

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL COWBOY HALL OF FAME AND WESTERN HERITAGE CENTER

# Persimmon Hill



# Persimmon Hill

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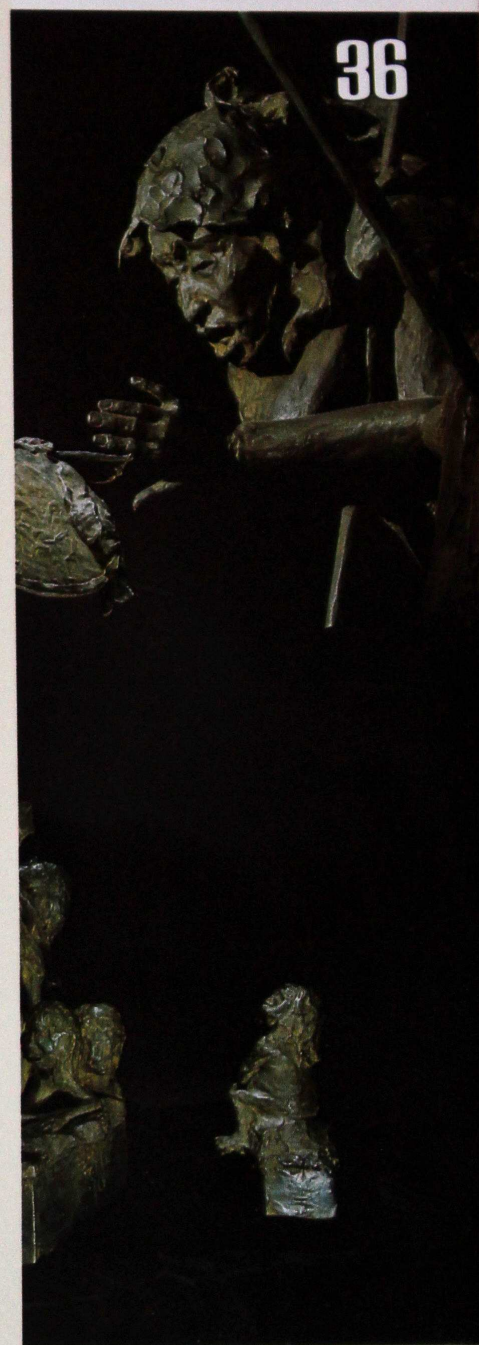
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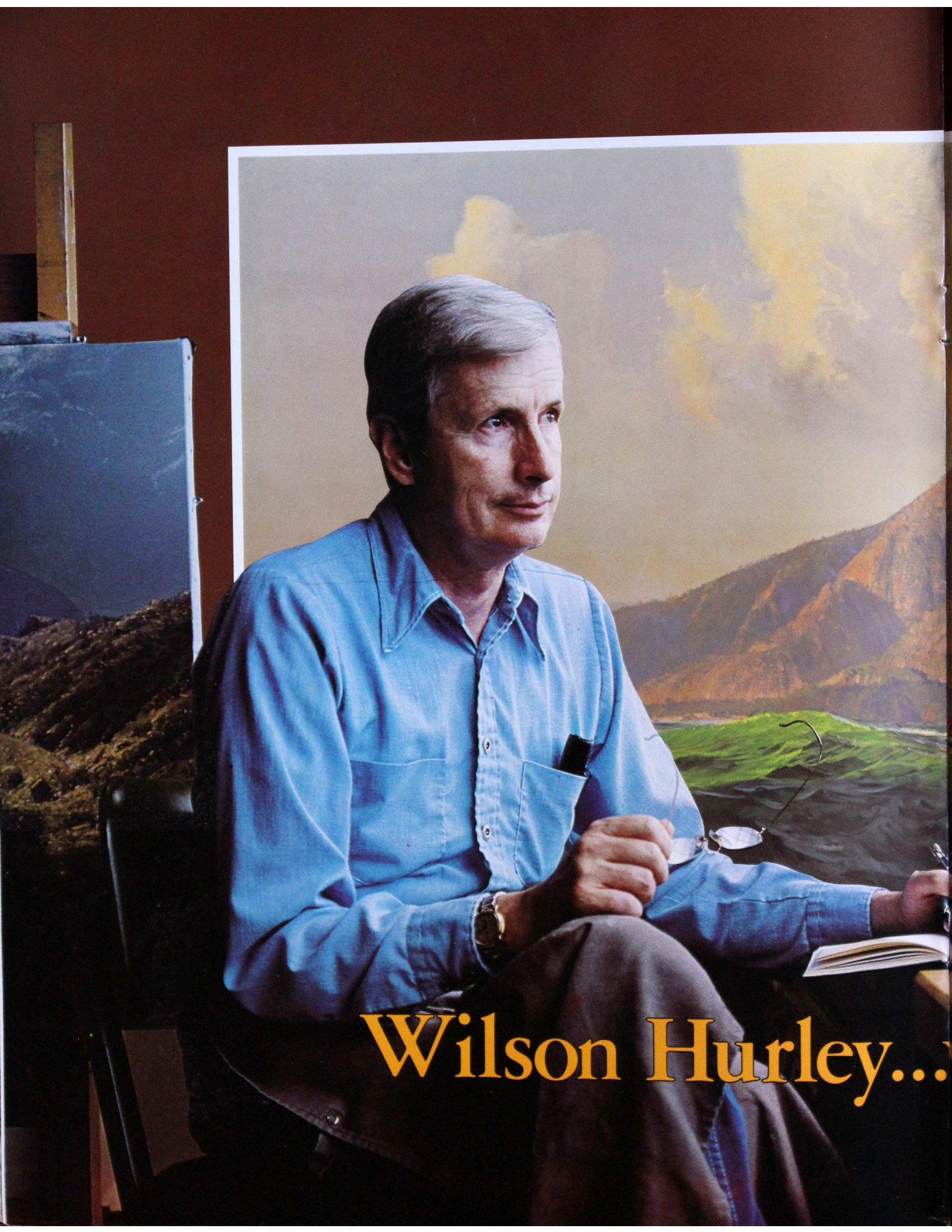
COVER: SNOW SQUALLS, CENTRAL UTAH. 30 x 60 inches, oil by Wilson Hurley.  
 INSIDE FRONT COVER: Cowgirls at Colorado Springs Roundup: Bonnie McCaroll, Jessie Roberts, unidentified, Mabel Strickland, Florence Hughes, Prairie Rose Henderson, Fox Hastings, Donna Cowen.

