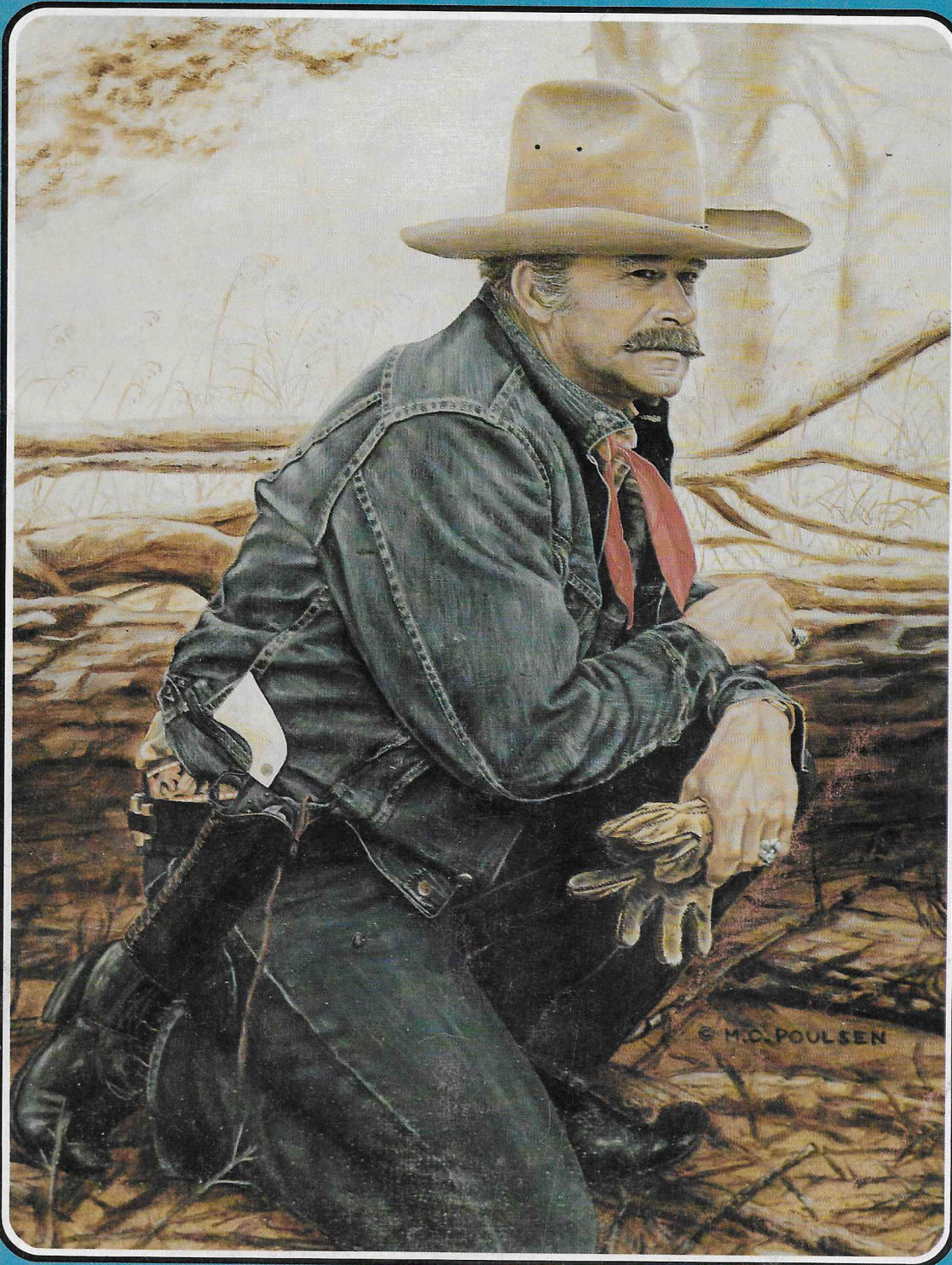


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**In this issue**

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# ***A Young Master***

## ***M. C. POULSEN***

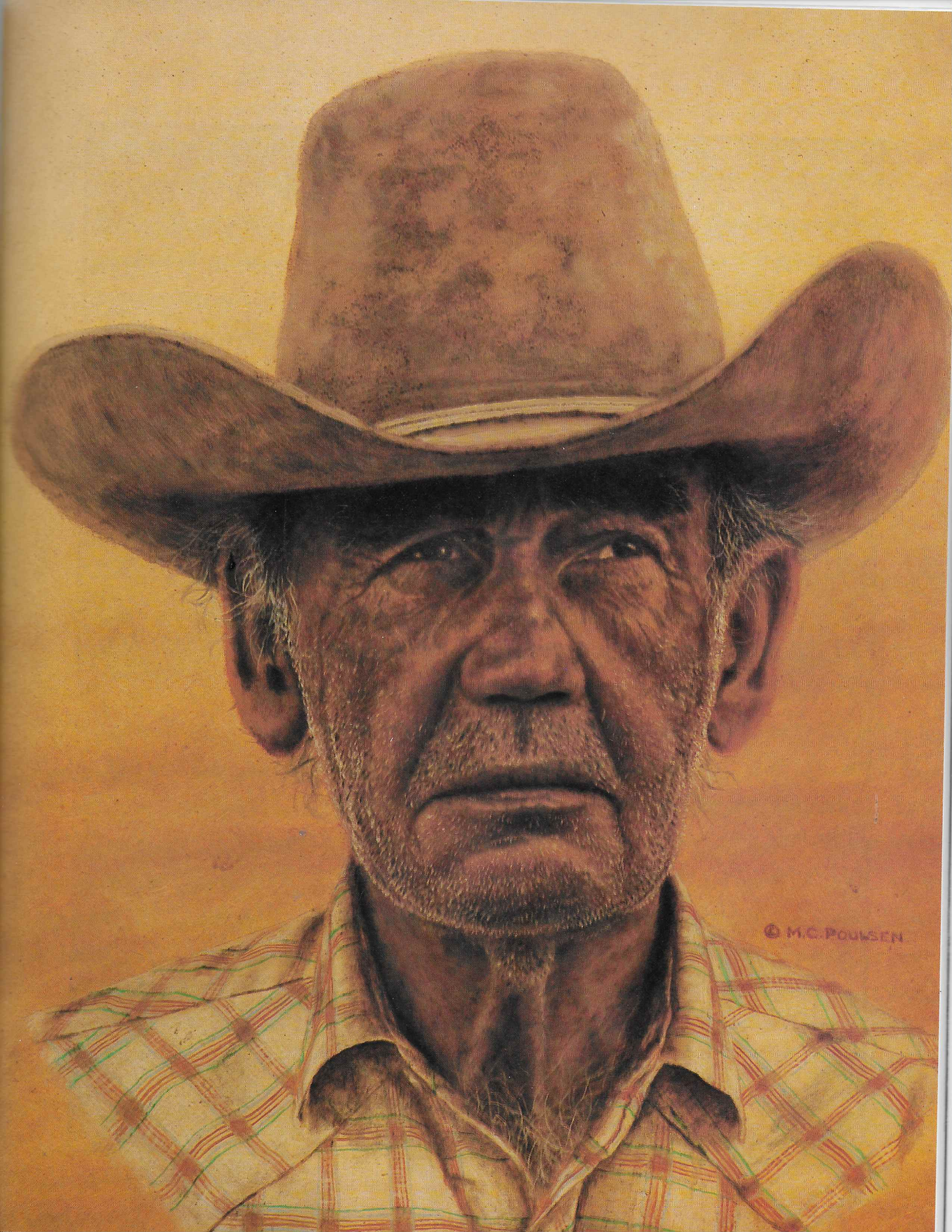
text by Kathe McGehee  
photos by Jack Richards

To the casual passerby Cody, Wyoming is a town literally hundreds of miles from nowhere on a barren stretch of Montana-Wyoming border, a dot in the midst of sugar beet fields and open range, boulder strewn buttes and wind leveled mountains. To the initiated, Cody is much, much more.

It is in the heart of a sportsmen's paradise. Men come here from across the nation, drawn by the rugged landscape and the plethora of game. In this last wilderness, they can trade three-piece suits and computer communication for rain slickers, the rustle of birds and animals in the brush, the creak of saddle leather and the smell of wet horses at sunset.

