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The Edge of Texas - Program 0109, Overview

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EDGE OF TEXAS(108)

George Catlin

THEME MUSIC UP AND UNDER

Welcome to the Edge of Texas. This is

Alex Apostolides . . .

. . . and I am Patty Walker. We come to you each week with tales from the Old West.

THEME MUSIC UP AND FADE

A George Catlin had it made. The portraits he painted were in great demand. He'd been admitted to the Pennsylvania Academy of Art, and statesmen, kings and scientists were among his friends.

P Busy? Listen to the man: "I have had within the last year more orders for portraits than I could handle, but I have refused all of them, as I have more of my own orders than I can handle for a long time to come."

-A

P He was busy, he was wildly popular and successful. He had a beautiful wife, and he moved in the company of kings

A and he was as unhappy as a man could be.

P George Catlin wanted to paint Indians.

A He wanted to leave the lush life of the east coast, go West -- and paint Indians. It had been his fondest dream for as long as he could remember.

P His mother had been captured by Indians in 1778, and had been released a few years later. The stories she had told young George had struck fire in his imagination -- he wanted to see -- and paint -- every Indian tribe in all of North America.

INDIAN DRUMS, CHANT, UP AND QUICK OUT

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A He never lost this dream.

P The Catlin home was filled with books, and reading went along with prayers every evening.

A There was hunting and fishing in the forest that lay all around their Pennsylvania farm, and the boy found a healthy balance between the outdoor life and the rich life found in books.

P His mother read to him a lot -- with that, and her stories about being captured by the Indians, a deep interest in our native Americans was kindled in young George.

A The Susquehanna Valley, where they lived, was a stopping place for people going West, and the house was often filled with Indian fighters, trappers, explorers, going West or coming back, and the stories they spun made young George want more than ever to go West and see it for himself.

P Now, his family had different ideas. Sure, the boy could draw -- he'd taught himself -- and he seemed to enjoy drawing and painting as much as he did hunting in the woods . . . but these were practical times -- a man must make a living.

A Drawing and painting, no matter how good you may be, is fine -- for a hobby. Life is more serious -- young George would be sent to law school.

P He came back two years later and began practise -- but his heart really wasn't in it.

A "During this time, another and stronger passion was getting the advantage of me, that of painting, to which all my pleading soon gave way--and after having covered nearly every inch of the lawyer's table (and even encroached upon the judge's bench)

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-more-

A with pen knife, pen and ink, and pencil sketches of judges, jurors and culprits, I very deliberately resolved to convert my law library into paint pots and brushes, and to pursue painting as my future and apparently more agreeable profession."

Q Both father and mother were supportive of his move.

A A letter from his father, dated March 26, 1821, had four pages listing the best early European artists, urging George to read about them and study their careers.

P His natural talents made him friends and won him clients -- and saw him being admitted to the Philadelphia Academy of Art, no small honor in those days.

A He was on an upward-mobile track . . . and he grew increasingly unhappy -- his foot was itching, and he wanted to head West.

P West -- to paint -- and to collect costumes, artifacts and weapons -- "to perpetuate them in a gallery unique, for the use and instruction of future ages."

A His younger brother Julius shared his dream of painting Indians in the West. Julius had graduated from West Point and had been sent out to the frontier in Arkansas, where his enthusiasm for George's project grew so strong that he resigned his commission and came back East to encourage George in any way he could.

P George, busy painting all the portraits he could handle, had gotten married in the meantime, was painting, besides the society portraits, paintings of Indians on nearby New York reservations.

- A It was the happiest of times, the best of times -- and then dark tragedy struck . . .
- P George was in Rochester, New York, painting a copy of one of his portraits of Governor DeWitt Clinton for the Franklin Institute.
- A Julius came up to visit -- the group went happily down to the Rochester river for a picnic. They went swimming -- and Julius drowned.
- P They'd been close -- but, ^{even with} ~~through~~ his grief, Julius's death only made George more determined than ever to go West, paint, make the dreams he and Julius had come true.
- A Meantime, he watched other artists head out for the far frontier.
- P The government had commissioned one of them, James Otto Lewis, to paint portraits of notable chieftains at the Indian Council Meetings along the Mississippi.
- A Another one, a Swiss named Rindisbacher, had come down from the Red River Colony in Canada and opened a studio in Saint Louis.
- P And Samuel Seymour, a Philadelphia landscape painter, had gone out with the expedition of Major Stephen Long, all the way across the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains.
- A He had to break loose. None of them was getting anywhere near the great plan he'd envisioned, but they were getting close enough to make him less than comfortable.
- P But -- leaving to go West now -- what about Clara, his beautiful wife...and what about the obligations to his family?
- A It was not a happy time for George Catlin.

