

# Through the Artist's Eye

The Paintings and Photographs of  
R. E. DeCamp

by Kirby Lambert



Courtesy Dennis and Kim Kolberg



Unless otherwise noted all paintings are in the MHS Museum Collection and were photographed by John Reddy, and all photographs are in the MHS Photograph Archives, Helena



Unlike other Montana artists of his time, Helena artist Ralph DeCamp did not paint scenery as backdrop but rather as his principal interest. His care for the detail and intricacies of the scenic landscape are admirably accentuated in *When Winter Comes* (above, oil on board, 5½" x 8½"), and in two untitled pieces: one of a forest fire (left, above, oil on canvas, 20" x 40"), and another of the Missouri River (left, below, oil on board, 8" x 12").

**I**n February 6, 1909, *Treasure State* magazine featured on its cover an image by “Montana’s foremost landscape painter,” R. E. DeCamp. Inside, the magazine reported that “there is living in Helena an artist who is giving the best of his energy, all that he can spare of his high talent, and a world of intense devotion . . . to the perpetuation in pictures of the surpassing scenic glories of the State which is his home.” Although DeCamp was also skilled as a portrait painter, it was, as the *Treasure State* noted, through his depiction of the Montana landscape that the artist made his greatest contribution to the art of the period, and ultimately to the state’s cultural legacy.

**P**resent-day Montana boasts an impressive number of painters who excel in rendering on canvas the state's vast prairies, shining mountains, and big sky. But that was not so true one hundred years ago. At the turn of the nineteenth century, no Montanan surpassed DeCamp's expertise at—and dedication to—portraying in resplendent detail the natural beauty of the state. While DeCamp's fellow artists Charles M. Russell, E. S. Paxson, and O. C. Seltzer were more than accomplished in depicting the Montana landscape, it was not their primary focus. Rather, they most often used scenery—no matter how expertly portrayed—as a backdrop to the narrative action central to their work. For DeCamp, the landscape itself was the principal interest.

While Russell, Paxson, and Seltzer painted pictures that told magnificent stories of a western past, DeCamp devoted his artistic energy to capturing contemporary scenic beauty. In doing so, he did far more than replicate topography. As one admirer put it, he was able to infuse into his work “a mood of nature . . . a wonderful feeling for the atmosphere and color of the season.”<sup>1</sup> DeCamp not only applied his talents to the traditions of landscape painting but also to the relatively new medium of photography. No other Montana artist working at that time so successfully fostered one artistic vision by mastering these two distinct art forms.

Although he was unquestionably one of the “most earnest and industrious of all the painters in the state,” as one observer put it, DeCamp was extremely modest about his work.<sup>2</sup> In reminiscing about “Mr. De,” as he was affectionately known, close friends and family recalled an infectious chuckle and keen sense of humor. To the outside world, however, DeCamp was a quiet man. As one longtime acquaintance said, it “was hard to get him to talk, especially about himself.”<sup>3</sup> Because of this unassuming nature, DeCamp was not particularly proficient at promoting his art. Nor did he ever employ anyone else to promote it. For these reasons he did not gain the lasting recognition that he otherwise might have, and today, outside Montana at least, DeCamp remains little known, but well worth discovery.

Ralph Earll DeCamp was born in Attica, New York, on September 17, 1858. His parents, Horace and Renette Earll DeCamp, were both natives of the Empire State, but when Ralph was about ten, his father—an inveterate traveler—moved the family to Wisconsin.

The DeCamps settled in the community of Wauwatosa, near Milwaukee. It was there that young DeCamp received his first professional art instruction, studying with Francis A. Lydston, a Boston-trained versatile painter who was adept at miniatures, frescos, still lifes, portraits, and landscapes.

In 1871 the DeCamps once again journeyed westward, moving this time to Minnesota—first to the railroad camp of Oak Lake, and a short while later to Moorhead. At the time Moorhead, a fledgling frontier settlement, served as the terminus for the Northern Pacific Railroad and was the head of navigation on the Red River. Thus situated, the town was an important launching point in a vast trade network that expanded northward into Canada and west as far as what was then Montana Territory.

In Moorhead, Horace DeCamp—a contractor and builder—found employment building and operating a hotel, but soon sold the hotel to pursue a variety of other endeavors, including politics. Eventually, he held several city and county offices. Ralph spent his youth visiting Moorhead's waterfront with its shipyards, machine shops, and steamboats. The lasting influence of these early years is reflected not only in the prominence of water in the artist's later paintings, but also in DeCamp's lifelong fascination with and expertise at all things mechanical.

