15. Harry Jackson at the age of one year. 1925

CHAPTER 2

BORN AGAIN COWBOY

Harry Jackson was born in Chicago on April 18, 1924. His father, Harry, was an unsettled man who, in his son's words, "was always sitting on his horse backwards. Poor fella, he never seemed to grow up and pull his weight." He left before Harry arrived and appeared only sporadically after that. Ellen Jackson, Harry's mother, ran a large lunchroom near the stockyards. She worked long hours, six and even seven days a week, leaving her little time for parental attention. At home, the Jacksons' housekeeper, Ruby Mae Woods, who came to Chicago from Cotton Plant, Arkansas, at the age of nineteen, helped bring warmth, affection, and a deep sense of "old time" religion into the independent boy's life.

One of Harry's earliest drawings revealed his view of the family and his place in it. He recalls "mother and dad sitting at a table—he didn't live with us but I drew him in there anyway, wishing he did—and me, on the other side, about four times bigger than both of them put together. I was an only child, and had little trouble with my ego." Harry's father did visit occasionally. At the age of five, Harry was taken by his father for his first horseback ride and they often went together to watch polo practices at the nearby 124th Field Artillery Armory. These experiences initiated Harry's love of horses, which was later reinforced by jobs he held as a stable and exercise boy.

Much of Harry's idle time was spent in his mother's café, listening to the yarns, brag talk, and stories of life on the open range spun by cowboys who came to Chicago with trainloads of cattle headed for market. The pages in his sketchpad that were not filled with drawings of soldiers and Indians were devoted to the faces of his big-hatted heroes.

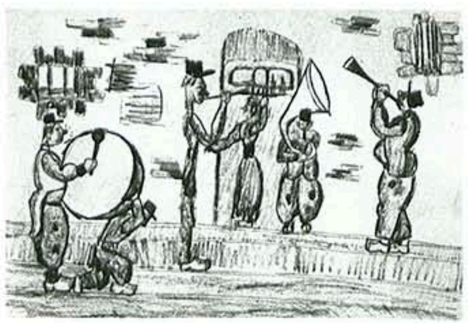
From his earliest exposure to formal education, he had trouble adjusting to the schoolroom regimen. Teachers battled with religious fervor to "correct" his left-handedness. Reading was an agonizing chore. The Harding Museum was just across the street from his school, and it was far more rewarding to stroll among Frederic Remington's bronzes of the American West, or to exercise the polo ponies at the armory not far away. The world he created from these experiences supplanted the normal progression of rote learning. Nothing in his

16. "Jackson's Sandwich Board and Coffee Shop," Halstead Street, Chicago. Harry's mother, Ellen, in white. 1938

17. *Ruby Mae Woods*. 1943. Ink and pencil on paper, 8 x 10¼"
Collection of the artist

18. Harry Jackson at the age of five years. 1929

19. Childhood painting of Greek warrior. 1931. Poster colors on cardboard. Collection of the artist

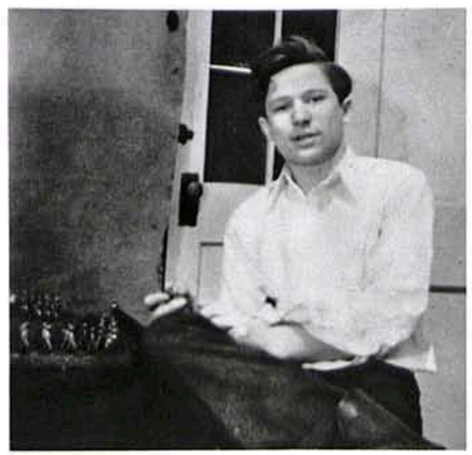


20. Childhood drawing of street band. 1931. Crayon on paper. Collection of the artist

21. Thomas Hart Benton. *The Fur Traders, Pioneers*. Panels from the State of Indiana Exhibit at the Century of Progress International Exposition, Chicago, Ill., 1933–34. Egg tempera on canvas-covered panel, 20 x 12'. Indiana University Auditorium, Bloomington, Ind.

schooling could compete with cowboys, horses, and art. The art was not always "good" or respectable—the chromoliths at home, especially one of "Old Ironsides," the sometimes stiff work of Remington—but it was alive to Jackson, and out of it he forged the links of his own identity and his passion for art itself.

