

Charles L. Peterson—

# A Brush With Success

Editors Note: A couple of years ago the following article appeared in the *Door County Advocate* newspaper. Appropriate for the audience, it is written with a “local man makes good” flavor. However, the basic information and the generous use of lively, authentic quotes makes it interesting reading for any audience and an insightful look at this local man of national stature. So, with generous editing for length, we hope you enjoy a “hometown” look at one of America’s favorite artists, Charles L. Peterson.

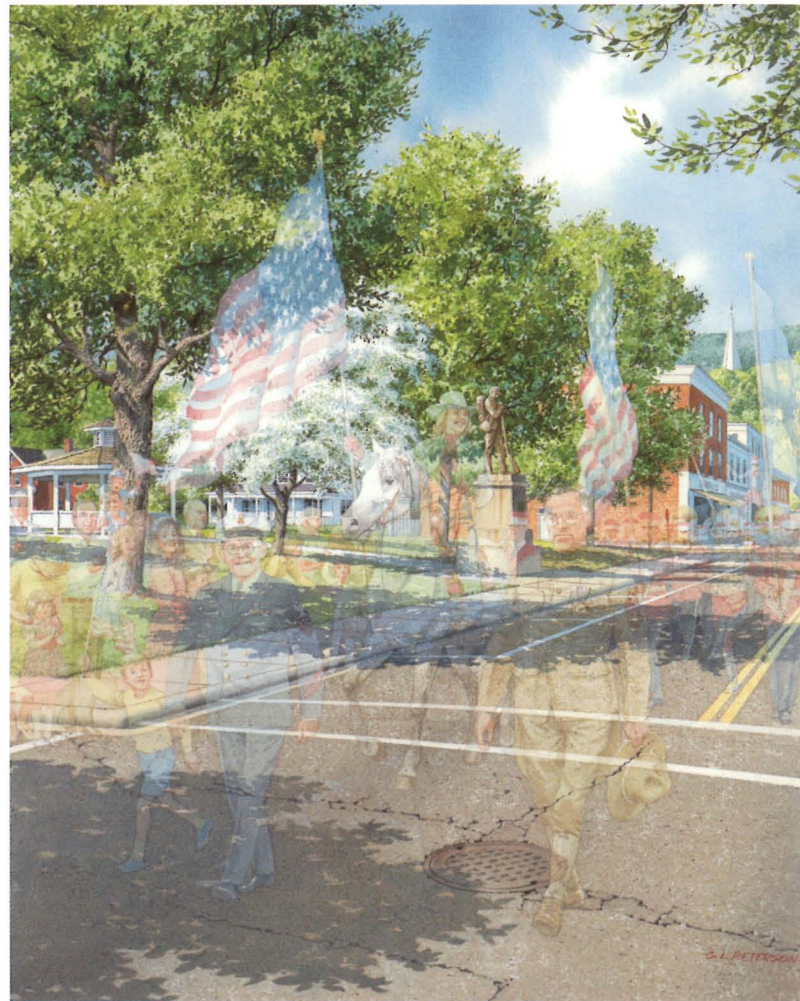
**T**here are bits and pieces of Door County hanging on walls throughout Wisconsin, most of the Midwest and countless locales beyond. Most are captured on film—a family trip perhaps, or a more serious photographic excursion. Others have been brushed across canvas, the result of a discriminating artist’s eye. Door County’s art community is large and well known. It wasn’t always that way, however. The Peninsula’s beauty dates back to the glacier that carved it, but artists took their time in settling in amongst it.

Charles L. “Chick” Peterson not only took a little

*“Sometimes an artist  
has to live before he or she  
has something to say”*

time to settle into the Door County arts community, he also needed time to settle into painting as a way of life. “I simply wasn’t ready (early in life) to devote full time to painting,” he admits. “I needed to ripen for 30 to 45 years. Sometimes an artist has to live before he or she has something to say.”