- Q Worried, tied down, wanting desperately to break loose but unable to, his health broke down.
- A It was the winter of 1829-30. Clara wasn't feeling too well herself, so the two of them packed their bags and left Albany for the warmer climate of Richmond, Virginia, where George was as busy painting portraits as he'd been before.
- Q But it wasn't enough. He'd decided on his future. His life was not going to be spent in these sophisticated Eastern city circles -- he was going West. He was going West to paint the primitive peoples beyond the Mississippi, and that was that
- A He headed for Washington, D-C. got letters of introduction to people in St. Louis.
- Q Packed Clara up and saw her safely to Albany, where she would convalesce.
- A Set out in the spring of 1830, to devote the rest of his life to the grand plan about which he'd dreamed -- to paint the people of every Western tribe, to set up a museum, a 'gallery unique,' where generations to come could learn about a world their forebears had destroyed.
- Q Did Catlin have an inkling of just what the coming of the white man meant? Maybe so -- he worked furiously, endlessly, to capture Indian life in drawings and paintings, before it disappeared.
- A And he succeeded -- Catlin's work is a time capsule of those last years in which the Indian still roamed free. His sketches and his paintings speak across the gulf of time, as fresh and strong today as when he first painted them.

P His work took him into areas, brought him into close contact with people most of the world would never get to know -- except through his paintings.

A And the work he did was a far cry from the polite salon portraits he'd painted in the East. In fact, one portrait saw a death sentence being placed upon his head . . .

P He was in Sioux country at the time, painting the portrait of Mah-to-chee-ga, Little Bear, a chief of the Hunkpapa band.

A "There is blood and butchery in the story, and it should be read by everyone who would form a correct notion of the force of Indian superstition. Three mighty warriors, proud and valiant, were killed and all in consequence of one of the portraits I painted . . . my brush was the prime mover of all these misfortunes, and my life was sought to heal the wound."

P Little Bear was sitting for his portrait, ^{at Fort Pierre} and Catlin decided to try a new approach, just for variety -- instead of full-face, he would paint Little Bear in profile.

A As with any artist, there was a crowd sitting and squatting around, watching him as he worked.

P The painting was almost done when Shon-ka, The Dog, chief of the Bad Arrow Points group, came in and sat on the ground in front of Little Bear, where he scowled at the painting.

A Shon-ka was an ill-tempered, nasty character, heartily disliked by almost all the other bands just because he was so damned mean.

¶ He'd come in a bad mood, but this was nothing new. He sat now, scowling at the painting and then at Little Bear, and his lip lifted in a sneer.

A "Little Bear is only half a man."

P Everything got still. This was not polite talk — this was fighting talk, inexcusable, and everyone tensed, waiting for what was bound to happen next.

A Little Bear looked at Shon-ka, his lips tight.

"Who says that?"

"Shon-ka says it. And Shon-ka can prove it."

P Little Bear turned his head slowly and he stared with contempt at Shon-ka.

A "Why does Shon-ka say it?"

"Ask the painter. He can tell you. He knows you are nothing but half a man, because he has painted only half your face, knowing the other half is good for nothing."

P That did it. Little Bear's eyes glittered.

A "When the Dog says this, let him prove it. Little Bear can look at anyone, but now he is looking at an old woman and a coward!"

¶ Shon-ka stared at Little Bear, then got up and, wrapping his robe about him with a flourish, walked stiffly out of the lodge.

A Little Bear watched him leave and then calmly turned around and sat quietly until the finishing touches were put on the portrait.

"I've finished now."

P Little Bear got up. He looked, smiling in approval, at the portrait — and then he presented Catlin with a beautifully painted buckskin shirt, decorated with porcupine quills.

A As soon as he left, the others crowded outside, because they knew something was about to happen, and that it would not be good.

P Little Bear went to his own tepee, where he got out his muzzle-loader rifle. He loaded it with powder, tamped down the patch and dropped a round lead ball down the barrel.

A Then he threw himself on the ground and prayed to the Great Spirit for aid and protection.

P His wife was hanging about in the background, and she was frightened. Little Bear had a look on his face that was not a happy one -- awful things would happen unless she stepped in to help.

A She wanted peace in the camp. She picked up the rifle, un-noticed by Little Bear. She turned it upside down and shook it till the lead ball rolled out on the ground.

P Little Bear was still chanting his prayer when Shon-ka's voice sounded just outside.

A "If Little Bear is a whole man, let him come out and prove it! It is Shon-ka who calls him!"

P Little Bear jumped up and grabbed his rifle. As he ran outside, he raised it and both men fired almost at the same time.

A Shon-ka turned around and fled, untouched . . . but Little Bear fell to the ground, half of his face shot away -- the half which had been left out of the portrait.