A few of his elders recognized in the boy's artwork a talent worth encouraging. His Aunt Doris, who one Christmas bought him a Hoot Gibson cowboy outfit—"hat, chaps, lariat, gun, the works"—often took him to the Chicago Art Institute, where he marveled at the full-scale plaster casts of Donatello's and Verrocchio's great equestrian sculptures. In 1932, at the age of eight, he began his first private art lessons, with Todras Geller. Then, through the efforts of his teacher, Mrs. Ann Fitzgerald, he attended Saturday children's classes at the Art Institute. He was to win scholarships for the Institute classes in 1935, '36, and '37.



22. Jackson with part of his toy soldier collection. 1937

23. Jackson at fifteen, working for Earl Martin at Wapiti, Wyo., in the fall of 1939

In 1933, some of Thomas Hart Benton's mural paintings were shown at the Institute in connection with the World's Fair (pl. 21). Their impact on Harry was profound. Benton was not a vague figure from the distant past, but a living American master. To Harry, even at the age of nine, they proved that it was possible to paint the American scene, the one he knew, in the manner of the masters, whose work he was beginning to know. Also important were Daniel Catton Rich's lectures on Renaissance art at the Institute and a lecture series at the University of Chicago to which his mother took him. Harry developed the habit of sketching the speaker in action, afterward working his way through the crowd to get the speaker's autograph. (He remembers the graciousness of Thomas Mann as he signed one of these early efforts.)

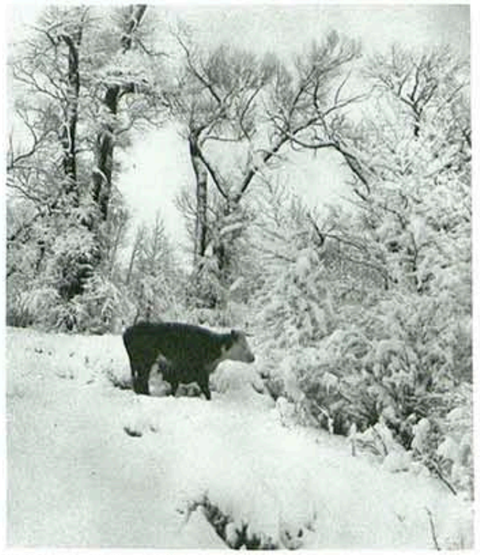
Another interest stands out in Jackson's childhood world. He amassed more than 3,000 toy soldiers—figures of lead and of papier mâché—a collection for which he won a prize at the age of ten in an exhibition at the Marshall Field Department Store. He was not content with just any toy soldiers; his had to be special, authentic. Carefully, with adhesive tape, bits of leather, wood, tin, and paint, he worked at converting them into the British Indian Army of the Northwest Frontier (pl. 22).

At the age of thirteen, Jackson ran away from home, hitchhiking to New York City with a friend (although they might as easily have gone in the other direction if the first ride offered had been westward). Once in New York, he went directly to the British Library of Information in Rockefeller Center, where he consulted Major General Sewell, retired. Sewell was patient and helpful, and when Jackson left he was prepared to detail his British Indian Army in exact replica of uniform and accoutrement. The episode ended when a truant officer notified by Chicago whisked the two friends back to renewed skirmishes on the plane of formal education.

But Jackson was already moving toward what he would later consider a rebirth. The ambitions he had nurtured were to be realized in a dramatic way, spurred at first by a seemingly casual event. In the first week of February 1937, he picked up the most recent issue of *LIFE* magazine. The cover photograph, a wintry Wyoming scene with a Hereford range cow tending her newborn calf in knee-deep snow, bore the title "Winter on the Range" (pl. 25). His attention focused on the related photographic essay by Charles Belden titled "Winter Comes to a Wyoming Ranch" (pls. 24, 26). (Prophetically, the issue also featured a spread on regionalist painter Grant Wood's latest landscape painting, *Spring Turning*, with its captioned discussion of his use of clay models to aid the study of volume, light, shade and scale, a technique that Jackson was to use and develop years later and that may have registered unconsciously at this time.)

