Robert Taft correspondence related to frontier artists, Rindesbacker - Schott

Section 9, Pages 241 - 270

A series of research correspondence from the Robert Taft collection relating to frontier artists. Robert Taft (1894-1955) was a professor of chemistry and author on the subjects of photography and art. The artists included here are Peter Rindesbaker, Julian Rix, Cornelius Rogers, William Allen Rogers, Warren E. Rollins, Charles M. Russell, John Sartain, Frank Sauerwein, Joseph Scheuerle, A. Zeno Schindler, and Arthur Carl Victor Schott.

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lest you say something complimentary about one of the pictures. As soon as you do his little composure is shattered—"Yep—Yep—pretty good," and he will shuffle like an embarrassed child and lead you hastily to the next picture. And this modesty he carries all through his life; it is the hardest task in the world to get him to talk about art, especially his art, except in a joking way, when he can cover reality with a film of ridicule. I am convinced that Charlie Russell does not know that he is a great man, so it cannot be said that he carries his honors lightly because he is not conscious that he has any honors to carry.

THE FRIVOLOUS CUBS

Joseph Hergesheimer maintains that every creative artist must be an egotist else he would not have the assumption to give his creations to the public. However much of truth there may be in this statement it is not true of Charlie Russell. He paints because he cannot help painting. It is as much a part of the necessity of living to him as breathing. If he lost his hands he could yet find some means of putting brush to canvas, for he must do it. And herein lies the true secret of the man behind the pictures.

In 1895 he married Mrs. Russell and from that time he gave up the cowboy life and devoted himself wholly to his art. But however much he may have lived through since then, deep within him he is still living in the old, wild days of the open range. The last thirty years, the most amazingly progressive decades in the world's history, have made no impression on him. He accepts the automobile, the airplane, the strides of sciences as transient, inconsequential, and when he does think of them he classes them with the hated barbed wire which spelled the end of the life he loved. But to him that life is not ended; his pictures, his bronzes, his stories, those expressions of what is going on in his heart and mind, are fresh and vivid as if he had but that day ridden in the great beef round-up. And so, with this pulsing, real life within him and no way to live it, he must paint and model and paint and model, and never can he create a work which will be as great as the conception, for that conception is his life.

The fact that in 1895 Charlie Russell was married has already been mentioned, but the importance of that fact has not. All of his artistic work prior to that date had been done, gratis, for his friends or at the rate of ten or twenty dollars a picture. He was not a good salesman for he did not appreciate, with his painful modesty, the tremendous value of his work. He tells a story which would seem to refute this; he says:

"A feller wanted me to paint a couple water-colors for him. When I finished 'em, I went to his room and says: 'Well, here's your pictures.' 'Fine,' he says, 'How much are they?' 'Twenty,' I says. 'Apiece?' Right quick I answer 'Yep, twenty apiece.' Gee whiz, I sure was surprised when he handed me the forty."

But Mrs. Russell realized the value of her husband's work and since then has attended to every business detail. When they are having an exhibition, she arranges the hanging and cataloguing and pricing and she is always there to show the pictures and tell their stories to visitors. Mr. Russell would be helplessly lost if he had to do that, as I have already pointed out.

He has a story to tell of their first venture to New York which goes something like this:

"We put up at the Park View Hotel. They give us a little room but it didn't have no view of the park. We didn't have the price to go to a gallery, so pretty soon I wanders down to the bar. In a minute a feller whams me on the shoulder.

"'Bet you don' know who I am,' he says.

"'One-eyed George,' I says.

"'Ssh,' lookin' around quick. 'You called the turn.'

"We got talkin'—One-eyed George was a gambler from out home—and he agrees to bring a friend of his, a lawyer, to look at the pictures; he's interested in one of 'em it seems.

"So the next day we fixes up the room and I warns the Missus: "'Now don't overplay your hand—not over two hundred dollars—we don't want to walk home and if we don't make this sale we sure have to!'

"In comes this lawyer. 'How much?' he asks. 'Five hundred dollars,' says the Missus without blinkin.' Wow! I just set there an' held on. 'Gosh, we've scared him off,' I says to myself. But d'you know that feller bought the picture an' since then I ain't ever interfered in the business."

And so to-day you can buy a small water color for six hundred dollars and a very nice oil for ten thousand dollars.

But even now Charlie Russell looks at it as a kind of a hold-up game. He can't understand why anybody should part with many thousand dollars of good money to buy something that he just can't help creating.

But the reason for this is not far to seek. Hundreds of volumes—history, fiction, poetry—have been written about the West, and hundreds more will be written, but read them as you will the real history is not to be found in the printed word but in the pictures of Charlie Russell. He is telling the truth, not only an objective truth but a subjective truth. True to earlier traditions of art as to other things, Mr. Russell believes that a picture should tell a story and every picture he paints is so conceived. Whether or not you quarrel with this theory from an artistic standpoint makes little difference, for even if you do you cannot help but admit that the great historical value lies in that and that alone. Each conception is a phase of the old life, with its drama, its pathos, its humor.

There is drama in all his work—the bronze "When the Best of Riders Quit" is full of it; so are all his pictures of bucking horses, and could there be a tenser situation than that which he shows in "Left Hand Shake is Best?" The pathos is usually reserved for the Indians. Mr. Russell is second to none as an authority on the Northwest Plains Indians; he knows them and loves them, and he, along with all those who are willing to look the situation clearly in the face, knows that the Indian has been scandalously treated at the hands of the white man. And as for humor, it is to be found hand in hand with drama in much of his work—"Bronc for Breakfast," for example.

But Charlie Russell is an unconscious historian. He is not telling a story in each picture because that is the way history is best told; the story is there because it is a part of the conception which is a part of the soul—the great strong dramatic soul—of the old West which in its elements was typical of all that is best in the spirit of this country.

TRYING CONCLUSIONS—a tragedy of the Plains

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Charles Russell—Cowboy Artist

By FRANK B. LINDERMAN

ASK any old plainsman or mountaineer, "Who has painted the best pictures of the West, especially the Northwest?"

"Charley Russell," he will answer, without the least hesitation or qualification.

"What about Remington?"

"Good," he will say. "Mighty good, especially when he painted regular soldiers. But he couldn't paint with Charley Russell. Remington didn't know, and couldn't feel the West as Charley did, because he wasn't part of it. Charley lived here since he was a kid. He saw life in the Northwest early, and he loved it even more than we did. But now he's gone, and there can never be another Charley Russell. It sure hurt me when he laid 'em down, partner."

THE passing of Charles Russell, the cowboy artist, saddened not only the old plainsmen and mountaineers, but everybody in the Northwest, since all knew and loved him. He was a boy of fifteen when he came to Montana to begin life for himself. He was sixty-two when he passed to the Shadow Hills at his home in Great Falls, on October 24, leaving behind him a wealth of wonderful stories told in pigment and bronze.

Russell's coming to the Northwest seems inspired. The very moment of his advent to the plains was propitious. The old life was already passing, and there had been none to write its history. Its characters, trappers and traders, touched the country so lightly that they left little to testify to the occupancy, and almost nothing of their history. They were nomads, not builders; and they drifted out of the picture before advancing civilization. They hoped always to keep ahead of it, and, in love with the wilderness, they deliberately strengthened popular belief that the Northwest was uninhabitable by the peaceably inclined whenever they could, so that its endless plains, high mountains, and dense forests, peopled with tribes of hostile Indians, set up their own barriers against settlement for more than a generation after the expedition of Lewis and Clark.

