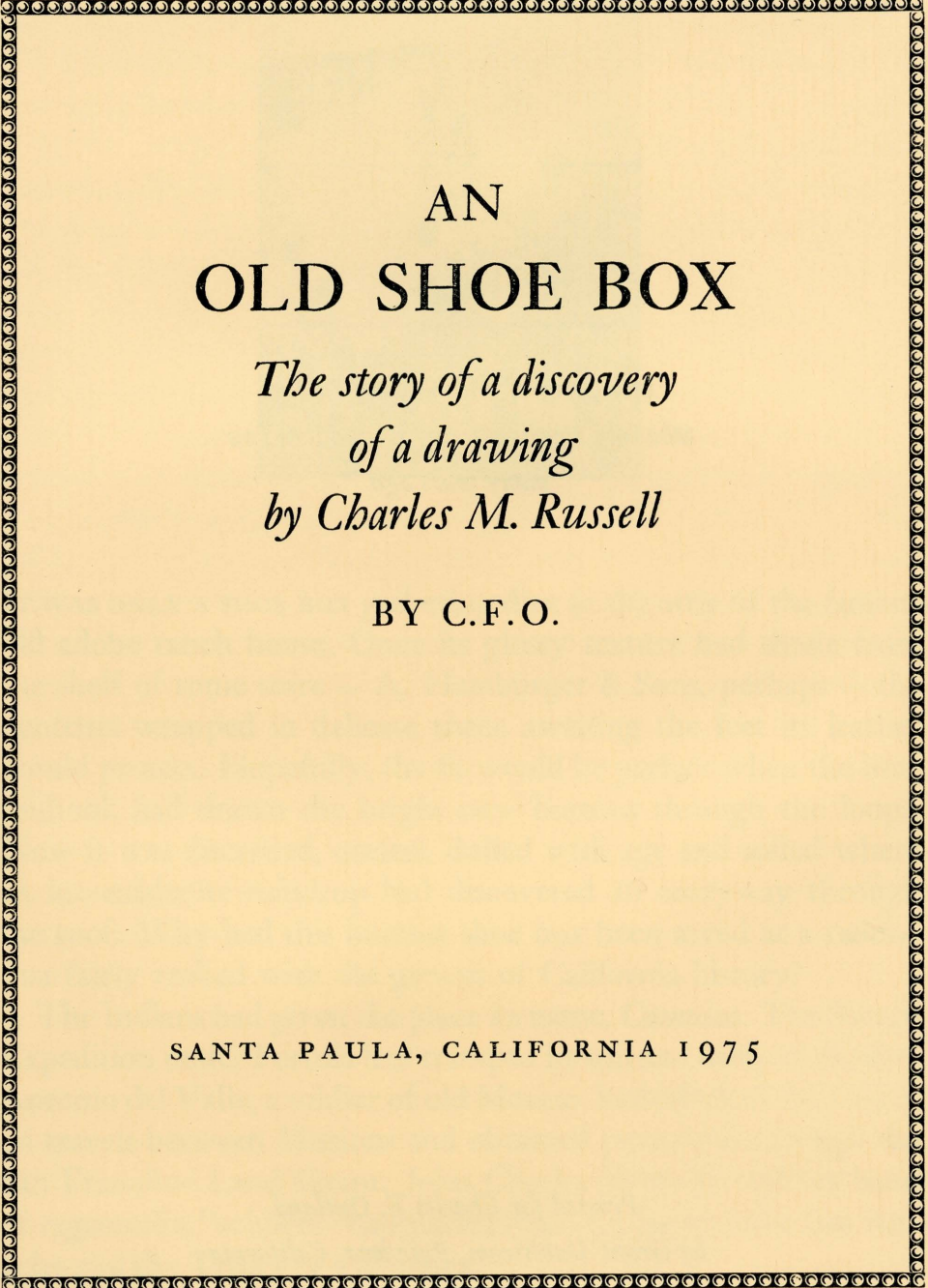


AN OLD
SHOE BOX



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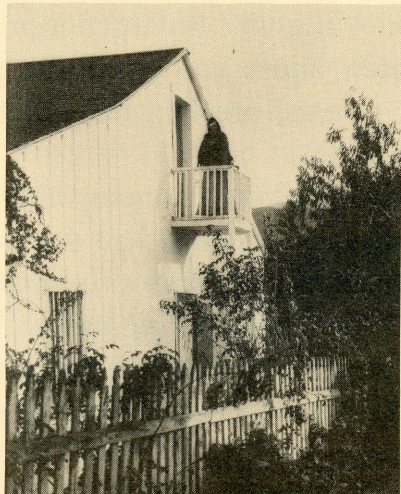
*The story of a discovery
of a drawing
by Charles M. Russell*

BY C.F.O.

SANTA PAULA, CALIFORNIA 1975

*In memory of Mary Rubel Burger
who told me the story of the old shoe box
many years ago*

*Printed for Charles F. Outland
by Grant Dahlstrom, Pasadena, California*



IT WAS ONLY A SHOE BOX gathering dust in the attic of the famous old adobe ranch house. Once its glossy texture had shone from the shelf of some store — A. Hamburger & Sons, perhaps — the contents wrapped in delicate tissue awaiting the feet its leather would protect. Hopefully, the fit would be perfect when the buttonhook had drawn the bright new buttons through the loops. Now it was discarded, useless, dulled with age and soiled where an inconsiderate raindrop had discovered an entryway through the roof. Why had this humble shoe box been saved at a rancho that fairly reeked with the genesis of California history?

The Indians had given the place its name, *Camulos*. The Sacred Expedition under Portola had tramped its soil and camped nearby. Antonio del Valle, a soldier of old Mexico, had admired the setting on travels between Missions and obtained possession through the San Francisco Land Grant. John Charles Fremont and his band of ragamuffin “soldiers” had passed this way en route to Los Angeles and the Treaty of Cahuenga.

It was Ygnacio del Valle who enlarged a primitive adobe into the now famous ranch house and lived the good pastoral life through his declining years, pressing the oil from the olive and wine from the grape.

