

# CHARLIE AND ME... WE RUN TOGETHER FINE

By Joe De Yong



*Joe De Yong studied with Charlie Russell for ten years, and was Russell's only acknowledged protege. De Yong lost his hearing at the age of eighteen and he and Russell communicated largely through "Sign Talk." Joe became practically a member of the Russell family, and often stayed in the log studio. A promising fine artist, he nonetheless turned his talents to Hollywood, where he worked as a technical advisor for movies.*

*The following article represents De Yong's personal recollections and interpretations of Charlie Russell. Reprinted by permission of The National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center as published in Persimmon Hill, Summer and Fall issue 1982.*

*Charlie & Joe "Sign Talk" at Lake McDonald*

I first saw Charlie Russell's work during the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri in 1904, and was a "firm believer" from that time on. Having spent the greater part of the first years of my life in Cherokee Nation of Indian Territory, where the comings and goings of cowboys and Indians were a commonplace part of everyday life, I, at ten years, already had built up a background that added insight to my appreciation of Russell's work. I did not then, or at any time since, need the opinions of any older, supposedly better-informed person to lend support to my convictions.

I first met Russell in the Trigg home in Great Falls in July of 1914, when he made a hurried trip down from Lake McDonald in order to take part in the Lewis and Clark 100-year memorial celebration. (The sort of public affair which he — due to his truly innate modesty — invariably sidestepped if at all possible.) Then, in 1916, it became my great good fortune to not only commence working in Russell's studio as an apprentice-artist, but to also become practically a member of the Russell family during the last ten years

of his life. I was also present when he wrote many of his illustrated, invariably humorous, personal letters to his widely scattered group of friends on every possible level. I was also present when he wrote his stories that made up his book, *Trails Plowed Under* — in fact, and in all modesty, edited some following his death. As a result, I feel justified in saying that I knew Russell as well as anyone now living, and far better than most ...

... But regardless of anything else, a mutual interest in Indians was the bond [between us]. A bond strengthened by the fact that, due to having lost my hearing at eighteen, the Indian Sign Language — at which Russell was an expert — became the usual means for a considerable part of most of our conversations, particularly where matters having to do with the early West were concerned.

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Charlie Russell was easy-going! Even physically lazy, by some standards, and yet his manner of working was actually far more efficient than that of most other successful artists. Indifferent to order in most matters of daily life, he had an orderly mind where his art was concerned; a sense of order all his own ... proven by the fact that, in spite of the almost unbelievable number of completed works in all mediums turned out during the slightly more than thirty years of his active professional life, there were only two unfinished paintings of any size found in his studio at the time of his death. And, in spite of his worsening health during those last months, this number was really the result of his systematically developed habit of carrying along and rotating from day to day between several pictures at the same time. So that at all times one or two of any such series of four or five was always incomplete — a method which developed out of the necessity for allowing an oil painting to dry for several days at a time between each of its various stages, from its initial “rough-in” to its final varnishing.

Further: those who possess an understanding of the problems and working methods of artists in general, and who have had the opportunity to examine Russell’s few pencil sketches, fewer pen drawings, and even rarer small color-notes on scraps of canvas (which made up his artistic “working library”) invariably have expressed amazement over their scant number and their simplicity. The bulging files, the carefully husbanded litter of clipped reproductions representative of the published works of other artists, countless photographs and life drawings of posed models in every conceivable position so noticeable in the studio of the average top-grade successful artist as to be regarded as characteristic, were notable by their almost complete absence.

Actually, Charlie Russell worked with the fewest and most simple tools known to his craft. And, from the standpoint of technical experiment or preoccupation with accepted scientific theories, he was frankly uninterested. As a matter of fact, once when speaking of the color of the shadow of a tree on snow in

one of his pictures, and recalling that I had also accidentally noted the same technical effect in nature, I asked, “Do you *always* use a warm color under such conditions?” To which he unhesitatingly answered with complete frankness that — rare for him — appeared to be slightly tinged with impatience: “I don’t know a *warm* color from a *cool* one!”

