

# Frederic Remington

1861-1909



## BIOGRAPHY

Frederic Sackrider Remington was born in Canton, New York on October 4, 1861. He grew up in Canton and nearby Ogdensburg, where his father, Seth Pierre Remington, was a newspaper publisher, U.S. Customs collector and a distinguished Brevet Colonel during the Civil War. His mother, Clara Bascomb Sackrider, came from a prominent mercantile family.

As a child, Frederic was a poor student but excelled at pulling pranks. He enjoyed canoeing, fishing, and frequent camping trips in the Adirondack Mountains. With concern over his lack of math abilities or discipline of study, he was placed in military school at age thirteen. But Frederic remained lazy towards work, lacking ambition. Drawing caricatures of fellow classmates in the margins of Upton's Infantry Tactics, he thought he might someday go into journalism or art.

In 1878-79, Remington attended the newly established School of Fine Arts at Yale University for three semesters. An indifferent student with little patience with the classical approach to instruction, his professors said he lacked the talent to be a serious artist. He excelled on the equestrian team, the football team, and as a boxing champion while at Yale. Leaving school during the Christmas holidays of 1879, he did not return due to the ill health of his father, who died in February of tuberculosis.

Spending a few weeks in 1881 vacationing on the plains of Montana, Remington becoming obsessed with the west. He later told of meeting an old-timer bemoaning the passing of the old West, and how he decided to "record some facts around me." It is probable that this was a calculated reconstruction of the truth composed by an artist later at the height of his power. One result from this trip was a sketch worked on plain wrapping paper, submitted and accepted for publication by Harper's Weekly, although it had to be redrawn by a staff artist.

From 1880 to 1883, he tried a business career in several successive jobs but clerking bored him. When he received his inheritance, he purchased a sheep ranch in northwestern Butler County, which he owned from 1883 to 1884.

Later selling out, he went to Kansas City where he entered a partnership in a hardware store. Spending more time sketching than accounting or selling, his hardware partner eventually bought him out. He became a silent partner in the ownership of a saloon.

Marrying Eva Adele Caten from New York on October 1, 1884, he kept the true nature of his job secret from his wife and family. When the truth was disclosed, Eva left him and returned east. Through legal maneuvering, he lost his investment in the saloon and lost his house.

Remington traveled again through the West, prospecting and sketching, before moving in with friends in Kansas City. It was at this point that Remington began painting in earnest, selling his first paintings at W. W. Findlay Art Store. He now began submitting sketches to magazines back east, along with text for accompanying articles.

Eventually, Remington returned east and was reunited with his wife. His Uncle Bill, long believing that Frederic had been born to be an artist, helped the couple out financially, sending Frederic to study under the Impressionist painters at the Art Student's League in Brooklyn, New York. Remington did not stay there long, having little patience for formal training.

When Geronimo led his followers off the reservations in revolt, Remington became a war correspondent for Harper's, traveling west to send sketches and stories back to New York.

As an illustrator and artist, he achieved great and enduring fame, a considerable fortune, and the admiration of the great personages of his era. During his day, he sold pictures for upwards of \$600; today they are priceless.

Made an associate of the National Academy of Design in 1891, he was also a close friend of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, often invited to stay at his famous ranch. Another personal friend, Theodore Roosevelt, said of Remington, "It is no small thing for the nation that such an artist and man of letters should arise to make permanent record of certain of the most interesting features of our national life. The soldier, the cowboy and the rancher, the Indian, the horses and cattle of the plains, will live in his pictures and bronzes, I verily believe, for all time."

A ruptured appendix and peritonitis ended his life on December 26, 1909, at 48 years of age, in Ridgefield, Connecticut. As per his wishes he once told to a drinking companion, his tombstone reads, "He knew the horse."

#### CONNECTION TO BUTLER COUNTY

Remington's Butler County sheep ranch was located in the southwest quarter of Section 25 of Fairmount Township, near the tiny settlement of Plum Grove, about six miles from Potwin,

twenty miles northwest of El Dorado. It was purchased for \$3,400 through a Yale classmate Robert Camp. Later he also purchased the southeast quarter of section 26 for \$1,250. Peabody, about 10 miles to the north, being the only town on the railroad line, was where Remington and Camp got most of their supplies.

