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The Case of W.H.D. Koerner's Invisible Sun**

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M.A. degree in Art History



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**GRAPHIC AND LITERARY ILLUSTRATION: THE CASE OF W. H. D.
KOERNER'S INVISIBLE SUN**

By

Shannon Christine Bonner

A THESIS

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

GRAPHIC AND LITERARY ILLUSTRATION: THE CASE OF W. H. D. KOERNER'S INVISIBLE SUN

By

Shannon Christine Bonner

W. H. D. Koerner's painting *Hard Winter* originally appeared as a black and white reproduction illustrating the novella "Short Grass" by Hal G. Evarts. Taking cues from the story, Koerner encoded messages that transcended the original heroic conceptions of cowboy mythology, revealing a tragic figure on the brink of demise. Through this perceived death, new and seemingly unusual bonds between the "lost" cultures of cowboys and Indians fueled and reconfigured new mythical constructions of these Western icons. In what follows I intend to show that these groups, whose fates were not readily associated with each other, can, through an examination of "Short Grass," historical intersections, and the work of other artists, reveal that "the fall" of these icons suggests that cowboys and Indians have much more of an affinity with one another than is generally assumed. I will offer a more balanced picture of the relationships of cowboys and Indians through a consideration of imagery, literature and history. Images of defeat exemplified in the work of Koerner, James Earl Fraser and Frederic Remington bind the fate of cowboy and Indian cultures. Although a comprehensive biography of Koerner is not the purpose of this paper, I have included an exploration of personal circumstances and earlier works that helped shape the artist's vision as contextual sources of artistic inspiration.

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This thesis is largely dedicated to my grandfather, Zane Wood, who first shared the myth of the West with me.

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I would also like to thank Pat Thompson, former director of the Fine Arts Library at Michigan State University, who assisted me in locating some of the hard-to-find material for my research, and my thesis committee: William G. Kilbourne Jr., Raymond Silverman and director Kenneth Haltman for their patience, support and advice. And above all I wish to thank my family and friends, for their countless readings and unconditional encouragement.

Mission incredible undercover convoy
Protect Chromosome cowboy
X-ray search and destroy
Smoke stack black top
Novacane boy¹

¹ Beck Hansen, Novacane, *Odelay*. Compact disc. Geffen Records, Inc., 1996.

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Introduction and Purpose

Although the heyday of cowboys only lasted approximately thirty years and disappeared over a century ago, images of these figures are still associated with an idea or definition of an "American." This is evident through today's popular culture and advertising tactics that rely on the mass appeal of cowboy imagery to sell products. America's 'Pop Culture' of cowboys remains distinct because of the stereotypical dress and demeanor associated with the icon, and is thus easily recognized; many like to identify themselves with this epic and, more importantly, American figure. As the image continually resurfaces, it has infiltrated the consciousness of many Americans. The contemporary media endorsement of cowboy imagery should not be surprising because of its dominance of virtually every new form of communication, originating with the dime novel and later transferring to radio, films, television and recently appearing on the Internet.

Because of their nostalgic appeal, lifestyles of cowboys have been used by authors and the media as means to a vicarious escape from the troubles and rigors of modern life. Undoubtedly the cowboy mystique cannot be separated from the Western environment; this association with freedom that cowboys have come to embody is related to the environment in which their work was performed. One explanation for America's fascination with the West could be that it is perceived as a place to venture in the hopes of escaping to a pure, simple lifestyle or ultimately to discover oneself. But in contrast to these expectations of escape and liberation, the vastness of the West was often overwhelming and humbling. For western-bound pioneers, crossing the frontier proved to be a tumultuous battle; many were overwhelmed by its immensity. Isolation and the

physical demands of the environment were and still are real concerns that should not be ignored. Even with the passage of time, the region has not lost its power to shrink egos.

The captivation with the West and its characters becomes evident in the abundance of writings available throughout the twentieth century, especially during the early decades. Among the most influential of the historical Western writers was Wisconsin historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who, in a speech delivered in Chicago in 1893, announced the idea that the *frontier* was closing. The speech, entitled 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History,' was largely based on his study of the 1890 census and developing economic trends. He argued that it was the crossing of the frontier and the hardships endured that transformed these European newcomers into Americans. Jerome O. Steffen, author of an article titled "Cycles of Myth Restoration," claims that in this thesis Turner "...theorized that the presence of free land attracted individuals of warring backgrounds and nationalities to the frontier. The isolation of the frontier prompted the erosion of tradition and stimulated the development of new practices and ideas."¹ Cowboys were not mythologized until Turner had declared the frontier, and the way of life associated with it, dead and gone, and over a century after he spoke many Americans are still attracted to the symbols and lifestyles associated with the American West. An equally influential writer was conservationist and America's first 'Cowboy President,' Theodore Roosevelt. He contributed to the growing Western literature with his 'The Winning of the West,' which consisted of four volumes, the first of which appeared in 1889.² Roosevelt's contributions did reflect in part a narrow view

¹ Jerome O. Steffen, "Cycles of Myth Restoration—One approach to Understanding American Culture," *Journal of American Culture*, vol.16, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 26.

² Theodore Roosevelt shared Turner's ideas that the hardships of western settlement transformed the European newcomers into Americans. In Roosevelt's book *The Winning of the West*, he states: "Those

of this period. In his version of the West's history, the struggle for progress was between the civilized and the savage.³ Nevertheless Roosevelt, who explored this region while grieving over his deceased wife and mother, and to tend to asthmatic problems, understood the need for the West as an environment and a state of mind. Roosevelt, himself, credited these experiences as beginning "the romance of my life," and often referred to hardships that the peoples of this area faced.⁴ His own relationship with the geographic legacy of the West was, I feel, among his reasons for setting aside large portions of land for National Parks, leaving these areas for future generations.

The close of the nineteenth century sparked an interest in novels in which authors depicted fictional tales set in the frontier. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* of 1902, for example, put the cowboy on center stage. Other novelists, such as Emerson Hough and Zane Grey, whose contributions were to add elements of romantic sentimentality in their stories, were largely influenced by the artistic images that were already created by artists such as Remington, Charles Russell and Charles Schreyvogel. For example, consider the work of Schreyvogel, who often depicted a lawless frontier where savage Indians attacked cowboys with cinematic precision. With the demand for these types of stories evident through publications such as *Atlantic*, *Century*, *Harper's* and *Scribner's*, other magazines began carrying fictional stories featuring the West. As circulation grew, the demand for

who had settled and conquered the American wilderness and who had remained isolated for generations beyond the borders of civilization had been 'Americanized,' forged and molded into a 'characteristically American type' as they interacted with the 'hard surroundings of their life.' These 'evolved' people created a new national identity. Michael Collins. *That Damned Cowboy: Theodore Roosevelt and the American West, 1883-1898* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 105.

³ Says Collins, "Each chapter of the narrative had dripped with the bloody atrocities committed always by Indians against whites. Roosevelt had recalled the horrible and hideous deeds of Indians, who, in his historical lens, were always the first aggressors who mercilessly scalped helpless settlers alive, burned and tortured innocent white victims, brained babies, raped women, and mutilated the bodies of their hated enemies—oftentimes without any provocation." Collins, 129.

⁴ Geoffrey C. Ward, *The West—an Illustrated History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 358.

text illustration similarly grew. Soon artists such as Remington, Frank Schoonover and N. C. Wyeth were lending their talents to the art of illustrating this developing literary trend, further cementing Western images onto peoples' imaginations.

During the early twentieth century, industrial strife, immigration and inner-city poverty plagued the East Coast, further sparking an interest in the West, which led many to look back to a version of America's "roots" and a reinterpretation of a glorified fictional and historical past. Even newly arrived immigrants were probably not immune to this strong cowboy mythology because of its perseverance in American culture. Given the situation of growing cities and unending urbanization, undoubtedly similar to the great migrations to the suburbs today, many Americans longed for an escape to a pure and simple lifestyle that offered wide-open spaces, a clean untouched environment that these stories set in the American West readily offered. This desire continued to grow when, twenty years later, the Great Depression brought about a time of distress and change during which many Americans, looking back to more prosperous and seemingly moral times, tried to claim an identity associated with a mythic definition of what it meant to be an American. In order to hold on to past ideals and positive identities many tried to recapture Western ideals through popular media of the era. Many popular arts, including music, film and literature, were dedicated to manipulating cowboy imagery in order to respond to the concerns of the time.

Lonn Taylor, co-author of *The American Cowboy*, maps out this icon's popularity from the 1890s to the 1970s.⁵ Although Taylor's analysis stops at the 1980s, I suggest

⁵ "The first flush of the cowboy's popularity came in the 1890s, and he was endowed by his Eastern admirers with all the virtues of the Progressive movement. The first mythical cowboy was manly, self-reliant, virtuous, competitive (but always fair), a free agent in the labor market, dependent only on his own

that the election of a 'reel' cowboy, Ronald Reagan, and later in the 1990s the image's appearance on the Internet, clearly illustrate America's ongoing fascination with cowboy icons, history and lifestyle. Though unlimited expansion no longer seems a possibility, a need still exists in many Americans to feel there is something more, a wilderness waiting to be discovered, and this is partially what keeps cowboy mythology alive. Many historians feel that Western migration has made America exceptional and therefore Western images, more specifically images of cowboys and their environments, have helped to sustain and ground certain American ideals of success, independence and ruggedness. What is unique about this artistic framework is the continual rendition of subjects such as pioneers, cowboys, Indians, cavalry, landscapes and animals. On the surface the subject matter has not changed, but what has is the artistic reinterpretation of these icons. Among these images, W. H. D. Koerner's *Hard Winter* is a progression towards a careful depiction of the West and its hardships that includes messages of hope and fortitude.

skills for employment, and, above all, 100 percent Anglo-Saxon, embodying all of the alleged virtuous characteristics of that ethnic group. Once established in this manner, the mythical cowboy hero became a medium through which America's own changing social values were displayed. In the 1920s, the decade of craziness, he became a daredevil entertainer, both on the screen and, as rodeo became a national spectator sport, in the flesh—riding, roping, shooting, and, as films acquired sound, singing. In the depression-ridden thirties he became an escapist fantasy: a crooner in a fringed shirt and tooled boots, singing about a never-never land where tumbleweeds tumbled and the water was always cool. In the 1940s and 1950s as juvenile audiences swelled, he became a surrogate parent. In the 1960s and 1970s he became a cooperate spokesman. We have yet to see what new forms he will take in the 1980s and 1990s." Lonn Taylor, "The Cowboy Hero: An American Myth Examined," in Lonn Taylor and Ingrid Maar, *The American Cowboy* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 63.

Section 1: Invisible Sun



Figure 1: W.H.D. Koerner. *Hard Winter*, 1932. Buffalo Bill Historical Center Cody, Wyoming. Donated to the museum by his daughter, Ruth Oliver Koerner. Photograph taken by author. Images in this section of the thesis are presented in color.

The painting *Hard Winter* (Figure 1) represents the same moment frozen in time as does the black and white illustration based upon it, yet the image transcends the reproduction's limited scope. On the surface the artist depicts two people on horseback leading a herd of cattle through a snowstorm. Located in the foreground, the first rider, his horse and a single cow command our attention because of the triangular structure, centrality, clarity and a wind-driven scarf that comprise the images-- all strong compositional elements sharpening our focus. Beyond the pyramidal group in the foreground, a second obscured co-worker and one half of a steer drifting leftward

designate a middle ground. Lastly, we observe a staggered, washed-out herd at the horizon.

The players in this winter scene appear to be frozen in movement. The action follows a slow downward procession from right to left, yet the cow's horns sweep the viewer back into the landscape and throughout picture space. The image may be read in three separate horizontal divisions which flow circularly together as the scene recedes into a hazy snowstorm. The movement creates a circle, beginning with the focused pyramidal group, continuing to the left, back around to the distant line of cattle, completing its cycle with the second rider. At the apex of the first pyramid, made by a horse and rider, we see a figure shown in three-quarter profile. Winter attire covers the rider's body from head to foot, and a dingy red scarf, adding protection from the cold, covers his head and neck. The long scarf folds the brim of the hat down over his ears, leaving only part of his face exposed. The tattered end of the scarf echoes the pushed-forward tails and manes of the animals. His hat and clothing, like the horse he rides, become frosted by a persistent snowfall as these frozen players make their way into the unseen landscape and by extension into an unknowable future.

