



## A Man with a Message

**ED TRUMBLE'S HUMOR AND ARTISTIC VISION ARE THE HEART OF LEANIN' TREE CARDS.**

*By Tracey Feist*

**A keen eye,** quick wit, and positive attitude have served Ed Trumble well for the past 85 years. The co-founder and chairman of Leanin' Tree cards has lead the company for 60 years, creating an American institution in the greeting card business.

"I was a born optimist, I guess," he says. "You have to be to be an entrepreneur." Growing up during the Great Depression, losing his father at age nine, and moving from a farm in Nebraska to several abandoned farmsteads, Trumble saw some dark days growing up. In retrospect, though, he says that he "never saw life as having a lot of obstacles."

His business career started in 1949 with a simple idea and a gentleman's handshake to sell western-themed Christmas cards. Trumble had met his future business partner, cowboy illustrator Bob Lorenz, while working with *Western Live Stock* magazine in Denver. Their original enterprise was called the Lazy RL. (The Lazy RL was a livestock brand Lorenz had selected for his dream ranch, one that never came to fruition after Lorenz's untimely death from cancer in 1965.)

In the fall of that first year, the partners used four of Lorenz's cowboy drawings to make Christmas cards. By trading for advertising space in various publications and arranging credit, they sold 50,000 cards and took in \$5,000 for a net profit of \$1,500. It was encouragement enough for Trumble to quit his job at the magazine, even though the partners had to fill orders from shoe boxes stored in Lorenz's apartment and deal with costly beginner mistakes, such as when a local printer misspelled Christmas, "Chirstmas".

Trumble had been nursing the idea of a greeting card company for a while. While serving as an infantry rifleman in the infamous Battle of the Bulge, he attended a makeshift Christmas



## ROUND UP

### 'If I get out of this hole alive, I will never again complain about my circumstances in life, no matter what.'

Eve Mass in the ruins of a local church in Hofen, Germany. Afterwards, Trumble made his way back to his foxhole—exhausted, frozen, and still suffering from a ground attack that had ruptured his left eardrum. He looked up and was surprised to see colorful German propaganda dropping from the sky, urging the American troops to surrender.

In a letter to his children 55 years later, Ed recalled his memories of that night: "We're likely going to be killed in this hole, if we don't freeze to death or die of fright before morning. I am swearing a pledge to you and myself right now. If I get out of this hole alive, I will never again complain about my circumstances in life, no matter what they may be. After all, if I am spared tonight, how could I ever be anything but optimistic in the future?"

"I was ready for the positive side of life," Trumble says. "I knew that when I got out of the service I wanted to be in business for myself. And I knew that if you fulfill

and follow your passion, it's unimportant how much money you make."

Just as Trumble and Lorenz had formed their partnership with a handshake, they ended it the same way 15 years later over creative differences. As a result, Trumble founded Leanin' Tree in 1964, a name he selected for its simplicity.

"When I was looking for a name, I wanted one that, when you saw the image, you saw the symbol that was the name of the company. So I used a little green leanin' tree," says Trumble of the Colorado blue spruce symbol. "We were primarily in the Christmas card business, after all." He also dropped the 'g' for simplicity's sake and to give the brand a "down-home feel."

For years, Trumble wrote the phrases inside each greeting card himself and has traveled the U.S. (and the world) to find cowboys, Indians, western wildlife, and western landscape paintings to fea-



An illustration depicting the moment inspiration struck Trumble while serving during World War II.

ture on his cards. Today, the company offers more than 3,000 greetings.

"I wasn't a cowboy, although I'd touched enough on it that I knew the nomenclature, I knew the way of life," Trumble says. "I recognized the authenticity or lack of it in our work."

Tom Trumble took over the reins from his dad as company president and CEO in 1991, and says his dad's persuasive use of language gave Leanin' Tree the advantage it needed.

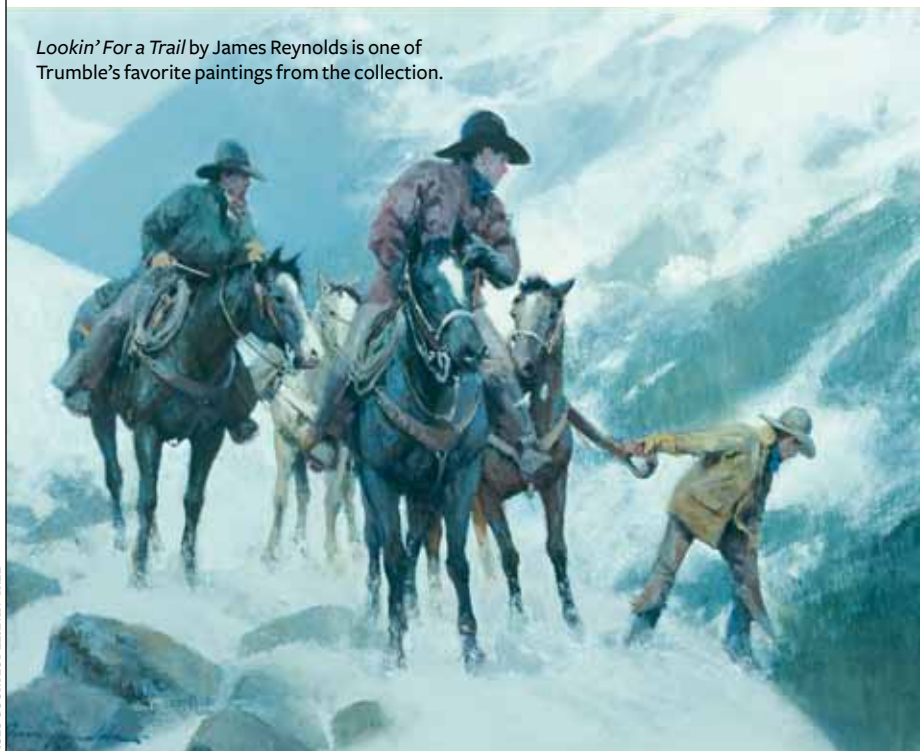
"We don't think the tradition [of giving greeting cards] is going to be going away anytime soon," says Tom. "There's nothing that replicates the experience of an unexpected card in the mail. It has a keepsake value that cannot be replaced by any other medium." The time and effort that go into picking a card are a meaningful tradition and embedded in American culture.

