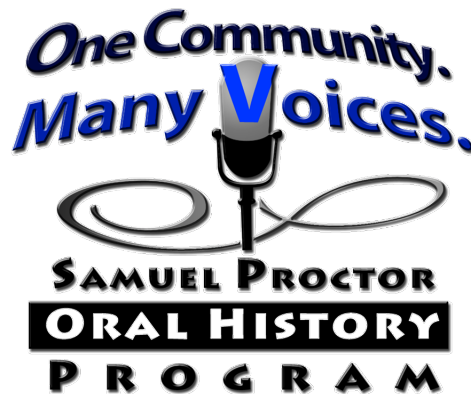


# Carl Tabby

**Southeastern Indian Oral History Project  
MISS CHOC-019**

**Interview by:**

**Rick Barry and Johnny Osceola  
February 1, 1974**



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**MISS CHOC 0019 Carl Tabby**  
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**Interviewed by Rick Barry and Johnny Osceola on February 1, 1974**  
**30 minutes | 11 pages**

**Abstract:** Carl Tabby speaks about his artwork. He began drawing early in life, before studying art at Santa Fe. After graduating he took a break from painting, and then began again, inspired by Nez Perce parfleche designs. His painting is intended to express the shared hardships that Native Americans have faced, while using vivid colors to signify the colorful lives they had. He discusses selling and exhibiting his work, his painting process, and plans for his future work. He describes that much of his style is related to the Plains peoples and his intention is to show universal Indian themes.

**Keywords:** [Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians; Art; Education]

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MISS CHOC 019

Interviewee: Carl Tabby

Interviewer: Rick Barry and Johnny Osceola

Date of Interview: February 1, 1974

U1: Rick Barry and Johnny Osceola interviewing Carl Tabby. How did you start out, and what got you interested in—?

T: I started out very early in life. I used to like to draw a lot—doodle, sketch, whatever you call it—and I used to do that when I was very young, even in the first grade on up to elementary. I mean, I would prefer to do that than do a lot of other things, like, you know, homework and so on like that. Then I received a lot of encouragement from a lot of people—teachers, and some people who knew something about drawing—later on in life.

U1: Do you enjoy art more than any other subject?

T: I would have to say I do. Because, for me, painting has given me one of the greatest satisfactions in things that I do. I like photography, and I like beadwork and all that, but the greatest satisfaction I get is painting.

U1: About how long have you been in art?

T: Well, sketching and so on, I've been doing that all my life, but, you know, actually involving a painting ... It started out really seriously. A lot of my work was during the last year I attended school in Santa Fe—during my senior year in high school. That's been about quite a few years. [Laughter]

U1: When did you get out of Santa Fe?

T: I graduated from Santa Fe 1967, and I went to California after that.

U1: Did you start painting right after you got out of school?

T: No, I didn't. The last painting I probably did was around [19]68, and then I didn't paint for two years. I came back and painted in 1971, I believe, and at that time I

was living in South Dakota. I was just messing around and getting some paint together to get into painting again.

U1: What kind of artwork do you do?

T: Well, it's different from what I used to do in high school, when I was at Santa Fe. 'Cause I didn't start developing anything until my senior year, my last year over there in Advanced Painting. What I'm doing now is totally different, but it's basically the same thing in that I am still painting about the Indians, or Indian design or culture.

U1: Is the Indian artwork the only kind of work you do?

T: Mhmm, that's the only type I do now. I used to think that I wanted to be a portrait painter, but after I got to Santa Fe, I changed my mind. Then I started working with Nez Perce parfleche design, which is, at that time when I started out, it was a geometric pattern, layout design, or whatever you call it. I guess you might say I was fascinated by the Nez Perce parfleche design. It's a bag that you carry stuff around in the old days, like food and other things that you need on a trip, or something like that. On the outside they usually have colorful design of some sort in geometric pattern. Most of the Tribes were like that. I guess if you had a parfleche design, there doesn't seem to be no difference between the other Tribes. All of them work in a geometric area. I started out with that, and I sort of developed that for about two years and then I stopped. I came back and I started working on something else. It's not too much of a difference, but it was something else. What I'm doing today is what I started like three years ago, and I'm still going strong, I think.