Belden's photographs captured the romance of the American cowboy, the world of the demigods who passed through Harry's mother's café. To Harry they represented the place he wanted to be, spiritually and physically. The pictures are about survival in hard conditions, and about what that calls forth in the people (and animals) who are born or choose to live in those conditions. A coyote wails into the falling snow. Cattle trail in endless, undulating procession across the snowscape. A day-old dogie (motherless calf) shivers in the cold. A horseback cowboy of the Pitchfork Ranch carries a rescued calf across his saddle, "back to warm

24. Charles Belden. *Cowboy Rescuing a Calf.* Photograph for *LIFE* Magazine, Feb. 8, 1937



25. Charles Belden. *Winter on the Range.* Cover photograph for *LIFE*, Feb. 8, 1937

26. Charles Belden. *The Long, Long Line.* Photograph for *LIFE*, Feb. 8, 1937

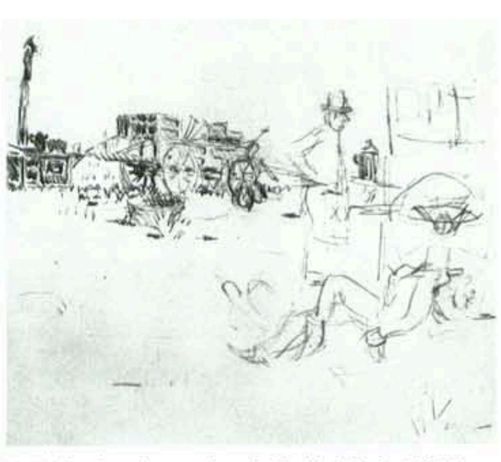
27. Harry Jackson, Cal Todd, Bill Hendricks, and Ken Ellison (left to right) at the rodeo in Cody, Wyo. July 4, 1939

safety." Belden himself, the New York-born part-owner of the Pitchfork, is shown in the photo credit section with an antelope fawn on his lap.

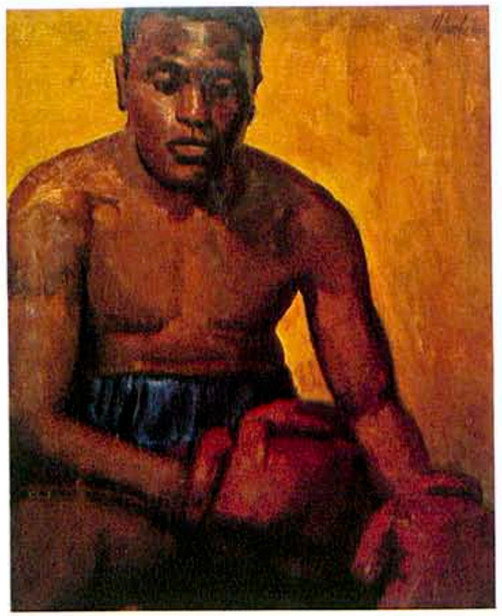
The images remained vivid in Harry's mind over the following year, confirming his resolve to go west. In January 1938 he entered Hyde Park High School and also began to study oil painting and life drawing on scholarship at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. Soon he dropped out of high school to devote himself entirely to the study of art. Then, in the summer, at the age of fourteen, he put on his cowboy hat and boots, left his mother a note, and thumbed his way out of Chicago on US 20. The final hitch left him at a gas station in Cody, Wyoming, where within minutes the first of a new family of western friends, Clayton and Trude Burke, drove up and gave him not only a job at the Diamond Lumber Company, run jointly with the Burkes' son-in-law Sam Decker, but a home as well. Other jobs followed, including chore boy for Earl Martin at the Bradford Ranch, where he 'wrangled horses, milked two cows, built fence and hayed for Ned Frost across the valley."

But Jackson had come west to become a cowboy on the Pitchfork Ranch, and that is where he finally went. The Pitchfork was a 300,000-acre remnant of one of the original western rangeland empires. Started in 1878 by cattle baron Otto Franc (Count Otto Franc von Liechtenstein), it was now owned by Eugene Phelps and his brother-in-law Charles Belden, whose *LIFE* photographs had lured Jackson to Wyoming. The ranch still operated in the old ways of the open range, trailing cattle, branding calves with their Pitchfork mark of ownership each spring on the range, with a chuckwagon the only conveyance on wheels to interrupt the horizon. Even the feeding during the harsh winter months was performed with horse-drawn hayracks, twenty-four of them. Today only a handful of ranches still operate completely from horseback. Harry Jackson was able to take part in the last days of the free and independent, highly romanticized, but lonely and raw life of the working cowboy.

