

Contents

	<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xv</i>
1.	Introduction: Discovering Merritt Dana Houghton	3
2.	Finding Vantage Points: 1846-1902	11
3.	The Grand Encampment Boom: 1902-1904	51
4.	New Horizons: 1905-1919	95
5.	Drawing Conclusions: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective	125
	Portfolio: Samples from the Houghton Portfolio	133
	<i>Notes</i>	<i>191</i>
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>205</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>211</i>

Illustrations

Maps

1. *All known Houghton sketch locations, 1891–1915* 7
2. *Houghton sketch locations, 1891–1902* 10
3. *Houghton sketch locations, 1902–1904* 50
4. *Houghton sketch locations, 1905–1915* 94

Figures

- | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1.1. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Buffalo, Wyoming</i> | 2 | 1.12. <i>Topographical view of the Spring Creek Ranch of Christ King and Sons, Lewiston, Fergus Co., Mont.</i> | 9 |
| 1.2. <i>Fort Laramie in 1836 for C. G. Coutant's History of Wyoming</i> | 4 | 2.1. <i>"Photographic Rooms at Houghton's" ad from the Carbon County Journal</i> | 14 |
| 1.3. <i>Ranch of K. P. Nickell</i> | 5 | 2.2. <i>Washakie</i> | 15 |
| 1.4. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1899</i> | 5 | 2.3. <i>"Wee-a Wah" or Whitehorse at Fort Washakie</i> | 16 |
| 1.5. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Sheridan, Wyoming, 1905</i> | 5 | 2.4. <i>Verso showing Houghton's imprint</i> | 16 |
| 1.6. <i>Lundquist "Wooden Shoe" Ranch</i> | 5 | 2.5. <i>Attending the Indian Races</i> | 16 |
| 1.7. <i>Cover of A Portfolio of Wyoming Views</i> | 5 | 2.6. <i>Methodist Church, Rawlins</i> | 17 |
| 1.8. <i>Cover of Views of Southern Wyoming: Copper Belt Edition</i> | 6 | 2.7. <i>Bird's-Eye View of South Pass City</i> | 18 |
| 1.9. <i>Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts</i> | 6 | 2.8. <i>Toll Gate, Green River</i> | 18 |
| 1.10. <i>Former Saratoga newspaperman Dick Perue with the original 1903 engraving plate for the Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts</i> | 6 | 2.9. <i>Round Up Kitchen, Cowboys at the Chuckwagon</i> | 18 |
| 1.11. <i>Sunset Farms, West Spokane</i> | 8 | 2.10. <i>Masthead from Houghton's short-lived Wyoming Illustrated Monthly</i> | 21 |
| | | 2.11. <i>Residence of C. E. Carpenter</i> | 21 |
| | | 2.12. <i>Residence of N. F. Spicer</i> | 22 |

2.13. <i>Keystone 20-Stamp Gold Mill</i>	22	2.39. <i>J. M. McIntosh Ranch on the Sweetwater,</i> 1899	40
2.14. <i>Stamp Room, Keystone Gold Mill</i>	22	2.40. <i>Sutton's "Boot Jack" Ranch on the Upper</i> <i>Green River</i>	40
2.15. <i>Vanner Room, Keystone Gold Mill</i>	22	2.41. <i>Ranch of T. E. Andrus</i>	40
2.16. <i>Woods Landing</i>	23	2.42. <i>Ed P. Steele Ranch</i>	41
2.17. <i>Red Sandstone Rocks at Red Buttes</i>	23	2.43. <i>Ranch of Harvy Dekalb</i>	41
2.18. <i>Merritt Dana Houghton in Laramie,</i> ca. 1900	25	2.44. <i>A. W. Smith Mule Shoe Ranch</i>	41
2.19. <i>Map showing Houghton ranch drawing</i> <i>locations in Albany County, Wyoming</i>	26	2.45. <i>A. W. Smith Old 67 Ranch</i>	41
2.20. <i>John Goetz Ranch showing the schoolhouse</i>	27	2.46. <i>James Mickelson Circle Ranch</i>	42
2.21. <i>Lundquist "Wooden Shoe" Ranch showing its</i> <i>schoolhouse</i>	28	2.47. <i>Ranch of D. B. Budd, Big Piney P.O. Green</i> <i>River Valley, Wyo.</i>	42
2.22. <i>Tatham Brothers Ranch</i>	28	2.48. <i>Ranch of Roney Pomeroy</i>	42
2.23. <i>James Hardman Ranch on Sand Creek</i>	29	2.49. <i>Opal Ranch, C. F. Roberson (Proprietor),</i> <i>(Opal, Wyo.)</i>	43
2.24. <i>John Reid Ranch</i>	29	2.50. <i>Fort Bridger in 1850</i>	43
2.25. <i>M. E. Nellis Ranch</i>	30	2.51. <i>Fort Supply</i>	44
2.26. <i>Wolbol Ranch on North Fork</i>	30	2.52. <i>Fort Bridger as a U.S. Fort</i>	44
2.27. <i>William Kenney Ranch on Cottonwood Creek</i>	31	2.53. <i>Gold Hill in 1900</i>	45
2.28. <i>K. P. Nickell Ranch</i>	32	2.54. <i>William Maxwell Ranch at Tie Siding, south</i> <i>of Laramie</i>	46
2.29. <i>Fort Caspar (Platte Bridge)</i>	32	2.55. <i>Ranch of Mrs. J. D. Baily and Son</i>	46
2.30. <i>Fort Fetterman</i>	33	2.56. <i>Herbert King Ranch on Rock Creek</i>	46
2.31. <i>Alcova Hot Springs</i>	34	2.57. <i>Ranch of H. Ralph Hall</i>	46
2.32. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Saratoga, 1898</i>	34	2.58. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Laramie</i>	47
2.33. <i>Old Fort Collins in 1865</i>	36	2.59. <i>Pen Sketch of Centennial</i>	47
2.34. <i>Bird's-Eye View of Fort Collins, Colorado, in</i> 1899	37	2.60. <i>Planing Mills and Lumber Yard of the W. H.</i> <i>Holliday Company, Laramie</i>	48
2.35. <i>Fort Laramie in 1889</i>	38	2.61. <i>Mountain Sheep</i>	48
2.36. <i>Bridger's Ferry</i>	38	3.1. <i>Early Pen Drawing of Encampment, 1902</i>	53
2.37. <i>Jim Baker's Cabin, Dixon, Wyoming</i>	39	3.2. <i>The Town of Battle</i>	54
2.38. <i>The James May Ranch near Centennial,</i> Wyoming, 1899	39	3.3. <i>Tramway Station #2</i>	54