There had been but little change on the plains when Russell came. The gold stampedes westward to the Rockies in the sixties had not affected them, because, in its greed for the gold, civilization had literally jumped over the plains to the mountains, and in their gulches had set up its cities, with no thought for the vast country that remained wilderness between its outposts east and west. And there was little in common between the gregarious miner and the solitary plainsman, anyway. Greed led many to the mines. Perhaps none came to the mountains primarily to build or to permanently settle; all hoped to enrich themselves, and go away. But long before the exciting discovery of gold on Grasshopper Creek, in the mountains of Montana, trappers and traders had established themselves on the great plains eastward, and if hope of gain in the fur trade had been responsible for their coming, these men soon learned to love adventure more, and stayed for the love of the game. Their posts were small and far apart, and these were the establishments of substantial corporations retaining scores of engagees, hunters, and hangers-on. The free trappers were men who roamed the plains and mountains at their own sweet will, sold their furs at the posts, or carried them down the Missouri River to St. Louis, if they pleased. Copying the Indian in many of his ways, they were the most picturesque of all plainsmen, and the most hardy and daring. Their lives were filled to the brim with blood-stirring adventure, warfare, hardships that seemed only to wed them closer to the wilds, and a freedom that made them men apart from those in any settlement. Their customs, apparel, and even their language, fashioned by requirement and experience, were as much their own as the great plains themselves. Russell came in time to know them all.

THE cowman, coming up the trails from Texas with his herds, only added romance to the great grass country of the Northwest. Freighters with their bull teams and skinners with mules, taking cargoes in wagon-trains from Fort Benton, on the Missouri River, to the mines in the mountains, were not settlers. Even the scattered cow ranches were mostly only headquarters for cow outfits. They were not regular homes where there were women and children. A pan of milk in a cabin in those days did not forecast the establishment of a dairy. It merely testified that a venturesome cow-hand had had a fight with a cow, and that the cow had lost. Nobody on the plains missed civilization. Nobody wished it to come to him there. So the plains were unsettled—Montana a Territory—when Charley Russell came to them from St. Louis, a boy of fifteen.

Cut off from the influence of family, and full of filtered romance unshaded by the serious side of frontier life, which seemed always to be secondary and evanescent in its higher light of adventure, he fell easily into the ways of the people of the plains, and never forgot them. At the age of fifteen, more impressionable than ordinary boys because of his inherent art and natural love for primitive life, he began to know the Indian, the trapper, the trader, and the cowman; the latter, then rapidly becoming master of the plains, especially attracted him, and he became a cowboy.

His knowledge of the customs, apparel, and life of both white men and Indians of those days was perfect, and he was almost fanatical in his attention

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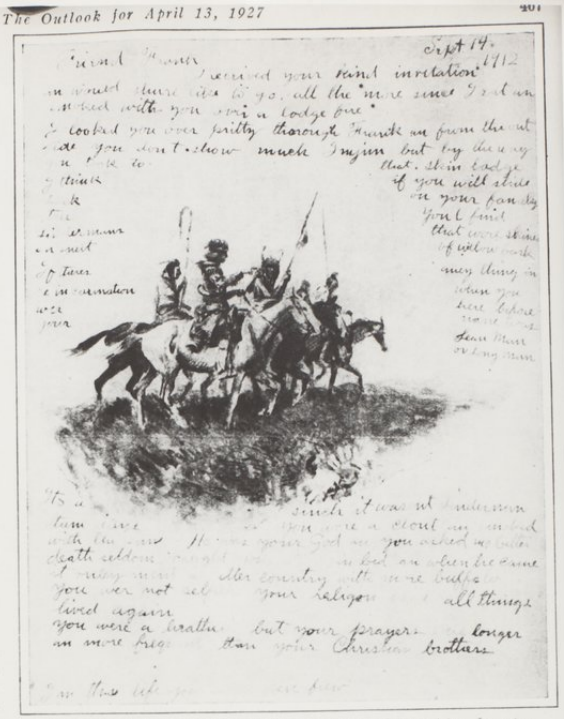
to detail in his paintings, which he began in the eighties and continued to the last day of his life. His "Waiting for a Chinook," a pen drawing of a cow, already reduced to a skeleton, standing humped up in a snow-drift on the plains, while a wolf near by confidently waited for starvation to save him even the possibility of a battle, was first to command wide attention. It was sent to Kaufman & Stadler in Helena, Montana, to acquaint them of conditions at their ranch during the terrible winter of 1886–7. The picture, done hurriedly to save writing a letter, and without proper materials, created much comment, and perhaps there was not a cowman in all the Northwest who was not familiar with its harrowing details. Those were days that threatened the cattle industry, but Charley Russell, for the amusement of himself and fellows, modeled animals, carved the butts of six-shooters, stocks of rifles, painted pictures on the cabin doors, and told stories to the delight of the hands fortunate enough to be employed with him during the awful winter of '86–7, when tens of thousands of cattle perished on the northern ranges.

RUSSELL'S philosophy of life was gathered from old plainsmen and mountaineers, both white and red. Their aphorisms never failed him as a source of deep wisdom, and their humor, so often embellished by his own and repeated in his inimitable manner, was the joy-cup of his life that remained full to the last, because of his own magical replenishments. He had no peer in the Northwest as a teller of stories, and with his face as straight as that of the chisled Sphinx he could keep a group of friends convulsed with laughter for hours without once faltering, except to roll an occasional cigarette, and then his art held his audience breathless until he resumed.

I have never known a simpler, a more humble man, than Charley Russell. He hated the counterfeit of anything, and could not pose. He avoided strangers, and, shy as a little girl, sought his own kind whenever they were near. Unique among them, possessing great talent that was as naturally his own as the blood in his veins, he was unbelievably modest of his attainments. "I couldn't help but be a painter," he would say whenever compliments approached flattery. Writing of himself, he has said: "I'm old-fashioned and peculiar in my dress. I am eccentric (that's a polite way of saying I'm crazy). I believe in luck, and have had lots of it. To have talent is no credit to its owner, for what a man can't help he should get neither credit nor blame—it's not his fault. I'm an illustrator. There are lots better ones, but some worse. Any man that can make a living doing what he likes to do is lucky, and I'm that. Any time I cash in now, I win."



A page of a letter from Charles Russell to the author of this article. It reads:

Sept. 14, 1912.

Friend Frank—I received your kind invitation an would share like to go, all the more since I eat an smoked with you over a lodge fire.

I looked you over pritty thorough Frank an from the outside you dont show much Injun but by the way you took to that skin lodge I think if you will slide back on your famely tree youl find Lindermans that wore skines an snelt of willow bark. If theres aney thing in reincarnation when you wer here before your name was Iron Man or Long Man. It's a sinch it wasent Linderman then days you wore a clout an smoked with the sun. He was your God an you asked no better death seldom caught your kind in bed an when he came it onley ment a better country with more buffalo you wer not selfish your religon said all things lived again

You were a heathen but your prayers were longer an more frequent than your Christian brothers

In this life your words were few

Once he told me, rather shamefully, of a "crooked deal" he had made in the early days of his art. He was flat broke when a stranger from Boston who was in town buying cattle asked him to paint two pictures. When they were finished, Russell carried them to the hotel where his patron was stopping, and said, "Here's your pictures, partner." The man was delighted. "How much are they, Mr. Russell?" he asked, reaching for his wallet. "He was a plumb stranger, and I thought I'd hit him good and hard, because none of the boys had any money. Grass hadn't even started on the ranges, and our saddles were in soak," confided Russell, "so I said, 'Fifty dollars.' And I'm a common liar if the fellow didn't dig out a hundred dollars and hand 'em over. He thought I meant fifty dollars *apiece*, you see. I got crooked as a coyote's hind leg right away. I didn't say a word. I just bought the fellow a drink, and kept the rest. He don't know to this day how bad he beat himself." To-day those pictures are worth many times the amount the purchaser paid for them in this "crooked deal."

