

Saving Charlie

Pete Vann saves the life of the West's greatest painter.

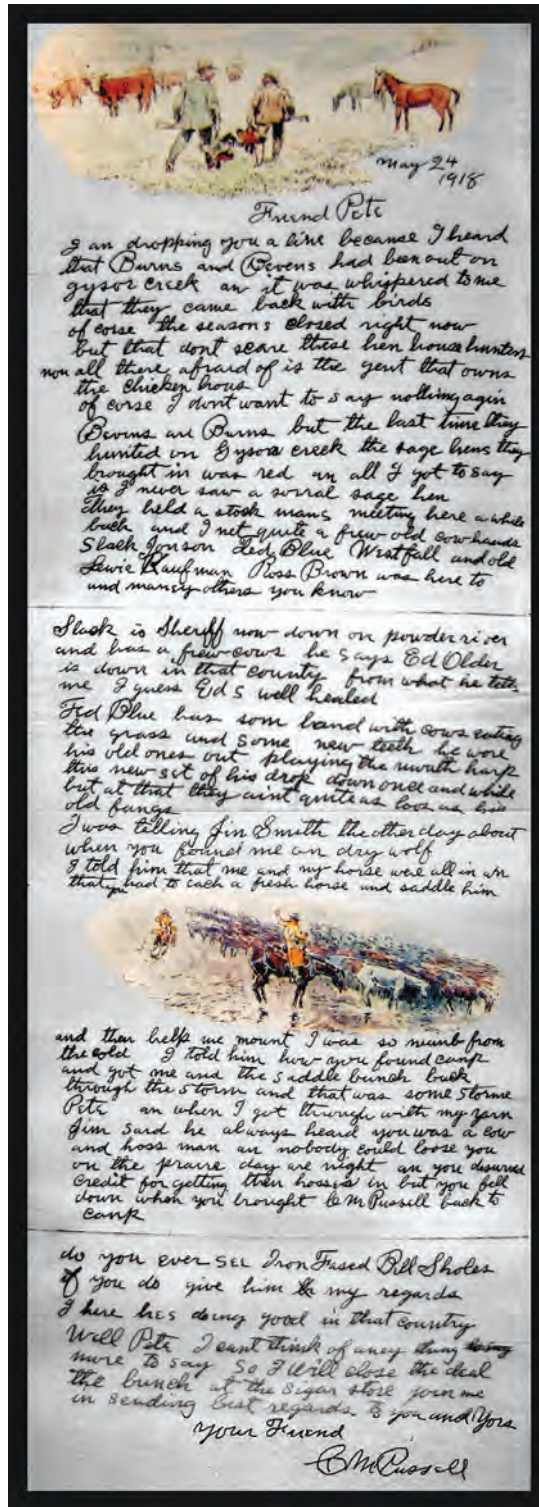
By Jane Lambert

What if a young Charles M. Russell, one of the premier western artists ever, simply vanished into a snowstorm and became a frozen corpse? What would decorate the walls of our living rooms and bunkhouses? Would anyone else have been able to capture such authentically depicted, historical time capsules of open-range cowboys and Native Americans?

These are questions without answers because Charlie's unsung cowboy crony, Pete Van, braved the blizzard and didn't give up. In Charlie's words: "Years ago I was lost in a storm on Dry Wolf Creek, with a bunch of saddle horses. I was nearly in, when Peet found me, so weak and cold, that Peet had to rope and saddle a fresh hoss, and help me mount. A few more hours would have meant the cash in for me. Several riders were out, but the storm drove them all back, but Peet, and if my big, laffing friend had turned back, I believe I would across the range waiting for him now."

Charlie Russell is well known today because of Peter Van, but *who was Pete Van?* For starters, his last name is Vann, not Van. In many, many books, Pete is listed as Van—because that is how he signed his name. Anyone familiar with Russell's grammar knows how creative spelling can be, but I think Pete dropped the last "n" simply for convenience.

Pete was born on May 24, 1863, in Fort Price, Minn. He has been described as a "half-breed," but you can cut that in two because his mother, Mary Belgard, was half-Indian, her tribe unknown. His father, Pierre, and family moved to Carl in Montana Territory by oxcart in 1875, then to Fort Benton in 1878. Pierre and Mary had five children, and when Pete was 15 he started hauling goods between Fort Benton and Cypress, Mont., north of Fort Assiniboine. He secured his own



A letter from Charles M. Russell to his savior Pete Vann, written on May 24, 1918.

outfit and freighted for two years. In 1880, Pete moved to the Judith Basin, near Stanford, Mont., and went to work for Perry Westfall, an early pioneer rancher. He was seeking a career change to cowboy, and that fall he was hired as nighthawk for the Judith Basin Pool on its roundups. He night herded until 1882, when Charlie Russell replaced him. Russell, although very inexperienced, was able to do this because Pete was found sleeping on the job. Not because he was lazy, but because he had ambitions beyond the night job and was learning as many cowboy skills as he could during the day, thus burning his candle at both ends.

Pete cowboied for a number of years and became an excellent bronc rider and all-around hand.

