



Ray Knaub

Rivers of Nebraska



STORY BY ADRIELLE HARVEY PAINTINGS BY RAY KNAUB

NINE-YEAR-OLD RAYMOND KNAUB stumbled over his two older brothers, Dick and Bob, in the kitchen of his family's home on the north side of the North Platte River. The three boys quickly swept peanut butter over slices of bread, wrapped their sandwiches and stuffed them into their Army packs, along with bottles of pop and World War II canteens.

It was summer 1949, and the day would mark the first of many that Ray would accompany his brothers to the Scotts Bluff National Monument and the river.

Off they went – Dick, Bob and Ray – through the open prairie until they reached the monument, standing 800 feet above the North Platte. They climbed it until they grew tired, and by then, the sun-warmed water of the river called to them.

It must have been quite a sight as young Ray forged ahead, taking the slope down to the river straight on, unlike his brothers who knew to zig-

zag. He quickly gained speed, and unable to stop the momentum of his body against the slant of the hill, crashed into Dick.

Thank goodness he did because there were a lot of cactuses and boulders there.

Shaking off the tumble, the boys continued toward the river. It would be an afternoon spent swimming in the North Platte before rinsing off the dirt and sand and scurrying home in time for dinner.

It was this same boyish affinity for the North Platte River that would mature Ray into an experienced landscape artist who captures the blazing oranges, reds and pinks of a Nebraska sunset settling over the land or the enraged clouds forming above the Missouri River.

IN JUNE 1914, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife, stirred feelings of

Ray Knaub first discovered his knack for art while attending college at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and through years of listening to and observing the Nebraska land, he's established his professional career as a landscape artist. For "Oxbow on the North Loup," Ray stopped near Brewster "to admire the beautiful curve of the river and hear the sand on the bottom moving with the water," he said. Opposite page, Ray has found that the same athletic abilities that took him to Texas are those he relies upon to seek out a composition. Upon choosing the location for "Sundown on the Niobrara," south of Springview, hiking the high bluffs above the river offered a winning view.



The agricultural and historical significance of the Platte River inspired Ray's "Sunset on the Platte," painted east of Kearney. In the 1800s, the river provided transportation for the French to trade furs with natives. Later, it became the means for water and game for westward pioneers, as well as the routes for the Oregon and Mormon Trails, the Pony Express and Interstate 80. Opposite page, "I am still amazed of all the ponds, lakes and rivers in Nebraska," Ray said, even after years of painting the state. "Nebraska Icon" features a farm near Fremont.



"Prairie Buffalo" is Ray's version of Albert Bierstadt's "The Last of the Buffalo." The landscape, located northwest of Sargent, is now home to cattle rather than buffalo herds. Opposite page, now at home in Denver, Ray makes frequent trips back to his home state. Born in Gering, his memories as a boy growing up on the north side of the North Platte River surge through him like the rivers flow through Nebraska.

Lincoln. Ray's turn came in 1958. He ventured south to Baylor University in Waco, Texas; he, too, on a track scholarship.

As a sophomore majoring in arts and sciences at Baylor, Ray was introduced to his first art class, which led him to taking another and another. He realized for the first time in his life that art was a "real possibility in my life to develop." At the same time, he recognized that Texas culture was not a good fit for him and transferred to UNL.

RAY WILL TELL YOU it takes years to form an artistry all your own. As an athlete, he is familiar with the hard work and patience it takes to develop a talent. It doesn't daunt him.

"Work and work and work," Ray said. "It takes forever to learn your craft, from the painting technique to the palettes you use.

We're talking hundreds of paintings."

Many of his years painting were spent in trial and error. First, he painted figures and animals, but it was the many faces of the Nebraska land to which he grew attracted to. Now the animals, and sometimes people, are minute details in his landscapes.

In one sense, Ray's work is quite methodical. He visits the site he wants to paint, walking around until he is struck by a particular composition. He then photographs the area and feels out the land by painting a small version of what he sees.

On the other hand, he doesn't allow the routine to dampen his creativity, which is derived from the land before him, his emotions and memories of the setting he is painting.

Take for instance, Ray's painting "Oxbow on the North Loup



Christopher Amundson

A collection of Ray's paintings will be on display and for sale Aug. 1-Sept. 31 in the **Meadowlark Gift Shop** at *Nebraska Life Magazine*, 206 W. Norfolk Ave., Norfolk. His paintings are in the permanent collection at Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln, Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney, University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha and Union Pacific Corporate Headquarters in Omaha. To contact Ray about his paintings, email knaubsheri@aol.com.

River." He started with the knowledge that it's an oxbow, and there's a cliff. "The edge would roll you down into the river," he said of the cliff's 45-degree angle. As he began to paint, he questioned: "What kind of weather would go into the painting?"

Ray pulled from the memories of time spent discovering the area, and from those memories, grandiose clouds stacked and stacked formed in shades of pink, gray, blue, white and yellow. The painting "arrived," he said.

IT WAS AT UNL in the summer of 1961 that Ray met his wife, Sheri.

"I got caught, so to speak," Ray said. "I was walking on the beach, and this good-looking blond woman said, 'Oh, would you put some lotion on my back?'"

Ray and Sheri were married in September 1963, after graduating from UNL, and they moved to Denver where Ray did graduate work at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Since then, Sheri, a farm girl who grew up 11 miles south of Wisner, has become Ray's main critic. She travels with him across

the globe to various museums and art shows and offers the "evil eye," as Ray puts it.

"Anymore, she's laid-back about everything," Ray said. "If I have to have a second opinion, I call her. She'll come down and say, 'Well Ray, it's not finished yet.'"

Though Ray and Sheri never left Colorado, the rivers and landscapes of Nebraska often draw the Knaubs back to their roots. In fact, Ray compares Nebraska to his trips to Italy, meaning there are landscapes nothing like anything else in the United States.

"You just have to have the eyes," Ray said. "Most people don't really look at the landscape very closely. They just kind of glance at it, whereas artists, we'll really look at it and be sensitive to its moods.

"In fact, some of the nocturnal paintings I've done," Ray said, "people will say, 'what time of day is this? Does that really exist?' I say, 'instead of watching the news at night, just go out and look.'"

Ray's passion, even beyond the Nebraska plains, is rivers, and for that he has a simple answer: "I just love them. Nothing complicated about it." ♡