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Wilson Hurley...



OFF THE COAST OF SULAWESI, oil, 24 x 48 inches

with the wind in his face

by Dean Krakel

October 3, 1977

Dear Mr. Hurley:

I'm most happy to inform you that the Board of Directors and Trustees of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, meeting in Jackson, Wyoming, September 17th, voted unanimously to award you their trustees gold medal for outstanding contribution to western art. Presentation will be made the evening of December 3, 1977.

Mrs. Autry and I are looking forward to meeting you and Mrs. Hurley personally and attending your great exhibition. Congratulations.

Most sincerely,  
Gene Autry, President  
Board of Directors

In receiving notice that he would be presented the National Cowboy Hall of Fame's coveted gold medal for outstanding contribution to Western art, Wilson Hurley had gained more than high recognition or a milestone in his artistic career. The forthcoming gold medal and his one-man show at the seventeen-state-owned

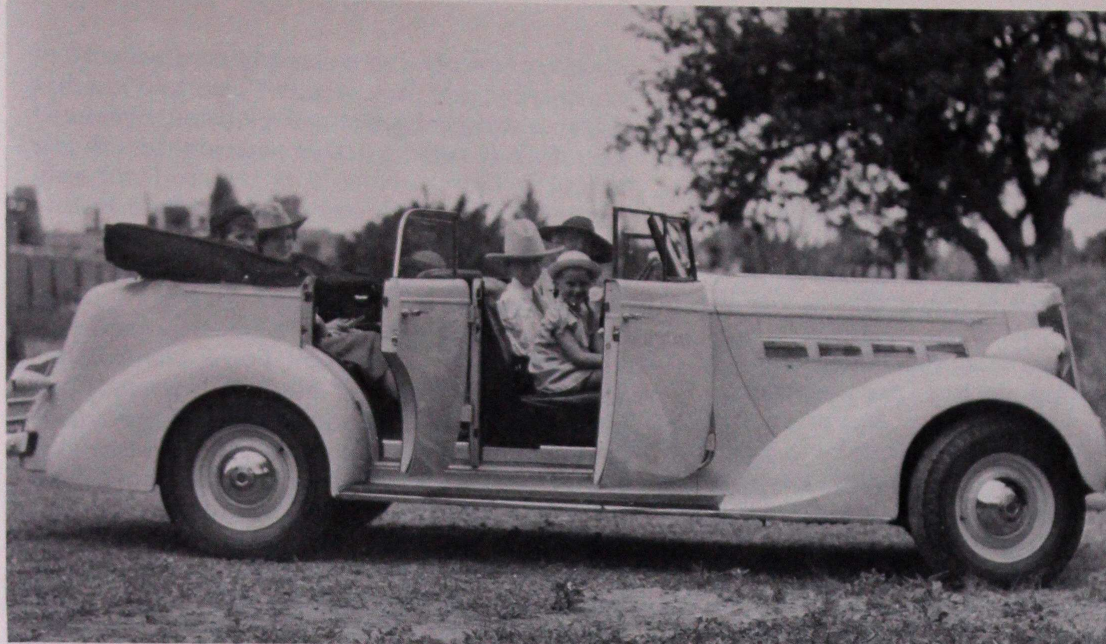
Cowboy Hall of Fame represents fulfillment of a carefully selected way of life.

To understand the magnitude of his achievement, one has to reach back into his life and that of his parents, because his brilliance as a painter, his ultimate triumph as an artist did not just happen.

As a boy, Wilson was not by any means the run-of-the-mill kid found on any block of Mainstreet, U.S.A. He grew into manhood in an atmosphere charged with greatness and excitement, where events of national and international consequence were discussed and experienced. Telephone calls and important messages and even secret communiques often came to the Hurley home from such nerve centers as the White House, Peking, Paris, Berlin, or London. The impact and drama of victory or defeat in international relations or even war, the outcome of an election often affected the temperament of the Hurley home. To say that Wilson and his three sisters grew up in a different kind of a world, different from mine, would be an understatement, to say the least. The boyhood world of Wilson was groomed, chauffeured, tutored and cultured.



ANASAZI RUINS, CAÑON DEL MUERTO, oil, 40 x 60 inches



*Wilson with his mother and sisters Ruth, Patsy and Mary in family Packard known as "The Yellow Peril."*

His father was Major General Patrick J. Hurley, cabinet officer, confidant of presidents, special emissary to Chiang Kai-shek, minister to New Zealand. Patrick J. Hurley was Secretary of War under President Herbert Hoover. He was Franklin D. Roosevelt's personal ambassador to twenty-one foreign countries. He is largely credited with uniting the divergent elements in China into a united military front as a major ally of the United States and Great Britain during World War II.

Wilson's father was born in Oklahoma in 1883 when it was Indian Territory. The elder Hurley grew up working as a cowboy and rode the range with Will Rogers. On one occasion the two worked together at the Springer Ranch near Cimarron, New Mexico. The famous humorist often referred to General Hurley in his comments on American diplomacy.

A sense of historical importance and high social standing abound not only on the paternal side of the Hurley house but also with his mother. On December 3, 1919, Colonel Patrick Hurley, recently returned from General Pershing's staff in France, married the beautiful Washington debutante Ruth Wilson, daughter of Admiral Henry Braid Wilson, commander of the Atlantic fleet. Patrick Hurley had first seen Ruth Wilson in 1917 when she appeared as "Diana Leading the Chase" as the climax to a hunt ball in Washington, D.C. At the time, Hurley whispered to a friend, "She's easily the most beautiful person I have ever seen."

While Pat was serving overseas, he and Ruth wrote to each other. On his return to the United States, with Ruth's approval, the young officer called upon Admiral Wilson aboard his flagship in New York harbor to ask permission for the couple to be married. Permission was granted.

The Hurleys moved to Tulsa where Patrick began a law practice. In his profession he

specialized in real estate and oil properties. Tulsa, at the time, was on the threshold of great development in the oil industry and was soon to become known as the oil capital of the world.

