



J.K. Ralston's "Old 79" draws inspiration from his time as a cowboy for that cattle company.

## THE ART OF THE COWPOKE

### Old West lives on in Ralston's works

By CHRIS RUBICHL  
Of The Gazette Staff

James Kenneth Ralston saw his first roundup at the age of 10 outside Helena.

The sights, smells and sounds remained with him over the decades, as he became among the last of the open-range cowboys in Montana and captured that vanished part of the West's history in paintings, sketches and sculpture.

He often is referred to as one of the three K's at the top of Western art, along with William Remington and Charles M. Russell.

Tall, lanky and slow-spoken, Ralston lived much of the life that he would depict in his artwork and poetry. But he also was a student of history, and his works on the battle of the Little Bighorn and the Lewis and Clark Expedition are full of detail.

Known as Ken to his friends, the artist was the youngest of five children born to Montana pioneers on a ranch near Choteau on March 30, 1896. But gold fever lured his father, William, to the Spokane area and on into British Columbia in search of the big strike.

The gold didn't pan out, and the family returned to Montana and its capital. There, Ralston was especially impressed by two things — the cowboy life that he saw up close at a roundup, and the Western artwork in the Capitol building and Russell works that Ralston's dad took him to see in the old California Wire House, says the spring 1966 edition of the Montana Historical Society Quarterly.

Among the Capitol works were efforts of another famed Montana painter, E.S. Panson, of Missoula, an acquaintance of Russell's. The two were prolific Western artists, as Ralston would become. And both Panson and Russell supported themselves at times by creating murals for public and private commissions, as Ralston later did.

The Historical Society article noted, "Although his style is original and lower keyed, Ralston's art... inevitably comes in for comparison with that of Montana's accepted master, Charles Marion Russell."

But on Oct. 7, 1962, Billings Gazette story noted that the soft-spoken Ralston "frown when he's called 'Montana's Second Charles Russell.' Ralston had begun sketching even



J.K. Ralston paints in his log cabin studio in the 1960s.

before he started elementary school, but his formal art education started at Helena's Hawthorne School. He didn't have a canvas, so he created his first oil painting, "Looking for Buffalo," on the back side of a piece of oil cloth when he was 14. The painting bore a theme that would recur in dozens of his paintings — an Indian on horseback, this one peering from a hill.

Like Russell, Ralston earned his college money working the range and riding for the Montana Cattle Co. and Pioneer Cattle Co., among others. He helped out on his dad's place near Colbertson and, at 17, began herding horses on a nearby ranch.

"I was with the 79 wagon in the Porcupine country north of Foreyik,

when a rider came into camp bringing news of the outbreak of World War I," Ralston recalled in the Historical Society article.

But the military life would wait. Ralston continued working cattle then boarded a cattle train in 1917 for a taste of his other love — art and instruction at the Art Institute in Chicago.

The war heated up, and U.S. involvement grew even as Ralston was honing his creative skills. In spring of 1918, he joined the Army with the intent of using his riding skills in the light horse artillery. He was diverted, instead, to the 9th Division Infantry and shipped out to fight in France. But the war ended and his landing was back in the States, instead.



J.K. Ralston's "Herd on Water" shows a moment of quiet for a cowpoke as the herd, stretched across the prairie, drinks.



In "The Arrival in Bozeman," J.K. Ralston returns to a theme that ties to his own pride in his family's pioneer past.

Back home he went to Montana and back to his father's ranch. Back to the steaming breath of straining horses that would find their way onto his later canvases. And on to more cowboying on the rugged range.

But, like the open range, Ralston's days carrying his life in the saddle were nearing their end. The fall of 1920 found him with his own cattle to sell, ones that he'd run on his father's place. And he was back on the cattle train to Chicago in the fall of 1920 to return at the Art Institute through the spring of 1921.

