

## WESTERN ART: Art in library through the month

*Continued from page 3*

Report (runningironreport.podbean.com) podcast from the bunkhouse by *Nugget* columnist Craig Rullman and Editor in Chief Jim Cornelius. Paintings like the ones Len gave away over the years are now selling for thousands of dollars. Len and his work will be back in Sisters on the first Saturday in August at the Sisters Fire Hall with live music and new oil paintings.

"I learned to draw as soon as I could hold a pencil," he said. "My father taught me how to paint a horse when I was about six or seven."

Now in his 70s, Len says he's made hundreds if not thousands of paintings in his lifetime. Although Len has become a living legend in the world of working cowboys, he said, "I never expected to become famous with the rest of the world!"

Len paints in the style of the famous Western artist Charlie Russell.

"Some people say my work looks too much like Russell, but I think they don't look enough like Russell," he said.

His work depicts the era of the cowboy, the Indian, the frontiersman; an era that began to disappear when the automobile came along. He paints in both oil and watercolor, draws with pen and ink, and creates small bronze sculptures. And, as if that's not enough, he also makes highly sought-after one-of-a-kind Western saddles.

During the Running Iron Report interview, Len admitted that, at first, the most difficult part of drawing a horse was getting the hoof right.

When it comes to creating the scene though, Len just gets it all right. A good example is his painting "Bringing in the Remuda," a term derived from

the Spanish for "remount" or change of horses. Buckaroos working the range required new mounts one or two times a day, in order to make sure that all horses were adequately rested. The wrangler was in charge of rounding up horses (the remuda) as the sun rose and set.

The first thing you notice in "Bringing in the Remuda" is the wrangler, bright yellow raincoat tails flying as he appears to become one with his mount. Then there is the light, squeezed beneath dark clouds, as the setting sun casts its rays on the storm's leftover water, pooling within the sagebrush. But there are always more details: the chuckwagon in the background, tarped for protection from the recent rain, and nearby, two big kettles of vittles for dinner, boiling over a fast flame. A pair of cooks watch the steaming pots, and another cowboy stands to one side, rope in hand.

Craig Rullman, who spent time as a buckaroo in Nevada himself, said, "I feel like I am stepping right into the scene."

Real historic events form the basis of Len's work. According to him, "There is a story in how things were, and that's important."

You can't have cowboys without Indians, and the early Native Americans show up in nearly half of Len's paintings. "Leaving Bent's Fort"

and "Blanket Traders" are companion pieces on display at Sisters Library. In the 1830s, Bent's Fort, on the banks of the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado, was a non-military outpost in the heart of Indian country, buffalo hunting grounds, and the crossroads of key overland trading routes. Mountain men visited there to exchange their beaver skins, obtain traps and supplies. Brothers Charles and William Bent, along with Ceran St. Vrain, partnered a highly profitable trading empire that reached from Texas to Wyoming, and from the Rocky Mountains to Kansas.

They were on friendly terms with the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, and William Bent married the daughter of a Southern Cheyenne chief. The fort was a neutral meeting place for tribes and U.S. officials, as well as tribal councils. The original fort was authentically rebuilt in the 1950s, and is now known as Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site. Len and Gloria stopped their a few years ago while driving to visit one of their sons, and right then, Len knew he had to paint the fort as it existed in its glory days. He also painted "Blanket Traders," a scene of Indians trading their goods with trappers on the nearby

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PHOTO PROVIDED

Len Babb's life in the saddle helps make his work authentic.

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