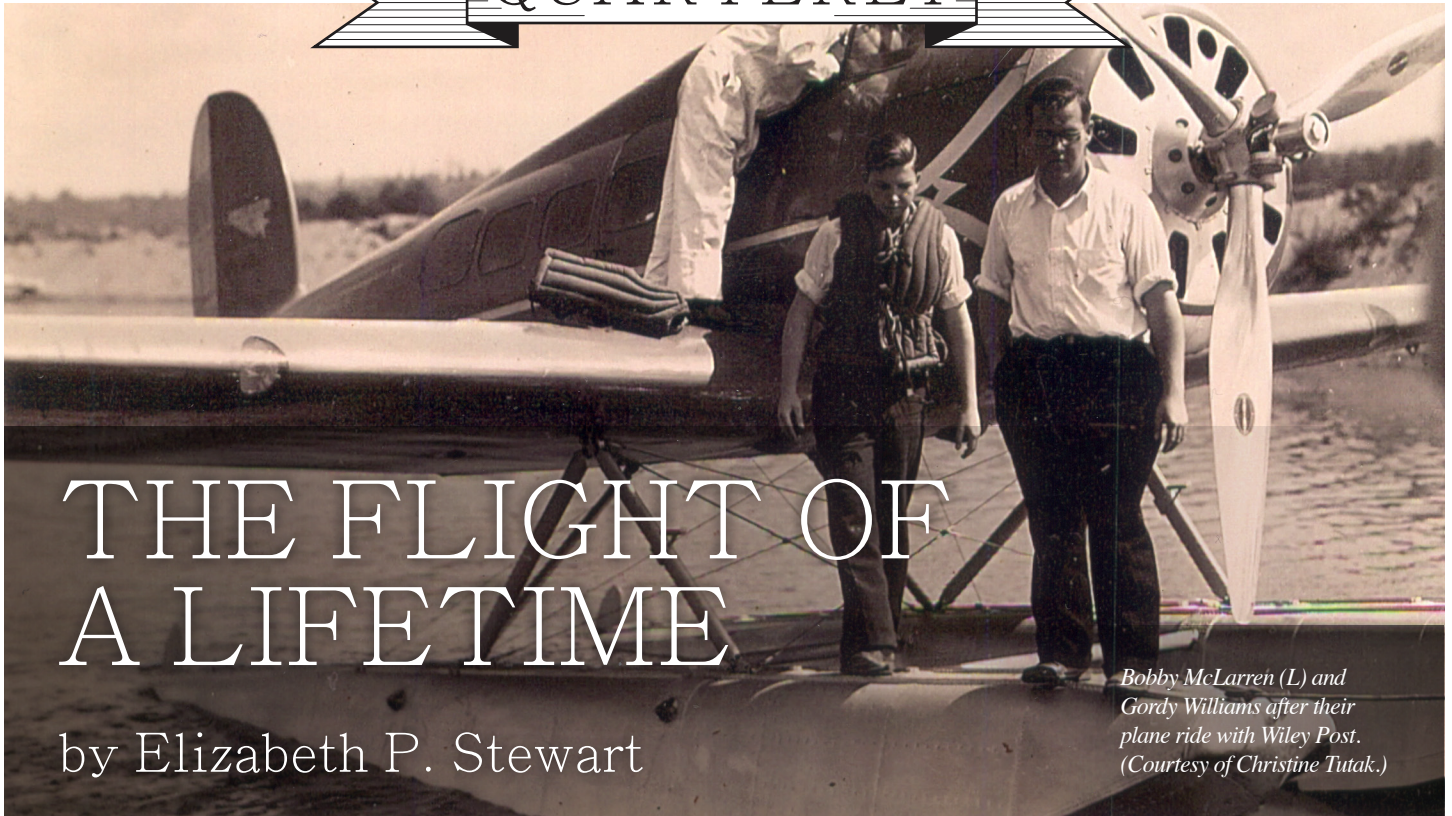


RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Fall
September 2012

QUARTERLY

Volume 43
Number 3



THE FLIGHT OF A LIFETIME

by Elizabeth P. Stewart

Bobby McLaren (L) and Gordy Williams after their plane ride with Wiley Post. (Courtesy of Christine Tutak.)

