

*Apryl, oil, 14" x 11"*

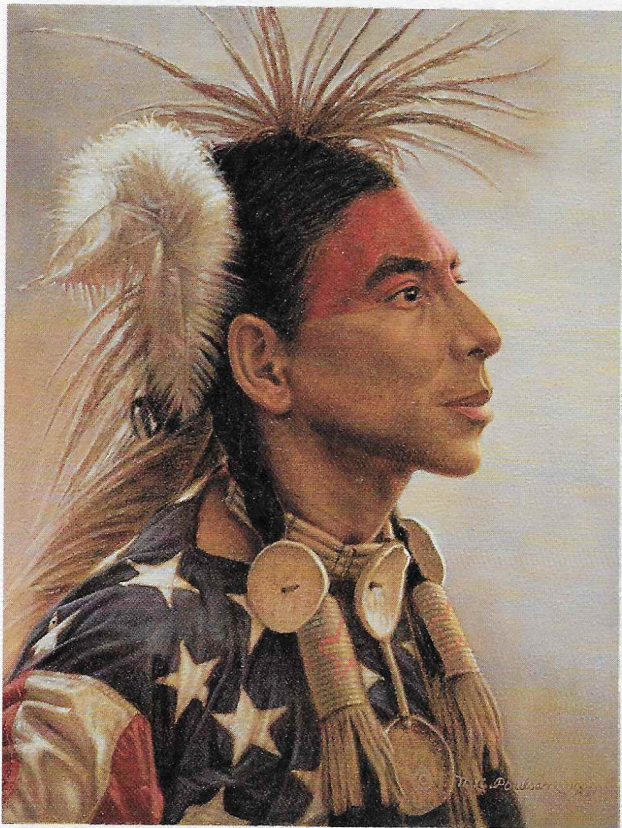
*"This painting is of my little daughter at age 4. I did it as a gift for my wife."*

M. C. POULSEN

# COUNTING HIS BLESSINGS

*By Carl Bechtold*





*Steve Spider, oil, 12" x 9"*

*"Steve has been an excellent subject for me to paint. His outfit and life have great interest and meaning."*



*Young Indian boy, oil, 30" x 24"*

*"This young Indian boy caught my eye at the Cody Powwow. He was fun to watch as the girls would flirt with him."*

Still recovering from a close brush with death, M. C. "Mike" Poulsen and his brushes are alive and well in Wyoming.

Stricken with leukemia in the winter of 1985, Poulsen is still plagued with the side effects of a violent cure. Yet, there is an inner peace in both Poulsen and his work, as he gains an ever-firmer grip on life and on the direction of his work. As the icy grip of a Wyoming winter fades to accept the budding glimmers of spring, Poulsen's work will once again blossom. "Along the Border Trail," his first major showing since he was diagnosed with leukemia, will open at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana, March 31.

In the spring of 1986, however, Poulsen was struggling for his life, with wave after wave of painful, unrelenting chemotherapy. During that summer, he stayed as active as he could, while awaiting a bone marrow transplant. The transplant followed in the fall, and the procedure's painful, lethal side effects plagued Poulsen for many months. His new blood's immune sys-