3.4. <i>The Ferris Haggarty Mine</i>	55	3.28. <i>Dam at the Head of the Pipeline.</i>	67
3.5. <i>Reduction Works of the North American Copper Company, Grand Encampment, Wyoming</i>	55	3.29. <i>Cabin of M. Hanley, Purgatory Gulch</i>	67
3.6. <i>The Copper Giant Mine</i> was owned in part by Buffalo Bill Cody	56	3.30. <i>Rambler, 1903</i>	68
3.7. <i>This Bird's-Eye View of Saratoga</i> updated Houghton's earlier 1898 sketch.	56	3.31. <i>Riverside</i> , labeled here incorrectly, was a small community just north of Encampment	68
3.8. <i>Ranch of N. K. Boswell</i> was one of Houghton's largest sketches to date	57	3.32. <i>Ranch of A. H. Huston</i>	69
3.9. <i>Elk in Wooded Country</i>	58	3.33. <i>W. H. Wolfard Ranch</i>	69
3.10. <i>The Sheepherder's Home</i>	58	3.34. <i>The Big Creek Ranch.</i>	69
3.11. <i>Breaking a Road, 1903</i>	59	3.35. <i>The D. Frank Crout Ranch</i>	69
3.12. <i>The Early Storm, 1903</i>	59	3.36. <i>The Ranch of George R. Brown</i>	70
3.13. <i>Rocky Mountain Copper Company</i>	60	3.37. <i>Dr. Dunsmore's Ranch</i>	70
3.14. <i>The Carbondale Coal Mines</i>	60	3.38. <i>Andrew Olson's Ranch</i> , at the current location of the town of Elk Mountain	70
3.15. <i>Dillon, Wyoming, in 1903.</i>	61	3.39. <i>Duke, a Prized Hereford</i>	71
3.16. <i>The Elk Mine</i>	62	3.40. <i>Sheep Bridge / Mountain Sheep.</i>	71
3.17. <i>The Moon Anchor Mine</i>	62	3.41. <i>Antelope in Pass Creek Basin</i>	71
3.18. <i>Houghton's second sketch of Grand Encampment</i> emphasizes the smelter. . . .	63	3.42. <i>Head-quarters of the Carbon Timber Co. on the Grand Encampment</i>	72
3.19. <i>Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts</i>	64	3.43. <i>Fort Steele Tie Loading Plant of the Carbon Timber Company</i>	72
3.20. <i>The Evening Star Mine.</i>	65	3.44. <i>Peryam's Hotel, Encampment</i>	73
3.21. <i>The Vauxhall Mine</i>	65	3.45. <i>The E&H Building</i> in Encampment is one of the few surviving buildings from Houghton's time	73
3.22. <i>The New Rambler Mine</i>	65	3.46. <i>Richmond's Livery Feed and Sale Stable, Saratoga</i>	73
3.23. <i>The Jessie Mines</i>	66	3.47. <i>The Hotel Wolf</i> remains a landmark in downtown Saratoga	74
3.24. <i>The Mohawk Mine</i>	66	3.48. <i>A cowboy vignette</i>	74
3.25. <i>Interior of the Copper Bar Shaft House</i>	66	3.49. <i>A miner's cabin vignette.</i>	74
3.26. <i>The Wolverine Mine</i>	66	3.50. <i>A Watering Hole vignette</i>	74
3.27. <i>The Sweede Mine</i>	67		

