

EDGAR SAMUEL PAXSON

(1852 – 1919)

“Montana’s Unassuming Artist”

Ed Paxson (1852-1919) was a survivor. He endured harrowing frontier adventures, debilitating wartime injuries, and an endless comparison with his contemporary, Charlie Russell, to become one of the state's most recognized artists. His depictions of Montana's historical events comprise an irreplaceable graphic record.

Born in New York in 1852, Edgar Samuel Paxson arrived in Beaverhead County in 1877. In order to make a living, Paxson pursued a number of occupations, but in so doing always carried with him a sketch pad and pencil. With these he captured the details of the frontier life he so carefully observed.

Entirely self-taught, Paxson began his professional art career as a painter of signs and scenic backdrops for theatrical performances. By the early 1890s, Paxson, who had moved to Butte with his family, withdrew from the hectic world of the stage to concentrate on a career in western art. Initially, he produced Indian portraits, three of which hung in the Montana pavilion at the Chicago World's Fair (1893).

During the 1890's, Ed worked intermittently on his masterpiece, the 9-by-6-foot epic, Custer's Last Stand. He spent months interviewing both white and Native American participants; he made numerous trips to the battlefield; and he corresponded endlessly with military specialists. Authorities still consider this Paxson documentary painting the most accurate depiction of the Little Big Horn Battle. Other well-known Paxson history paintings include six documentary murals commissioned by the state in 1912 to adorn the walls of the House of Representatives anteroom*, and eight similar murals commissioned for the Missoula County Courthouse in 1914.

Like his contemporary Charlie Russell, Paxson mourned the passing of the Old West and attempted to record the heroic and the noble aspects of pioneer life. Upon his death in 1919, Russell remarked:

"I am a painter too, but Paxson has done some things that I cannot do. He was a pioneer and a pioneer painter... Paxson has gone, but his pictures will not allow us to forget him."

(To view these murals, walk to the west end of this corridor and take the elevator or stairs to the third floor. Exit to the left and follow the 'Russell Painting' arrow to the anteroom of the House of Representatives.)