THE life Russell painted was a life of action. His horses are alive. His buffalo, his Indians, his plainsmen, are not merely set upon his canvases; their action stirs one until he wishes earnestly that he might have lived on the plains

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HAWAII

SKIM BLUE SEAS TO AN ISLAND EDEN

Have you ever seen a lithe bronze-skinned boy walking up a cocoanut palm? Hawaiians singing at a *luau* (native feast) on the beach in the moonlight? The Southern

with them. Even his bronzes are so full of lively action that they seem fairly to move. He seldom painted still objects. I remember that once when I carried to him a commission to paint a picture for the Montana Club at Helena, I was requested to ask him to paint us something "that was not going like the wind." He loved action. Even his illustrated letters are full of it, and whenever they are in evidence there is always a group of people gathered round them, eager to see more.

Quickly and easily impressed by speech or action, with a heart as tender as a child's, Russell felt keenly every cruelty practiced upon man or beast. I have seen him rescue a badgered mouse from a tormenting cat and carry it a hundred yards to safety, all the way commenting on cat creation in a manner wonderful to hear. "But I reckon God made them," he ended, excusing even the offending cat. He shunned all modern things, always ready to set the gauge of the past disparagingly against the present. Once at Lake McDonald we were walking near his summer home when we discovered that several hens that had been raised by an incubator and a small chick that had been hatched in the old-fashioned way were following us. Russell stopped to drive them back. At this, one of the hens picked viciously at the toes of the little chick, and it ran to us for protection. "Did you see that?" asked Russell, throwing a small stick at the chick-eating hen. "Get out!" he said, disgustedly, stamping his foot. "Git, you unnatural hussy! *Your* mother was a *lump!*"

CHARLES RUSSELL sorrowed over the passing of the old-time Northwest, and to his last day never quite forgave the seeming wantonness of the destruction which attended its settlement. There can never be another Charley Russell, any more than there can be another new Northwest; and if the men of the old days who have left us have kindled their fires in the Shadow Hills, then Russell has found them, and is happy there.

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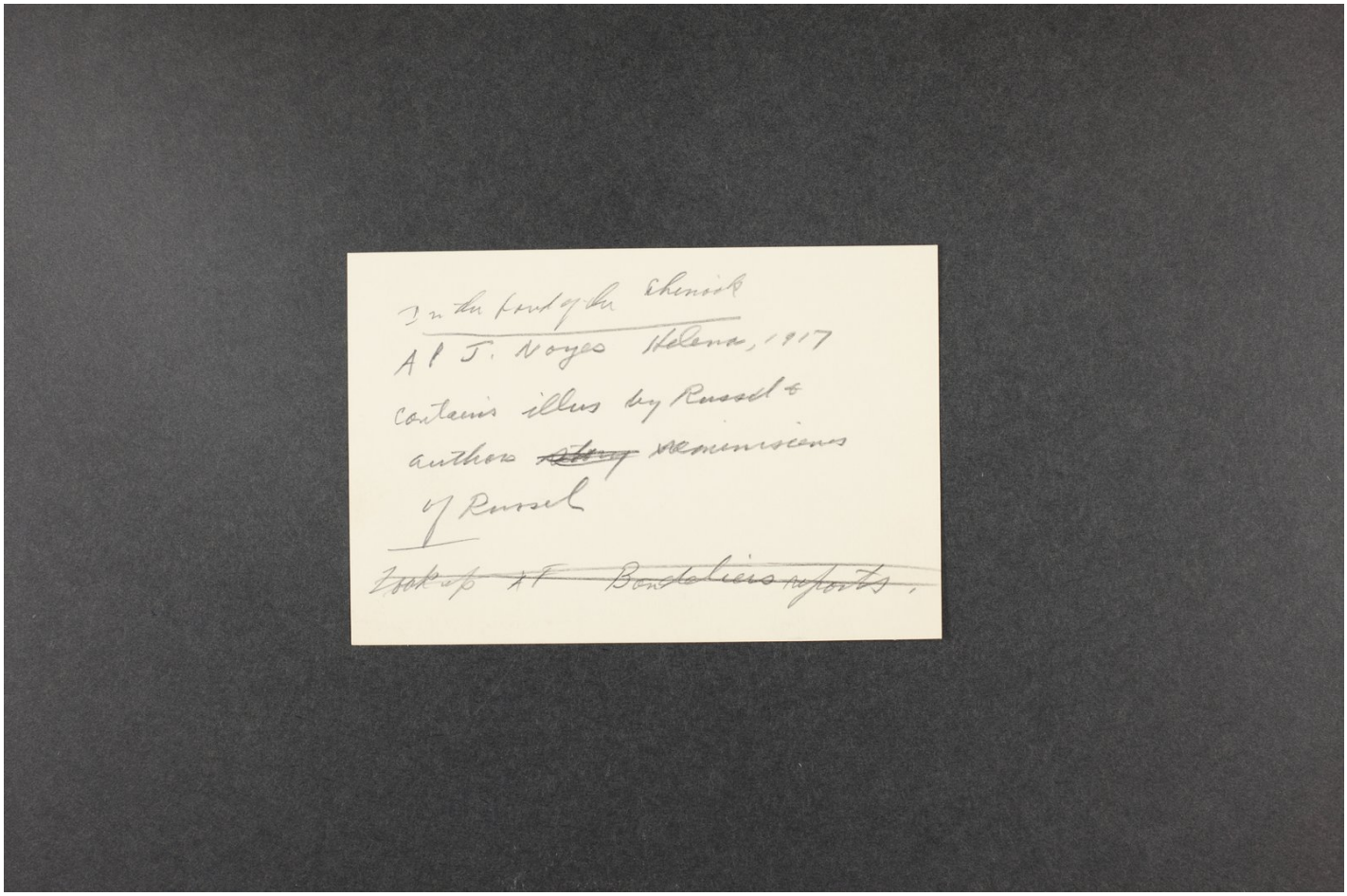