Hurley was to become associated with some of the great names in America's oil industry: Frank and Waite Phillips, Harry Sinclair, William Skelly. In 1921 he became president of the First Trust and Savings Bank of Tulsa (later the First National Bank). Along with John Markam, Jr. and Waite Phillips, he was appointed receiver of the Gilliland Oil Company, then threatened with bankruptcy. Ultimately the firm was managed to success and became the basis for a major oil company. It was into this atmosphere of world events, business success, and the excitement of close association with such great names in world history that Wilson Hurley was born.

"There was never enough time to play," Wilson recalls. "When I wasn't in school, we were usually on the move." Wilson was a tall and handsome boy; even then he had the military bearing which characterizes his appearance. He was tutored and coached to say the right things. "Yes, Sir" . . . "Mr. President" . . . or, "Mr. Prime Minister." Occasionally he was allowed a gee-whiz or a jimminy crickets.

But what of the inner self of this sheltered, thin, wide-eyed curious boy in knickers who loved to sail boats, build magnificent kites to fly, and gaze at the stars through a telescope? He was independent, fiercely independent. Wilson remembers the fights he had in public school at Leesburg, Virginia, in defense of himself. This was occasioned by his father having the chauffeur drive him to school in the official car, complete with the flags and crest of a cabinet officer.

A favorite family story involves a visit by President Hoover to the Hurley home in Virginia. The president took a liking to Wilson's pet

# Wilson Hurley

Scottie dog and for some unexplained reason, the dog wet on the president's shoe. While family members were embarrassed at the sudden turn of events, President Hoover laughed, "The dog might as well do it to me; everyone else in the country is."

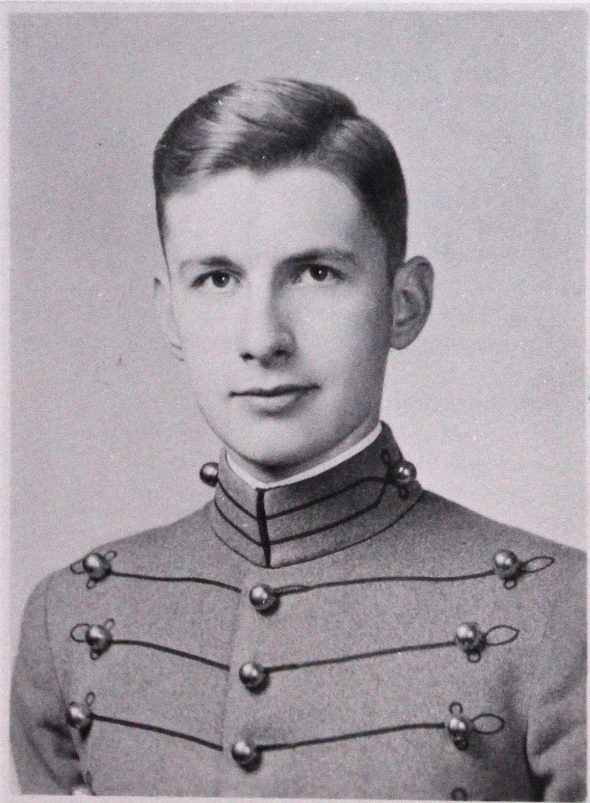
Like a true Hurley, Wilson had a mind of his own. He was the kind of a boy who preferred to make his own airplanes or bow and arrow instead of having what could be bought at a store. He loved the out-of-doors and so spent much of his childhood and youth on camp-outs and hikes. He loved to fish and hunt. He gained a love of nature from the woods of Virginia.

As a result of his passion for speed, Wilson was given flying lessons as a young teenager. The opportunity came about when his father caught him driving the family touring car in

excess of seventy-five miles an hour. "Instead of a whipping," Wilson recalls, "Dad told me that if I was going to break my neck, I could perhaps best do it in an airplane. I was sent to a flying school in Elmira, New York, where I not only learned to fly but loved it." Significantly this was a period when flight was an uncommon way of travel and aeronautics still a mystery in the public mind.

Wilson's family had moved to Santa Fe in 1936 following his father's years as a cabinet officer under President Herbert Hoover. New Mexico suited Wilson for a number of reasons — principally for its color and vastness. Everything about the state appeared to be grandiose. The sky seemed endless with huge cloud formations, there were wide horizons, deep colorful canyons, and it appeared to Wilson that there were more Indians here than any place in the world. There were artists to talk with and watch as they painted and art galleries by the dozens to browse through.

