

## [The Enchanted Jug]

Interview

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### THE ENCHANTED JUG

One morning some twenty years ago as Bert Phillips, noted Taos artist, stood talking to Geronimo, a large Pueblo Indian with one half-closed [?] eye , their conversation turned to a piece of pottery which Geronimo had found up the canon from the Pueblo.

"I tho'ught perhaps you'd be interested in buying it, Mr. Phillips," suggested Geronimo. The Indian and the artist were friend of long standing- Geronimo having posed for Phillips for many years and accompanied him on many painting expeditions.

"I'll tell you, Geronimo, from your description of the incised decoration on this vase, I think I should at least like to see it and estimate its value. You bring it in to town some time." And so the matter was dismissed. Each time Phillips saw Geronimo as he shuffled past his house on the Pueblo road he would call - "Say - when are you going to bring in that piece of pottery for me to see?"- and Geronimo would shrug his broad shoulders and squint his eye. Several months went by and finally Geronimo's wife promised that either she would bring it in - or Mr. Phillips might get it at the Pueblo if he drove out.

Again months went by. And one day in Ralph Meyers Mission shop he mentioned the incident. Mr Meyers laughed heartily. "You'll never get that piece, Bert, I've been trying to see that for over a year. The Indians believe it can't be moved and they'd never get it in to

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town." Phillips was provoked and with utter disdain for the superstition - planned that he and his young son, Ralph, would drive out over the bumpy dirt road to the Pueblo. And so they harnessed the horses and prepared to leave. [C18 - 6/5/41 - R. ?]

On the drive out , Phillips kept pondering on the piece of pottery - its reputed beauty and whether Geronimo or his wife would ask a fabulous sum for it. "I simply can't pay more than ten dollars for it," he mused to himself. But upon their arrival at Geronimo's house - the Indian's wife handed him the delicate vase without question. "How much?" asked Phillips - and to his surprise the Indian woman replied, "Fifty cents!" Phillips and Ralph eyed it hungrily - yes, it was all that Geronimo had said - and then some - the thin paper shell delicacy of it was covered with fine incised ornament. At least two thousand years old, thought Phillips to himself. "Now, Ralph, go easy and hold that ladder steady - we're going to get this piece of pottery to town if it's the last thing we do - we'll show them how silly their superstitions are...."

And slowly they climbed down from the second story of the Pueblo over the crudely made ladder- Phillips holding his prize tenderly - and his young son watching with eagle eyes that nothing should happen to jar it from his hold.

They both gave a sigh of relief as they heeded the horses toward town - Ralph driving and the vase held carefully on Phillips' lap. The drive was slow and the day hot - so as they approached the fork of the roads where the old cemetery lies on the outskirts of Taos, Ralph turned the horses sharply to the north again on to the main Pueblo road. "Where are you going? I want to get this thing home as fast as I can." But the boy explained that surely there could be no harm in taking a swim in the tiny pond on the reservation which furnishes both ice and recreation. He looked pleadingly and argued so earnestly that the artist with his vase finally gave in. In no time the lad was stripped and enjoying the cool waters of the small lake....his father standing on the shore holding the pottery gingerly.

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“Hey,” shouted Ralph, “why don't you put that on the wagon seat - nothing will happen to it.”

“Not on your life - so far so good - and the horses might jerk the wagon - or it might roll off - but I'll put it down here,” he said, resting it against an upright pole.

That day for the first time in weeks, the light and atmosphere, the reflection of the Sacred Taos mountain in the water of the pond, were identical to that day when Phillips had started a canvass on that very spot. He stared fascinated at the reflection, studying the planes and coloring. And then his mind was diverted by a “halloo” from two native youths on burros. Friends of Ralph's, they were urged by him to join in a swim - and Phillips - his mind again on the precious find of Geronimo's grabbed the vase from the ground. The burros might think it contained salt - and in their eagerness paw at it and break it. So quickly he wrapped it in young Ralph's clothes that were lying in a bundle on the shore - 4 greeted the two boys who were preparing to swim and with a feeling of assurance again fell to studying the water reflections.

Suddenly - a sound - as ominous as the crash of planets - as full of significance as the darkness of eternity - a great explosive ‘bop’ came to his ears. It meant only one thing - no other set of cacophonous vibrations could [emanate?] from anything but that precious vase.

Not daring to turn - yet impelled to - Phillips stared horror-stricken at Ralph. There the boy sat frozen to the ground where he had sat on his clothes to dry himself after his dip. The two looked at each other for an endless space of time - Then Ralph, his face contorted, pleaded, “Oh, father, I didn't mean to - honestly, I didn't know it was there - you know I wouldn't have done it”- until he was almost in an emotional frenzy. Phillips tried to pacify him - cover his own tremendous feeling of loss - and then with shaking hands they picked up the fragments of the beautifully incised vessel. The drive home was in silence - and for days no reference was made to the incident.

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But two days later Geronimo came to the door..”My wife, she says you came and got the vase - do you have it here?” Phillips cleared his thro'at - “Why yes, I got it , Geronimo, but see you were right - we couldn't take it away from the Pueblo - there it is -” and he pointed to the pile of fragments.

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Geronimo squinted with his half closed eye at the remains - gave a significant look at Phillips and shrugged - “You didn't really think that you could, did you?” and shuffled off down the road to town.

This lovely olla, (oya) (round earthen pot) was glued piece by piece into form again. Dr. Alfred Vincent Kidder of the Boston Museum of Natural History dated it at about two tho'usand years of age and stated it was the third piece of its kind ever found east of the Rio Grande. Mr. Bert Phillips still has this vase at his studio in Taos.

Source of Information

Interview with Bert Phillips, Taos August 9, 1936