U1: What do you hope to do with all your art stuff? Do you have a future?

T: Actually, I'm just painting to satisfy myself. I'm not really trying to establish anything, although I have an idea why I'm painting this, and how I feel about our own people—not just my own Tribe, but you know, all the other Tribes as well.

U1: Your painting symbolize anything?

T: You mean, does it mean anything?

U1: Yeah.

T: Well, I don't know. [Laughter] Two other people, they may look at it differently, but for myself, I paint about the Indians today as well as yesterday. In a sense that we had led a tragic life that nobody really knows much about it. It's not a written history, or nobody really paints about it. But from there, I try to depict a humanistic approach about the tragedies of the American Indians, or Native people, as you may call it, that is never written about. I mean, I'm trying to project a human compassion about the American Indians—the way they look, how one must have felt, with the broken dreams and all that, and when they feel that they were cheated and so on. And the hardship that they went through back then, and the hardship that we have today. I just try to paint it like that. I try to imagine how they must have looked, how they must have felt. I try to picture it in their faces rather than the way it happened, you know, like the dead man laying out there with blood all over him. In some cases, I've done that, being shot at and so on. I think, with my main ideas, to give a montage effect, usually use real vibrant color, although we had a tragic life. Every one of them, every Indian or Native people did back then, and we still have some of that yet today. And this is what I try to

paint about. Although we may have had a painful life, we still had a colorful heritage. No matter how much we've lost it, we still have some of it. We probably had a more colorful life back then than we do today. And this is what I try to do. That's why I use a lot of vivid colors, if I can, on any particular subject that I want to depict. I try to—you know, I've done work on people dying, the death, and people crying. Maybe I'm painting about sadness. That's what I'm doing, I guess, mostly on sadness and the Native people.

U1: Do you sell your paintings?

T: What?

U1: Do you sell your paintings a lot?

T: Oh, I sell most of it. I don't have any, that's for sure. [Laughter] And that's another thing I really don't like to do, though. I don't intend to keep it, either, but a lot of people have an idea that when a painter comes out and starts painting, they feel that they're out to paint, to make money and get rich, look for fame and all that. For me, I think that people have a misunderstanding in this concept. A lot of painters come out to paint what they feel is right for them, and it's not usually in the case of selling your work or gaining fame or getting rich. Maybe I'll change my opinion later, but that's what I'm trying to do right now. It doesn't really prove nothing to me, even if I sell my work, because if I feel that I can make another person understand what I'm doing, I think that's the most important thing. If I can sell it, fine, if I can't, it's okay—somebody's going to get a free painting. That's the way it is, because I don't like to keep my paintings around very long, no more than maybe a year. Nobody buys it, if it sits there, I just might just give it to

somebody—that's what I'm going to do. But I try to keep a record of what I've done, in case people want to know about it. I try to do that—to keep slides and photographs, or something like that.

U1: Do you encourage your way of art to other people?

T: No, not really, in a sense. I would rather encourage somebody that's coming up, like Johnny here, to whatever he finds. Go after it on his own way, and if he feels it, it's right for him. I would encourage him to go in that direction, because, you know, this is the way I was taught from another painter. He was my instructor, and he's pretty well known in the Southwest area. His name is Fritz Shoulder, and he's getting pretty rich, too, from **standing there** lately. [Laughter] But this is what he told me when I was in his class. I was in his class two years before I could finally start doing something, and he encouraged me to pursue what I felt was right for me. And this is what I would encourage—this is what I would give as advice to anybody that wants to paint, wants to draw, and go in that direction. I mean, I wouldn't want to tell somebody young that's coming up, or somebody maybe has an idea what they want. And each of us is different. It doesn't matter if we all paint traditional technique, or we're painting modern art, as they are called today—contemporary, whatever you call them. I would rather that—I'd say, for myself—I would have to tell the upcoming painter to go in his own direction, if it's right for him, follow it and pursue it the way he knows best. I think that that would be the best way to tell anybody how to go about it. I mean, if he asks, you know. Maybe he needs some kind of advice, maybe you can help him. I could try. I could tell them to go this way and that way, but he could feel that it may not be