*Left: Hurley as a West Point cadet in the early 1940s.*



*Below: Lieutenant Hurley with PBY crew off Sandakan, Borneo in 1946.*

*Right: Ruth Wilson Hurley and General Patrick Y. Hurley pose with their son Wilson in Washington, 1944.*



"It was providential that we came to New Mexico," Wilson reminisces, "because all that has become dear to me in a professional sense was here. I was right in the middle of an exciting world."

From flying, young Hurley gained an awareness of the earth from above; he saw the land in wide vistas and experienced the exhilaration of soaring aloft and playing in cloud formations. The artist in him had surfaced.

While the elder Hurleys were cultured people and the arts had a role, although secondary, in their lives, Wilson's inclination toward painting was not encouraged. In fact, it often became a subject of heated discussion. Later on Wilson was to point out to his parents that great men like Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower were painters, thereby giving the profession a dignity needed in official circles and the Hurley home.

Wilson's persistent interest in painting led to his being allowed acquaintances with several

New Mexico artists, including John Young-Hunter, Theodore Van Soelen, Doel Reed, Fremont Ellis, Randall Davey, John Sloan, Walter Ufer, Jozef Bakos.

"When I was fifteen or sixteen, I remember my mother telephoning John Young-Hunter, the portrait painter, to make an appointment in Taos for me to visit him at his studio. I became excited about getting to visit a real artist and I was to stay there two weeks. Mr. Young-Hunter talked quite freely with me — he had studied and worked with the great painter John Singer Sargent. I remembered most of the points we discussed because I was so interested and impressionable. Young-Hunter maintained that a sense of color was intuitive. He said sensitivity to color by the painter corresponded to an ear for music. We are born with one or the other, he explained, and frequently with both. Neither can be taught."

"Color," the artist told Wilson, "produces an emotion which, if it is beautiful, can stimulate in us a tingling state of excitement. Or, if it is discordant, can make us suffer the pain of outraged feelings the same as false notes in music can create." In addition to discussing axioms of art, John Young-Hunter taught Wilson how to stretch a canvas, a little about mixing paints and the different mediums.

Jozef Bakos was the first artist Wilson ever painted with. On their field trips, Bakos not only discussed techniques of sketching and painting and his education, but also his coming to the United States from Poland and his eventual move to the West. Bakos settled in Santa Fe in 1921 and teamed up with four painters to form Los Cinco Pintores — the legendary five painters of Santa Fe. Wilson's first attempts at using watercolor were under Bakos' supervision.

As the 1930s waned, life changed for the Hurleys. General Hurley was often asked by Franklin Roosevelt to return to Washington, D.C. where he consulted with the president and took assignments abroad of international magnitude and consequence. A world war was on the immediate horizon. Shortly after World War II started, Wilson graduated from Los Alamos Ranch School.

It is not unusual for the sons of prominent military men to seek an appointment to the United States Military Academy. In fact, it is more the rule than the exception. However, Wilson was an exception in that he combined an aptitude for science, mathematics and flying with a natural talent for painting and a love of the arts in general. There was much talent and diversified intellect inside him. As a young man he could converse with adults on almost any subject. He had been raised in a stimulating home with busy, active, highly intelligent parents. Intellectually he was mature and faced life with confidence.



PHOTOS COURTESY  
WILSON HURLEY

# Wilson Hurley

In the summer of 1942, Wilson Hurley was sworn into the United States Army for a term of six years, enrolling as a cadet at the military academy. The route to West Point for Wilson was not necessarily a long one due to his having studied mathematics and science extensively in high school. But for Cadet Wilson Hurley, coming to West Point represented freedom from family domination — at last he was on his own, free to use his own intellect and talent. Among his classmates were sons of George Patton and Mark Clark. John Eisenhower was a class ahead of Wilson.

The academy's setting along the Hudson River was inspiring, and the pageant of foliage turning color each autumn made Cadet Hurley ever mindful of the artistic values in nature. The Hudson River Valley had influenced countless individual works of painting, poetry and music. Wilson gained an awareness of artists who had painted in that valley — Jasper Cropsey, Robert Havell, Jr., Albert Bierstadt, Asher Durand, Thomas Cole. They had, in fact, left a legacy known as the Hudson River School of Painting.