P Forget whatever you may have read about stoic Indians -- the camp was thrown into a yelling-frenzy panic.

- A There must have been a thousand warriors, running about and yelling, racing for their tepees, stripping off their clothes, war cries mounting until they could have been heard all the way to the Mississippi.
- q They all came out again, carrying their guns and bows and arrows. Nobody was going to get away with hurting Little Bear, much less that rotten Shon-ka, who was no good, anyway.
- A The Bad Arrow Points bunch gathered about their chief, and they all raced for their horses in a storm of arrows and round shot.
- P The rest of the warriors chased after them, and soon the fight was surging back and forth on the prairie, in full view of the fort.
- A Shon-ka's Bad Arrow Points gang managed to escape, although it was learned later that one of the rifle balls had hit him and broken his arm.
- q While this was going on, the women of the Bad Arrow Points were hustling about, taking down the tepees, ready to make a fast move to a different neighborhood.
- A Little Bear died -- the damage at close range had been too massive.
- P His wife set up a wail. She believed, and rightly, that she'd been responsible for her husband's death, when she'd acted in all innocence, hoping to preserve the peace.
- A All the warriors and friends of Little Bear's band gathered in front of the tepee, raising their weapons in the air and swearing not to rest until Shon-ka, the Dog, had paid for his crime with his life.

P And now a fearful note was shouted in the wind, fearful to the people gathered in the shelter of Fort Pierre --

A --Shon-ka was rotten, a bad case all 'round . . . but the artist who'd painted Little Bear in profile, George Catlin, was the direct cause of what had happened -- if he'd painted Little Bear in a decent full-face pose, there'd have been no trouble.

P The traders at the fort got ready to defend themselves against what they thought would be an immediate attack.

A "For God's sake, get out of here!" they urged Catlin. "Get yourself packed up and out of here as fast as you can move, boy! Get your backside aboard the Yellowstone. She's about ready to sail, and your life isn't worth a plugged nickel in this country right now."

P Catlin did. The riverboat cast off in a hurry and Catlin sailed downstream as the angry warriors stood on the river bank, shouting threats until the boat was out of sight.

A It was quite a while later before Catlin found out what happened after that. Four months passed before he took the risk of going back up to Fort Pierre.

P When he got there, they told him Little Bear's followers had gone on the war-path.

A They'd trailed Shon-ka's Bad Arrow Points gang for many days, fighting several skirmishes along the way as they caught up and the Bad Arrow Points fought a while before running away again.

P Little Bear's brother, Steep Wind, was killed in one of these short battles -- and Catlin was held responsible for his death.

A Not only was he responsible for the deaths of Little Bear and Steep Wind -- **the painter of that indecent portrait...**I mean, whoever heard of painting only half a face...the man who did that painting was responsible for the deaths of everyone who'd died in the feud.

P When something this heavy happens, a solemn council must be called.

A All the bands attended, with the exception of the Bad Arrow Points -- Catlin's painting may have set off all the fighting, but no one was going to rest, either, until Shon-ka was brought down., that much was certain.

P Meantime, what to do about this White Eyes, whose painting had brought so much trouble down on the group?

A Well, obviously, he had to die. Let's not forget Shon-ka -- he sealed his own fate . . . but Catlin, the artist, had to die. So be it.

P This was easier said than done, of course. Catlin steered a wide circle around that part of the country from then on.

A He went back down to St Louis, where he learned later that Shon-ka had finally been tracked down near the Black Hills and killed.

P This ended the feud, and ^{the} various bands got together as friends again. Catlin? He was far away and out of sight -- the main source of the trouble had been dealt with, and time passed, as time will, and it's doubtful if they thought about Catlin very much any more.

A Meantime, he set his sights for farther West. A small party of Cheyenne Indians had visited Fort Pierre while Catlin was there. They'd brought wild horses in to trade.

P With them was a good-looking lady who was wife of the head chief.

A She had the wonderful name of She Who Bathes Her Knees, leaving one to wonder about the bathing habits of the rest of the group.

A She Who Bathes Her Knees looks calmly out from the canvas, a red cross painted on her forehead.

P Two red dots are painted on her cheeks, and a bright red pigment colors the part in her hair and both her ears, which have been pierced in at least three places, jewelry dangling from them in anticipation of fashions of a time to come, more than a century away.

A One feels Catlin had a much quieter, enjoyable time painting this portrait than he did with the unfortunately profiled Little Bear.

P Catlin loved the West and the people who had inhabited it from time immemorial. There may have been a little romanticizing in the things he painted, but that was the fashion of the time.

A For the most part, he looked about him with the clear and critical eye of the artist -- no knee-jerk liberal sentimental gush about the Noble Savage. He respected the people he painted too much for that.

