



The Carnegie Courier

Newsletter of

The Mitchell Area Historical Society (MAHS)
& The Mitchell Area Genealogical Society (MAGS)

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JAMES EARLE FRASER

Reminders of our past & a Mitchell Connection to International Fame

"ELEVEN O'CLOCK ROADS"
WESTPORT, CONNECTICUT

July 10, 1943

Professor Van Kirk
Wesleyan University
Mitchell, South Dakota

(Please note: This is a copy of the original letter sent to Professor Van Kirk by James Earle Fraser on onionskin paper dated 1943.)

Dear Professor Van Kirk:

I have been informed by Mr. James Truslow Adams of your desire to obtain some works of artists of the Amer. Academy of Arts and Letters for the Wesleyan University at Mitchell. I am particularly interested in this movement, for the reason that I spent my boyhood until twelve years of age in Mitchell.

My father had to do with the building of the railroad from Sanborn, Iowa, to Chamberlain, South Dakota. He brought his family to Mitchell as soon as the railroad had reached that point, I am not sure but I think the year was 1881. For a time we lived in a box car until he had built a house about a mile and a half southwest of Mitchell, where he had taken up claims with numerous members of our family making a very large ranch and grazing ground. In this house we lived until I was twelve when my father went to another railroad, which was to be built, the 'Soo' - from Minneapolis to Sault Saint Marie. Sometime before this he had been one of an expedition of engineers sent by the U. S. Government to survey what he always called the Yellow Stone Valley - it is now Yellow Stone Park. He often spoke of his wonderful experiences and particularly of the beautiful landscape, memories to him which were very pleasant and poignant. On the way back down the Missouri (they had gone by steam boat to the Yellow Stone River) they brought back the body of General Custer. I realize more now how interesting and vivid that pioneering was to him.

I still remember Mitchell as it was in those early days, and remember also the places I used to fish and where I rode my pony. For two or three years after we had settled, the Indians not understanding why they were pushed back across the Missouri River into the Crow Creek Reservation, would slip away at night and move into their old hunting ground, which happened to be the territory around Mitchell. Often we would be awakened in the early morning by the setting up of their wigwams, barking dogs, and the whinnying of numerous ponies a short distance from our ranch house. We had not the slightest trouble with the Indians - they liked to trade prairie chickens for domestic chickens and antelope for pork. But we did have Indian scares and barricaded ourselves in the house many times. Once we took a wild moonlight ride into Mitchell on rumors, someone saying the Indians were painting themselves with war paint and were rounding some hills.



James Earl Fraser



Figures of Lewis and Clark as envisioned by James Earle Fraser.



At left: James Earle Fraser at work in his New York Studio circa 1920. Below: Fraser with his wife, Laura Gardin.



At right: End of the Trail by James Earle Fraser.



This may seem very strange now because the country is all fenced in; at that time there was no fence of any kind or trees, except in the river beds. Buffalo bones were strewn in serpentine lines for miles in various directions where the hunters had killed them for their hides and so that the railroad could pass on to the Missouri River. They were hunted possibly a year or so before the railroads came through the territory.

I recall seeing the building of the railroad from Mitchell on toward the West. It wasn't particularly difficult because of the flat nature of the country. I remember also the little Main Street of Mitchell and I often wonder whether or not there are chalkstone facades left of the buildings, principally saloons. The chalkstone was my delight because of the fact that I could carve it easily. It was soft and could be sawn in square blocks which were placed on top of one another for building purposes. It had much to do with my desire to be a sculptor.

The quarry was east of Mitchell toward the Jim River. The Jim River, I thought a great stream; it was filled with pike, catfish and bullheads. About a mile north of the bridge there was a mill and a dam where the fishing was especially good. Every spring the trappers would come down the river dressed in their buckskins and would portage their canoes around the dam. The hunting and trapping was wonderful. I learned at that spot the curious fact that a gun muzzle filled with mud is a dangerous instrument. One of the trappers in carrying his canoe with his mate happened to stick his gun in the mud. When he got back into his canoe he saw a rabbit on the bank and shot at it, but he was more injured than the rabbit. To this day I remember his coming up out of the river with the water streaming from his hair, blood coming from his nose and a cut on his forehead. Fortunately, the gun did not explode, but it was nearly as disastrous for the trapper. He was knocked out of his canoe and badly shaken. They went on their way finally after diving numerous times to get the things that tipped out of the canoe. I have patterned my statue of Lewis of the Lewis and Clark Expedition on my memory of the trapper I saw at this place.