Similar to the obscured background, the rider's identity remains hidden from the viewer; we might look at his slumped posture for further insight. The "S" curve of his body, with his upper torso leaning forward, knees slightly bent, with an upward flexed foot in the stirrup, helps his position and balance in the saddle. But the rider's upward pointing foot may reflect this cowboy's apprehension of the downward grade. His huddled posture suggests the bitter conditions, and, with his head hung directly over the horn of his saddle, we are uncertain about the direction of his gaze; perhaps he is asleep

or in a daze from the cold. The tensionless reins hang loosely in a gloved hand that he rests on the edge of his saddle, while his left hand remains concealed in his pocket. The brim of his hat prevents interpretation of further individual information, while his heavy coat and woolly chaps also conceal individual details; these items protect him from the elements. These weather conditions seem not to be his only enemy; as a further means of defense, we see a rifle tucked away in a scabbard.

The composition of the main rider, horse, and cow forms a solid, classical triangle. It depicts a vision of unwavering strength and balance. Usually when an artist assembles an equestrian figure, the image denotes stability because of its triangular form, however Koerner has chosen to depict his rider with a weak posture, in contrast to the stability of its construction. In addition, this pyramidal stability is weakened by the



Figure 2: Detail of
Hard Winter

precarious setting of this winter environment. The horse's two front legs form a second smaller pyramid located at the center foreground of the painting. The horse's legs appear stiff, frozen almost to the point where the animal's legs might break from the stress and cold. We as viewers know that these characters are moving across the picture plane, but their movement appears frozen; these compositional dichotomies create tension within the painting.

The humans, we see, have much in common with their animal counterparts. The cowboys, horses, and cattle all move at a slow pace with slumped postures, and every living being in this painting seems to be sharing the same sentiment: *it is cold and I am tired*. The horse, echoing its rider's exhaustion, steps with rigid front legs while its hind legs, flexed, suggest the gentle slope of the descent. In the bitter cold ice forms at the

horse's mouth. It bites down on the metal bridle, while exhaling a frosty mist from its nostrils; its tight musculature echoes signs of physical exhaustion, yet the ears remain forward, erect and alert. The main rider intent on preventing the steer in the foreground from straying away from the group, while the steer, with squinted eyes, blindly obeys. With manes and tails thrust forward and hooves submerged in the wind-whipped waves of icy blue and white snow, horses, cattle and riders slowly mark their arduous course to an unseen destination.

The main figure is not alone; he contests the environment with a human co-worker, but the obscured conditions prohibit a deeper look at his companion. This second shape (Figure 3), though blurred, mirrors the body language of his partner in the foreground. These two riders do not evenly share the picture space allotted to them. The second rider's size and positioning set him further back establishing a mid-ground.



Figure 3:
*Detail of
Hard Winter*

The final "frontier" in the painting exists at the horizon line, comprised of a blurred row of cattle, haphazardly following one another, almost merging into the grays and blues of their drab setting. Despite our obstructed view of the landscape, Koerner has carefully demarcated the silhouettes of the passing steers in the background by applying thick white paint on the hind-quarters and horns of the animals. These ghost-like cattle serve another visual purpose, separating ground from sky, while emphasizing the low visibility created by the storm. Because of the dense weather conditions and the similar color scheme of the two planes, the viewer would have difficulty discerning the visual separation without this line of cattle.

The extreme weather conditions, which surround the figures, emit a sense of uncertainty, suggesting a never-ending extension into the unknown. The harsh wind and snow, rendered with white diagonal slashes, persistent in their sweep, constantly push from behind as if some force of nature helps these cowboys with their journey. Yet these conditions suggest a tragic end; an encroachment of something unknown. The bleak coloring of this painting, with its varying hues of blue, green, brown and black, also suggests this gravity. Although a direct light source is absent, the reflection of white snow lends an overall lightness to the painting.⁶ The landscape also shares a sense of anonymity with these cowboys and animals. The viewer knows not what, if anything, lies behind this curtain of unending snowfall: perhaps a ranch or outpost lies within a few yards, but these conditions limit the viewer's as well as the cowboys' perceptions.

While we can feel safe in deducing that the two riders are cowboys given their Stetson-like hats, coats, woolly chaps and western boots, the relationship between them remains unclear. The two men drive these cattle to a destination under seemingly impossible conditions. Even



Figure 4: Detail of *Hard Winter*

⁶ The title of this section 'invisible sun' is the title of a contemporary song by The Police. Certainly the lyrics do not refer to Koerner's image, or to images of cowboys in general, but the connection that I make in employing this phrase is one relationship between the image and an underlying sentiment of struggle and perseverance. As previously mentioned, the painting is void of a direct light source, or sun; instead these characters are forced to draw upon a source of inner strength, the strength that enables all, as humankind with the power of facing unfavorable odds. Therefore the 'invisible sun' becomes a metaphor that relates to hope and the persistence to endure no matter what the circumstances. This struggle is not only with the environment and surviving the moment, but also in a larger scope, the image could be read as the survival of the profession of a cowboy. The Police and Hugh Padgarn, "Invisible Sun," Compact disc. A & M Records Ltd., 1981.

though the main rider's face remains largely hidden, we can see his wrinkle-free skin, denoting youthfulness, but this is only one of a few individual characteristics visible to us. The figure remains anonymous, preventing further insight into his character. Even more anonymous is the blurred second figure, who seems a shadow of the first.

The image conveys a sense of the West's harshness, reinforced by the diagonal brush strokes representing heavy, wet snow. The generic nature of this landscape may suggest that Koerner has tried to reach a very broad audience with this image. *Hard Winter* served to enchant its viewers as an exhortation not to forget the spirit of struggle recognizable in two cowboys who, instead of giving up, continue to persevere in an unforgiving environment. Such renditions, where cowboys, their duties and lives are presented in a harshly realistic manner, had special relevance during the Depression. The lack of ethnic specificity due to the bundled-up appearance of these two cowboys, universalizes the image. (See Figure 4) One is reminded of huddled figures standing in soup lines during the Great Depression, a scene with which every subscriber to *The Saturday Evening Post* during the period was familiar; *Hard Winter* equals hard times. In the following sections I explore possible manipulations of this analogy by George Horace Lorimer, the periodical's editor at the time. I also investigate Koerner's images within the context of Evarts's story, which retells the fall of the American West for both cowboys and Indians.

Section 2: "Short Grass" and Its Illustrations

The illustrations for "Short Grass" were not the first joint project for Koerner and Hal G. Evarts.⁷ During his career, Koerner also worked with many other noteworthy authors, such as Emerson Hough, Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Stewart White, Zane Grey, Ben Ames Williams and Oliver LaFarge.⁸ Koerner also had working relationships with prominent editors among them George H. Lorimer. At the time of *Hard Winter's* creation fictional stories set in the West were popular among *Post* audiences as an early account acknowledges: "Examination of more than 400 issues of the *Post* published during this decade [1910- 1919] makes it possible to note that the Western story comprised only seven percent of its short fiction and a minuscule proportion of its serial offerings."⁹ Later, during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the publication began to increase the frequency with which it published Western stories. During the onset of the Great Depression years the *Post's* weekly circulation surprisingly increased to more than three million, and the popularity of the Western story was evident, represented by its

⁷ Evarts stories Koerner illustrated in chronological order: "Tumble Weeds" 1922, "Painted Stallion" 1925, "Fur Brigade" 1928, "Post Office at Dry Fork" 1928, "Tomahawk Rights" 1929, "Ride and Tie" 1929, "Shaggy Legion" 1930, "Short Grass" 1932, "Detour" 1934 and "Wolf Dog" 1934.

⁸ Zane Grey became popular in 1912 with *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Pro notes: "It has been written that W. H. D. Koerner probably did some of the finest illustrations for Grey. He illustrated 11 of the 12 installments of 'The Desert of Wheat,' a patriotic saga written by Grey during WW1 for the farm journal *Country Gentlemen*. Later the serial was published as a book including some of the illustrations, two originals of which Koerner sold for a total of \$40. In 1920 Koerner did 16 illustrations for "Sunset Pass" and several pen-and-ink drawings for the "Drift Fence," both published by *American Magazine*. Grey was apparently delighted with the illustrations and asked about purchasing them. It's not known if he acquired them or not." Julio Pro, "Zane Grey and his Illustrators," *Southwest Art*, vol. 16 (March 1987): 80. Hutchinson, Koerner's biographer, also comments on Koerner's Desert Wheat illustrations for Grey: "Their whereabouts today are unknown, as is so for many of Koerner's originals which he either gave away to personal friends or his editors." W. H. Hutchinson, *The World, Work and West of W. H. D. Koerner* (Oklahoma: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 119.

⁹ In the decade 1910-1919: "about 5% of its articles concerned the West, which was higher proportion than found among other magazines." This percentage rapidly increased in later decades. Hutchinson, 138.

frequency in other popular publications during the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Dorys Crow Grover attempting to describe America's fascination with the West and its fictional stories during this period, writes:

The West became a timeless and unchanging Eden for many writers as well as readers and movie-television fans. The Cowboy became a symbol of nobility, courage, freedom and rugged individualism at a time when the urban East, with its increasing immigration problems, industrial strife, shifting populations and inner-city poverty needed a positive influence for its masses. If the masses could not rise above the city squalor, they could read about the clean, wide spaces of the great open West, and identify with the cowboy and what he symbolized.¹¹

As previously mentioned, *Hard Winter* (the illustration) was among seventeen images and vignettes to appear in "Short Grass," the plot of which revolves around greed for land, range wars, tensions among cowboys, settlers and ranching outfits, as well as issues of law, civility and savagery. While Evarts at times suggested tension between cowboys and Indians, here their relationship is one of cohesiveness. In an article titled "History Myth and the Western Writer," Wallace Stegner describes the basic conflicts of a Western novel: "Male freedom and aspiration versus female domesticity, wilderness verses civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and the tamed."¹² These conflicts are apparent in "Short Grass," where we find an ambitious cowboy, Jeff Carver, whose ultimate desire is to own and operate a ranching outfit, and a domestic schoolmarm named Beth Terrill, who would like to see him married and beginning a family. The Hat Ranch, a group of cattlemen, has a history of handling range disputes violently, yet Carver only resorts to violence in self-defense; for the most part, he has a reputation for fairness. A battle for land erupts when the newly formed Turkey Track Ranch, owned by

¹⁰ Hutchinson, 4.

¹¹ Dorys Crow Grover, "Some Western Paintings of W. H. D. Koerner," *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 15.

¹² Wallace Stegner, "History Myth and the Western Writer," *The American West* (May 1967): 77.

Carver, encroaches upon an area that the Hat Ranch, headed by Brazos Dade, hoped to occupy. Ultimately, Evarts's novel treats the fencing off of open range, the settlers and cattle outfits who wish to claim the land as theirs, and the confrontations that these groups encounter. The desire to own, occupy and develop an area of land grew dangerous as more settlers came in and established neighboring sites. This, of course, was the beginning of the end of a stage in the cowboy profession, as settlers moved further West displacing many inhabitants. The fencing off of land, railroad construction and the brutal winter of 1886-87 added to the radical transformation of cowboy culture.

The opening installment of "Short Grass" appeared as the first story in the *Post* on May 21, 1932 accompanied by a total of four images, the first one which featured the primary characters, Jeff Carver and Beth Terril, in a circular frame surrounded by text. (Figure 5) "Short Grass" revealed that typically ranch hands demonstrated a deep loyalty to their bosses especially when dealing with range rights and the protection of property against trespassers. The owner of a ranch could depend on the backing of the hired crews. It is this loyalty that Jeff Carver has towards his former employer, Breek Coleman, owner of the Muleshoe Ranch. Carver once worked as a foreman on the Muleshoe, and this ranch occasionally worked with the LC Ranch whose foreman, Bob Hall, was Carver's childhood friend. These former ranch supervisors purchase an area of land called Silver Creek, in the hopes of going into the cattle business for themselves.

