Looking backward and forward from the Mountains: Renner and Russell—Revisited

Ginger Renner

Editorial Note: Frederic G. Renner was a lover of beauty—in nature and in art. But he never allowed this “romantic” bent to obscure his vision of reality and the practical means of coping with it. An impassioned admirer of the cowboy painter Charles M. Russell, whom he had known personally as a childhood hero in Montana, Renner chose a career in the Soil Conservation Service as his means of serving the Western land that both he and Russell loved. With practical vigor and competence, he rose to the post of chief of the Range Management Division of the SCS. He helped establish a society (SRM) dedicated to rangeland, and contributed an award (the Renner) to encourage its members to strive for its objectives. With the same practical energy, he assembled the largest private collection of Russell’s work, contributed artworks and expertise to museums, and authored a definitive work on the painter, so that many could share his appreciation and enjoyment of Russell’s art.

Although he himself chose a career involving science and administration, Renner secured the copyright for the Society for Range Management to use Russell’s “Trailboss” as a logo, apparently finding in the romantic figure from the Old West the vision, dedication, and wisdom required of the contemporary range manager.

Fred Renner passed away in 1987, and his widow, Ginger Renner, has continued his life work.

Renner—I was out in the pool tonight—there’s a pale gold, quarter-moon hanging over the Praying Monk, and the north side of Camelback is standing dark against an odd night sky. You and I saw it like this so many times—remember?—all those summer nights when we retreated to the refreshment, the silky comfort of the bath-tub temperature of the water. We floated around, admiring Arcturus shining overhead and I pontificated over the Great Swan and Orion, none of which impressed you very much. Remember, some nights when we first moved to Arizona we could see the Pleiades, twinkling like a bunch of turned-out teen-agers. We haven’t seen them in ten years—too much city-light, too much glunk in the air—it takes so little to shut off the glories of our natural world.

I waited—floating pleasureably in the sun-warmed water—waited to feel you around. You weren’t here tonight. Sometimes I have felt you so close—at times I have almost sensed you sitting up there on the deck and I could nearly smell the Prince Albert smoke from your pipe—other times it seemed you were sitting on the pool steps, letting your legs wave gently back and forth in the movement of the water—making your usual wry comments on my lack of aquatic skills—and there have been so many times I have talked to you—even argued with you—these days, dear, I always get the last word—it wasn’t always like that, was it, Fred?

Tonight, I sort of wondered—have you come across Charlie, Fred? If so, I don’t think you’ll come around much more. Who would hang around here when you could be leanin’ against a corral fence somewhere swapping stories with Charlie? I wouldn’t expect you to—come back, that is. I’m already musing about the scene—the two of you together. I don’t suppose you’ll think to clear up a lot of those questions I had—you remember, the ones you thought I shouldn’t ask! Come on, Fred, now you surely knew he wouldn’t mind me asking. I expect that fairly soon you’ll get around to talking about that subject the two of you cared about so very much—the land of our Western world. Oh! I can almost hear it now—neither one of you are much for stepping on another man’s words, but it must be hard to the two of you not to be butting in on each other’s lines. You and Charlie felt so keenly about what had happened to our land. You and I thought Charlie expressed those feelings better than they had ever been set forth before or since—

“Bob you won’t know the town or the country either its all grass side down now where once you rode circle and I might wrangle a gopher couldn’t graze now the booster say it’s a better country than it ever was but it looks like hell to me I liked it better when it belonged to God It was sure his country when we knew it” 1

You always said Charlie was ahead of his time. In ways—certain ways—I think you were right. What you wrote in your foreword to your book, Paper Talk, was right on target—“To Russell the deliberate destruction of Montana’s beautiful grasslands was little short of desecration. He had the perception to know that once the grass was destroyed, desolation would follow. As a conservationist, Russell was many years ahead of his time.” 2

I cheer you for writing that, Fred. I know you came to that conclusion calmly, deliberately, as was your style always in mental probing. But Fred, I think in saying that, perhaps, you were taking just a romantic view of Charlie as he, himself, had of old Montana. You label him a ‘conservationist’ and certainly he falls into that position when he laments the destruction of Montana’s grasslands. Remember the letter he wrote to Granville Stuart, one of Montana’s great pioneers,

“I went through the Basin last fall there is nothing there now to show that a cow ever lived there the farmer has plowed all the grass under and there s not feed enough to stake a grasshopper Where once great herds of antelope fed there s not even a curtoo now” 3

Yet, Fred, when I was sort of licking my wounds last summer, after you left, I spent the month of August riding over the

1Excerpt from a letter to Bob Stuart, March 10, 1913. The author has, in the interest of clarity, corrected Mr. Russell’s unique spelling. No attempt has been made to insert punctuation since Charlie managed rather well for over forty years to live and communicate without it.