DeCamp left no written biography, and later in life spoke little of his early experiences. As a result, much of what is known about his youth comes from newspaper accounts. In 1872, the Moorhead *Red River Star* reported that “Ralph DeCamp, 14, has perfected and put into operation a miniature engine 12 inches in length and six inches in width, which is a model of beauty and skill. We expect to hear of Ralph's ingenuity hereafter.”<sup>4</sup> The following year he attracted further attention when he built and displayed a miniature steamboat, which he named “The City of Moorhead,” and displayed it at the country fair. In 1875 the *Star* summarized DeCamp's mechanical prowess by reporting that the young artist “excels many older minds in mechanical ingenuity.”<sup>5</sup>

DeCamp's artistic talents drew similar praise. “There dwells in our midst a prodigy in the person of a young gentleman . . . whose mental gifts and attainments are really marvelous,” said the *Red River Star* in 1873. “The walls of his room are hung with paintings which would adorn an art gallery; these are the

1. H. E. Longmaid to Roy P. Johnson, October 1, 1954, Roy P. Johnson Papers, Assumption Abby Archives, Richardton, North Dakota (hereafter Johnson Papers). During the 1950s, journalist Roy P. Johnson of Fargo, North Dakota, researched DeCamp's life and career extensively. His research materials, which constitute the largest collection of records related to DeCamp, are also available on

microfilm at the Montana Historical Society Library, Helena (hereafter MHS).

2. Uncredited newspaper article, September 23, 1911, artist's file, in author's possession.

3. Kirby G. Hoon to Roy P. Johnson, October 29, 1954, Johnson Papers.



DeCamp attended high school in Duluth, Minnesota, and won local praise for his artwork. The scene above, *North Shore of Lake Superior Near Grand Marais* (no date, watercolor, 9" x 20") was probably done late in life but represented the kind of scene he would have been familiar with and may have painted as a youth.

work of his pencil." The paper went on to predict that his future would be "bright with usefulness in the mechanical, and brilliant with fame in the art world."<sup>6</sup> Two years later, under the heading "Our Young Artist at Work," the *Star* reported

Ralph DeCamp, is not idle these days; nor by the appearance of his studio, has he spent many leisure moments during the past winter. His sketches and paintings adorn the walls of his father's dwelling and at Frances Bergquest's bookstore may be seen several choice productions in oil, the work of Ralph. His rare genius, coupled with his self-taught practice, has made for him a fame quite sufficient for one of his age—he being only 17 years of age.<sup>7</sup>

DeCamp attended high school in Duluth, Minnesota. It is not known what kind of art instruction he received there, but he later recalled painting excursions along the north shore of nearby Lake Superior. After graduating in 1873, Ralph returned home to Moorhead where he placed a notice in the *Star* advertising "Lessons in landscape and pencil sketching. . . . Terms very reasonable." To support himself—something he did not feel he could accomplish through art alone—he worked in a sawmill, served as an apprentice engineer on a Red River steamboat, and in 1876, built and operated a twenty-five-passenger steam launch that he dubbed the "Nameless." No matter his vocation, art remained his focus. In an interview in the early 1930s, DeCamp reminisced that when he "landed a job as an engineer" at

the sawmill, he "had a better opportunity to paint. I set up my easel in the engine room and painted all my spare time."<sup>8</sup>

In 1878 Ralph married Edna Blanchard, the daughter of the local sheriff. The couple had one son, Edward, born in 1879. To support his new family, Ralph, in partnership with a friend, established a threshing business in the Fargo-Moorhead area. (Always fascinated with the mechanical, he enthusiastically described his new steam threshers as "splendid machines.") But the couple's happiness was short-lived. After several months of painful illness, Edna died in June 1880, and Ralph's parents apparently assumed responsibility for the care of thirteen-month-old Eddie.<sup>9</sup>

For some time, various people had encouraged DeCamp to pursue his study of art more seriously. By 1881, perhaps spurred by the loss of his wife, he was ready to follow this advice.<sup>10</sup> In fall that year—after abandoning plans to go to Paris—DeCamp enrolled at the Pennsylvania School of Art. En route to Philadelphia, he wrote home that "this is a grand country for an artist, there being plenty of material to fill a sketch book with, and I have not been idle."<sup>11</sup> After several months of study, DeCamp returned home to Minnesota and his threshing business.

Both before and after his schooling in Philadelphia, DeCamp made occasional engravings for the *Red River Star*, which the newspaper used as illustrations. In 1884

4. Moorhead *Red River Star*, September 21, 1872.

5. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1875.

6. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1873.

