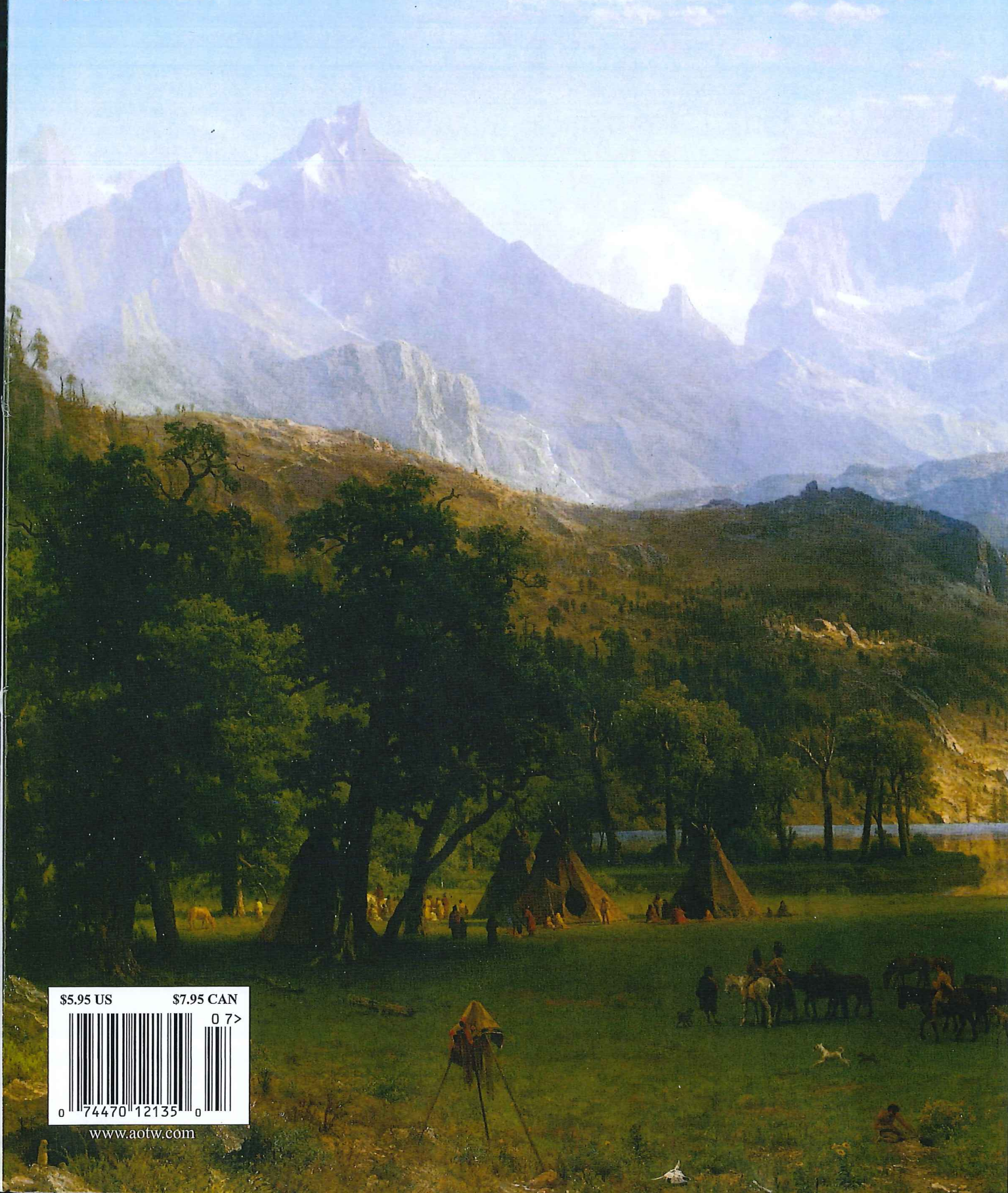


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HAROLD T. HOLDEN

BACK IN THE SADDLE

By Sara Gilbert Frederick

Four years ago, Harold T. Holden wasn't sure if he should accept any more commissions. He wasn't even sure if he'd be able to finish the pieces he had underway. "H," as Holden has been known all his life, was so sick that he couldn't walk. He couldn't ride his horses. He could barely stand up. "I was just a couple of weeks away from dying," he says.

