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Abby Williams Hill: Artist of the West and Champion of Education, Equality, and National Parks

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INSIDE

Abby Williams
Hill (1861-
1943)—
Northwest
painter and
ardent activist



Abby Williams Hill

Artist of the West and Champion of Education,
Equality, and National Parks

By Laura Edgar

WELL KNOWN IN the Pacific Northwest for her talent as a landscape artist whose paintings depict the beauty and grandeur of the region, Abby Williams Hill is little known for her passionate activism.



Abby Rhoda
Williams,
c. 1880.

Mount Rainier from Eunice Lake, Abby Williams Hill, 1904. Hill painted this mountain scene as part of her 1904 commission for the Northern Pacific Railway.

"YOU, DEAREST, COULD NEVER IMAGINE CHILDREN BEING SO POORLY CARED FOR AS THEY ARE HERE. HUNDREDS OF THEM SLEEP ON THE STREETS. POOR LITTLE FELLOWS!"

Fiercely independent, she eschewed the fashions and pastimes of traditional women in the early 20th century for a life spent hiking in the wilderness and traveling with her children. She was frequently separated from her husband Frank, often for months or even years at a time, but their marriage remained strong and Hill wrote to her husband that "people think I'm dreadful to be away so long, but I have learned so much, I am sure it was right and we shall enjoy each other more when we do see each other again."

Hill was a highly educated, modern woman with a talent for painting and a passion for social causes, particularly those of child welfare and education. Her paintings of the Pacific Northwest and our national parks remain relevant today; however, Hill's most significant contributions to society were her commitments to equal education for African Americans, improving the treatment of Native Americans, creating a loving environment and a strong educational foundation for all children, and preserving our national parks.

Abby Rhoda Williams was born on September 25, 1861, to Henry Warner Williams and Harriet Hubbard in Grinnell, Iowa. She demonstrated an early aptitude for both art and languages, and her supportive parents encouraged her to explore these interests. Her reputation in Grinnell as a talented artist developed quickly. She taught painting and drawing classes in the community, while local galleries regularly exhibited her work. Leaving Grinnell at the age of 18, she traveled to Chicago to study at the Art Institute. While there, Hill lived with a German minister's family and became fluent in the German language, which served her well in her later European travels.

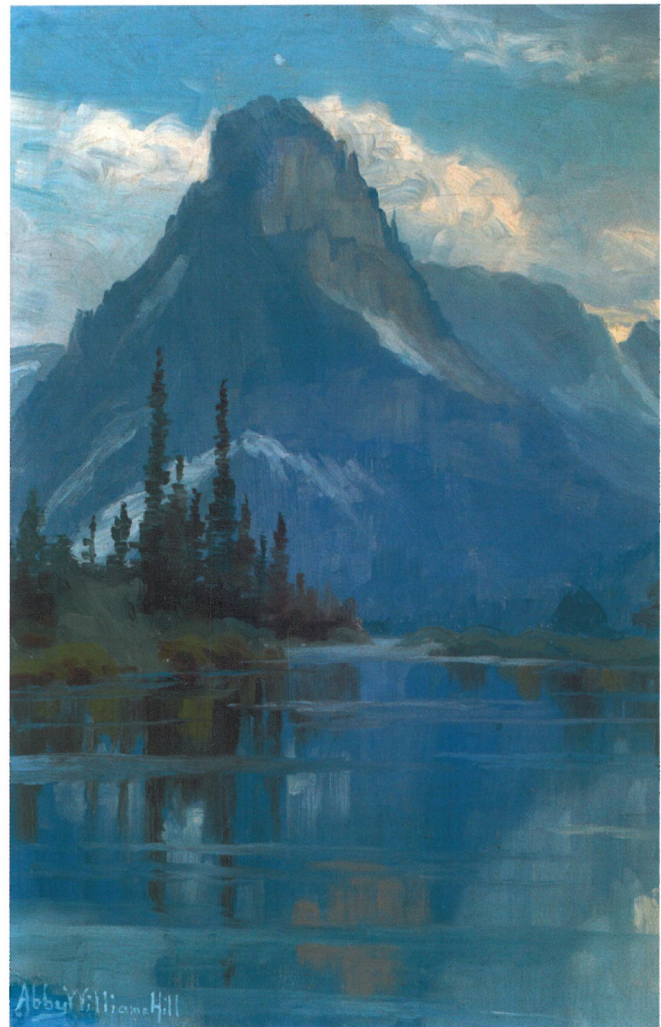
In 1884 she took a position teaching painting and drawing at a seminary for girls in Berthier-en-Haut, Quebec. On her days off Hill painted scenes along the St. Lawrence River that were later exhibited in Grinnell to positive reviews. In 1887 the young artist moved to New York City to study with noted American painter William Merritt Chase at the famed Art Students League. Her formal art studies concluded when she married Dr. Frank Hill in Brooklyn, New York, on December 22, 1888. The newlyweds left New York soon after and headed west to Tacoma in the newly created state of Washington. Tacoma offered many opportunities for a young doctor, and Frank hoped that the beautiful scenery that surrounded them in the Pacific Northwest would inspire his new bride and provide much content for her paintings.

