

Chapter 1 - 0:26

Introduction

Announcer: Few other artists have become so identified with their state as Oklahoma's Charles Banks Wilson. He was a painter, lithographer, teacher, lecturer, historian and magazine and book illustrator. In this interview, Charles talks about his childhood days in Miami, Oklahoma and among other topics his live sittings with Will Rogers and U.S. Senator Robert S. Kerr. He credits lithography for making him a real artist and describes the steps he took to create the four murals of Oklahoma's history in the State Capitol Rotunda. His work has been shown in more than 200 exhibitions in this country and around the world. Now you'll get to know the personality of Charles Banks Wilson as you listen to another oral history interview underwritten by our generous Founding Sponsors on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 - 5:50

Family

John Erling: Today's date is August 10th, 2010. My name is John Erling. Charles, state your full name please.

Charles Banks Wilson: Charles Banks Wilson.

JE: Your date of birth and your present age?

CBW: August 6, 1918. I am now 92.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

CBW: In Fayetteville, Arkansas, in my studio home.

JE: Tell us where you were born.

CBW: I was born in Springdale, Arkansas. My father was in World War I. My mother had come

to Springdale to have her baby. My dad then got out of the Army. I was then 10 months old. He took me immediately to Oklahoma and would never let me leave.

JE: Where in Oklahoma?

CBW: Miami, Oklahoma.

JE: Why Miami?

CBW: My mother was teaching school there and he had fallen in love with my mother. He had been a trombone player in the big bands in Chicago. But my mother was not going to put up with living with a traveling musician. So he then went back into a business that his father had been in, which was a paint and wallpaper business. He put up a store there and that's where he stayed for the rest of his life.

JE: Let's go back to your grandmother, her name was?

CBW: Carrie Wilson. She was a Christian Science practitioner who was blind. And I would in turn go to Florida where she had moved and would look after her for the whole summer. I would read to her because she couldn't read of course. I told my grandmother after I had read the Bible for all those years, I said, "When I get through reading to you, I'm never going to read the Bible again." (Laughter) And my grandmother said, "Charles, as a you are just talking."

JE: But you kind of became her eyes.

CBW: Absolutely. Yes, I would describe people that would come to visit in every detail. My grandfather, his brother had a circus and he was a trapeze artist. That's what he did. My grandmother wouldn't stand for that, so he gave that up.

JE: And your mother's name?

CBW: Bertha Banks.

JE: Her maiden name was Banks?

CBW: Yes.

JE: Where did she grow up?

CBW: In Springdale, Arkansas.

JE: Can you tell us what your mother was like?

CBW: My mother was very, very smart. She was a teacher in Oklahoma and that's why my mother and dad became man and wife in Miami, Oklahoma. She taught the third or fourth grade. One of her students, I think, was a very famous motion picture photographer. He said that mother was so nice that any time a student was particularly nice she would let them come and stand up by the front desk and put her arm around them.

JE: Your father's name?

CBW: His name was Charles Bertram Wilson. My grandmother named him after somebody she was reading about in a book.

JE: Where was he born?

CBW: I'm not really sure. But he did grow up in Springdale, Arkansas. He lived on the other side of the tracks, so he never did know my mother until they both moved to Miami, Oklahoma.

JE: The other side of the tracks, was that the poor side of the tracks?

CBW: That's what they usually call the other side of the tracks.

JE: What did he do for a living?

CBW: Well, he had been a trombone player for the big orchestras back east. He got out and made money to buy a trombone, which I have right there. (Motioning) That was what he did. He was in the big orchestras in Chicago.

JE: Did he ever talk about the names of the orchestras and who he we played with? Do you remember?

CBW: No, but he would tell me things that were advantageous to me, because I was on the stage a lot. I used to spin ropes and would be on the stage, and I would make some money for me to go to school. Dad would tell me about some things that happened in the theaters when he played in them. I know he told me about one fellow who had a most interesting way to end his act. He would have them lower the American flag and then he would drop his pants and he would have on red, white and blue underwear. (Laughter) He told me that was a great way to end an act. (Laughter)

JE: So was he an interior decorator?

CBW: Yes, he was. He had five men that worked for him. He had a paint and wallpaper store in Miami.

JE: Would you say you maybe inherited some artistic values there?

CBW: I have no idea. You couldn't know that. My mother and father just encouraged me by giving me the tools to work with. I tell this to parents who have children that are interested in art, that my mother never did ever say, "I like this, or I don't like this." She would always say, "What do you think of it?" And for that reason I think you have a dependence on your own attitude about your work.

JE: But there must have been times when she saw a great work of yours and to say, "My, that was good."

CBW: Yes.

JE: As you became an adult in the art world, she had to show you appreciation for what you had done?

CBW: Yes, yes, without saying it. She would say, "What do you think?" And I think that's good advice. But they would do such things like build me a room in their house where I could do my art. I was drawing when I was very, very young. I recall one time when I was drawing underneath my mother's table, which was a big area that just invited you to draw. I heard mother driving up in the car and I quickly erased where I had drawn and wrote instead "Mother, I love you." (Laughter)

JE: Why do you think you did that?

CBW: So she wouldn't get peeved at me drawing on the bottom of her table. (Laughter) Any large area is always an invitation to young artists.

JE: Yes. Did you have brothers or sisters?

CBW: Eight years later I had a brother who played the trumpet.

JE: What was his name?

CBW: Richard.

JE: Is he living today?

CBW: No, he died about three years ago.

Chapter 3 - 3:08

Will Rogers

John Erling: Growing up in Miami, what was that like? Do you remember the first house you lived in?

Charles Banks Wilson: The first house I lived in was the house I lived in most of my life. It was the house my mother and dad had when he came back from World War I.

JE: Was it a large house?

CBW: It was a pretty good-sized house.

JE: Back then, when you were four or five, six and seven years old, were you drawing?

CBW: Yes. I was drawing when I was tall enough to reach under the table and draw, because that big area was a great invitation to draw.

JE: Right. So you would have been four or five years old maybe?

CBW: I was around four years old I think. I painted Will Rogers from life when I was 14.

JE: From life?

CBW: From life. I was going to draw him up on the stage. My dad had made arrangements for me to go there and draw. In the meantime, instead of his being at the theater for 20 minutes, because he was getting money from the crowd, he in turn stayed almost two hours. So, in those two hours, I went back across the street and got my studio material and came over and did a painting of him. And as far as I know, that's the only painting that he ever posed for, according to his children. Will Jr. and Jim Rogers said that I did the only painting as far as they know that had ever been done.

JE: And he sat for you?

CBW: He stood for me and he would do things that he was doing and he was very nice to me.

I remember I was complaining about how difficult it was doing him and he said, "Well Charles, it always takes a certain amount of fleas to keep a dog from worrying about being a dog." (Laughter)

JE: So his personality was very engaging?

CBW: Oh, very much. I loved him from that time on. I was in Florida when he died, when he was killed and I felt like I had lost my best friend. A lot of people in America felt that way.

JE: That's really something that he stood there, was he talking to the crowd or?

CBW: He was talking to the crowd. But the painting that's hanging in that room (motioning) is the one I did when I was 14 and that one is going to The National Portrait Gallery.

JE: He had no idea what kind of an artist you were, so-

CBW: Well yes, because I'd been making pencil drawings of him, and he was very surprised. I think I gave them to Will Rogers Memorial. I'm rather gregarious about things like that.

JE: So then he knew that you were a good artist because he had seen those pencil drawings?

CBW: Yes, I suppose so.

JE: Was he always funny? Was he always saying funny things?

CBW: I think he was always saying things that people considered funny. I'm not sure that at the time he thought of it as witty, but he was just that way.

JE: By the way, is it true that that painting of Will Rogers, you were going to present that painting to him during a family visit in August of 1935 and instead that's when Will Rogers flew to Alaska and met his death?

CBW: That's right. We just figured it was a drawing. We didn't think that much of it. I remember my mother had it down in the basement and it wasn't until Will Rogers-I think something about it encouraged me to bring it up from the basement. I touched it up a little. I have to admit that. It became the only painting ever done of Will Rogers from life.

JE: In his entire life?

CBW: That's what I was told by Will Junior and Jim

JE: That's amazing, and at 14 years old.

