

Middle Border Bulletin

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J. A. Van Kirk, Supervising Director

Welcomed Help

Your editor acknowledges with a hearty thank you the assistance given by FMB friends in Chicago and Denver this month. While he was vacationing in the mountains of his native state, New Hampshire, they made this issue possible.

Worth Waiting For

James Earle Fraser, the distinguished sculptor whose reminiscences of his boyhood at Mitchell, S. Dak., were published in the Winter, 1944, issue of the Bulletin, is "writing a little history of the prairie," he discloses in a letter to Mrs. Albert E. Jones, relayed to the editor. That is good news, indeed. Mr. Fraser has the ability to wield the pen as deftly as he does the chisel, and his full-length recollections of his prairie days will be important Middle Border literature.

Mrs. Jones, it will be recalled, is a daughter of the late Joseph H. Durrell, the pioneer sheriff who is remembered so vividly by Mr. Fraser. "The circumstances surrounding his being made sheriff at Mitchell," Fraser says in his letter, "were particularly interesting to me principally because the young boys as well as the older inhabitants had such deep respect for him as a man and for his ability—I seem to be able to see him now—a tall well-made figure of a man, who was kind yet decided." Mr. Fraser, in his article referred to, noted, "Many times I have thought of making a sculptured model like him, called the 'Sheriff.'"

That too, will be well worth waiting for!

The Relative Middle Border

"The Middle Border," suggest a waggish correspondent, "must be out where Uncle Sam's vest begins."

If he has made appropriate apologies to the author of "Out Where the West Begins," we accept his pun and concede that behind its facetiousness lies a point. The Middle Border concept does have to do with the West. As a term, however, it is relative both to time and to space.

Recently at a meeting of the Westerners, in Chicago, Prof. E. Douglas Branch opened a discussion of General Boquet of French and Indian War fame by noting that in his time the frontier, which is to say the Middle Border, was Western Pennsylvania. In their excellent book, "Western America," Le Roy R. Hafen and Carl Coke Rister include in a discussion of "On the Middle Border" historical events of Colorado.

Somewhere between these regions lies the Middle Border. It does not oversimplify the matter for present purposes, therefore, to think of two great American frontiers. One started along the Atlantic seaboard and surged westward on a tide of flatboats and covered wagons. The other began many years later on the West Coast and backwatered toward the East. The Middle Border brackets the great area

An Appeal for Truth in Books About the Old West

By William MacLeod Raine

Distinguished Author of Western Fiction,
Denver, Colorado

It is unfortunate that certain writers dealing with our vanished frontier do not feel the obligation resting on historians to curb their imaginations in factual accounts of characters who had a part in the events of which they are making a record. I do not refer to novelists, who have a right to create imaginary heroes in a non-existent setting, but to those who purport to be setting down the story of what actually took place.

Our West has always been for many a land of dreams, an imaginative escape for millions from the humdrum of an existence in cities to which they were physically tied. They want to believe in fearless heroes riding the endless rolling plains into the sunset after valiant exploits.

The writers to whom I refer supplied the heroes. In the story of the West there were many thousand brave men and women who did their part in winning the desert. They built their cabins, plowed the land, and fought blizzards, drought, grasshoppers, and often Indians. They subdued the outlaw and brought law into the chaparral. But these are not the men and women of whom such writers find the material for their stuff.

The names that come first to mind are "Wild Bill" Hickok and "Billy the Kid." Both are manufactured heroes on the way to become legends, even though the facts thoroughly discredit both of them.

Hickok started his own saga by telling a hodge-podge of lies to Colonel George W. Nichols, who published them in Harper's magazine, February, 1867. He tells how he killed single-handed with gun and knife ten ruffians of the McCanles gang, and during the fight received in his body eleven buckshot and thirteen knife cuts. The truth is that Hickok with the help of others murdered McCanles and two others who were probably unarmed, that he was not wounded at all, and that the McCanles family were good citizens much interested in developing the country. The brother of the murdered man was later a state senator in Colorado. All this, with much other damaging material was brought out by George W. Hansen, Nebraska historian. But before that time scores of writers had accepted the story as true and had helped to build up the

between those frontiers which gradually grew together and coalesced.

The meeting point varied. East met West in Colorado, in Montana, in Nebraska, Missouri and elsewhere for the pioneer did not schedule his coming and goings by a formula. But in the Dakotas the east-west movements are clearly evident and their merging typifies the whole Middle Border. This region is bisected by the Missouri River. To the east is glacier-smoothed prairie, dominantly agricultural with here and there the smoke stacks of industry. To the west the plains are ruffled, breaking into the Bad Lands and the Black Hills, eastern outpost of the Rockies. Here ranches and mines carry on traditions of the West.

It was with such facts in mind that Friends of the Middle Border investigated

myth, among others as reliable a chronicler as Emerson Hough. The great explorer, Henry M. Stanley, did his share to propagate the fable.

Both Hough and Stanley were entirely honest, but later writers have been deliberate distorters of fact in their attempts to make heroes out of ruffians. The story of Billy the Kid told by Walter Noble Burns in the main accords with the facts, but it is so wrapped around with suggestion that the reader is left with the impression of a gallant young Robin Hood destroyed by an evil fate. He was in truth a callous scoundrel who murdered at least three good men toward whom he did not even have any animosity.

In his later book, "Tombstone," Burns shows this same ingenuity in trying to build up Wyatt Earp into the greatest law officer of the West. I must do him the justice to say that here again it is his perspective rather than his facts that is wrong. But a later writer on Earp appears to swallow completely the farrago of nonsense the old man poured out to him in his declining years. Nobody would deny that Earp was a brave man, but he played no such important part as has been assigned him. Nor was he justified in his turbulent Tombstone life, even though some of those opposed to him were outlaws.

In one book of Western lore I read that Bat Masterson killed 30 men at Dodge City. Not counting the Indian fight at Adobe Walls, the records show only four killed by him in all. One could quote many pages of such exaggerations in books and magazine articles. A recently published volume by a reputable writer gives an entirely erroneous account of the killing of three men by Billy the Kid.

In recording the story of the West it is inevitable that details must be filled in by data given by oldtimers who were a part of pioneer days. Often their memories were a little treacherous. All of us who have plowed into this field know that accounts given us have sometimes been erroneous. All we can do is to try to sift the wheat from the chaff.

It was a part of the Western philosophy of life to exaggerate humorously. This was often born of a wise courage which used it as a defense against defeat and tragedy. But historians of the West today are in no stress that justifies them in telling tall stories to make their stuff more dramatic.

and then named Mitchell in South Dakota as the logical seat of the organization. While its museums and collections primarily reflect the historical, social and cultural development of the Upper Missouri Valley its interests are as broad as the Middle Border itself. Through its members and branch organizations, FMB has an unfolding opportunity to bring in association men and women everywhere who are concerned that Americans be creatively aware of what it is that makes America America.

You are invited to aid in this effort to develop the indigeneous culture of this region. Annual memberships are \$1; sustaining, \$5; contributing, \$10; life, \$100. And provision has been made for those who would help in an especially generous way: benefactor membership (for life, also), \$1,000.