In his book, "Trails Plowed Under," Charlie stretches the truth on Pete by writing the story, "When Pete Sets a Speed Mark." According to Charlie, Pete set this mark by riding his saddle off the rump of his bronc in a buffalo herd, landing on his feet, then proceeding to stay in front of a mad bison cow—and running so fast he catches up to his own horse. (Another friend says he *never* saw Pete make a quick move without a horse under him.) Also in this book is a story featuring Pete titled "How Louse Creek Was Named." Truth is, most all cowboys got lousy in those days, and Charlie's own horse once got lice from *him* because he used his saddle blankets for bedding.

Charlie loved to take the stories he got from friends, or about them, and embroider them to the hilt. It was his brand of esteem and flattery.

In 1899, Pete married Florence Richards. They established their own place near Geyser, Mont., and produced two boys, Ronald and John. The Vanns were successful enough for Pete to buy an interest in the Geyser bank. In a letter to old friend Bill McDo-



AUTHORS COLLECTION

“A few more hours would have meant the cash-in for me.”

C.M. RUSSELL, 1918

“The Pride of the P Herd,” from left to right: Pete Vann, Henry Keeton and Dan Martin. Fellows behind on the hillside are Hank Warehime and Charlie Russell. The photo was taken around May 1883 at Umbrella Spring near Denton, Mont. Henry Keeton said it was among the first photos taken of cowboys from that region.



COURTESY VANN FAMILY

Russell illustration from the 1918 letter to Pete Vann shows Pete riding in to save Charlie during the blizzard on Dry Wolf Creek. BELOW: CMR illustration for “Pete Sets a Speed Mark” in the Russell book, “Trails Plowed Under.” Picture shows Pete outrunning a mad cow buffalo.

nough in 1914, Charlie ribs Pete’s success and stretches the truth again by writing, “Peet may not have been a financier, but we know he was a cow man, an when the big herds left the basin, he bought a few mighty good cows. Each of these cows had four are five calves a year. An Peet was mighty handy with the iron. This kind [he drew a picture of two cinch rings, held by two green twigs, making a cowboy running iron] he was really artistic but I am glad



“PETE LANDS RUNNING”

old Peet, or any of my friends got theirs before the dry landers grabed everything.”

By 1917, in a letter to cowboy friend Kid Price, Charlie further comments on Pete, writing: “He had a bank in the town of Gyser, but traded it off for an automobile, and a white faced bull, an from what I here of him as a chaffaure, Id rather ride the bull than take chances with Peet in his skunk wagon. Peet sits on his hat when he drives, an a friend of mine told me he rode with Peet once, and once was all he wanted he said he lost his hat, and would have been looser his falce teeth if he hadent put them in his pocket.” This letter was illustrated with Pete and his car on the high fly.

This last story is truer than not, as the Vann family has a picture of Pete posing with his new car, which has a white-faced bull calf in the back seat!

Charlie was a character, and life was never too serious with him, but it was sterling character. Charlie became the highest paid living artist of his time, but remained true and loyal to his old cowboy friends until he died. Proof remains in the illustrated letters he wrote to them. When he heard Pete was in failing

health in 1918, he wrote heartfelt words of thanks, remarking on Pete’s tenacity in staying out in that long-ago blizzard. “[Y]ou found camp and got me and the saddle bunch both through the storm, and that was some storme Pete.... [Y]ou was a cow and hoss man, and nobody could lose you on the prairie, day or night an you deserved



Picture of early Judith Basin cowboys. Pete Vann is second from left. Others are unidentified.

credit for getting them hosses in but you fell down when you brought CM Russell back to camp.”

Well, everyone who appreciates good vintage western art does *not* agree that Pete “fell down.” In fact, quite the opposite, and Pete Vann is about to get the public recognition and thanks he truly deserves. He was inducted into the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2014 and will be featured in a new interactive gallery in the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls. The gallery opens to the public in early February 2024.

This is the man who saved Charlie Russell’s life! Charlie’s eulogy says multitudes in a letter written to his Brother Elks in Great Falls, Mont., after Pete crossed the Big Divide in September 1918. “Pete and I were friends since boy hood in the days when friendship ment more than a hand shake. Our home was where we spread our blankets—for many years we ate and slept together in a country that mostly belonged to God. It was a big

home for those who loved it. Often the roof leaked making it wet cold and lonesome, but its discomforts that pans out the good and bad in man. Pete always showed good in the pan....

“Its the lonesome, motherless places that tie men’s hearts to gether in a way that time distance or mans laws not even death can break. for the grave cannot steal from memory, our friends.” ■

Jane Lambert and her husband, Eric, live in Stevensville, Mont. She is a retired vocational agriculture teacher, rancher and author of “Charlie Russell, the Cowboy Years,” a book which has just come out in a third edition and is available at Amazon.com. It contains the above information and a whole lot more about Charlie and Pete. NOTE: Charlie Russell gives credit for Pete Vann saving his life in two letters: One was written to Pete on May 24, 1918, and one to the Great Falls Elks Lodge on Sept. 10, 1918.



LEFT: Russell illustration for a story in “Trails Plowed Under” shows a cowboy washing his shirt and pounding the seams with a rock to kill lice. His horse is also infected with them. RIGHT: Pete Vann and Florence Richards on their wedding day in 1899.