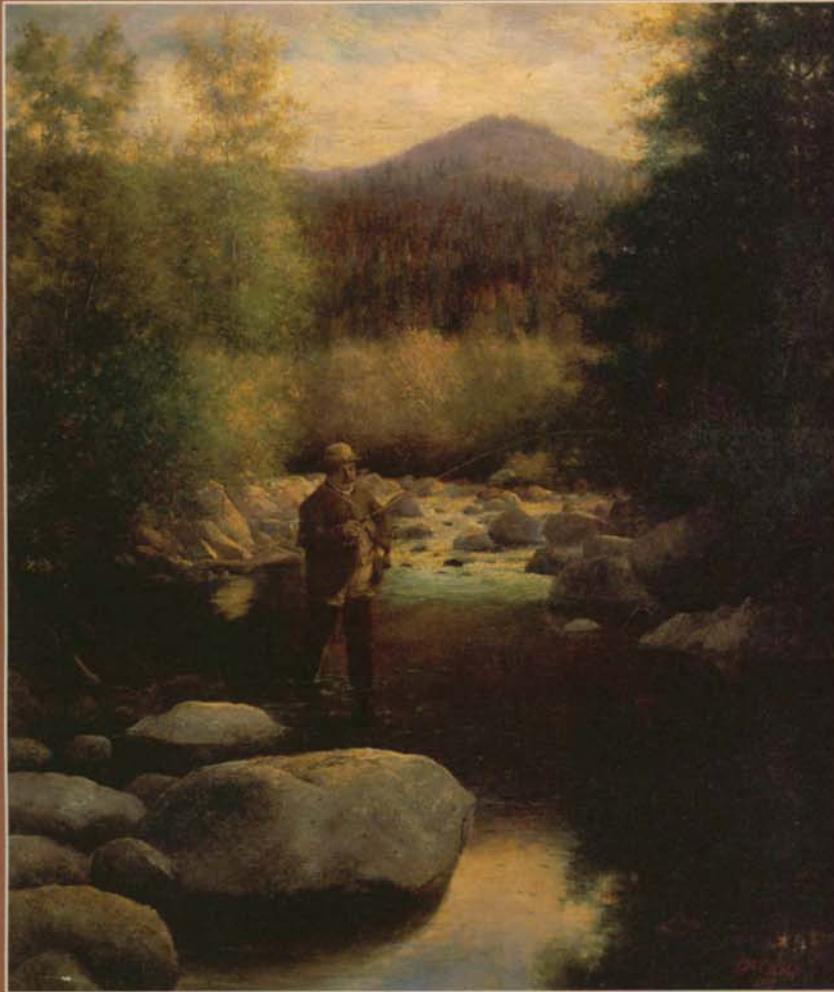
7. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1875.

8. Montana Newspaper Association insert, April 22, 1935, microfilm, MHS Library or in artist's file, in author's possession (hereafter MNA).

9. Renette DeCamp died in 1886. Horace remarried and moved to Helena with Eddie and his new wife in 1889. Horace died in 1891. Records are contradictory on where Eddie lived thereafter, but in 1896 he moved to the Lewistown, Montana, area to work as a cow-boy and eventually establish a small ranch of his own. Eddie drowned in 1906 while fording the Missouri River on horseback.

10. See Fargo, North Dakota, *Daily Argus*, April 30, 1881; Moorhead, Minnesota, *Advocate*, December 16, 1880.

11. Fargo *Daily Argus*, September 1, 1881.



As both artist and photographer, DeCamp often painted composite scenes using elements from more than one photograph. Such is the case with his painting, *Fisherman* (1909, oil on canvas, 30" x 25") in which he combined the image of the stream from one photograph and the fisherman figure from another.

The Gates of the Mountains on the Missouri River north of Helena was one of DeCamp's favorite subjects. The scene below, *Picnic Canyon at Sunset* (1924, oil on canvas, 17" x 20") was said to depict the place he first met Margaret, his second wife. He presented the painting as a Christmas gift to his son and daughter-in-law, Renan and Louise DeCamp.





Little of DeCamp's early work has survived. Nonetheless, DeCamp was fascinated with engineering and the mechanical arts all his life and painted the above scene, *The Derelicts* (circa 1935, oil on board, 8" x 12"), while living in Chicago in the 1930s. The image is based on a scene of abandoned ships at Lake Calumet.

he produced a similar type of illustration for a very different purpose that ultimately and dramatically changed his life. After witnessing a train accident, DeCamp drew sketches of the mishap that were used as evidence in a resulting court hearing. His drawings attracted the attention of Charles Fee, a high-ranking executive for the Northern Pacific Railroad. Fee, a tireless and expert promoter, regularly commissioned artists to travel west to paint the scenic wonders and dramatic landscapes encountered along the railroad's recently completed transcontinental line. The art produced on these expeditions was used to adorn station lobbies and other public spaces, and in promotional materials designed to lure potential passengers westward. Impressed with DeCamp's ability, Fee asked the painter to join this corps of artists working on the Northern Pacific's behalf, and the young artist accepted.