Pictorially, Evarts's story begins with a meeting of the main characters, Carver and Terril. The local schoolteacher playfully pulls the straps of her bonnet as she looks up at Carver. Even though Jeff does not meet Beth until the beginning of the second chapter, Koerner features this first meeting between cowboy and settler, not only to begin

the story, but given the story's placement as the feature of the issue to introduce the magazine itself. It is probable that Koerner placed this image on the first page of the text because it is sweetly romantic and would catch the eye of a potential reader. Many literary texts begin in this same fashion by use of an interesting first image that captures



Figure 5: First illustration for Evarts "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 3.

the reader's interest. Shortly after Koerner's death, Wesley Stout, in an article that appeared in the *Post*, specifically commented on this opening illustration, reiterating the uniqueness of Koerner's insightful composition. "In Short Grass the hero and heroine meet for the first time in a frontier general store, but such a store is a drab setting in which to incubate a dawning

love scene. Mr. Koerner waited until Mr. Evarts moved the pair outside, then painted them, throwing in a sod house to set the time and place."¹³

As Jeff questions Beth about the town, he senses regret in her voice. The caption that accompanies the image states Carver's question: *Why don't you like Akton? He asked. I told you that I did. She made an answer.*¹⁴ Moving from a small town outside of St. Louis, Beth has taken the position of a teacher in the only school in the fictional town where two worlds, one cowboy, the other homesteader, meet.¹⁵ Carver shares the details

¹³ Wesley Stout, "Yes We Read the Story," *The Saturday Evening Post* (June 25, 1937): 40.

¹⁴ Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 3.

¹⁵ The author mentions the Cimarron River that borders Kansas and Oklahoma and also several trips to Dodge for supplies, but I was unable to find any evidence that would support the existence of a town

of his life with Beth telling her about his family or lack thereof. At the age of fourteen, he and his childhood friend, Bob Hall, had lost their parents to cholera during a westward journey. Since then Comanche Al Williams, another prominent figure in the text, had raised both teenagers in “the ways of an Indian.” Yet Carver admits that his relationship with Williams during the past year has been brief, because the short grass region is becoming “too civilized” for him. Carver does not care for Akton for similar reasons; he feels that if settlers continue to populate the short grass country, his way of life is in jeopardy.

The division and differences between these two characters appear both literally and visually. Beth stands opposed to what she perceives to be Carver’s “violent nature.” She detests guns and the verbal battles occurring between local ranching outfits; yet she is enamored of the cowboy although leery of him. Visually Koerner places these figures within a circle located directly in the middle of the opening text. An implied division line runs down the center of the illustration between these two characters. Beth embodies the world of a homesteader, demonstrated by the sod house to her right. She would like to settle down and raise a family. Carver’s prefers the free but deracinated life of a cowboy and his horse. Carver’s body language gives the reader a sense of his masculinity: he clutches his gun belt as if to adjust his firepower. Evarts’s text suggests a deep-seated antipathy between settlers, who were increasing in numbers, and cowboys. Despite the initial attraction between these two characters, underlying tensions exist.

called Akton in Kansas. More than likely, Evarts, who was born and raised in Kansas, chose his native state as the setting for the novel, although he makes no blatant connection within the text.

The relationships among many characters of the novel reveal the nature of these conflicts. Although the romantic interludes do not play a significant role in story development, Beth's character adds a challenging factor concerning the savageness and unlawful Western frontier. Typically, in novels set in the American West, women are depicted as pioneer mothers or gentle schoolmarms who try to sway a potential love interest, usually a cowboy, to a civilized life. She is the outsider, or perhaps she symbolizes the *Post* subscriber, who would read this story and pose the same questions as she does about the 'lawless frontier,' where people wantonly kill one another in their desire to add more land to their ranges.



Figure 6: Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4.

In addition to the large, sometimes more than half-page story illustrations, Koerner included four mini-cameos of a few pivotal characters beginning with Ben Sholte, a hired hand who works for the Hat Ranch owned by Brazos Dade and his three nephews.¹⁶ In the text, Carver recognizes Sholte from a distance and announces: "That'll be Ben Sholte, that big, iron gray is his favorite mount and he set a heap o' store buy that pinto vest."¹⁷ The vest in question is hide from a red and white spotted calf, and even though the image of Sholte appears in black and white, with close observation we see the spotted texture of his vest; again Koerner was carefully noting Evart's descriptions. Sholte's squinting eyes appear in safety of the shadow under the brim of his hat. Koerner depicts this character already on the defense, leaning forward a bit, his finger on the trigger of a shotgun.

¹⁶ Brazo Dade, owner of the Hat Ranch, has three nephews: Bill, Sorrel and Chunky Dade.

In his cameo Carver, shown in profile, wears a bandana tied around his neck; even though the author does not mention this accouterment worn by the character, nevertheless the artist is consistent when he chooses to illustrate Carver. This is worth noting because the bandana becomes a visual clue that distinguishes Carver from the other ranch hands featured. Koerner has signed this cameo with a capital K and a curved line underneath. It is probable that the size of these cameos may contribute to the abbreviated signature. In their original textual layout, the first two cameos are placed in the same location on opposite sides of the page, facing each other in confrontation: Ben Sholte clutches a rifle while Carver stares him down.



Jeff Carver

Figure 7: Hal G. Everts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 5.

A community of cowboys exists between the local ranching outfits, in this case the LC and Muleshoe Ranches, who work together to protect their lands from intruders. These ranches also share a concern for the rival Hat Ranch. The Dades should be united with the other ranches; however, in an act of greed they harass and even murder in order to expand their range. Everts states that typically the law was not involved in these ranching feuds. The community was leery of outsiders, especially the law, and tried to solve disagreements itself. In a gesture of camaraderie, Carver offers an explanation to the Dades as to why he and Bob Hall had decided to buy Silver Creek. His statements offer an insight into the urgency of owning land:

¹⁷ Everts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4.

The squatter invasion that's sweepin' across the short grass like a prairie fire. It ain't reached here yet, but someday it will. We bought Silver Creek against the day when the settlers'll come surging in to crowd us.¹⁸

Carvers' intentions are similar to those of the rival ranch; both outfits want to



Figure 8: Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4 -5. The image from Walt and Roger Reed, *The Illustrator in America 1880-1980* (New York City: Madison Square Press, Inc., 1984), 131. (The image in the *Saturday Evening Post* was difficult to scan because the spine of the periodical was in the middle of the image.) The Buffalo Bill Historical Center also owns the oil painting, entitled "Moving the Herd," located in the Whitney Gallery of Western Art as a part of its W. H. D. Koerner

protect their claims from settlers, and this common need should be a bonding factor between local ranchers, who feel their large expanses of land and way of life may soon disappear. Carver warns that inevitably the swarm of settlers will bring law and order to the short grass region. However, the Hat Ranch continues to pursue the idea of adding Silver Creek to its range. The third image in the introductory chapters depicts Brazos, Sorrel and Sholte moving a herd. Its caption reads: *The Hat brand prospered amazingly through the years. If the increase seemed out of normal proportions, those who suffered thereby could establish no proof to support their convictions.*¹⁹ (Figure 8) This caption directly connects the Hat Ranch to this image. Evarts describes two brand marks used by

¹⁸ Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 5.

the Turkey Track and Hat Ranches, (whose brand was, logically enough, a hat). (See Figure 9)

The brand of a hat is clearly visible on a hind -quarter of a hat rider's horse.

Koerner takes this opportunity to translate brand information directly from the text into his paintings. Throughout the illustrations, there are prime areas where Koerner could



Figure 9: Detail of figure 8, first rider from left, *Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4 -5.*

have designated ownership of cattle, but the artist decided only to reveal this type of information selectively. Further complicating this image, the rider of this marked horse bears a striking

resemblance to Carver. The reader may think the two trailing riders are Carver and Hall, who keep a suspicious eye on Brazos, who in turn observes their passing herd. At first glance the band on his hat and the bandana around his neck may signify to the reader

that he is the story's hero, but the man rides a horse with the hat brand, so logically this could not be Carver. Later, we will see horses with the Turkey Track brand, clearly identifying them as such.

The reader learns that because of the harsh financial conditions of the cattle business, Carver takes a second job working on a train as an express manager. It seems ironic that this cowboy decides to work on a train; after all, railroads were a contributing element to the increasing obsolescence of cowboys' work. However in the text, employment with the railroads serves as an avenue through which he could earn money to put back into his cattle business. During his shift as an express manager delivering mail, the train was robbed. The robbers successfully took several bags containing

¹⁹ Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4.

consignment checks, but not without a price; Carver wounds one of the robbers in his left arm. Koerner features the antagonist in his third cameo, along with the caption: *The man stared at Carver.*²⁰ This image sets the dilemma for Carver; he suspects Sorrel of shooting his partner, Bob Hall, and now of an attempt on his own life. This is the first real hint that the Dades were robbing trains in order to keep their ranching business in operation. In the text, the only identifying characteristics Carver could remember of his adversary were that he shot left-handed and had red hair; otherwise Koerner keeps the identity of the robber disguised.



Figure 10: Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 28, 1932): 19.

In chapter eight we are presented with a cameo of Beth which is unusual in comparison to the others, because her image makes direct eye contact with us. This over-the-shoulder, direct stare seems out of character for the delicate schoolmarm but, in so far as a sign of adumbration, she represents the rise of the settler and this direct stare is assuring her class of people's growing presence. Beth is attracted to Carver, but because of his 'cowboy' nature she becomes slightly interested in Sorrel Dade. She does not share Carver's suspicions that



Figure 11: Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 4, 1932) 13.

Sorrel has murdered his partner. This relationship naturally upsets Carver but he remains calm and focuses on the Dades' transgressions. Beth has a difficult time relating to his

²⁰ Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 28, 1931): 19.

ideas of fighting till death for his beliefs. Evarts again sets the stage for this conflict between settler and cowboy with the following explanation:

Cattlemen were vastly alarmed at the incredibly swift tide of homesteaders that was sweeping westward across Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. Year by year, the settlers, objecting violently to the trampling of their crops by northbound trail herds, had crowded pastoral transportation of Texas cows farther and further west. Pitched battles between cowmen and settlers were of frequent occurrence. Many an adventurous squatter who had pushed on to drive his claim stakes in territory which the cattlemen considered theirs found his home wrecked and his possessions burned. Many, too, left their bones there.²¹

Beth pleads with Carver to let the law handle this matter between the feuding ranches, but he cannot see the benefit in that action. The clash of lifestyles and moral outlooks continues between the two, causing her to protest: “killing just seems so matter of fact for you.”²² Carver takes this opportunity to clarify his conscience:

It was the only way we knew how to go on living. When the Injuns jumped us miles from nowhere, intent on lifting our hair, we couldn’t hardly wait for an act of Congress to send ‘em back to the reservation to save our scalps. And when some hard hombre reached for his gun, it warn’t no time to flash a law book on him and invite him to read up on the statutes; or threaten to call the police. We had to depend on ourselves.²³

With these statements, Carver also relays the ideas behind a community of cowboys who united to protect their range originally not from encroaching settlers, but from Indians, the concern of early ranchers. Carver also reveals his feelings about the Indians which he feels to be violent and unlawful, although he devoutly trusts Comanche Al.

Many of the characters in “Short Grass” share suspicions concerning laws and the U. S. Government in general; as Evarts states: “All laws seemed aimed at the protection of the settler, the tiller of the soil.”²⁴ The author takes this opportunity to reinforce the

²¹ Evarts, “Short Grass,” (June 4, 1932): 65.

²² Evarts, (June 4, 1932): 64.

²³ Evarts, 64.

