

BRINGING
**CHARLIE
RUSSELL'S**
WEST TO LIFE

Building a replica of an Old West boomtown from scratch

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HALFWAY BETWEEN THE TINY, CENTRAL MONTANA agricultural towns of Hobson and Windham, along a lonely stretch of rural highway, sits the Oxen Yoke Inn, which isn't an inn at all. More aptly, it's a watering hole, an oasis in the prairie. It is, in fact, the only full-time operating business in Utica, a former Judith Basin cattle hub that saw its heyday at the turn of the 20th century. There's not even a church or post office.

Until recently, a passerby would have been hard-pressed to find evidence of the once vibrant Old West settlement. The Oxen emerged well after the boomtown's decline. All that remained for many years was an abandoned stone trading post and a house across the street from it.

That house happens to be Don Waite's childhood home, and it helps explain why he's spending his retirement, slowly but surely, reconstructing from scratch a scaled-down composite replica of frontier Utica, building by painstaking building. A



Don Waite stands in front of a scaled-down, composite replica that he built of downtown Utica as it appeared in a 1907 Charlie Russell painting. Waite is holding a reproduction of Russell's "A Quiet Day in Utica." INSET AT LEFT: Waite points to a picture on display at his ongoing project celebrating Utica's history.



LEFT: Waite sits surrounded by paintings, photos, and texts, which are on display throughout his project as educational resources. BELOW: The Utica Trading Post is one of two remaining structures from Utica's heyday at the turn of the 20th century. The other is Waite's childhood home.

in Judith Basin in 1882. For his first wrangling gig in Utica, he joined 70 other hired hands in a spring roundup of 500 horses. Russell remained in town afterward, learning the ropes as a night herder, which allowed him to observe frontier life and paint during the day. His studio was in the back of the

meticulous amateur historian, the 77-year-old Waite is applying the same fervor to his pet project as he did to his lengthy career in water resource management. And he has a handy visual guide, Charlie Russell's 1907 painting, *A Quiet Day in Utica*, although he's taking creative liberties.

"Some of the ranchers around here say, 'Goddammit, Don, you're crazy,'" he told me last fall, standing in front of his hand-constructed row of storefronts, just down the road from the Oxen. "I say, 'I guess I am.'"

Waite retired in 1996 as the head of water resources for the Bureau of Land Management in Washington, D.C., a role that came on the heels of federal government stints in resource management and economics from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. He had long been fascinated by Utica's history, and his family's place in it. His grandfather, Walter Waite, arrived in Judith Basin — an expanse of grasslands flanked by four mountain ranges between Lewistown and Great Falls — from Saratoga, New York, in 1882, alongside a stream of other settlers from his home state. The pioneers who had founded Utica three years earlier, including Walter's cousin, J. D. Waite, took inspiration from Utica, New York, which harbored an insane asylum.

"They named this place after Utica because everybody said, 'You'd have to be crazy to start a town here,'" Waite says.

Charles Marion Russell came to Judith Basin from St. Louis, Missouri, in 1880 as a 16-year-old kid with big cowboy dreams but nonexistent livestock skills. He took a job at a sheep ranch under Pike Miller, a family friend who had invited him West, and J.D. Waite. But Russell quickly tired both of sheep and Miller, and ended up living with a mountain man named Jake Hoover, a skilled hunter, trapper, and prospector. Hoover took the boy under his wing.

Russell briefly returned to St. Louis before settling back

Shelton Saloon, one of the town's first three buildings, where he worked on his art and the more essential cowboy skill of drinking. Despite his full immersion in the culture, Russell, by his own admission, never amounted to much of a cowboy.

In 1887, Russell completed one of his first commissioned paintings, *Cowboy Camp During Roundup*, for Shelton to hang in his bar. Other grand ideas emerged from the Shelton Saloon, most notably Walter Waite and Ed Morris concluding that Utica needed a bigger place to drink. So they built the Silver Dollar Saloon, an impressive structure for its day, with two stories, a dance hall, a fancy back bar, pool and card tables, and a barbershop.

Positioned on a stagecoach line from Great Falls to Billings, as well as nearby Lewistown, Utica became a full-fledged Western boomtown. Sparked by the cattle interests of T.C. Power, then one of Montana's wealthiest men, about 80,000 cattle roamed the Judith Basin at its peak. Stagecoach traffic brought money and investors, including some who constructed the 15-room Judith Hotel next to the Silver Dollar.



COURTESY SID RICHARDSON MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

Walter Waite's wife, a young Métis woman from Canada named Louise (Holland) Waite, managed the hotel.

A QUIET DAY IN UTICA
1907 | OIL ON CANVAS | 24 1/8 X 36 1/8 INCHES

ship that often left Louise covering for the wild woman. "Grandmother had to cook when Calamity got drunk,

which was most of the time," Waite says. In 1907, the sons of Charles Lehman, proprietor of Utica's central mercantile, commissioned Russell, now famous and living in Great Falls, to paint a picture showcasing their father's store. The Lehmans wanted the image to advertise on calendars. The resulting oil-on-canvas painting depicted a downtown Utica street scene, prominently displaying the mercantile up front. Russell initially titled the piece, *Tin Canning a Dog*. The name refers to a common form of entertainment at the time, in which people — particularly kids — tied a rope or string to a dog's tail with tin cans attached, so that when the pooch took off running, trying to escape its newly noisy rear end, the streets would jangle with clanking metal and laughter. The title was later changed to *A Quiet Day in Utica*. Today, in its permanent home at the Sid Richardson Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, it's shortened simply to *Utica*.

Russell left town in 1890 to cowboy elsewhere in Montana. In 1893, he quit wrangling to commit to art full time. But it was his time in Utica that provided the sturdy artistic foundation from which the rest of his career grew. "Utica was ground zero for Charlie," Waite says.