Mitchell in those days was a very dangerous little town with dangerous men living in it - there were many gun-fight murders - but at the same time a great many very interesting people lived there, adventurous and forward looking people, probably the founders of your University.

I don't know where it is located but I recall that I used to ride my pony around an excavation. It was south of the railroad station, I imagine about a half a mile or so beyond a ravine and on a slight slope. Could this be your site? I do recall hearing that it was to be a school of some kind.



Dr. James A. Van Kirk

He joined the DWU staff in 1920, became head of the History Department and taught there for 33 years. He was instrumental in organizing Friends of the Middle Border in an attempt to preserve the culture of the Midwest; he contributed to off-campus life of the community through service in numerous local enterprises and organizations.

The railroad came to Mitchell in 1880. James would have been 5 years old. His dad built the house on the SE4-29-103-60 west of the I-90 330 exit.

My father made drawings for his inventions of machinery. On the other hand, urged by him and his efforts, I made drawings not of machinery, but of ponies and the various animals on the range, some of which I have saved, but most of them were lost in a fire. I had a great opportunity to study all kinds of domestic and wild animal life and I had a natural love for it.

There were a few timber wolves crossing the prairie and many antelopes, and, of course, jack rabbits. Coyotes sat on the knolls and barked and howled at the newly made house. In the spring the prairie chickens would gather on the lake beds (at least we called them lake beds) as soon as the water seeped into the earth. They, literally, covered the surface of the ground--the cocks booming out their calls, the hens chattering, making a din that could be heard for a mile, and everybody has heard of the flight of geese and ducks in fall and spring. Thousands stayed to nest in the lake beds that retained water.

Our ranch house was surrounded by sod barns, which were very easily made from the newly broken ground. Hay and strawstacks protected the buildings from the fierce winds that blew constantly. For the first few winters, the antelopes got much of their feed from our strawstacks, but one particularly heavy snow made it impossible for these poor animals to run with any speed, and the pot-hunters followed them and drove them into the snow drifts and killed them by the hundreds. I recall the station platform lined with double rows of frozen antelope piled one on the other, which were shipped East.

During a blizzard the ponies and cattle would go directly with the wind for miles. We could always locate them by the direction of the wind and when the blizzard had finished, we often found them 20 miles away. Of course, they had to be brought back through the drifts. At certain times, the crust of the snow was so iced that they had difficulty in feeding, but they seemed to locate a spot, which they would dig through to the buffalo grass below. Nearly all the big rocks on the prairie (there were not many of them) were deeply rutted around by the buffalo rubbing their sides against the stones. The prairie was full of many buffalo wallows with no stones in them. Now I suppose they are called depressions.

Numbers of prairie-schooners passed toward the west during the first two or three years of our residence. They often stopped at evening to camp and have their dinners near the house and to call in to see us for a talk.

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I mentioned the Indians that escaped to the old hunting grounds, they would be found and the soldiers would urge them to return to the Reservation and in most cases it was done very understandingly. I had so often heard people say that the poor Indians would be chased into the Pacific Ocean one day, that it created the thought for my equestrian statue, which you may recall having seen, "The End of the Trail". The 'buffalo nickel' which I designed was the result of these early years. I have another Indian statue, which comes from the same period, the "Buffalo Prayer". Early in the morning before sunrise, I saw this medicine man or counselor of the tribe make his prayers. It was for the return of the buffalo. It intrigued me as a small boy to see the old man on a knoll outside of Mitchell. He made his prayer after a night in a sweat lodge, having had no food he would go to the creek, bathe himself, put on a few strips of buffalo hide and place in front of him a buffalo skull, then build a small fire of buffalo chips beyond that toward the East. A thin column of smoke would lift to the sky and the rising sun would shed a golden glow over the whole picture. The bronze color of the man, his black hair with bits of red wound into his braids, making a picture indelibly impressed on my mind since my boyhood. The Indian boys and I watched from a respectful distance.