CBW: Yes.

Chapter 4 - 4:36**Kicked Out of School**

John Erling: You had an interest in being a cowboy back then didn't you and trick-roping?

Charles Banks Wilson: I don't know exactly why, but I was pretty good. I paid part of my art school expenses doing that. But I never was really great.

JE: Didn't you appear in rodeos in Vinita?

CBW: Yes, I would do that. I had a good friend who did trick riding. We would go on to the arena and he would come in standing on his shoulders. Then I would rope the top of his feet, which were sticking up in the air. It wasn't really great, but people thought it was.

JE: You were in Vinita, Tulsa and Claremore?

CBW: Mostly Vinita. But when I went to school in Chicago, of course I was on the stage in Chicago.

JE: What elementary school did you go to?

CBW: Pershing School.

JE: Was there a teacher there, or teachers that were interested in your artwork and encouraged you?

CBW: Not particularly. I don't think anyone ever encouraged me until I got into high school and they only encouraged me then because they knew I could decorate the blackboards.

JE: Were you a good student and did you enjoy school?

CBW: I enjoyed school and I think I was a pretty good student. I know the school treated me beautifully.

JE: What was the name of the high school?

CBW: Miami High School.

JE: You were President of your class?

CBW: I don't think I was very well liked, but everybody thought I was awfully smart. So they would appoint me as president of this or that or the other. I have to tell you this though. When I would go up to the pencil sharpener, people would come over to look at my drawings. The teacher said I was disturbing study hall. So in that regard, I was kicked out of school, which was silly. At the time, they put me in a room by myself. I resented that tremendously. But they decided that I could do so many things for the various classes with my art, that they put me back in school. One of the teachers, who by the way was also the principal, told the superintendent, "I don't think we ought to kick him out of school, because he might amount to something someday." So they put me back in school.

JE: So your artwork was disruptive to the kids and that's why they removed you from the classroom?

CBW: As I remember it.

JE: Was that in high school?

CBW: Yes, that was in high school.

JE: Was it just for a few days that you were removed?

CBW: I don't remember. They did put me in a room by myself so I wouldn't bother people. I really resented that. Two men were in the room with me. They would come in there practicing boxing. They were two teachers. They thought it was a shame that they had me there and the principal of the school didn't like it because I could no longer decorate the teachers' blackboards. (Laughter) So all things considered I got back in school.

JE: Then you graduated high school and you were 18 years old. What did you do?

CBW: Nothing for a while. Then I went to the Art Institute of Chicago.

JE: How did you pay for that?

CBW: My parents paid for it. They never encouraged me, but they did things like that. They saw to it that I had an education in art and they paid for it. My mother washed my clothes every month.

JE: That must have been a real culture shock for this Miami, Oklahoma boy to go to the big city of Chicago?

CBW: I remember coming back from school and there was a very wealthy man standing across the street and I walked over to say hello to him. He said, "You know Charles, you people think that when you are gone we miss you and we don't even know you're gone." And that hurts me to this day. (Laughter)

JE: Why did he have to be so mean and say that to you?

CBW: Well, he was wealthy. He had that prerogative.

JE: I guess he thought he had that prerogative.

CBW: Yes.

JE: How were you accepted then there in art school? How did that go for you?

CBW: I think I was a pretty good student. I'll show you one thing in here that I did, which everybody thinks is excellent. I of course thought it was excellent. An artist has to have a certain amount of self-confidence, and it's interpreted as ego you know. I had the ability to draw.

JE: What was your subject matter then as you came to Chicago. What were you drawing?

CBW: Well, I drew what the teachers told us to draw. We had models and all of that. However, I did start drawing Indians and I remember something I recall at the time was drawing cowboys on horses. So many of the students were interested in that. So then I started maybe putting a few Indians in it. Then the kids started buying the pictures that I had

drawn of Indians. I remember there for a while they would pay a dollar for one of my drawings. And I thought, my goodness, how long has this been going on? (Laughter)

Chapter 5 - 2:32

Coleman Theatre

John Erling: Do you remember growing up in Miami going to movies or do you recall any movie stars and their names?

Charles Banks Wilson: I remember there were people who were stars, but I don't remember them vividly. I do remember that the man who was the head of the Coleman Theatre thought I was pretty good at what I did and so he let me go downstairs where they painted the signs. In those days they didn't have printed signs to advertise films, they had people downstairs in the theatres that would paint the signs to promote the films. This was a big, fine theatre. They started paying attention to me too. I could draw people well, but I couldn't draw letters well. So they would letter the signs that went outside of the theater and I would do the pictures of the various movie stars.

JE: Do you know if any of those were ever saved?

CBW: I have a photograph of about six or eight of those films that I did of the movie stars at the time. Not only that, but see, I, too, was a musician of sorts. I would have an orchestra. Every time that some comedian orchestra would come to the theater, I would get my little band together and we would play. I was very active in the theater and the reason I elaborate on that is I think the most encouragement I had for my art was the theater, the newspaper and the sign painter there in Miami. Those three people I think made an artist out of me.

JE: What about the newspaper? How did that come about?

CBW: They would tell me about how the cartoons and things were done. Later on when I got into school in Chicago, there were two fellows. One who did *Terry and the Pirates* (comic strip) and there was another one. Those two people thought I had a lot of talent and they, in turn, sent me to New York to be the cartoonist in the newspapers in New York.

JE: You did cartoons as well?

CBW: Well I tried, but I didn't like it. So I went back to school and completed the rest of the year. But it was a lot of money and the people who sent me were cartoonists.

JE: So you tried that for a little bit and you didn't like it?

CBW: I tried that for a little bit. All I did was like in *Terry and the Pirates*, he would make the

drawings and I would ink it in. I didn't like that so I went back to school in Chicago and finished another year.

JE: So how long were you in art school?

CBW: I was there four years. I was there three years and then went to New York and came back and finished the fourth year.

Chapter 6 - 4:45

Married / Magazine

John Erling: So then, we are kind of bringing you up to 1941, you were 23 years old and World War II breaks out?

Charles Banks Wilson: Well, I had to come back to go into the Army, which I didn't have to go into, because I was writing for the Office of War Information, so I didn't have to go into the Army.

JE: You were writing for the Office of War Information?

CBW: Yes, it was the handling of how the Americans treated the American Indian.

JE: Was that out of Chicago Art School? It was after that?

CBW: Yes, it was after that.

JE: You went right into writing about how the Indians were treated?

CBW: Yes. You see, the Japanese said that the Americans treated the Indians terribly. Of course the Americans resented that. Because I knew a great deal about the American Indian, they put me down to do these things. In fact, I did one of the most famous drawings ever done of the American Indian in the war. That was published in 250 newspapers I think. It was about the way Americans appreciated the American Indian.

JE: I suppose you had to sign up because the draft was on and then because of that they told you, you didn't have to-

CBW: Well, that and the fact that I had gotten married and was expecting a baby.

JE: Speaking of that, who was to become your bride?

CBW: Edna McKibben who was Miss Indian America. She was a Quapaw Indian and Quapaw was near my home.

JE: How did you meet her?

CBW: I met her at a powwow. She was a beautiful Indian girl and I married her and we had two children. I was at the powwow a great deal and the first time I saw her was there around the fire.

JE: Where was the powwow?

CBW: Quapaw, Oklahoma. The reflection of the fire on her Indian features, I just thought she was the prettiest thing I ever saw in my life. That fire was illuminating her features.

JE: I suppose you asked her out?

CBW: We just dated and became close friends.

JE: How long after you first met her did you get married?

CBW: I was in school in Chicago, because I remember I had a photograph of her on my wall. When I got out of school I came back and married her.

JE: Then you moved to New York City?

CBW: Yes, then we moved to New York. That's when I went there to illustrate cartoons, which I didn't like. I started doing lithographs, drawings on stone. Lithography was something that I did very well. Probably, before I quit, I had done more than 200 stones. It's a drawing on a stone with a grease crayon. I am sure that I did at least 200.

JE: You did your first lithograph for the Associated Artists of America?

CBW: No, I did my first lithograph at the Art Institute in Chicago where I studied lithography.

JE: So they introduced you to that concept?

CBW: Yes. I could always draw well and lithography is something that necessitates drawing. It's nothing like an etching.