Q He was very much aware that what he was painting was a people and a way of life doomed to extinction. The knowledge didn't tend to make him any happier.

A Sailing up and down the river on the steamboat Yellowstone, he saw the beginning of the end -- the buffalo hunters were beginning to move in, and not a trip did the Yellowstone take without a heavy cargo of stinking hides.

P No one knows how many millions of buffalo were slaughtered in a senseless massacre that went on for years. Some of the old ones told of herds of buffalo that covered the ^{earth} ~~erath~~ as far as each horizon, herds that tood days to move past one spot.

A And they were gone, after having given the Indian his food, his clothing, his shelter, for thousands of years, wiped ^{OUT} ~~in~~ the relentless advance of 'civilization' moving inexorably West.

P General William Tecumseh Sherman was probably one of the men most responsible. The Indians depend upon the buffalo for their food and shelter? Fine -- wipe out the animals and the Indians will disappear shortly after.

A Look at what a wonderful, rich country this would be, ripe for the picking, if only those troublesome Indians would disappear, leaving the land free for decent, Christian folk.

P Wipe 'em out, I say. And rejoice in the fact there's big money to be made from the sale of the buffalo hides.

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A And a swarm of buffalo hunters, a breed of barbarian not seen in the world for centuries, descended on the land -- the buffalo disappeared and whiskey came upon the scene -- and the Indian watched it happen, helpless to interfere.

P Catlin's comments seem to sum it up -- he was at Fort Pierre one day when a band of Indians crossed the river at noontime to attack a huge herd of buffalo nearby.

A "They came back at sundown with fourteen hundred fresh buffalo tongues. The white traders had urged them to go out and bring back this delicacy, for which they received a few gallons of whiskey, which they proceeded to drink on the spot.

"Not a skin or a pound of the meat, except the tongues, was brought in. which fully supports me in the seemingly extravagant prediction I have made as to the extinction of the buffalo. The Indians look to the white man as wiser than themselves and able to set them examples -- and see none of these in their country but sellers of whiskey, setting the example of using it themselves.

P "They easily acquire a taste, where whiskey is sold for sixteen dollars a gallon and soon impoverishes them, and must soon strip the skin from the last buffalo's back to be vended to the traders for a pint of diluted alcohol.

A "The Indian and the buffalo are joint and original tenants of the soil, and fugitives from the approach of civilized man.

P "It is not enough in this polished and extravagant age, that we get from the Indian his lands and the very clothes from his back, but the food for his mouth must be stopped, to add a new article to the fashionable world's luxuries . . .

A "...that white men may figure a few years longer, enveloped in buffalo robes -- spread them over the backs of their sleighs and trail them ostensibly amid the busy throng, as a thing of elegance that had been made for them.

P "It may be that power is right, and voracity a virtue -- and that these people, and these noble animals, are righteously doomed . . . "

A Catlin painted a people and a way of life that was, indeed, doomed. His work grew, along with his collection of costumes and artifacts, and his dream for that museum, that 'gallery unique,' where people could come and look on the faces of a people they themselves had doomed to die.

P He opened an exhibition in New York, and it was a great success, followed by others -- this was heady stuff, these views and things of a vanishing race!

A His sympathy with the Indians made him enemies in Washington, naturally. You can kill savages with a clear conscience, wipe out their food supplies, even send them blankets loaded with smallpox -- but, if they're human beings, this is not good.

P If civilized people begin to regard Indians as human beings, this goes completely against government policy -- I mean, there's a whole continent out there, just waiting to be taken, and we must justify the things we do as being right and Christian.

A Catlin is a trouble maker. The man must go .

P He had supporters -- strong ones . . . but politics is a strange and ugly game.

A Politics have a strange effect on anything reflecting even vaguely on national policies -- especially when those policies cannot stand up to public scrutiny or criticism. In this, at least, nothing's changed in the past hundred and fifty years.

P Catlin's dream of a National Museum got nowhere. There was a lot of praise for the wonderful things he'd done, but . . . you must understand, in standing up for the Indians, you've picked the wrong side. Sorry, but -----

A And so, George Catlin went to Europe -- and that's another story.

TRANSITION MUSIC UP AND FADE

INTERVIEW

OUTRO MUSIC UP AND FADE

This program is produced in the studios of K-T-E-P, on the campus of the University of Texas at El Paso. Our audio engineer is Jeff Skibbe.

We leave you once again with the words from that wonderful old Navajo chant --

May you walk in beauty
Beauty in front of you
Beauty behind you
Beauty all around you
May you walk in beauty.

Thanks for sharing. This is Alex Apostolides.....
.....and I am Patty Walker. May you walk in
beauty all your days.

THEME MUSIC UP AND FADE

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