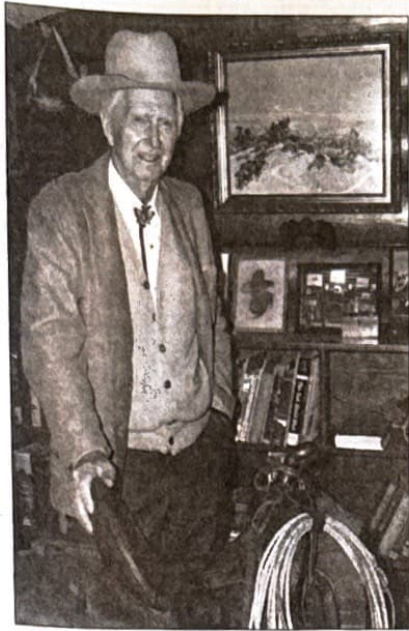
In the summer of 1923, he crammed his dusty cowboy hat on his head to work for a cattle company for the last time as he chased the calves and cows

wearing Frye Cattle Co.'s F-Bar brand.

Abandoning cowpunching, he left Montana for the West coast to work as a commercial artist. Far from his oil paintings and bronzes that would later become parts of major private and public collections around the world, these works were those of an artist ching out a living with illustrations for newspapers and part-time jobs for ad agencies and engraving houses.

He came back to handle things at his ailing father's Montana ranch in 1930, but Ralston was determined to make his living through his art. He found opportunity with government commissions, including those through the

Please see Ralston, 7E



Books, sketches and paintings line shelves in J.K. Ralston's cabin.

## Ralston

Continued from 1E

Works Progress Administration, and among his works were murals in post offices at Sidney and Sturgis, S.D. And grasshoppers, drought and Depression only hardened that resolve.

In the mid-'30s, Ralston and his wife, Willo, moved their children, Marjorie and Kenneth, to Billings, where Ralston established a reputation for his historically accurate Western art. And his public murals helped get his work into public view and boost his popularity.

He became especially known in the region for his massive mural in the Billings airport that showed 1913's first successful plane flight there and for "After the Battle," his mural of the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

In the mid-1940s, he and his son built the artist's studio cabin that now sits on the Rocky Mountain College campus and that is expected to be moved to the Western Heritage Center. At his studio, then two miles from town, Ralston would entertain friends from his cowboy years, and the tales of the range would spin out hour after hour.

Decades later, with many of those old pals gone, Ralston's tales still could take friends and even strangers back to the days when hard-talking, hard-riding ranch workers trailed in the dust of wide-ranging herds of cattle, before barbed wire defined property lines and before his little log studio was surrounded by Billings' expanding city limits.

He knew personally some of the Native Americans who had fought against Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer in the 1876 battle. And Ralston immersed himself in the study of history.

For his artwork, he tried to travel to the site of the action to accurately capture the trees, waters and mountains. And he used books, newspaper accounts, magazines, interviews and his own experience to give detail to clothing, shelter and equipment in his paintings.

His interest in history led him to paint the journey of the Corps of Discovery in several works. And, in the early 1960s, the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Commission hired Ralston to create paintings for the Museum of Westward Expansion in St. Louis, Mo.

His painting, "Into the Unknown," shows dozens of Native Americans and members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition along with canoes, cooking pots and a pole-and-hide shelter as Ralston depicted the corps leaving a Shoshone village at the Beaverhead River to head over the Divide.

People familiar with Pompey's Pillar get a different perspective of the site in Ralston's "Captain Clark at Pompey's Pillar," which shows Clark in the bow of a cottonwood canoe landing there on July 25, 1806. And another Lewis and Clark painting, "The Crossing," shows Sgt. Nathaniel Pryor astride a horse as he talks with Clark at Blue Creek near Billings before Pryor split off to head overland to Mandan lands. Ralston's depictions of the



J.K. Ralston's pen-and-ink sketches showed the hard times of cowboy life, but also the whimsical ones, such as this night on the town.



A sketch from J.K. Ralston's "Rhymes of a Cowboy," shows the detail with which he captured horses, even for simple pen-and-ink work.

range showed the needle-sharp sleet blasting a hunched-up cowboy tending the herd in a blizzard and the raucous gunplay of cowboys in town for a night of fun. Pen-and-ink sketches have meager wash blowing on the line outside a cabin and a skittish horse angling for freedom from a cowboy clutching the reins and stirrup while hoping to mount.

Ralston also portrayed the pioneer spirit of his parents and others who settled the West. Animals struggle to pull covered wagons in paintings and one painting commissioned in 1939 by the pastor of Billings' first church, First Congregational, was transformed into a round stained-glass window above the church's entry on North 27th Street. Dedicated in 1942, the window, in the church where Ralston was a member, was named "Prayer on the Trail" and showed a preacher holding a service for pioneers standing and sitting on the ground in front of their wagons.

