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Review of *The Drifting Cowboy* By Will James *I See By Your Outfit: Historic Cowboy Gear of the Northern Plains* By Tom Lindmier and Steve Mount

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The Drifting Cowboy. By Will James. Tumbleweed Series. Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing, 1995. Illustrations. 264 pp. \$25 cloth. \$14 paper.

I See By Your Outfit: Historic Cowboy Gear of the Northern Plains. By Tom Lindmier and Steve Mount. Glendo, Wyoming: High Plains Press, 1996. Photographs, illustrations, glossary, index. 173 pp. \$16.95 paper.

Will James (1892-1942) served as living proof that prison can reform a man. Convicted of rustling in 1915, he used his writing and drawing ability in prison to prove his social worth and rehabilitation. By the time alcohol abuse ended his life, he had illustrated and written twenty-four entertaining volumes.

Most of James's books have been long out of print. Thanks to joint efforts by the Will James Society (PO Box 8207, Roswell, MN 88202) and Mountain Press Publishing, all of his works will be reprinted. *The Drifting Cowboy*, first published in 1925, joins his first book, *Cowboys North and South*, in this welcome reprint series.

Like the best of the cowpoke scribes, James understood how to tell an entertaining story. His folksy language, humor, and action-packed pen-and-ink and charcoal drawings bring the sound and look of authentic cowboy life to the reader. James wrote the kind of stories that have entertained cowboys around campfires for more than a century.

Some of his tales are autobiographical, but even the fabrications show an intimate, thoroughgoing knowledge of range and ranch life. This is not to say that one can read James as

history. After all, he changed his name and created a new fictive birthplace for himself to hide his not-so-western origins in Quebec.

James set his seven stories of Bill, *The Drifting Cowboy*, during the time he was writing. Thus instead of epic cattle drives, we get tales of early Hollywood westerns and rodeo. Bill also tries his hand at "Desert Range Riding" (he greatly prefers the Plains). We also get the inevitable story of a great bronc rider who finally meets "His Waterloo."

The Drifting Cowboy never achieved the popular acclaim of *Smoky* (1926) or the semi-autobiographical *Lone Cowboy* (1930). Nevertheless, any fan of cowboy literature will enjoy riding along with James in this handsomely produced, welcome new edition. An added bonus for aging eyes is the book's large, clear typeface.

Texas cowboys get more than their fair share of attention from historians and other writers. *I See By Your Outfit*, with its focus on Wyoming cowboys, provides a welcome northern Plains counterpoint. The authors, both Wyoming natives, have scoured archives and libraries across the state to round up more than a hundred photographs and catalog illustrations showing all aspects of cowboy dress and tack. The focus is the cowboy; women's clothing gets a scant two pages.

Far more than a mere picture book, *I See By Your Outfit* includes well researched and accurate written descriptions of nineteenth-century hats, boots, and everything in between. The authors explain how cowboys came to call their yellow rain slicker a "fish" (an early brand name). We also get colorful asides, such as the fate of "Big Nose" George Parrott, a cowboy gone bad, hanged in 1881. "Parrott's skin was tanned and made into a pair of shoes worn by Wyoming's first Democratic Governor, John Osborne, during his inauguration."

The book makes for enjoyable browsing and reading, but also serves as a useful reference. Coverage is comprehensive, right down to cinches, knives, quirts, and suspenders. One drawing provides the nomenclature for a western stock saddle. A glossary defines thirty-

five technical terms. The book is well indexed. Individuals are identified by name in most of the photographs. The illustrations clearly show what authentic dress and equipment looked like a century ago. The authors' evidence demonstrates that old-time riders did not dress like Hollywood celluloid heroes or rodeo stars.

I have only minor criticisms to make. A few photographs are very dark, making it difficult to distinguish faces and other details. The authors provide brief historical background on most clothing and equipment, often high-

lighting their Hispanic origins. A little more research into recent scholarship on the cowboy, however, could have bolstered the text. The book is nicely produced and edited. I found only one typographical gaff—"dur" instead of "dar la vuelta." Overall *I See By Your Outfit* is a good addition to the western bookshelf of cowboy buffs and serious researchers alike.

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