3.51. The historiated letter “O,” from <i>A Portfolio of Wyoming Views</i>	74	3.70. <i>The Battle Lake Basin</i>	82
3.52. The historiated letter “C,” from <i>A Portfolio of Wyoming Views</i>	74	3.71. <i>The Ranch of Jones and Williams</i>	82
3.53. The historiated letter “W,” from <i>A Portfolio of Wyoming Views</i>	74	3.72. <i>Anderson’s Farm Gardens, Grand Encampment, Wyoming</i>	83
3.54. The historiated letter “T,” from <i>A Portfolio of Wyoming Views</i>	74	3.73. <i>The Home and Pole Camp of John Sublette</i>	83
3.55. Houghton’s advertisement for his second book appeared in the <i>Grand Encampment Herald</i> just two weeks after his first book became available	75	3.74. Houghton poked fun at his publisher, the <i>Grand Encampment Herald</i> , in this sketch of a small donkey munching on the paper	83
3.56. The cover of Houghton’s second book included one of the only two known photographs of the artist	77	3.75. The historiated letter “B” included a bucking bronco.	84
3.57. Houghton included this photograph of mountain man Jim Baker that he had taken in Rawlins in 1879	77	3.76. The historiated letter “C,” from <i>Views of Southern Wyoming</i>	84
3.58. <i>The Pearl Smelter</i>	78	3.77. The historiated letter “M,” from <i>Views of Southern Wyoming</i>	84
3.59. <i>The Big Creek Mine</i>	78	3.78. The historiated letter “R,” from <i>Views of Southern Wyoming</i>	84
3.60. <i>The Big Horn Mine</i>	79	3.79. The historiated letter “S,” from <i>Views of Southern Wyoming</i>	84
3.61. <i>The Ben Hur and Black Foot Mines</i>	79	3.80. The historiated letter “T,” from <i>Views of Southern Wyoming</i>	84
3.62. <i>The Independence Mining Company</i>	79	3.81. <i>The Beginning of a Prosperous Copper Mining Camp in the Encampment Copper District</i>	85
3.63. <i>The Magpie Mine</i>	79	3.82. <i>The Battle Lake Basin</i>	85
3.64. <i>The Montezuma and the Almeda Mines</i>	79	3.83. <i>Encampment from the Southwest</i>	86
3.65. <i>Jack Pot Mining and Milling Company property</i>	79	3.84. <i>Flocks on the Red Desert</i>	87
3.66. <i>The Pluto Mine</i>	79	3.85. <i>Dixon, Wyoming</i>	88
3.67. <i>Sketch of Dillon, 1903</i>	80	3.86. <i>Baggs, Wyoming</i>	88
3.68. <i>Sketch of Dillon, 1904</i>	80	3.87. <i>Pearl, Colorado, in 1904</i>	89
3.69. <i>Bird’s-Eye View of Wolcott, Wyoming, the nearest station to Encampment</i>	81	3.88. <i>Walden, Colo., 1902</i>	90
		3.89. <i>The Vyvex VX Ranch east of Encampment</i>	91
		3.90. <i>The Toothaker Ranch</i>	91

3.91. Bird's-Eye View of the South Park Vegetable Gardens, Property of J. J. Wombaker Grand Encampment, Wyo.	91	4.14. Sheridan State Fish Hatchery District 2	107
3.92. View on the Ranch of Haglund Brothers, Carbon County, Wyo.	92	4.15. Bird's-Eye View of Big Timber, Montana, 1906	108
3.93. View of the UL Ranch	92	4.16. Topographical view of the Spring Creek Ranch of Christ King and Son, Lewistown, Fergus Co., Mont.	109
3.94. Topography of the El Ray Mining Property and Its Immediate Vicinity, 1904	93	4.17. Portrait view of the Christ King Ranch. . . .	110
4.1. Bird's-Eye View of Wheatland, Wyoming, 1905	97	4.18. Bird's-Eye View of Dillon Looking Southwest	112
4.2. Bird's-Eye View of Casper, Wyoming, 1905	98	4.19. Mullan, Idaho.	114
4.3. Bird's-Eye View of Sheridan, Wyoming, 1905	99	4.20. Hunter Mining District, Chloride Hill, in the Coeur d'Alenes, 1907	115
4.4. This simplified sketch of Guernsey appeared in a 1907 issue of the <i>Wyoming Industrial Journal</i>	99	4.21. The Dredge in its Artificial Lake could have been made in Idaho.	115
4.5. Fairbanks was a small community near Guernsey	100	4.22. Five Mile Prairie, Washington.	117
4.6. Bird's-Eye View of Buffalo, Wyoming, 1905. . . .	101	4.23. The Empire Coal and Coke Company	119
4.7. Hole in the Wall.	101	4.24. Houghton's Valentine sketch and poem showed his affection for his new home in Spokane	120
4.8. Big Horn City.	102	4.25. Sunset Farms, West Spokane	122
4.9. Dayton, Wyoming in 1905	102	4.26. West Spokane	123
4.10. Monarch, Wyoming in 1905	103	4.27. Spokane, Wash. Relief Map of Northern and Central Portions, 1915	124
4.11. Dietz, Wyoming.	104	5.1. Ranch Scene	128
4.12. Munkers Coal Mine, 1905.	104	5.2. Greenacres, Washington	129
4.13. Trout Farm of S. H. Smith, Sheridan, Wyoming	105	5.3. Helping the Messwagon	131

Portfolio Plates

1. Fort Collins, Colo. 1899.	134	6. Grand Encampment from the South West, 1904	139
2. Walden, Colo., 1902	135	7. Wheatland, 1905.	140
3. Rambler, 1903	136	8. Bird's-Eye View of Sheridan, 1905	141
4. Saratoga, Wyoming, 1903.	137	9. Bird's-Eye View of Buffalo, Wyoming, 1905	142
5. Flocks on the Red Desert, 1903	138		