JE: Is it difficult to do?

CBW: I didn't think so, because I did 200 of them. I evidently didn't think it was hard, because I don't like to do things that are hard to do. Most of the paintings I do, I do them because they are fun.

JE: When you were in New York, you met John Steinbeck?

CBW: I met about everybody.

JE: And you did illustrations for books?

CBW: I did illustrations for *Collier's Magazine*, *Saturday Evening Post* and various other magazines. So many of them I don't remember. In fact, the other day, I copied one of my illustrations because I thought it was so good and I didn't know I did it. (Laughter) It's true! I didn't know I did it. I picked up a magazine and there was a drawing in the magazine of that picture. And I thought, my God, I did that. I didn't know I did that.

JE: That's funny. You don't recall John Steinbeck at the moment because he had done *Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden* and *Of Mice and Men*.

CBW: Only that I remember that he was a great writer. I may have done something in his books. See, I was doing lots of books and lots of magazines. I think I did 20 magazines.

JE: You were in your mid to upper 20s when this is all happening?

CBW: Yes, that's right.

JE: Were you making money?

CBW: I don't think I was making much. I did pictures that I enjoyed the most for *Coronet Magazine*, two or three of the men's magazines that I did.

JE: That all came about because you were living in New York City?

CBW: I think that's true, yes. However, it's a funny thing. When I was working in New York, they thought of me as an Oklahoma cowboy, which I certainly never was. But anyway, they would be interested in my work thinking I should be drawing up cowboy stories. I didn't do well when I lived in New York doing that. But when I came back to Oklahoma I got all kinds of work from people who wanted their cowboys done by somebody out west. But when I lived in New York, nobody wanted me.

JE: They thought it was more authentic that way I suppose.

CBW: Perhaps. Yes, I did 29 books.

Chapter 7 - 3:57

Teacher / 50 Cents

John Erling: So then you moved back to Oklahoma and in 1943 you established a permanent studio in Miami?

Charles Banks Wilson: Yes, up above my father's paint and wallpaper store.

JE: So that's where you began with your family. What kind of work were you doing then in 1943, 1944 and 1945?

CBW: I think I was doing lithographs. I got myself a press and all of the equipment necessary and started doing lithographs there in the studio on Miami.

JE: How many prints would you produce of each work?

CBW: Maybe sometimes 15 and then they began to sell so I started doing 30. That was probably the most I printed there until I really got to doing well, then I would do like 100.

JE: Where were you selling them?

CBW: I would be selling them in Chicago, New York and maybe some other places.

JE: You would ship them to galleries and they would have them on display for you?

CBW: Yes. I did drawings with a grease crayon on a stone, a Bavarian limestone. I couldn't do etching. I didn't like it. Because I like to work in tones and the tones were only possible from the stone.

JE: You began teaching at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M?

CBW: Yes, I started teaching in night school. I was so successful that people at night school would say, "Well Charles, why don't you start teaching classes during the day?" The

Superintendent agreed to that, so I started teaching day classes at Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College.

JE: That is now known as Northeastern State University.

CBW: Yes. I taught there 15 years.

JE: I'm sure you influenced a lot of young people, didn't you?

CBW: I tried to influence them because I really believe that most students should go to junior college first. That's what I am doing with my own grandson now. I think they should go to a junior college first and get oriented.

JE: You began to do portraits?

CBW: Yes I did. I would do that because I could draw people. If people ever came up to the studio that I thought had an interesting face, I would ask them if I could draw their picture. I will tell you a little bit about the Indians because that's where I really made my name. The Indians used to rest over in the places where they would get tickets for the bus station. They would get bored over near the bus station and they would come over to my studio which was quite a large place and sit in the hall and comb their hair and put in him and tobacco in their pipe. I thought they were interesting people. Consequently, I asked one of them one time, "Could I draw your picture and what would you charge me?" They said, "50 cents." And I said, "Well, I'll draw you." So then I started drawing everybody at 50 cents. So I drew about 200 of the Indians that lived around Miami. I paid them all 50 cents.

JE: Then you were able to sell those to New York and Chicago?

CBW: I don't know that I really was selling them at that time. I think I just kept them. I might have sold them. But if I sold them I didn't get any money hardly out of them because I was just a local kid. Then I began to do things I could sell. *Coronet Magazine* came out with a full, double-page spread of my work. Things like that began to make me famous, so that I could get you know \$10 out of a painting. So you know it was unbelievable I'm sure but...

JE: Which would have been back in the 1940s?

CBW: Yes.

JE: Did you start getting mail from people all over who had seen your work?

CBW: No, no I don't think I did. I think I had to promote myself.

JE: Were you a good self-promoter?

CBW: I think probably. It's funny to me because when I was in New York I couldn't really get any illustrations from the books and things of that sort. But when I came back to Oklahoma, then I could do the cowboys and so forth. I was a real cowboy artist and so I stayed in Oklahoma.

JE: Did you ever get discouraged thinking that you couldn't make it as an artist?

CBW: Oh no, I was always too egotistical for that.

Chapter 8 - 3:35**Thomas Gilcrease**

John Erling: In 1957 you completed the first commissioned portrait of Thomas Gilcrease, tell us about that, was that from life?

Charles Banks Wilson: Oh yes. I wouldn't do anybody that wouldn't pose for me.

JE: How long did it take for you to paint Thomas Gilcrease?

CBW: I have no idea really. I was a good friend of Tom's and I did a lot of things artistically for him and his museum. I wanted to do Tom and he was rather egotistic. I don't blame him. If I had all those billions I would be too. But anyway, I would make drawings for him and he would pose for me. I remember one time he had the most wonderful look on his face. Acee Blue Eagle the Indian was just back from living with a bunch of Cherokee women and Mr. Gilcrease just thought that was wonderful and he smiled all the way through the story. (Laughter) Yes, we were good friends. I can tell you all kinds of stories about Mr. Gilcrease.

JE: Did he enjoy your sense of humor? Did you share laughs together?

CBW: Mostly he liked me because I am a good listener. He would invite me to dinner quite often or take me out to dinner because I would listen to his stories. One of the best stories I remember was the bank called and wanted to check on how much money he had in the bank. The bank wanted to know this. And he said, "Well, I want to know how much you've got?" And so they came out and told him how much money they had and so he just bought the bank and fired the head of the bank. (Laughter) And that's the God's truth. But I really loved that old man.

JE: You would meet him in Tulsa then?

CBW: Yes.

JE: Do you remember where you went to eat and any restaurants or anything like that?

CBW: No, we ate either at his home or in a hotel. He always liked to take me because he loved to talk.

JE: What was his main interest when he talked? Was it collecting art?

CBW: No, his main interest was himself. (Laughter) His main interest was himself.

JE: But you still found him fascinating?

CBW: Oh yes. I loved his stories and I love people that tell stories.

JE: He died in 1962 and that must have been a loss to you because you had become his friend.

CBW: Yes, well, not really. He wanted to buy me one time. He said he would build me a house and I would live there by his museum and he could say to people when they came to visit that that artist just lives right over here. I said, "No, I am not going to do that." I got

up and left. I told my wife, I said, "Wasn't that embarrassing to you for me to get up and leave?" And she said, "No, I thought you should have left before that."

JE: So he wanted to own you?

CBW: He wanted to own me. That's right.

JE: The man who said "No" to Thomas Gilcrease is right here. (Laughter)

CBW: Well, there were two others too, an Indian boy and Woody Crumbo. They didn't get up and leave. They just said, "No." it didn't work. He wanted to own us all.

JE: Thomas Gilcrease said once, "A man must leave a track of some sort and it might as well be a good one."

CBW: Oh, I admired him tremendously. He was witty too. I could tell you all kinds of stories about him.

JE: He was kind of lucky. He had land allocated to him south of Glenpool and he became wealthy at a very young age. He was a teenager when he got started making his money.

CBW: Well, he had a clubfoot and he had to have that operated on. But I will tell you one thing real quick. I remember one time he told me that his father drank a lot. One time he said his father left him in charge of the bales of cotton, which is what he did as a kid with his dad. He said that while he was gone, the wind blew the cotton into the water and when his father came back he was drunk and he thought his son had put the cotton into the water. And he said, "He just whipped the hell out of me." That's the kind of story he would tell.