The image was a fitting one for the artist, who took pride in reminding people that he was the son and grandson of pioneers. He rarely was seen without his cowboy hat and a string tie and, even in his 90s, still wore the pearl-snap shirt of a cowboy.

He celebrated his pioneer heritage as past president of Eastern Montana Pioneers and a member of Sons and Daughters of Montana Pioneers, the Yellowstone Historical Society in Billings and Range Riders Association in Miles City.

Another source of pride was his 1978 election to the Hall of Fame of Great Westerners at Oklahoma City's National Cowboy Hall of Fame. Over the years, Ralston had many honors, including an honorary doctorate of arts from Rocky Mountain College and a Montana Arts Council Governor's Award for Distinguished Achievement. His

"After the Battle," was included aboard Montana's Centennial Train.

Ralston's preservation of the Old West extended beyond his artwork to include a book of poetry, stories and art, "Rhymes of a Cowboy." His painted images in words just as in his oils as with his recollections in "Down in a Cow Camp" which showed his inspiration for his life's work:

*"It is the early impressions that are the most vivid and lasting — Sights, sounds and smells etch in vivid reality the days of boyhood and youth. All I need do now is close my eyes to — hear the familiar camp sounds close by and far out in the dark the tinkle of the cavy bells coming in."*

Ralston stopped painting in the early 1980s, but he kept creating.

He and historian friend John Popovich brought the last years of Eastern Montana's open range to life as they worked together on Ralston's life story, "The Voice of the Curlew."

The novel title originated from Ken's habit, while night herding on the Montana prairies, of singing in a voice that reminded his none-too-gentle and unappreciative saddle buddies of the voice of that drab but vocal native of the plains, the long billed curlew," said a Gazette review when the book was released in 1987, just months before he died in November 1987 at age 91.



"Cutting Out the Big Ones" includes the dramatic angles of action that mark many of J.K. Ralston's Western paintings.

Popovich said he always regarded Ralston "as one of Montana's great artists, as well as being a great historian."

"He has helped preserve the history of the state, its cattle industry, fur trade and early exploration and the settling of the state," Popovich recalled for a Gazette article after Ralston's death.

His love of the land, its people and its history shines on in Ralston's artwork and his poetry, including these lines from "The West":

*I love to roam here in the West,  
Across its grey, sage speckled breast,  
And count myself among the best.  
I love the prairies, free and*

*wide,  
Where trails run out for the divide,  
Mystery-packed on the other side ...*

*Land where the wild range cattle grow  
And walk the trails of long ago;  
Trails first made by the buffalo.*

*Where the eagle wheels in the summer sky;  
Where the meadowlark on a sage nearby  
Mingles its notes with the curlew's cry.*

*Yes, those who know and love the West  
Can count themselves among the best.*



His ever-present cowboy hat casts shadows on the face of J.K. Ralston as he sits on a horse in a 1940 photo taken outside his studio, which he and his son, Kenneth, built.

# A CABIN FOR DOWNTOWN

## Artist Ralston's studio to be moved to Heritage Center



LARRY MAVER/Gazette Staff

The cabin studio of the late Western artist J.K. Ralston is viewed by Julie Dial, executive director of the Western Heritage Center, and architect Wayne Gustafson, project coordinator for the cabin's relocation from its current site on the Rocky Mountain College campus to the WHC.

By CHRIS RUBICH  
Of The Gazette Staff

When Western artist J.K. Ralston and his son, Kenneth, built a log-cabin artist's studio in 1946-47, it lay about two miles outside the city of Billings.

By the time that Ralston died in 1987, the studio that stood in the 2100 block between Alderson and Grand Avenue was surrounded by homes and businesses. And, in 1988, the studio and a two-room addition moved to the Rocky Mountain College campus.

The cabin is expected to move again soon — to what was the heart of the city when the cowboy-turned-artist adopted Billings as his home in 1936. City permits are pending to allow placement of the cabin outside another historic building — the Western Heritage Center at 2822 Montana Ave.