right for him. One more thing I have to say is that I think that to be a painter, I think you have to start being honest with a lot of things—not only with yourself, but a lot of the belief you have. For me, this is what I like to do. I try to understand what other people do, and everything else, and I try to give them an understanding of what is right, or whether it's wrong or not. But I really would rather follow my own opinions than anybody else, and try to go after the right thing that I feel is right for me.

U1: So, you show your feelings in the paintings—just paint what you think of?

T: What I feel is an honest opinion to be true.

U1: Is it a habit for you to paint?

T: Sort of spontaneous, you might say. You know ... I never just paint. I get an idea, I don't paint it right then. Sometimes I keep it as long as I can, and then when I feel the time is right, then I transfer it onto canvas, and I start painting. I usually have an idea, and maybe I might be doing a canvas right then, and I've got an idea of what else I want to do, so I put that aside later. And I'll just work on what I'm doing right now, finish it, then later on I'll go on and go into it.

U1: Do you ever get bored painting?

T: Not really, but I get mad! [Laughter] No, I don't. I usually find it exciting in what I'm trying to do, so I don't usually get bored. I guess the only time I can say I get sort of bored is when there's too many people, just too many people, and I can't concentrate on what I'm doing. Sometimes I lose a little bit of what I was trying to do, and I usually lose some interest in it. Sometimes. Not all the time, though.

U1: Do you usually get nervous when somebody is watching? Watching you paint?



T: Well, it depends. If I'm really involved in what I'm doing, then it doesn't bother me too much, but if I'm less concentrating on what I'm doing, it usually bothers me. Sometimes it gets me frustrated in what I'm trying to do, or too self-conscious of people around me, and I usually just quit. [Laughter]

U1: Do you pick the right time to do your paintings, or anytime?

T: Well, I don't usually do that, but I usually paint at night, because it's quieter at night, and there is less noise also, and not enough people around to disturb me, even if there were some around. I usually play the stereo on loud enough to take the noise out from the surroundings, I guess, although the stereo might be playing loud and I'm too involved in what I'm doing, it doesn't bother me. I usually go along with whatever's playing, the mood, or whatever it is, the rhythm, all that. It's sort of a tempo thing, and it helps me.

U1: Have you done any other paintings besides Indians and ornaments?

T: No, I never really have. I used to do a little bit of portrait-like paintings on my own, you know, for fun, but that was all. And some illustration painting, but as far as doing it as a serious thing, I haven't tried it yet.

[Break in recording]

U1: [Laughter] Do you ever exhibit paintings?

T: Yes, I do. I used to do that even when I was in school, if the school sponsored an exhibit, or something like that, or some show they had for competition, usually. I never won anything. [Laughter] But the main thing was just showing, under the recommendation of my instructor. And I had some recent ones here in the state—one was in Jackson, Mississippi, and one in Tupelo. I also sent two of my

work to Red Cloud Indian Art Show last year, which ran in August, and I haven't done any more since then. I'm working on two more shows right now that I hope will come about. One is at the University of Nebraska, and one is in McComb, or one of the Gulf South galleries, run by a lady from Greenwood.

U2: Carl, I think a lot of people would like to buy paintings from you, except that your work is so large, and the homes are so small. And we were wondering if you have any plans in the future to paint some small enough that we could buy to use in our home, because we just have small homes, and those great big ones, just don't have a wall big enough.

T: I do plan to paint some small ones, and of course, I'm still doing my larger ones. I don't know when I'll do them. I haven't the faintest idea about this. [Laughter] But eventually I will do that—probably this year. Maybe I'll have some for Jerry, I don't know yet.

U2: That would be good.

U1: How come you do all large paintings?