The property included a three-room ranch house, still standing though extensively remodeled, a corral and two barns, now gone. The large barn, one of the last buildings razed, had an etching of a cowboy roping a steer cut into the inside wall with a knife.

Fred, as he was known here, was a big fellow, jovial, friendly and popular with the younger set, throwing bachelor parties with plenty of liquor and always ready for a horse race, wild steer riding, or any other sport. Other residents wouldn't have given a nickel for his chances of becoming a renowned Western artist. A renowned hell-raiser maybe, but not an artist.

Along with sheep, Remington lost no time in also purchasing a string of horses. He acquired an unusual half-breed Texas-thoroughbred mare, a light gold dust color with a mane and tail of Naples yellow. Named Terra Cotta, his hired hands shortened it to Terry. "The gallop across the prairie is glorious," wrote Remington. "The light haze hung over the plains, not yet dissipated by the rising sun. Terra Cotta's stride was steel springs under me as she swept along, brushing the dew from the grass of the range. . ." Many remembered him riding a bucking, galloping pony, waving his sombrero with a free hand.

He also raised cattle, but never mules, as has been erroneously told by many. Considerable remodeling of the barns was necessary for rearing sheep; he also had a sheep shed built at the top of a slope overlooking the range.

Always, Remington sketched, filling books with sketches of his ranch, his friends, animals, life on the prairies – anything that interested him. He gave most of these early drawings away.

At 5'9" and 220 pounds, he was a proficient boxer, and often arranged boxing matches with other young men of the area, using one of his barns as a makeshift gymnasium. Once he rode into Peabody to find the town bully picking on another man. Remington dismounted and gave the bully a sound thrashing.

A popular local sport he discovered was "running jacks", a sport involving mounted hunters with six-foot lances, a fleet dog, and the long-eared Kansas jackrabbit. The dog would flush the rabbit from cover and the hunters then began the chase. The object was to touch the jack with the lance – a feat not often accomplished. Remington's story, "Coursing Rabbits on the Plains," was published in *Outing Magazine* in May 1887. During the race mentioned in the story, he foolishly lost his beloved mare, Terra Cotta, in a bet with a local settler.

In July, Remington and George Shepherd of Peabody left to take a look at the country to the southwest. Remington made another such trip and was gone most of the summer, leaving the ranch to his young employees.

With a seemingly unlimited store of pranks, the hardscrabble ranchers of the area considered him nothing but a wealthy playboy. Resenting his extravagance, careless management, and his impact on their children, his constant pranks angered them.

At one party, Remington slipped behind an English rancher and fired his revolver in the air, only to have the unruffled Englishman say calmly, "Put up that gun. You might hurt someone, Frederic."

The first of November, the preacher found his buggy on top of the church and his cow inside the front door. Just out for fun, Remington paid to get the buggy down, clean the church and paint it, and made a cash donation to the minister.

#### COMING TO / LEAVING THE AREA

In correspondence, Robert Camp described the beauty of Kansas and its potential. It was a boom time for raising stock, with wool prices steadily rising. Early in 1883, seeking to make his fortune, Frederic Remington arranged for Camp to purchase a sheep ranch for him, sight unseen, with a portion of his inheritance, even though he knew nothing about the business. He figured there would be plenty of people who could handle the details while he played the part of gentleman rancher.

But stepping off the train in Peabody to discover that Kansas wasn't what he expected, he spent two weeks in deep depression at the Peabody hotel. He had imagined the cowboys and outlaws of Dodge City. Also, his ranch house was little more than a shack and the sheep stench was terrible. Raising sheep was exactly what Camp had told him, promising a fine return on his investment, but it was ugly.

Deciding to make a go of it, he hired two ranch hands from the area, Billy Kehr and Grandom Scrivner. Kehr, having experience in sheep ranching, lived at the ranch doing most of the work. Several hundred sheep, horses and cattle were purchased, and improvements made. Remington did the cooking and watched the stock. Often he would find willing neighborhood boys to watch the stock while he sketched or roamed the surrounding countryside.