10. Dietz, Wyoming, 1906	143	33. Toothaker Ranch, Encampment, Wyoming, ca. 1903.	168
11. Bird's-Eye View of Dillon, Montana, 1906	144	34. Topographical View of the Spring Creek Ranch of Christ King and Sons, Lewistown, Fergus Co. Mont., 1906	169
12. Mullan, Idaho, 1907	145	35. Trabing Commercial Co.'s Store, Laramie, Wyoming, 1891	171
13. Five Mile Prairie, Washington, 1908	146	36. Soda Works, Laramie, Wyoming, 1891	172
14. West Spokane, 1910	147	37. Bird's-Eye View of the South Park Vegetable Gardens, Encampment, Wyoming, 1903	173
15. Spokane, Wash. Relief Map of Northern and Central Portions, 1915	148	38. Head-quarters of the Carbon Timber Company on the Grand Encampment, 1903.	174
16. Keystone 20-Stamp Gold Mill, 1891	150	39. Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts, Wyoming, 1903	176
17. The Ferris-Haggarty Mine, Carbon Co. Wyoming, 1902	151	40. Sunset Farms, West Spokane, Washington, 1914	177
18. Reduction Works of the North American Copper Company, Grand Encampment, Wyoming	152	41. Fort Fetterman, from C. G. Courant's History of Wyoming, 1898	179
19. Head of the Encampment Pipe Line, 1902	153	42. Dugouts and Log Houses of Carbon in 1876, ca. 1899	180
20. The Sweede Mine, Pearl Mining District, Colorado, 1903	154	43. Fort Laramie in 1889, ca. 1899	181
21. The Discovery Shaft, ca. 1903	155	44. Deer Creek Station during the 1860s, ca. 1898	182
22. Topography of the El Ray Mining Property and Its Immediate Vicinity, 1904	156	45. Fort Bridger in 1889, ca. 1898	183
23. Dredge in its Artificial Lake, ca. 1907.	157	46. Elk in Wooded Country, 1902	185
24. Hunter Mining District, Chloride Hill, in the Coeur D'Alenes, 1907.	158	47. Slaughtering Establishment of Harden and Hardman, Laramie, Wyoming, 1903	186
25. Empire Coal and Coke Company, ca. 1910	159	48. Breaking a Road, 1903	187
26. Unidentified Ranch, ca. 1904	161	49. The Early Storm, 1903	188
27. The J. M. McIntosh Ranch, 1899.	162	50. Trout Farm of S. H. Smith, Sheridan, Wyoming, 1905	189
28. Ranch of Roney Pomeroy, Fontenelle Uinta Co. Wyoming, 1899	163		
29. Sutton's Boot Jack Ranch, Wyo., 1899	164		
30. Ranch of K. P. Nickell, 1902.	165		
31. Opal Ranch of C. F. Roberson, ca. 1902.	166		
32. Ranch of N. K. Boswell, Albany Co., Wyo.	167		

In the summer of 1988, I first discovered the work of Merritt Dana Houghton in the small northern Wyoming town of Buffalo while I was rephotographing a historic image of the town's Main Street made by Cheyenne photographer Joseph E. Stimson in 1903. Not quite able to figure out exactly where Stimson had positioned his camera, I ventured to the local Jim Gatchell Memorial Museum for help. While there, I discovered Houghton's pen and ink drawing of Buffalo made around the same time as Stimson's photograph (see figure 1.1). Unlike Stimson's view taken on Main Street, Houghton's image was a fanciful one, looking down at the town from a high vantage point. The drawing showed the distant Bighorn Mountains, and I could pick out Clear Creek running through town as well as the buildings in Stimson's photograph. This enabled me to locate exactly the correct location at which to re-shoot my photograph. As I worked on my rephotography project across the state, I found more Houghton town drawings as well as scenes of ranches, mines, forts, businesses, and animals. I also discovered that he published two small books of his work, in 1903 and 1904.

Three years later, in 1991, I spent my summer in Laramie working on a research grant from the Wyoming

Council for the Humanities, locating and identifying every Houghton image I could, researching his life, and compiling it into a catalog of his work. In those days before the internet, this type of research required traveling to potential museums and archives to see the artwork and look through files. I knew that both of Houghton's booklets had focused on the southern Wyoming town of Encampment, so I was delighted to find more originals there plus a cache of research materials on Houghton's life. I found additional images and biographical material in nearby Saratoga, at the Carbon County Museum in Rawlins, and at the University of Wyoming. In Cheyenne, I discovered another trove of sketches including historical views of Wyoming forts and stage stations Houghton created for C. G. Coutant's 1899 *History of Wyoming* (see figure 1.2) and a biographical sketch made in the 1930s that described both Houghton and his wife, Fannie. There were also several beautiful Houghton watercolor paintings, including one of the infamous K. P. Nickell Ranch, where the stock detective Tom Horn had murdered young Willie Nickell (see figure 1.3).

I also discovered two enormous original bird's-eye views, one of Fort Collins, Colorado, made in 1899 and another of Sheridan, Wyoming, made in 1905.

<https://doi.org/10.5876/9781646423668.c001>

FIGURE 1.2. *Fort Laramie in 1836* for C. G. Coutant's *History of Wyoming*. Courtesy, Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources, Wyoming State Museum, Cheyenne.