During her first years in Tacoma, Hill focused more on creating a comfortable family life than on her artwork. Her son, Romyne, was born partially paralyzed in 1889; consequently, he required constant care for the first few years of his life. Hill's deep interest in social issues blossomed during these years at home. She became involved in several civic organizations, including the Tacoma Art League and the Ladies Musical

Club. She attempted to improve the plight of patients at the Fannie Paddock Hospital in Tacoma by donating her artwork to brighten the halls and by organizing "Mrs. Hill's Angels," a group of local girls who visited the hospital and read to patients. Her strict Christian upbringing influenced her life in Tacoma; she became involved in the temperance movement, helping to found the local Seaman's Mission and encouraging young sailors to stay at her home instead of submitting to the temptations offered at the port.

Although she was busy with commitments at home, Hill carved out time in 1895 to join a 26-day camping trip to Mount Rainier, followed by a 12-day expedition to Hood Canal. These adventures were her first experiences in the wilderness of the Pacific Northwest. She wrote in her diary, "We pitched a tent on an elevated place where the thunder of the avalanches on the Nisqually glacier came from the left and that of the Sluiskin

Rising Wolf Mountain from Two Medicine Lake, Glacier National Park, Abby Williams Hill, 1926.



falls from the right. The night was bitter cold. All were quite ready to go home in the morning but me. I felt I could endure much for a few days of such grandeur.”

In 1895 Frank Hill took advantage of an opportunity to do postgraduate work in Germany. His wife accompanied him, leaving their son Romaine behind with relatives in Ohio for two years. While in Germany, Abby further developed her drawing skills, taking lessons with Hermann Haase, a noted German illustrator. She also completed a course in political economy at the University of Bonn, demonstrating her continued interest in social and economic causes.

As the couple traveled extensively in Germany and around Europe, Hill was keen to visit hospitals and schools, taking an interest in local social conditions and recording her observations diligently in her diary. She was particularly concerned with the conditions under which children were living. In a letter to her son, she wrote of homeless children in Italy:

You, dearest, could never imagine children being so poorly cared for as they are here. Hundreds of them sleep on the streets. Poor little fellows! They are knocked about, mistreated and unloved until they know vice in every form and lose all the sweetness of childhood. Does it seem as if this is a part of the world in which we live?

Hill felt obligated to help children in need, and she had the education and financial means to do so. Upon returning home to Tacoma in 1897, she convinced her husband to adopt a motherless child, Eulalie. She agreed to pay Eulalie’s expenses with her own inheritance if her husband supported the adoption. Thus Frank assumed no financial responsibility for Eulalie or the two other young girls his wife subsequently adopted, Ione and Ina. In addition to her own beloved children, she often welcomed into her home children who had fallen in with the wrong crowd or had a difficult family life, providing an education for them and caring for them as she did her own children.