Helen Hunt Jackson, while dreaming her typically maudlin nineteenth-century classic, *Ramona*, had stopped here for a few hours to taste the flavor of the California rancho period, an era that was lingering on its deathbed long before Ygnacio had completed the ranch house. Yet it was she more than anyone who would forever put the stamp of fame upon the place the Indians had called Camulos.

Now a new day was dawning. No longer would the descendants of Antonio del Valle dispense the legendary hospitality of the Californians. As a means of saying goodbye, the del Valle family would hold one last grand and glorious "bull's head barbecue" for which the old rancho had long been famous. Then the Camulos would be turned over to August and Mary Rubel, who had purchased this remaining acreage of the once vast San Francisco Grant of eleven square leagues. They were tenants who had promised to cherish and guard the land and its heritage with all the fervor of Ygnacio himself.

But there was work to be done. Dozens of historic documents and artifacts abandoned by the del Valle family were interlarded with worthless trivia in the attic of the adobe and the loft of the winery. (One might suspect that to a del Valle a bull's head barbecue, vintage Camulos brandy, and a fandango rated higher priorities than an 1852 legislative document printed in Spanish or an ancient pistol plowed to the surface in the orange orchards of the Camulos. And who is to say that he may not have been right?) Even that old shoe box was abandoned, although there must have been some reason for its preservation. In an attic jammed with the

mishmash castoffs of generations, the wheat must be separated from the chaff and the accumulated dust swept clean. Here was a job for the new mistress of Camulos, Mary Rubel.