I made a large sketch of this medicine man but I have never had the opportunity to develop it properly. I wonder if I could find the knoll where he prayed. Possibly it may be built over by this time. It was near the Firesteel Creek, where I went to fish in the early morning. At that time I had no playmates--there were practically no children near, my ponies and dogs were my companions.

Many interesting and tragic occurrences took place in the town of Mitchell, but two very close to home. One was a terrible night spent through a blizzard waiting for the return of my grandfather. He had walked to Mitchell to call a doctor for my sister. The doctor came out on his pony; my grandfather walked. It was early in the evening and the doctor reached the house as the blizzard arrived over the prairie. I recall that the doctor was forced to stay for two days. My grandfather didn't reach the ranch, so the night was spent watching and putting candles and lamps in all the windows. It seemed impossible for anyone to live through the night on the prairie. We knew he was on his way, because the doctor passed him just before the snow started to fall. He told us later that he stumbled through the blizzard from evening until 2 o'clock in the morning, when he came to the railroad some miles west of Mitchell. He felt sure he was west of the village, so he followed the tracks and came into the roundhouse at 3 o'clock in the morning, more dead than alive. Much of the time he had been followed by prairie wolves, which he could see dimly waiting for him to fall.

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He kept them off by shooting at them from time to time. The trains couldn't reach Mitchell through the heavy drifts for more than a month. My father ordered that ranchers be given railroad ties which were stacked along the tracks. Undoubtedly, great suffering and lives were saved by this possibility of warmth when there was so little fuel.

The other event was the tragic fall of my three year old sister into a well back of our house. The well was 50' deep and it was filled with 20' of water. She evidently stood on the coil of rope, pulled at the rope which had a bucket full of water standing on an inside shelf. The bucket fell from the shelf and the coil of rope pulled her over the top of the wall and she fell 30' hitting the stones on the side of the well and severely cutting her head. My mother hearing the unusual sound ran out in time to see her going over the edge and down into the well. Unfortunately, no men were around, so my mother, fighting off the efforts of my aunt to keep her from the well, climbed over and went down the rope hand over hand where she pulled my sister from the water. She stood on the stones walling the well taking off the child's wet clothes, stopping the bleed, and in some way getting her own skirt off to wrap up her small child. I recall my aunt coming down onto the range on a pony calling for the men that I happened to be with to come to her aid. They finally were able to pull my mother from the well, but it was a long serious illness for the child. Many people came to congratulate my mother and a committee from Mitchell presented her with an inscribed silver dish for her courage.

There were some picturesque sheriffs, one in particular, I remember named Durell (strange I should remember his name all these years.) I think possibly because he was such a magnificent looking young man, a giant of a fellow with long blonde hair. His head was very handsome as I remember it--a clean-cut face with blue eyes and aquiline nose. On occasions he wore dark blue corduroy with a black sombrero and other times a buff colored corduroy suit and sombrero to match, cowboy boots, spurs and Colt revolvers in his belt.

Many times I have thought of making a sculptured model like him, called the 'Sheriff.' I have made many drawings, but unfortunately, I have never had the time for the sculptured model. I should find the time because I doubt that many artists have seen his like.

Your interest in obtaining some works of art for Mitchell seems to have produced a long story, possibly because I so often think of my early and vividly different home but so rarely come in contact with anyone from Mitchell.



Chief John Big Tree

Chief Big Tree (Kiowa War Chief) - After he stopped raiding and got out of prison, he turned to Hollywood and was known for his roles in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *The Avenging Arrow* (1921), and *Red Fork Range* (1931).



At left: Two Moons, Northern Cheyenne War Chief, fought in many battles to save his way of life including The Battle of the Little Bighorn. He travelled to Washington D.C. to speak to the President about conditions that existed on the reservations and how awful the Cheyenne way of life had become.



Chief Iron Tail (Lakota war chief) was part of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show.

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I will be very happy, when the Government allows the casting of bronze once more, to send a gift to the Museum of one or two of my works, should you care for them. Maybe you would like the ones particularly associated with Mitchell. That can be decided later or possibly you might have another thought. If you care to, you can find the record of most of my works in "Who is Who."