Plans call for the addition to be

removed from the original studio cabin, where Ralston painted into the 1980s, and for the studio to stand on the northeast corner in front of the center. The cabin would be free-standing and would rest on a new concrete foundation in a landscaped courtyard with the cabin entrance facing west.

The 450-square-foot cabin's fireplace, built of rock from the Rumrocks, echoes the sandstone quarried from the Rims to build the Western Heritage Center. The plan is for the 18-foot by 25-foot cabin to be used as a reception area, gift shop and gallery.

"This is going to create a visual landmark," said Julie Dial, the center's executive director.

She said the cabin and its contents — which include unfinished paintings and a jar holding paint brushes — provide "a look through the man's life."



A cowboy hat and string tie were standard garb for Western artist J.K. Ralston, who died at age 91 in 1987.

ings and a jar holding paint brushes — provide "a look through the man's life."

Please see Ralston, 9A

### INSIDE



THE ART OF THE COWPOKE

Western artist J.K. Ralston earned many honors in his lifetime and leaves a colorful legacy. **Magazine 1E**

Find out more at:  
[billingsgazette.com](http://billingsgazette.com)

For a complete chronology of the life of J.K. Ralston, see the link in this story.



Architect F. Wayne Gustafson's architectural drawing shows how the fireplace of the J.K. Ralston cabin would align with similar rock when placed at the northeast corner of the Western Heritage Center.

## Ralston

Continued from 1A

Project coordinator Wayne Gustafson, a retired Billings architect, has been working on architectural sketches to present plans to the city to relocate the cabin.

"It is an exciting opportunity for us to renew the heritage of Ken Ralston and what he means to the West," said Gustafson, who knew Ralston 50 years ago when the artist was doing murals for banks and other buildings around the city and who also is a past president of the Western Heritage Center Foundation.

He called Ralston "one of the finest artists of Western history."

"We're promoting his legacy and moving it forward," Dial said.

Last week, the Ken Ralston Foundation and Western Heritage Center Foundation received state approval for the merger of the two nonprofit groups. Some representatives of the Ralston Foundation will be on the center's board.

In addition to the cabin, a large collection of paintings and artifacts used in Ralston's studio is part of the acquisition and merger. Among those items is the drawing table that once belonged to Will James, another Western artist who lived in Billings. The table also was used by Ralston.

Moving the cabin to the Western Heritage Center would bring together two historic structures. The center, which is on the Historical Register, is in the original home of Parnly Billings Library. The library was built more than a century ago with money donated by the family of Frederick Billings, who was president of the Northern Pacific Railroad and a major investor in the Montana Land & Improvement Co., which platted the city in 1882.

The library was constructed just north of the railroad tracks and opened Oct. 1, 1901. The land on which the Western Heritage Center stands is owned by Montana Rail Link, which agreed to allow the cabin to be added to the site. It would sit seven feet west of the property line.

"It's a valuable asset to the Western Heritage Center and the Historic District on Montana Avenue," which stops not far east of the center, Gustafson said.

"We're very interested in maintaining the architecture and look of the studio and Montana Avenue," Dial said.

The Western Heritage Center will archive, document and display Ralston's works, she said, noting that the artwork in the cabin are reproductions of originals, which are kept in a vault.

The actual date of the studio move is contingent on receiving the last of the city permits and arrangements with a house mover for the relocation. The budget for the project has not been finalized,

*"A lot of good people have worked on this — keeping Ralston's legacy alive. I'm glad to see it find a home on Montana Avenue."*

— Wayne Gustafson,  
retired architect

but a grant has been sought to pay for the move, and some additional fund-raising probably will be done, Gustafson said.

The center hopes to have the cabin in its new home by the end of October.

Ralston and his wife, Willo, lived in the cabin from the 1940s until moving to a new home built on the Alderson Avenue property in 1967. She died in 1974, and, in the 1980s, Ralston moved to St. John's Lutheran Home until his death in November 1987.

Ralston "was such a multifaceted art person," said James R. Graff, who was a friend of the artist and among those who worked to preserve the cabin.

"He could do clay molds, and they emerged as fabulous bronzes," Graff said. "He did pen and ink and wrote poetry."

He recalled Ralston as someone who "you'd sit down and talk with a couple hours" and who would still have more stories to tell.

"He had a lot of things that he wanted to impart to whoever wanted to listen to him," Graff said.

