



LEE LESTER, an artist and man of faith.

“...here I was gettin’ paid for something I loved to do.” Lee Lester

I’m sitting with Lee Lester at his dining table, on west main, in Buena Vista, Co. Lee and his wife, Vickie are surrounded by Lee’s paintings, sketches, and sculptures. The wild life scenes, the western bronzes, the Navajo rugs, and the native hides and furs tell you, that you are in a special place. There also is no doubt, you are in the West. Lee was born and raised in Southeast, Colorado, and grew up wanting to be an artist. A few decades later, he is recognized as an exceptional artist/sculptor of the west. Sit back and listen to his story.

Marv: Lee how did all of this come about?

Lee: It was in the 70’s and I was, in the military, in Europe. I had spare time there, so I did a lot of sketching and painting. I went to a lot of museums. There weren’t many art galleries there, at the time, but there were an awful lot of history museums and some art museums. I guess I was stimulated by this. I also checked out a book from the library written by

McCracken about Charlie Russell.

Marv: Charlie Russell is one of my favorites of all time.

Lee: That really motivated me. Between what I saw and what I felt about the spirit of the west. I knew this was something I wanted to do. So I painted in Europe and when I got back to Colorado, I went to Western Electric and got a job there. I was there two years and I hated it! I needed to be outside, so one day I just couldn’t take any more and I walked out. I know this caused a problem for the guy that got me the job but I just felt like I was going to die.

Lee: My next job was as a surveyor. I liked that. I was out all the time. We would do surveys for these big transmission lines. We did a lot in Eastern Colorado. We’d start at a point and would go from 40 up to 70 miles and do the elevation of the land, so they could get the profile for those poles. I did that for a couple of years. I was painting quite a bit, at the motel, at night. I was single. So there was a lot of stimulation, for me, thinking about the Indians that had been in Eastern Colorado.

Marv: I read recently about the railroads that came in here and the importance that survey crews played in that. They always mentioned who the head surveyor was. The railroad company was always pushing the survey crews because once they could identify and record a given description of land then they could mortgage it or the government would give them additional financing. So it was a continuance battle for funding.

Lee: Well, they sent us to Oklahoma City, to do some surveying, for distribution lines and I went to the Cowboy Hall of Fame. So that was the end of my surveying. I saw all this impressive art work and I knew that's what I needed to be doing. I was 27 at the time. So I quit again and went to Art School. I started that September, in Denver. Went to school for a couple of years but it was really geared for kids that didn't know what they wanted to do, however one teacher did help me a lot. I had learned quite a little on my own but this teacher taught a western sculpture class. The sculpting was easier for me than painting. I didn't have to work at it. It seemed to come naturally.

Marv: I would think that sculpturing would be more difficult.

Lee: It depends on the person. Not a lot do both painting and sculpting. I'd say no more than 10% or 20% do both.

Marv: I know that anatomy is part of an artist's training but you really need to have that down, as a sculptor.

Marv: Do you recall your first sale?

Lee: I remember that first bronze I sold was to a guy that owned a liquor store in Garden City, Kansas. I got \$600 for that bronze and could not believe getting that much for something I made.

Marv: Where do your ideas come from?

Lee: Something I see...something I say...something somebody else says. It just comes.

Marv: Well, that's kind of the way with my poetry too, but I need a "hook," a concept. Then I can build around that some. I never know completely what I'm going to say, but it kind of comes. Otherwise it's a struggle and it shouldn't be a struggle.

Lee: But you know, if you have some substance to start with, you have a foundation to start from. Otherwise you're just grabbing stuff and throwing it together. I still struggle with that. Landscapes for example, you want something with some feeling in it. Without that there's nothing to carry it beyond color. That substance is what people respond to.

Marv: Did it worry you to make a living as an artist?

Lee: Yeah, it did. That was one of the things, when I got out of art school, worried me a lot. About that time, through the course of a bunch of different events, I made a commitment to the Lord. When I did that I had this amazing assurance. "If God made me and gave me the gift, then it was in his hands to take care of it." I haven't missed a meal in 30 years. We've had some rough times but there were times that I made more money than I'd ever thought possible.