Thus, DeCamp found himself bound for Yellowstone National Park in early summer 1885. His traveling companion was Ole E. Flaten, a Norwegian-born photographer who operated a studio in Moorhead. When the pair arrived in Livingston, Montana—the Northern Pacific's gateway to Yellowstone—deep snow still covered the park. To pass time, DeCamp and Flaten traveled to Helena, but DeCamp's initial impression

of Montana's capital city was not favorable. "When we arrived it was a hot June day," he later recalled. "We walked up Dry Gulch and sat on some rocks. It was awfully hot. 'I wouldn't live here if they gave me the state,' I told Flaten."<sup>12</sup> Even so, DeCamp, who wondered "how anybody could stand the sun's rays and breathless air," managed to have a productive day. "It was terrible," he said, "but the day furnished for me a sketching for one of the best things I ever accomplished—a canvas that simply radiated the terrific heat."<sup>13</sup>

When the snow in Yellowstone melted, the pair returned to Livingston and ventured into the park by pack train, where DeCamp sketched and Flaten photographed the incomparable scenery. After leaving Yellowstone, the artists traveled through Idaho and Washington as far west as Seattle before returning to Minnesota. Back in Moorhead, DeCamp transformed his rough field sketches into finished paintings—selections of which the Northern Pacific purchased. Although their lives diverged thereafter, DeCamp and Flaten remained close friends. Upon Flaten's death in 1933, a grieving DeCamp wrote: "For many years our trails have been divergent, but there was a time when we played the leading parts of two tenderfoot explorers, with about as unruly a pack outfit as was ever assembled." He added: "Then it was I got to value Mr. Flaten for his rare traits of courage, patience and

12. MNA insert, April 22, 1935.

13. *Helena Daily Independent*, December 20, 1925.

consideration of others, that were so important in making our crazy venture a success, an epic of the past of pleasant memory."<sup>14</sup>

Despite his initial reaction to the Montana capital's heat, DeCamp decided to relocate to Helena after his return to Minnesota. It would be his home for the next fifty years. DeCamp's exact reasons for moving are unknown, but the beauty of the landscape undoubtedly helped lure him. As noted by one later observer, Montana "was a fairyland to the artist's eye." It represented "a land of high adventure, of challenge, for an artist of DeCamp's temperament and drive. There was much to do in his field."<sup>15</sup> At every available opportunity DeCamp roamed the hills and forests surrounding Helena—or traveled farther afield to other parts of the state—in search of subject matter for his paintings. One friend recalled, "he was a great outdoorsman and would sit by the hour, studying the coloring of mountains, trees, bushes, etc."<sup>16</sup> The result of this careful study—an "intensified feeling that proved the enthusiastic intimacy of the painter with his subject"—would become a hallmark of DeCamp's Montana landscapes.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his devotion to his art, DeCamp was never able—or more likely never believed himself able—to earn a living solely through painting. As a result, he always maintained employment outside the field. Upon arriving in Helena in 1886 he secured a job as manager of the Helena Abstract and Title Company. Ten years later he went to work as a draftsman for the United States Surveyor General's Office, a position he held until his retirement in 1924. Although he never relied upon painting as a primary means of support, DeCamp, and those around him, viewed art as his principal calling.

In 1888, several Helena artists formed a sketch club with DeCamp serving as its first president. The club's members sponsored periodic weekend outings and met twice weekly to sketch models in DeCamp's downtown apartment, which he outfitted as a studio. The

organization's most famous member was Charles M. Russell, who for a short period lived in Helena. Years later, DeCamp recalled the group's gatherings, remembering that "Charlie sketched but seldom. He would sit on his heels, smoke one cigarette after another and tell stories."<sup>18</sup> Russell and DeCamp became lifelong friends. Louise Waterbury DeCamp, DeCamp's daughter-in-law, remembered how Mr. De "used to tell of camping out with Charlie Russell and how he was painting a scene and Russell thought he needed a deer in it and Mr. De said he could not paint a deer, so Russell took a piece of wax from his pocket which he always carried with him and in a minute molded a perfect deer and so Mr. De used that as his model and the deer went into the picture."<sup>19</sup>

If on occasion critical of DeCamp's ability to portray wildlife, Russell admired his mastery as a landscape painter, one time remarking, "that boy can sure paint the wettest water of anybody I know. You can hear his rivers ripple."<sup>20</sup> Eugene Sanden, a close friend and collector of DeCamp's work, related a story about a landscape in his possession that depicted "a frost scene in upper Dry gulch, some three or four miles south of Helena." Charlie Russell, he said,

accompanied Mr. DeCamp on an Autumn's outing at that spot in the hills. They occupied a cabin there together, and when they awoke one morning there was a heavy frost on the trees and undergrowth. Mr. DeCamp told me that Russell insisted on his sketching the scene, and that when Russell saw the completed painting later he said that he thought it was the best thing Mr. DeCamp had done.<sup>21</sup>