When nationally known humorist Will Rogers and circumnavigator Wiley Post made an unscheduled landing at Renton Airport—then known as Bryn Mawr Field—on August 6, 1935, it was front page news. And for two lucky young men, Bobby McLaren and Gordon Williams, the visit ended with the airplane ride of a lifetime. They could not know just how special a ride it would be.

Rogers and Post stopped in Renton on their way to Alaska, the first stop on a planned around-the-world trip. Pilot Wiley Post wanted his red hybrid Lockheed Orion fitted with pontoons for water landing. As the furthest north seaplane

landing strip in the continental U.S., Bryn Mawr Field was the logical place to have the work done. The two men landed at about 10:30 a.m. with “only a few people, mostly mechanics and nearby residents” on hand to greet them.¹

Fifteen-year-old Robert McLaren was spending the summer with his friend Gordon Williams, who knew the airport manager well enough that he allowed them to hang around the airfield. Years later, Gordy described the airport of 1935, with “not only a short dirt strip for land planes, but a wooden seaplane ramp and two old hangars.”²

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A UNIFORM — *for every* — PURPOSE



A UNIFORM FOR EVERY PURPOSE

On September 13, the Renton History Museum opens our first fashion history exhibit, *A Uniform For Every Purpose*. The exhibit uses the Museum’s own collection of military, fraternal, and sports garb to explore how clothing has helped Renton residents create a shared identity. From their roots in Greek and Roman antiquity, uniforms have helped soldiers quickly distinguish friends from foes and combatants from non-combatants; clothes worked so well at creating cohesive groups, they were adopted by bands, fraternal orders, sports teams, and scout groups. *A Uniform for Every Purpose* features multiple uniforms, including a WWI “Doughboy” uniform, Rosie the Riveter coveralls, lodge regalia, and a Longacres jockey silk.

From
September
11
To
February
2

WELCOME, KELLY!

Our new Office Aide, Kelly Senseman, joined the Museum’s team in June, on Daisy Ward’s retirement. Kelly came to us with experience from positions at AmeriCorps and Phoenix Zoo, among others; among her many skills are customer service, office management, writing, and web design, all of which will be assets here. Kelly is working Wednesday through Saturday, and we’re hoping that having staff to assist our Volunteer Greeters on Saturdays will allow us to increase weekend services. Please stop by and welcome



Kelly when you have a chance!

FUN IN THE SUN

The Renton Historical Society and the Renton History Museum had plenty of opportunities for outreach this summer, at the Renton Farmers Market, neighborhood picnics, and Renton River Days, if course. These fairs and festival are our chance to raise awareness about our city’s heritage. During River Days, we served almost 1200 kids and adults, thanks to the efforts of staff and especially our dedicated volunteers. With a grant from Humanities Washington, we were also able to sponsor the “Sounds

of Cultural Activity” booth all weekend and Japanese drummers Kaze Daiko on the main stage. Thanks to all of you who contribute your time to helping people learn about history!



MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,
Museum Director

At the Renton Historical Society Annual Meeting on June 6, the Society had the privilege of honoring the contributions of four local heroes whose teamwork preserved an important piece of Renton history. The Historical Society gives the George and Annie Lewis Custer Heritage Citizenship Award annually for outstanding contributions to the documentation, preservation, and/or education about Renton's heritage. The award serves as our opportunity to encourage others to join us in caring for the city's history.