I understand that Mr. Licht is designing a building for you. I believe he will recall me as he had something to do with the building of a house for me in New York.

I doubt that it is necessary again to tell you of my interest in your project. This too long letter speaks for itself.

Very sincerely yours,

James Earle Fraser

P. S. I am sending one or two photographs under separate cover.

J.E.F.



<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/buffalo-nickel-values->

The Buffalo nickel or Indian Head nickel is a copper-nickel five-cent piece that was struck by the United States. It was designed by sculptor James Earle Fraser. Specifications for the nickel: Minted from 1913 to 1938; Weight: 5 grams; Diameter: 21.2mm; Metal Content: 75% copper, 25% nickel; Mint mark Locations: Located on the reverse of the coin if minted in Denver or San Francisco.

James Earle Fraser wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1931, "The Indian head on the Buffalo is not a direct portrait of any particular Indian, but was made from several portrait busts which I did of Indians. As a matter of fact, I used three different heads; I remember two of the men, one was Irontail, the best Indian head I can remember; the other one was Two Moons, and the third I cannot recall." His wife later recalled that, "the third Indian had been Big Tree, a Kiowa, who was a favorite model of Fraser's on several occasions." Black Diamond at the New York Central Park Zoo was the model for the buffalo side. Fraser spent many hours studying the animal. Sadly, when the animal was 22 years of age he was auctioned off and slaughtered for trophies of head and robe.

According to www.thesprucecrafts.com/buffalo-nickel-values updated in 2022, a Buffalo Nickel can be valued from 49 cents to as much as \$99,000.



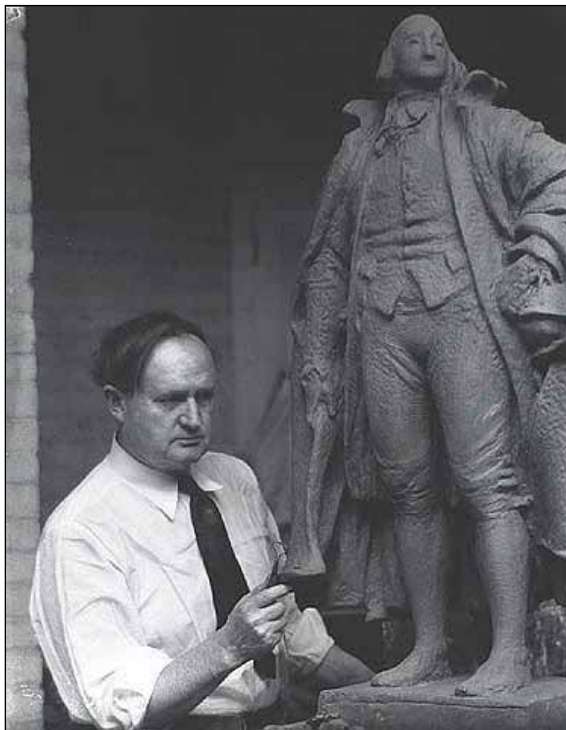
Oregon Trail Half Dollar Coin
by James Earle Fraser



Another look at Abraham Lincoln by James Earle Fraser



Stop by the Carnegie and see our display of James Earle Fraser who spent his childhood in Mitchell and became one of the more famous American sculptors of cowboys, Indians, and horses. He also designed the Buffalo Nickel. The display includes a Teddy Roosevelt Bas-Relief Profile Portrait Plaque done by Fraser signed and dated 1920. Thanks to former Mitchellite, Jim Scheetz for sharing it with us.



Fraser at work.





Buffalo Nickel Designer Dies

WESTPORT, Conn. (UP) — Sculptor James E. Frasier, who designed the "buffalo nickel" and several widely-known statues, died Sunday. He was 76.

Frasier, a native of Winona, Minn., first gained nationwide attention at the age of 17 when he modelled "The End of the Trail," showing a tired Indian on a horse. This and the buffalo nickel depicted scenes seen in his youth in the Dakota territory.

1956 Newspaper Article

Originally published in the Sioux City Journal dated 05-28-1956 on page 9, these excerpts from an article about James Earle Fraser contained some interesting information.