Holden has pulmonary fibrosis, a condition that damages lung tissue and makes it difficult to breathe. Although medication and therapy can help ease some of the symptoms, there is no cure. For many people, the best solution is a lung transplant. By the summer of 2010, that was Holden's only hope.

Earlier that year, Holden had taken on two projects—one a major monument, the other a sculpture, titled *Thank You Lord*, for his church." As he got sicker and sicker, he worried that he wouldn't be able to complete either of them. "I didn't know how fast it would get me," he says. "I didn't know if someone else was going to have to finish those up for me."

Holden finished the monument, then tried to focus on the piece for his church. "The preacher would come out and pray with me," he says. "He prayed that I could get a new lung, so that I could finish that piece."

By July, Holden was so sick he



Strike Lightning, bronze, 18" by 14"

"There is always a design challenge with sculpture, but action pieces are always fun to do to create movement that helps to tell the story of the piece."

wasn't able to work at all. He credits Edna Mae, his wife of 25 years, for nursing him and keeping his daily pills straight while they waited for news that a transplant was possible. When they finally received the call that a lung was available,

they quickly got ready for the two-and-a-half hour drive to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, for the surgery. One of the calls they made was to that preacher. "I called to ask for an extension," Holden says. "And he granted it."



Caught in a Blizzard, bronze, 16" by 17.5"

"I always enjoy creating weather-related pieces, especially snow. I know lots of cowboys who can identify with this change in the weather."

Holden eventually finished *Thank You Lord*, a six-foot bronze that features a cowboy with his head bowed, his hat in his hand. It's a position that Holden often finds himself in, as well. He knows that he got his new, healthy lung from a 48-year-old from somewhere near Kansas City. Although they don't know who it was, Edna Mae writes a letter to the family every year and sends it to the organization that facilitated the donation.

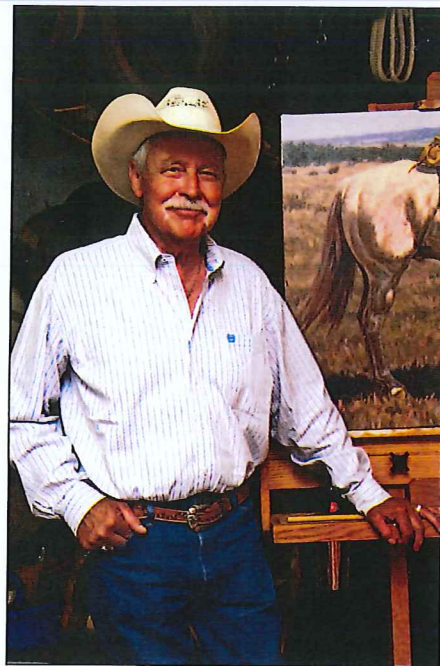
"We never have gotten a response," Holden says, "but we're awfully thankful. It's a hard thing.

It's sad for some family out there, but it's a good thing for me."

Within six months of the lung transplant that saved his life, Holden not only was back at work but he also was back out on the horses he and Edna Mae keep on their ranch near Kremlin, Oklahoma. Before the transplant, Holden, who was born and raised in Enid, less than 15 miles away, hadn't been able to get out and ride without losing his breath. Now he is riding and roping again.

Holden has always loved horses. His father was an avid horseman who raised horses and inspired

"When I was starting, there were only a handful of people I knew who were doing Western art,"



Holden's interest in them. But it was his grandfather who inspired his interest in art. Although he made his living in the oil industry, Holden's grandfather had studied art and loved to paint. "He encouraged me to be an artist," Holden says. "And we always had good art around us, which really helped me in trying to improve my work."

Holden decided early on that he wanted to be an artist—and, like his childhood idol, Will James, he wanted to be a Western artist. He studied art at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, but wasn't sure how to make it a career after graduation.

"When I was starting, there were only a handful of people I knew who were doing Western art," he says. "So I went the commercial route."

