

The Rathbun Family Collection

This remarkable collection was assembled from the late 1880s through the early 1900s by Ella (Nellie) Woodard and her son, Charles Raymond. Nellie was an enterprising single mother, having been divorced from the father of her boy in the early 1880s. At first she established a successful business in Peoria selling wigs and hair products before selling her business around 1887 and moving to Chadron, Nebraska, where her older sister resided.



Nellie Woodard's store circa 1891

There she opened a general store called Nellie Woodard Dry Goods, and from that point on both she and her son, who went by Raymond, used the last name "Woodard." Interestingly, her descendants have no idea why she chose that name. While Chadron was a bustling town of some 3000 residents, much of Woodard's business came from Sioux Indians on the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations, just across the state line. Nellie began to make frequent trips to the reservations, accompanied by Raymond, in a wagon laden with goods for sale. Often they would stay for several days with Sioux families, sharing meals and developing friendships. Both became fluent in the Lakota language. Young Raymond, a beautiful lad with long, curly locks, became a favorite on the reservations, and was given a Sioux name "Pahahanka-Oskhila," which meant "Long-haired Boy."

On December 29, 1890 Nellie and Raymond were on the nearby Rosebud Reservation when the infamous "battle" at Wounded Knee took place. Upon hearing the news, they set off for the battle site to see if they could help the survivors, knowing that some of the Native American participants were undoubtedly their friends. The horrific scene they encountered has been thoroughly documented in numerous photos of the scattered dead and destruction in the battle's aftermath.

Not surprisingly, young Raymond was profoundly affected by what he saw. For years he would tell of the bitterness and bewilderment he had felt, and for the remainder of his life Raymond was an ardent supporter of Indian rights and maintained many friendships among the Sioux.

Nellie and her son gathered three Indian rifles from the battlefield, which they took home to Chadron. The three guns became revered family relics, carefully preserved by future generations, and they are included in this auction along with the many examples of beadwork and other craft collected by the Woodards over their years visiting the reservations.

As a teen, Raymond developed a friendship with Red Cloud, legendary chief of the Ogala Teton Sioux. Red Cloud was past 80 and nearly blind, and the boy would roll home-made cigarettes and provide other assistance to the old man. The beaded moccasins and fine ceremonial pipe which Red Cloud presented to his young friend are included in this auction, along with gifts from Chiefs Spotted Elk and American Horse.

After trying his hand at circus life and trick shooting, Raymond settled back in Chadron, opening a men's furnishings store. He became one of the town's most active and best known citizens, remaining close to his many Indian friends. As he lay dying in 1940, small groups came from the reservations to pay their respects. Although he was in almost continual pain, Raymond told his family, "I'll always see the Indians." Having learned more of his family's origins, the dying man asked his three sons to change their last names from "Woodard" to "Rathbun," which they dutifully did. One of his sons was the father of Paul Rathbun, the present consignor of this collection whose affidavits of provenances accompany each piece.

Sometime around the 1930s Raymond made an inventory of the collection, adding notations in a code of his own devising. The inventory was transcribed by his wife Jocelyn (who survived until 1961) sometime in the late 1950s. The original collection tags and stickers on the relics which had belonged to famous chiefs correspond to both inventories.

We will leave it to Paul Rathbun to explain in his own introduction the reasons why he felt the time had come to offer this remarkable collection



Raymond (Rathbun) Woodard at age 12, photographed in Deadwood, S.D. in 1894