West Point, too, had had its share of artists who passed through her portals. James McNeill Whistler and New Mexico artist Peter Hurd were unsuccessful as cadets but highly admired artistically.

Wilson took his vows to the army and cadet life seriously; he could not and would not fail. In fact, he vowed to excel even though, for the time being, it meant his love of painting could not

interfere with his ambition for soldiering. There was to be a pot of gold at the end of Wilson's rainbow upon graduation. It was the opportunity to fly an airplane at high altitudes, to be his own liberated man aloft, and to see remote and exotic parts of the world from his own perspective.

Artistically there was little opportunity at the military academy for Wilson. He did love visiting the museum to view the visible symbols of the soldiers' glory. In time he would transfer the pomp and pageantry of West Point and the discipline of his years there to the field of art. In the meantime, Wilson adjusted well; he ranked high in his studies. Somehow he found time to paint an occasional cover for the West Point magazine and to draw hilarious cartoons of his classmates, particularly upperclassmen. Classes in topographic mapmaking and courses in mechanical drawing reinforced Wilson's ability to draw. "I realized that to become a good artist, I had to become a superior draftsman," Wilson recalls. "My years at the Point were to be my basic art training. I approached many courses with that thought in mind."

In June of 1945, Hurley graduated as a second lieutenant. For him there were mixed feelings. The war in Europe was over and the war with Japan was nearing the end. Before the summer was over, conflict around the world would cease, at least temporarily. Wilson was disappointed that he would not engage the enemy, yet the peace and tranquility that existed throughout the world was not to last. Wilson was attached to a unit in Southeast Asia on an unusual assignment flying a PBY. They were engaged in collecting and transporting bodies

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*Flying over 150 missions, Major Hurley served as a forward air controller in Vietnam in 1969.*

*Wilson and fellow Vietnamese officers stand with gun captured from the site he destroyed to earn the Distinguished Flying Cross.*





*TWILIGHT PEAK, oil, 30 x 24 inches*



*MIDSUMMER SUNSET, SANDIAS, oil, 36 x 54 inches*

*Below: TOWERING CUMULUS, oil, 48 x 60 inches*

## Wilson Hurley

and remains of military men either killed in combat or air crashes. The "cargo" was flown to a central point for identification before being returned to families back home. Later on Wilson was to fly a PBY seaplane in rescue work in the Philippines. The fact that he could and did fly as a commissioned officer in first the Army Air Corps and then the United States Air Force and helped to usher in the jet age was rewarding to Lieutenant Hurley's sense of history and achievement.

Wilson hoped to serve in Korea, but was not sent; it was years before he served in combat. However, in 1968-69, his tour in Vietnam was to make up for what he missed in previous years.

Upon his return to the states, Wilson saw that his chances for promotion were slim in view of the huge complement of ranking military men in all categories standing in line for jobs and schools. He decided he did not want to waste his years waiting, so he requested and received reserve status. Wilson was free to begin another



career in the field of law. He enrolled at George Washington University and, within three years from date of enrollment, Hurley had graduated and in 1952 passed the New Mexico bar examination.

Wilson's law practice was successful. His was a name that was widely known and respected. He toyed with the idea of going into politics at the national level. He branched out into other business enterprises, principally banking. However, the more pressing his law practice became and the more successful he became as a banker, the more he realized he wanted to paint. He had been painting at every opportunity. His mother had sent him paints and art supplies in 1946 while he was in Southeast Asia. Painting was in his blood now, even stronger. In each spectacular sunset and billowing cloud formation, each time he visited canyons, Wilson saw challenging compositions. Sunday painting was simply not enough.

"I became fed up with my life," Wilson emphasized. "I wanted to paint; I had always wanted to paint. For more than twenty years painting played second fiddle in my life, so I decided to give it a try."

*Field sketching near Albuquerque.*



It took courage to do what Wilson did. There was domestic protest, turmoil, and disruption in his life. It was an uphill battle.

In 1965 he was determined to try painting full time. "I vowed to try it for three years," Wilson comments. "I had been an engineer, a flyer, lawyer, part-time banker. I wanted to be an artist. If, after three years I was fed up with art, I would know that was not for me."