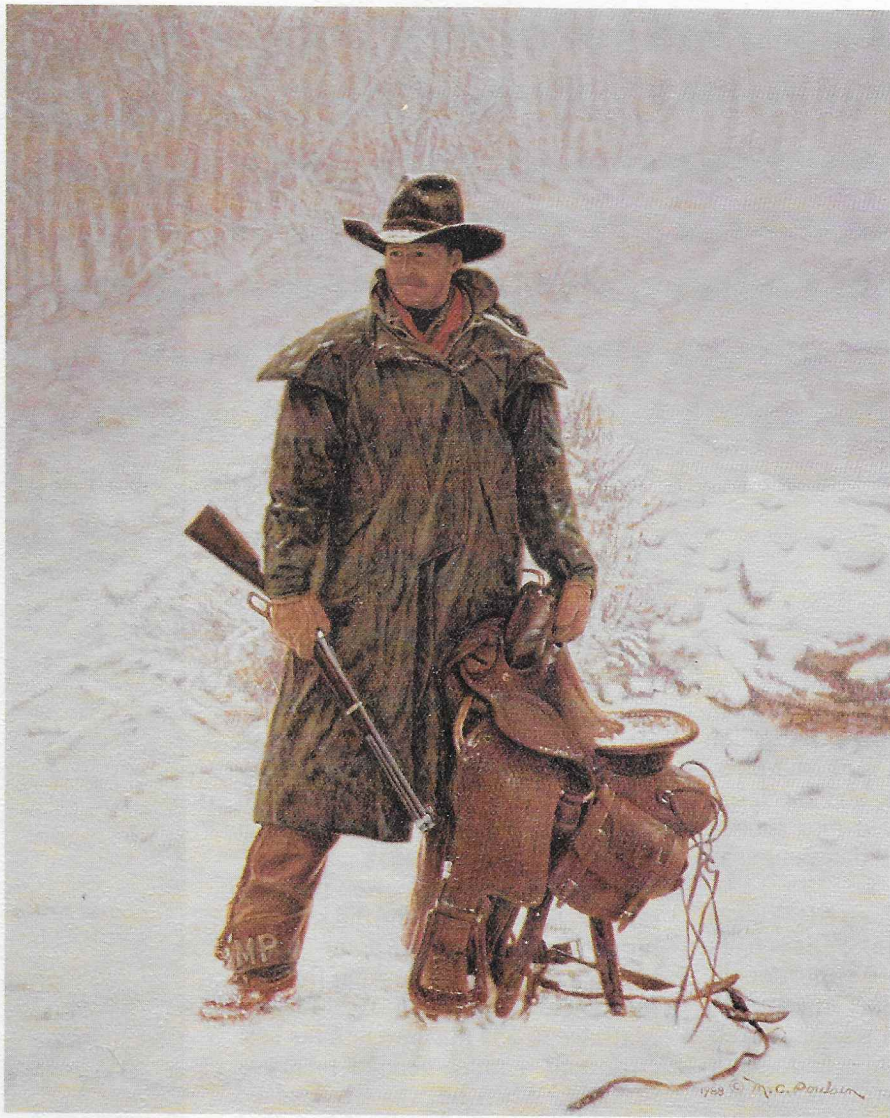
tem had to be suppressed to keep the graft from attacking its host. The normally gregarious Poulsen was confined from his friends, yet determined to get back into the full swing of life. During the long months of recovery, he continued to struggle with the graft-host disease and the effects of combatant medication.

Struggling to overcome waves of exhaustion, shaking in his hands, and a blurring of his vision, Poulsen would paint and rest, rest and paint. It was a time of tempering and deepening of spiritual conviction, as Poulsen had to learn to deal with physical weakness, quite an ordeal for a man who had been a Marine, a stellar city league basketball player and consummate outdoorsman.

In the midst of the torment, Poulsen completed *Steve Spider, An American Indian*, and his sketch of the Wind River Canyon became a massive new oil titled *Prayer to the Great Spirit*. As he continues to gain strength, Poulsen and Shauna—his wife, partner, and business manager—have launched a new series of limited edition prints

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*Artist in Hunting Gear, oil, 18" x 22"*

*"This was the last hunting season before my illness. I posed with my father's saddle and my favorite old slicker."*

through Poulsen Fine Art Print Company and continue preparations for the upcoming show in Bozeman.

Poulsen's works demonstrate a broadening of scope and a refinement of style and exhibit a subtle mellowing of color, a deepening of tone. A deadly realist, Poulsen captures finite detail with infinite determination. "I've always been fascinated with detail," he says. "Not the hardness, but the softness, like a leaf on a tree. It's very detailed, but very soft and pleasing. That's the way a painting should be."

An avid student of Frederic Remington, Poulsen learned from the masterful strokes of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. In Cody, he was blessed with the best tutors of the ages, all housed within the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Poulsen got special permission from the curator to paint

from the classic works displayed there and would park his easel in the corridors while attempting to duplicate, translate, and enunciate the moods, flows, colors, depth, and passions of those great painters.

Poulsen is constantly studying. He has trooped to the mountains with friends, like Glen and Harold Hopkinson, and traded tips and techniques with other artists. From the vibrant, reclusive talents of Jim Bama to the boisterous, grand bluster of Harry Jackson, Poulsen loves them all, respects their works, and borrows all he can from their minds. They, in turn, have given him great encouragement.

Painting what he knows and understands, Poulsen reflects a lot of Cody country in his subjects. He's not limited to the portraits of mountain men and outfitting scenes that elevated him

to national acclaim, but tests his talents on sprays of floral arrangements and landscapes. His works range from miniature studies to four- and five-foot canvases. His range of endeavor encompasses with equal skill the offshore drilling rigs of Hunt Oil and the delicate reflections of a mountain wildflower.

Poulsen exudes a joy as his brush tips respond to sources, both internal and external. "I like to mix my main light source into everything," he says, while working on a painting of a mountain man. "That way, you have a lot more harmony in the painting." Colors and intensity drive the viewer's sight





and mood, and then come the deft featherings of detail. The sharpness also can be directive, and the lesser elements are mellowed into subconscious vision by the dampening of edges.