Plans to preserve Ralston's cabin by making it a museum and art gallery were announced in 1982. Friends of the artist hoped "that this heritage could be saved and preserved for Billings," recalled Graff, who was a member of Billings' Downtown Rotary Club, which helped launch the drive with a \$30,000 donation. Graff became first chairman of the nonprofit J.K. Ralston Studio Corp., which was formed in late 1983 by the Rotarians and Ralston's family and friends.

Among those who worked to preserve Ralston's legacy were the late historian John Popovich, who collaborated with Ralston on his memoirs, "The Voice of the Curlew," and Dale and Mary Hawkins, who often shared their collection of Ralston art for displays and fund-raisers.

The studio was deeded to the group and moved to the north-west end of the Rocky Mountain College campus in the late 1980s. It was open to the public part-time until closing in the late 1990s.

In a 1990 Billings Gazette article, historian John Willard, then



The interior of J.K. Ralston's studio cabin contains artist brushes, unfinished paintings and many other items from the artist's life.

chairman of the studio foundation, noted that the cabin's move to the campus "didn't even jostle a brick in the fireplace."

"The building is in excellent shape" for a new move, Gustafson said. He said a professional log-home builder had examined the structure and reported that it needs minimal repairs — mostly cleaning inside. Gustafson said removing the two-room addition from the cabin won't affect the building's integrity.

"A lot of good people have worked on this — keeping Ralston's legacy alive. I'm glad to see it find a home on Montana Avenue," Gustafson said.

Dial said the move will make the building more visible to the public and allow more people to view the artist's legacy.

She said Mary Hawkins, Calvin Odle and Graff have been among those who have worked hard to move the preservation effort to this point. The

Hawkins also were involved in founding the Western Heritage Center, and Mary Hawkins recalls making items for sale at the center's gift shop.

"It's a natural tie" to have the cabin at the WHC, Graff said, since the center's mission is preservation of the history of the Yellowstone Valley.

In April 2005, the center's West Gallery will feature an exhibit of Ralston works to run through the summer.

## Cabin built after WWII

James Kenneth Ralston and his son, J.K. Ralston, built the artist's cabin studio after the younger Ralston returned to Billings at the end of World War II.

According to L.K. Ralston's narrative related to a family attorney, Stuart Conner, in 1996, the logs came from timber cut in the Clark's Fork Valley southeast of Cooke City.

The tracing company of Dick Popelka, of Billings, got a contract to bring the logs to Billings. Popelka and a friend, Blake Mackin, hauled 183 logs in Popelka's war-surplus flat-bed semi-trailer over the Bearpaw to Billings.

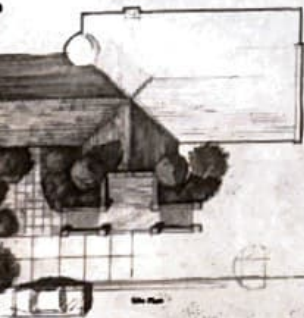
Draw knives were used to scrape the bark from the logs by hand.

Building materials were under wartime controls, so the cabin's construction often got delayed when materials were scarce. The Ralstons had to make daily visits to lumber yards and other suppliers to get lumber, wiring, nails and other materials.

They could find no finish lumber and had to use rough-sawn rafters and floor joists, which were fit and leveled one-by-one.

The Ralstons hauled the rock for the fireplace from the Blinnocks in a two-wheeled trailer pulled by a car. They built the fireplace using hand-mixed concrete, and a mixture of varnish and linseed oil coated the logs inside and outside.

The entrance to the J.K. Cabin, at lower left, would face west and open into a courtyard in this overview showing the roof of the Western Heritage Center at the top.



# THE ARTIST'S STUDIO



DAVID GRUBBS/Gazette Staff

Teri Mundahl, office manager at the Western Heritage Center, stands in the J.K. Ralston studio-cabin that the late Billings artist and his son, L.K. Ralston, built in the 1940s.

## Ralston exhibit set to open in Billings

By **DONNA HEALY**  
Of The Gazette Staff

At the Billings airport, a mural of the first flight over Billings painted by J.K. Ralston shows the expressions of awe on faces in the crowd. The painting also shows a horse hitched to a wagon bolting away from the noise in terror.