Perhaps the longing for a more "Wild West" led to his later writing a legal friend in New York a hasty note: "Paper came all right – are the cheese – man just shot down the street – must go." An examination of Peabody newspapers shows there was no such catastrophe.

Remington took a special interest in the children of the area, giving them free run of his ranch. One day he bought candy for a handicapped boy named Hervy Hoyt. He told Hervy to "make them pay," knowing how the other boys teased him. Hervy shared the candy by tossing it in the air for the others to catch in their mouths like dogs.

As winter came, work grew more difficult and more boring, causing Remington to grow restless. His general lack of skill in managing a sheep ranch, as well as an ill-fated Christmas Eve party, led to his decision to leave Kansas.

The fateful festivity was held at the Plum Grove School, the small stone building also serving as a church, which was crowded beyond capacity. Young Remington and “the boys” were there, as well as Nathan Duncan, against whom they nursed a grudge. The target proved irresistible, resulting in paper wads being aimed at Duncan’s bald head. The offenders were asked to leave.

Anger fueled by liquor led to more mischief. A box of excelsior was found, brought up in front of the double doors of the school building, and set afire; the doors were opened and someone yelled “Fire!” After looking, Dr. Seaman of Plum Grove realized that there was no real danger and tried to quiet audience. But the prank led to a near panic, with residents diving out of the windows. One plump maiden lady got stuck in a window before calm was restored and the program continued.

Authorities called the prank criminal and warrants were sworn out for the arrest of the five perpetrators. Remington was blamed for everything, referred to as “Billy the Kid.” The trial was held in the justice court under Justice of Peace Charles E. Lobdell. Frank S. Allen, later donator of the Susan B. Allen Memorial Hospital to El Dorado, was one of the jurors. The trial lasted two days, resulting in a hung jury. It was never retried, being dismissed upon payment of court costs by Remington.

No longer accepted in the community, Remington headed back east, selling both quarters in the spring of 1884 for \$5,500. The new owner, finding the walls of the buildings covered with Remington sketches, painted over them. In light of that spring’s crash in stock values, Remington would appear to have done well in getting out when he did.

His time in Kansas was the only time that he established residence in his beloved West, although in subsequent years he made frequent Western trips for inspiration and fresh material. The spirit of Kansas continued to color his later work. One small volume of Kansas sketches remains, at the Remington Art Memorial in Ogdensburg, New York.

## ACHIEVEMENTS

The flavor of the old West has nowhere been more successfully captured than in the works of Frederic Remington. His legacy of nearly 3,000 oil paintings, watercolors, drawings and 22 bronzes easily establish him as the foremost artist of the early West, capturing forever the quickly disappearing life of cowboys, cavalry soldiers, horses and native Americans.

Very few illustrators go on to gain fame as museum artists, making Remington unique. He also wrote about the west in numerous articles, where he literally painted the sights and

experiences he observed with his pen. His accounts had the solid ring of reality to them, providing an authentic picture of classic ranch life.

Remington dressed as a cowboy and used “range lingo” to prove his drawings were authentic because he had “been thar.” He was full of stories, largely embellished, of working as a rancher, prospector, Indian scout, and cowpuncher. He campaigned with troops, including the 10th Cavalry Buffalo soldiers, and later in Cuba during the Spanish-American war. All of these experiences found their way into his art and stories.

Compared to fellow western artist Charles Russell, Remington’s work was frequently less exact in detail, being more primarily interested in capturing live action. He gave a masterly portrayal of horses, the first artist to depict the horse in action. Fascinated by their motion, he took many photos of them with the newly invented box camera. His paintings depicting horses with all four feet off the ground brought criticism and ridicule, but photography proved his depiction to be correct. One critic wrote described his horses as wild, lithe, flexible, and alive.”

Though his early work was unpolished, it had the unmistakable ring of truth, with a raw power applied to human figures and horses applied with the reality of observation. Remington’s work signaled the end of the Victorian era of romantic illustration.

