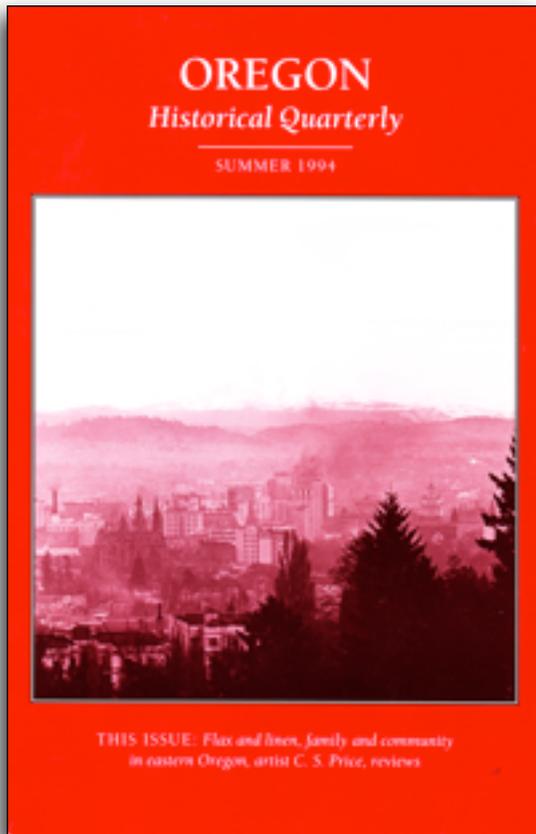


Chapter 19 - C. S. PRICE AS I REMEMBER HIM

By Eugene Edmund Snyder

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REMINISCENCES

C. S. Price *As I Remember Him*

Eugene Edmund Snyder

CLAYTON SUMNER PRICE (1874-1950), WHOM MANY would call the Pacific Northwest's most illustrious artist, moved from Monterey, California, to Portland in late 1928. He had already received recognition in California, and the February 3, 1929, Oregonian reported his move with the headline:

NOTED MODERNIST ARTIST
ADOPTS PORTLAND AS HOME

The article also announced the opening of an exhibition of his paintings, organized by the Oregon Society of Artists and held at the Meier & Frank Company, which in those days had an art gallery in its department store. There with his work was Mr. Price.

My mother, the artist Amanda Snyder, saw that exhibition and was impressed not only by the paintings but also by the personality and character of Mr. Price. They became good friends. Mr. Price told my mother she was the only person who came to his show who understood what he was trying to do. At that time Mr. Price was fifty-five years old and my mother was thirty-five.

They both tended to be "loners" in their vocation, avoiding classes and groups and working out technical problems by experimenting on their own. Mr. Price spent his time alone in his small studio-bedroom in a downtown office building. My mother was not quite so solitary, since she was also a homemaker, wife, and mother. She visited his studio two or three times. She invariably referred to him, or addressed him, as "Mr. Price," a respectful form that I, too, have always used. Mr. Price, sometimes accompanied by their mutual friend and fellow artist Charles Heaney, came several times to my mother's studio, which was in the basement of our home. (At that time we lived on Southeast Seventh Avenue, on the bluff above the Willamette River.)

In the late thirties and early forties, when I was in college in Portland, I was recruited occasionally by my mother to deliver little gifts to Mr. Price - jars of jelly or pickles, cake or cookies, or some of her artwork. It was in this way that I had the privilege of getting to know Mr. Price.

Until 1940 his studio was in the Worcester Building, at 220 Southwest Third Avenue, between Oak and Pine streets. Also in that building were the studios of several other artists, among them Sidney Bell, William Givler, Harry Wentz, and Darrell Austin. Mr. Price's room number was 411.

I would take the rickety and frightening old elevator up to the fourth floor. Just down the hall from Mr. Price's studio, in room 407, was the Portland Chess and Checkers Club. Mr. Price would sometimes take me there and we would play chess. I don't remember whether Mr. Price was a formal member of the club, but he was known to its habitués. Perhaps it was open to anyone.



Portland's Worcester Building, at SW Third Avenue and Oak Street, where artist C. S. Price had his studio until 1940, when he moved to the Kraemer Building. Several other artists kept studios in the Worcester Building, which was torn down in August 1949 to create additional city jail space (OHS neg. OrHi 62436)

The clubroom was dimly lit and tranquil. There were several small tables bearing a chessboard and chess pieces, each flanked by two straight chairs. A few casually dressed men, most of them elderly, would be about the room, perhaps playing chess or just talking - but talking in low voices. Chess players hate noise. Certainly, there was no background music. I never saw a woman in the clubroom. It was a quiet haven the likes of which we shall not find again.

Our chess games were casual and far from intense. I never had the patience to plan four or five moves ahead; I was always too curious to see what was going to happen after I had made my move. As a result, Mr. Price usually won.

In 1940 Mr. Price left the Worcester Building (a wooden structure that had been condemned as a firetrap) and moved to an office building at 206 Southwest Washington Street - the Kraemer Building - a low-rent and well-worn edifice built in 1885 for the Portland Savings Bank. His second-floor studio was not exactly a "garret" in the architectural sense, but it did embody the visions evoked by that word: an

austere cubicle inhabited by an impecunious artist consumed by a driving urge to express his thoughts and feelings with paint.