In Moorhead, DeCamp's favorite subject matter for his paintings had been scenes of the Red River.<sup>22</sup> In coming to Montana, he did not forgo his fascination with water. Rather, DeCamp redirected his attention to the Missouri River and to the small creeks and streams that formed its tributaries. One segment of the Missouri he found especially captivating was the Gates of the Mountains. Located approximately twenty miles north of Helena, the Gates—a three-mile-long canyon of towering limestone cliffs—was so named by Captain Meriwether Lewis as Thomas Jefferson's Corps of Discovery passed through the region in 1805. For DeCamp



DeCamp met Montana's cowboy artist Charlie Russell when the two were members of a Helena sketch club in the late 1880s. They became lifelong friends thereafter and are shown together here (Russell on the right) in about 1910. Russell said DeCamp could paint "the wettest water of anybody I know."



Nicholas Hilger, Helena judge and stockman, gained unexpected success in Montana's early tourist industry when he began using the small steamboat, *The Rose of Helena* (above, no date) to take sightseers to the Gates of the Mountains. He also gained an unexpected son-in-law when Ralph DeCamp met and then eloped with Hilger's daughter, Margaret, in 1891. Above, Hilger is shown at the wheel.

enthusiasts, the canyon would become synonymous with his painting.

Although DeCamp was drawn initially by its tremendous scenery, the Gates of the Mountains also held another attraction. This dramatic stretch of the Missouri River was located adjacent to, and was most easily accessible by way of, a ranch belonging to Nicholas Hilger, a noted Helena judge, stockman, and entrepreneur. Among Hilger's varied pursuits was the operation of a small steamboat, *The Rose of Helena*, through the Gates of the Mountains. Hilger purchased the boat in 1886 hoping to establish a business shipping commercial goods on the Missouri. This venture proved unsuccessful, but its failure was quickly assuaged by the overwhelming reception the *Rose* got as a launch for carrying sightseers through the Gates. Given his early experiences on the Red River, DeCamp must have been delighted to find a steamboat so close to his new

home. Of even more interest, however, was Hilger's daughter Margaret, whom Ralph met while on a sketching trip to the Gates. In 1891, DeCamp and Margaret—ten years his junior—eloped. The Hilgers' immediate reaction was one of "considerable turmoil," as Margaret's younger sister Esther later recalled. "It was not long, though," Esther said, "until all hard feelings were forgotten and Nicholas and 'Mr. De' were on the best of terms."<sup>23</sup>

Margaret, a violinist, was an artist in her own right. Writing in 1930, historian and educator Robert Raymer said of Mrs. DeCamp: "She is now recognized as one of the most talented violinists in the northwest; her concert appearances having been many and her artistic triumphs having been equal in number."<sup>24</sup> After their marriage, Ralph continued exploring Montana's scenic wonders, but now when he went on these excursions Margaret often accompanied him, practicing her

14. Fargo, North Dakota, *Forum*, February 19, 1933.  
 15. Fargo *Forum*, February 24, 1957.  
 16. Kirby Hoon to Johnson, October 29, 1954, Johnson Papers.  
 17. Helena *Daily Independent*, May 31, 1909.  
 18. MNA insert, April 22, 1935.  
 19. Louise Waterbury DeCamp to Johnson, September 3, 1954, Johnson Papers.

20. Frank Bird Linderman, *Recollections of Charles M. Russell* (Norman, 1964), 93.  
 21. Eugene Sanden to Johnson, August 21, 1954, Johnson Papers.  
 22. MNA insert, April 22, 1935.  
 23. Rose Esther Hilger Nash to Johnson, September 1, 1954, Johnson Papers.  
 24. Robert G. Raymer, *Montana: The Land and the People*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1930), 3:546.





On a trip from Helena to Lewistown, DeCamp photographed an old wood-burning Northern Pacific locomotive (left) as it puffed its way through Sixteen Mile Canyon southeast of Helena. DeCamp's faithful reproduction of the scene in *Jawbone Railroad, Sixteen Mile Canyon* (1904, oil on canvas, 22" x 27") appears below.



violin while he sketched. After the birth of their son, Renan, in 1896, such outings became a regular family occurrence and often took them back to the Hilger ranch and the Gates of the Mountains.