²⁴ Evarts, 67.

conflict between cowboy and settler: “The average cowboy took a vast pride in the fact that his clan worked only on horseback. To labor a foot in the fields was unthinkable.”²⁵ Throughout the novel Evarts states that the courts tended to rule in favor of settlers, people who would work the land, over cowboys who required large areas to raise and move cattle. Robert V. Hine, author of *the American West: an Interpretive History*, writes about this conflict and competition between cowboys and settlers, noting that this friction has deep roots, extending back to Cain and Abel.²⁶ These groups had differing motives concerning land-usage; settlers were to have families and build a permanent existence, while cowboys were free to roam, passing through only to use land for their grazing cattle. As the need for land increased, cowboys and ranchers realized things were beginning to change even in the cattle business itself: corporations were formed to buy out resident owners and combine their ranges. In the meantime, settlers were crowding in. “The settlement of the land had assumed almost the nature of a national religion.”²⁷

The installment of June 11 displays a confrontational conversation illustrated in the eleventh image of the text. The caption reads as part of the conversation when Brazos directs a question to Carver: *What’s to hinder my putting my herds across Lime-Cut Crossing if I pay what damage they do? Brazos craftily inquired.*²⁸ (Figure 12) Originally the Lime Cut Crossing was a path used by the Hat Ranch to shorten the time of its cattle drive, but now the area is owned by Carver and he refuses to let any one

²⁵ Evarts, 63.

²⁶ “Perhaps it all started with the conflict between Cain, the tiller of the earth and Abel, the keeper of the animals. Throughout history, farmers and herders have felt disdain for each other. On the plains of America the antithetical occupations fought for supremacy....The cowboy was a bachelor, intimate with saloons and poker tables; the settler was a family man, committed to building schools and churches. As Cain slew Able, the farmer would eventually overcome the cattleman on the open range, but not without a battle.” Collins, 146-147.

²⁷ Evarts, “Short Grass,” (June 18, 1932): 55.

²⁸ Evarts, “Short Grass,” (June 11, 1932): 18-19.

trespass. Brazos feels that his refusal to permit the Hat Ranch access is a declaration of war, and the tensions between the two increase. To the left of the image, Curt Allison, another Turkey Track rider, listens to this discussion, calmly rolling a cigarette. Again, Carver is clearly identified by his bandana and central placement, but also the brand on his horse

clearly
signifies the
Turkey
Track
Ranch. He
appears
apprehensive
in this image,

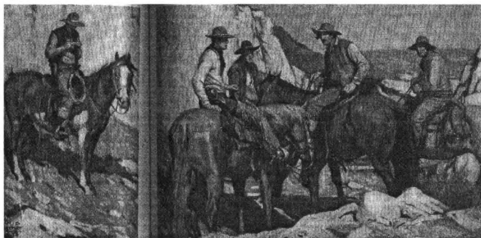


Figure 12: Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 11, 1932): 18-19.

as Brazos leans forward into his statement with a clenched fist. The receiver of this message moves backward slightly in his saddle with his hand resting near his gun. Close observation reveals that both Curt Allison's and Carver's horses bear the symbol of the Turkey Track Ranch—an instance where Koerner chooses to reveal this information through a brand.

The fifth series, on June 18, contained only two illustrations, both in chapter fifteen. In the opening image features Comanche Al, with the caption: *cruised widely off to the south, [in order to spy on the Hat riders.]*²⁹ (Figure 13) We see Comanche Al on horseback and, as cattle graze in the distance, he observes the large expanse of land

²⁹ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 18, 1932): 24.

known to him as the short grass region. The two illustrations used to depict Comanche Al show him wearing the attire of a ranch hand, even though the text sporadically alludes to him wearing traditional Indian dress. For example, in chapter eleven, after Comanche Al has become a permanent fixture on the Turkey Track Ranch, Carver observes him lounging in the sun "attired only in breechclout and moccasins- a custom retained from the many



Figure 13: Hal G. Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 4 -5.

years he had spent among Indian villages."³⁰ For the most part, both visually and in the text, he is given the dress of a 'common' cowboy. Even his name 'Comanche Al' combines two traditions, traditions that conflict. Carver's relationship with Comanche Al becomes a unique cowboy and Indian saga. Carver has contempt for other Indians, for example the savages from whom he defended his land, but for Carver, this Indian is different. This cowboy relies upon and respects the old Indian. Frequently, however, Comanche Al questions Carver's methods of defending the range:

Old Comanche Al was wavering between the tenets of his early Indian training- which stressed the advantage of surprise attack- and the code of the six-shooter- which decreed that no man might fire upon his adversary without due warning. Comanche Al held to the white man's code.³¹

³⁰ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 11, 1932): 19.

³¹ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 4, 1932): 59.

The “white man’s code” was the fighting technique of a respectable cowboy, not the cunning advantage of hiding out and attacking as a “savage” Indian would. Evarts writes that Comanche Al has subscribed to several other of the settler’s habits; he is fond of drink and can be seen visiting the local saloon, in contrast to our virtually flawless hero, who, although he drinks, is never described as having become intoxicated.

In image fourteen, Koerner illustrates another tense moment. We see Carver, who has just arrived on the scene to our left. Wright, owner of the bar, turns to confront Carver with the

statement: *Jeff someone*

was telling me that Lafe

Morton had an

accident. Horse drug

him to death. That so?

as the three Hat riders

exit the jagged doorway

of the saloon.³² The

three anticipate Carver’s

response as a passerby

tends to his horse in the right foreground.³³ Carver recounts the moments before Lafe’s

death when he was able to tell Carver that Bill Dade had killed his childhood friend and

business partner, Bob Hall; and with that accusation, Bill draws his gun and in an act of self-defense Carver shoots, killing Bill.

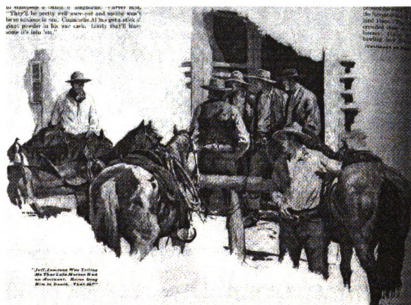


Figure 14: Hal G. Evarts, “Short Grass,” (June 18, 1932): 24.

³² Lafe Morton-- minor character, hired hand of the Turkey Track Ranch.

The installment of June 25, marking the sixth of the series, prominently displays the illustration *Hard Winter*, which consumes half of the page, introducing chapter eighteen. As an illustration, the image depicts a crucial point in the text when Carver heads out to gather cattle that have dispersed because of a fire set by his nemesis Brazos Dade in yet another attempt to gain Silver Creek. In contrast to the surrounding text the half page image appears dark and cold; the caption reads: *It was the*



Figure 15: *Hard Winter* as Illustration, "Short Grass," (June 25 1932): 18.

*red glare that waked Carver, as fires crept across the short grass in every direction.*³⁴ The text conflicts with the image. The caption underneath the image reads: *The snow eddied and whirled about the men. Night had descended by the time they reached the ranch house.*³⁵ As we turn the page and continue reading we discover that by mid afternoon rain has turned to snow as thousands of cows drift further away.

Despite these conditions, Carver and his outfit manage to retrieve much of the Turkey Track stock and success came to the ranch when the winter storm decimates the herd though, because of the fences, most of the cattle stay within the area and many are

³³ Koerner designates the stranger's horse with the male insignia. The symbol for the male sex was actually used as a brand by his friend Phil Spear who is mentioned in the third section.

³⁴ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 25, 1932): 18.

retrieved. The fences designed to keep trespassers out now contain the cattle from wandering too far. Amazingly, Carver perseveres through the difficult winter and prospers, while in fact, according to historical reports, many ranches were financially devastated by the winter storm apparently based on a actual blizzard that hit the Northern Plains during 1886-87.

Already cows on the open range were dying by the hundreds. News trickled in on from other parts. The whole cattle country was suffering similar hardships.... Many big Montana outfits simply had given up hope of saving their cows. Blizzard followed blizzard and some of the biggest Montana cattlemen already had losses running up to 30 percent of their herds and with no relief in sight. Nebraska, Dakotas and Western Kansas reports were but little better.³⁶

By the summer of 1886, the once booming cattle business was in trouble. "Seven and a half million hungry cattle were now competing for grasses that every year grew less plentiful from overgrazing."³⁷ Large herds of sheep were beginning to move across the landscape, settlers were moving in and farmers were appearing, turning grasslands into fields and putting up barbed wire fences in order to keep cattle from their crops; meanwhile beef prices were dropping. Cattlemen would remember the winter of 1886-87 as the "Great Die -Up." Northern cattle ranches lost a record amount of stock to these winter storms. The blizzards, which began in November of 1886, were devastating for many and were one of the early signs that the end of trail drives on the open range was soon to become a harsh reality. "Ironically, this [blizzard of 1886-87] came at a time when the cattle industry on the entire northern plains had risen to an all-time peak of prosperity."³⁸ If we take this historical perspective into account, the image carries a powerful vision of two cowboys out gathering stray cattle this record blizzard has

³⁵ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 25, 1932): 18.

³⁶ Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 25, 1932): 74.

³⁷ Ward, 368.

dispersed. We can further connect *Hard Winter* to this historical blizzard because Evarts situates his novella between the Lincoln County War of 1887-81 and the Johnson County War, which began in 1892.³⁹ Both wars centered on range rights, resulting in many bloody confrontations among ranchers, cowboys and outlaws.

The seventh and final installment of July 2 contains two illustrations. Chapter twenty-three relays the events in the second-to-last major illustration for the story. Beth has just met up with Jeff and Comanche Al in order to inform the Indian and cowboy duo of the Hat Ranch's plans to murder Carver. The caption that accompanies this image reads:



Figure 16: Evarts, "Short Grass," (June 25, 1932): 18

*We can't stay out here in the middle of this open stretch. Brazos Dade may be riding along here any second.*⁴⁰ Beth feels horrible for doubting Jeff, and, as she pleads her case to him, Comanche Al looks on. What is interesting about this illustration is the editing, placement and vignette technique that Koerner employs. The effect of the outlined image resembles a cow skull anticipating future events, an end of some sort, a transformation, perhaps death. The depiction corresponds to the action taking place within the story, where Beth relays the

³⁸ Harold McCracken. *The American Cowboy* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 167.

³⁹ "By the time that Jeff Carver and Bob Hall located on Silver Creek, twenty miles due north of the Hat Ranch on the Oxhide, range wars were not few. The last echoes of the bloody Lincoln County War in New Mexico still were in the air. Already were heard the first faint rumbles of the Johnson County War in Wyoming, destined to become popularly known as the Rustlers' War." Evarts, "Short Grass," (May 21, 1932): 3.

Hat Ranch's plans of murder, and perhaps suggests something larger in scope that transcends the novel: the end of a cowboy's way of life and of the freedom of the West itself.

During the final climactic shoot out between the ranches, Carver puts into practice lessons learned from Comanche Al. In order to sneak up on the unsuspecting Dade group quietly, he changes out of his cowboy attire. "He produced a pair of moccasins from his saddle pockets and donned them instead of boots, then took off his heavy leather chaps."⁴¹ As a result Carver catches the Dades off guard, successfully holding them up until reinforcements arrive. Yet, recall an earlier incident, when Comanche Al was waging a battle in his mind; should he follow the "civilized" code of "the white man" and in an open manner make his presence known, or should he quietly sneak up on them as a so-called "savage" Indian would? Here in dealing with the Dades, Carver chooses the latter. A final shoot out occurs between the Hat Ranch and this cowboy and Indian pair, who successfully kill all Hat Ranch members and recover stolen silver. When the law finally arrives, they piece the situation together and thank Carver, but he has no time for congratulations; he politely excuses himself in order to meet up with Beth. Despite this ostensibly happy ending, Evarts implies that Carver assumes the life of a settler, forfeiting his roaming cowboy life.⁴²

⁴¹ Evarts, "Short Grass," (July 2, 1932): 24.

⁴¹ Evarts, "Short Grass," (July 2, 1932): 40.

⁴² The stories of the Depression Era "reflect an attempt to adjust to existing conditions by drastically scaling down the characters' dreams and expectations so that they are not glaringly at odds with the hard economic facts. In some cases the stories explicitly caution against desiring too much, portraying not ambition but acceptance and contentment as the ultimate virtues. Readers of such stories were no longer encouraged to strive and succeed; they were exhorted to adjust and accept." Charles R. Hearn, *The American Dream in the Great Depression* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), 159.