In a sense Wilson was self-taught, yet in another sense he was not, because he had learned and gained background from being immersed in art and surrounded by artists most of his life. For a long period of years, Wilson had the friendship of artist Theodore Van Soelen. Van Soelen became Wilson's best critic. They would spend hours together discussing a painting and its subject in broad terms.

"Robert Lougheed has been to me in recent years what Mr. Van Soelen was early in my career. To learn the various mediums and techniques in art is like learning Chinese," Wilson philosophizes. "To learn painting from the ground floor up, you almost have to be born into it — one lifetime is not enough." He adds, "Studying the master painters, which I have done in great galleries and museums, will help one up to a point, but then there comes a time when you have to do it alone, all by yourself out there on top of some mesa or in a canyon floor. Painting early in my full-time career (after I chucked my tie and white shirt) was sorta' like soloing in an airplane. The thrill of doing it alone . . . competing with myself, laying it all on the line, was exhilarating."

"I struggled with myself," Wilson goes on. "What kind of a painter did I want to become? What would my hallmark be? Or, specifically, my monument as an artist? I had done a lot of fiddling around in art, sorta' like buzzing in a plane, flying under bridges, in and out of the clouds. I had painted landscape scenes in Borneo, Java and Vietnam. I had painted airplanes, portraits, contrails and even a helluva big mural for Kirtland Air Force Base."

"In 1966, I finally found myself . . . out there on the edge of things. I had shot off my big mouth. Brought turmoil to myself and others. My wife, whom I had married in 1951, and I were divorced. We had five children. It seemed as if all our problems were brought out into the open during this period."

"Could I become a worthwhile painter? I mean a *real* painter, a *master* painter? One on whose paintings people, collectors, and museums would spend their hard earned money?"

"Suddenly my world got cold. Sort of polarized. I'd walk into a gallery with a painting or two under my arm and say, 'I'm Wilson Hurley, I paint.' This was back in the sixties. Nine chances out of ten the dealer would be indiffer-

# Wilson Hurley

ent. I was an unknown. 'Who collects you?' the dealer might ask. Or, 'What did you say your name was?'

"Actually things were pretty lean for me, but I loved it. I was happy as a kid with a new toy, sketching and painting my heart out. I couldn't get enough of it from daylight until after dark. It was exhilarating. The sunrises, the sunsets. Lonesome picnics way off somewhere. Poking around some ruin or just standing on a high bluff with the wind in my face. I could imagine things. This is Coronado and Father Escalante country. I loved it all, every moment of it — I had sure made the right decision!"

Of course, all was not smooth for Wilson. Things never are for a strong-willed, restless man. The Air Force had a string on him as a reserve officer in the 150th Tactical Fighter Group. Wilson was sent to the nightmare called Vietnam where he became a forward air controller. Flying a Cessna airplane with limited armament and maneuverability, his mission was to direct fighter bombers into the battle and conduct the air strikes, thus preventing the killing of civilians, non-combatants, and friendly troops. Major Hurley flew more than one hundred and fifty missions within a seven month period.

This war and the U.S.S. Pueblo incident turned his yearning for an ordered and tranquil life into chaos. "But I was older, into my forties," Wilson reminisces. "I had started to paint



RAIN FOREST, SABAH, oil, 24 x 29 inches

and my career was underway. I had to be philosophical about it. I had painted for five years. Sales had been sporadic, but I was making a living out of it. And my next love was to be flying an airplane. I owed a duty to my country, and if I got shot down, I had given it all I could."