In spite of his widely recognized ability to paint dazzlingly rich sunlit effects in a high key, such as is characteristic of the light atmosphere in high altitudes, I am certain that he was not talking for effect. In fact, his ignorance — unawareness is a better term — of many aspects of Art is best illustrated by an incident which occurred one evening in his home. At a time when he was literally struggling over the writing of a letter in his usual grim-jawed manner, he turned to me with a completely baffled expression in his eye. And he said carefully — so I might be better able to read his lips: “How ... how d’yuh spell ...” and then, as a twinkle suddenly appeared in his eyes, he chuckled and added, “How d’ yuh spell ARTISTIC?” (In one of his illustrated personal letters which is to be found in his book *Good Medicine*, he has stated: “I am the kind that sweats when he writes! The pen and the pick are alike to me.”)

At such times he would grasp the pen in one hand and the ink bottle in the other while staring blankly straight ahead — exactly like a steersman holding onto the wheel of a ship in rough weather. With the sweat streaming down his forehead, he appeared to actually struggle over every word — it being extremely rare for him to write a complete sentence without having to stop and think before going farther.

One, two, three words at a time, and always slow ... he had little idea of spelling and none whatever of punctuation other than the period, sometimes a question mark, and — though rarely — a few chance commas sprinkled in like so much pepper and salt. It might take him an hour to write a half page — or, when the ideas were slow in coming, he might lay a started letter aside until a day or two later. But always he *said something* and in an entirely original manner. To know the man, his background, and his point of view might supply the key ... and surely the illustration of such incidents added to their charm. But his writing alone contained a quality of its own.

In all the years I knew him, he

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never pretended to *teach!* And I now think that, having learned by observation himself, he took it for granted that such was all anyone required ... though (and rarely) he might, provided his own work was going unusually well, move over beside me as I worked and say — either by word-of-mouth or Sign Talk or, sometimes, if I failed to get his exact meaning, by *writing* — something on the order of: “Are you going to leave that rope coiled up on that saddle that way? It looks like a life preserver!”

Invariably brief and to the point, such remarks were also apt to be either dryly humorous or sarcastic. As a matter of fact, I doubt if he offered any suggestions that could be called Technical Advice on more than half-a-dozen occasions. Unbelievable as that may sound when stretched over a period of better than ten years’ time!

If he possessed any distinctive method of working, strangely enough, he — who punctually lived by the sun as did the Indians he knew so well — could only be measured by the hands of the clock since, invariably up early and usually at work by six, his working day was finished by noon. But when at Bull Head Lodge — his summer camp at Lake McDonald — he often painted all day long, simply because there was little else to do.

As a matter of fact, when on his annual New York visits, fellow artists — arising late and struggling over their morning coffee and the various “drags” which might have lingered from the night before — were invariably amazed that his day’s work was often finished before they had managed to get started!

While he usually worked in an absorbed, yet relaxed manner (except when faced by some unexpectedly knotty problem — at which times he could turn noticeably stubborn, irritable even) he welcomed the company of intimate friends and would usually carry on a genial, even humorous, conversation while painting. And yet, as he grew older — and in spite of the fact the quality of his work was at its zenith — his self-imposed “sense of finish” in his work grew more and more exacting.

At that time I remember his saying: “The game gets harder all the time. Nothing comes easy!”

There were certain times — moods, rather — when he seemed to be as removed from and apparently as indifferent to the need for conveyance of thought by speech as any sane person could possibly be. A state of mind — of his entire being — when to “come back to the surface” even for the answering of some simple question appeared to be a definite struggle: “Yes.” In a fumbling, groping, semi-hypnotic state beyond mere absentmindedness, he at such times appeared so self-centered as to seem altogether indifferent to those around him, their desires and even temporary welfare ... as to be regarded as altogether indifferent if not downright

selfish. And yet at such times he was never arrogant, irritable or in any way demanding — more a matter of being “elsewhere.” On the other hand, there were also unpredictable occasions when the urge to “Talk” amounted almost to a hunger.

The first, being well-known to his family and small circle of intimates, was accepted without any seeming need for discussion — surely never resentment. While the other extreme was much less apt to arouse any reaction other than spontaneous delight since he was at such times the genial, magnetic, quietly-expansive personality which his friendships — far more often with men than with women — were based. A man’s man, yet altogether lacking in the offensive “Billy Goat” type of brag too often characteristic of those of the same general classification.