3Excerpt from a letter to Granville Stuart, undated but probably 1924.
back roads of Montana and the Basin was lush with good grass—the cattle were fat—(course, the price wasn't very good!) Granted, there sure are enough fences to give ol' Charlie a fit. I dog-legged around section corners all the way from Utica to Buffalo—much of it had to be country that Charlie rode over on Monte—back in those halcyon days of the early 1880's—those days he wanted to remain forever.

It seems to me, Fred, a real conservationist has a much broader view of the definitions of that title than Charlie ever exhibited. Russell did not look beyond his passionately-held, personal desire to maintain an accurate status quo, circa 1880. As far as I can tell, Fred, from reading Stuart's journals and from the reports in the weekly newspapers of 1880, the snow had been deep that winter, so when summer came the grasslands rolled, lush, unbroken and green. 1880. personal desire were considered that. Herefords—still he acknowledged he had walked into heaven. He really meant no wonder that sixteen-year-old, Just-turned-loose kid thought he had walked into heaven. He really meant it when he wrote to his friend. Grovent, forty years later, saying, "You were right we are not young. But we lived when meat was plenty and we didn't have to hide when we drank or gambled. One day then was worth more than 20 years of living now. We got the cream these late comers are getting skim milk. Grovent we got no kick coming." So we have to give Charlie credit. While he genuinely grieved over the inexorable progress, the flood of homesteaders that washed over the land, the change that came through the establishment of towns, the buffalo turned into long-horns, who in turn gave way to short, squat placid Herefords—still he acknowledged that he had been blessed to know it in its pristine state and eternally he gave thanks for that.

Yet, Fred, you were the true conservationist. You came along a generation-plus later—you saw the devastation on the land brought about by the very people that Charlie considered "regular men"—ranchers, cow and sheep men, who were overwhelmed by the vast grasslands they found, free and unfenced, in Montana in the 1880s—men who threw ever-increasing herds across the seemingly endless valleys and waterways and who, in less than ten years, came to know the land would not tolerate such abuse. You came much later—you and a very select group of men—scientists, rangemen—adventurers, but no romantics—and instead of lamenting the rape of the West, you set about to rehabilitate her. You all came up with some mighty innovative procedures.

I was telling someone just a week or so ago about you working out the ideas and details for the very first snow survey ever done anywhere—a survey that would eventually predict how much water one could count on the following growing season. Like Charlie, Fred, you had the cream! Snowshoeing into the Idaho wilderness area, between the ghost towns of Atlanta and Rocky Bar—I told them about you spending your last night, before pushing off on your own personal snowy adventure, on the front room floor at Peg Leg Annie's. Tell Charlie about that one. Fred. He'll love it—after all, he knew some girls like her at Chicago Jo's in Helena. Nowadays, Fred, the young men whoop up into an area in a snowmobile, take their measurements and are back home in time for the Monday night football game on TV. Still, what they are doing is just what you first did so many years ago in the expanse of the Idaho wilderness.

I remember, dear, how you used to talk about establishing the experiment station north of Madera in the San Joaquin valley. You were so proud of that! And rightfully so. And I remember how you rather forlornly wandered over the property when you and I drove back there years later—it had expanded by unnumerable buildings, equipment, houses for employees, corrals and sheds. Still, up on the hill that first station building, the one you designed and managed to pull off, even with the restrictions laid down by the Department of Agriculture—that still was fully used, in fair shape. But down the road after we headed south you said, out of the silence of miles of highway, "It's a left-over—it's not doing anything new—we solved those problems thirty years ago—it ought to be disbanded." So you, too, dear, expressed disappointment—underneath your regret was the implication— "the west we loved died. She was a beautiful girl that had many lovers but today there are only a few left to mourn her?"

You, too, thought like Charlie—it was a world gone awry. Yet you, Fred, sought out and solved a number of problems around the world. Few men have the chance to really affect the earth, at least in selected areas, as you have done—the eleven months you spent in the back hills of Greece still reverbare—old men, clutching their carved staffs, following the small herds of goats down the rocky roads, find some respite shade under the gnarled olive trees and they remember a sturdy and determined man who walked over their land and changed thousand-year-old irrigation practices that had been leaching the soil and gutting the hillsides. You know, Fred, Charlie didn't know how to do that sort of thing—to help the land recover—to find ways to renew her strengths, so he did the very best thing he could have done—he simply spent a lifetime painting the land as it was before too many men swarmed over the land, taking her treasures, using her riches with no thought of paying her back. He painted her in her glory—unfettered, unfenced, unending—this was his solution to a problem for which he could see no satisfactory outcome. Both of you left lots of good marks on the land—I expect he'll be mighty proud of you—he might even say so when you get together.

That quarter moon has gone down, Honey—I'll be going in now—as it always was, it's sure good to talk with you.

2Excerpt from a letter to Phil Weinhard, October 17, 1919.

*Friend Grovent is not identified; letter is undated but written c. 1920.*