with his wife and lifetime manager, Nancy Cooper Russell, a housekeeper from Cascade, Montana. "She is the business end and I am the creative," Russell said of his partnership. "She lives for tomorrow and I live for yesterday."

The Russells built on the "good" side of town, at the fashionable address of 1219 Fourth Avenue North. Russell worked mornings in his studio—a cabin built of telephone poles. After that, he'd lunch with Nancy, then, legend has it, he'd ride off in the afternoons to one of his favorite saloons, Nancy standing at the door, two fingers held in the air to say, Two drinks, Charlie.

Today the house and the studio are part of the C.M. Russell Museum, perhaps best known for the C.M. Russell art auction (held each March), where Russell originals and other Western artworks are sold. The museum offers



EDWARD MCCAIN

Charlie was here: Tools of the artist's trade fill Russell's cabin studio.

document-led tours of its galleries of Russell works, as well as tours of Russell's home and studio.

As Russell's art triumphed in exhibitions in 1911 in New York and in Rome, his work commanded higher prices—a single painting sold for \$1,000—and his social circle widened to include author Will James and actor Will Rogers. By the 1920s, Russell and his wife spent summers at their cabin in Glacier National Park and winters in California. Eventually the Russells built a home in Pasadena, although Russell would not live to see its completion. On a Christmas card written just weeks before his death, he wrote, "Heres hoping the worst end of your trail is behind you / That Dad Time be your friend from here to

the end / And sickness nor sorrow dont find you."

He died on October 24, 1926. Three days later, a horse-drawn hearse bore him along the streets of Great Falls, followed by a riderless horse wearing Russell's saddle and bridle. Schoolchildren, cowboys, Native Americans, and other Great Falls Citizens lined the streets to say their last good-bye to the Cowboy Artist.

Still, Russell's legend lives on: in his paintings, in the way he shaped Westerners' visions of their past. "Any man that can make a living doing what he likes is lucky, and I'm that," Russell wrote. "Any time I cash in now, I win."

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Preserving Charlie Russell's Montana



PAUL BOUSQUET

Russell and friend in downtown Great Falls; below, Crow Warrior is part of the C.M. Russell Museum collection.

Gateway to Montana's Russell Country is Great Falls, which is served by Alaska, Delta, and Northwest Airlines. June weather should be excellent, with daytime highs in the 70s and nighttime lows in the high 40s. Later in the summer, temperatures increase; you can expect dramatic afternoon thunderstorms.

For a general guide to the region, contact the **Russell Country tourism office** (800/527-5348 or www.russell.visitmt.com).

The self-guided **C.M. Russell Auto Tour** highlights Russell paintings and history between Great Falls and Lewistown on U.S. 87. Call the Russell Country tourism office (see above) for a free copy.



Fort Benton

ATTRACTIONS Museum of the Upper Missouri River. Exhibits on river life. \$4. *Old Fort Park*; (406) 622-5316. **Walking Tour.** A self-guided tour leads through historic downtown; pick up a copy at the museum.

LODGING Grand Union Hotel. Rooms from \$99, breakfast included. 1 Grand Union Square; (888) 838-1882 or www.grandunionhotel.com.

Great Falls

ATTRACTION C.M. Russell Museum. \$6. 400 13th St. N.; (406) 727-8787 or www.cmrussell.org.

DINING Borrie's Restaurant. This 1938 supper club serves up heaps of Italian pasta and steaks. 1800 Smelter Ave., *Black Eagle, MT*; (406) 761-0300. **Dante's Creative Cuisine.** Quite elegant: Choices include pecan chicken with wild rice, and tiramisu for dessert. 1325 Eighth Ave. N.; (406) 453-9599. **Snyder Drug.** Sip a cherry phosphate at the 82-year-old fountain. 2515 Sixth Ave. N.; (406) 452-6461.

LODGING Charlie Russell Manor. This 1916 brick mansion features rooms thematically based on the Lewis and Clark expedition and an English ballroom. 6 rooms from \$75. 825 Fourth Ave. N.; (877) 207-6131 or (406) 455-1400. **Collins Mansion.** A Queen Anne with parquet floors and a covered porte cochere. 5 rooms from \$85. 1003 Second Ave. NW; (877) 452-6798.

Lewistown

ATTRACTIONS Central Montana Historical Association. Displays on yogo sapphire mining and Montana homesteaders. 408 N.E. Main St. **Charlie Russell Chew-Choo.** Train trip from north of Lewistown to Denton includes dinner and staged holdup, with outlaws galloping alongside, then boarding. On Sat, Jun-Sep; \$85, \$50 ages 12 and under. (406) 538-2527. **Lewistown Art Center.** Contemporary Montana art in a handsome

1890s stone building. *Closed Sun-Mon.* 801 W. Broadway; (406) 538-8278.

Maiden and Gilt Edge ghost towns.

Travel 10 miles north of Lewistown on U.S. 191, then take Maiden Rd. 9 miles to the ghost town of Maiden, a gold-mining camp that boasted a population of 6,000 in 1881 and in 1905 burned to the ground. Five miles farther is Gilt Edge, once frequented by Calamity Jane.

DINING Bon Ton. Confection perfection: handmade chocolates and caramels, and a 1909 marble soda fountain. *Closed Sun.* 312 W. Main; (406) 538-9650. **Mint Bar & Grill.** This restored 1914 watering hole features portabella sandwiches and salmon. *Closed Sun.* 113 Fourth Ave. S; (406) 538-9925.

LODGING Pheasant Tales Bed & Bistro. The inn offers dinners (try the veal saltimbocca) and helps arrange fishing and hunting outings. 6 rooms from \$75. 4½ miles south of Lewistown off Upper Spring Creek Rd. on Timberline Rd.; (406) 538-7880.

Symmes/Wicks House Bed and Breakfast. Beautifully restored bungalow. Three rooms from \$65. 220 West Blvd.; (406) 538-9068. **Yogo Inn.** In downtown Lewistown, the inn occupies the 1913 train station. 122 rooms from \$60. 211 E. Main; (800) 860-9646 or (406) 538-8721.

Utica

ATTRACTION Utica Museum. *Closed Mon-Fri.* Main St.; (406) 423-5208.

LODGING Circle Bar Guest Ranch.

Guest ranch with riding, hiking, and fishing. Also sponsors the annual guided historical Russell Trail Ride, which includes a stop at Jake Hoover's cabin.

10 cabins and 4 suites from \$1,600 a week. (888) 570-0227, (406) 423-5454, or www.circlebarranch.com.

More Russell

Montana Historical Society. In Helena just west of Russell Country, the society has one of the largest public collections of Russell's art. \$3. 225 N. Roberts St.; (406) 444-2694 or www.montanahistory.org. ♦