Such excursions not only provided DeCamp with an opportunity to produce field sketches and study his subject matter firsthand, at some point in his career, they facilitated a new form of artistic endeavor—photography. Just when he began taking pictures is unknown, but DeCamp was using views taken by Northern Pacific photographer F. Jay Haynes as subject matter for his paintings as early as 1880, and time spent with Ole Flaten in Yellowstone likely influenced his interest in the art form.<sup>25</sup> DeCamp's expertise with the camera eventually progressed to the point that he was able to assist other photographers with their work. In 1956, the highly respected Helena photographer Leslie Jorud remembered several trips that he and DeCamp took to the Gates of the Mountains. "A warm friendship was formed, and I always regarded him as an outstanding artist," Jorud recalled. "He helped me in many ways with some of my work, as he also was a good photographer and had several cameras."<sup>26</sup>

In his studio DeCamp painted from his photographs in the same manner he did from field sketches, sometimes reproducing them exactly, at other times rearranging subtle elements to attain the greatest artistic effect. In addition, he isolated aspects of unrelated photographs and added them to other views. As Helena artist H. E. Longmaid observed, "He had a knack

for selecting scenes with good composition and making the most of them."<sup>27</sup> Whether reproducing a landscape exactly as nature presented it or recomposing it, DeCamp paid meticulous attention to detail. Jorud, who often printed the artist's photographs, recalled that "many times he wanted a certain tree or rock or something made a certain size so he could get the actual details to put in the foregrounds the way he wanted."<sup>28</sup>

Although DeCamp pursued photography primarily as an aid to his painting, he valued it as a meritorious art form by itself. For a short time he maintained a photographic publishing company, selling mounted images to the public—principally views of Helena. He experimented with formal portraiture of family members, and happily documented the informal gatherings of family and friends. As his niece, Helen Nash, recalled, "From my earliest remembrances, my uncle Mr. De was part of our lives. . . . On every picnic or special outing or event Mr. De was there with his camera on

25. Clay County, Minnesota, *Advocate*, May 27, 1880.

26. Leslie H. Jorud to Johnson, October 30, 1956, Johnson Papers.

27. Harold E. Longmaid to Johnson, October 1, 1954, *ibid.*

28. Leslie H. Jorud to Johnson, October 3, 1956, *ibid.*

29. Helen Nash to *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, August 14, 1979, artist's file, in author's possession.

30. *Fargo Forum*, February 24, 1957.

31. Eugene Sanden to Johnson, August 21, 1954, Johnson Papers.

32. Rose Esther Hilger Nash to Johnson, September 1, 1954, *ibid.*

33. Florence Sanden MacPherson to Johnson, October 15, 1956, *ibid.*

34. *Helena Daily Independent*, December 20, 1925.

35. Florence Sanden MacPherson to Johnson, October 15, 1956, Johnson Papers.

36. Eugene Sanden to Johnson, August 21, 1954, *ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, September 8, 1954.

38. *Helena Independent*, December 15, 1907.

tripod with black cloth over his head shooting the scene.<sup>329</sup>

Whether working with paintbrush or camera, DeCamp was, by all accounts, a perfectionist. "My father," said his son, Renan, "would not let a picture go out of his hands unless he was fully satisfied with it."<sup>30</sup> Eugene Sanden underscored this observation. DeCamp, he said, "never rushed his painting, nor did he ever force himself to paint. He had to have the 'feeling' for his subject before he could go on with it, and sometimes days, weeks, and months would pass before he would complete a work. There were many canvases that were never completed, and then destroyed ultimately."<sup>31</sup> And Esther Nash, DeCamp's sister-in-law, reiterated this fact when she reported that "his favorite expression if a picture didn't meet his expectations was 'kick a hole through it.'"<sup>32</sup>

DeCamp's desire for perfection did not carry into the business side of art. According to longtime family friend Florence Sanden MacPherson, "Mr. DeCamp painted because he loved to paint—and cared nothing whatever for the commercial side."<sup>33</sup> No extant records document how or where DeCamp sold his paintings. He may have placed some works with local art dealers, but more likely he sold most of his paintings directly to his customers. By DeCamp's own recollection he always had more buyers than available paintings.<sup>34</sup> Even so, he often had trouble setting values on his work. "He could never make up his mind what price to put on pictures," MacPherson recalled "and it often took him

quite a while to get ready to sell one, particularly if it struck him as being a little extra fine."<sup>35</sup>

Neither, apparently, was DeCamp particularly concerned with securing public displays of his work. "He disliked the bother of exhibiting," said Eugene Sanden, "and consequently did very little of it."<sup>36</sup> As he had in Moorhead, DeCamp displayed recently completed paintings in his Helena studio and in local offices and shop windows. In addition, his work was featured—but relatively infrequently—in more formal venues. In 1893, he exhibited a painting at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where it received an honorable mention award.<sup>37</sup> His landscapes were highlighted in major Helena exhibitions at the Montana Club in 1904, and at the offices of the *Treasure State* in 1909. Both shows included the work of such well-known artists as Charlie Russell and J. H. Sharp. In 1907, DeCamp entered a number of works in a national show in San Antonio, Texas. Upon its conclusion, the exhibition's organizer wrote: "Everybody here was delighted with the work of your Mr. DeCamp and we have nothing but expressions of admiration of them."<sup>38</sup>