But Wilson had never failed in anything he set out to learn, conquer, or fly. The circumstance of adjustment and chance had been a common denominator in his life. In 1969, he was awarded the United States Air Force's highest flying award, the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation reads:

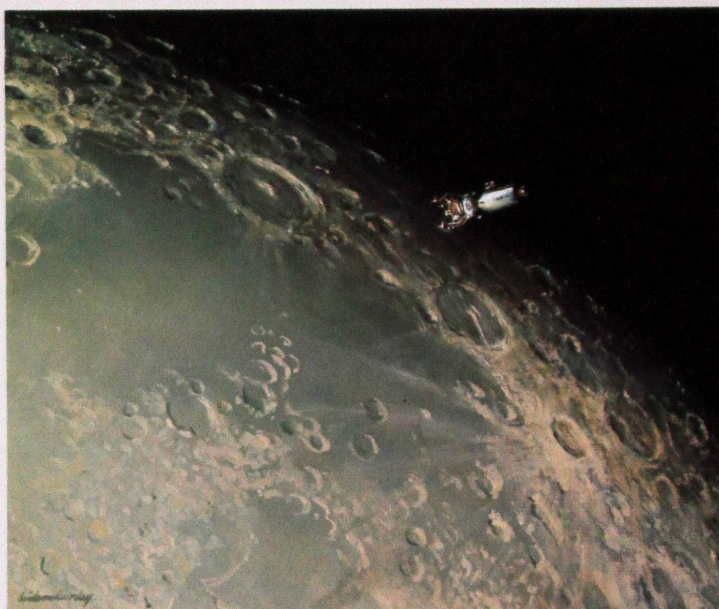
*Citation to Accompany the Award of  
The Distinguished Flying Cross  
to*

*Wilson P. Hurley*

*Major Wilson P. Hurley distinguished himself by extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as a Forward Air Controller near Phu Cat, Republic of Vietnam, on 1 March 1969. While flying in support of an operation of the Korean Capital Division, he was assigned to neutralize a 12.7 mm antiaircraft site which had severely damaged six United States Army helicopters and was jeopardizing the entire operation. Demonstrating exceptional flying ability, coolness under intense hostile fire, and outstanding control of assigned support aircraft, he succeeded in destroying the gun site and inflicting heavy damage upon the opposing force. The professional competence, aerial skill and devotion to duty displayed by Major Hurley reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.*

In not too many months, Wilson was back in Albuquerque after serving his tour in the Air Force. The first thing he did, even before becoming accustomed to civilian life, was to marry Rosalyn Roembke whom he had gotten to know before he went back to active duty. Roz not only proved to be a sweetheart of a wife but also a good critic of her husband's work. Within a few days after their wedding, Wilson began picking up the threads of his artistic life, buying paint tubes and brushes, thinking about north light, planning sketching trips and preparing canvases to paint. Wilson had plenty of time to think about painting while he was on the other side of the world, particularly in some of Vietnam's hell-holes. Now life had greater meaning. Each hour and each day became more precious. He knew what he wanted to paint and record and in what style. Wilson picked up where Thomas Moran left off — he'd seen sights, smelled smells, and dreamed dreams that might not have come into Moran's head. (And some

SUNSET OVER FUNERIUS, oil, 14 x 16 inches



say Wilson can sit on the same landscapists' throne as Moran.)

Wilson could envision what and where he would paint: Grand Canyon, Wotan's Throne, the Red Wall, Manzano Highlands, Mesa Verde, Anasazi Ruins, Cañon del Muerto, Cliff of Algodones, Powell Point, Canyon de Chelly, Black Mountain and Black Mesa, the Yellowstone, storm clouds, cloud pile-ups, a thousand places and a thousand compositions. "My God," Wilson thought, "can I live long enough to do it all?"

He even wanted to trace and paint the route of Father Escalante from Santa Fe to Monterey. He talked the whole thing over with Roz — someday they'd do it. Then he and Roz would revisit his old wartime haunts of Bali, Borneo, Java, Sumatra, Nam, Mindanao, Philippine Sea, Kinabalu, coast of Sabah, Molucca Sea, South China Sea . . . and if there was enough time, they'd go back to the plains of West Point and take a look at the Hudson and the autumn foliage and see what great painters and his friend Peter Hurd had seen there. He and Roz would do that. Wilson would put on his wide-brimmed hat that he wears in the field, he'd be wearing a pair of old boots, his fountain pen would be filled with ink, and he'd be ready to do some sketching. And if a cadet happened to come by and ask, "Who are you, Sir?" Wilson in all probability would not look at the cadet directly, as he has a way of looking at people from the side with his head cocked down so he can see over his bifocals and say, "Well, this is Roz. She's my wife. My name is Hurley, Wilson Hurley. I'm a painter. I've been a painter, son, for a long time — a long, long time." 