Chapter 9 - 5:30

Portraits / State Capitol

John Erling: From 1963 to 1968 you went to work for the Oklahoma State Legislature. You were producing the life size portraits of Will Rogers, Sequoyah, Senator Robert S. Kerr and Jim Thorpe.

Charles Banks Wilson: Yes.

JE: You were about 45 years old. Let's talk first about your first portrait which was Will Rogers, you portrayed him in a business suit. Was that difficult to do?

CBW: Yes, it was. Sure, yes. Every painting is difficult, but every painting is fun.

JE: Do you remember how long you spent on that portrait?

CBW: I would say at least three or four months. In

JE: You had him standing on a Navajo rug.

CBW: Yes, I think it's in the entrance to the Will Rogers Memorial Museum. It's hanging there now. They bought it.

JE: Now, that was not from life. You were painting him from what?

CBW: I made him out of clay. I made a clay figure of him. Then I did a black and white painting of the figure, then I did color. But I had to find somebody that would stand like him and put on the clothes like him and all that. I did many color studies on that. I had a responsibility for it to be that good.

JE: Why did you feel that you had a responsibility?

CBW: Because everybody loved him. It couldn't just be another portrait. It had to be something special. I remember when it was unveiled. His son, Jim Rogers was there for the unveiling and he said, "My mother would have loved that painting you've done. You got his tie straight."

JE: Is that one of the portraits that you are the most proud of?

CBW: Not really. Not really. I was egotistic. I think I thought pretty much everyone that I had done was one I'm proud of, or I just don't do it.

JE: Yes.

CBW: See another thing, every painting that I have done, whether it's a painting or drawing or whatever, I've looked at as fun. If it wasn't going to be fun, I wouldn't do it.

JE: It must be a nice feeling though. Do you think about the fact that it hangs in our State Capitol and so many people come in on a daily basis?

CBW: I'm conceited. You know you have to believe in yourself. I like it when everybody tells me they like it. But I'm not sure that looking at the painting makes me feel that way. Because every painting that I have done was fun, was enjoyable.

JE: Did you ever look back on these portraits, let's say Will Rogers' portrait, and say to yourself, oh, I might have done differently? Or there's a little something-

CBW: No, I might have said I might have done it better, but never different. See, I usually did two or three pencil drawings and maybe a clay model. Then maybe a small painting, then a large painting and then I do the big one. Any good work that I have done is something of a development.

JE: Another portrait hanging in our State Capitol is that of Sequoyah. Tell us about Sequoyah.

CBW: Well, that was interesting to me because nobody knew exactly what Sequoyah looked like. I did the picture in the background of his home. I drew that from his home. But I went around and visited Cherokees and I would say, "Do you know anybody that looks like this?" They would say, "Yeah, so-and-so does." And it wouldn't look like him at all, someone maybe this tall (motioning). I just looked and looked and looked and finally I just modeled him out of clay. And I got Indians that were around when probably somebody from the Sequoyah people had remembered what he looked like. But I finally

just built him out of clay. I got people to model for it. The jacket that he has on in the painting, I actually got that from someone that had come on the Trail of Tears. It was still kept as a treasure, but it rotted. They had had it for 50 years. Because I got it out and used it as a model for the Sequoyah painting that's in the State Capitol, and it just rotted to pieces.

JE: Wow. Did he have a name other than Sequoyah? Was it George Guess?

CBW: Yes, because they think this fellow Guess was his father. That his mother was an Indian but his father was not.

JE: And he was given the name Sequoyah?

CBW: Yes and why they didn't put that at the top of the capitol I will never know. Good God.

JE: They should have put Sequoyah up there?

CBW: Oh absolutely, absolutely. They were going to call the state Sequoyah. Some smartass changed it and called the Oklahoma.

JE: I suppose what they thought is then all of the other tribes would be jealous if this man represented the Cherokees.

CBW: Wouldn't that be a shame? Yes.

JE: And so they would feel left out.

CBW: Yes, they were going to name state Sequoyah. Do you remember that?

JE: That how great of a man he was.

CBW: Yes.

JE: He of course created the alphabet for the Cherokee Nation?

CBW: Yes. He first did one and it had 600 figures in it and his wife burned it. So then he did the new one and that's the one we know now.

JE: I understand he got the idea when he heard the white man sent thoughts by signs and marks. So when he saw them doing that, he thought well I can do that for my own people.

CBW: He might have.

JE: And that's how that came about.

CBW: Well, how it came about is he found a Bible in a room one day and picked it up and thought all of those shapes would be good. So he turned some of them upside down. It actually came from the Bible.

JE: So then you used several people as a record of what Sequoyah looked like?

CBW: There was pretty much one because I found a man, because he was only half Indian, you know, he wasn't full-blooded. I found a man who I thought would be a good Sequoyah and that's the one I used. The costume and all of that was authentic.

Chapter 10 - 4:36**Senator Robert S. Kerr / Carl Albert**

John Erling: You were getting paid by our State Legislators?

Charles Banks Wilson: But not enough.

JE: So then comes along Senator Robert S. Kerr and you did his portrait.

CBW: Yes.

JE: Did you meet the Senator?

CBW: Oh sure, he posed for it.

JE: He posed for this?

CBW: I did drawings of him.

JE: Was he a good poser?

CBW: He was and he was most interesting to talk to. He was so proud of what they were doing with this river. When he would talk about that, he was not a politician. It was really special to have been with him when he was talking about the river. He told me that what he looked forward to the most was to see his name on that river.

JE: The river you are referring to is the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River navigational channel, which originates at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa and it follows the Arkansas River and two other rivers to the Mississippi. He should have been proud of all the work he did to make that shipping channel happen. It's been very successful.

CBW: But I know when he would talk to me, he would almost cry. He was so proud of what was being done. The desk that I used in that State Capitol portrait was his desk and the things on the desk were his and the shirt that he had on was his.

JE: The portrait?

CBW: Yes. His family made those things available to me. The portrait is a damn good portrait of him because I was with him all of the time. He was so damn fat he could hardly get into his clothes.

JE: All pictures of Robert Kerr that I have ever seen have looked like what you portrayed.

CBW: Why sure.

JE: Then we come along to Jim Thorpe. There was some talk about we don't need another Indian, because you had Will Rogers and you had Sequoyah and there was a state Senator who wanted you and Thorpe replaced, but Henry Bellmon would not hear of this.

CBW: That's right. Bellmon just looked down on him at the time and told him we were going to do so-and-so now and just walked off. I remember those paintings well.

JE: Who modeled for Jim Thorpe? You kind of did body parts on him.

CBW: No one had legs like Jim Thorpe. There was a picture that had been made of Jim Thorpe from the side, which someone had made measurements on him, so I had that. I knew people that knew him. One man was on his baseball team. When I was working on the painting, a man came up, and Indian that looked like Jim Thorpe. I said, "What can I do for you?" And he said, "I understand you are painting my brother." It was Jim Thorpe's brother. He came in and he looked at it. He said that he had another brother who was older than all of them, and he was the one that would protect them when somebody wanted to whip them. It wasn't Jim Thorpe that did it. It was his older brother. I always learned too damn much about what I am doing (Laughter) because I have to be interested in it to do it.

JE: As a result of all of this, you became a historian yourself. You also did two smaller portraits, one of Carl Albert, former Speaker of the House and Angie Debo, state historian?

CBW: Both of them I knew and I did them from life.

JE: Robert Henry, the former Judge of the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals asked you to do Angie Debo?

CBW: He sure did, he and another person in the legislature. That was a nice experience for me to be around that lady. She was intelligent. I one time laid something on the kitchen table and she said, "Mr. Wilson, don't ever do that again, my mother knitted that top." I said, "Well, I won't do that again."

JE: Because you were in her home painting her?

CBW: I was in her home painting her. Oh, she was so wonderful to be around and so intelligent. I have had a lot of honors and she would tell me about the honors she had.

JE: The picture of Carl Albert, wasn't that with his classmates around?

CBW: Yes. I had done all of these kids around him. He knew all of those kids. He wanted to be with all of his classmates and I drew all of his classmates. When they unveiled the painting, all of the classmates were now grown people and came to the unveiling of the painting.