In summer 1902 DeCamp once again found himself employed on behalf of the Northern Pacific Railroad. In that year, he accompanied Olin D. Wheeler, editor of the Northern Pacific's magazine, *Wonderland*, on a pack trip through the Bitterroot Mountains. Wheeler, who was retracing the journey of Lewis and Clark, hired DeCamp to serve as photographer and illustrator for the portion of his trip that took him over the western leg of the Lolo Trail. Wheeler, DeCamp, a guide, and a cook, set out from Kamiah, Idaho, and traveled east over the rugged Bitterroot Mountains until incessant rains and worn-out pack animals forced the venture to an early conclusion. Wheeler wrote an account of the trip which appeared in *Wonderland 1903*. Although none are so credited, several of the photographs that profusely illustrate the article are surely



DeCamp's remarkable ability to reproduce beautifully in oils the scenes he captured on film with his camera is underscored by comparing the painting above, *Upper End of Sixteen Mile Canyon* (no date, oil on canvas, 20" x 24") with his photograph of the same scene at right.



DeCamp's work. A number of DeCamp's photographs and two of his paintings—*The Heart of the Gates of the Rocky Mountains* and "*Fort Rock*" at *Three Forks of the Missouri, Montana*—were also reproduced in Wheeler's two-volume work, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark, 1804–1904*, published in 1904 in commemoration of the Expedition's one hundredth anniversary.<sup>39</sup>

**I**n 1911 DeCamp was selected to paint six murals for the Montana State Capitol. To many, these murals represent the apex of his career and his most lasting contribution to Montana art. The four-foot by seven-foot landscapes were commissioned to adorn a new law library, then under construction as part of an expansion to the capitol building. After much debate regarding the nature of the art that should embellish the addition, the Capitol Commission voted unanimously to employ Montana artists portraying Montana scenes rather than hire "recognized" mural painters from the East to depict more traditional allegorical themes.<sup>40</sup> In testifying to the commission, DeCamp "assured the board that he could do appropriate work." He said the Montana landscape would provide the most suitable subject matter for the murals, asserting that "the capitol belongs to the people and that the average person would be much more pleased with paintings representing things at home than sketches foreign to the state."<sup>41</sup>

When DeCamp received the commission he set to work immediately. For the next several months he traversed the state, searching for the perfect vistas to serve as subjects. When suitable scenes were located, he sketched and photographed extensively on site, then returned to his studio to produce preliminary studies for the commission's approval. The finished murals were installed in 1912 in niches that lined the new library's upper walls. DeCamp was paid \$1,800 for the murals, which depicted six of Montana's grandest views—the Bitterroot River, the West Gallatin River, the Gates of the Mountains, Lake McDermott (now Swift Current Lake) in Glacier National Park, the Mis-

sion Mountains near St. Ignatius, and a mining scene on Last Chance Gulch with Mount Helena in the background. In 1927, the state commissioned DeCamp to paint four additional works "of a certain size and character to match those pictures already in the Law Library." This time he chose scenes of Flathead Lake, the Rosebud River, Holter Dam (below the Gates of the Mountains on the Missouri River), and the Granite Range near the northeast corner of Yellowstone National Park. In 1928, these new murals were installed adjacent to the six original paintings to help complete decoration of the law library.<sup>42</sup>

Following his retirement from the Surveyor General's office in 1924, DeCamp remained active. He continued to paint and to tinker with things mechanical, especially cars, to which he was avidly devoted. "Both Mr. De and my husband were natural mechanics," said his daughter-in-law Louise. "They used to spend all their weekends under one car or the other."<sup>43</sup> Ralph's enthusiasm for the mechanical, however, failed to translate into expertise behind the wheel. Stories abound of his lack of driving skill. "For years, Mr. DeCamp was a familiar sight on the streets of Helena," one friend recalled. "Once he got under way, he drove manfully forward, often oblivious of other traffic, or the obstacles interposed by lights and signs."<sup>44</sup> Said another friend: "I have a most distinct recollection of meeting him on some of our winding mountain curves, tooling along as fast as the car would go, entirely disregarding deep canyons and narrow passes."<sup>45</sup>

After nearly fifty years as a mainstay of Montana art, DeCamp's life in Helena came to an abrupt halt when Margaret died unexpectedly in November 1934. The following January, a distraught DeCamp was taken to Chicago to live with his son, Renan, who was by then an electrical engineer. Although he greatly missed Montana, the aging artist adapted to life in the city. He purchased a car and explored Chicago much as he had roamed Montana's countryside. He was especially fascinated by the activity along the city's industrial waterfront—the ships and lake shore transporting him back to his childhood on the Red River. He frequented the Art Institute, and he painted regularly—

39. Olin Wheeler, "One Hundred and Fifty Miles with a Pack Train," *Wonderland 1903* (St. Paul, Minn., 1903), 71–86; Olin D. Wheeler, *The Trail of Lewis and Clark, 1804–1904* (New York, 1904).

