

## Jim Hamilton: Sculpting the Character of Life's Experiences

By Peggi Ridgway

Seldom does one get to see the inside of a sculptor's studio, let alone his soul. But you can when you watch Jim Hamilton's hands as he works. Watch a century's worth of American history wend its way magically from Hamilton's own firsthand experience, through his memory, his heart and soul, his hands, the warm and pliable wax, into figures of horses and men into which he breathes life. He will take these wax *story* sculptures, make their molds and cast them in bronze, preserving forever his own stories and those of countless settlers of the West.

When you ask him about those stories and how he came to experience so much of the unadorned early West, he'll respond with a drawn out "W-e-l-l-l . . . I didn't intend to be this age this quick." One corner of his mouth will turn up slightly to greet the twinkle in his clear blue eyes. And then he'll lead you on a guided tour down the backroads of the Osage hills in northeastern Oklahoma and around by Pawhuska and forgotten Foraker. He'll introduce you to settlers like his dad, a cattleman from Kentucky, his mother, a country schoolteacher, notables such as Osage Chief Thomas Bacon Rind, townsmen and ranchers like Ben Johnson (father of the actor) and ordinary farm and ranch families and their children – all subjects, along with their animals and artifacts, of his more than 200 sculptures.

After nearly 80 years of age and 60 years of ranching, Jim Hamilton and his wife Dorothy live near Glenpool, a stone's throw south of Tulsa and more than an hour's drive from the family ranch in Osage County. His studio occupies an apartment in his barn, and he goes there daily to sculpt. He has worked almost continuously, at the ranch and now at Glenpool, since his artistic career began at the age of 49.

More than a quarter century's work in forming the figures of life in art have produced pieces

deepening in artistic value and historic significance for Hamilton. "Someone asked me about a work once, 'Are you satisfied with it?'" Hamilton recalls his response: "Of course not! I'm still learning and growing!" The sensitivity and truth of his body of work have grown as he has. He feels that in recent years he has opened himself to his work, been more intuitively one with his subject matter, so that his work is infused with "more power and more of myself now."

Although "going to work" is an everyday routine for most of us, Jim Hamilton admits there are times when he'd rather not, which is quite understandable in view of a life-and-death confrontation with cancer in 1992 and a lifetime full of activity and hard work. Still, there are those pieces he is creating in his sculptor's head and those on which work continues in the studio. "One day when I was in my early 70s and we were driving somewhere, I made a sudden twist and a turn and Dorothy Lee said I was driving like a teenager. Our friend Joe, who was in the car with us, commented that I'd be driving just like that, just like I'd be sculpting, 'til I was 90. And you know what? I plan to!"

His work closely parallels his life. Just like his sculpture, he spent a lifetime, beginning as a child, branding and roping cattle, bucking off horses, riding the range. He cooked over campfires and got his education in music, sex, money and the "finer" points of life in general from "the boys in the bunkhouse." ("Needless to say, I had to change my views on a lot of that stuff later," Hamilton says with a laugh.) He rode horseback to a two-room school and was delighted with the frequent visits of Chief Bacon Rind to his family's ranch at Foraker.

As Hamilton tells it, the Chief leased land to the Hamiltons and it was he who named Jim at his birth. Chief Bacon Rind, a large, imposing figure,

often arrived at the ranch in a big 1920s model Studebaker, sitting in the back seat in all his blankets and robes, saying “Loganey, loganey (Good, good).” He carried an old 30-30 saddle gun which he used to shoot, directly in the heart, any steer he chose from the herd. His Indians butchered the beef while he waited. Frequently, the Chief would reach down into some pouch among all his robes and blankets and pull out a dollar bill, which he handed to little Jim. Hamilton recalls Bacon Rind’s orations, for which he was well known, to groups of Indians and whomever was gathered ‘round, in the Osage language. “We didn’t know what he was saying, but he sure sounded good. We were fascinated.”

From the colorful tapestry of his childhood, Jim Hamilton continued in the ranching tradition and raised a family of his own. There was a bit of a detour, during which he learned a considerable amount about life from a different perspective, when he traveled as a salesman of poultry feeds for General Mills. And then he returned to the rigors and joys of ranching and, later, sculpting.

Somehow, some way, that great powerful expanse of grass and sky which Hamilton calls “the Osage” has always captured his spirit and his attention away from everything else. When the day begins, when the day ends, when sultry storms roll across the continent and prairie chickens are “drummin” during mating season, when the vast ocean of prairie grass comes to life in a sea of spring color, Hamilton is enthralled. Even now, living a distance away from Osage County, he lights up at the thought or the mention of that special land where he lived for nearly three quarters of a century. “It’s bigness is terrifying,” he says. There’s no question that he misses its greatness and beauty, as he misses having cattle.

With the changes time and technology have introduced, Hamilton has formed his opinions: Racial issues, as reported by the media, are overkill. Erecting monuments and conducting memorial services to remember negative events simply prolongs the trauma and reinforces the negative aspects of the events. Quoting an axiom, he says, “All things perish by their own excesses.” We shouldn’t take things so seriously. Further, use the wonderful tools of television and computerization to impact society in a positive way.

Even this homegrown, self-taught artist’s Western work is showing signs of modern technology’s influence. A Hamilton work still in progress depicts a cowboy on his horse with his laptop

computer balanced precariously on the horse’s mane. That’s a far cry from the sculpture of Will Rogers pecking away at his faithful Remington typewriter, perched on his knees while Will sat on the running board of an old Ford. Yet the story told by these two pieces spans several generations and more than sixty years, again historically documenting the events of the twenty-first century.

Jim Hamilton is extremely well educated for a man with no formal education, especially on the subject of art and art history. His amazing mind has absorbed the contents of books about native Americans, Van Gogh, Giacometti, Wyeth, Rockwell, The Indian Wars, Egyptian art, philosophy, animal and human anatomy and, he inserts, “some wonderful writing about mustangs, longhorns and American history.” John Joseph Matthews is a favorite author, although Hamilton has been known to re-read any number of the many tomes that line his bookshelves.

This, in all honesty, is a genuine person not likely to pretend he is anything but what you see in front of you. With a firm handshake and a warm welcome, he’ll let you in the back door if the spring rains mean you’ll get wet walking from your car to the fancy front door. (“Country folks and bootleggers always get to come in the back door.”) He is more likely to greet you in blue jeans, Hush Puppies and ball cap than in the expected cowboy hat and boots. “You certainly don’t look like an artist,” one woman observed, probably accustomed to the Western look. “Thank you, Ma’am,” Hamilton replied readily in his soft twang. “That’s a compliment.” He bemoans the fact that artists feel they have to dress a certain part or look a certain way to be taken seriously.

Hamilton isn’t trying to *become* a sculptor or to *learn* the Western way of life; he is an authentic product of the Western prairie-become-sculptor who has carefully and lovingly documented the recent history of his home territory.

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