Hill educated her children at home—teaching them languages, music, art, literature, and natural sciences—regularly using nearby Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains in her lessons. She believed that visiting other places and learning firsthand about other cultures was the best lesson her children could receive, and she began traveling extensively with them in the early 1900s. In 1901 Hill took her two oldest children on an educational tour of the United States, with stops across the Midwest, East Coast, and the South before returning home to Tacoma via California. In Chicago she and the children toured Jane Addams’s Hull House, which provided progressive social, educational, and artistic programs for recent immigrants. She wrote in her diary:

Our ride to Hull House was through a very dirty, rough part of Chicago, bad smells, ever so many factories, saloons in great numbers. Hull House is a Social Settlement, the intellectual and social center for those living near it. There are held there clubs for



The Hill family in Tacoma, left to right: Ina, Abby, Ione, Frank, Romaine, and Eulalie, 1901.

The Hill Family Legacy

The University of Puget Sound is the permanent repository of the Abby Williams Hill Collection, which includes paintings, works on paper, correspondence, journals, news clippings, photographs, artifacts, and ephemera belonging to Tacoma artist Abby Williams Hill and her family. Just as her artwork provides us with a lasting vision of many of the iconic sights of the American West, Hill’s papers paint a remarkably rich picture of American life between the Civil War and World War II.

The Hill Collection is available for viewing by appointment only. Tours are offered to small groups upon request. To schedule an appointment to view the materials, contact Laura Edgar, curator of the Abby Williams Hill Collection, at abbywilliamshill@pugetsound.edu or 253-879-2806.

men and women and children, entertainments of various sorts. In this way they bring people together in a good place, give them pure amusement and help them to become better citizens. . . . Without [my] children I visited the Juvenile Court, a sad spectacle. At least fifty children were there whose parents either did not care for them, had quarreled and the court must decide which parent was to have them, or some such trouble. . . .

By 1902 the family reached Alabama, where they visited the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, an educational facility founded by African American author, orator, and educator Booker T. Washington. Hill and the children stayed at the Tuskegee Institute for 10 days, and she wrote extensively of the experience in her diary, expressing her deep appreciation for the education Washington provided at Tuskegee. She studied the industrial training programs at the school and listened to evening lectures by adult students on how the education they received at Tuskegee had improved their lives. Hill believed that equal educational opportunities for African Americans must be established throughout the United States. After witnessing a musical performance by the students, she wrote:

"LET US BE THANKFUL FOR BOOKER WASHINGTON'S LIFE. . . HIS INFLUENCE LIKE THE STREAM FROM THE MOUNTAIN WILL GO ON THROUGH THE AGES TO BLESS AND HELP MANKIND."

When they began singing the plantation melodies, I was moved to tears. The songs connected so closely the past with the company before me, I thought of all those young people in bondage—of stripes and irons and indignities, and when they marched past us two by two, I was thrilled with the thought of them marching out of slavery and into freedom, and what it meant, not only to the South, but to us, that they should not be left in ignorance, but should be educated and trained. What one sees here proves that they can be lifted, and if they can be, they must be.

The visit to the Tuskegee Institute made a lasting impression on Hill. Several years later, when she had the opportunity to name a mountain in the North Cascade Range, she named it after Booker T. Washington. A controversial choice at the time, the National Geographic Survey denied any knowledge of the significance behind the name. Of Mount Booker, Hill told local newspapers: "Here was a glorious monument not made by the hand of man but carved by the Almighty. What could be more fitting than to name it for one of the most truly great men of our times. . . . When we look at Mt. Booker let us be thankful for Booker Washington's life, for what he did to solve seemingly impossible problems. . . . His influence like the stream from the mountain will go on through the ages to bless and help mankind."

Hill met with representatives from the Great Northern Railroad in 1903. The railroad was looking for an accomplished artist to paint scenes along the route of the Great Northern Railway in the Pacific Northwest for use in advertisements and display at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. After presenting several paintings to the representatives, she was hired; in lieu of formal payment she asked instead for 1,000 miles of free rail travel for her and each of her children. Hill soon began a series of paintings for the Great Northern commission, and her four children accompanied her on her travels—hiking, camping, and completing lessons in the wilderness. Frank Hill remained in Tacoma, dedicating his time to his medical practice.

Hill completed 21 paintings of scenery in the North Cascade Mountains in Washington while managing many difficulties in the wilderness—rattlesnakes, oppressive heat, rain, wind, and bugs. She painted en plein air, meaning entirely outdoors, completing each canvas on location whether deep in a mountain valley or high on a precarious cliff. The railroad reproduced her canvases in a pamphlet titled "Scenic Washington along the Line [of the] Great Northern Railway," and all were exhibited to positive reviews at the St. Louis World's Fair as well as back home in Tacoma. The local Tacoma newspaper reported: "According to reports from St. Louis, Tacoma is the best represented and best advertised of the Northwest cities at the World's Fair."