Another quintessential Old Western figure lived in Utica: Calamity Jane. She showed up from Deadwood, South Dakota, in 1898 and got a cooking job at the Judith Hotel. Louise Waite, Don's grandmother, befriended her, a relation-

ship that often left Louise covering for the wild woman. "Grandmother had to cook when Calamity got drunk, which was most of the time," Waite says. In 1907, the sons of Charles Lehman, proprietor of Utica's central mercantile, commissioned Russell, now famous and living in Great Falls, to paint a picture showcasing their father's store. The Lehmans wanted the image to advertise on calendars. The resulting oil-on-canvas painting depicted a downtown Utica street scene, prominently displaying the mercantile up front.

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"Frank Hartzell's bucking horse and the tin-canned dog cause just enough excitement to bring a little wild to the West and enliven what would have otherwise been a dull day in Utica," states the museum's description of the piece.

Lehman appears in the painting, as do a number of his customers and notable Judith Basin figures — the American West historian and Russell scholar Brian Dippie calls it a “portrait gallery” — including Russell himself, pictured leaning against a hitching post wearing a red Métis sash that he had purchased at Lehman’s shop in the 1880s. Jake Hoover, the mentor who first helped Russell get settled into frontier life, makes an appearance. In the middle of the hoopla is Millie Ringold, an African-American woman and former slave who came to the area in the late 1870s during the gold rush at nearby Yogo Gulch, which ultimately became known best for sapphire mining. An unidentified Native American is also among the crowd of observers.

The year that Russell finished the painting, 1907, coincided with Utica’s death knell:

Long before he became famous, Charlie Russell got his start as an artist by painting in the back of a saloon in Utica. Locals continue to celebrate his connection to the area.



The Great Northern Railway was cutting through the basin but missed the town by 10 miles, giving rise to a new hub in Hobson. Then, in 1913, a mysterious fire burned down a saloon and several other buildings. Walter Waite later killed himself. Shortly thereafter, the sapphire mines in Yogo Gulch began fizzling out. The Judith Hotel and Silver Dollar Saloon were torn down in the 1940s.

While historians have established the identities of most of the characters in the painting, Waite is hoping to correct the record on one misidentification. The man stooped over with his hands on his knees was long believed to be Teddy Blue Abbot, a friend of Russell’s. But Waite says it’s actually L.B. Divers, an assessment echoed by Divers’ granddaughter, Imogene Olson, in a 1996 letter to *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*.

Waite’s interest in the intrigue of the painting’s human elements aside, his primary focus lies in recreating the row of storefronts, with his own flourishes. The “composite replica,” as he calls it, combines buildings from both sides of the street into a single row of storefronts, and introduces family tributes into the mix.



Waite stands in front of his Shelton Saloon replica, a repurposed cabin and the first completed piece of his ongoing project.

The idea dates back 15 years when Waite relocated his brother’s cabin from a nearby property to its current spot along Utica’s main street. He repurposed it into a carbon copy of the Shelton Saloon. To Waite’s surprise,

it caused a stir, attracting photo-seeking visitors and curious observers. A Hutterite man asked for permission to hold a wedding there with the saloon as a backdrop.

About five years ago, Waite decided to build a small replica of his grandfather’s Silver Dollar Saloon to accompany the Shelton. The original Silver Dollar had a 50-by-80 square-foot main level; Waite’s version is 16 by 20. Then he thought it would only be fair to construct a Judith Hotel, since his grandmother was its manager. Even though those businesses weren’t in Russell’s painting, they were fine substitutes for the hotel and bar that were (owned by Breathitt Gray, a central character in the piece, pictured holding a pipe). But Waite is playing it by the book, as closely as possible, in the design and construction of Lehman’s mercantile, which was still in progress as of April but nearing completion.

The first generation of Waites — J.D., Walter, and Louise — established Utica’s history, and the last two have worked to keep it alive. Charles, Don’s father, researched and wrote historical accounts, while his now 90-year-old brother, also named Walter, penned a book about the town. Waite is trying to lift the past from those pages, from the words and photos and paintings, and express it in a physical form that people can see and smell, touch and inhabit.

Because Waite’s ultimate goal is education, he has populated the structures with framed informational sheets that he typed, alongside reproductions of Russell paintings

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with explanatory material, photos, and era-appropriate artifacts. He doesn't know when the project will be finished, because he keeps getting new ideas, but it's already a worthwhile sight. As a historical resource, it complements an existing museum down the street, which is open only on weekends during the summer.

"If people come there and there's a building to walk around in, and there are photos interpreting it, it brings it to life," Waite says. "Outside, you can see the hill where Russell wrangled those horses. That's part of the objective, to bring it to life for people.

"Hopefully, it will be a little attraction when it's done,"

Waite traded out the hotel and saloon that appeared in Russell's piece in favor of including his family's businesses, though the street's layout remains true to the painting.

he adds. "The town could use it."

Waite now lives along Big Spring Creek near Lewistown, about 35 miles from Utica, but he regularly drives his pickup — which is brimming with a mixture of power tools, historical texts, and research notes — to the worksite. Sometimes he's able to talk a family member into helping, otherwise he goes it alone. Though he's moving to Missoula to be closer to medical services for his ill wife, while continuing to live part of the year in Arizona, his commitment to the project hasn't waned.

Growing up in the 1950s, Waite was one of about 50 kids who went to school in Utica. Today, any children in the area go to Hobson. He says you can count Utica's remaining population "on your fingers." His childhood home was sold a few years ago. He feels the loss of his hometown's vigor deep in his bones. But the absence softens with every swing of the hammer.

"When you lose your school and your post office in a little town, you're done for," he says. "I want to do something for Utica and preserve its history." ▲



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