The Fort Collins drawing hung in a lawyer's office and depicted the city from high above the Cache La Poudre River, with today's Colorado State University and the Front Range easily located (see figure 1.4).

At four feet tall and eight feet wide, the Sheridan sketch is the largest Houghton image I found (see figure 1.5). Its vantage point is also an artificial one east of the town looking west where Main Street is clearly visible. A closer look reveals many local landmarks including the Sheridan Inn, Fort MacKenzie (today's Sheridan Veterans Administration Medical Center), plus the city cemetery, the County Courthouse, a railroad roundhouse, and a baseball park.

My Houghton research also unearthed the book *Wyoming's Pioneer Ranches*, a 1955 publication written by "Three Native Sons of the Laramie Plains": Robert Homer Burns, Andrew Springs Gillespie, and Willing Gay Richardson. Although this large volume does not cover the entire state, it does look closely at the many ranches around Laramie and includes more than a dozen Houghton drawings. While reading the book, I learned that Houghton had once worked as an

itinerant schoolteacher, moving from ranch to ranch, sketching places where he taught.

Houghton's ranch drawings work a bit like the bird's-eye town views because they also look down on the homesteads and include people, wagons, ranch buildings, and pastures set in their surrounding landscapes. They also depict types of cattle as well as poultry and horses. In his sketch of the Lundquist "Wooden Shoe" Ranch southwest of Laramie, Houghton even placed a schoolhouse, clearly marked with "District 17," at the center of his drawing (see figure 1.6).

Houghton's two promotional booklets, *A Portfolio of Wyoming Views* (1903) and *Views of Southern Wyoming: Copper Belt Edition* (1904), contain more drawings (see figures 1.7 and 1.8). The first book featured over forty original sketches including views of towns, ranches, tie cutting, mines, animals, and businesses. Newspapers reported that it was a tremendous success and that all 1,000 copies sold in a few months.¹ Houghton responded with the second book the following year, with even more area drawings. I found original copies of these rare books in Cheyenne, Laramie, and Encampment.

The most spectacular find was an original copper engraving owned by Saratoga mayor Dick Perue, a former newspaperman who had been given the piece when he purchased the newspaper in the 1960s. According to Perue, a previous owner had hidden the plate during a World War II scrap metal drive because of its historical value. The image, *Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts*, was amazing because it showed a topographical view of the Encampment area

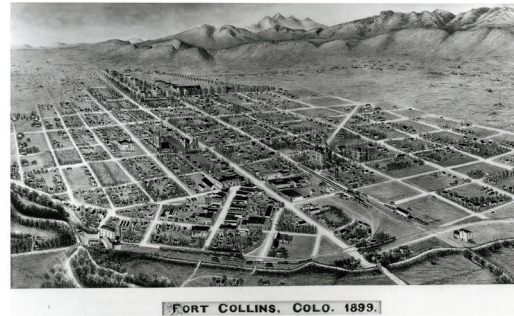


FIGURE 1.3. (LEFT) *Ranch of K. P. Nickell.* Courtesy, Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources, Wyoming State Museum, Cheyenne.

FIGURE 1.4. (RIGHT) *Bird's-Eye View of Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1899.* Courtesy, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



FIGURE 1.5. *Bird's-Eye View of Sheridan, Wyoming, 1905.* Author's collection.

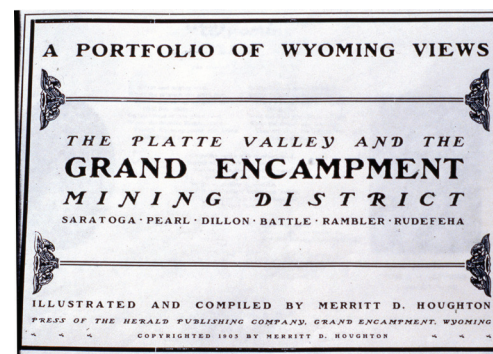
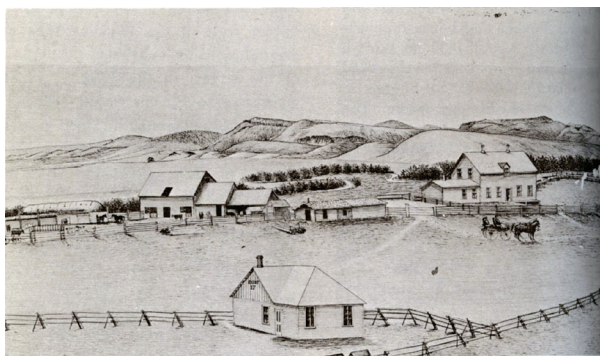


FIGURE 1.6. (LEFT) *Lundquist "Wooden Shoe" Ranch, from Wyoming's Pioneer Ranches*

FIGURE 1.7. (RIGHT) *Cover of A Portfolio of Wyoming Views.* Courtesy, Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources, Wyoming State Museum, Cheyenne.

FIGURE 1.8. (LEFT) Cover of *Views of Southern Wyoming: Copper Belt Edition*. Courtesy, Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources, Wyoming State Museum, Cheyenne.