This year's award winners were the group who rescued and restored the Henry Moses Honoring Pole that disappeared from the parking lot of the Renton Fred Meyer in the autumn of 2010. Fred Lund, Jim Ploegman, White-Bear, and Chad Lindstrom (representing Fred Meyer) each played a role in ensuring that the pole was not permanently lost. Fred Lund, then a Renton Municipal Arts Commissioner, was the first to notice that the beautifully carved pole was missing. After the Seattle Police Department located the 800-pound Renton pole in Keizer, Oregon, along with another pole stolen from West Seattle, City of Renton staff and the Seattle Parks Department arranged for it to be returned. Master woodcarver Jim Ploegman originally designed and created the pole to commemorate Renton's Duwamish roots in the Moses family; Ploegman came forward to restore the damaged pole, with the carving assistance of his son and White-Bear, a local Native American artist, storyteller, and traditional healer. In May 2011 the pole was re-placed in a ceremony attended by Mayor Denis Law and Duwamish Tribal Chair Cecile Hansen, this time in a more visible spot in the parking lot.

What makes this project worthy of the award? The Henry Moses Honoring Pole was commissioned and put in place in 1975, only six years after the death of Henry Moses. Not only was Moses a star of Renton High baseball and basketball, as a descendent of Chief Sealth he was a living link to the city's first residents. Born in 1900, Henry Moses lived to see multiple transformations: in Renton and its environment, and in attitudes and understanding between Native Americans and whites. The Honoring Pole represented a milestone on the path toward Renton's acknowledgment and even celebration of Renton's First People. This team's rescue of this piece preserves that link between our past and our future, and that is what the Custer Award is all about.

We thank these diligent preservationists for their assistance in capturing the past, educating the present, and inspiring the future!



Elizabeth P. Stewart
—
Director



Henry Moses Honoring Pole.



May 2011 dedication of the pole.

RENTON HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

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235 MILL AVE. S
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P (425) 255-2330
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HOURS:
Tuesday - Saturday
10:00am - 4:00pm

ADMISSION:
\$3 (Adult)
\$1 (Child)



CULTURE

UPCOMING EVENTS



PLANNED GIVING SEMINAR

September 20
5:00-7:00pm

Join us as Edward Jones representative Shane Klingenstein outlines how you can leave a legacy to benefit your favorite nonprofit and your loved ones. Please RSVP.



THE BEAUTY AND FUN OF FLAMENCO

October 13
11:00-12:00pm

Maria Gitana and her group Flamenco Gitana will entertain and present flamenco dance. Thanks to Renton Municipal Arts Commission.



ANXIOUS, ALARMED, AND AMUSED

October 27
11:00-12:00pm

Join storyteller Norman Brecke as he takes you on a hair-raising journey filled with ghouls, squeaky doors, phantoms, and trick-or-treat.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Theresa Clymer, President

Summer days are soon to fade and fall will be in the air. Along with arrival of fall come many new activities, as well as reflecting on past activities.

The Museum has planned several superior exhibits throughout this coming year. Please watch for details and plan on sharing in the fun. Along with exhibits we are busy planning and preparing for our annual dinner and auction fundraiser to be held on Wednesday, October 24. Save the date and watch for details. This year's theme is "Things that Go Bump in the Night" in honor of Halloween, and it is guaranteed to be a night to be remembered! You will not want to miss this.

Another event coming very soon is the Planned Giving Seminar on September 20th. This seminar will be given by Shane Klingenstein, the Historical Society's Edward Jones representative. It will be a great chance to gather important information in ways to support and donate to your favorite organization. It offers an excellent opportunity to ask questions in a comfortable and relaxed setting.

The Museum once again hosted two very busy booths for our outreach efforts in the community. Trustees, volunteers, and staff operated one booth at the Renton Farmers Market at the Piazza and another at Liberty Park during Renton River Days. A big thank you goes to all those who helped at these booths. It was fun to talk to all the folks who stopped by and especially fun assisting the many children at River Days with their Coast Salish hat and necklace creations.

As you can see, it is people that make our museum such a wonderful place to be involved with. We are most excited to be adding several new people to our Board of Trustees. The three new trustees are: Meris Mullaley, Stefanie McIrvin, and Lisa Wivag. Each of these ladies is already active in our community and we are happy that they have decided to share their time with us in addition to their other commitments. They care about Renton, are enthusiastic, interested in promoting the Museum's mission, and bring with them new energy and ideas.

I look forward to working with our trustees and museum staff and will do my best to promote the Renton History Museum. I hope that you will all find time this year to visit the museum and join in many coming events.



