If the combination of atmosphere, rainfall and soil have produced a Will Rogers and an Andy Payne, the protoplasm of Prague, Oklahoma, must be of a finer and more spiritual quality. Already it has produced two people who are destined to become nationally famous in art; in fact, they are already approaching that destiny: Laurence Williams and Olinka Hrdy.

Our Larry first appeared on the scene as a war victim. He came in when the campus was being transformed into military barracks and an emergency hospital. So at least we have one thing to be thankful for having the now infamous S. A. T. C. and the hard-boiled shave-tail, a certain lieutenant who set up his general headquarters on the corner opposite the president’s house, took complete possession of the campus and thought himself a Napoleon the Second.

Larry, being of a tenacious northern temperament, survived the ordeal, later to appear as plaster-of-Paris Apollo in the “Faun” production, now a classic and a legend in the fine arts. He finished college, both arts and sciences and fine arts, in four years and between smokes he mortared up powerful portraits in glowing colors, two or three of which are still in existence.

We told him what we knew about the technique of art and introduced him to art history. Towards decorative design he had the then prevailing masculine attitude. One thing was in his favor during these early formative years; he did not, like so many of the other boys, insist on becoming a get-quick commercial artist but was willing to buckle down and lay his foundation on hard pan if not rock bottom. After graduation there was no job immediately available in his field so he took the principalship of the high school at Red Rock; that was valuable training. Here he was thoroughly unhappy; that is, I am sure he must have been thoroughly unhappy, and had time for reflection. He studied the brooding, broad, plain surface of Oklahoma in winter but he did no creative work. When he had enough of this his friend Wadsack and I bundled him off to old Yale, and I honestly believe Wadsack was more excited about the adventure than Williams.

He hasn’t told us much about his two or three years at Yale—making his way at old Eli and bumming his

(Turn to page 318, please)
ABOVE—South Canadian River, an oil painting by Professor Williams
BELOW—Black Mesa, a water color painting by Mr. Williams
Larry—an Oklahoma Master

(Continued from page 298)

way to New York occasionally. But some of us know what he did, having been there some time before. Perhaps he taught a little English to the proto-Americans, slung hash, acted as professional pall bearer, or went to Polis (Zeiglers of course was closed). But above all things he worked, and in that apostle of unity and distinguished painter, Eugene Savage, he had a sympathetic and fair-minded master who allowed him more freedom of expression than is usually customary at Yale. At any rate, within the year he brought down the Beaux Arts Institute prize, a national honor among American art students. This entitled him to a sojourn abroad, but instead of taking advantage of this he returned in 1924 to Oklahoma and his first love as instructor. In one year Larry was Professor Williams.

College life would be an ideal existence if there were no professors or if there were no students, depending upon the point of view. With an entirely inadequate teaching staff, attempting to do justice to an ever increasing enrollment in the art school, Williams had little time for creative work during his first two years on the other side of the desk. But this period enabled him to digest and ruminate all the things for good and evil that he had absorbed at Yale.

There was a conflict noticeable between the exacting labored academic symbolism of Savage and the artistic romanticism in his own nature. Then he discovered the southwestern art and artists not only of Oklahoma but of Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona as well. With a friend and camping equipment he travelled back and forth in our rugged western landscape all the way from southern Utah to the Mexican border. He criss-crossed Oklahoma and Texas in an attempt to assemble the material from which he later was to distill the art that is now his own.

His paintings possess an epic quality rather than a lyrical one. They are interpretations of the stern mountains of New Mexico, the vast loneliness of wide expanses in cloudy weather, the bitterness of nude earths, drifting sands and muddy waters. He paints an Oklahoma different from anyone else's. He wrestles with her savage moods, fields plowed up or built off, arroyos of red clay and grayish-purple water, barren mountains shivering in the cold evening. Of course Oklahoma can be lyrical as well with pretty trees, flowers, sunshine, and butterflies, but Williams sees another charm more poignant, more stern, less sweet but equally beautiful.

Not only his pallette but his very attitude towards art changed after this intimate contact with our southwest. I do not know if it is so, but I feel sure that Williams must be of half Scotch or Norwegian blood. It must be so because no Continental European, unless it be the Russian, has his particular inner vision or attitude towards nature. By that I mean that he economizes with paint.

In three respects only does he belong to the moderns: there is a total absence of sugar in his art; there is modern organization in his canvases; and there is a Cezannesque weight to his forms. The rest is all Williams, serious, stern, uncompromising, sometimes grim, brooding and elemental; such are his landscapes.

And yet the people of Oklahoma do not know that they have a fine artist in their midst, but after only about two years of creative work in spare time his reputation is widening in larger circles. Some of his work has recently been reproduced in the "Art Digest" of New York. Williams is another Oklahoman whom it will be exceedingly interesting and probably very profitable to watch. He works both in oil and water colors, the latter quick and spontaneous impressions are easily the finest Oklahoma has yet produced.

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