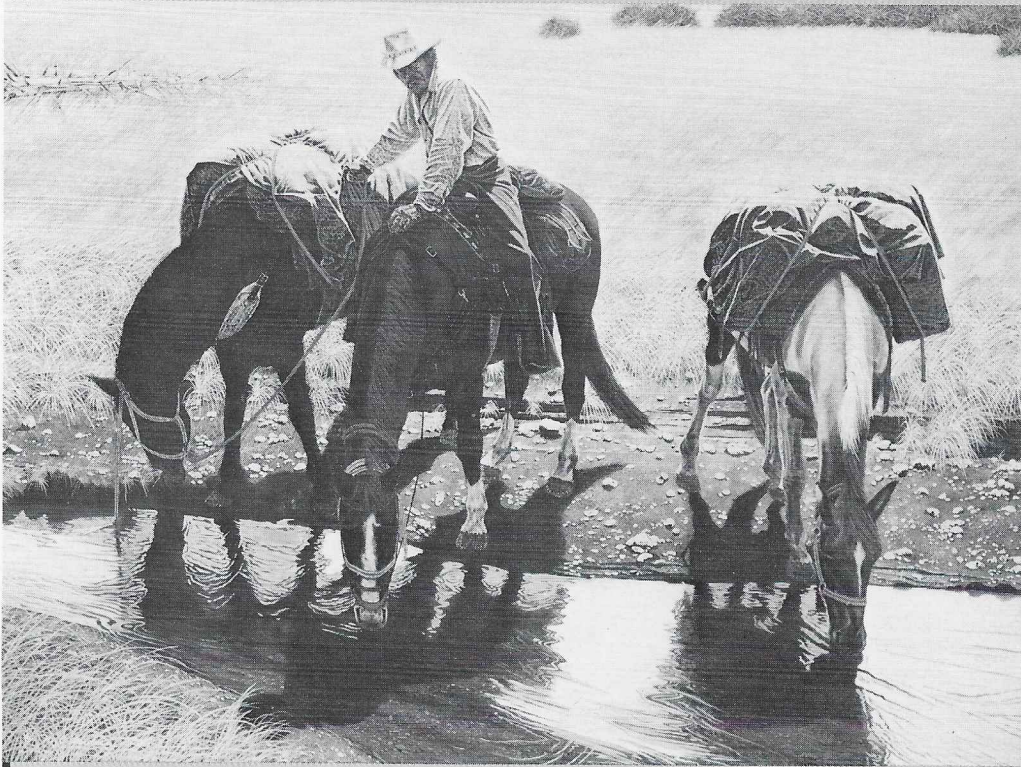
And, in spite of, or perhaps because of its isolation, Cody also is a center for fine Western art and artists. The Buffalo Bill Historical Center is here with its fine collection of Remington, Russell, Leigh and Koerner paintings hanging among the works of a host of other prominent deceased and contemporary Western artists. In the area around Cody, a small force of top contemporary artists have gathered to work and live — among them Nick Eggenhofer, James Bama, Harry Jackson and wood carver John Kittelson.

At home in the company of both Cody's artists and outdoorsmen is a "Young Master" named Michael C. Poulsen. Just 28, with the clear skin, blonde curls and sky blue eyes of a Raphael cherub, Mike Poulsen is a recognized member of any artists or outdoorsmen gathering. His boyish face sits atop a six-foot-plus frame and he speaks from experience about packing and hunting as well as the Old Masters painting technique he employs with growing success. He signs his paintings M. C. Poulsen — and that's a name you'll be hearing about frequently in the future.



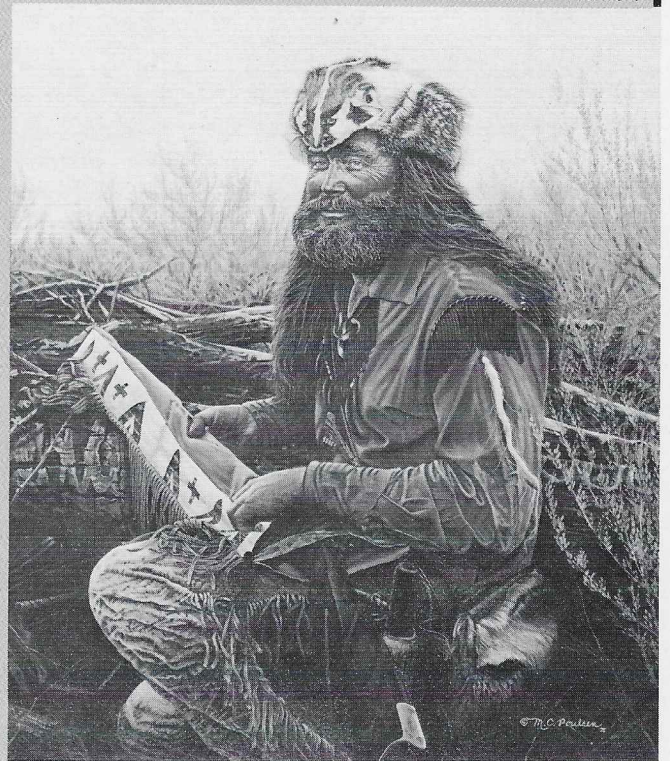
© M.C. POULSEN

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. C. F. Palmer



**WATERHOLE**  
oil - 36 x 48

Collection of W. H. Hunt



**CECIL CHENOWETH**  
oil - 24 x 32

**A** licensed guide with nearly fifteen years in the rough Wyoming back country behind him, Mike knows and is known to the wranglers and hunters who regularly pass through Cody. His hard work, intelligence and friendliness have won him acceptance from even the most seasoned veterans of the back country.