Mitchell, S.D.- Special: Two of the works of one of the country's most prolific sculptors, who spent his boyhood in a boxcar near Mitchell, will be unveiled on Alumni day at Dakota Wesleyan University.

At 2 p.m. June 4, the original copies of two Lewis and Clark statues, modeled by the designer of the Buffalo nickel, the late James Earle Fraser, will be unveiled at a special Fraser ceremony in the lobby of the new D.W.U. College Hall Library.....

The combined shipping weight of the two eight-foot statues was 1,900 pounds. Now stored in the Friends of the Middle Border Museum. Lewis is shown as a trapper with his gun. Clark is pictured drawing a map. Both men capably handled the many challenges confronting them as leaders of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.....

[He] completed his best-known sculpture – The End of The Trail – before he was 17. Frasier's keen observation of the way of the Sioux Indian during his first 12 years in Mitchell inspired this classic, which netted him a \$1,000 award from the American Art Association of Paris.

Christmas at the Carnegie success

Attendees of the Christmas at the Carnegie on December 8, a snowy winter evening, were inspired by the Christmas carols of the Mitchell Area Children's Choir and the Mitchell Barbershop Harmony Chorus. The event raised \$567 and 154 pounds of food for the Mitchell Food Pantry.

FYI: Lyle Swenson is currently at the Brady Retirement Home in Mitchell, SD. He is holding his own and still interested in the workings of the Mitchell Area Historical Society and its members. He looks forward to each new Courier and Back in Time articles in the Mitchell Republic. Again, he wants to thank all who are contributing to making the Carnegie Resource Center a success.



Carnegie Resource Center all decorated for Christmas.



Mitchell Area Children's Choir performed during Christmas at the Carnegie.



Mitchell Barbershop Chorus performing during Christmas at the Carnegie.



Food Pantry tree.

Quilt Event at the Carnegie

**ON President's Day
February 20, 2023, at 7:00 p.m.**

**Raffle drawing for
the Stars & Stripes
Forever quilt**



**Quilt made & donated
by Sheila Scheetz**

**Proceeds go to
benefit the
Mitchell Area
Historical Society**

**Wheelchair Accessible
on the east side of building**



**Reveal of the Ribbon
Quilt and a
program on quilting**

**Restoration by
The Heartland
Quilt Guild**



**Donated to MAHS
It contains ribbons from as
early as 1892 ranging in
topic from the Masons to
the fight for the capital.**

**Ruby Pattison and
Louise Maeschen will be
presenting a program
on quilting.**

Upcoming Events

***Mitchell Area Genealogical Society (MAGS)
And Mitchell Area Historical Society (MAHS)***

- February 20, Monday, 5:00 p.m. MAHS Business Meeting
7:00 MAHS Quilt Program & Stars & Stripes Quilt Raffle Drawing
- February 27, Monday, 6:00-6:30 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7:00 p.m. MAGS PROGRAM – How Do You Find Genealogical Records
- March 20, Monday, 7:00 MAHS Business Meeting
- March 27 Monday, 6:00-6:30 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7:00 p.m. MAGS PROGRAM – Data Mining the Deceased
- April 17, Monday, 7:00 MAHS Business Meeting
- April 24, Monday 6:00-6:30 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7:00 p.m. MAGS PROGRAM – Fundamentals of Research
- May 15, Monday, 7:00 MAHS Business Meeting
- May 22, Monday 6:00-6:30 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7:00 p.m. MAGS PROGRAM – Virginia Hanson, State Archivist –
The Human Side of Genealogy
- June 19, Monday, 7:00 MAHS Business Meeting
- June 26, Monday – MAGS - Visit to Mount Vernon Historical Museum
-Meet at 6:15 at the Carnegie Resource Center
or at 6:30 in Mount Vernon
- July 17, Monday, 7:00 MAHS Business Meeting
- July 24, Monday 6:00-6:30 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7:00 p.m. MAGS PROGRAM – Germans from Russia
presented by Yvonne Haefner



Think Spring!

***Carnegie Resource
Center
119 West Third Avenue
Mitchell, S.D. 57301***