JE: Let's talk about Carl Albert and the portrait that hangs in our nation's Capitol along with other speakers who have won that distinguished office. Where did you do that and was it from life?

CBW: Yes it was from life. I did it in the United States Capitol in his office. He used to tell me wonderful stories about the war. He would tell me some great stories about that.

JE: Was he really talkative?

CBW: He was very talkative and just wonderfully interesting.

JE: He was a very short man?

CBW: Yes and a spellbinder. God he was a wonderful storyteller. Everybody in the Capitol knew I was doing his portrait, because everybody loved him really. He just drank enough

'til everybody loved him. (Laughter) I remember I was leaving one day and somebody hollered from up at the top of the Capitol, "How are you doing with our painting?" And I said, "Just fine." So they considered it "our painting".

JE: Yeah, that's great.

Chapter 11 - 3:40

Mural: Discovery and Exploration

John Erling: Because of your portraits of Robert S. Kerr, Sequoyah, Jim Thorpe and Will Rogers, which we have talked about, the 1970 legislature commissioned you to create four murals which depicted the history of Oklahoma from 1541 to 1906. The first picture was Discovery. Coronado was in the first picture and you used your likeness for Coronado.

Charles Banks Wilson: That's the only time I used myself, yes. Even then I put a beard on it.

JE: How did it come that you used yourself?

CBW: I needed a model. I didn't dare use this man or this man or this man. I was using real people. I wasn't making up anything. So I thought well, it won't make anybody mad if I put myself on there. But I've got a beard and mustache. That's the only time I ever did that.

JE: Each person you illustrated was depicted from life and you used clay models before you painted each scene.

CBW: I sure did. I did clay models and then I did a small painting in black and white and then I did it in color. I did three preliminaries and then I did the big paintings.

JE: Thirteen x 27' linen canvasses, woven in Belgium and mounted on fiberglass with hot wax and composite adhesive and then placed 36' above the floor. As we are looking at this mural then, you spent time sketching buffalo from life? And you used Mexican prisoners for models?

CBW: I sure did. I wanted to pay them and they wouldn't allow me to pay them. They had been picked up by the highway patrol and they wouldn't allow me to give them any money. It was the same way with the Indians up there on the cross. They were on the highway and they weren't allowed to be on the highway. So they picked them up and put them in jail. I went to see them in jail and I wanted to give them cigarettes, but they wouldn't allow me to give them any cigarettes. But I painted these guys in jail. Real Indian Mexicans, not just Mexicans.

JE: Right.

CBW: And the dog was the dog that led them around and would catch animals for them to

eat. That dog was over across the street and I drew him quickly on the curb and I went back and he was gone. I have always wondered, well, was he really there? (Laughter) Honest to God. He was there when I wanted him and I went over and laid my pencil down and when I came back he had disappeared.

JE: As you look to the horizon on the mural it is said to symbolize the endless possibilities for Oklahoma.

CBW: I actually did this painting on the spot, that one right there (motioning).

JE: You are pointing toward All That Water

CBW: Yes. I think it was salt water. That was water that drew people there like the Indians and all of the rest of them would come over there to get water.

JE: And they needed the salt?

CBW: Yes.

JE: I think you felt that you didn't portray oil in any of these because that's not the way Oklahoma was developed.

CBW: Yes.

JE: But salt was essential to the development because they needed cowlicks and all for their cattle and so that was essential.

CBW: This house right here and this man here was a Wichita and the Wichita Indians built that for me then.

JE: Right in the middle there's a house.

CBW: Yes, that's a Wichita house and this was the Chief of the Wichitas right here (motioning toward mural). They made a Wichita house and had a meeting in that house to decide whom this person should be. They were very interested in my doing it because we know that there are very few Wichitas and maybe the only Wichita who is going to be left is going to be in the Oklahoma Capitol. That's why the chief of the tribe wanted to be this man right there (motioning).

JE: That's great.

Chapter 12 - 1:45

Mural: *Frontier Trade*

John Erling: Let's take *Frontier Trade*, as we look at that, you knew whipsaws were used to cut the wood, but you couldn't find any photographic evidence of one.

Charles Banks Wilson: I went to Washington and did that.

JE: In the Smithsonian?

CBW: Yes, in the Smithsonian, that's right. I sure did.

JE: You sketched a reconstructed whipsaw?

CBW: I reconstructed everything there. Not for me but I just had it in there. I had remembered it, yes.

JE: And the pecan tree that you painted is an actual tree growing at Three Forks?

CBW: Yes and that little girl right there is my daughter.

JE: Oh really?

CBW: Yes.

JE: There's Joe Benny Mason.

CBW: He is pure blood Osage.

JE: And he's from Fairfax, Oklahoma.

CBW: That's right.

JE: He was a golf champ and a former football player. He was the model for the figure of the Osage Chief

CBW: Absolutely.

JE: The features were unique to each Indian tribe. When you depicted a specific tribe, the models were whenever possible, full-blooded members of that tribe.

CBW: Yes. This fellow right here (pointing) agreed to pose for me if I would be his best man. He was a historian for the University of Oklahoma. He said, "I'll pose for you if you will be the best man in my wedding."

JE: And so were you?

CBW: Yes.

JE: And then color is really important to you. Everything stayed true to the different colors that were important to each Indian tribe.

CBW: That's right. This back here (pointing) is where they are making salt.

JE: In the back there in the upper right-hand corner is where they are making salt.

CBW: And by the way, this was to protect the white people, not to protect the Indians.

JE: What is that a fort?

CBW: Fort something, I don't know which fort it was. That's why they built those things was to give the soldiers a place to stay.

JE: To be protected from the Indians. Well, that is a great picture, and that is *Frontier Trade*.

Chapter 13 - 1:23**Mural: *Indian Immigration***

John Erling: Then we have *Indian Immigration*. Let's take a look at that mural together.

Charles Banks Wilson: This boy was just back from World War II.

JE: He is the lead one there?

CBW: Yes.

JE: The headdress is worn by the Osage medicine man.

CBW: This was a real Osage Indian. I got that in a museum.

JE: You found that at the Field Museum in Chicago? And you were able to sketch that.

CBW: That's right. And each one of these represented the Five Civilized Tribes. I actually used someone from each of the Five Civilized Tribes.

JE: R.L. Fitzgerald, the former superintendent of Seneca schools was the model for this figure.

CBW: Yes, for this, number four. He was in that tribe.

JE: You were able to position him to show that he was ready to defend.

CBW: Yes, that's right. He has a gun.

JE: And he is defending his family and his tribe.

CBW: Each one of these is that tribe. I thought I had a responsibility to authenticate it like that.

JE: That's something to think out how you are going to place all of these elements. As in all of your murals, to be able to put all of this in one mural had to take a lot of planning.

CBW: No, I did a drawing first. I've got it down in the basement. Then I did a clay model. After the clay model, I did a small black and white painting of this and then a small color painting of this. Then I did the big one, in every mural.

JE: Great work.

CBW: And that was a place for great work.

Chapter 14 - 1:33**Mural: *Non-Indian Settlement***

John Erling: All right, now I want to give you the *Non-Indian Settlement* to look at the smokestacks there and the smoke. You researched this?

Charles Banks Wilson: Oh yes. Not only that, but I wanted to know what color-the train would put a flag out in front-what color would the flag be. If it is a non-scheduled run, it would

be white. Of course, I wanted it to be red, but it's white, so this has white flags on it. This one has a suitcase there and when I got a suitcase, how much do you think the suitcases were? The good ones cost 50 cents. This one they are setting the land up for the Oklahoma Land Run and here they are dividing up Oklahoma. The black man was afraid to pose for me, so he made me take him to a garage behind the house and I drew him in there. But he didn't want other blacks to know that he had posed for me.

JE: This is Number 3 here?

CBW: Yes. That's The Run.

JE: Former House Speaker Bill Willis was the model for that.

CBW: Yes, on this side, but this was not Bill Willis on this side (pointing). Yes, he was running in it and this guy was whipping the horses. The first woman on the Run was riding a white horse. Well, I didn't want to do a white horse so I did a cream horse.

JE: You are talking about the Land Run.

CBW: The Land Run, yes. This woman was leading the Run. And these (pointing) were criminals from outside of Oklahoma who would come over here to get land.