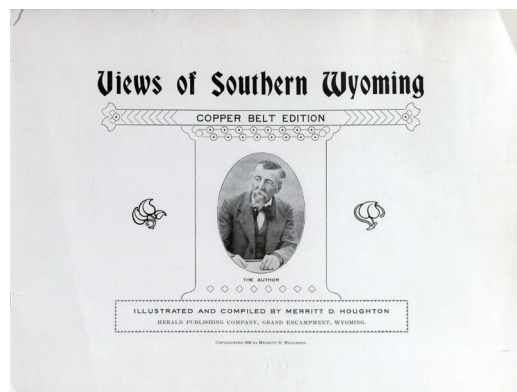
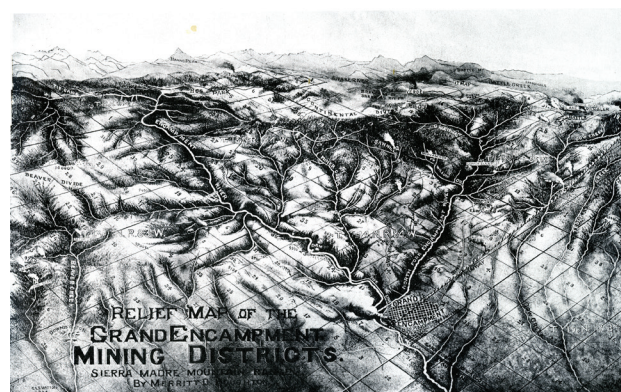


FIGURE 1.9. (RIGHT) *Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts*. Courtesy, Dick Perue/Bob Martin Collection, Historical Reproductions by Perue, Saratoga, WY.



on which Houghton had placed the national grid as well as local features, including mines and the aerial tramway that brought copper ore to town (see figure 1.9). Perue could still make original prints from the ninety-year-old engraving (see figure 1.10).

By the end of summer 1991, I had compiled a catalog of 144 Houghton images including 26 town views, 32 ranch scenes, 33 mining drawings, 20 historical sketches, 9 topographical pictures, 4 images showing the tie and lumber industries, and another 20 miscellaneous views. For each, I included a list showing pertinent information and location. I also included a basic biography of Houghton's life and deposited a copy at the University of Wyoming library and kept another for myself.²

I updated my catalog the next year with 8 new town views, 2 mining scenes, and 15 new ranch drawings plus views found while on a trip to Spokane where Houghton died in 1919. On that trip, I conducted research at the county courthouse and visited what

is today the Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, where I discovered four more Houghton sketches of Spokane suburbs and another of Mullan, Idaho. One called *Sunset Farms, West Spokane* also included the national grid, farmers' names, and their main products and animals, such as Holsteins, alfalfa, and grain hay (see figure 1.11). The image also showed forests, streams, a rural high school, and, in the distance, Spokane stretching to distant mountains. In the clouds above the city, Houghton added "1910 Official Census Spokane 104102."

In autumn 1994, I published an article in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* titled "Pen Sketches of Promise: The Western Drawings of Merritt Dana Houghton" that included 2 portraits, 2 watercolors, and 7 pen and ink sketches. The article was well received by the editors, and I was surprised to see in a later issue a letter to the editor about Houghton that showed 2 more sketches the artist had completed of a Montana ranch near Lewistown (see figure 1.12).

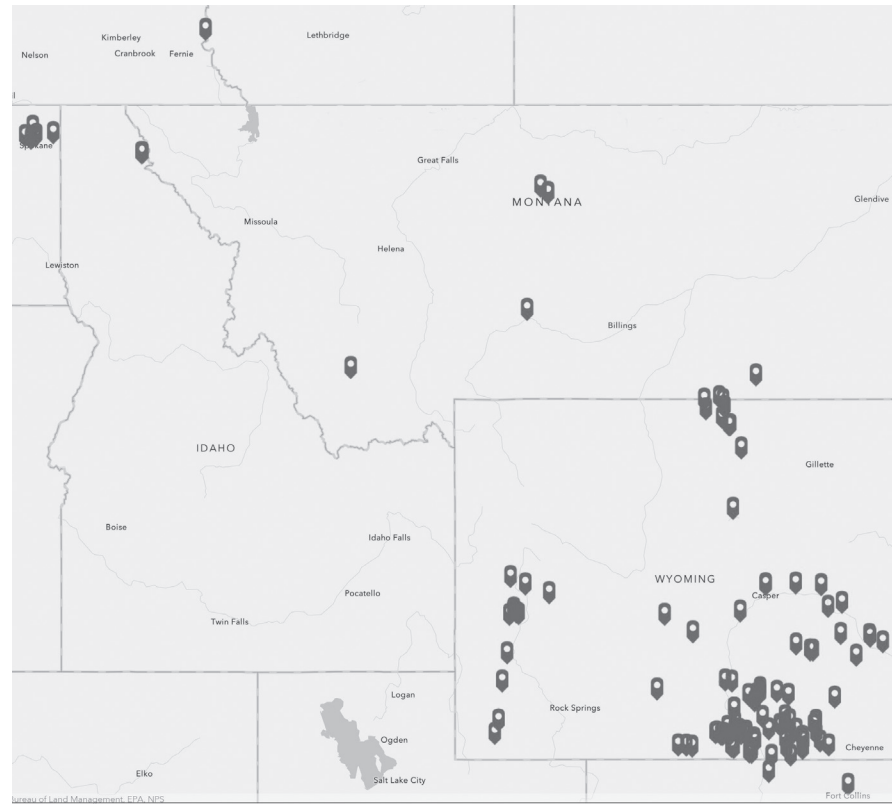


FIGURE 1.10. Former Saratoga newspaperman Dick Perue with the original 1903 engraving plate for the *Relief Map of the Grand Encampment Mining Districts*. Author's collection.