Koerner follows Evart's literary cues carefully and consistently throughout his illustrations, but also includes additional information not made explicit in the text. For example, though Evarts never mentions Carver wearing a red bandana, Koerner uses this bandana as a recognizable identifier for the hero. Both depictions of Comanche Al show him as a typical ranch hand, even though the author mentions this character's connection to a Native American culture. Comanche Al had assimilated into the role of a cowboy, and now he defends the range along with his cowboy counterparts.

Section 3: The Artist and his Vision

Never could write, never could talk, not good at having myself taken...Look over the bunch of illustrations I've done and you'll see my life, feel the struggles I've felt, know my joys and sorrows. Ever since I drew any first breath I've drawn my history.⁴³

-----Letter to Ruth Oliver Koerner from her father, W. H. D. Koerner

Wilhelm Heinrich Detlev Körner (W. H. D. Koerner) was born in the village of Lunden, Holstein, in Germany on November 19, 1878. He and his sister, Auguste Margaretha Wilhelmine, were the only survivors of twelve children.⁴⁴ When Koerner was two years old, the family took passage at Hamburg for an Atlantic crossing to America. The four arrived in New York and later immigrated to Clinton, Iowa, which during 1880 was a booming lumber and railroad town. His father, Hans Henning Wilhelm Körner, a cobbler who owned a shoe store, was very supportive of his son's artistic endeavors and enrolled him in John Stitch's art classes in their adoptive town. Later, Koerner credited these classes at Stitch's studio as having developed his photographic mind, a necessary element for any staff artist, which was his ultimate professional goal. Julia Gordon, Koerner's grammar school teacher, noticed his talents and allowed him to conduct informal drawing lessons for fellow students. In 1897, at age eighteen, Koerner graduated from Clinton grammar school with an eighth grade education, "the pinnacle of most young people's education" at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Two years later, he moved east to Chicago seeking a job as an illustrator at the prestigious *Tribune*.

⁴³ Unfortunately the microfilm reels from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center were not consistent with paginating frames. This particular fame was not paginated. McCracken Research Library Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY. W. H. D. Koerner Studio Collection Archives, Reel 622, MS 13.

⁴⁴ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and the West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 8.

⁴⁵ Hutchinson, 14.

Koerner's entry job at the *Tribune* was as a staff artist, whose duty was arriving at the scenes of city happenings striving faithfully to record events and details. In 1902, after five years of working at the newspaper, he left the position of assistant art director to enroll in drawing classes offered at the Art Institute of Chicago. During this time, he found opportunity to sit in on other drawing classes at the Francis Smith Art Academy of Chicago where he met Lillian Lusk. The two were married in 1903 and moved to Lillian's hometown of Battle Creek, Michigan. Just one year prior to the marriage, Koerner's father died, and from that point on he took financial care of his widowed mother.

While in Battle Creek, Koerner had the opportunity to execute several drawings used as advertisements by Postum-Grape Nuts Cereal Company. Afterwards he found himself the art editor for a Michigan-based magazine *The Pilgrim*; but after two rather uneventful years he resigned and the couple moved to Detroit, where Koerner became the art editor of the newly founded *United States Daily*. In 1905 this paper was disbanded and he took the opportunity to move to New York in order to attend the Art Students League. While at the ASL, he worked with Gutzon Borglum, a sculptor best known for his presidential portraits on Mt. Rushmore. It was under Borglum's instruction that the young artist participated in modeling classes with a focus on the human form. He continued his studies independently with George Bridgman several of whose life drawing classes he attended at the ASL.

The secret of Koerner's success may have been his constant desire to improve and re-invent his own work. In 1907, with encouragement from friends, he sought out Howard Pyle, then regarded as "the father of American illustration," in order to enroll in

weekly composition classes under Pyle's instruction in his Wilmington studio. Pyle advised his students to depict natural, realistic images with the goal of creating pictures that could 'stand' without text.⁴⁶ His pupils at the time included Harvey Dunn, N.C. Wyeth and Frank Schoonover. Koerner worked with these artists and they afforded him constructive criticism concerning his work. As with many illustrators of his time, he would carefully read the story, taking notes in order to subscribe faithfully to the ultimate goal for any artist in illustration, which was to depict scenes with accuracy, and to create an interesting image that did not reveal too much plot information.

Earlier Works

An early work displays his ability to render a historical scene enigmatic. His *Through the Mud to Glory*, used to illustrate Eugene Wood's *Declaration Day*, made its first appearance in *Good Housekeeping* in 1914. (Figure 17) The short story commemorated young soldiers who died during the Civil War; it contained only three illustrations by Koerner, but this image in particular shares many of the same compositional formulas and messages apparent later in *Hard Winter's* construction. The image depicts a line of soldiers who emerge from a thick, rainy fog, while an officer, with sword drawn, inspects his regiment. Two mysterious cloaked figures



Figure 17: W.H.D. Koerner. *Through the Mud to Glory*. Illustration for Eugene Wood's "Declaration Day" in *Good Housekeeping*, Vol. LVIII, No. 5, May 1914. Image from *Howard Pyle: The Artist & His Legacy* (Delaware Art Museum, 1987), 31.

⁴⁶ See Virginia A Herrick, *Howard Pyle: The Artist & His Legacy*, (The Delaware Art Museum, 1987), 31.

lead a thick line of soldiers along an implied diagonal from right to left. In the right distance one can see a silhouette of a covered wagon, hidden by the fog. The image depicts soldiers with blank faces resembling hollowed skulls, less forward-looking than its title, creating an eerie connection to death. Again here, as in *Hard Winter*, a prevailing sense of hopelessness becomes apparent through the harsh elements, sloped figures and anonymous characters, yet historically we know that victory is in store for these northern troops.

Although the title, *Through the Mud to Glory*, suggests a struggle for freedom, it is uncertain if Koerner himself assigned the title to the image. We do know that he was paid \$250 for three illustrations for Wood's story.⁴⁷ According to Virginia A. Herrick: "True to Pyle's method, Koerner imagined himself in the scene. The suffering and privation that can dampen but cannot quell indomitable spirit is palpable and convincing."⁴⁸ This quote is testament to Koerner's ability, an ideal he remained true to throughout his career.

After his instruction with Pyle, Koerner, though thirty-one years old, continued his education. He and his wife Lillian joined former Pyle students Percy V.E. Ivory, Herbert Moore, E. and Roscoe Shrader at a two-story house and studio referred to by its occupants as *Naaman's on the Delaware*.⁴⁹ The studio was a prime location because of its proximity to the magazine hubs of Wilmington and Philadelphia. The couple was also faced with the responsibilities of a growing family; in 1913 a daughter Ruth was born and

⁴⁷ Unfortunately the microfilm reels from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center were not consistent with paginating frames. Reel 624. McCracken Research Library Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY. W. H. D. Koerner Studio Collection Archives MS 13.

⁴⁸ Herrick, 33.

⁴⁹ "Originally it (the house) was occupied by a Swedish family who named it 'Naamans,' and this we named our colony 'Naamans on the Delaware.'" (Reel 624): 63.

in 1915, a son, Bill.⁵⁰ Koerner's reputation, which continued to grow as he created appealing, realistic images for several East Coast magazines, resulted in his first cover for *Harper's Weekly* in 1910.⁵¹ The image on the cover represents a male wearing winter attire complete with a scarf wrapped around the head and traditional snowshoes, smoking a pipe and crouched over an ice hole to see if the fish are biting. This image was not only his first cover for a major publication, but also appeared in color.

With the onset of World War I, and his work becoming more popular, the Committee on Public Information requested that Koerner travel overseas to record American troops in action. He was faced with the need to establish his father's naturalization since without such proof he technically was an 'enemy alien,' and anti-German sentiment was rampant.⁵² He successfully proved that his father became a naturalized citizen on May 2, 1882 thus establishing his American citizenship, but he missed the opportunity to travel abroad. However, he did create patriotic posters for the war effort.⁵³

Koerner is probably best known for his painting *Madonna of the Prairie*, used to illustrate Emerson Houghs' novel, the *Covered Wagon* in 1921, also serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Of the twenty-four paintings produced as illustrations for the text, the portrait of Molly Wingate, the novel's heroine, was chosen to appear on the cover of the *Post* issue that included the first installment.⁵⁴ The image inspired another adaptation in a visual form, film. "The Hollywood quality that permeates [Koerner's

⁵⁰ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and the West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 100.

⁵¹ Koerner's first cover was for *Harper's Weekly*, 1910. The checklist on page 228 also confirms his first cover for a major publication, *Harper's Weekly* (2/26/1910) Hutchinson, 228.

⁵² Hutchinson, 114.

⁵³ Hutchinson, 114.

⁵⁴ *Madonna of the Prairie* appeared on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post's* April 1, 1922 issue.



Figure 18: W.H.D. Koerner. *Madonna of the Prairies*. Oil, 37 x 28 1/4. Illustration for Emerson Hough's "The Covered Wagon," *The Saturday Evening Post*, (April 1, 1921): Cover illustration.

image] perfectly suited it to a silent film based on the novel and produced by Paramount pictures in 1923, *the Covered Wagon*."⁵⁵ Koerner's image had such an impact that in both the play and film versions, Molly's pioneer costume remained consistent with the painted image. When presented with *Madonna of the Prairies*, the author was delighted with the artistic interpretation of Molly.

"Tell Koerner that this is the first time in my career that an artist has really pleased me with his work."⁵⁶

Hough specifically requested several illustrations from Koerner for *North of 36* and other novels.

Although the image may at first glance appear to support the ideals of Manifest Destiny, its meaning may be more equivocal.

In his portrait an idealized young female pioneer daintily holds the reins of her horse as she glances slightly towards her left. The minimized opening of the covered wagon on which she is seated resembles a halo, illuminating her head; the whole wagon cover surrounds her body, suggesting a mystical aura of purity or divine purpose. She is not a threatening or overpowering figure; instead she seems motherly because of the warm colors and her lack of a direct intruding gaze at the viewer. Her symbols of a more refined way of life include an embroidered shawl and cameo pin, which suggests an Eastern ancestry to be re-established in the West. According to Anne Butler:

⁵⁵ Anne Scott, "Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women: Images of Emigrant Women in the Art of the Old

Like Koerner, all the illustrators turned out appealing images of frontier people and heightened Americans' positive attitude toward Western settlement. These artists presented westerners as individuals of character, refinement, and integrity. Perhaps more important, as the nation moved into a world that turned on mechanization and industrial growth, these illustrated Western stories kept national frontier concepts at center stage for American readers.⁵⁷

I agree with Buttler's latter statements concerning an American desire to relate to these images and stories of the West; however, I take issue with her suggestion that

Madonna of the Prairies exudes "a positive attitude toward Western settlement."

Granted, many images of pioneer women were used to encourage Easterners to make the westward trek; but I would argue that the uncertain look on the young pioneer's face and her reluctance to grasp the reins of the leading horse fully suggest an unwillingness or ambivalence concerning her journey. The pensive look on her face also suggests apprehension; therefore I question the description of the image as being an unequivocal endorsement of Western settlement. Yet Butler reinforces the idea that Western images or images of the frontier were featured in novels in order to remind the larger public to take strength in an American heritage, an idea I will explore further when addressing Koerner's work, specifically for the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Depictions of 'Prairie Madonnas' and emigrant women were not a new artistic motif. Anne Stott, argues that such 'marian iconography' had long reflected the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. "Identifying Western women with the mother of the savior of the world reinforced the message that the Western enterprise had the blessing of God and that women's role was to bring the double salvation of Christianity and Anglo- American

West," *Prospects Annual*, vol. 21 (1996): 311.

⁵⁶ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and the West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 143.

⁵⁷ Butler, "Selling the Popular Myth," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the American West*, 777-78.

civilization to the Western plains.”⁵⁸ During the late 1920s, ‘Prairie Madonnas’ were given a much sterner depiction, for example August Leimbach’s *Madonna of the Trail* (Figure 19). A modestly dressed, austere woman fearlessly leads her clinging children towards the West. She almost steps off her stone pedestal as her left foot advances.