The emotion in the painting takes you into the story, said Ralston's granddaughter, A'Lisa Scott. Scott will reminisce about her grandfather on Friday during the opening celebration of the Western Heritage Center's exhibit "J.K. Ralston: History on Canvas."

Ralston, who had a meticulous eye for detail, spent 10 years researching the Battle of the Little Bighorn. His mural,

which hangs at the battlefield's interpretive center, contains 39 historically accurate scenes and took six years to complete.

It was a family joke how tired Ralston's wife, Willo, must have gotten looking at dead horses, Scott said in a phone interview.

The heritage center's exhibit contains artifacts from the artist's life, along with paintings illustrating the depth of his career. For the first time since 1996, the general public will also be able to tour the Ralston cabin, said Julie Dial, the center's executive director. The cabin, which was built in 1947, moved from the campus of Rocky Mountain College to its current home at the Western Heritage Center in 2004 as the



J.K. Ralston in his studio-cabin. The cabin was moved from the campus of Rocky Mountain College to the Western Heritage Center in late 2004.

Please see Studio, 12A

### If you plan on going

J.K. Ralston Days at the Western Heritage Center, today through Saturday, focuses on the opening of the gallery exhibit, "J.K. Ralston: History on Canvas." A

preview reception and fund-raising auctions take place tonight.

On Friday at noon, the High Noon Lecture Series features a talk by A'Lisa Scott, Ralston's granddaughter, followed at 1 p.m. by a presentation of the short

film "The Old West of J.K. Ralston" and a talk by the filmmaker Jim Graff. Guided tours of the exhibit will be Friday and Saturday.

The center, at 2822 Montana Ave., is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

# Studio

Continued from 1A

WHC merged with the J.K. Ralston Studio Inc.

Ralston died in 1987.

"What's so wonderful about his work is his need for detail and his great desire for historical accuracy," said Scott, who works as a bookkeeper in Missoula.

One of his paintings shows her mother, Marjorie, and her uncle, Kenny, as children, looking at a mare and her new filly.

"That painting has been in my house all my life," she said.

After remodeling her home in 2000, she hung the painting back on the wall and noticed for the first time in 40 years that her grandfather had painted a piece of baling twine hang-

ing out of her uncle's back pocket.

"He had an incredible eye for detail. His paintings never stop taking you in," she said.

Scott was in her late 20s when her grandfather died. Because her father died when she was 10, her grandfather was closely involved in her upbringing.

As a child, she remembers him giving her big hugs that invariably ended with him patting her and saying "Aw, what a good little heifer you are."

Scott is enthusiastic about the chance to see some of the works in the exhibit herself. The exhibit's center wall contains one of a series of 3x15-foot line drawings done by her grandfather.

"They'd been wrapped up in tubes in storage for years because there was no place for them to be displayed," she said.

In addition to paintings from the center's collection, the exhibit showcases borrowed pieces from area families and institutions.

Scott's memories of Ralston's cabin focus on family gatherings with relatives clustered around the dinner table.

"It was like having a shoe-horn, sitting around the dinner table," she said.

For years her grandfather's studio sat in the 2100 block between Alderson and Grand avenues, behind what is now the Village Inn Pizza Parlor.

At the heritage center, Ralston's cabin has been set up as it was when the artist used it as his studio, Dial said.

"The look we're going for is like he just left," Dial said.

Funds from tonight's auction at the WHC will help pay for landscaping and security around the cabin.

# MOVING HISTORY



BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff

JoAnn Ostermiller directs traffic as the Ralston Cabin reaches the Western Heritage Center Tuesday.

## Artist Ralston's cabin is moved to Western Heritage Center site

By **CHRIS RUBICH**  
Of The Gazette Staff

Two pieces of history now share the same site in downtown Billings.

The log-cabin studio of the late Western artist James Kenneth Ralston stands on steel beams and dollies outside the Western Heritage Center, which was built more than a century ago to house Parmly Billings Library.

On Tuesday morning, Ostermiller Housemoving eased the cabin from the campus of Rocky Mountain College and onto Rimrock Road. The 450-square-foot cabin traveled east to North 27th Street, then south to downtown before being backed into place on the northeastern corner of the Western Heritage Center, at 2822 Montana Ave.