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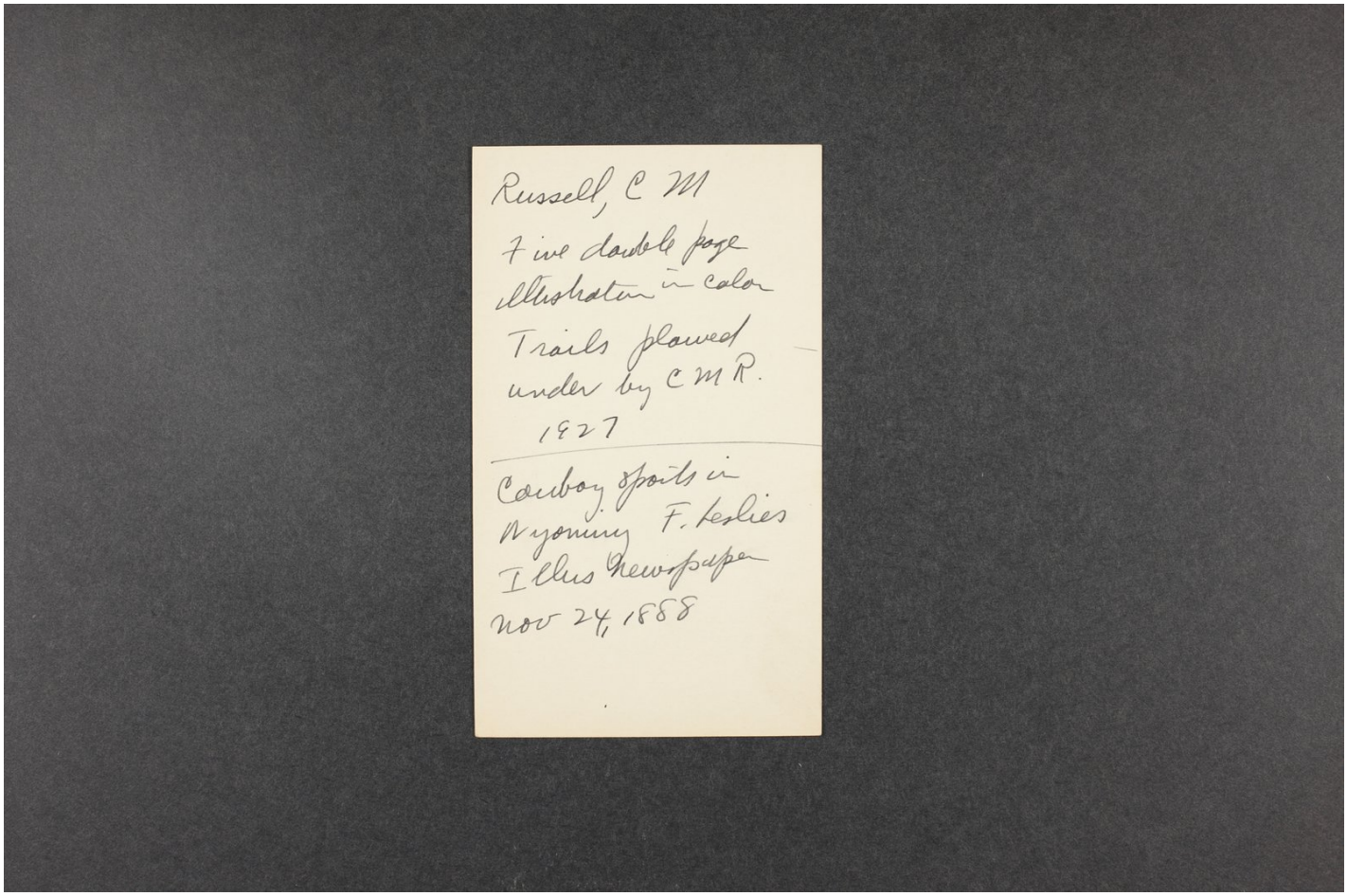

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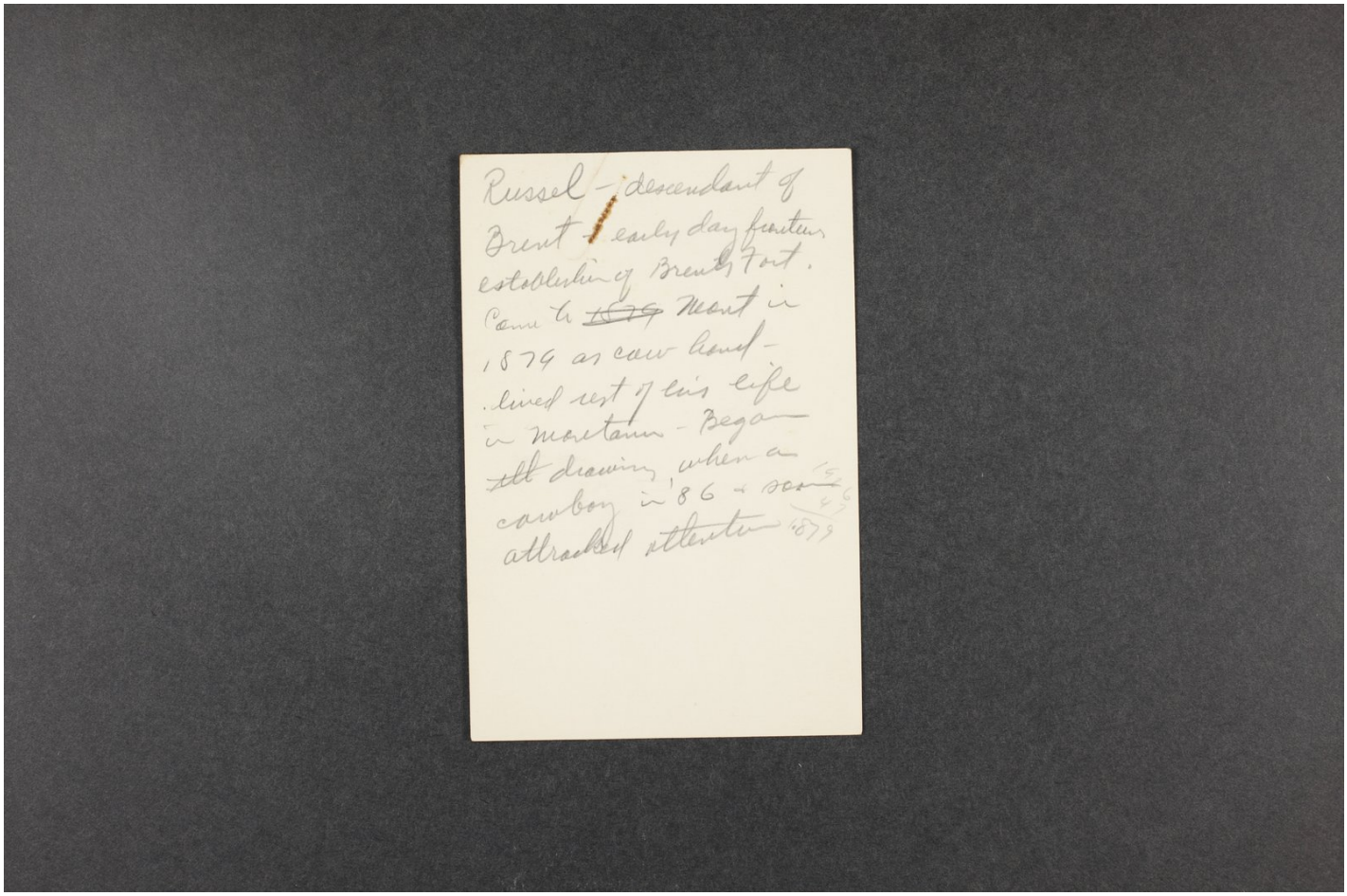