What Peterson has to say these days offers an intriguing interview. A self-professed “novelist with a brush”, he may be the E. F. Hutton of American painters: When “Chick” Peterson speaks, people listen. At least that seems to be true based on his amazing success, especially over the past decade. Last year, and for the five years before that, he was among the 10 most popular artists in the field of limited edition prints, according to *USArt*



Parade of Honor

2600 s/n ■ 25½ x 18 ■ \$195

magazine. But you don’t have to talk with him long to realize that success has never risen anywhere near his head. His is a modest soul, one that he says is laced with pessimism. But his broad, warm smile leaves you wondering.

Although first exposed to Door County in the 1940s, this Illinois native from a family of engineers carved his own course in art. He studied at the American Academy in Chicago and eventually attended Marietta College in Ohio. He appreciated his training in commercial art, however, Peterson realized it wasn’t his future. He saw college as a “good life”, both in his pursuit of a liberal arts degree that reflected his love of history and English, and as a professor of art for 20 years.

While Peterson needed time to commit his life to art, he has always been painting. He counts the number of times he’s painted Anderson Dock in Ephraim in excess of a hundred. “When I’m gone and memory of my name fades, they’ll remember me as the Anderson Dock master,” he said with a chuckle. Many of those attempts were during the years he and his wife, Susan, would visit her parents’ cottage next to the dock. They eventually built a home further up the bluff overlooking the dock—still their home today.

In 1968, while the home was being finished, Peterson took a year-long sabbatical from Marietta and realized for the first time that a career as a full-time artist was a possibility. “It was something of an impossible dream until then,” he said. He had three more years of a teaching commitment to fulfill at the college before moving his family to Ephraim. Peterson was 45 years old when he left teaching and picked up a brush full time. “I admire the courage of today’s young artists,” he said, amazed at how many are trying to carve a livelihood from a brush and canvas. “Unfortunately, so many with real talent just can’t make it.”

As traditional as his work may seem to most observers, Peterson also is a bit of a rebel. He was an aspiring teenage artist who refused to take high school art classes because he preferred a different approach, a different teacher. Even today, at age 70, Peterson is enjoying his greatest appeal through a technique he admits is “an inappropriate use of the medium”—excruciating detail with watercolor, a medium that often “has a mind of its own.”

Peterson’s “Memories Collection” of limited edition prints now numbers more than 30, a series of watercolor works that have captured the fancy of a nation. Using a “memory image” concept, Peterson takes an old or weathered image from today and infuses life with the people and activities of generations past. The joy he gets from creating these nostalgic gems is clearly evident on his face. There are a number of the works scattered around his studio, and the explanation of each is a step into a piece of Peterson’s life. Born in Elgin, Illinois, he is proud of the Midwestern values that run through the works. “Love, family and labor,” Peterson said, stressing the themes that are strongest in the series. “There are concerns about a collapse of our culture,” he added. “Hopefully, I’m doing something that will remind people of the values that are important.”



Rites of Spring

Collector Edition ■ 2800 s/n ■ 19 x 26 ■ \$195  
Encore Edition ■ 2000 s/n ■ 12 x 16½ ■ \$95

Those values can be seen in paintings that range from family reunions to concerts in the park, barn raisings to barn dances. While Peterson employed this theme as far back as the mid-70s, the print series dates only to 1989. It took Peterson’s determination to master the technique and a hunch by a Minnesota publishing house to make the Memory series one of the most popular in the country today.

How long does it take to create a painting? “About 70 years,” he shot back with a devilish smile. “It takes that long for it all to come together. But in actual production time, anywhere from three to five weeks.” Despite the painstaking work involved in producing these “memories” paintings, Peterson seems to be as caught up as anyone in their appeal. “The more I paint, the more possibilities seem to appear. The pressure to come up with ideas could be terrible for many artists, but I’ve got more than enough to last through my painting years. It’s what I’ve experienced and observed my whole life.”

*“I’m devoted to painting...  
I’d hate not to be painting”*

Entering his eighth decade of life, Peterson is riding a wave of success, and he plans to enjoy the trip. “I’m devoted to painting,” he confessed. “I’d hate not to be painting.”

All of Door County and beyond couldn’t be happier about that.