

A Threshing Sketch by William Allen Rogers

By Robert T. Rhode

Editor's Note: Please see the illustration on Pages 26 and 27.

The illustration captioned “Harvest Hands on Their Way to the Wheat Fields of the Northwest” is so widely recognized that numerous websites, books, and articles have mentioned it. Published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1890, a woodcut made from the original drawing by William Allen Rogers (1854–1931) carried this description: “The vivid and picturesque scene [was] made at Castleton, just west of Fargo, of a group of men on their way from more easterly regions, to work as harvest laborers in the bonanza wheat fields. Many of them are lumbermen, employed during the winter in the woods of Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Canada, and they are usually distinguishable among other workmen travelling to the harvest work by their knit jackets, and other characteristic features of their attire. There also drifts westward at this time a large element of floating city population, including not a few who would unmistakably be classed as tramps. ... The group portrayed by Mr. Rogers has evidently had a weary time of walking, and have resolved to wait at the prairie station in the hope of boarding some train. That they are tired is indicated by the way in which most of them have bestowed themselves for sleep, and lie about amid their characteristic lumbermen's oil-cloth valises, which contain their worldly goods Those who have been so lucky during the day as to secure poultry or other eatable materials by purchase or capture, find means to cook them Upon the platform cars in view against the background of the bare prairie are wagons, reapers, and other farm machinery on the way to the wheat regions and the elevator”

In 1950, Dr. Robert Taft published an article in the *Kansas Historical Quarterly* as part of a series titled “The Pictorial Record of the Old West.” Taft wrote, “Rogers was born in Springfield, Ohio, in 1854. His father died at an early age [in 1855] leaving the family more books than money. The books fascinated young Rogers and he poured over them by the hour taking special delight in those that were illustrated. At 13 he went to work as a railroad check clerk, keeping a daily record of empty freight cars as they passed through the yards. Here he found Mike Burke, the fireman of the switch engine in the yards, and a friendship was soon struck up between the two. Mike, previous to his railroad days, had been employed as an artist to paint scrolls and small landscapes on the headboards of threshing machines, and it was not long after his friendship with Rogers was formed that he was instructing the youngster in this craft. These impromptu lessons with ‘red chalk’ were all the art training that Rogers received, according to an account in his autobiography.”

The title of Rogers' autobiography is *A World Worth While*, which was published in 1922. In his book, Rogers describes Burke and the art lessons: “Mike had bushy red

hair and a little mustache which he curled up at the ends Mike had worked as a ‘scroll artist’ before he became a fireman. He used to paint scrolls and little landscapes on threshing machines—and he was clever at it. He and I used to climb up from the top of a box car into a loft over the freight office, and up there we practiced drawing scrolls with red chalk on the plaster walls.” Rogers adds, “There were several of those ‘scroll artists’ in the town. One of them was an old German who wore a rusty cloak with a red lining, let his hair grow long over his shoulders, and seemed to imagine he was a real artist. Maybe he was in his heart, poor old chap! Then there was another, who had a shock of black curly hair which he oiled prodigiously. He wore a pair of fierce mustachios and a goatee, and was suspected of using ivory black on them to hide the frosts of time. On Saturday afternoons, he used to appear on the streets in an immaculate suit of white duck and a big gray sombrero which he wore with a tremendous swagger. He, too, appeared to imagine that he was a real artist, yet I fear he was mistaken.”

Page 5 of the *History of the Manufactories of Springfield, Ohio* (1884) says, “In 1842, John A. Pitts, the original inventor of the Combined Thresher and Separator, began the manufacture of his machine in Springfield. The business progressed rather slowly and Pitts disposed of his shop to Pitts (his son) and McClellan in the year 1850. In 1855 the firm changed to McClellan & Bro., and was operated under that name from 1866 till 1867; the firm then changed title to McClellan & Cushman, and three years afterwards to Rinehart, Ballard & Co., under which name business was carried on until 1882, when the concern was incorporated under its present name [Springfield Engine and Thresher Company], with Mr. O. S. Kelly as its President.”

Burke, the artist turned switch engine fireman, must have been employed by the thresher works prior to 1867; accordingly, the firm was named either Pitts & McClellan or McClellan & Bro. at the time that Burke adorned threshing machines with his paintbrush.

Dr. Taft explains the way Rogers got his start: “His mother ..., an enthusiastic amateur painter, doubtlessly played an important part in directing his boyhood activities. Under the direction of his mother and Burke, he had made sufficient progress by the time he was 14 that he had published a series of cartoons in a Dayton, Ohio, newspaper, and when 16 his skill had developed sufficiently to secure professional employment in an engraving house in Cincinnati. From this time (1870) until he joined Harper's staff in 1877, he was employed as engraver or artist in several Western cities and toward the end of this period, he was in New York, where for a time he worked on the celebrated but short-lived *Daily Graphic*.”

Dr. Taft speculates that the sketch for the “Harvest Hands” illustration could have been made as early as 1878,

noting that "Rogers' first important out-of-town assignment with Harper's came in the fall of 1878 when he was sent 'to cover' the visit of President Hayes to the Minnesota State Fair at St. Paul and the Northwestern Fair in Minneapolis." A maverick, Rogers could not resist touring the territories. Dr. Taft says, "The West had become so much a part of the national consciousness by this time—it was two years after Custer's defeat on the Little Big Horn—that the opportunity gave Rogers 'visions of the wild life of the plains' that dazzled his imagination. He had no authorization from Harper's to make any such trip but the temptation became too great and he wired Harper's that he was going." According to Rogers' autobiography, the commanding reply from Harper's arrived after Rogers had already left: "Come back at once. Harper & Brothers." Rogers traveled through the Dakota Territory and into Canada. When Rogers belatedly returned to New York, he found Harper's prepared to fire him. When the editors saw his brilliant sketches, all was forgiven. Rogers went on to become one of the most illustrious of Harper's artists, ultimately gaining fame as a cartoonist. His work appeared in the *New York Herald*, the *Washington Post*, *Life*, *Puck*, the *Century Magazine*, *St. Nicholas Magazine*, and other publications.

Dr. Taft's surmise that Rogers' sketch in Castleton might date to 1878 (although published in 1890) makes it tempt-

ing to try to identify the age and manufacturing history of the equipment on the flatcars. Unfortunately, important details are obscured, and nothing guarantees that the woodcut designed from Rogers' sketch exhibits the degree of accuracy required for positive analysis. Viewers can safely conclude that the closer car has a thresher under a canvas and a return-flue steam engine. The more distant car has what might be a section of a threshing machine on end and a second steam engine. The flatcars themselves and the clothing resist identification by year. The pole and grain elevator are consistent with the 1870s.

In the *Iron-Men Album* for March and April of 1963 is a poem by Charles Genter of Byron, Oklahoma, that captures the mood of Rogers' famous illustration:

Where are the hoboes of yesteryear,
The boys of the mulligan stew,
The boys we liked for their fun and wit,
The boys of the threshing crew.

Where are the hoboes of bygone days
Who were free as the winds that blow.
Tonight we envy their carefree way
As we sit by the firelight's glow.