By 1995, I believed I knew all I could ever reasonably know about Houghton and put the topic aside.³

Twenty-five years later, the director of the Grand Encampment Museum emailed asking if I would come back and give a presentation on Houghton. I agreed, thinking that it would be interesting to see if the internet, which did not exist in 1993, could offer any new information. After scanning my original slides into a power point presentation, I began researching Houghton online and was shocked by how much new information and how many new images I discovered. Using primarily ancestry.com, I found Houghton and his wife, as well as important siblings, in Michigan, Illinois, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Washington State. Astonishingly, I also found Houghton's college records during the US Civil War and his Omaha, Nebraska, marriage license. Using digitized newspapers, I traced the artist as he conducted his work across the northern Rockies. Additional stories highlighted his efforts in Wyoming politics and uncovered a whole new illustrated newspaper Houghton had created including new images I had never seen. More searching uncovered Houghton photographs from the 1880s and even more original drawings. In short, it seemed as though I learned as much about Houghton following the 1994 article as I had prior to its publication.

Over these same three decades, scholars of the American West have revised and expanded their understanding of the West's visual culture that helps us better contextualize Houghton. When I first discovered his work, the dominant approach to understanding



the area was the century-old Turner Frontier thesis that examined the region as the meeting ground between civilization and savagery and looked at how the frontier experience made Americans innovative, democratic, and free. This view saw Houghton's work as highlighting the brave pioneer homesteaders and miners who used innovative new techniques to find copper or raise cattle and how the frontier brought the West up from savagery.⁴

MAP 1. All known Houghton sketch locations, 1891-1915



FIGURE 1.11. *Sunset Farms, West Spokane.* Courtesy, Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture/Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane

The upstart paradigm of the late 1980s—which now dominates the field—is known as New Western History and discards the Turner thesis as an ethnocentric, racist theory of white privilege. Instead, New Western History suggests an approach that leading historian Patricia Limerick dubbed the 4Cs: how the conquest of the region and the environment shaped the West; the convergence of many peoples and cultures; a sense of continuity, that the forces shaping the West did not end with the frontier in 1890; and a feeling of complexity, that the full story was more complicated than Turner’s theory. These historians might see Houghton’s sketches as showing the conquest of nature, the continuity of western development in the twentieth century, the complexity of his town views, or the convergence of new settlers on western lands.⁵

Still another approach is that of World Systems Theory, which suggests that the dominant theme of New Western History is the global expansion of capitalism and how westerners removed Native peoples from the land, repopulated the region, and then brought its bounty into national and international markets. Within this field I would place John W. Reps, the authority on bird’s-eye view drawings of America who has shown how such images were sold as booster visual culture. These historians would see Houghton’s work for what he intended: local propaganda to show potential investors what the mines, ranches, and towns had to offer.⁶

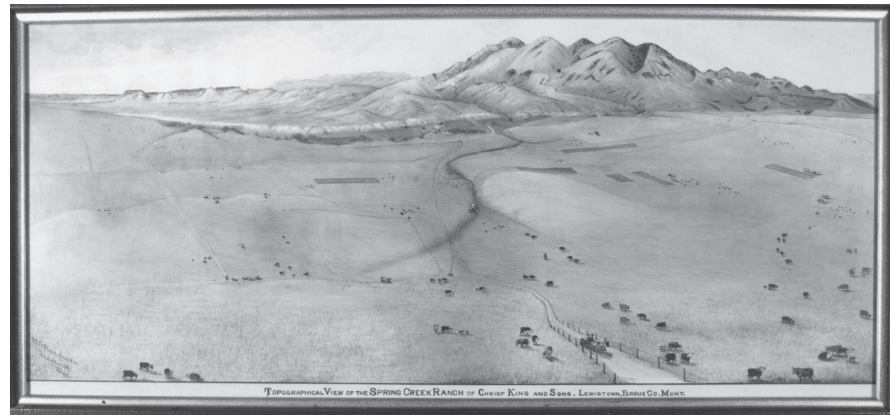
Finally, a still newer view is that of Settler Colonialism, an idea that focuses on the replacement of Native peoples on the land of the West with a settler society that reconstructed the land for its own purposes. Scholars of this school of thought will find similarities between Houghton’s photographs of Native peoples in 1880s Wyoming and those of Edward S. Curtis’s “vanishing Indian.” They might also see his ranch, mine, and town views—as well as the absence of Native peoples—as clear illustrations of a settler society remaking the West.⁷

I also consider Houghton’s work a form of documentary illustrated boosterism because he used his artistic skills not simply to document what he saw before him but also to promote it for potential investors. This is clearly evident in nearly every image Houghton made. Looking closely, one sees only clean, orderly ranches set against bountiful fields amid beautiful scenery; mines and smelters

with men at work and smoke belching into the sky; well-laid-out towns and cities with manicured lawns, shade trees, and interesting buildings. There is never old machinery lying against ranch buildings or clutter in the fields. The mines and smelters are never shown shuttered or dirty. The towns and cities never have unpaved streets, litter lying about, or dilapidated buildings ready to be razed.