Leimbach’s statue, completed in 1928, portrays ‘the pioneer woman’ as keeper and nurturer of the next generation of homesteaders; his sculpture depicts strength and bravery, while Koerner’s *Madonna of the Prairie* offers a more human reaction towards the reality of westward expansion: fear and uncertainty. Leimbach’s statue is popular even today and many Western states own a copy. Koerner’s version appears frail and uncertain, at a time when the more popular ‘Prairie Madonna’ image was fearless. Stott attributes this change, from passive to heroic, to the women’s movement gaining support during the latter part of the 1920s.⁵⁹ In Koerner’s version we see a young girl driving her covered wagon into a new environment overwhelmed by her destiny.



Figure 19: August Leimbach, *The Madonna of the Trail* (1928) 6' Lamar, Colorado. Image from Anne Stott's "Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women: Images of Emigrant Women in the Art of the Old West," *Prospects Annual*, vol.21 (1996): 313.

Koerner also took on the role of teacher and mentor. Like Pyle, he conducted morning session classes where selected students could seek advice and receive instruction. The end of his teaching stint came when one of his students decided to study

⁵⁸ Anne Stott, "Prairie Madonnas and Pioneer Women: Images of Emigrant Women in the Art of the Old

under Harvey Dunn at his Grand Central School of Art in New York and told Koerner that his paintings were out of date. "The fashion in illustration now was patterns, not figures and details: black and white work was adequate for black and white reproductions, while color painting was reserved for easel work, true Art, not commercial work."⁶⁰ Perhaps taking that comment under advisement, Koerner returned for instruction, this time from Hugh Breckinridge, a faculty member at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, who conducted summer sessions in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In the summer of 1922, Koerner moved his family to Gloucester in order to participate in Breckinridge's painting sessions for two months. During this time, Koerner broke away from strict color and tight composition and leaned towards an impressionistic or 'broken color' method of painting inspired by his new teacher.

The goal for an illustrator is to create an image that does not reveal too much information, while aesthetically complementing the text. Titles become irrelevant and Koerner did not title many of his images. Therefore *Hard Winter* downplays the scene to which it is attached; it minimizes the difficult journey. His daughter stated that because of his high productivity output her father did not have time to attach titles to his paintings.⁶¹ The title was the result of a collaboration between Koerner's daughter and Harold McCracken of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center during the late 1970s. After reading "Short Grass," they assigned the title *Hard Winter* to the image.

West," *Prospects Annual*, (1996): 300.

⁵⁹ Stott, 316.

⁶⁰ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and the West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 131.

⁶¹ Koerner papers--The Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

Figure 20 depicts Bill III (Koerner's son) posing for *Hard Winter*. During an interview in 1993, Bill III recalled the hot July day when he was wrapped in the winter attire needed for a scene in the novel. The following remembrance was transcribed by Frances B. Clymer, a librarian at the McCracken Research Library at the time:

On August 19, 1993 William H.D. Koerner III, the son of W. H. D. Koerner, told me a story about this painting. According to him, he posed for the figure on horseback so that his father could get the right modeling on the clothing worn by the cowboy being portrayed. This was done on swelteringly hot July day. 'Little Billy Koerner' was swaddled in coats and scarves from head to toe. In order to help endure this very uncomfortable situation his father told him the story surrounding the scene he was painting. Even today, Mr. Koerner remembers how much cooler he felt imagining the blizzard in the story.⁶²



Figure 20: Bill jr., Koerner's son posing for *Hard Winter*. Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Center Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings, June 1-July 21, 1974.

This account not only demonstrates that Koerner carefully read the story for details but also affirms his meticulous care with compositions. At this point in his career, he was well-versed in the complexities of the human form and he chose to develop his compositions by employing the help of those nearby, his family. Ruth later recalled that her father would have her pose in order to capture lighting and solve compositional difficulties:

I spent much of my childhood watching Daddy create those paintings of the Old West. If he needed a model to pose for an old squaw, guess who was chosen? He didn't want my face, because he knew the anatomy of female features. All he wanted in the pose was the drape of the buckskin and how the light and shadow would affect the contour of the

⁶² Interview (8/24/93) courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Frances B. Clymer, Librarian, Koerner Papers.

costume. Two weeks later, I'd be a pioneer woman sitting on a prairie-schooner seat as it bumped up the sweetwater towards the South Pass.⁶³

One may ask how did this illustrator, who lived in the East, develop his knowledge about the West? In an article, "Rediscovery of a Western Illustrator: W.H.D. Koerner," his daughter recalled that his interest and research in the West began when he received his first Evarts story, "Tumbleweeds," in 1922. The story addressed the Cherokee Stripland rush in Oklahoma Territory: "He began his research in New York, studying Indian tribes and the historical setting of the story, spending 'many hours'... in the New York Public Library's rare book room at the Museum of Natural History, and the Heye Indian Foundation for this was the story of the Cherokee Strip."⁶⁴ In addition to research, Koerner felt compelled to discover the West for himself. 1924 marked the first of many family visits to The Spear Head Ranch in Montana, where he developed a rapport with local cowboys and filled sketchbooks with images of ranch activities.⁶⁵ The artist was quite meticulous when rendering a scene, and his summers at Spear's Montana ranch provided much of his visual information of the West and cowboy life. Phil Spear, owner of the ranch, became a life long friend and his range "had been traversed by the 'bloody Bozeman' Trail on its way toward ill-starred Fort C.F. Smith before Red Cloud and the Sioux had closed it in the 1860s."⁶⁶ Additionally Koerner stocked his Eastern studio with authentic props gathered on his Western adventures.

⁶³ "An Act of Devotion," *The Westerners* (1970): 83.

⁶⁴ Mallory B. Randle, "Rediscovery of a Western Illustrator: W.H.D. Koerner," *Southwest Art* (March 1968): 50.

The *Saturday Evening Post* and the Great Depression

While Koerner illustrated stories for such magazines as *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Scribner's*, and *Harper's Weekly*, he is probably best known for his associations with the *Saturday Evening Post*. He was on more than agreeable terms with the *Post's* notoriously opinionated editor, Lorimer, who, between 1920 and 1931, raised the magazine's circulation.⁶⁷ Koerner was given the freedom of placing his illustrations where he saw fit. According to his biographer Hutchinson, "*The Saturday Evening Post* sent him stories of the type he liked to illustrate, whether they were action stories or challenging characterizations, and its Art Department did not pester him with nit-picking suggestions about illustration size, technique to be used, or story incidents he should illustrate."⁶⁸ Perhaps because of these freedoms, during the last five years of his life he illustrated only for the *Post*, and more than one half of his total output was done for the magazine. "His best year was 1930, when his income surpassed \$30,000; however, his income rose and fell with the fortunes of the *Post*. Subscriptions had exceeded three million, but during the Depression advertising revenue declined so that fewer pages limited the number of stories and illustrations for each issue."⁶⁹

As previously mentioned, the painting *Hard Winter* and the accompanying illustrations for the novel were completed during the onset of the Depression years. Hutchinson explains the interest in the American West during the Great Depression:

⁶⁵ Koerner represents his friend Phil Spear's ranch brand; see fig. 14. The passer-by's horse bears Spear's brand mark, the symbol for male.

⁶⁶ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 199.

⁶⁷ Hutchinson, "The Mythic West of W.H.D. Koerner," *The American West* (May 1967): 56.

⁶⁸ Hutchinson. *The World, Work and West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 127.

⁶⁹ Dorys Crow Grover, "Some Western Paintings of W.H.D. Koerner," *Journal of American Culture* (Summer 1991): 16.

The great West had provided a readily available escape, be such truly physical or purely psychic, from intolerable conditions; it had provided the means to pursue whatever freedoms one fancied for himself or for the continuity of his family's generations. The Depression drove home the fact that the frontier truly had vanished, and this induced a claustrophobia that still grips the nation with adjustment pangs and passions.⁷⁰

Hutchinson claims that the Great Depression increased many Americans' desire to recapture the ability to triumph over adversity. This notion of self-reliance was one that many magazines including the *Post* tried to sustain through its featured stories.

Innumerable stories of the thirties illustrate the fact that the value of initiative, ambition, aggressiveness, profit making, starting from the bottom, competition, entrepreneurial chance taking, and hard work had certainly not been lost sight of by the popular writers. Many of the stories of the thirties reflect an awareness that the Depression was calling into question some of the traditional faiths that Americans were accustomed to living by. Thus, frequently the stories are highly transparent vehicles of propaganda designed to buttress the old values. Just as prevalent in the thirties, however, were fanciful success stories which betrayed little awareness that the Depression ever existed. These stories created a fairy-tale world where everything was possible and no one suffered. As in the "cashing in" stories which they resemble, myth and reality have completely separated; the dream had become pure illusion, not a means of interpreting and responding to reality but a means of escaping it."⁷¹

Many Western stories certainly fit into this propaganda of American exceptionalism and Lorimer intended to infuse a new work ethic and sense of pride into the American mainstream with his magazine. His goal was a reshaping of a personality or outlook that concentrated on hard work and self-reliance. Initially, Lorimer felt the stock market crash of 1929 was nothing to fear, and during the early years of the Depression, stories and editorials in the *Post* neglected to comment on America's desperate situation.⁷²

⁷⁰ Hutchinson, "Illustrating the Western Myth," (May 1969): introduction.

⁷¹ Hearn, 75.

⁷² "The stock market crash seemed to resolve the contradictions, the old values had been proved correct. Lorimer rehearsed them to what he hoped was a chastened American people, and when the Depression settled over America he rehearsed those values again in the expectation that they would provide models of behavior and sources of hope. Instead Lorimer found Americans turning away from the last of the quintessential characteristics of Americanism. The nation had abandoned hard work and thrift in the boom

Pat Cohn states that although the staff of the *Saturday Evening Post* and its editor were reluctant to mention the unemployment problems plaguing many Americans at this time, yet the magazine did elude to America's desperate situation. A few articles explained how to make the best impressions during job interviews for example. Lorimer felt that America's hope of escaping its economic problems lay with themselves, not the government.

By the beginning of 1931, a new sense of urgency appeared in Post articles on the economic situation; that urgency, however, was not occasioned by the Depression itself or even by the *Post's* own failing economic position. The crisis for Lorimer lay in the attempts of the Hoover administration to intervene with government programs for relief and revival. The basic theme of the *Post* in these months and in the years to follow was that projects initiated and implemented by the federal government could not ameliorate the economic picture; only American self-reliance and manly courage would win the day.⁷³

It is at times of despair that many people look back and reinterpret past histories; the histories of the West, both fact and myth, were being communicated by various media to satisfy this need for reassurance. Hutchinson again addresses America's interest in Western images during the end of Koerner's career, when he worked primarily for the *Post*.

These were the first traumatic years of the Great Depression and Lorimer's predominantly middle class audience comprised the group that felt itself most threatened by the raw conflict between labor and capital that symbolized their world turned upside down. It was this audience that clung most tenaciously to the vanishing values, because their need was greater: a need to bolster hope that these values would again prevail. In the Western confection that Lorimer published in these years, in the imagery that Koerner gave to them, this hope was kept alive by a gripping, nostalgic awareness of the promise that had been in the West-That-Was.⁷⁴

years; under the New Deal it jettisoned self-reliance." Pat Cohn, *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 13.

⁷³ Cohn, 228.

⁷⁴ Hutchinson, "The Mythic West of W.H.D. Koerner," (May 1967):59.