In the three brief years since he became a professional artist, these same qualities — coupled with determination, discipline and a large portion of talent — have earned him the respect and camaraderie of the region's older artists.

A little over a year ago, Mike married a girl who shares his love for her native Wyoming as well as for art — “particularly, Sarolla, Rembrandt and W. R. Leigh,” Mike says. Today, the Poulsens are frequent hosts for the artists, art patrons, sportsmen and outfitters who pass through their town.

When I arrived at their small studio-home, Shauna was hosting a party for four little girls from her Sunday School class. After courteous introductions and a few muffled giggles from the guests, Mike and I retired to his favorite restaurant for thick steaks and further conversation.

As we walked into the roadhouse, it became apparent that everyone in Cody knows Mike Poulsen and is glad to see him. Mike accepted the recognition easily and later said he considers it a legacy from his father, Chuck Poulsen, who was killed in an accident a few years ago. It was soon apparent that Mike and his father shared a particularly close relationship and that Mike attributes much of his discipline, knowledge and drive for success to his father's teaching.

Chuck Poulsen was “charismatic” according to Mike, who spoke proudly of his father's many successes. Before bringing his family to Wyoming, the senior Poulsen had been an actor and a successful businessman. Mike and his brothers were born and grew up in Akron, Ohio, but there were summer vacations in Wyoming — time to pack and hunt and share good times with Dad.

Mike's first artistic expression ended badly, he recalled. While attending a racially integrated kindergarten in Akron, he colored a black-faced clown. He still remembers the humiliation of having the teacher hold this work up and ridicule it before his classmates.

The young artist persevered, however. His curiosity about art was unquenchable and he would frequently wander into the art centers which dotted the Akron area to unabashedly question students and teachers alike.

At about age 10, Mike discovered the works of C. M. Russell in a school-book. He was hooked. On the spot, he decided to reverse his own initials and emulate the Cowboy Artist. For several years, Mike signed his works C. M. Poulsen and he said that works signed that way may still be in the hands of collectors.

The Poulsen family moved to Wyoming when Mike was 13. Chuck bought a dude ranch, and with Mike as his able and willing assistant, became a professional outfitter and guide. Mike recalled those years with a wistful smile, remembering swapping tales with Chuck and other outfitters in Cody's plentiful bars and waking up early in camp to gather storm-skittish horses for another day's work.

When I returned to the Poulsen studio next morning, to continue the interview, Mike presented me with one of his first limited-edition prints, *Wrangler In Yellow Slicker*. Mike told me it was a portrait of his Dad, “the way I remember him best. Waking up to hear rain on the tent and his horse outside. He'd be coming back to camp from gathering the horses.”

Pack trains, camps and the men who inhabit them are Mike's typical subject matter. He is not consciously a western painter, but these are the things Mike knows best and he insists his work be accurate. Although his “Old Master” painting technique requires him to paint in the studio, Mike uses photographs and his own memory of the subject to insure accuracy. Mike said he has quit hunting but he still guides each year to make sure his knowledge of knots, tent riggings and other details is correct.

Mike's studio is actually a neat and well-organized corner of the Poulsens' living area, lit by a skylight and a wall of north-facing windows. On the shelves below the windows are volumes and volumes about the techniques and lives of artists, from Michelangelo and Rembrandt to Mike's favorite, W. R. Leigh. In addition to painting ten or twelve hours a day, or “all night if the deadline on a commission demands it,” Mike reads voraciously. He claims he is critical of authors and likes to “read from two or three sources, to get the real feel of the artist described.”



**GLENN FALES**  
oil - 24 x 22

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Dick Gard



**HIGH COUNTRY REFLECTIONS** - oil - 20 x 30

Some years ago, Mike studied at the University of Arizona, but quit to become a professional artist. Most of his training and advancement has come from his his own study and from the assistance of other artists such as Mike's friend, Jim Bama. Mike shrugs off the inevitable comparison between his and Bama's style. He is grateful to Bama as well as to John Kittelson for their assistance, but according to Mike that has been mostly in developing discipline and the business skills necessary to a successful career.