Lee: I kind of got side tracked for several years: first by remodeling this house and then building the studio cabin. We're happy with what we've done here, but it took five years. We didn't want something too rustic, but would have a western feel and flavor to it.

Marv: Well, I'm sure that you feel, as you're working, that the spirit is part of the process, even though you may not be aware.

Lee: I felt that God showed me that we are beings that he created to accomplish his purpose. Some people think I'm crazy but sometimes you want this earth shaking thing to happen to show you what to do. But it's the simple, subtle little things of daily life that make me a good artist. It's our experiences, and where he places us, are things we can put our heart into.

Marv: It's those memories and the feelings connected with them. You may remember them differently than they actually were, but particularly the boyhood memories are part of what formed a person.

Lee: Sure, that's the conglomeration of what you are. People respond to the real you.

Marv: Well, and you have an opportunity to be genuine. That shows through in the work and in the artistic, esthetic value that you provide.

Marv: Now, do you also work on commission?

Lee: Sometimes, usually I sell out of inventory.

Marv: Do you still participate in shows?

Lee: I quit around 7-8 years ago.

Marv: What were the good and bad aspects of that?

Lee: By the time I paid my expenses, it would carry me a little while, but it got to where I was only breaking even, by the time the dust settled. So I felt like it was time to stop and put trust in the Creator.

Marv: Do most of your sales come from walk-ins.

Lee: You know, it can be real creative. I'm a hunting guide in the fall and sales while I'm doing that will often carry me a half a year or so. The service is out of Telluride and folks pay \$5-\$6000 for a hunt so they are open to spend more for a painting they like. I have established a personal relationship with those people, so it all ties in.

Marv: Do you have favorite pieces that you've been reluctant to sell?

Lee: Yeah, there are some.

Marv: Is it harder to let go of some?

Lee: Yeah, there are some that I feel are some of my better work. "It's a disaster to fall in love with your work and not be able to part with it.

Marv: That's right...you may be eating a lot of crackers.

Marv: I get several western magazines and it strikes me that there are a lot of good western artists.

Lee: There are. It can be a very competitive business. Art is such a personal thing and there is something in it that exposes you.

Marv: Is there anything you'd like to be remembered for, anything you'd like people to say about Lee Lester?

Lee: I guess I'd like to be remembered, as someone who produced good art work and was a man with good values.

We now walk to the cabin that Lee built, as his studio.

Marv: I'm in Lee's studio. My senses are just overwhelmed with all of the art, the beauty, the West. I'm looking at an antler chandelier here, which has some huge elk horns and rawhide shades.

Lee: I traded for that. Sometimes that's how you get paid.

Marv: There are many, many wildlife paintings, sculptures of wildlife...here we have a Native American chief with a peace pipe, with all of these things a story can be a part of it. Here is a unique piece; a horse with a buffalo hide covering its head and body with an Indian brave looking from under the hide. You can imagine this as part of a hunt or some other purpose to disguise the warrior. Here we have some Mallards coming out of cattails. It's magnificent! Here we have a rider with a new born calf across the saddle and it will probably have its ears and tail frozen, when it gets to where they're headed. Here's

a great pack string bronze, on the mantle and another over here. We have some Navajo rugs in the loft with the one on the floor showing some age, perhaps from the Germantown era. There's an elk hide, a coyote pelt, and a buffalo robe down there...so you won't freeze either.

Marv: So folks, if you've got an hour or two, come out to Lee Lester's, Grey Wolf Gallery studio and you'll probably walk away with a treasure. Trust me, it will be a delightful experience.

Marv: Lee, you want to make any profound, final comments.

Lee: "I want to share my life with people and give something back."

Marv: Well said, thank you so much Lee Lester.

Have a peak at Lee's website, for more about this renowned artist at www.leelesterstudios.com