While his studio was in the Worcester Building, Mr. Price lived with his younger brother, Maurice, in North Portland. But when he moved to the Kraemer Building, he began to live there. His "office" (room 206, the same number as the street address, by coincidence) became a studio-bedroom. That one room was not large. Behind a screen were a bed, a washbasin (the room's only plumbing), and a counter with a hot plate whereon he brewed "cowboy coffee" and did minimal food preparation. He took nearly all his meals at the counters of the small cafes in that part of town.

That old building had, of course, no such thing as air-conditioning, and Mr. Price usually kept his windows shut because of the traffic noise. Since he didn't smoke, there were no tobacco fumes, but the air was thick with the fragrance of turpentine and oil paint - congenial to one like me who had grown up in such an atmosphere. There was his painting table, with palette knives, brushes, and blobs of paint. His easel held the painting on which he was working at the time; other paintings leaned against the wall where he could study them and think about improvements.

His windows faced east, so that he did not have the "north light" which some artists consider important in that it is constant, without moving sunlight and shadows. From his windows he could see little more than two or three other office buildings, much like his own.

How, one might ask, could a sensitive person like Mr. Price be content in such a location? The answer: He was oblivious to his surroundings. He had a rich inner life full of images and ideas, and he was totally absorbed in seeking to portray them on paper and canvas. He was so preoccupied he never took time to ask himself whether he was happy, with the result that he seemed to be happy. More conveniences or enervating comforts might have been counter-productive for him.

Down the worn linoleum-covered corridor was the second-floor Men's Room. It was illegal for Mr. Price to live in an office - that violated building and safety codes - but he had an "understanding" with the building owner and manager. And it would have been a very officious city inspector who would have evicted such a peaceful old gentleman as Mr. Price. In 1947 he was seventy-three years old.



The Kraemer Building (here ca. 1920), at SW 2nd Avenue and Washington St., where C. S. Price had his studio from 1940 to 1949. Mr. Price's bedroom-studio was on the 2nd floor (room 206), on the east side of the building near the fire escape. The structure, as originally built in 1885, had only four stories; It was demolished in 1951-52 (Courtesy Kenneth Kraemer; (OHS neg. OrHi 90630)

In the Kraemer Building in the 1940s were the studios of several other artists. Unlike Mr. Price, they did not live in their studios. Among them, on the second floor near Mr. Price's room, was Gabriel Becquet, a painter who had been a student at the Portland Art Museum School in the thirties. Also on that floor was Sidney Bell, a distinguished portrait painter who had left the Worcester Building about the same time Mr. Price moved. On the third floor were Gabriel Lavare, a sculptor who had worked for the WPA program in the thirties when Mr. Price also had been a WPA artist, and Howard Sewall, a painter who was an admirer of Mr. Price's work. On the fifth floor was the studio of the Runquist brothers (Arthur and Albert), painters who were good friends of Mr. Price. The Arts & Crafts Society was on the sixth floor. These painters and sculptors all knew each other, and that old building must have housed a rather congenial artists' community.

I spent World War II in the navy, was "demobbed" in 1946, and then worked in New York City or was in graduate school. But I visited Portland often, and again

I was required to deliver food gifts, drawings, or paintings to Mr. Price. It was during this period, 1947-49, that I took the notes that are the basis for this article.

Often, when I had delivered the gift from my mother, Mr. Price and I would sit in his small studio and chat in a leisurely way, the conversation drifting from one thing to another. Thus, my talks with him could hardly be called "interviews." If I had taken out a notebook and had begun to write down his remarks, he would have been ill at ease and much less spontaneous. He was a very private person, and shied away from familiarity, self-revelation, or anything suggesting egotism. After the visit, however, I recorded what he had said, sometimes paraphrased but in his own words when I could remember them. Those old notes are now, in this essay, being put to use at last. (I have placed quotation marks around phrases I believe were his exact words.)

Once, when I visited him in 1947, Mr. Price told me how a wealthy Portlander who liked his paintings had taken him to his home. The family had a grand piano, and Mr. Price played the piano and sang cowboy songs. The family enjoyed it and, he recalled, he did, too. He said he did not read music readily; he played "by ear."

Then he talked about some events and friendships during his Monterey years, 1918 to 1928. Artistically, that period was, for him, a decisive one, during which he began "to see things differently." He moved in his artwork from realism (western and cowboy illustrations) to his own style of what, for lack of a better word, we might call "expressionism" - expressing the deeper and sometimes mystical meaning of the subject.

For a while, in Monterey, he lived, worked, and slept in a shack. At first he shared it with another man. But the roof leaked, and one night it rained and filled his friend's shoes with water. The next day the friend moved out: "That was the end of sharing the cabin."

Mr. Price's conversations tended to be anecdotal rather than analytical - appropriate for casual conversations between friends, and also more entertaining!

Mr. Price mentioned two friends who helped him with his painting during those years: August Gay, a maker of picture frames in Carmel, California, and "Pop" Ernst in Monterey. Another friend was a woman