That promise was that America will always triumph no matter how bleak the circumstances. Hutchinson states that images of American cowboys were now used to remind many Americans of this past and to revitalize their sense of pride, during the Great Depression when reassurance was in short supply. He continues by stating that the editor's choices to feature Western short stories were deliberate during this time:

In the post-war years Lorimer strove to give his readers renewed pride in their country and in their countrymen's accomplishments which would help them face the uncertain future with their traditional values unimpaired. One means towards this end was to make the nineteenth century's culmination of the unique American experience, the Westward Movement, the equivalent of the historical romance of the turn of the century....⁷⁵

The stock market crash of 1929 was not catastrophic for the Koerner family but, as for many Americans, the aftermath of the crash proved a financial and emotional strain. "The full impact of the depression smote the Koerner family in 1933, when the *Post*'s reductions in fees dropped his income by more than sixty per cent to its lowest level since 1924."⁷⁶ Although Koerner was experiencing moments of success as an illustrator during this time, he felt financially constrained because of his family commitments. Koerner's mother-in-law lived with the family, and he continued to send money back home to his own mother in Clinton, Iowa, a practice that continued until her death in 1934. Bill III wanted to attend the ASL like his father, and Ruth was considering a trade school; meanwhile authors were beginning to reduce their requests for illustrations.⁷⁷ The new, modern art ushered in by the prominent photographer Alfred Steiglitz and "Ash Can" painter Robert Henri began to change American art, leaving images of the West behind. In many ways Koerner may have had a unique understanding of the Western images he

⁷⁵ Hutchinson, *The World, Work and West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 142.

⁷⁶ Hutchinson, 215.

portrayed nevertheless transitions in the art world caused him to question his role as an artist. Harsh economic, political and social conditions also had an effect on the artist and his work; and with photography claiming its hold on magazine advertisement and illustration jobs becoming less plentiful, the Western illustrator may have felt antiquated. For a time, Koerner seriously thought about abandoning illustration altogether, yet he remained active until 1935 when his arthritis became so painful he was bedridden. After three years as an invalid and suffering minor strokes, Koerner died at fifty-eight on August 11, 1938 at his home in Interlaken, New Jersey.

⁷⁷ Although this was true for many publications for this time, *the Saturday Evening Post* slowly made the transition from drawings to photographs due to "Lorimer's resistance to change." John Tebbel, *George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1948), 117.

Section 4: The Symbolism of Decline

At the end of the nineteenth century when Turner declared the Western frontier dead and gone, many artists and authors were recording its decline through two of its major figures, cowboys and Indians. Much of the art depicting their relationships narrates stories of confrontation and strife, yet the histories of these two cultural groups reveal that the cowboys and Indians shared similar experiences. Both groups were systematically removed from land or relocated, though both have endured and survived. In “Short Grass” cowboy and Indian band together in order to protect their range from settlers, or in this case the character of Beth, who symbolizes the intrusion of settlers. Cowboys found it necessary to protect themselves from larger forces, just as Indians had twenty years earlier. Perhaps the most celebrated statue of the Native American struggle is *End of the Trail* by James Earl Fraser. What is subtly apparent in both *Hard Winter* and, as will be seen later, *End of the Trail* is the possibility of overcoming seemingly impossible circumstances thereby revitalizing the existence of cowboys and Indians.

It should be noted, Koerner was not the first artist to attempt this theme of defeat in the world of the turn-of-the-century cowboy. One of his predecessors, Frederic Remington (1861- 1909), painted an image with a similar message. His *Fall of the Cowboy* appeared as an illustration in an article by Owen Wister entitled “The Evolution of the Cowpuncher,” published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1895. Wister argued that cowboys had personified a self-reliant Anglo-Saxon destiny and made the West safe for the weaker population which now crowded the area. Remington supplied Wister’s story with a total of five images; the final illustration was *The Fall of the Cowboy*. The image depicts two men, one on horseback, the other opening a gate into a

field with a barbed-wire fence stretching into the vast distance. Presumably Remington's cowboys have returned to a secured ranch after a round up or riding excursion. The figures, horses and fence stand out from the snow-blanketed environment.

In Remington's wintry vision, we see that in order to gain entrance into the ranch, one rider must dismount, therefore breaking the strength of the triangle; a fall accurate both historically and visually. I suggest that Koerner's *Hard Winter*, where the figures almost blend into the blizzard, touches on the same sentiments yet the message remains ambiguous in

Remington's version. His cowboys appear 'matter of fact,' tending to business at the end of the day, yet wearily. The plot of "Short Grass"

makes it clear that indeed Remington's image would not be



Figure 21: *Fall of the Cowboy* by Frederic Remington used to illustrate "Evolution of the Cowpuncher" by Owen Wister, 1895. Image from William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, *The West of the Imagination*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 245.

out of place within the context of the novel. The image can and does stand on its own foretelling the day when cowboys would devote their time not to trail drives and roundups but to digging post holes and opening and closing gates. The heyday of the profession began to suffer with the fencing off of the open range and the inexorable encroachment of the railroad. The increasing numbers of settlers and the brutal winter of

1886-87 only reinforced this close. Koerner's version suggests struggle and persistence, with defeat looming but not yet present. Visually, *Hard Winter* remains unresolved; it allows for the possibility of hope, as bleak as it may be.

Although known primarily for his paintings, Remington began sculpting in bronze around 1895 and produced many pieces before his death in 1906. A lesser-known bronze



Figure 22: Frederic Remington, *The Norther*, Bronze Sculpture, 22 inches in height, 1900. Image courtesy of Frederic Remington The Masterworks, Michael Edward Shapiro and Peter H. Hassarick eds., (The Saint Louis Art Museum in conjunction with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody: Abradale Press, 1988), 188.

work, *The Norther*, dated 1900 and measuring twenty-two inches in height, depicts a swaddled cowboy on a horse.⁷⁸ Remington's bronze shares structural and visual elements with Koerner's *Hard Winter*, for example, a similar attire of woolly chaps, heavy coat and especially the scarf wrapped around the cowboy's head. This cowboy tucks his right hand under his thigh presumably for warmth, while his left hand holds the reins. Koerner's cowboy and horse are in motion, whereas this cowboy and horse pause, as if the rider hears or sees something in the distance. Horse and rider seem to be emotionally detached from one

another. The horse hangs its head, unable to navigate a course, and the rider turns slightly to the right as if sensing danger. The title leads us to a clue, the 'norther' or the

⁷⁸ The term "norther" as defined in Webster's Third New International Dictionary: Norther: 1: to turn, veer, or shift to the north—used chiefly in the wind. 2: a northerly wind; esp: a sudden strong north wind over the Plains or such a wind over the Plains or such a wind in Texas and on the Gulf of Mexico and western Caribbean sea.

chill in the air, suggests that a change is about to occur. Again, here as in *Hard Winter* and *Fall of the Cowboy*, we see figures facing an unseen destiny.

In an attempt to disassemble myths that surround this epic figure, I would like to explore the historical realities that many popular Western images neglect, yet seem to be suggested in Koerner's *Hard Winter*. Cowboys seem to embody an independence of spirit that is unique to America reflected by literature and images surrounding the icon. Images of cowboys have been successfully molded into an icon of freedom, but the only 'freedom' a cowboy had was the option to quit. After all these riders were largely employed by ranchers, who controlled their destinies as well as their destinations. Although Wister's "The Evolution of the Cow Puncher" is to a degree correct in its praise of the cowboy, a grimmer reality was usually neglected in popular media. The association with freedom that cowboys have come to embody is related to the environment in which their work was performed. The job was difficult, lonely and at times dangerous. Because of these circumstances, the average age of a cowboy was twenty-four, and only a third of them were willing to undergo the harsh conditions of a trail drive more than once.⁷⁹

In recent decades considerable scholarship has been dedicated to the demystification of inaccurate ideas and uninformed attitudes towards cowboys. Many personal stories have come to the forefront that refute the popular conception of an Anglo hero, who heroically defends and delivers endless trail drives, occasionally having a violent encounter with a settler, Indian or any other figure that poses a threat to the mission. Historically, cowboys involved in a trail drive worked within a team that

⁷⁹ Ward, 271.

usually consisted of twelve to fourteen members, yet many artists in their depictions of cowboys chose to ignore this fact; instead subscribing to a popular image of a singular cowboy who heroically tends to a herd alone.

It is also possible to rediscover a more accurate past by revealing the diverse racial make up of cowboys during this period. The settling of the West brought together many cultures, all working for inhabitation of a dramatically harsh environment, of which cowboys were one indispensable element, but popular culture, especially visual images, continues to falsify the sources of their genesis. In myth, cowboys are identified as Anglo, yet they were in fact ethnically varied through the North, South and Central America. We know this mainly through photographic evidence. This is not to say that paintings of ethnic cowboys, Chinese, Mexican and African- Americans for example, do not exist because indeed they do, but the number of works of art that feature non-white cowboys are few in comparison to the stereotypical images seen in popular culture. Recently-freed slaves, American Indians, Mexicans and even immigrants who had just recently learned to ride were employed to make the long trail drives necessary to deliver cattle to markets. One account states: "Nearly one cowboy in three was either Mexican or Black."⁸⁰

This ethnic diversity also included American Indians who became involved with ranching, yet remained true to their heritages. The idea of American Indians taking on this profession belies the typical movie version of "cowboys and Indians" as cast in roles of violent opposition. This is not to say that cowboys and Indians did not play competing roles; both groups were desperate to claim lands in order to maintain their way of life, yet

⁸⁰ Jerry Korn, ed. *The Cowboy*, (Time-Life Publishing, 1973), 18.

some American Indians who sensed the inevitable looked to ranching as a means for survival in an ever-changing West. In the words of Peter Iverson, author of *When Indians became Cowboys*:

Cattle ranching obviously represented the best chance for native communities to build a local economy and rebuild a society. The photographs, oral histories, and other documents from the time all testify to the appeal of the new pastime. Even with the discouragements and disappointments of the era, the hope remained that cattle ranching would persist in the years to come. The involvement in ranching had helped to bridge the transition from treaties and agreements and the early reservation days to the final years of an assimilationist era. They could be like white men and not be white men. They were finding new ways to remain Indians.⁸¹

Iverson also states that becoming a cowboy meant that American Indians could integrate into the larger white society. "By raising cattle of good quality, one showed that Indians could participate on an equal or competitive basis in a pastime that dominated the surrounding non-Indian society."⁸²

As mentioned earlier in "Short Grass," one of Carver's major confidants was Comanche Al, to whom he turns for advice and an understanding of his situations.⁸³ These two cultures, one Indian and one cowboy, join together and in turn rely on each other. This symbiotic relationship seems to contradict the "popular" fiction and Hollywood's version of the relationship between these cultures. Evarts constructs a direct literary comparison between the plight of Indians and cowboys in chapter sixteen:

⁸¹ Peter Iverson, *When Indians became Cowboys Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West*, (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 84.

⁸² Iverson, 54.

⁸³ Peter G. Beidler and Marion F. Egge ambitiously attempted to document every instance or mention of American Indians in *the Saturday Evening Post*. Here are their findings: Evarts, Hal G. "Short Grass." V. 204, no. 47 (May 21, 1932): 3-5, 62, 64-68; V. 204, no. 48 (May 28, 1932): 11-12, 61, 63-67; V. 204, no. 50 (Jun. 11, 1932): 24, 26, 50, 55, 58-59, 62-63; V. 204, no. 52 (Jun. 25, 1932): 18-19, 73-74, 76, 79-80; V. 205, no. 1 (Jul. 2, 1932): 24, 26-27, 35, 38-41. "Marauding red men and organized bands of cattle thieves that operated on either side of the Rio Grand..." One major character, "Comanche Al," may be Indian. Peter G. Beidler and Marion F. Egge, *Native Americans in the Saturday Evening Post* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 156. Although Evarts never states that Comanche Al was an Indian, or a member of the Comanche tribe, the author makes direct connections within the text.

Vast changes had occurred in the past few years. The Indians had fought for their lands and their very existence against the hide hunters and the encroaching cowmen. The latter and their cows had usurped the place of the red man and the buffalo in the short grass. And now, almost overnight, the cowmen in turn were fighting for their very existence against the encroaching horde of settlers.⁸⁴

In this passage Evarts suggests that the plights of these two groups were one in the same. This comparison may seem strange because in many dime novels and movies Indians are portrayed as savage aggressors whose presence results in conflicts between “the good guys” and “the bad guys.” Yet in “Short Grass” we find these two very different groups united, fighting together against a shared fate.