White signs on the sides of the cabin proclaimed, "The historic Ralston Studio going to the Western Heritage Center."

Montana Avenue was closed, and folks stopped to watch as the tractor



Spectators watch from the Western Heritage Center stairs with a photo of J.K. Ralston looking over their shoulders as the Ralston Cabin was moved in Tuesday.

driver sharply angled the tractor and its load into the narrow space between the center's stone steps and the foundation onto which the cabin will be rolled in the next few days.

Please see Cabin, 14A



Find out more at:  
[billingsgazette.com](http://billingsgazette.com)

■ To see additional photos of the Ralston cabin en route to the Western Heritage Center, see the photo gallery link in this story.

# Cabin

Continued from 1A

The driver's skill at maneuvering within inches of obstructions was watched especially carefully by Alicia Cook, Ralston's granddaughter, who had come from Missoula for the move.

The trip from the campus, where the cabin had been moved in 1988, was projected to take about two hours. But the move went even faster.

Before noon, the sound of hammers rang out as workers began making final adjustments before the cabin can be transferred to the new concrete foundation. Getting to this point took lots of measuring and measuring again to ensure that the foundation would exactly fit the cabin, which was built by the artist and his son, L.K. Ralston, in the mid-1940s.

For the move, the cabin was lifted off its old foundation. But the concrete that had been laid to support the stone fireplace when the cabin was built was kept intact to support the stones that were quarried from the Rimrocks. And a special support was built to hold those extra inches of concrete and the fireplace once the cabin is in place.

Once the cabin is moved onto the foundation and leveled, special structural fasteners will be driven through its lower logs and into wood plates on the foundation to provide stability, said Wayne Gustafson, a retired architect who coordinated permitting and other aspects of the move.

Among projects remaining are installing utilities and the heating system, reinstallation of the porch rails that support the entry roof, replacement of the roof, pouring of a concrete walk-



**J.K. Ralston used his experience as a cowboy and his research into the history of the West to create murals, paintings and pen and ink sketches for more than a half century.**

way and landscaping.

As part of the move, a two-room addition to the studio was removed, and materials from the addition may be used to help in the restoration. The old foundation also will be removed from the RMC campus and the hole filled.

Julie Dial, executive director of the Western Heritage Center, said they expect to be able to begin interior finish work and cleaning of the cabin on Monday. With the merger of the WHC and Ralston foundations and deeding of the cabin to the WHC, the center has acquired the studio's furnishings along with Ralston artwork and his artist's equipment.

Copies of original Ralston oils and notecards, along with his biography, also went to the WHC

and will be sold at the studio when it opens.

The WHC staff is in the research stage for an exhibit of Ralston's work, set to open April 22 in the Main Gallery. Cook has provided the staff with information about how her grandfather went about his painting and the studio.

"She has been wonderful helping put artifacts in perspective" and came from Missoula several times to help, Dial said.

Ralston was known for the historical accuracy of his works, and Cook helped others understand the process he used to research his paintings and Ralston's place in history.

The artist would go to the setting for works such as his mural showing of the aftermath of the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

There, he would learn all he could, including listening to the stories of individuals involved or descendants, walk the land and take photos.

Back home in Billings, his wife, Willo, would help archive the materials.

Then, with a stick, rock or "whatever he picked up" as emblematic of the site, he would paint, Dial said.

The WHC hopes to incorporate looks at his approach to the world, what can be learned from it and its relevance to today into future projects. His historical significance ranges from his life as one of the last open-range cowboys in Montana, his role as an artist hired by the Works Progress Administration in the Depression and his stature as one of the three R's at the top of Western artists, which include Charles Russell and William Remington.

Dial said the WHC wants to restore the cabin to look as it did when Ralston worked there in the 1980s and to have some exhibits to travel to schools beginning in the fall. Old photos of the cabin's interior will help in the restoration.

The moving and restoration project are estimated to cost \$56,000, and grants have been sought to help pay the costs. The public may help by donating to the J.K. Ralston Fund at the WHC.

The move has drawn new attention to Ralston, and people in the community who own Ralston works have contacted the WHC about possibly lending materials for exhibits or to share stories about the artist.

"It's been a very rewarding experience to preserve the history and legacy of Ken Ralston and prepare to share it with the public as soon as possible," Gustafson said.