The mellowing of sharp edges is typical, also, of Poulsen's life. The son of a Wyoming high-country outfitter, he showed an early interest in art. After graduating from high school in Cody, he joined the Marines and, while stationed in Virginia, commuted to Georgetown University where he studied law. "The real idea," he laughs, "was to get off base any way we could."

But, Poulsen's study of law only made him more aware of art, and he visited every museum in Washington, D.C. Later, while in Hawaii, where he played on the Marine basketball team, Poulsen was introduced to his first great teacher, Larry Roberson, who after seeing Poulsen's talent, invited the budding artist to apprentice with him. "That was extremely valuable," says Poulsen. "He taught me the fundamentals. If you don't know them, it takes years to catch up."

Later, while studying art at Arizona State, Poulsen's father was killed in a hunting accident. Poulsen was very close to his father, who for years had carried a sketchbook with him in which he recorded outdoor experiences, bits of wisdom, practical insights, recipes, and sketches. In conjunction with his upcoming show at the Museum of the Rockies, Poulsen is now publishing his father's book, complete with some sketches of his own. His father's death marked a painful change in Poulsen's

life, and he returned to Cody to operate the family business, running Hidden Valley Ranch. Those were tough times, learning times, and a season for sorting values.

During that time, Poulsen met and married Shauna, and she did much to hone the rough edges of the young blade and send him slashing through the jungle of booming Western art. Marriage to Shauna gave him his best critic and a much-needed business manager. When he was 21, Poulsen painted the portrait of his father that was to become a major art print. Other contemporary Western outfitting and cowboy scenes quickly established him as a forceful artist.

Poulsen landed a prestigious commission to paint a dozen scenes for W. H. Herbert Hunt, and his works adorned the Connally Altermann Gallery in Houston. Business was booming, but Poulsen and Shauna found something lacking in their lives. Unable to have children, the young couple visited the nation's leading clinics and experts. They ultimately joined forces with a clinic that matched technology with their rigid standards of ethics, morals, and religious values. Using in vitro methods, the Poulsen's twins—Michael and Apryl—were born in 1984.

Young Michael, Jr., appears to be Poulsen's protégé, dabbling in daddy's paints at nearly every available opportunity. As a result, Poulsen now and then finds himself presented with the opportunity to repair a few of Michael's "adjustments" to various works in progress.

Although Poulsen loves to paint on



location using live models, the intricate detail of his work frequently requires him to work from photographs. He often translates those photographs to small studies, first penciled on base colors, then painted, as Poulsen plots his theme and mood and strikes a rhythm. He then translates the work





*Prayer to the Great Spirit, oil, 48" x 72"*

*"I was diagnosed with leukemia at the beginning of this painting. Two years later, I finished it, inspired and thankful to be able to paint again."*

to a larger board or canvas and develops the finer, more-intricate details. Backgrounds are then changed or added, lighting more explicitly defined, and the mood refined into its final statement.

And so, the days steadily pass for Poulsen, painting and preparing for his

next show with the measured determination of a young bull who has survived a very tough winter. □

*Mike Poulsen is represented by Big Horn Galleries in Cody and Jackson, Wyoming.*





*The Wedding Dress,  
oil, 30" by 24"*

*"The original dress in this painting is on display at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center. The center had a reproduction made and commissioned this painting as a companion piece to the dress."*

rare book collector, who helped to facilitate one of his two trips to Russia in the early 1990s, where he negotiated an exchange of his work with the Russian Arts Council, visited museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and bought dozens of art books.

The legacy of the American West, which fascinates the Russians, is close at hand for Poulsen. He often visits the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, where he has studied romantic landscapes painted by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, as well as works by Frederic Remington, W. R. Leigh, and the Taos painters. "As I tried to dupli-

cate their color schemes, I began to understand why they used certain colors against other colors and experimented [to identify] how they achieved a certain feel with those colors," Poulsen says. "It was a tremendous learning experience."

Last spring, Poulsen used the center's collections to teach an on-site studio art course that he titled "Learning From the Western Masters." He enjoys teaching almost as much as he enjoys painting. "It is a wonderful way of putting me in my place," he says. "It humbles me and brings me down to earth. My students learn from me, and I learn from them."

After more than 25 years as a professional artist, Poulsen still finds art exciting. "There are so many ways to interpret things," he says. "I have so much more to learn. We're expected to do everything in 60 or 70 years, but I need three or four more lifetimes."

As he looks to the future, Poulsen anticipates the continued challenge of communicating with his art. "Art is the love of my life," he says. "It brings me great joy to create something that might touch the soul of another." □

*Stan Cuba is a writer living in Denver, Colorado.*