There are reasons to believe that *Hard Winter* holds many visual and situational similarities to a specific depiction of American Indians. This symbolism of decline is also present in James Earle Fraser’s *The End of the Trail* (figure 23) -Fraser’s most popular and enduring symbol of Native American defeat in their. The statue, with its depiction of a vanquished Indian on his exhausted, thin, windblown horse, symbolizes the



Figure 23: James Earle Fraser’s *End of the Trail*, Bronze 1895 Slide from the visual resource library at Michigan State University, Jan Simpson, curator.

⁸⁴ Evarts, “Short Grass,” *Saturday Evening Post*, (June 18, 1932): 50.

defeat of Native Americans and the culmination of Manifest Destiny in the United States. This Indian, with his buffalo hide and wary posture suggests a tragic loss of land similar to that expressed in Koerners' *Hard Winter*.

The first bronze version dates 1894. Fraser completed this statue before he turned seventeen, when he came to the attention of French sculptor Auguste Saint-Gaudens and traveled to Europe to continue his studies as an apprentice. The statue was first exhibited at the Pan-Pacific Exposition held in San Francis in 1915, celebrating the ten year history of the Panama Canal. As the inspiration for his vision of the horse and rider, Fraser acknowledged a poem by Marian Manville Pope, which reads in part: "The trail is lost, the path is hid and the winds that blow out the ages sweep me on to that chilled borderland where Time's spent sands engulf lost peoples and lost trails."⁸⁵ Fraser's ultimate goal for the piece was to have it placed overlooking the San Francisco Bay. In this location, horse and rider "would stand forever looking out on the waste of waters—with nought save the precipice and the ocean before them..., in very truth, 'The End of the Trail.'"⁸⁶

Many of Fraser's works depict the West and Western characters, for example his design for the buffalo nickel and a bust of president Theodore Roosevelt, but *End of the Trail* became his most enduring monumental statement. Fraser's statue won the gold medal as "the outstanding sculptural work" of the exhibition.⁸⁷

Shortly after the awarding of the gold medal, small replicas of the statue began to appear, along with photographs, bookends, ashtrays, post cards, and a flood of trinkets all based on the sculpture. A national print firm commissioned a prominent artist to paint a version of *End of the Trail*, depicting the defeated Indian on his weary pony silhouetted against a

⁸⁵ Patricia Janis Border, *Bronzes of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 186.

⁸⁶ Brian W. Dippie, "The Visual West" in Milner, O'Connor and Sandweiss eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the American West* (Oxford-New York: The Oxford University Press), 696.

⁸⁷ Dean Krankel, *End of the Trail: Odyssey of a Statue* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 4.

setting sun. Within a few months tens of thousands of framed prints had been distributed for sale throughout the country.⁸⁸

It seems as if all of America were connected in one way or another with Fraser's sculptures. "The success of *End of the Trail*, combined with the reception of his buffalo-Indian head nickel, made James Earl Fraser the most popular sculptor in America."⁸⁹ Fraser's three-dimensional portrayal of the displacement of American Indians (or in this case Plains Indians) proved to be popular among its audiences:

If Fraser failed to capitalize on the statue, he did not forgo invitations to sell rights to use the theme commercially. *End of the Trail* became a pattern on silverware and fine china; it was frequently incorporated into political cartoons; and almost no book pertaining to the Indian and the West was published without a photograph of *End of the Trail*.⁹⁰

Both Fraser and Koerner spent time at the Art Students League, but whether or not Fraser's statue had a direct impact on Koerner's *Hard Winter* remains uncertain. It is, however, highly probable given Koerner's early associations with sculptors and Fraser's popularity that he was aware of statue.

Although Evarts' story does not focus on American Indians, he combines the efforts of cowboy and Indian to save Carver's ranch. Fiction, some of which included American Indians as characters, dominated the pages of *the Saturday Evening Post* for long periods during the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁹¹ As for Koerner, he was equally fascinated with Indian culture, customs and struggles. Grover notes: "He made studies of various Indian tribes in order to differentiate between the Sauks, Crow, Apache, Arapaho,

⁸⁸ Letter to Harold Schutt, Fraser Papers, National Cowboy Hall of Fame; cited in Krankel, *End of the Trail: Odyssey of a Statue*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 4. I was unable to locate the reproduction, however a Henry R. Poore author of several art theory books lists an *End of the Trail* painting.

⁸⁹ Krankel, 6.

⁹⁰ Helen Card, Fraser Collection, National Cowboy Hall of Fame; cited in Krankel, *End of the Trail: Odyssey of a Statue*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 11.

Cheyenne and their weapons, war regalia and customs.”⁹² His desire to portray these peoples in their native settings and customs led to the completion of several covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* that depicted Native Americans riding horses and engaging in ceremonial dancing, yet each image had to meet Lorimer’s approval.⁹³ In addition to editing the stories that appeared in *the Post* and contributing of his own commentaries on contemporary issues, he also chose the cover illustrations.⁹⁴ It was recorded by Hutchinson that the editor did reject at least one of Koerner’s ideas for a cover, which depicted a Plains Indian holding a ceremonial buffalo skull towards the sky. Lorimer felt the skull was inappropriate, and the image never made the cover.

If one compares Koerner’s sketches for *Hard Winter* with Fraser’s sketch for *End of the Trail*, (Figures 24 and 25) we discover that, although these two riders may have different reasons for their defeated posture, yet they reflect the same sentiments. The figures in *Hard Winter* are in motion, whereas Fraser’s Indian is stopped suggesting that historically American Indians were the first group of people to be removed from desirable areas of land; it is only later, that cowboys were deprived of the opportunity to own land. Notice the flexed foot of Koerner’s cowboy; although it could be argued that this would be how a rider would stabilize him or herself on a horse riding on unstable ground, this subtle positioning seems to signify a resistance to change. Even though both

⁹¹ Peter G. Beidler and Marion F. Egge *Native Americans in the Saturday Evening Post* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000), 143.

⁹² Grover, 16.

⁹³ Koerner Covers for *the Saturday Evening Post*: April 4, 1936, March 3, 1934, May 21, 1934, May 21, 1933, October 24, 1931, October 6, 1928, April 1, 1922 and October 22, 1921.

⁹⁴ “Lorimer picked the covers as a weekly routine, with the same unerring judgment that he exercised on the editorial content. Fifteen or more cover candidates would be lined up on the floor, leaning against the wall, and the Boss would walk past them like a general reviewing troops. As he made his rapid progress he would stab at them with a finger and keep a running monologue...He went through the same process with the story illustrations, and he also sat as censor on the advertising art. If he thought there was too much feminine leg in a picture, he would order it retouched. He meant to keep the *Post* a family magazine, right down to the smallest illustration. “Tebbel, 114.



Figure 24: James Earl Fraser, *Sketch for End of the Trail* statue. Image reproduced from *Bronzes of the American West*, p. 181 by Patricia Janis Broder. Original sketch is charcoal on tinted paper, 4 x 5 1/2 inches,



Figure 25: W. H. D. Koerner, *Sketch for Hard Winter*, courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, WY. Photograph taken by author.

of these figures fought to keep their land and therefore their way of life, both were forced to surrender to the larger power of the settlers.

Symbolically, these images reflect a shared sense of defeat. I argue that one decline in the cowboy's way of life that Koerner depicts represents a connection between the two peoples and their fates- although the circumstances of these two groups' downfalls greatly differ. Obviously there were differences in their circumstances, and I am in no way suggesting that these two groups of people suffered and endured equally, but both were powerless against an economic expansion that did not require their contributions. *End of the Trail* and *Hard Winter* have become an insignia of loss, a loss of land and way of life and although these sentiments may appear to be defeatist, yet behind the dreary façade, lives the spirit to endure and transcend the fate brought about by the settlers.

Conclusion

The West and its icons were Koerner's foremost love; almost all his creative life was spent depicting scenes with realism and storytelling. Although he is remembered for his depictions of the West, his subject matter was diverse. Throughout his career, he created more than 2,400 illustrations, with about 600 of those being Western images.⁹⁵ Given this artist's accomplishments, one has to ask why unlike Western illustrators such as Remington, he was not given much attention in the art world. Hutchinson offers an explanation for this relative neglect by stating: "Koerner had no ties with the world of art critics, museum curators, collectors or fashionable painters."⁹⁶ Although many American museums in the West and East have exhibited and commemorated his work, while he was alive, Koerner never spent much time socializing with critics, art dealers and the like. Consequently, many of his works remained with the family after his death. In 1968, Lillian died and bequeathed her husband's paintings to their two children. And only later, after Ruth Oliver Koerner donated a large number of paintings to the Buffalo Bill Historical Center's holdings, did he receive the attention his works deserved. In 1978, his studio was re-constructed and was dedicated to the Buffalo Bill Historical Center as a permanent part of the Whitney Gallery of Western Art.

Images reflecting the settlement of the American West, an unique experience to American history, have elicited differing interpretations. The art of the American West seems to have been a perfectly adaptable vehicle to enhance the role of an artist as interpreter and re-former of the environment, and upon examination, many images have contained encoded messages that transcend their original intent. All of the major images

⁹⁵ Butler, "Selling the Popular Myth," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the American West*, 777.

⁹⁶ Hutchinson, *The World, the Work and the West of W.H.D. Koerner*, 5.

presented, Koerner's *Hard Winter*, Remington's *Fall of the Cowboy* and Fraser's *End of the Trail*, address Turner's theory of "the closing frontier," which represented, in fact not an end, but a new beginning. Even though *Hard Winter* was specifically created for a serialized story, the image remains powerful without its surrounding text. *Hard Winter* is unique to the illustrated cowboy genre because it is a scene of troubling hardship, and in the historical context of the twentieth century both Western literature and its images, which fed upon each other, further complicated the myths surrounding cowboy imagery. Koerner seems to have been an artist who was keenly aware of the possibilities for renewal.

Because of the American spirit of freedom and independence, many Americans desired to rise above the economic hardships and social limitations which were their lot in life as consequences of the Great Depression; and *Hard Winter* was an image with which many Americans and the artist himself could identify: a scene of unrelenting persistence, countered by a determination to keep going no matter what circumstances lie ahead. With constant representation of the West's leading image in magazines, cowboys especially serve as a reminder not to forget this American spirit of determination and struggle. *Hard Winter* appears bleak; it is the end of an era, the end of many existences, yet the figure of the cowboy will survive only to transform itself. This was a lesson that many who were experiencing this difficult time could relate to and perhaps Koerner was acutely if only subconsciously aware of the power of this image.

This thesis has afforded me the opportunity to view cowboys and Indians as cultural groups who shared similar fates, in contrast to Hollywood's depictions of them as well as other popular conceptions which have led many to view these two people as

antagonists. As art historians we need to interpret the larger picture of American Western art in which cowboys are only a segment. The cowboy as subject matter is not new; it had been constructed long before Koerner decided to depict his images, and the icon continues to be reinvented. The hardships and struggles that were endured during this time are still with us in so far as the struggle is the fate of human existence. Every historical period is subject to differing interpretations; the American West has been and continues to be transformed with each generation of historians, philosophers and artists. For this reason art historians need to increase their unique contributions to this evolving conversation.

Today, as technology rapidly increases and the *Wild West* becomes the *Wired West*, I feel that many will still look to the images of cowboys and the West and, just as our predecessors did some ninety years ago, feel that something was lost. Throughout the twentieth century, many have looked to images and stories of the West, not only as an escape from the rigors everyday life, but also as a remembrance of freedom that they may feel has been lost. Despite the suffocating nature of today's mass culture and urban lifestyles, many still long for the past, and specifically for the America of the *Old West*. Corporate America and the media have recognized the mass appeal of the cowboy as icon; and now the reincarnation continues with the appearance on the newest form of technology, the Internet. In many ways the Internet has become a modern frontier; it is a technological arena where one can go anywhere and identities can be masked. Similar to the West, it has become a place to re-invent oneself, and, like the beginnings of the Western settlements, it lacks well formulated rules and regulations. At the beginning of

the twenty-first century the appearance and discussion of the person and icon on the Internet suggests that America's fascination with cowboys is still alive and well.

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