

Introducing 2012 Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame Inductee...

J. K. Ralston (1896 - 1987)

James Kenneth "J.K." Ralston (March 31, 1896 – November 26, 1987) was an American painter of the Old American West whose primary topics were the American West and images of cowboys and American Indians. He also did commercial artwork. Ralston's family moved to Colorado from Independence, Missouri in 1859 by ox team, then Idaho in 1863, and finally Montana in 1864, seeking gold each time. Ralston was born in 1896 in Choteau, Montana. His family moved to Helena, Montana before he was 10 years old. When he was 10, in 1906, they moved to the Capital P ranch in Dawson County, Montana, just south of the Missouri River across from the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in northeastern Montana.

He spent his early adult years as a cowboy in eastern Montana. In 1917 he attended the Chicago Art Institute for three months before joining the United States Army in spring of 1918. He served in the 62nd Infantry, Eighth Division in World War I. This unit served overseas but did not see combat. Ralston returned to the Chicago Art Institute in the fall of 1920. In 1923 Ralston married his wife Willo and they lived on the Pacific coast for seven years. They returned to Montana in 1930 and took over his father's ranch, the Roman E, near Culbertson, Montana. The Great Depression forced them to move to Billings, Montana in 1935. Ralston opened a studio in Billings and worked as a professional full time artist. Ralston died in 1987 in Billings.

The MonDak Arts & Historical Society, which is located in Sidney, Richland County, Montana and was founded in 1967, opened the J. K. Ralston Museum and Art Center in 1972. This operated until 1984 when the Center was moved to the newly completed MonDak Heritage Center in Sidney. Ralston's works are also on display at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, the Western Heritage Center in Billings, the Montana Historical Society in Helena, the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument near Crow Agency, Montana, and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis, Missouri. In 1946 Ralston and his son built a log cabin art studio for him to work in. After his death, Ralston's log cabin studio was first moved to Rocky Mountain College in Billings and then to the Western Heritage Center in 2005. In 1978, Ralston was awarded a Gold Medal by the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.