The publicity surrounding Hill's paintings for the Great Northern Railway brought her artistic talents to the attention of

a competing company—the Northern Pacific Railroad—whose representatives likely viewed her work for the Great Northern while it was on exhibit in Tacoma following the world's fair. The Northern Pacific hired Hill for three consecutive commissions in 1904, 1905, and 1906. Again, she negotiated payment in the form of 1,000 miles of free rail travel for herself and the children. She also required that the railroads return her paintings when they were finished with them, thereby ensuring that her art collection remained relatively intact.

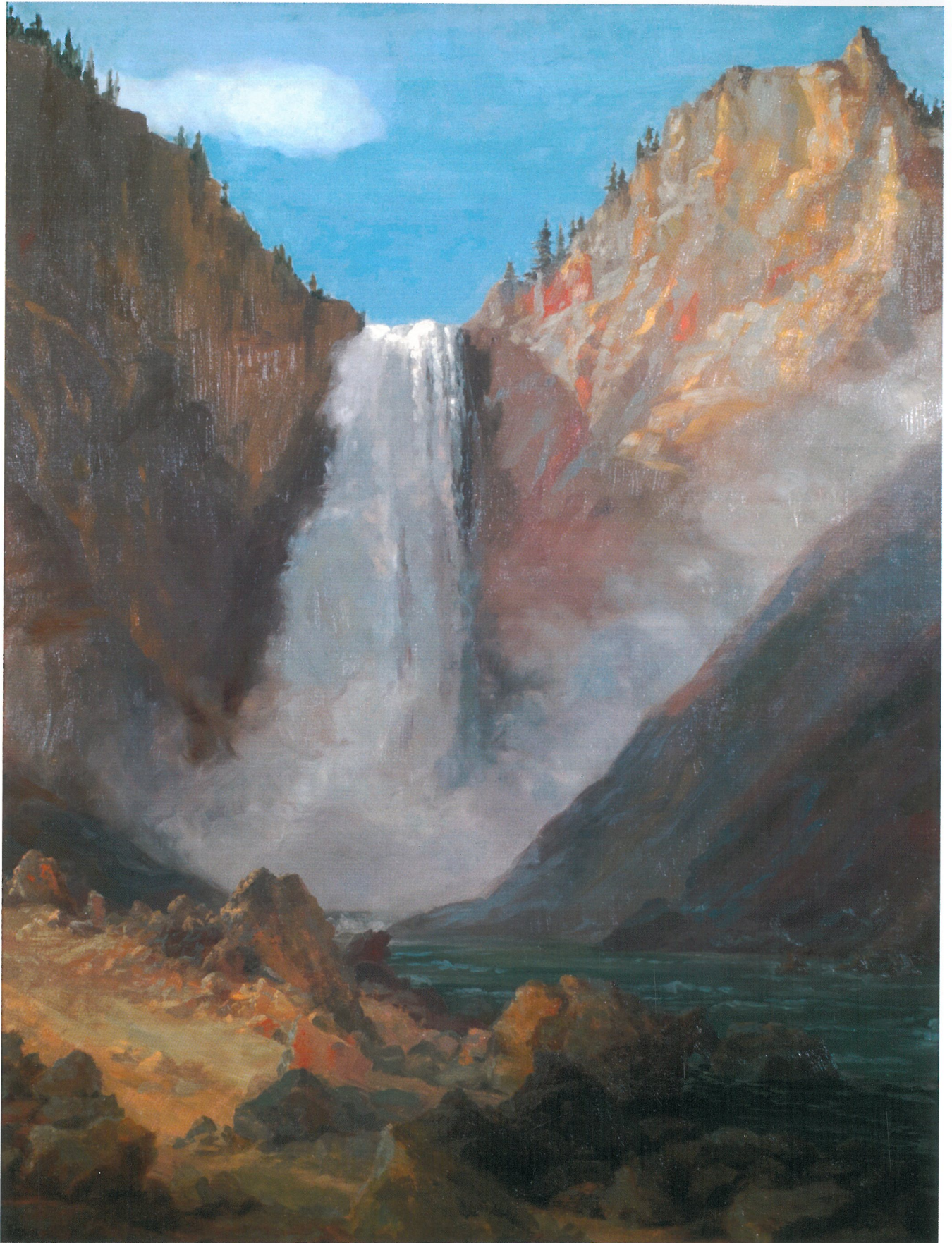
The first commission for the Northern Pacific included scenes of Mount Rainier and the mountains near Monte Cristo, Washington, as well as scenes in Idaho and Montana. Again, the children accompanied her, enjoying life "in the wilds," as Hill lovingly referred to her outdoor adventures. She completed 11 canvases for her first commission, all of which were exhibited at the Lewis and Clark Exhibition in Portland, Oregon, in 1905.