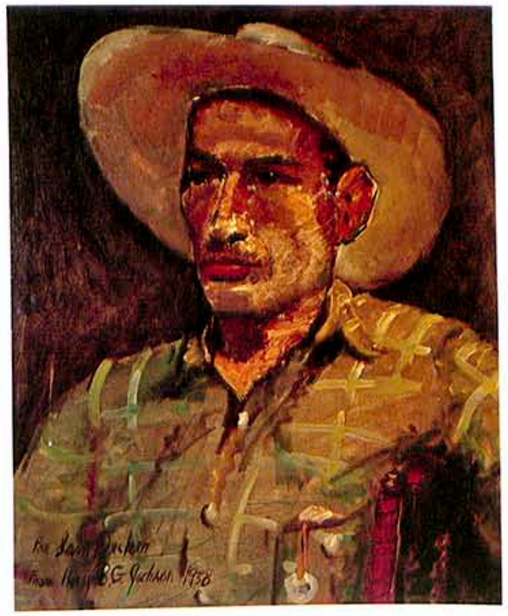
He was the butt of every joke designed to torment a tenderfoot. Leading the pack of jesters was Cal Todd, who later became general manager of the Pitchfork and Harry's closest friend. "We pulled as many jokes on him as we could, but he was a real good dude, you know what I mean. He took them fine. If he didn't know how to do something, he'd watch to see how it was done. Then, if that was the thing to do, that's the way he wanted to do it. He was willing to learn anything. He absorbed every-



28–30. Sketches of cow work on the Pitchfork Ranch. 1939–42



31. *Negro Boxer.* 1938. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30". Collection of the artist



32. *Sam Decker.* 1938. Oil on canvas, 24 x 30". Collection Sam Decker, Cody, Wyo.

thing that was going on." Eventually even the cowboys' pranks.

"We'd be riding and I'd point to some horses across on another ridge," recalled Cal. "'See that lead horse over there, Harry? That's a gelding. And the bay behind is a mare.'"

"Why," Harry would exclaim in utter astonishment, "how do you know that, Cal?" He strained and squinted to see where Cal was pointing.

"Oh, you just know those things, Harry. Just come to know those things."

Harry squinted some more at the moving dots on the horizon, then turned: "Hell, Cal, you don't know any more about it than I do."

The hazing faded as Jackson proved his mettle. The cowboys were impressed with his ability to take a ribbing, and how determined he was to be a cowboy. "Like the time I broke my foot bad riding a half-broke colt but still rode every day, with the cast, and 'made a hand,' until I just cut the cast off myself, the way I'd seen an older cowboy do."

The sketchbook Jackson packed with him fascinated the cowboys as much as they did him. "He used to carry that book all the time," Cal recalled. "Every chance he got he'd be sketching, drawing something. He was always asking questions about what we were doing, and why." Just as he wanted to paint proper uniforms on his toy soldiers, Jackson was intent on drawing the cowboy, his horse, and his equipment, with an accuracy even the Pitchfork cowboys would approve. Drawing was no more and no less than learning to be a cowboy. It was the cowboy way of living and looking at life that had attracted him in the first place, and every particular of that life had to be part of his art. He would spend hours in the newly founded Cody Museum (known as "Uncle Willy's attic") on the occasions he volunteered to sweep out the place. The miscellany of objects he found there, from bronzes to saddles, bits, and spurs, carried as much culture and human experience in their own way as any great work of art, especially to one who could also appreciate the differences.

Jackson returned to Chicago for short periods over the next four years to attend art school, including the Frederick Mizen Academy and the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. In Wyoming he studied painting with Ed Grigware, an acquaintance of his Aunt Doris and an illustrator who divided his time between Chicago and Cody. He sketched everything around him, from the landscape and the general cow work to details of spurs

33. *Ropin' the Stud.* 1941. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24". Collection of the artist

and saddle riggings. His paintings, such as *Cowboy in a Yellow Saddle Slicker* and *Portrait of a Negro Boxer* (pl. 31), were usually of individual figures to whom he was drawn by their strength of character. Many of these works ended up in the collections of Cody residents who had befriended the "Chicago kid," including the Burkes, the Deckers, and Charles and Frances Belden. His very first sale, a painting of local mountain man "Dirty George" Inman, was to a schoolteacher.

For more than three years Jackson followed his calling in Wyoming. Then, on December 7, 1941, the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the idyll of apprenticeship on the Pitchfork, just "making a hand" and sketching cowboy life, came to an abrupt end. The code of conduct and survival he was beginning to master in the informal company of his cowboy guides and companions would within a year serve him in a larger arena of life and death.