

Joe De Yong

PROTECTING THE OLD WAYS

by William C. Reynolds

“Horses! There’s all kinds of horses, just like there’s all kinds of folks, and you can’t set any hard and fast collection of rules to fit ‘em. They have to be handled like individuals.”

You would expect to hear such words from one of today’s many horse clinicians teaching natural horsemanship. The truth is, those words were spoken back in the late 1930s by cowboy artist Joe De Yong. De Yong is known in the Western art world as the only protégé of Charles M. Russell, “Montana’s cowboy artist,” and, like his mentor, he filled his life with horses.

De Yong was born in 1894 in Webster Grove, Missouri, only a few miles from Russell’s birthplace of St. Louis. He was raised in Indian country, and, as he stated in his work-in-progress biography *I, Mine, and Me*—now part of

the permanent collection of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum—horses entered his life at an early age. “My parents moved to the Cherokee Nation of Indian Territory in 1899,” wrote De Yong. “In a community where ‘cowboys and Indians’ were still commonplace and with a strong personal attraction to horses, it was only natural that I should have become a Kid Cowhand.”

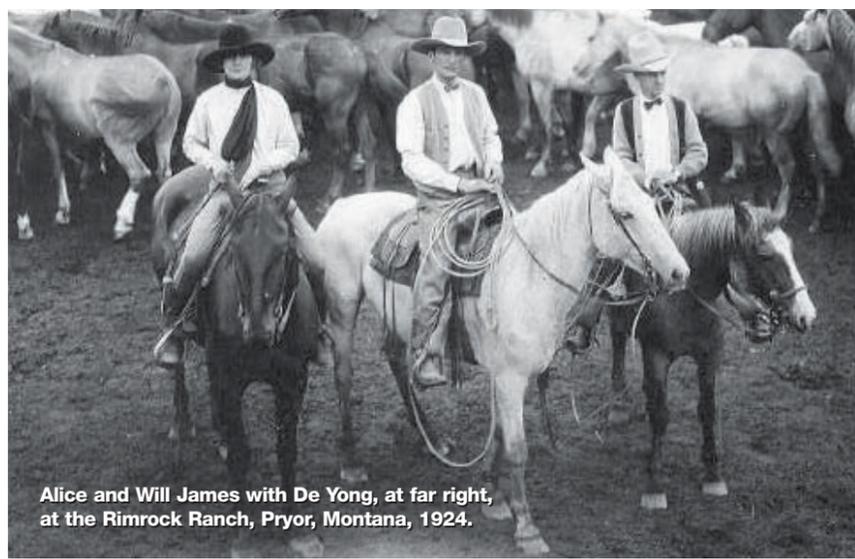
De Yong pursued his love of horses when not in school and started day work on ranches at the age of 13. He had an almost obsessive passion for the cowboy life and tried very hard to emulate the top-notch cowhands he admired: “Some were better hands than others, some were better men, but anybody could read that list forward and back or right down the big middle and it still means the same thing—they were the real ones,” he

wrote. Not only was Joe learning the ways of horses and cattle from these cowmen, he was also learning to draw and record “the life.”

Around 1910, De Yong was working cattle on the Horseshoe L Ranch in Dewey, Oklahoma, when Tom Mix came to town. Mix, former livestock foreman of the famous Miller 101 Ranch in Bliss, Oklahoma, had found a life in “moving pictures” and was in the area to work on a movie, *Ranch Life in the Great Southwest*. De Yong got a bit part in the production and after seeing the action was bitten by the acting bug. He worked again with Mix on a picture in Arizona. It was then that he contracted meningitis, which, in his words, left him “totally deaf, cross-eyed, and without any sense of balance.”

During his recovery, while traveling through the Rockies, he attended Cheyenne Frontier Days and saw an exhibit of Western art by the already legendary Charles Russell. From that moment on, De Yong’s life would never be the same.

Over the next several years, Russell and De Yong corresponded. De Yong had resolved to meet and study with Russell, and in 1916 he began what would be a 10-year adventure as Russell’s protégé that ended with the artist’s death in 1926. De Yong was a sponge. He absorbed Charlie’s world and viewpoint about what they perceived to be the vanishing West—a West that neither of them would allow to go quietly or without being celebrated and remembered.



Alice and Will James with De Yong, at far right, at the Rimrock Ranch, Pryor, Montana, 1924.

During this time, De Yong met other important players in his life, characters who held Russell’s critical eye for authenticity and detail in the same great respect as De Yong did. The Western talents De Yong befriended included Ed Borein, Will James, Olaf Seltzer, Alexander Harmer, Charles Lummis, and Maynard Dixon, to name a few. His friendship with Will Rogers was so significant that he was given Rogers’ prize rope horse, Bootlegger, after Rogers’ death. Both being died-in-the-wool ropers, the gift was understandable. It was a time when the West’s best surrounded him, and De Yong was in the thick of it. And his reputation as an artist was further enhanced by Russell’s widow, Nancy, whose promotion of De Yong helped validate his work.

After Russell’s death, De Yong moved to Santa Barbara, California, which led to his working with Ed Borein and joining him on the annual ride of the Rancheros Visitadores—a group of businessmen, ranchers, and stage, screen, radio, and political celebrities. Every May, in a reenactment of the days of the dons, when ranchers rode from spread to spread visiting their neighbors, the group covered more than 100 miles on horseback and in stagecoaches, bunking down at ranches en route. De Yong’s expertise on horseback helped cement the many relationships that had their beginnings in the Visitadores days. His involvement with the group also led to yet another big moment in his life—a meeting with movie mogul Cecil B. de Mille. De Mille went on to hire De Yong as a scenario and costume consultant on many classic Westerns, including *The Plainsman*, *Union Pacific*, *Red River*, and *Shane*. On George Stevens’ *Shane*, De Yong worked directly with famed costume designer Edith Head and helped create one of the most recognized and mythic Westerns ever produced. As always, Charlie Russell’s influence burned in De Yong to “make it right.”

De Yong’s life in Hollywood continued for 30 years, until 1967, but throughout his career his involvement with horses remained constant. In the ‘40s and ‘50s he was called upon by numerous publications to write about all things horse, from “bronc stompin’” to “roun’ pen use” to the proper ways to handle the Pacific Slope bridle horse. Indeed, his mission of keeping folks on track

when it came to classic and proper horse handling continued until his death in 1975. And to the end, he would often defer to memories of Russell:

“I had no particular idea of ever becoming an artist. In fact, handling young hosses and ‘follerin’ after cattle’ were my main interests in life. Always better mounted as he was, I’d often found it hard to stay in sight of his dust, in art and in life.”



De Yong working in Hollywood as a scenario research consultant, a career that would last off and on from the late 1930s through 1967.



Joe De Yong riding Bootlegger, a favorite rope horse given to him by Will Rogers.

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