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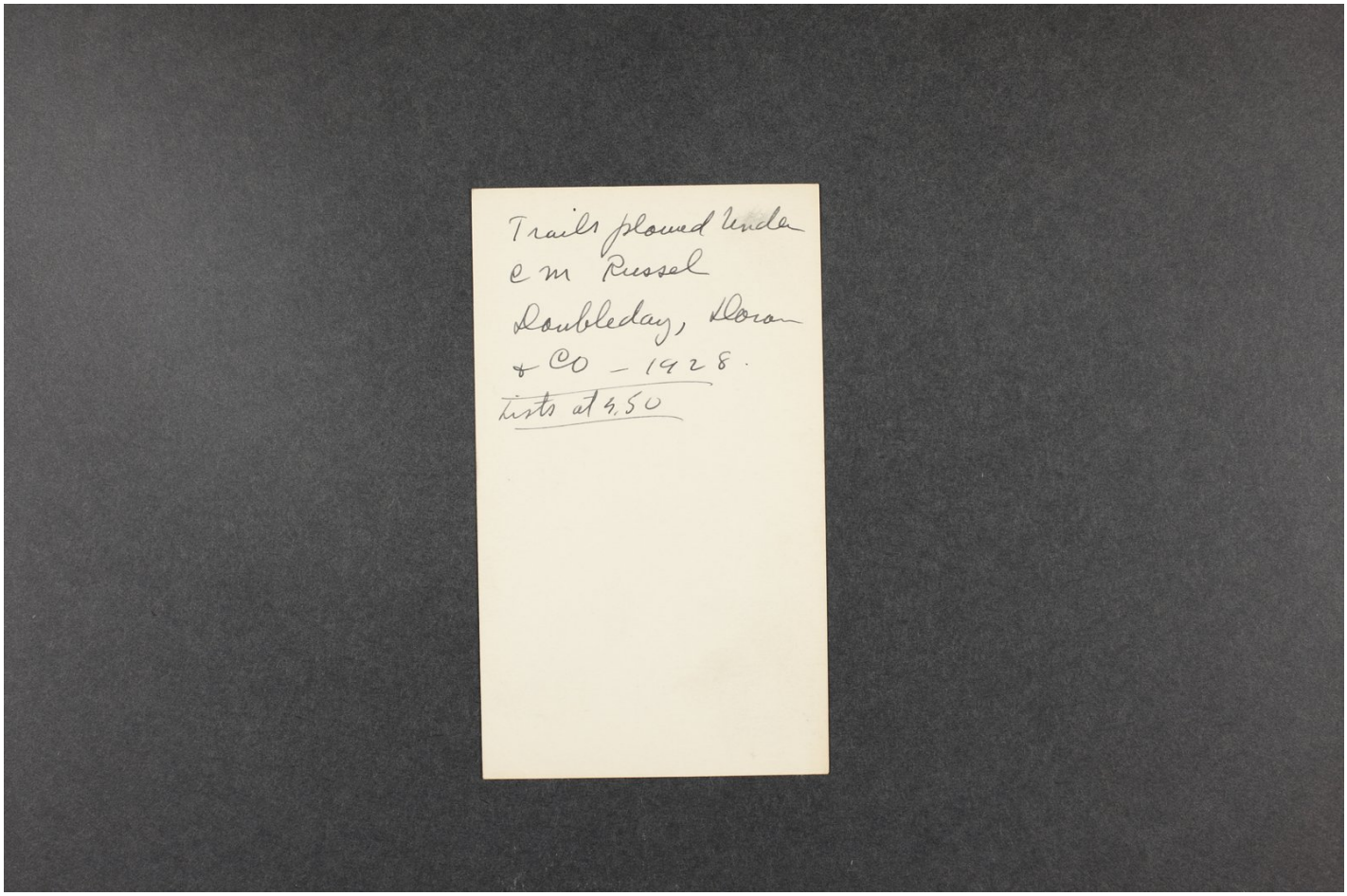

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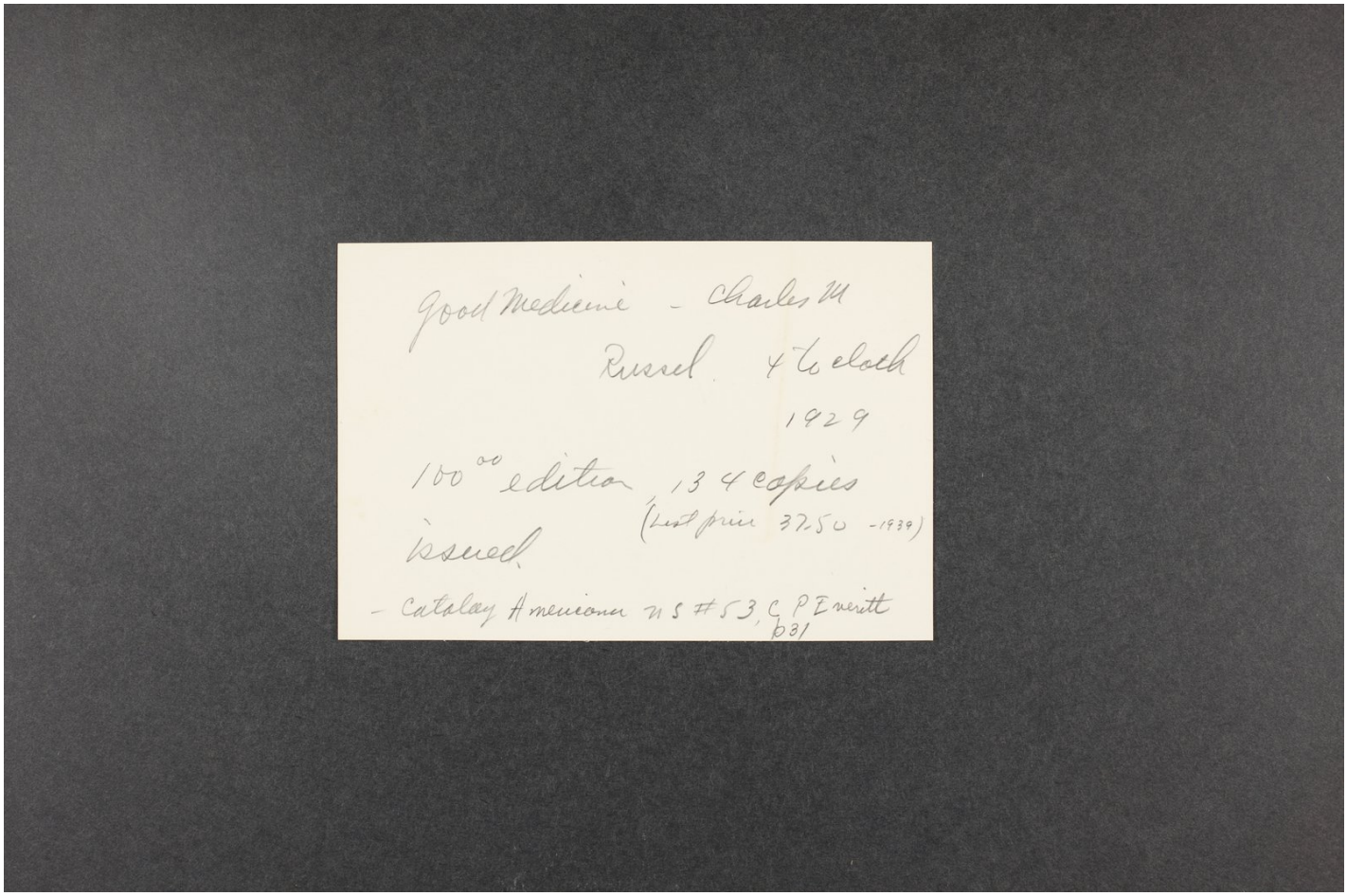