Hill's second commission for the Northern Pacific took her and the children to Yellowstone National Park; the railroad wished to advertise its Yellowstone Park Line, which was the main way into the park for tourists. Hill painted several scenes near Yellowstone Falls at the park's north entrance, but she had to contend with bad weather and high winds as she worked. She wrote in her journal of a particularly terrible wind storm:

Got out on my perch and painted a few hours with Eulalie as company when suddenly there came a roar and without more warning, a big twister struck us, wrenching the picture from its fastening, jerking it under the poles and away down the canyon, which is at least 400 feet deep and the sides almost perpendicular at this point. For a few moments, Eulalie and I attended strictly to keeping ourselves flat down on the cliff and hanging on. When it was safe, we crawled off with the things and walked up and down the edge to see if the picture was in sight, at last spied a corner some 100 feet below, just over the steepest part. . . . I have worked all the time it was possible since coming and cannot bear to think it gone and the season so advanced. I can hardly make more than one other [painting].

The following day, a group of men rescued the painting, climbing gingerly down the steep cliff to bring it back to Hill. The painting was wet and covered in dust, but it was salvageable and she was grateful for the daring rescue, writing to her husband, "I had just told Eulalie I considered it easily worth a thousand dollars. It is good of an uncommonly difficult subject that nearly everyone fails on, and it has been so hard to paint there. I feel like giving up painting in the park. . . . The gnats,

FACING PAGE: *Yellowstone Falls* (from below), Abby Williams Hill, 1905. This painting was part of Abby's 1905 commission for the Northern Pacific Railway.



"RATHER THAN SEE THAT THERE IS VIRTUE IN NOT BEING GREEDY AND GRASPING, IN BEING CONTENTED WITH LITTLE, WE TAKE THE VIEW THAT THESE ARE UNCIVILIZED TRAITS."

tiny little things, almost devour us. We are much spotted. Some of the stage drivers wear veils. I cannot . . . when I paint."

Hill's third and final commission for the Northern Pacific returned her to Yellowstone National Park in 1906. She painted the park's famous geysers and pools, again fighting illness, weather, and throngs of tourists to complete her work. She also completed several landscapes in Montana. Despite the obvious presence of tourists and the facilities that catered to them, Hill's paintings depicted only virgin landscapes devoid of any representation of human intervention. She felt strongly that the increased presence of humans in the national parks harmed the pristine natural environment; this opinion grew stronger as the decades passed, resulting in a flurry of correspondence with the US Department of the Interior in the late 1920s and 1930s. When Hill's work for the railroad was complete, she began a personal project that she had long wished to undertake—painting portraits of Native Americans in traditional garb.

Hill's interest in painting Indian portraits, which she harbored for many years, was first mentioned in a letter to her husband in 1902. She commented on a group of Native Americans she and the children met on Hood Canal, "You can imagine how much I should like to sketch them but a woman must be accompanied." Hill noted that the traditional dress and customs of the tribes were rapidly disappearing due to forced assimilation by the United States government, and she wished to preserve a piece of this culture through her portraits. In 1905 and 1906, between commissions for the Northern Pacific, Hill and her children lived on several different reservations; they forged friendships with Native Americans and worked to gain their confidence so they would allow her to paint them. Much like her pristine landscape paintings, her Native American portraits feature her friends in their traditional dress with no visible Euro-American influence. Her diary entries reflect her conscious appreciation of the plight of the Indians at the turn of the century:

We began at the wrong end. We try to civilize the Indian by cutting his hair and putting our kind of clothes on him and find it strange that short hair and trousers do not seem infinitely better to him than braids and a blanket. We corset women and do their hair on top of their heads, give them French heels, tight gloves, trains, monstrous hats with civilized feathers on them and cry aghast when they leave school and get back to the reservations because they immediately return to the simple practical garment of their for[e]mothers, wear moccasins and braid their hair. In speaking of the Indian, I have heard more people mention their going back to their simple clothes as positive proof you cannot civilize them than of any thing else. In another matter white women might well imitate, the Indian Home government is such a very quiet matter that one does not think of it, the children rarely cry and I have yet to hear the volley of words the white woman in nine cases out of ten indulges in at every little misdemeanor. . . .

One's heart aches for these poor people and as one knows more of them, sees life from their standpoint and sees so much in their characters to love and respect, one realizes what we have lost by not in the first place making of ourselves such true friends they could trust and depend on us. To most people who come in contact with them we are told it is just a question of how much they can "beat the Indian out of," and rather than see that there is virtue in not caring for great accumulations, in not being greedy and grasping, in being contented with little, we take the view that these are uncivilized traits. The Indians' love of wandering thru the mountains, living in the wilds, dressing generation after generation in the same clothes of simple practical make are virtues which make for natural living; we box ourselves too much, tie ourselves to our civilized belongings and lose what is best of all God has given us. . . . An Indian wrapped in a blanket came into Mr. Beckwith's store at sunset, could not speak English but in excitement drew Mr. B out and pointed to the glowing range of mountains. They are children of nature and we need them to develop it in us, they can teach us much.

In addition to the formal portraits, Hill created one piece with an obvious social message. In her painting *Empty Papoose Case*, she directly addresses the tragic consequence of a measles epidemic that killed many Native American children who lacked resistance to common Western diseases. The painting depicts a grieving native woman bent over an empty papoose case. Hill continued to correspond with her Native American friends after her return to Tacoma and retained a lifelong concern regarding the US government's interference in Indian affairs.

Hill's portraits, along with many of her paintings for the Northern Pacific Railroad, were exhibited in 1907 at the Jamestown Tricentennial in Jamestown, Virginia, and at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle in 1909, where she won two gold medals for her work. The Native American portraits received positive reviews in Tacoma, where they were exhibited at the local Chamber of Commerce. One review stated, "Mrs. Hill is an indefatigable worker and has much to show for her last year's summer stay among the Flathead Indians at their reservation in Montana. The pictures of Indian types, while not large . . . are strong in native character and expression."

After completing her work for the railroads in 1906, Hill decided to take a break from her artwork and devote her time wholly to her primary interest and social concern—child welfare. One of Hill's childhood friends, Mary Grinnell Mears, was heavily involved in a national organization known as the Congress of Mothers; their mission, to eliminate threats that endangered children, spoke directly to Hill's heart. She had followed the activities of the Congress of Mothers for years but did not attend her first national meeting until 1905. In 1906 Governor Albert Mead appointed her the founding



TOP: *Empty Papoose Case*, Abby Williams Hill, 1906. This painting addresses the tragic consequence of measles outbreaks on Indian reservations—the disease killed many Native American children who lacked resistance to common Western diseases.



LEFT: *Ta-Tan-Ka-Ska (White Bull)*, Abby Williams Hill, 1905. This painting depicts Abby's friend White Bull, a Sioux chief, in traditional native garb.

BELOW: The artist and her children with White Bull, c. 1905. From left to right: Romaine, Lone, White Bull, Eulalie, Ina (kneeling), and Abby.



"MOTHERS, MORE THAN WOMEN OF ANY OTHER PROFESSION, NEED THE BENEFITS OF NEW IDEAS, NEW TRAINS OF THOUGHTS, NEW VISTAS OPENED FOR THEIR CONTEMPLATION."

president of the Washington State Chapter of the Congress of Mothers. She held this position until 1911, after which her title remained "honorary president."