Holden moved to Houston, Texas, where he established himself as a commercial artist. Although the work he did for *Horseman* magazine, and the paintings he worked on after hours kept him inspired, he missed the wide-open spaces of his family's ranch. When he started selling a few pieces to galleries, he decided to give up his job and move back to the country.

"I quit the city and came back home," Holden says. "We had two



Windbreak, bronze, 13" by 17"

"This is another snow piece that I tried to capture the feel of the piece, both in movement and in the patina choice."

kids by then, and there were some very lean years, but I would rather do that than fight the city anymore."

By then, Holden had started migrating from paint to clay. He sculpted the horses, cattle, and cowboys he had grown up with, usually telling a story about Western life—sometimes pulled from his own experience and sometimes pulled from history. It was history that provided his entree into monumental public sculptures.

In 1986, his hometown of Enid was building a new downtown conference center, and city officials wanted a large piece of artwork for the front of the structure. Holden had an idea to do a sculpture that represented the Cherokee Strip Land Run of 1893, the largest land run in the history of the United States during which more than 100,000 people sought to set claims on more than

6.5 million acres of land, including the area in and around Enid. Holden created a maquette—a small, preliminary model out of clay—and was able to earn the commission.

That monument, *Boomer*, shows a man riding his horse full gallop, with a flag rolled up under his arm, eager to stake his claim—and it started a new chapter in Holden's career. Since then, he has done two more featuring that same man and his family as homesteaders. He has done at least 20 other monuments as well, including several that are larger-than-life-size, that are displayed in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Kansas.

Holden's work has earned him numerous awards, from the Oklahoma Governor's Art Award in 2001 and the Distinguished Alumni Award he received from Oklahoma State University in 2005 to the

Lifetime Achievement Award for Art from the American Culture Awards in 2010. He's been a professional member of the National Sculpture Society since 2004 and became a member of the Cowboy Artists of America in 2012.

But a few months ago, Holden received news of what might be his highest commendation to date: induction into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, which is scheduled for November. "This is the highest honor you can receive from the state of Oklahoma," Edna Mae says. "Since its inception in 1927, only 662 people have been inducted—and very few have been artists. We are very excited."