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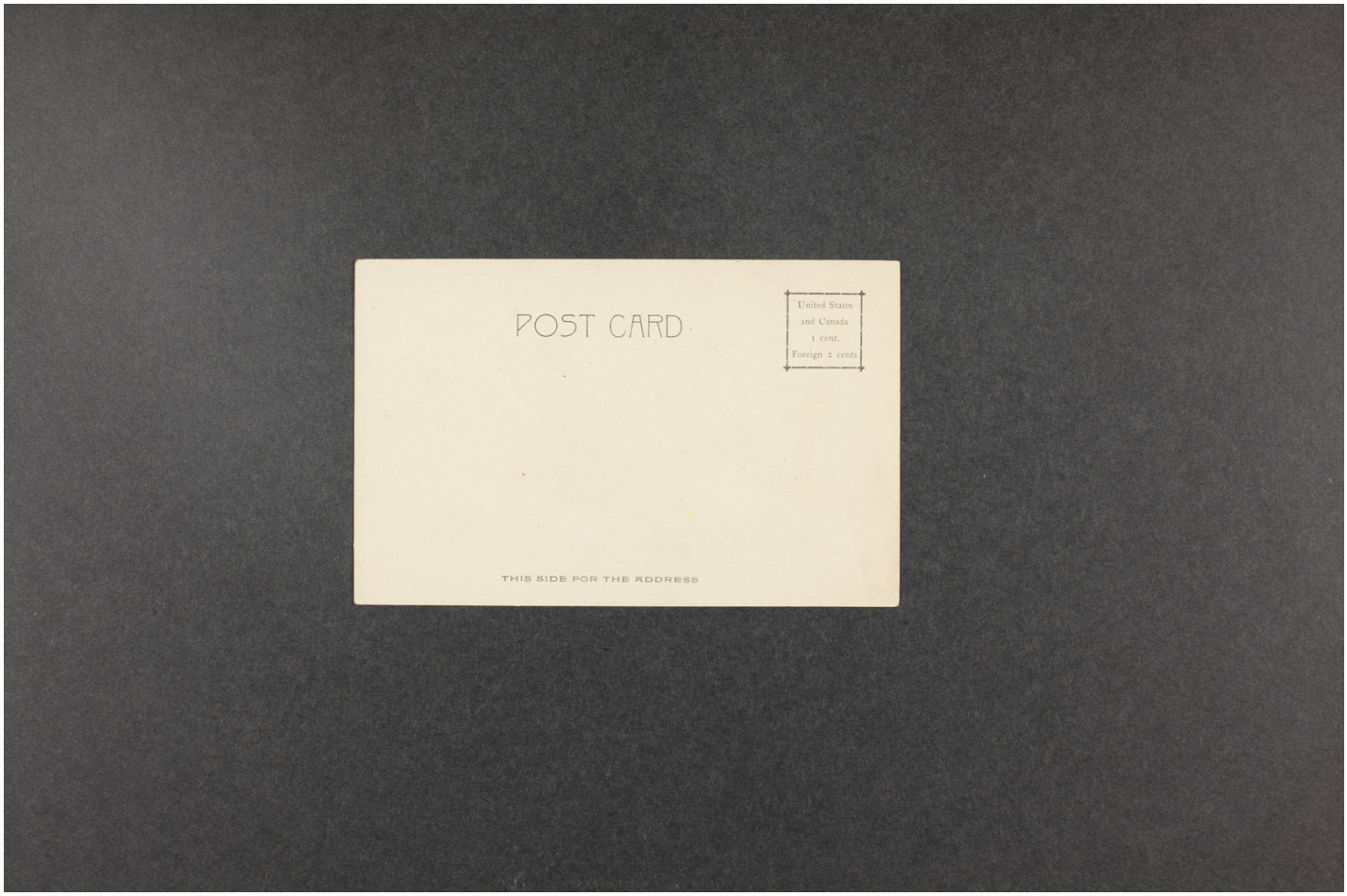

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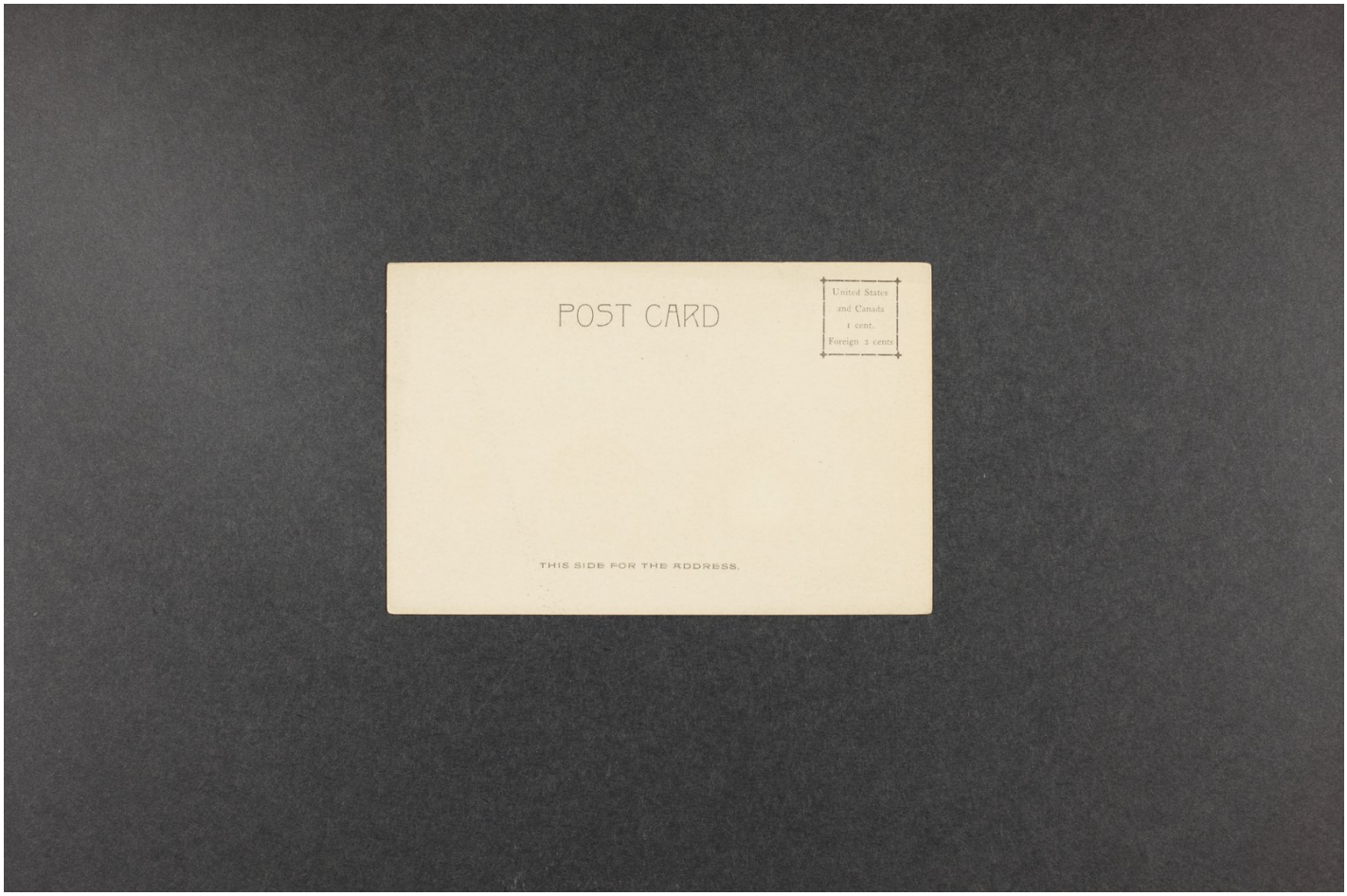