"People who buy Leanin' Tree cards are completely loyal and devoted," says Trumble. "I'm sincerely told this all the time—that Leanin' Tree is virtually an American institution."

Cowboy cartoonist Boots Reynolds was instrumental in adding the humor that has helped make Leanin' Tree iconic. A founder of Cowboy Cartoonists International, Reynolds says he'll never forget the first time he met Trumble.

"Mike Scovel and I were over at the C.M.

*Lookin' For a Trail* by James Reynolds is one of Trumble's favorite paintings from the collection.



IMAGES COURTESY LEANIN' TREE



Examples of Leanin' Tree holiday cards. The company began with four Christmas card designs.

Russell show in Great Falls, Mont. in the '60s," says Reynolds. "We were cartoonists and the folks putting on that show did not feel we qualified as artists in any way, shape, or form. So we went in there and told Ed we had art out in the parking lot." Trumble ended up buying Reynolds's entire inventory—from his truck.

"He took everything I had, paying \$250 for the reproduction rights alone, when I was only selling the originals for \$200," says Reynolds. "Ed paid me so much money it scared the hell out of me to have that much on me at one time!"

Trumble would buy 97 paintings from Reynolds over the next 25 years.

But it was more than money that solidified their friendship. "I told Ed that if he was paying me this kind of money, I'd go to art school," says Reynolds. "Ed said 'Don't even consider it. No one has influenced you in any way and you're such an individual. If you look through all the history of art, anyone, whoever amounted to anything in the way of art, are all individuals.'"

And Trumble's unique sense of humor and ability to write phrases that match the artwork are what make Leanin' Tree so original.

"A lot of people accuse me of having an absurd sense of humor, even macabre," says Trumble. "But that's what's made this company special."

For instance, one of the best selling

prints in company history includes the now famous line: "There's a helluva lot of things they didn't tell me when I hired on with this outfit."

Trumble also created the Leanin' Tree Museum and Art Gallery in Boulder, Colo, which houses his personal art collection of 300 paintings and 150 bronze sculptors from 100 different artists—one of the largest private collections of Western art in the world. Each year 50,000 visitors come visit, all free of charge.

The 12,000 square-foot gallery and sculpture garden include works by James Reynolds, Bob Kuhn, Melvin Warren and Olaf Wieghorst, and Buck McCain. (The 160,000 square-foot building also houses the printing press and equipment to manufacture the company's greeting cards.)

"Everything in this collection is an expression of my father's singular taste," says Tom. "We love every single piece. Dad bought each piece for a particular reason. It's one of the things that makes this small museum distinct and different from a public collection."

Trumble adds that he's always on the lookout for quality art. "If you have any taste at all, you can't look at 10,000 paintings, as I have, one at a time—study them at art shows, artist's galleries and studios, some while still on the easel—without the better paintings floating to the top," he says. "When you make a choice to buy a painting you're kind of adopting it. In the long run, nobody owns anything. I see Leanin' Tree simply

as custodians of this art." Much of his collection has already withstood the judgement of time and will be admired for generations to come.

Despite his numerous accolades—like the prestigious Chester A. Reynolds Memorial Award awarded him in 1999 by the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City—Trumble says his greatest achievement are his four children, all of whom are involved in the family business. The mother of his four children, Patricia, is deceased, and Trumble has been married to his second wife, Lynn, for 25 years.

Acclaimed western writer Don Hedgpeth describes Trumble's influence best: "Old fashioned in western traditional values and solidly confident in his own tastes, Ed Trumble had a dream 60 years ago of how he might revitalize popular interest in western art, redeem its reputation, and help a new generation of western artists find an audience."

Clearly Trumble's dream will live on at Leanin' Tree.

#### COFFEE TABLE BOOK

Along with writer Don Hedgpeth, Ed Trumble has written a new book, *The Story of Leanin' Tree* (Leanin' Tree Inc., 2008). Trumble's art commentary highlights nearly 500 artworks, and his recollections of rowdy good times with some of America's finest western contemporary artists add a nice personal touch.

In fact, Trumble dedicated the book to the American cowboy: "It is the cowboy and his horse that serve as the cornerstone of Leanin' Tree," he writes. "The cowboy, the cowboy land, and the cowboy way were essential to the creation of Leanin' Tree, and six decades later they remain our central theme. We thank the cowboy, the artists who have portrayed him, and especially the Leanin' Tree customers whose loyalty helps keep alive the myth and reality of the great American West."

**Info: [leanintree.com](http://leanintree.com)**