JE: Up in the left-hand corner.

CBW: Yes, and here they are turning that around and whomever got the number would get placed and have their home.

Chapter 15 - 2:55

Pure Bloods

John Erling: Are you of Native American descent?

Charles Banks Wilson: No, I don't think so. I just don't know.

JE: You don't know? You don't know what their heritage was?

CBW: Not really. I think my dad probably had some Italian in him. My grandfather spoke Italian, not all of the time, but once in a while, enough that I remember a lot of it.

JE: No Cherokee or Quapaw or anything?

CBW: No, I'm nothing like that. My mother said she was French and Indian, but I don't know whether she was or not.

JE: In 1979 you began traveling throughout Oklahoma to create a collection of drawings representing every American Indian Nation or Tribe in the state.

CBW: I went clear across the United States.

JE: You completed this in 1982 and they were exhibited nationally in Search For The Pure Bloods. What is a pure blood?

CBW: Someone that has no white blood at all or other tribe blood than whatever tribe they were.

JE: And this sketching started earlier way back when, when you were drawing Indians at the bus station and you decided to complete this.

CBW: They would come up to the studio usually to hit me up for a quarter. Then I would say, "Well, let me draw your picture." And then I would put them in a box. I didn't realize that I had so many pictures in the box. Then I decided I would go clear across the United States and hunted for pure-blood Indians and drew them.

JE: So you traveled many, many miles and you got to 60 tribes?

CBW: I gave them all to Gilcrease Museum. I think I did another four or five later and I sent those to them after I had done those additional ones.

JE: Was it easy to find these people and were they willing when you found them?

CBW: Oh God, one woman, I was going to do her and she was on the other side of the fence. I had been told she was kind of hot-headed. She was a Seminole I think. Anyway, she was working in the field and there was a woman who drove up behind me with a camera and was going to go over there and take her picture because she was interesting looking. And this woman saw her with the camera and chased her out of the field with this fork she had, so the woman wouldn't take her picture. So I thought, hell, I don't want that, so I got out of there myself. But most of them-

JE: Most of them were willing to let you?

CBW: Oh yes. One fellow would not pose for me. He had been a very famous Indian, so I wanted to draw him and he had gotten quite old. I had gone to see him three times and he wouldn't pose for me. So I went the fourth time because he was the most unusual of that tribe. He said, "I'm not going to pose for you unless you pay me." I said, "Well, how much do you want?" He said, "50 cents." I said, "I'll pay you." And I drew him. But almost every one of those pictures is a story, every one of them.

JE: So that took three years for you to do that?

CBW: Yes, it may have taken longer than that, but at least that long. I just went straight across America and every time I would come to a tribe I would ask, "Do you have a pure-blood?" If they said, "Yes, there is this man and his son," then I would draw them. But it was very difficult to find pure-blood Indians and I wanted somebody that was from just one tribe.

JE: Because they were dying off?

CBW: Oh yes. Well, they intermarry, that's a big thing they intermarry. A lot of Indians were going to Indian Schools and this Sioux I drew married a Seneca, so their children would no longer be pure-bloods.

JE: I'm from the Dakotas. Do you remember going up to South Dakota or North Dakota?

CBW: Yes, I do. My grandmother is from North Dakota.

Chapter 16 - 1:56

Best Work

John Erling: Do you think your sketches would be your best work or your paintings or your lithographs or what do you consider to be your best?

Charles Banks Wilson: Probably the lithographs. I did some awfully good things. That painting I did there (pointing) of Thomas R. Benton, that may be the best painting I've ever done, because he had done himself beautifully and that's better than anything he had ever done. Because his wife told me, she commissioned that painting, and she said, "That's better than anything Tom ever did himself."

JE: Is Tom Benton an artist that you looked up to?

CBW: Yes, as a person, I never did copy anything that Tom Benton did because he was almost a cartoonist. In fact, I think Tom was a cartoonist, but a damn good one. When he was young he did black and white cartoons. This painting, President Truman unveiled that.

JE: Whom did you look up to and maybe influenced you as an artist?

CBW: I think nobody influenced me, but they would be a challenge. There were artists that I thought of as being better than me. With an artist's ego, that's being pretty generous (laughter).

JE: You said that lithography is the medium that made an artist out of you.

CBW: Yes, I am sure that's true.

JE: Why?

CBW: The only reason I can imagine is that it was so difficult to do the drawing and grind the stone, do the drawing on the stone, pull the prints and then market them.

JE: And again it's made from a flat slab of Bavarian stone.

CBW: Yes.

JE: What's so special about Bavarian stone?

CBW: It's the quality of the stone.

JE: You did *Ten Little Indians*, a piece portraying children in tribal costumes?

CBW: That was just something I wanted to do. To be honest with you, I don't think I ever did a painting I didn't want to do. To me, painting was fun. I don't think I ever did one that I didn't think was fun. Even illustrating books, I illustrated books because I thought it was fun.

JE: You illustrated Robert Louis Stephenson's *Treasure Island*?

CBW: Yes. I did 19 books or more, I don't know.

Chapter 17 - 2:33

Ford/Rockefeller Jr.

John Erling: You did work for Ford Motor Company?

Charles Banks Wilson: Oh my yes. I did their magazine Ford Times magazine. I did a lot of paintings for the Ford Motor Company. They would send me out all over the country. I think at first they had me going to restaurants, little country restaurants all over America. I ate a lot of food that way. But I would find wonderful restaurants out on the roads. That's what Ford Times did. They were just patronizing little restaurants all over the country.

JE: They were good people?

CBW: Oh yes.

JE: Did you meet any Fords?

CBW: I saw a magnificent house that a Ford man had built. They said that he did not live there anymore. I asked, "Well, why?" And they said, "They fired him." I said, "Why did they fire him?" They said, "He invented the Edsel." (Laughter) That's what they said. That's why he doesn't work there anymore. Yeah, Ford used to send me all over the country.

JE: John D. Rockefeller, Jr., did you do work for him and did you meet him?

CBW: Yes, he's the one that I went out to do the mural in Wyoming.

JE: In Yellowstone?

CBW: Yes. What's interesting is that when he died, he asked about me. I mean that just floored me.

JE: He asked about you on his deathbed?

CBW: No, not on his deathbed, but when he was dying. He asked, "How's Charles?" That was such a shock because I didn't even know that he knew I was out there. See, I was out there painting.

JE: And what did you paint?

CBW: A mural for their hotel.

JE: Was it an expanse of Yellowstone National Park?

CBW: I did that painting of when they would come in and gather and have parties. Not when they were out hunting beavers, but it's when they come in and they would have contests and horse races and bring women and marry them. I did a big mural of that for

him. And by the way, Mr. Rockefeller called me and he said, "Charles, we can't use that painting." I have to tell you the truth. I had a figure in my big mural of them holding up a can. That can contained brass nails. They would sell them and say I will give you this can of brass nails if you would give me the material that you are going to trade, like beaver and other skins. Mr. Rockefeller said, "I think people will think we are trading whiskey to the Indians, and I would like to have you change that." So I did. I just didn't tell Mr. Rockefeller, no, I can't do that. So I put a beaver pelt or something else in there.

JE: You don't remember what kind of money you got for that?

CBW: Not very much. I think I got about \$9,000 for it, which today would be about \$100,000.

Chapter 18 - 7:26

People Charles Met

John Erling: You illustrated J. Frank Dobie's *The Mustang*.

Charles Banks Wilson: Yes.

JE: You were really able to capture the spirit of the mustang in that sketching.

CBW: I agree with you and I did some of these from it.

JE: You are pointing to one on the floor right now.

CBW: Yes.

JE: You have one on the easel that you just painted in the last couple of days, as of this interview.

CBW: Yes.

JE: But the mustang and the flurry that came with all that and the fight that went on between those two horses, just captures that mustang.

CBW: I agree that's the best one. I think the book sold for \$2.50 or something like that. The last time I heard one had sold in auction in Kansas City for \$5,000.

JE: Let's talk about people you have known, maybe you can just tell me a little bit about them? William Keeler he was president of Phillips Petroleum and Cherokee Chief, you did his portrait?

CBW: Yes.

JE: You knew Woody Guthrie?