Washington was the 13th state to join the National Congress of Mothers; the first meeting was held in Tacoma's First Baptist Church. Local newspapers reported extensively on Hill's travels around the state to organize "Mothers' Circles" and give lectures on the importance of early childhood education and creating a loving, nurturing household. Active members of the Congress of Mothers were often criticized for the amount of time they were away from their homes, but Hill felt that her time was well spent. She was quoted in the *Tacoma Daily Ledger* as saying,

While the movement was still young in Washington I used to be beset by critics, who scored me for advocating that mothers should leave their homes occasionally to go out and talk with other mothers in the Mothers Congress meetings. "A mother's place is in her home, not at a club meeting," was the cry. I hear less of that now as women are generally waking to the perception that when such an office as motherhood deteriorates to mere routine and drudgery it has lost its very life force. Mothers, more than women of any other profession, need the benefits of new ideas, new trains of thoughts, new vistas opened for their contemplation.

Invited in 1907 to give an address at the national convention in Los Angeles, she spoke on what could be done for "erring and unfortunate children." She wrote,


The consensus of opinion seems to be that erring children should be punished. Why punish them? You can not by that means undo the wrong they have done. . . . One does not need large sums of money or great experience and knowledge to do for these children a friendly smile behind which is a truly loving heart. . . . Let us seek to make for erring children a place in our lives and homes where they are always sure of a welcome, deep affection and protection and where the shadow of their past never mars their development or discourages their efforts to live better lives.

Hill's husband Frank suffered a mental breakdown in the 1910s and entered a period of severe mental illness that required the family to move to Laguna Beach, California, hoping that a warmer, sunnier climate would improve Frank's health. While her husband's illness necessitated that she step away from formal duties with the Congress of Mothers, Hill continued to follow the activities of the organization throughout her lifetime and even found time to present a paper, "The Power for Good or Evil of the Moving Picture and the Phonograph," to the Washington State Convention in 1912. She also authored an article titled "Immigrant Mothers Must Learn to Speak English," which stressed that by learning English foreign-born women could contribute positively

to the education of their children in America. Hill's legacy as founder of the Washington chapter of the Congress of Mothers continues today—the organization is now known as the popular and powerful Parent-Teacher Association (PTA).

Frank Hill's illness was his family's main focus throughout the 1910s and early 1920s. He spent time in various mental institutions in California and Arizona, and his periods of good health were few and far between. Hill painted several scenes of Southern California during these years, but for the most part she dedicated herself to her husband's care. Although the family lived primarily in California by 1910, she returned frequently to Tacoma, where the Hills still owned an apartment building near Wright Park called Hillcrest. In the 1920s, during a period when Frank was feeling better, the Hill family purchased a car and embarked on a seven-year tour of the South and the western national parks. Hill's goal was to capture iconic scenes in the national parks for future generations, before they were irreparably damaged by the ever-increasing numbers of visitors. From the various parks that she visited, she wrote to federal officials, alerting them to what she viewed as the certain and eventual destruction of the landscape due to commercial development and comparing the condition of the parks in the late 1920s to their more pristine condition when she had visited them 20 years earlier. From Sequoia National Park in California, Hill wrote to Horace Albright, superintendent of the National Park Service:

This forest is our most easily ruined National Park. There are acres and miles of acres of fine forest where people can "play," but this one—the few comparatively ancient sequoias are priceless and should be guarded with all possible care. In building the roads now being made several sequoia trees have been blasted out to make way for the road. This is nothing short of a crime, for these trees, although not giants, are the forest of the future.

Frank Hill died in 1938 and Hill followed five years later in 1943. She left behind a legacy as a talented, respected artist and a passionate social activist with a deep love of children and motherhood. In her lifetime she produced a remarkable collection of landscape paintings showcasing the grandeur of the American West. Additionally, she generated a large archive of letters and journals addressing issues of continuing social and historical interest, including African American and Native American rights, early childhood education, motherhood in the early 20th century, the plight of tuberculosis patients, and the preservation of our national parks. 

Laura Edgar is curator of the Abby Williams Hill Collection at the University of Puget Sound. Prior to coming to the Puget Sound area, Laura served as cultural affairs manager for the town of Windsor, Colorado, and was an archivist and records manager at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. All of the illustrations for this article are courtesy of the Hill Collection, University of Puget Sound.