Theresa Clymer
—
President



Renton Historical Society booth at
Renton River Days.



THE FLIGHT OF A LIFETIME

Crew adds pontoons to Wiley Post's Lockheed airplane at Bryn Mawr Airfield, Aug. 1935. (RHM# 41.3916)

Continued from page 1

Bobby relished his experiences at the airport, telling his mother “I go up in an airplane nearly every day. I wipe off the guys’ planes and help them work on them and they take me up whenever there’s an empty seat.” He mentioned flying to the shipyards at Bellingham. The summer had already been the experience of a lifetime, and then he met Wiley Post and Will Rogers.³

In 1935 Will Rogers was a much-beloved folk hero, a storyteller, writer, and a radio, stage, and motion picture personality, famous for capturing the ways of the American West. As the first aviator to circumnavigate the world solo, Wiley Post was only slightly less well-known. Post was one of the original barnstormers—flyers who demonstrated the acrobatic capabilities of planes at county fairs around the U.S.—so his and Rogers’ sense of showmanship were uniquely suited to one another. The trip to Alaska and beyond was Rogers’ idea, a way to drum up new material for his very popular newspaper column; for his part, Post thought he would investigate the feasibility of an air service for mail and passengers between the West Coast and Russia. *Renton Chronicle* reporter Ellen White thought they perfectly complemented one another: “One has the nerve and ability to go places and the other such dry humor that would make any trip a success.”⁴



Fifteen-year old Bobby McLarren and pilot Wiley Post at Bryn Mawr (later Renton) Airfield, 1935. (Courtesy of Christine Tutak.)



Will Rogers returns to Bryn Mawr Airfield after the plane's test flight with new pontoons. (RHM# 1985.079.2128)



Renton Chronicle reporter Ellen White in 1948. (detail, RHM# 1998.012.4726)

Post spent some time at the airfield, overseeing the work on his plane. Gordy described him as “short and stocky, very informal, and happy to answer the many questions we teen-agers had.” The airport was short-handed, and Bobby and Gordy had proven themselves to be handy enough that they were drafted to help mechanics from Northwest Air Services install the new pontoons. Bobby believed that Post “thought we were some of the workmen,” as Bobby “asked him how such and such looked and if he wanted such and such bored or drilled and stuff.”⁵ Bobby asked Post whether he wanted to go for a canoe ride on Lake Washington while he waited for mechanics to finish. “Well, there was a big crowd waiting around watching him and everything, and they all laughed,” Bobby told his mother. “He said sure.”⁶

The two borrowed canoes and paddled out on the lake, chatting across the distance. “I asked him if it wasn’t soothing to the nerves,” the boy recalled, “and he said, Ahhh yes.” Meanwhile, back at the airport, the crowd of newspaperman and photographers was growing; the two canoers returned to a passel of photographers who had received word that Post and Rogers were in Renton. Friend Gordy snapped an off-center photo of McLarren and Post with his Graflex camera, and Bobby went home thinking “I was just the big stuff. I had gone canoeing with Wiley Post.”⁷



Will Rogers at the Bryn Mawr Airfield before his final flight. The young girl may be Myrna Hayes. (RHM# 1980.075.1083)

On Monday morning, even more still and newsreel photographers had caught up with the famous pair in Renton. “There was the Wide World, Paramount News, Fox Movietone, and all sorts of Seattle Times, Seattle Post Intelligencer and other newspaper men,” the dazzled teen wrote to his mother.⁸ While the photographers busied themselves shooting the plane, Post asked whether Bobby and Gordy would like to go up on “the test hop of his new plane.” A stunned McLarren wrote, “And what did I say, just ask me, what did I say, hotch cha cha cha.”⁹

Post told him to put on a life jacket and be ready to go in five minutes. “I was shakin’ all over and could hardly see the airport,” the boy reported. “I yanked up the life jacket and put it on and walked out there. All the cameramen were grinding away.” Bobby had a little trouble getting Gordy to believe him, “Gordy thinking the whole thing was another one of my pranks. But we crawled in the back in the cabin whilst the cameramen ground out foot after foot” of newsreel film. Post instructed them to “sit in the rear-most seats to help weight down the tail.”¹⁰