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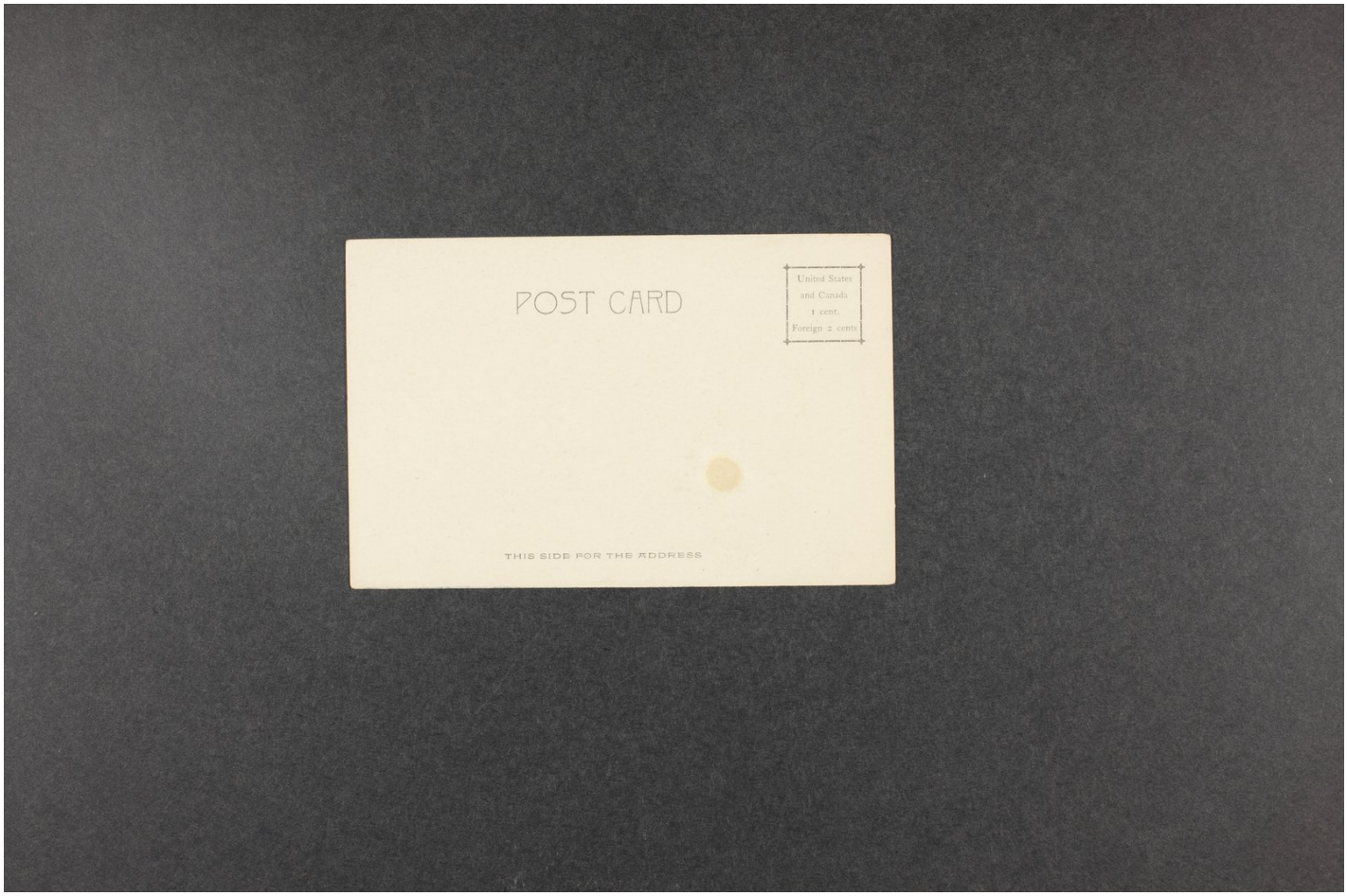

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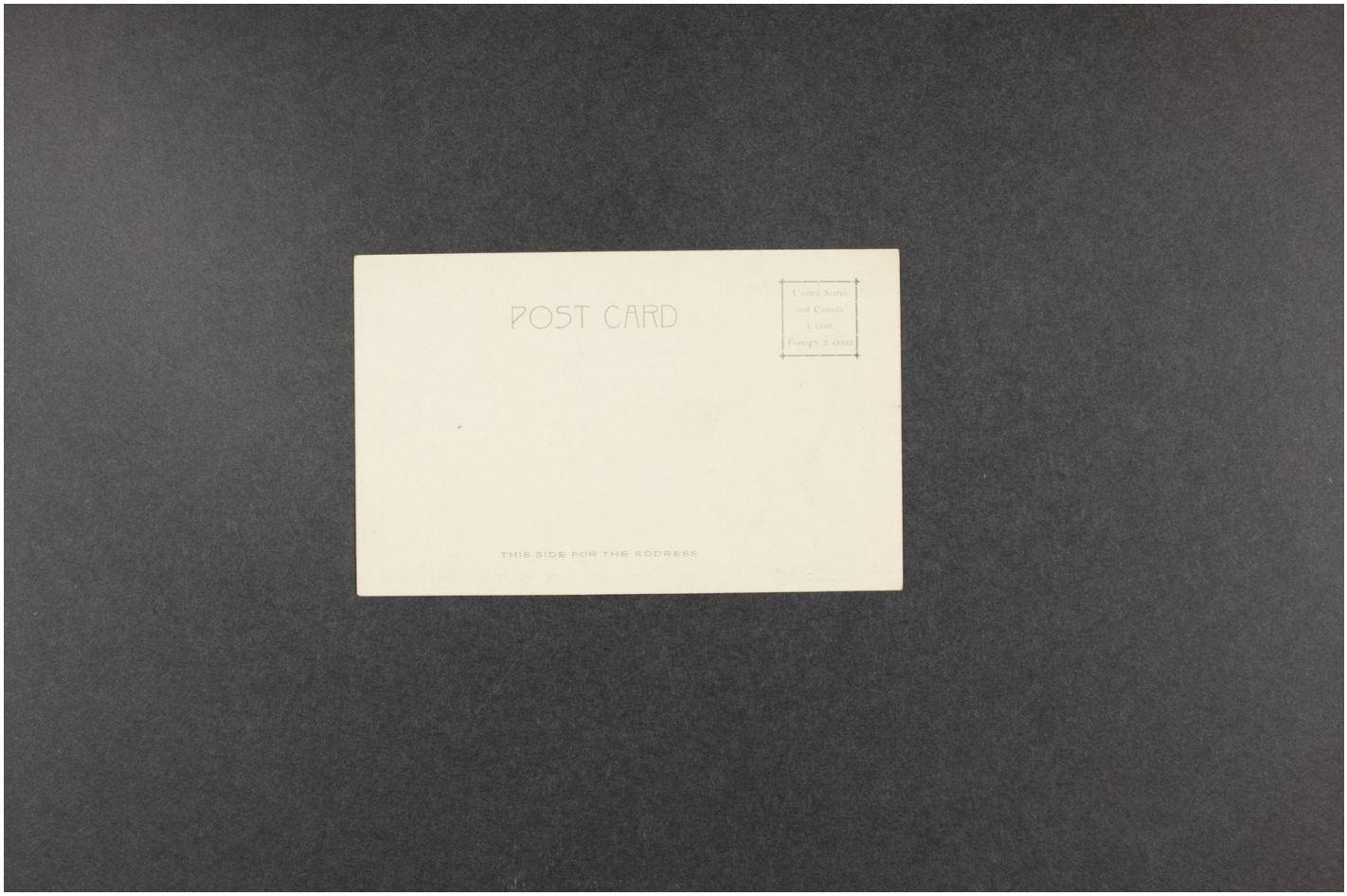