40. Two other Montana artists were chosen to paint murals for the new capitol wings: Charles M. Russell, who produced his masterpiece *Lewis and Clark Meeting Indians at Ross' Hole*; and Missoula's E. S. Paxson, who painted six scenes for the lobby of the House of Representatives.

41. Minutes of the Montana Capitol Building Commission, June 29, 1911, folder 4, box 1, RS 65, MHS Archives.

42. *Laws of Montana*, Twentieth Legislative Assembly, House Bill 103 (Helena, Mont., 1927), 514. Eighteen niches line the walls of the law library, thus making it possible to have eighteen murals in the

room. Why the original commission chose only six or why the 1927 legislature commissioned only four more is unknown. When installed in 1912 and 1928, however, the murals were placed in such a manner as to give the room a completed look. The law library was moved out of the capitol in 1982 and its space converted into a hearing room. Although the original character of the room has been greatly altered, the DeCamp murals remain intact.

43. Louise Waterbury DeCamp to Johnson, September 3, 1954, Johnson Papers.

44. Edmond G. Toomey to Johnson, September 24, 1954, *ibid.*

45. Agnes D. Regan to Johnson, September 24, 1954, *ibid.*

46. *Helena Daily Independent*, December 20, 1925.

47. *Fargo Forum*, February 17, 1957.

scenes of both Montana and Chicago. He visited Helena one last time in summer 1935 while on a vacation with Louise and Renan. In March 1936, at age seventy-seven, he suffered a stroke from which he never recovered and died several weeks later. His body was returned to Montana where it was buried next to Margaret in the Helena Valley.

With DeCamp's passing Montana lost a uniquely gifted artist, but his legacy remains in his art. The number of works that DeCamp produced during his long career is unknown. In 1925, when asked how many paintings he had completed, the artist replied, "I really haven't the slightest idea. You see I have been painting for fifty years, and it would be impossible to even give the remotest figure. Some years I have done a good many, other years just a few—depending on the subjects that I have had on hand, the trips I have made and the time I have had."<sup>46</sup>


Of DeCamp's surviving works, most probably remain in the Treasure State. The Montana Historical Society Museum has in its permanent collection almost fifty DeCamp paintings. Of these, approximately half were given to the museum in 1977 by DeCamp's grandson Renan. The Museum's canvases range in size from a diminutive eight inches to five feet wide and cover the full spectrum of DeCamp's career, from field



DeCamp crowned his career in 1911 when he was commissioned to paint six four-foot by seven-foot murals for the upper walls of the Montana State Capitol's new law library (shown at right in 1917). He painted four additional murals in 1927. One of the original works, all of which remain on display today, was a Last Chance Gulch mining scene based on DeCamp's own photograph (above, circa 1911).



sketches produced in Yellowstone in 1885, to views of Chicago completed shortly before his death. In addition, the Society's Photograph Archives holds more than three hundred of DeCamp's original glass-plate negatives and vintage prints. These images—donated by Renan DeCamp and members of the Hilger Family—include family snapshots, views of Helena and the Hilger ranch, and artistic landscapes. Most of the collection's photographs date between 1890 and 1910. A few are hand-tinted by the artist.

DeCamp's works are rarely seen for sale. Most of his paintings are held privately as family treasures that have been handed down to the current generation from parents and grandparents who were DeCamp's contemporaries. Although professional art historians might have more stringent criteria, to these Montanans DeCamp qualifies as a master painter. As one biographer put it, "A survey among DeCamp canvas owners reveals that his works meet the definition of what makes art great. They have been loved by many people over a long period of time."<sup>47</sup> 

KIRBY LAMBERT is the curator of collections for the Montana Historical Society Museum. This article is drawn from research conducted for the Society's most recent temporary exhibit, *Through the Artist's Eye: The Paintings and Photographs of R. E. DeCamp* (April 22, 1999–March 15, 2000). A previous contributor to this magazine, Lambert has curated exhibits for the Society since 1989 on topics ranging from the art of Blackfoot wood-carver J. L. Clarke to the impact of horses on Montana's material culture. In addition, he has written several articles highlighting various aspects of the Society's collections.