It was Bobby’s first time in a seaplane, and he described that “we felt sorta funny even tho [sic] he was such a great flyer.” They circled Mercer Island and Post brought her in for a landing; “she sailed down just like a sea gull.” “He gave her the

gun,” Bobby wrote, “and we went out over Renton, Washington and came roaring back in at about 200 miles per hour.” The second landing was a little bumpier. They took off a third time and flew out over Kent this time. After an hour and a half in the air, Post brought the plane in for a final landing, “as smooth as glass.” The boys scrambled out over the pontoons, again with the cameras running, and made it to solid ground. “He thanked us and punched me in the shoulder,” Bobby proudly remembered. “He really seems to like us.” The boys promised to send him some of their photos, and he gave them his address in Oklahoma.¹¹

Both boys recognized the ride had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Much later Gordon described himself as “glowing with the realization of what we had just done.”¹² “To be lifted from just another spectator to an actual passenger in his plane ON ITS FIRST TEST FLIGHT and to be with WILEY POST when he made his first WATER LANDING was just too much for me,” Bobby wrote to his mother. He hoped to move to the Seattle area someday, he said, because “THERE’S EVERYTHING here.”¹³

Bobby mailed his letter to his mother on August 8, the day after the flying duo left Renton for Barrow, Alaska.

Continued on page 10



First class to graduate high school in Renton at Central School, 1904. Mary Sedlacek Bassen is front, center. (RHM# 2000.048.0695)



Joe Moses and dog at the Moses family home, ca 1930. (RHM# 41.2003)

COLLECTION REPORT

by Sarah Samson,
Collection Manager



Sarah Samson
—
Collection Manager

84% That's how close we are to completing another major Museum digitization project! Since April I have been ferrying small batches of our oral history cassette tapes to and from Precision Audio Restoration in Shoreline to be digitized. The process has slowly preserved the audio on the 145 tapes that make up our oral history collection. The final batch of cassette tapes is currently being digitized.

This project is vital for the preservation of the Museum's oral histories. The cassette tapes on which the oral histories were recorded are already outdated technology and some have deteriorated and become fragile. Fearful of damaging the tapes, we were not able to listen to any of them. Transcripts of the interviews were the only way we could access the information contained in the tapes. Thankfully, most of the tapes had transcripts.

The transcripts are excellent, but nothing compares to hearing the voice of a person telling their own history. We can now hear two Duwamish songs sung by Joe Moses in 1942. Joe was the older brother of Henry Moses and their family home



Interior of Tonkin's store, ca 1910. (RHM# 41.0610)

was located on the banks of the now-disappeared Black River just west of Renton High School. On other tape we can hear the voice of Mary Sedlacek Bassen, who, in 1904, became one of the first students in Renton to graduate from high school. Her memories of early Renton were captured in a 1978 interview. The next tape that I'm eager to hear is the oral history of Harold and Frank Tonkin, great-grandsons of James Tonkin, the English immigrant who founded the Tonkin General Store.

All of the oral history digital audio files are now attached directly to our database and are available to be heard by the public for the first time. Digital copies of oral histories may now also be purchased. Our hope is to be able to use snippets of these oral histories in audio installations in upcoming exhibits so that our visitors can hear the actual voices of Renton's past.

The digitization of the oral histories has been made possible by a collections care grant from 4Culture, along with grants from The Next Curve and Renton Rotary. Board Member Alexis Madison and her husband Brian Birmingham also contributed funds to see this project through. The second phase of the project, digitizing the Museum's film collection, will begin once the oral history portion of the project is complete.

MEMORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Just one week later, newspapers around the country reported the accident that killed the pair. Engine trouble and heavy fog forced them to land in a Native village in Point Barrow; they had repaired the engine, they thought, and had dinner with residents before attempting to take off. The plane crashed almost immediately, flipping upside down in a river. Post's body was pinned underwater and Rogers was thrown clear of the crash; neither survived.¹⁴ Aviation experts have speculated on the cause of the crash. Post had requested that Lockheed add the floats to his aircraft, but the company refused, concerned that his modifications made the plane dangerously unstable. Most agree that the excess weight and extreme length of the pontoons were more than the engine could cope with.¹⁵

We have no record of Bobby and Gordy's reactions to the tragedy, but Pres. Franklin Delano Roosevelt expressed the shock of the nation. He remembered the pair: "Will Rogers was an old friend of mine, a humorist and philosopher beloved by all.... [Wiley Post] leaves behind a splendid contribution to the science of aviation."¹⁶

A special thanks to Christine Tutak for sharing her uncle Robert McLarren's August 8 letter to his mother.

1 [Ellen White Pope], "Post and Rogers Regular Fellows Says Reporter," *Renton Chronicle*, 8 August 1935. Ellen White (later Pope) would gain some notoriety later as the last reporter to have spoken with Will Rogers before his death; he mentioned her in his last column as the "girl newspaper reporter." "Chronicle Reporter Last Press Member to See Will Here," *Renton Chronicle*, 22 August 1935, p.1.

2 "Personal Remembrances of Gordon Williams of the Wiley Post/Will Rogers Stop at Bryn Mawr Airport in August of 1935," typescript, n.d. (Vertical file, Renton History Museum).

3 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p. 3.

4 [Ellen White Pope], "Post and Rogers Regular Fellows Says Reporter," *Renton*

Chronicle, 8 August 1935, p.1.

5 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.1.

6 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.1.

7 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.1.

8 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.2.

9 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.2.

10 "Personal Remembrances of Gordon Williams of the Wiley Post/Will Rogers Stop at Bryn Mawr Airport in August of 1935," typescript, n.d. (Vertical file, Renton History Museum).

11 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.1.

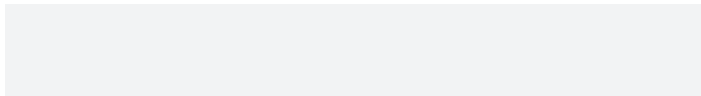
12 "Personal Remembrances of Gordon Williams of the Wiley Post/Will Rogers Stop at Bryn Mawr Airport in August of 1935," typescript, n.d. (Vertical file, Renton History Museum).

13 Robert McLarren to Ruth McLarren, 8 August 1935 (Vertical File, Renton History Museum), p.1.

14 "Flyers Land to Fix Motor; Craft Dives Taking Off Again," *Seattle Daily Times*, 16 August 1935, p.1.

15 Alwin J. Muhonen, "Flashback: Circa 1935," typescript (Vertical file, Renton History Museum); Kenneth G. Johnsen, "Will and Wiley's Last Trip," *PNAHF Journal* 3 (1971), 9-11.

16 "F. R. in Tribute to Rogers, Post," *Seattle Daily Times*, 16 August 1935, p.1.



The aftermath of the Post-Rogers seaplane crash at Point Barrow, Alaska. The photo was taken by William Kibizoff, a Russian who worked at a nearby gold mine. (RHM# 2003.036.6410)



“Things that go Bump in the Night”

Renton History Museum Annual Dinner and Auction October 24, 2012

5TH ANNUAL RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BENEFIT DINNER AND SILENT AUCTION

Get your tickets now for the Annual Benefit Dinner and Silent Auction on Wednesday, October 24, 2012 at the Renton Senior Activity Center. The event will feature a silent auction, fantastic meal, entertainment, and will be hosted by an emcee. Please support the Renton History Museum by celebrating Renton’s past and promising future! Tickets are \$40 per person or \$300 for a table of eight. Call the Museum at 425.255.2330 to reserve your space now or order online at www.brownpapertickets.com/event/268312

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RENTON HISTORY MUSEUM
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Dodgeball at Lakeridge Elementary School, 1957. The photo was taken by teacher Emmons Williams, a skilled photographer who twice had his work published in *Life Magazine*. (RHM# 2010.015.029)