

Mythic American West Apparent in Copyright Deposit

JUDITH NIERMAN

In 1890, when the decennial U.S. census found three million families farming on the Great Plains, the superintendent of the census declared the American western frontier closed. Just three years later, in a seminal scholarly paper entitled “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner, a University of Wisconsin and Harvard historian, expounded a theory that the settling of the West was the formative experience of the United States as a nation and that conquering the frontier defined American democracy and gave the national character its sense of rugged individualism and self-reliance.

Although the West may have been inhabited, plowed, cultivated, and urbanized, the American national character in the late 19th and the 20th centuries manifested a love of the idea of an “Old West” populated by hard-riding cowboys and Indians; herds of mustang, cattle, and buffalo; and rowdy lawmen and rogues. Americans bought western art and dime novels, saw Buffalo

Bill Cody’s traveling Wild West show, and soon flocked to motion pictures, all centered on the West of myth.

After July 8, 1870, when statutory was added to the list of works eligible for copyright registration, artists’ three-dimensional depictions of the legend of the American frontier flowed into the Copyright Office. Sculptors such as Charles Marion (Charlie) Russell (1864–1926) of Montana took advantage of the opportunity to protect their works. An application to register Russell’s statue “Buffalo Hunt” arrived in the Copyright Office on April 3, 1905, and a certificate of registration was mailed on April 7 of that year. The work, which perpetuates the vision of the American West as a place of great hunters, Native Americans, and powerful animals, was cast in bronze by the Roman Bronze Works of New York City, the company used by fellow sculptor Frederic Remington, and offered for sale at Tiffany’s in New York. The application describes it thus: “One Indian two buffalo. One of the buffalo just had an arrow driven into her side so is lunging into the other animal. The horse is running poised on one hind leg. The Indian just in the act of driving another arrow into the buffalo.”

Today, thanks to college students working as summer Junior Fellows interns, long-hidden copyright deposits have been inventoried, permitting us to see Russell’s original photo that served as a deposit and depicted the mythic West of our American heritage. ©

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



The application for the “Buffalo Hunt” statue (above) and deposit (right) were inventoried by Junior Fellows.