**Happenin's 'Round the House**

*by Margi Bertram, Museum Administrator*

Visitors to the William S. Hart Museum soon discover that in addition to being a famous Western silent film star, Hart authored a number of books. For someone who had very little formal education, this seems a surprising, if also inspiring, undertaking.

During his years as a film star, Hart began writing novels and collections of short stories. In all, he wrote eleven books, some coauthored with his sister Mary Ellen.

A favorite of many is the book Told Under a White Oak Tree (1922), a fanciful look at the wild, action-packed world of a wise cracking horse co-star who hopes to become as famous a screen legend as “the Boss.” Fritz recounts various dangerous stunts he performed in the movies with Hart. Early on, demonstrating some frustration, Fritz writes, “Maybe it’s things like that which make all the little boys like my Boss and think he’s a hero. Of course I think they should, only I can’t see WHY they should when I do all the work.” There is no confusing which James Montgomery Flagg illustrations on view in the house were used in this book, as those four all feature the distinctively marked Fritz center stage and in great peril.

When researching the other, less familiar books, I was charmed to find that in the Pinto Ben – and Other Stories (1919) collection, the story written by Mary Ellen Hart titled “The Last of His Blood” also features an animal companion voicing much of the account. In this case it is a bulldog named Socky (named after Socrates, “…Billy says the only thing he ever saw as ugly as me was the bust of Socrates in the High School hall…”). Socky recounts the goings on at the farm where he is brought to live, as well as his experience tangling with a prize bull.

A personal favorite artist of this writer, R. L. Lambdin (1886 – 1981) painted the three illustrations for this short story, and they can be seen in the formal Dining Room. Although all are color paintings, only one appears in color in the published book. Lambdin worked as an artist for some of the most prestigious magazines of the 20s and 30s, including *Harper’s*, *Collier’s*, *Munsey’s*, *The Elks*, and *Pictorial Review*. He also illustrated a number of books for young readers. Much of Lambdin’s early work was done in pen and ink but as line drawing went out of style, he worked in watercolor washes and oils. He took part in the New Deal Section of Fine Art project by painting a mural in the Bridgeport, Connecticut post office in 1936.