CBW: Yes.

JE: Did you get to meet him?

CBW: Oh yes.

JE: *This Land Is Your Land?* Tell us a little bit about him. What kind of person was he?

CBW: Well, he was a most interesting person. The story that I like the best is there in one of the big buildings in New York City. He was going to play his guitar while the orchestra had a 15-minute rest. So he was going to come in and fill up those 15 minutes. We all had gone over to the Waldorf Astoria before this because we were all friends of his. We had our best clothes on and we were at the top of the Waldorf Astoria. When the Mexican Orchestra came on and introduced Woody, he came on dressed pretty nice. We all had our best clothes on. He came on and he strummed that guitar and he said, "What the hell am I doing here?" and walked off and never came back.

JE: So he was an eccentric sort of guy?

CBW: Yes. I saw him sometime later in a restaurant. He was sitting at the counter and I said, "Well, what are you doing here?" He said, "Are you going to buy my dinner?" And I said, "Are you going to buy mine?" (Laughter) Every time I was with him he was flirting with some girl.

JE: When you painted him, that wasn't from life?

CBW: Oh no, no, he had been dead 40 years.

JE: But you drew him from life?

CBW: I made a drawing of him, that's right and I gave it to a friend of mine over here who is a guitar player.

JE: Were you around him a lot?

CBW: Not much.

JE: His politics?

CBW: No, I just didn't care much for him and I really didn't admire him very much. But I painted a good painting of him. It was just almost as if God had said, "Put this in there and put this in there" when I did that painting of him, which is in the state capitol. When they came over here and wanted me to do a painting, they wanted me to do an Indian. I said, "Well, I don't much want to do another Indian for the capitol, but I'll do something." They said, "We'll just take anything you'll do." Before they got out the door I knew what I was going to do because I had been trying to do a painting of Woody Guthrie. It was probably a couple of months before he came back. When he came in I showed him I had painted Woody Guthrie and he thought I was doing two Indians chasing a buffalo. He said, "Well, that's not exactly what we expected but I'll take it." I said, "It's not going to cost you \$15,000, it's going to cost you \$20,000." He said, "Well, all right." And I said, "Besides that, you've got to give the money to the Woody Guthrie Medical whatever it was. They were so impressed and so pleased about it that they had my daughter and me come to New York City and they had a nice big dinner for us. He didn't bat an eye when I said it was going to cost \$20,000.

JE: You knew Eleanor Roosevelt?

CBW: I took her through the big museum there in Chicago. It was just an accident. She came early in the morning to see a sculpture exhibit. I was there drawing because I would go early and they would let us draw early before the public came. They said, "Well, he is the only one here and he will take you through." So I took her through that big exhibition on sculpture. I was really impressed with that woman. I thought she was really magnificent looking. You know everybody talks about how ugly she was and she didn't have an ugly bone on her. She was almost majestic. I'll never forget that.

JE: She was very grateful to you for showing her around I would imagine and very nice.

CBW: Oh yes. She had a car parked out front, a big Cadillac or whatever it was. I was embarrassed because when you first went in there they had these big nude sculptures and she stood there a long time and looked at them.

JE: Harry Truman, you met him. Do you remember what he was like?

CBW: He was awfully nice. Yes. He was from Kansas wasn't he?

JE: Yes he was.

CBW: He unveiled my painting of Benton.

JE: Mickey Mantle?

CBW: Didn't like him.

JE: Jim Shoulders?

CBW: I liked Jim Shoulders very much. I did his portrait.

JE: How about Madame Chiang Kai-shek?

CBW: Oh yes, I went to a party with her. There was a fellow who was in charge of the books for the newspaper in New York and he had her for dinner and I was there. She was a really nice person.

JE: You talked to her?

CBW: Yes, I didn't say much, but I was just there with a bunch of other people.

JE: Gene Autry? (Laughter) Do you have a fun story about him?

CBW: Well, the last time I was with Gene Autry he was drunk. He had on shoes and socks, no pants, but he had on a bathrobe and a cowboy hat. (Laughter)

JE: Anthony Quinn?

CBW: Anthony Quinn. I went out to judge a show out West and he and I were on the train together. We both were coming back to Kansas City and he wanted me to introduce him to Thomas R. Benton. When we got into Kansas City it was snowing. It was just cold as hell and he wanted to meet Thomas Benton. So I called Mrs. Benton and told her that Anthony Quinn wanted to come and see him. She said, "Well it's just too cold. We don't want to see him." So he went his way and I went mine. Can you imagine somebody saying it's too cold to meet Anthony Quinn? Well, that's the Bentons for you, because they were meeting famous people all of the time.

JE: Chester Gould, creator of the comic strip *Dick Tracy*?

CBW: He and another fellow are the ones who sent me to New York wanting me to become a cartoonist. I decided quickly I didn't want to be a cartoonist and I came back and went back to the Art Institute.

JE: Bing Crosby?

CBW: Bing Crosby came to Miami, Oklahoma. He was a good friend of George Coleman, a wealthy fellow in Miami. His Dad owned the lead zinc mines. He was a huge golfer and they played golf together. He came and he wanted to see my lithographs. He sat there and he looked at my lithographs.

JE: Where was he that he would have seen your lithographs?

CBW: At George Coleman's house. George Coleman had a collection of my prints and he liked my lithographs. I think the only time I was really impressed was when *Collier's* magazine did a double-page spread of my drawings. I think I really was impressed then, because it impressed my Dad.

JE: So they finally said something good about your work?

CBW: Yes. (Laughter)

JE: You said earlier they didn't always comment, but when that came out in *Collier's* magazine...

CBW: I really did. I thought I had really made it then. I really did. Yeah. Of course, I did in paintings and that sort of thing, but I still think the lithographs were what I did masterfully.

JE: Are you the most proud of your lithographs?

CBW: Yeah, oh yeah, by far. I get proud of this item or that item or something like that but collectively the lithographs.

Chapter 19 - 0:53

Lithograph Book - *Prince Esquire*

John Erling: I brought along *The Lithographs of Charles Banks Wilson*.

Charles Banks Wilson: Yes.

JE: I would like to show one or two that were your favorites and we'll look at them.

CBW: I've got to tell you about this one.

JE: What we are looking at now is *Prince Esquire* or *Royal Breed* and this is *One Fine Bull Number 43* in this book. Tell us about that.

CBW: I wanted to draw him, and he didn't want me to draw him. So when I would start to draw him, he would lower his head and start walking toward me. The fellow that took care of him said, "Well, I can take care of that." So he went over to the next field and got a female and brought her over and put her on the other side of the fence. Then the bull raised his head up and his eyes raised up and he posed for me. (Laughter)

JE: For how long do you think you were there sketching him?

CBW: I don't know, but it made all of the difference in the world. Most of my pictures are stories.

Chapter 20 - 0:55

Lithograph Book - *Freedom's Warrior*

John Erling: Here we have Number 35 *Freedom's Warrior*, the soldier with the flag. Tell us about that.

Charles Banks Wilson: Along with this, I did a story on the American Indian in WWII. I did it for the Office of War Information and for the newspapers. This was in 200 newspapers. This was Chief Joseph Sitting Bull, Tecumseh and Geronimo. This was Black Hawk and Pontiac.

JE: And this was a soldier?

CBW: This was soldier. The fellow that posed for this was a code-talker.

JE: There were 17 code-talkers I believe.

CBW: Yes. These guys made up their language because they were all Comanche. Comanche was a very difficult language. So they had to make words for things in the Army that there was no word for. And that's why I called this *Freedom's Warrior*. This went into 200 and some odd newspapers.

JE: That's quite a picture.

CBW: I later did it in color.

Chapter 21 - 0:56

Lithograph Book - *Hand Game*

JE: This is Number 33, it's called *Hand Game*.

CBW: Hand Game would be a game the Indians would play among themselves. The person

here (pointing) with a stick has to guess which hand the Indian woman is holding a disk in. She had a disk and she had to hide it and he has to guess which hand it's in. If he guessed right, he gets something and if he doesn't guess right, well then it goes on to somebody else. It's a very typical Indian hand game.

JE: And these people that are in it?

CBW: They are playing the drum.

JE: These people actually posed for you?