Illustrating for several popular magazines of the day, including Harper’s, Collier’s, Outing, Youth’s Companion, and Century, he illustrated a series in the latter written by a young Theodore Roosevelt. So overwhelmingly successful was his illustrative art, other well-known artists of his day were known as “of the School of Remington”.

He also illustrated a number of books, including Solomon Buckley Griffin’s Mexico of Today, Owen Wister’s The Virginian and Done in the Open, a reissue of Longfellow’s Hiawatha, and Frances Parkman’s novel, Oregon Trail.

Previously the press had tried to play down the wilder aspects of the West to encourage European investments and settlement, but now, with news stories such as Custer’s Last Stand, the public was hungry for illustrations of the “real West.”

Taking up serious writing, he produced excellent short stories and novels with a flavor of the West and an understanding of its characters that are individual and unique. His book, The Way of an Indian, is a sympathetic and deeply probing study. Among his other books were Pony Tracks, Crooked Trails, Frontier Sketches, and John Ermine of the Yellowstone.

Remington accompanied General Nelson Miles’ 1890 expedition as a correspondent, into the Dakota Badlands to repress the Sioux uprising under Chief Sitting Bull. His account of the Battle of Wounded Knee is still well known today.

Sent to Cuba in 1898 by the Hearst Syndicate and Harper’s, he witnessed the battle of San Juan Hill, capturing it in the celebrated painting of Teddy Roosevelt leading his Rough Riders into battle. Teddy acclaimed Remington as the greatest of American artists.

Remington's work was regularly exhibited and sold in numerous galleries, beginning with the Academy of Art in New York City in 1893. His early paintings reflected romantic realism with strong details; later paintings showed an emerging Impressionism, encouraged by artist friends like Childe Hassam. In 1903 he began work for Collier's as an artist under contract, leaving him free to choose his own subjects.

Among his better known paintings are "The Last Stand", depicting a cow with her calf in the snow surrounded by wolves, based on drawing made on rough brown wrapping paper while living in Butler County, "A Dash for the Timber" painted in 1889, acknowledged as his first masterpiece, "The Cheyenne Scout" and "Texas Cattle in a Kansas Corn Corral".

While living in New Rochelle, Remington was neighbor to Frederic W. Ruckstull, a successful sculptor. In 1895 Remington, with some prodding from Ruckstull, gave shape to his own first sculpture, "The Bronco Buster," based on an earlier painting. Preliminary sketches used for this painting were drawn on his Kansas ranch, portraying Grand Scrivner on a spooked horse. Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders presented a casting of this piece to him, becoming one of his most precious possessions.

Quickly mastering the medium, Remington thoroughly enjoyed what he termed his "mud" work, using the sand cast and later lost wax methods. Other well known pieces include "Coming Through the Rye," of which a plaster replica exhibited at the St. Louis World Fair in 1904, and "The Wounded Bunkie."

Remington's work both distorts our overall sense of the American frontier west and yet provides a rare and important insight into the experience. With an unusual perspective, he records the struggles of the historic west as well as its gradual death as civilization became more fully entrenched.

#### AWARDS, RECOGNITION

In 1888, Remington won the Clarke and the Hallgarten prizes at the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design. He was awarded a silver medal in the art exhibit in the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889.

The entire March 18, 1905 issue of Collier's Weekly was devoted to Remington's works. He was listed by E. Benezit in his Dictionary of Painters, Sculptors, Designers and Printmakers of All Times and All Countries as studied by French and Foreign Specialists.

On October 8, 1940, the U. S. Post Office issued a commemorative Frederic Remington stamp, one of their artist series, in the 10¢ denomination.

The Frederic Remington High School, east of Whitewater in Butler County, was dedicated on November 17, 1963, being named after the painter. A bronze casting of "The Bronco Rider" sits in their courtyard and their athletic teams are called the Broncos.

Today Remington's Ogdensburg home in New York has become a memorial museum, filled with some of his best paintings and sculpture, along with memorabilia of his colorful life.

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