U2: May I answer that? **And** always works as he feels. He just works like he feels, if he feels like working on a big picture, he works on a big one, and so if you want a small one, you'll just have to wait until he feels like it.

T: [Laughter] What was the question again?

U1: How come your paintings are—?

T: So big?

U1: Yeah.

T: Well, it's just a preference with me. It's not a matter of being more expressive in a larger painting than a small painting. I've done small ones, even the size of, let's see, six by eight, or something like that, eight by ten. I've done it before. But usually it takes much more detail work when you do your real small paintings, when you consider that. I try to move along as I paint, as fast as the paint can dry, more or less. Because a lot of times I'm working on a new painting while I'm doing this painting, while I might have an idea that I'm gonna do maybe two or three paintings later that I'm working on. I try to get it out as fast as I can, and not too fast where I won't have to lose it. Usually when I take a big painting, I try to go at it at full speed, and try to get it done, which usually takes me more than I think that it would. Sometimes I can do a painting in one day, or three hours, depending on how I feel. Sometimes I might have a big painting that I want to get it done real quick, but I might switch to a smaller one, mainly because sometimes I get to a point where I get frustrated in what I'm doing, and going about it too fast. Then I stop, I quit right there. Then I go to a smaller one. Then I can go at a slow pace and take my time on it, then later on I can come back to the big one and finish it.

U1: If it's not too personal, what do you plan to do in the future?

T: [Laughter] That's not too personal. Oh, I don't know yet. I'll still paint as I am now, but I have a lot of other ideas that I'm planning to do, which I haven't gotten together yet. I'm in one phase right now. Maybe six months later, maybe a year—I don't know how long it's gonna take, but I'm trying to get it together—a

technique that I started when I was younger, when I was still in high school. I'm going to try to develop it, with what I'm doing right now, and back then.

[Break in audio, speech from original transcript]

U1: Why do you paint mostly about Plains Indians, and not the Southeastern Tribes, such as Choctaw, Creek, and Cherokee?

[Audio resumes]

T: Uh, let's see. I guess my painting depicts, more or less, the universal theme, the culture, or religion, or whatever you call, about the American Indians. It's more or less influenced by the Western Indians, maybe because I love the open space, I love the desert scene. Not actually to paint, but I love the desert area and the Southwest and that particular country. But I try to paint as a universal theme of the Indians—not one particular Tribe, although I've done some work in my own Tribe, Choctaws—but I haven't done too many, because I'm too involved in what I'm doing right now, in what I'm trying to achieve in this area. I don't usually have the time to try to think of something else to do at this time. Maybe later on I might change my mind and get involved in this area, maybe my own culture. I don't know. I won't know until I get there, but maybe my ideas on what I'm doing maybe may run out. I don't know. Then I'll have to look for something else, if it does. So, at this time, I'm painting about more or less I guess you might say Plains-style, or the Plains people, but I'm still trying to paint the Indians as one big family, more or less. 'Cause, I think that every Tribe—no matter what Tribe we are—I think we went through the same phases, life cycle, it doesn't matter how you look at it. Although we're Indians, and we have different cultures, and

different languages, and religion, Tribal religion, we went through the same phases, so that's what I'm trying to paint. Although a lot of people say that it's more a Plains painting than any other, it's a universal painting, more or less.

U1: Do the people from around here buy a lot of your paintings? I mean, this place?

T: This place? No, not too many. It's usually people from other states or other areas that buy the paintings. There are some that bought quite a few from here.

U1: Would you teach art in school if they had it?

T: I'd try to teach art, that's what I would do. I think I'd like it, too, but I would try to teach, more or less, on an individualized **basis**. I think I could give more help that way than any other way or any other system. One-to-one basis, I think it would work out fine. Teaching art is really difficult, because you have to try to stay away from teaching what you have learned, and what you have developed. You can advise, more or less, on painting or art in general. My point of view is, if you have to teach art, try to stay away from teaching in your own opinion of what you believe is art. I guess that's all.

[End of interview]

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