CBW: Probably because I had been to the game many times. The woman is teasing him. They do this to the beat of the drum and they are playing to the beat of the drum. It's usually at a dinner or something like that at night.

JE: Were you actually at a group like this?

CBW: Oh yes, many times.

JE: Well those are just a few out of the book *The Lithographs of Charles Banks Wilson* with text by David C. Hunt.

Chapter 22 - 8:25

Good, etc.

John Erling: You have pieces hanging in the Library of Congress, The Smithsonian and many places in the world. Does that mean anything to you?

Charles Banks Wilson: Not really. Probably in a lot of places that I don't even know about.

JE: Did you have a tough time seeing some of your work go out the door?

CBW: Never, because it was always mine. I just think they had paid to have it in their house. It's still mine. I never felt like I had given up what I had done. It's like having your son marry somebody and he's still your son. That's the way I felt about my prints.

JE: Did you ever do anything because you needed to money-or only because you wanted to do the painting?

CBW: No, I think I just wanted to do the painting. I don't remember doing any painting for money.

JE: Your advice to young people who want to be artists, you've inspired so many-what would you say to these young people generations from now who will hear our conversation, what do you say to them?

CBW: I don't think I have ever done anything that I didn't think was going to be fun. I never did anything for money that wasn't going to be fun. I don't think I ever did anything just for the money. If it wasn't going to be fun, I didn't do it.

JE: Make it fun. If you enjoy it, do it. Is that nice for you to know that this work of yours, this legacy of yours, that it will last, does that make you feel good?

CBW: Well, I don't really think of it that way. But if that were to be true I would be egotistically proud. Artists are egotistic. You know they've got to be or they wouldn't give all of themselves to whatever it is they are doing.

JE: How did you handle criticism of your work? Somebody must not have liked your work?

CBW: Oh, I just thought they were stupid. (Laughter)

JE: How would you like to be best remembered?

CBW: I think probably the most important thing I did was of the American Indian. I don't know that some of my paintings of the American Indian were my best, but I think what I have done of the American Indian has been something that I have been most proud of. Because I did say something, it's just like when I did something like the dancers from various tribes, or being judged by judges of various tribes. I don't know I just think that probably was the important thing I did.

JE: Well, you brought so much attention to the Indians and they deserved to have that attention.

CBW: An Indian's greatness was his art, I think. In some instances, they actually were painters. I never did see any that I thought were as good as the art of their dance and things like that.

JE: You are an artist, but wouldn't you say that you are a storyteller?

CBW: Oh yes, absolutely. I think I would even rather be remembered as a storyteller because I even told the story about the Indians and I respected them.

JE: Well, I couldn't agree with you more, the respect that you have the longer you live for Native Americans and how this country really was built from their beginnings.

CBW: Yes, that's right. I think that was the important thing I did when I went across the country looking for the last of the pure bloods. That's the most important thing I've done. The important thing was they were all favorable except the man who wanted 50 cents. That was the only person that ever wanted any money. I did them (painted their pictures) in bars and out in the middle of the road and I did them in churches. One man was a little peeved because they were waiting for him to go fishing.

JE: Could you sketch one pretty fast?

CBW: Pretty fast, yes.

JE: A half-hour or 15 minutes?

CBW: Oh yeah, not over a half-hour. I might work on them a little bit after that. You know I've done that.

JE: Okay, here we are, it's August 10th, 2010. You are 92 and you are still painting?

CBW: Yeah. I think that's the tenth last painting I am going to do.

JE: And then there will be an eleventh and a twelfth. (Laughter)

CBW: God, I hope not.

JE: Because, what do you do with yourself these days?

CBW: Yeah, that's true. I went for about two weeks without doing anything and then I did this little painting here.

JE: The one he is pointing at is on an easel and it's of horses running, mustangs I guess they would be wouldn't they?

CBW: Yeah. What I was doing was Tom Benton had written a story about the male horse and all of the others are females and he (male horse) is running the whole show. There are stories about that and words about that. That was in a story that J. Frank Dobie did.

JE: The point is, you can't stop it can you?

CBW: I've tried damn it! (Laughter) I swear I will not do another one. In all honesty, I would say this is my last painting.

JE: But what would you do with your time?

CBW: Yeah.

JE: Because you are very healthy, you could live another 10 years for sure.

CBW: Oh, I hope not.

JE: Here you are at 92 and if you stopped painting, then what would you do with the day?

CBW: That's very true. But now I sort of ease into it, you know. I say I maybe will do this one figure and that's all, but then I will do this one and that one and pretty soon I come along as I did this morning and put that one on the right, back in the back.

JE: It takes you longer in a day, you know but you get up and have breakfast and you do a little bit of that and then there's lunch and you probably take a nap in the afternoon, I don't know but.

CBW: I do now.

JE: But then you might do something in the evening so the day goes by pretty fast when you have that to go to.

CBW: That's right.

JE: You are fortunate that you have that.

CBW: Yeah, in fact I put some work on this figure in behind (motioning) today, this morning.

JE: Those are such precious pieces, especially now at your age. Where will they go?

CBW: People are not buying paintings now, which is kind of ridiculous because, it's like Tom Benton, he brought a painting of some flowers over to me. My wife said, "I want to buy these." I said, "Well, I am not going to spend \$5,000 for another artist's work." She said, "Well, I'd sure like to have these." It was a still life. But two or three years later it sold for \$2 million. But generally people come to "oh" and "ah" but they come mainly to see me it looks like. (Laughter) But I've done some good things.

JE: You mean in your elder years?

CBW: Yes.

JE: I just want to thank you so much for taking time. It's no question you are a national treasure. You are a state treasure. You are so important to Oklahoma because you portrayed Oklahoma history.

CBW: And I've got, in fact, I gave the book to Gilcrease Museum. I had a whole book as a kid, full of pictures that I had drawn of people around Miami. They would go into town on Saturday and have an auction of their old furniture and I would go out there and sit all day and draw things that people were selling. I think something that I did that was rather important, it's not so important now, but at the time I thought it was, and I still think it is important even if it's not considered that way. I did the mines underground. I probably went down underground 200 times drawing underground and digging out the ore.

JE: Where would that have been?

CBW: The lead zinc mines in Miami, Oklahoma were the biggest in the world. I would go underground there and draw and maybe somebody would come up on me. The only they would have would be these lights on their head. So I wouldn't see them until they got about right there (motioning). I did a lot of that.

JE: Do you consider yourself an Oklahoman?

CBW: Oh yes, by all means.

JE: You live in Fayetteville, Arkansas now, but...

CBW: Oh, I still have property in Miami. I have all kinds of contacts in Miami. My mother and dad and my uncles and my granddad were all buried there in Miami. My grandmother's father laid out the plot.

JE: Is that where you will be buried?

CBW: Sure. Absolutely.

JE: What's the name of your dog here?

CBW: Kima.

JE: Kima?

CBW: Yes, it means "come here"

JE: In what language?

CBW: In Comanche. That's all he could speak is Comanche because he'd been raised by Comanche Indians. We had to teach him English.

JE: He's been a pal of yours?

CBW: Oh, he's just the greatest friend in the world. (Laughter) Yeah.

JE: What is the most expensive painting you've sold?

CBW: I think probably the most I have ever sold one for was for \$100,000. That's not really a lot when artists are selling for \$500,000 and things like that. I think most of my things

that I have done for a lot of money have been in the thousand-dollar class. But I think that one of Tom Benton, because of who it is, is worth a lot more than that. And then one of the paintings in the studio, a fellow offered me \$50,000 for one in there, but I wouldn't sell it to him.

JE: When you contracted with the state legislature to do those murals, was that like for \$65,000 and you did it over a period of four years?

CBW: Yes, I think it was something like that, so much apiece.

JE: You were giving a lot to the state then?

CBW: Yes I was, yeah.

JE: The value of those...

CBW: Well, I think the state got their money's worth.

JE: They sure did.

Chapter 23 - 0:53

Conclusion

Announcer: Now you know Charles Banks Wilson in a more personal way. We're grateful to him for sharing his thoughts and his personality to better understand this very accomplished Oklahoman. Please consult our For Further Reading Section and our Bookstore for topics discussed in this interview which was made possible by our Founding Sponsors on VoicesofOklahoma.com.