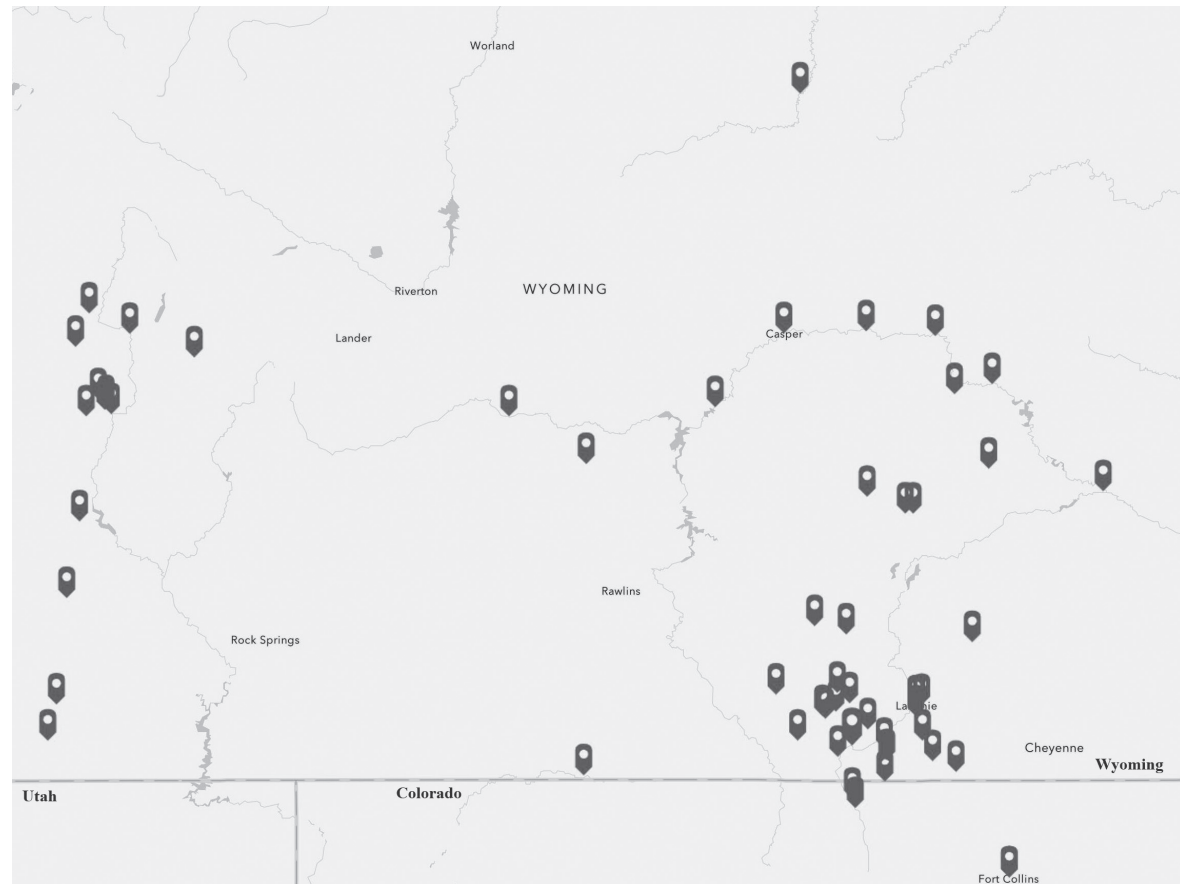
This promotional artistry was also present in Houghton's contemporary, Cheyenne photographer Joseph E. Stimson, who photographed Wyoming and the West around the same time as Houghton. Working for railroads and the state, Stimson took photos of dazzling landscapes that promoted tourism and of interesting streetscapes that brought investment. His photographs were documentary, but he was also always trying to promote, with mansions described as typical houses, for instance. But as a photographer, Stimson was limited to what he saw. As an artist, Houghton had the advantage because he could sketch exactly what he saw but then add smoke pouring from factories, fields ripe with grains, businesses busy with customers. Knowing this, we can read his sketches as promotions but also as documents because they might be the only firsthand account made that shows how some of these places appeared.⁸

This combination of new artwork, new biographical information, and new ways of looking at them warrants



another examination of Merritt Dana Houghton's life and art. What follows are three biographical chapters that trace his life from his birth in 1846 to 1902, to his two most productive years in Encampment, and then to his journey north to Montana, Idaho, and finally Spokane, where he lived until his death during the 1919 influenza epidemic. Along the way, these chapters will be illustrated with sketches, photographs, and ephemera related to his life and art. Following these biographical chapters, a short conclusion looks at how Houghton connects to our time. A portfolio of his best-preserved works—organized into the fields of bird's-eye views, mining drawings, ranch illustrations, business sketches, topographical views, historical scenes, and animal pictures—is then provided.

FIGURE 1.12. *Topographical view of the Spring Creek Ranch of Christ King and Sons, Lewiston, Fergus Co., Mont. Courtesy, Montana: The Magazine of Western History.*



MAP 2. Houghton sketch locations, 1891-1902

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