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Book Review: The Western Pursuit of the American Dream: Selections from the Collection of Kenneth W. Rendell

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The Western Pursuit of the American Dream: Selections from the Collection of Kenneth W. Rendell. By Kenneth W. Rendell. Natick, MA: Historical Publications, 2004. x + 358 pp. Photographs, illustrations, index. \$39.95.

Like many other lovers of the West, collector and dealer Kenneth Rendell was inspired by his childhood experiences in nature—in his case, his family's annual summer stay at a lakeside cabin sans utilities north of Boston. It was nurtured by his firsthand acquaintance with the original materials of history when he began his dealership in 1959, flourished in his friendship with historian Stephen Ambrose, and reaches its zenith with the stunning collection of materials he shared in a 2004-05 exhibition at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, MA, and published in this book.

The collection begins with a 1492 letter signed by both Ferdinand and Isabella only nine days after Columbus sailed for the New World—"early exploration is a very difficult area to collect," Rendell notes, explaining that the document relates to local rather than New World affairs—and concludes with a cowboy hat from the Hollywood premier of the Civil War Western, *Virginia City* (1940) signed by many of the attendees such as Errol Flynn, Alan Hale, and future President Ronald Reagan. In between are the results of his almost half a century of collecting, arranged in a chronological and geographical trip from the East Coast to the West.

The collection is rich in published material, but Rendell has also added early peace medals, fascinating manuscripts (from Sir Walter Raleigh to Peter Stuyvesant, George

Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Daniel Boone, George Rogers Clark, David Crockett, Stephen F. Austin, William Barret Travis, Andrew Jackson, Jim Bridger, John James Audubon, Henry R. Schoolcraft, and Lewis and Clark, to mention only a few), and classic objects (beaver hat, a pipe tomahawk, long rifles, Concord Western stagecoach). A painting by artist Alfred Jacob Miller, prints by Karl Bodmer, George Catlin, McKenney & Hall, Henry Warre, and Thomas Moran, and the unpublished drawings from George Brewerton's western travels are accompanied by beautiful examples of Plains Indian artifacts such as a pictorial buffalo hide, medicine robe, hide scraper, costumes, and the like. Rendell's collection of gold rush and outlaw memorabilia brings to mind other well-known episodes of Western history, while the Indian photographs of C. S. Fly and Edward Curtis capture the tragic and Romantic vision of Native Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Rendell has added a narrative that swiftly carries the reader through the well-known outline of western history, pausing from time to time to comment upon his acquisition of an item or to offer a bit of encouragement or counsel to would-be collectors. The book represents a comprehensive and fascinating collection from a thoroughly knowledgeable collector who has gathered, sifted, and retained the most elusive, illustrative, unusual, and significant pieces that have come his way.

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