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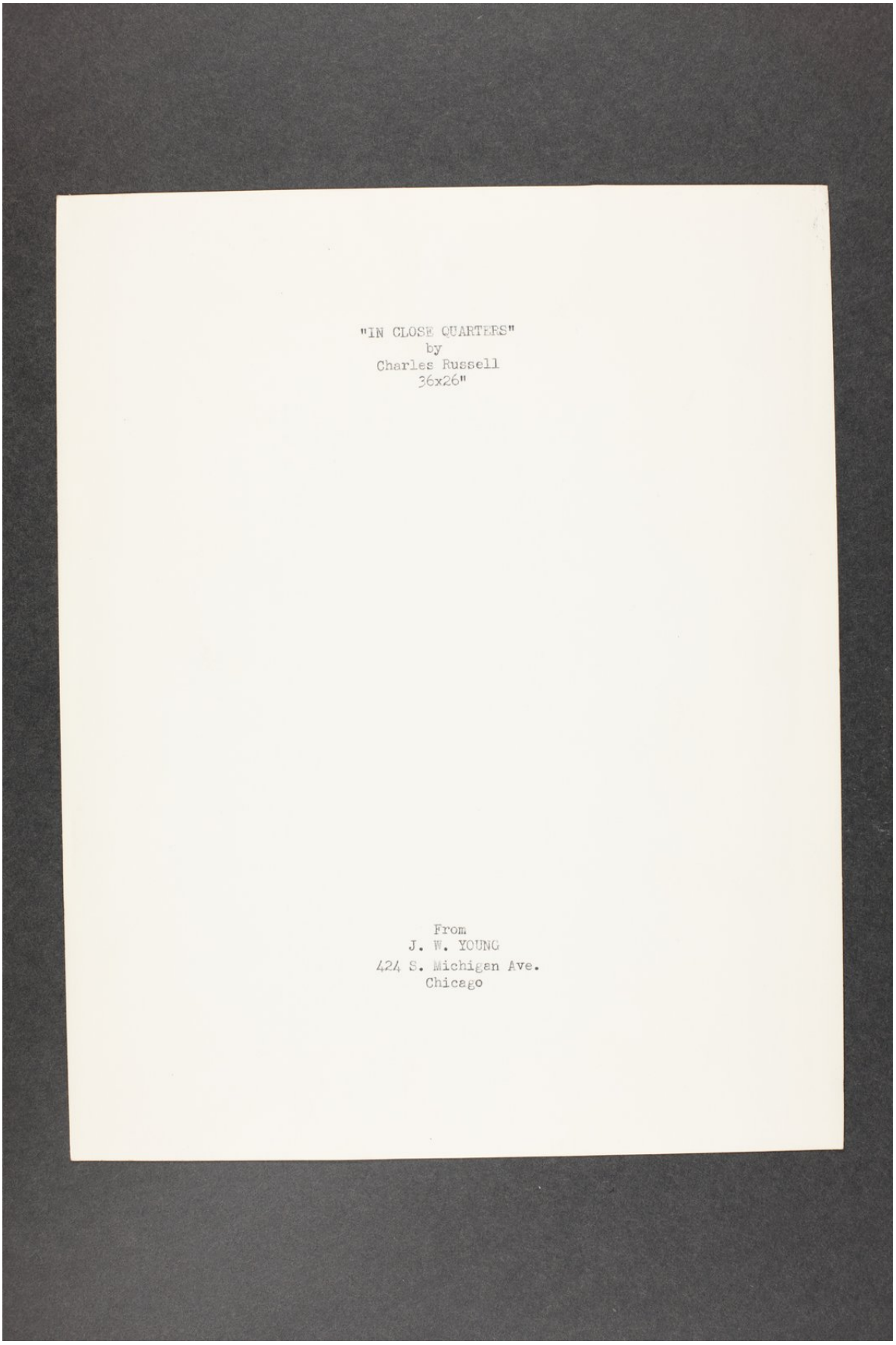

"IN CLOSE QUARTERS"
by
Charles Russell
36x26"

From
J. W. YOUNG
424 S. Michigan Ave.
Chicago

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"CAUGHT IN THE ACT."—Drawn by C. M. Russell.

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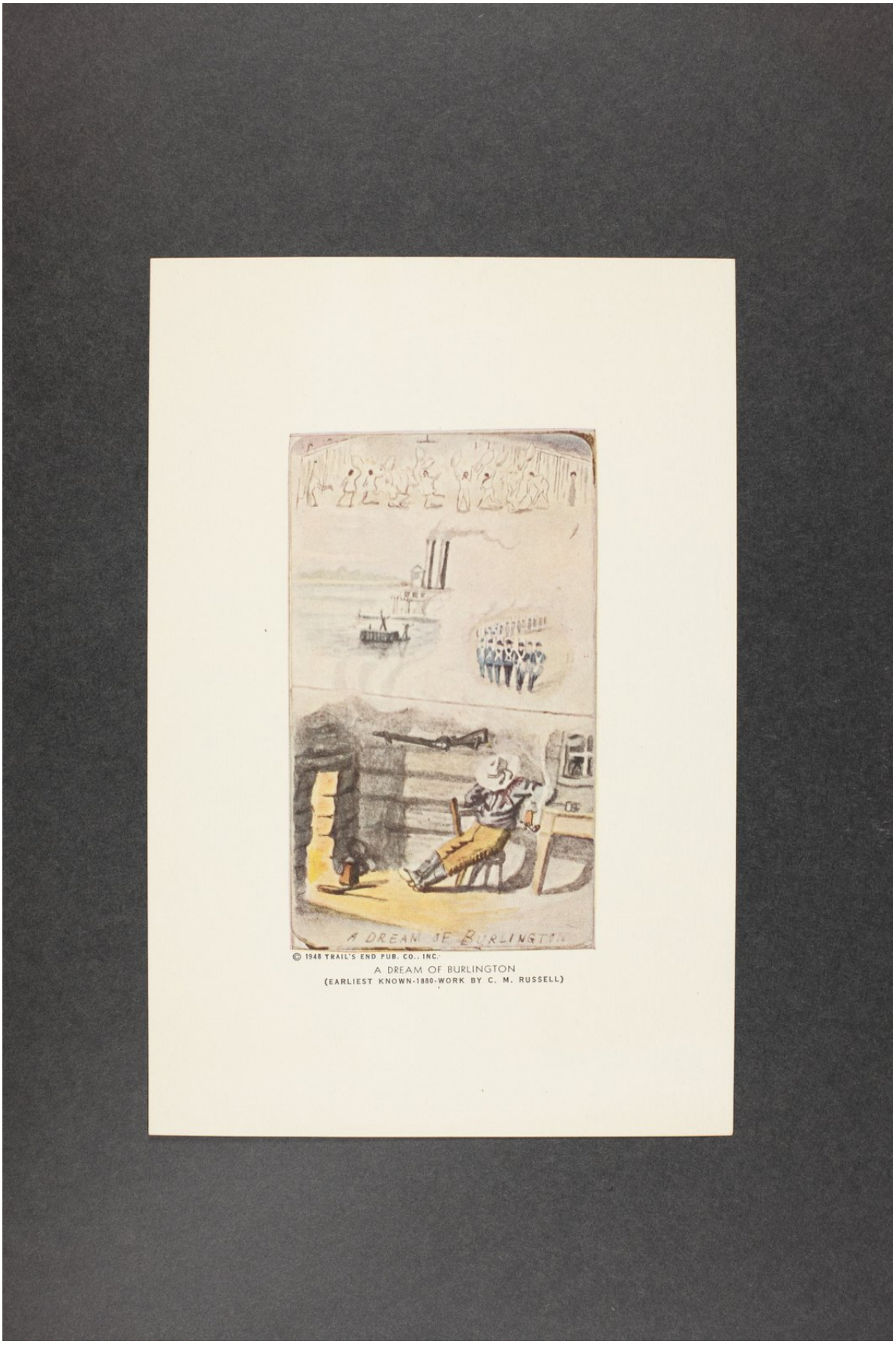

A DREAM OF BURLINGTON
(EARLIEST KNOWN-1880-WORK BY C. M. RUSSELL)

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