

The Cowboy Collector

Legendary American Airlines CEO C.R. Smith was also a serious art collector **BY SHAWNA REDING**

C.R. SMITH, BBA '25, GREW UP IN TINY Minerva, Texas, formerly known as Midway—as in, midway between Rockdale and Cameron, about 50 miles northeast of Austin. Surrounded by rolling hills and little else, he spent his youth hunting and fishing. He earned his first paycheck at the age of nine working for a cattleman.

After graduating from UT, Smith became an accountant and then in 1928 joined Texas Air Transport as secretary and treasurer. In 1930, he was appointed vice president of the southern division of American Airways. He was elected president of American Airlines in 1934, dispatched to its New York City headquarters, more than 1,000 miles from his bucolic hometown. It was then that the country boy-turned-executive began collecting Western art.

“Paintings should be acquired, owned and preserved by those who have a deep affection for them,” Smith once wrote. “(The painting) has to bring back some pleasant memory...or it has to tell about a time and a people dear to you.”

His first purchase was William Robinson Leigh’s “The Roping,” (below) followed by pieces from celebrated Western painters Charles Schreyvogel and Frederic Remington. His collection is now housed at UT’s Blanton Museum of Art, and select pieces were recently featured in the exhibit, “Go West! Representations of the American Frontier.”

The paintings depict the raw beauty of Native American territory, cowboys trampling westward, and landscapes about to be transformed by a growing nation.

Smith was himself a pioneer, transforming air travel into a smoother network and standardizing American Airline’s fleet with top-of-the-line models such as DC-3s and DC-7s. From the mechanics to the executives, every employee knew Smith simply as “C.R.” After retiring from American in 1968, Smith was appointed secretary of commerce by his longtime friend, President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Not bad for the boy from Minerva.



Smith’s collection of Western paintings had a starring role in The Blanton Museum of Art’s recent “Go West!” exhibit.