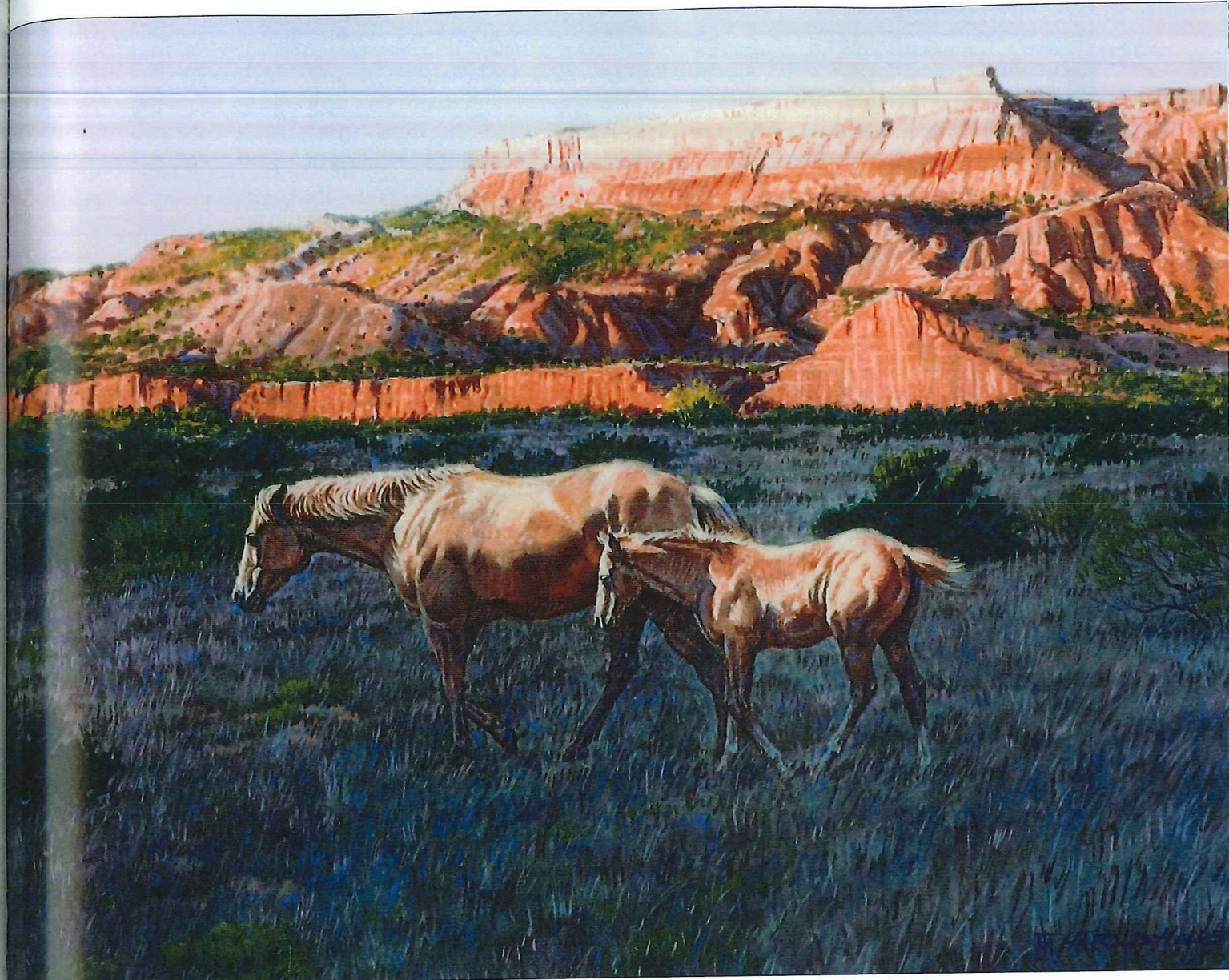
Holden hasn't been taking on as many monumental assignments as he once did—but it's not because he doesn't think he'll be around to finish them. Each one is a tremendous



Bueno, bronze, 13" by 9.5"

"This is a new piece I created for Prix de West this year. I sculpted the relief around the horse's neck to add a little more interest."





Staying Close, pastel, 16" by 20"

"This is a piece I did several years ago, when I was working in pastels quite a bit. It is one of the few pieces Edna Mae talked me into keeping."

Opposite Page: Thank You Lord, bronze, life-size and maquette

"This maquette is one I completed in preparation for a life-size monument edition. One of the monuments is outside our Church Emmanuel Baptist in Enid, and another stands at the Nazih Zuhdi Transplant Center at Integris Hospital in Oklahoma City. This piece has particular meaning for me because of my transplant."

time commitment, and he's reached a point where he wants to be able to put his time into projects he feels strongly about. That includes his three young grandchildren, who keep him and Edna Mae busy, running to football games, track meets, trap shooting competitions, and ballet recitals. "We really do enjoy our grandkids," he says. "It sure is fun to try to keep up with them."

Holden has started painting more again, too, although he admits it's not as easy for him as sculpting.

"There's so much more to it," he says with a laugh. "Colors, values, the application of the paint. I suppose that, if I had kept painting and didn't become a sculptor, I'd be a better painter by now."

Although preparing for upcoming shows, including the annual Cowboy Artists of America exhibition, keeps him busy, he and Edna Mae also make time to get out on their horses and practice roping their cattle. Holden also is more than a little

impressed by everything his wife, an attorney, does well.

"In addition to taking care of the business side of my art, she also writes cowboy music and stories," he says. In 2008, Edna Mae won a Wrangler Award from the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum for "Oklahoma...Where the West Remains," an album she wrote and produced.

Both Holden and Edna Mae are grateful for every morning they wake up together on their Oklahoma ranch. "I feel good," Holden says. "I can't run a marathon, but I never could have anyway. But beside that, I can do just about anything I want to now." (AV)

Sara Gilbert Frederick is a writer living in Mankato, Minnesota.