

## CARL SWEEZY, ARAPAHO ARTIST

By *Althea Bass*

Carl Sweezy was born near Darlington, on the old Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, and took pride to the end of his life in his full-blood Arapaho heritage. His father was *Hinan-ba-seth*, "Big Man," and he was given the Arapaho name *Wattan*, "Black." He never knew the date of his birth, but the year was probably 1881, since he was listed as a seven-year-old pupil in the Mennonite Mission School at Darlington in 1888. Because his mother died when he was quite small and his father was a member of the Indian Police who lived in their own tepees to the north of the principal Agency street, he had no home of his own, and he and his brothers were reared and given their early education in Mennonite mission schools. When his older brother, sent to the Mennonite school near Halstead, Kansas, took the name of Fieldie Sweezy, Sweezy being the name of the railway agent there, the other children were given the same family name, and little Watan became Carl Sweezy. To the day of his death, in 1953, he did honor to the name, and the innumerable paintings of Indian life and customs that he left behind will do it honor for years to come.

While he was still a little boy in knee trousers, he too was sent to the school at Halstead where at least one brother and one sister had preceded him. If the Mennonite missionary teachers were strict disciplinarians and taught even the youngest of their pupils to accept hard work and responsibility, they also gave them a sense of family affection and security; there were daily devotions and singing and games, as well as work, for the Indian boys and girls, in kitchen and laundry and garden and field and dairy. Carl remembered his boyhood as fortunate and happy, and held the Mennonite teachers and missionaries in gratitude all his life.

When he was fourteen, having learned how to farm and care for live stock and do dairy work, he came back to the Reservation at Darlington. He brought a baseball and bat and a catcher's mitt with him, and was ready for anything, white or Indian. He had been doing some drawing, and somewhere he had acquired a box of water color paints which one of the white women at the Agency showed him how to use.

Soon after Carl's return, the anthropologist James Mooney came to Darlington to study the customs and the handicrafts of the Cheyennes and the Arapahoes. He needed two Indian assistants: an interpreter to help him talk with the men and women he interviewed, and an artist to make paintings of the costumes and war gear and household equipment that he found among these Indians.

Paul Boynton, a Cheyenne youth with the unusual ability to speak both Cheyenne and Arapaho, became his interpreter, but no artist was available. For want of one, Mr. Mooney took on the boy Carl Sweezy, impressed him with the necessity of strict accuracy in recording design and color, and put him to work. "Paint only what is Indian and paint it accurately," Mr. Mooney insisted, and Carl responded in a way he had not dared to hope for.

For the next few months Carl painted shields and war-bonnets and baby carriers and drums and rattles, all the equipment brought in by the Indians for the anthropologist to study or to buy. He learned more than he had known before about how these things were made and how the materials for them were acquired by Cheyenne and Arapaho craftsmen. When Mr. Mooney returned to Washington, at the end of his long stay among the Indians in what was to become Oklahoma, the collection he took with him included many of Carl Sweezy's first paintings. Mooney's supervision was the only art instruction that Carl Sweezy had, but it was all he needed to start him on the road to becoming one of the best of the primitive Indian painters. To the end of his life he continued to paint, and to paint in what he called "the Mooney way."

It is impossible to establish dates for events in the lives of Indians like Carl Sweezy, born before calendars and clocks and birth certificates became part of their lives. But at some time during his teens he went to Carlisle Indian Institute for two years, not finishing his course there because he became ill and was sent back to the Reservation to recover. What he had learned at Halstead stood him in good stead at Carlisle, where he added to his knowledge of farming and dairying in the school and on the farm at Washington Crossing which was his summer home. He would have liked to study drawing there, too, but was too shy to make the necessary arrangements.

Having recovered his health, he went back to school again, this time to Chilocco. Changing trains at Enid on his return from there, he met an Indian friend who had contracted to play with the Enid baseball team and who persuaded him to sign too. He played two summers with the Enid team, and later joined an all-Indian team that toured the country. When they reached Portland, Oregon, they visited the Lewis and Clark Exposition, and saw some of Carl's paintings, unsigned, in an exhibit from the Smithsonian Institution. Since it was some years before he began to sign his paintings, most of his early work is unidentified.

Because he understood farming and the care of livestock, it was easy for him to find employment. For many years he worked as farmer or dairyman at Rainy Mountain and Saint Patrick's and Concho. At Rainy Mountain he met and married Hattie Powless, an Oneida who was employed as a matron there. After her death,

in 1944, he had no permanent home, but spent most of his time in Oklahoma City where he had access to Indian friends and relatives, and to the Historical Society where he was always a willing contributor of information about Indian dress and handcrafts.

Carl Sweezy died on May the 28th, 1953, in the Indian Hospital at Lawton. Of his own generation, one brother, Frank, is still living. A daughter, Mary Mahardy, two sons, Carl Hilton and Merle Everett, and eight grandchildren survive him.

Accuracy of detail and color give his paintings a special value. During his boyhood he knew Cheyennes and Arapahoes who belonged to pre-reservation days; he visited in their tepees, seeing their equipment for home-making and for war and for religious ceremonies;<sup>1</sup> he heard their stories of battles and hunts and over-land marches; he himself remembered the "Ghost Dance," and sun dances and peyote ceremonies, and Christian religious services of many sects. He never wanted for subject-matter; the whole of a disappearing way of life was his to draw from for his paintings of sun dancers and peyote worshippers, war dances and buffalo hunts, Indian games and family activities, and sooner or later he made use of all of it. All his life he lived under the influence of two cultures, that of the Plains Indians, ancient and vanishing, and that of the white man, changing even while he learned it. Yet he was not confused by them, and he chose for himself the best of both ways. His pictures, simple and orderly and balanced, are those of an Indian who lived harmoniously and philosophically under circumstances that most men would have found embittering and confusing.

Unfortunately, Carl Sweezy kept no record of his paintings, and it would be impossible to determine how many of them exist with or without his signature. Early in 1953, when an exhibit of his work was arranged by the Anthropology Department at the University of Oklahoma, it was difficult to locate and borrow enough of them to represent him adequately. But there are many of these paintings, some in oil and more in water color, distributed in homes and museums and art galleries throughout the country, where they stand as unique memorials to a man who combined a fine native talent with the grace and good will to make the most of it.

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<sup>1</sup>The original painting "Medicine Lodge," by Carl Sweezy, in the Museum of the Oklahoma Historical Society was reproduced in colors on the front cover of the Annual Report of the Oklahoma State Health Department, July, 1951.—Ed.