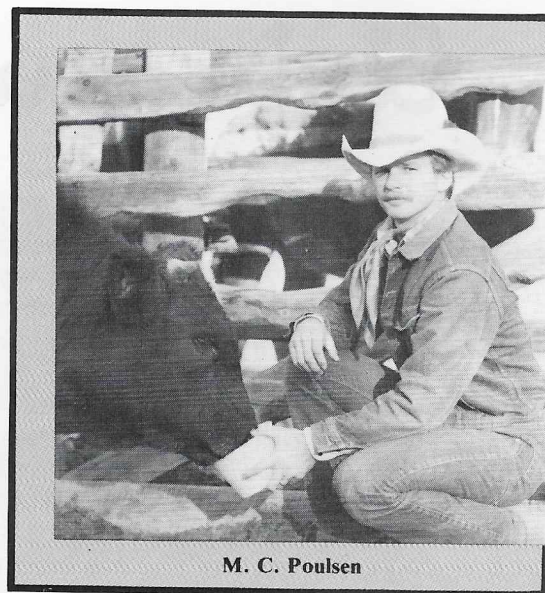
Near Mike's easel was a half-finished portrait of a leathered old-man, Al Smith, an outfitter and mountain man famous in the Cody area. As I admired the clarity of the colors, Mike took the painting over to the door to show me the result of his "Old Master" technique. Under direct light, the portrait shone with an inner luminosity as if lit from behind, or within, the board.

Mike returned the painting to the easel and got out his notes for the work. In a neatly ruled tablet, he had listed each color needed for flesh, hat, clothing and other details, ranging from the darkest to the lightest value. He explained that he does not mix pigments on a palette. Rather, in the style attributed to Rembrandt, he builds up color on the board by placing one thin layer of paint over another. The finished portrait would have over thirty layers of paint, including board preparation and alternate layers of glaze and varnish.

He told me that this time-consuming and painstaking method appeals to him because he wants to achieve maximum transparency. He added that he wants to make sure that his works, like the old masters, withstand time and do not peel or crack in a quarter or half century. Mike likes boards for portraits although he occasionally uses canvas for pack scenes and larger works. The board is carefully prepared and sealed — front, back and sides — before Mike begins his meticulous work.

On the easel was a large board with the faint outline of a careful pencil drawing. Clipped to one corner was the photograph of Glenn Fales, the model for the finished work. An accomplished draftsman, Mike quickly dismissed the importance of original drawing. Whether he projects the image on the board or draws it in free-hand, for this artist, the creativity is in the coloring.

The rider's hands and face on the work in progress were shadowed in the beginning stages of a value study. This is where Mike's mastery begins to emerge, for he plans in advance the finished colors and values to be obtained from the multiple layers of paint. His knowledge is sure. When asked about mistakes he told me, "They just don't happen anymore when I plan in advance."



M. C. Poulsen

As I examined the other works in progress standing about the studio, Mike told me that the drying time needed for his technique made it necessary to work on several pieces simultaneously. The detailed notes were necessary to remember the sequence for each work.

Most of Mike Poulsen's works are commissions or are sold while still on the easel. The portrait of Al Smith had been commissioned by Jim Marks of the Gunnison, Colorado, Grizzly Tree Gallery, Mike's exclusive agent. He hasn't had time to assemble enough paintings for a major exhibition and with a steadily growing number of collectors demanding his work, he isn't likely to find it in the near future.

He is, indeed, beginning to feel the press of time. He is disciplined and works long hours each day in painting and research, yet he said he hopes to "work up to producing about 30 paintings a year" and is considering releasing a portfolio of prints about the packing experience.

Shauna, who had been busy in the kitchen area, placed a delicious hot salad on the snack bar and announced lunch was ready. As we sat down, talk turned to plans for the future. There is to be a new house, with an attached studio for Mike, on 40 acres near the old dude ranch. Shauna hopes to finish her last year of college at the University of Utah, and Mike wants to learn and paint more. Cody, however, will always be their home for their roots are deep in Wyoming.

As we talked about the plans and work ahead, Mike looked up at his painting, *Chuck Poulsen, Outfitter*, which hangs to one side of the counter. "He was the best he could be at everything he did," Mike said, squaring his shoulders and considering the future, "and he taught me to be the same. I feel I owe it to him to be that good." ■