In the "wheat" Mary would find those Indian artifacts and ancient firearms plowed up in the fields; saddles and bridles of Mexican origin; and early California legislative pamphlets printed in the Spanish language, one on the condition of the native Indians. These countless memorabilia of the del Valle family were carefully set aside, while the "chaff" of trivia was tossed across the attic to be carted away and burned. The old shoe box sailed through the air with all the grace of a derailed freight car, but in its flutterings Mary Rubel had seen something that had no business being on a shoe box. Walking over to the pile of trash, she examined her find.

It was a simple sketch, yet charming. The artist had drawn two horses front and center standing head to rump, each swirling the flies from the other with its tail. In the background were more horses, tossing their heads, stomping their feet, and tails flying in the desperate, eternal battle against flies. In the lower left corner were the initials C. M. R. over the legendary horned skull. Russell! Charles Marion Russell!

Mary Rubel smiled. She had always wanted a Russell. Yes, even a simple sketch on an old shoe box would do. The famous painter of horses and the West had not given his work a name (it was probably an impromptu doodling on Russell's part), but an appropriate title was obvious: *Damn the flies!*

Later, Mary would cut out the sketch, using the remainder of the box for matting. A recessed old-fashioned frame completed the preservation of this mysterious bit of Western Americana.

How had this homey piece of art, created by one of America's most famous painters, come to be in the attic of the old Camulos ranch house? It is tempting to imagine Russell's presence at that

last bull's head barbecue, an affair now legendary in del Valle annals. A guest list that included George Wharton James, Carrie Jacobs Bond, Charles Wakefield Cadman, and William S. Hart would not have suffered from Russell's presence, particularly in view of the fact that Hart and Russell were close friends. However, the del Valle farewell was held at a time when America's foremost Western painter was severely handicapped with health problems. Further, Mary Rubel would have remembered if he had been there and known of the shoe box sketch before it ever got into the crammed attic of the adobe.

Possibly someday some obscure researcher will find documentation of when Russell was at Camulos and the circumstances of his visit. In the meantime, from the meager evidence and Russell's known sketching habits we can only imagine what might have happened.

Two friends in particular must be suspected of bringing Charlie Russell to the ranch: William S. Hart or Charles Lummis. Both men were thoroughly at home and familiar with Camulos. In fact, it is known that Lummis became so fascinated with "The Home of Ramona" that his visits were altogether too frequent and prolonged in the opinion of some members of the del Valle family. Charles Fletcher Lummis has to be the first choice as the one responsible for bringing Russell to Camulos, with William S. Hart a close second.

Another consideration is the known sketching habits of Russell. Give the man any pen, pencil, or what have you, a piece of paper and those talented fingers would be at work drawing some Western theme. Indeed, there are those who will maintain that if Russell had been lost in the wilderness and stumbled onto a sliver of ochre and a large smooth rock, the result would have been a masterpiece to stir the envy of his Indian friends.



"Damn the flies"
Sketched on an old shoe box by Charles M. Russell

Finally there is the shoe box itself. Why, of all things, a shoe box? It is doubtful that even Charles Lummis would have had the audacity to request of Mrs. del Valle a shoe box upon which her guest might sketch some horses. No. There is a more plausible theory.

Old shoe boxes were and still are handy containers in which to pack picnic lunches. Is it difficult to imagine Charlie Russell and Charles Lummis, or possibly William S. Hart, throwing together a picnic lunch, packing it in the shoe box and riding horseback into the hills surrounding the Camulos? And to carry the fantasy still further, is it unreasonable to visualize the men resting in the shade of a native oak during a warm noontime, with Russell's restless talent scribbling on the side of that shoe box, now empty, the unique fly-swatting techniques of his favorite animal; or his companion, fascinated with the sketch, conjuring up some excuse to carry it back to the ranch house upon their return?

A fantasy it must remain for the present, to this writer at least. After all, it *was* only a shoe box gathering dust in the attic of an old California adobe ranch house made famous by Helen Hunt Jackson. But are there any finer ingredients for fantasy?