He was sometimes quiet and absentminded when planning a picture or model, or would freeze up at an overly familiar stranger (as anyone has the right to do). But I never saw the time when Russell was the least bit conceited or conscious of his own fame. Nor could he understand others who let success go to their heads; rather he pitied them. I remember his saying once that “*Nobody* is important enough to feel *important.*”

In July 1923, when returning to Lake McDonald from the Dempsey-Gibbons fight at Shelby, Montana, we had to lay over several hours between trains at Glacier Park Station. While there, we were up at the Big Tree Lodge (as the Indians call the Great Northern’s hotel) and there happened to be some officials of the Great Northern and one or two others of prominence who, of course, urged Russell to eat with them. But as soon as he could get away he signed to me, “Let’s go down where *my* people are” — meaning Mike Shannon’s place where the guides, packers, and Indians hang out — adding, “This is too highbrow for me.”

From the time following his death, much was made of his friendship with Sid Willis, the old-timer and former northern Montana sheriff who owned the Mint Saloon which housed a considerable collection of Russell’s earlier works. However, the association which received less attention on the part of the public but was of much longer duration and far more deeply-rooted was with Bill Rance, Charlie’s free-wheeling, high-dealing buddy in the sporting life of Great Falls’ early years. Proprietor of “The Silver Dollar,” directly across Central Avenue, Rance’s place was small, darkly panelled, and the gathering place for the “elite” — the “quality-drinkers” of the town ... and until its owner’s tragic death by his own hand, it continued to be Charlie’s downtown headquarters.

The Mint — large, usually crowded — catered to the smelter workers and more often noisy, expansive types. And when I happened to remark, “It looks like the Mint gets the trade!” Charlie explosively, and with

— for him — an extremely rare expression of scorn in his eyes, blurted: “It’s all five-cent stuff!”

While he would drop into the Mint occasionally in making his afternoon rounds along Central Avenue, the small cigar store next door gradually became his unofficial headquarters, probably due to its intimate atmosphere. His was an easy-going, unpretentious, magnetic personality that knew neither class nor position.

For instance, a certain workman of the lunch-bucket type who was employed at a refinery across the River remarked after Russell’s death, “I used to try to get off early and hurry up to the cigar store to hear Charlie tell stories. But now I go straight home!”

I remember once we were at a Studio Party at Dr. Lummis’ place in Los Angeles, and one of the guests happened to be a middle-aged moving picture actor who had played prominent parts in a few pictures but without ever having set the world on fire. At this party he had entrenched himself in a corner, arranged his graying locks to the best advantage, folded his arms and rocked back on his heels, as tho posing for a statue of the British Lion — all with such a self-satisfied air that anyone within ten feet of him could taste it. I noticed Russell eyeing the would-be celebrity, and at last he said to me in sign, “Maybe he thinks he’s a Chief!”

Actually, while Charlie Russell ordinarily gave the impression of being on a par with those of his time and surroundings, his was of a mentality that could not absorb instruction in the commonly-accepted manner. As a matter of fact, he once stated: “They couldn’t teach me anything in school, they just let me sit!” Adding, “When I left military school at Brunswick, New Jersey, I had over a hundred hours of guard duty hanging over my head!”

...According to the Chief, the most picturesque stretch of mountain and plains was out on a high

prairie hill south of Great Falls. After a frosty morning, when the work wouldn’t go so well, he’d put on a mackinaw, pick up his bundle, pull his hat down and step out to the outside where old Neenah would be stepping about pretty with his neck and tail kinked, blowing mighty scarey (for an old horse he had a lot of stuff). An hour or so later Russell would come back, his face red and a light sort of blazing in his grey eyes. He didn’t ever say much at such times, but you could tell he’d got what he’d gone for — he’d made connections. The work’d go with a swing then, and he’d step back and forth, to and from his easel, with a quick, impatient sort of toss to that long lock of sandy grey hair that hung down at the side of his forehead. A touch he had when inspiration crowded close — and after a while he’d stop to build a cigarette, grin sort of a shame-faced way, and sign, “My medicine is strong now ...”

On such rides he most often headed for those rolling prairie hilltops south of town where now, under a big rough boulder, he’s making the Big Sleep, with the Highwoods to the east, the Big Belts and the Little Belts to the south, and Rockies showing plain in a long, low, tumbled snow-capped line eighty to a hundred miles east [sic].

They are making a museum of his studio, and there is talk of someday moving him to the same spot. But I hope they never will. He worked in the cabin and he loved it, but outdoors was where his heart was and that spot is his country. With the rumble of streetcars a short block away, and the rattle and

bang of trucks close at hand, he’d never rest easy. Out where there’s room, a big sky, long look and lots of color, leave him.

