

OLIVER LA FARGE, 1901–1963

DOUGLAS S. BYERS

OLIVER LA FARGE was born in New York, December 19, 1901, the son of Christopher Grant La Farge and Florence Bayard (Lockwood) La Farge, and grandson of John La Farge. Trained in his youth to handle himself in the open, he was at home on a horse or in a boat.

He was educated at Groton School, to which he took an intense dislike, and at Harvard. A copy of MacCurdy's *Men of the Old Stone Age* in the Groton Library excited his imagination and led him into archaeology. He went to Harvard with the avowed purpose of studying anthropology and solving the problems of the European Paleolithic.

This determination was shaken by trips to Arizona in 1922 and 1923 under Sam Guernsey — to the Tsegi and to Poncho House. From then on, he was sold on the Southwest and the Navajos. In 1924, he led a party, on which I was cook, to Waterfall Ruin on the Chinle, and then by horseback to Dinnehutso, Lukachukai, Hasbidwibitoh, and so into canyons north of the Lukachukais that were then totally unknown. We were in Painted Cave before Bernheimer and Haury, but the Navajos would not permit us to dig — permission to ride through the country was only grudgingly given. With two companions, La Farge then set out to ride from Lukachukai to the Grand Canyon. This ended in a horseback trip across Black Mesa that brought them into intimate contact with the Navajos, with whom they often ate supper, and who they always invited to breakfast.

La Farge was Hemenway Fellow at Harvard for the first half of 1924–25, but left during the second semester to join Blom and the First Tulane Expedition. He was back at Harvard, again as a Hemenway Fellow, with a bundle of linguistic and ethnologic material that he worked over in the first half year of 1925–26. This went into *Tribes and Temples*.

An Assistantship in Ethnology drew him back to Tulane in February, 1926, and he occupied this position into 1928.

In 1927, he led the Third Tulane Expedition to Jacaltenango, Guatemala. His study of the religious system, calendar, and daily life of the village was an outstanding contribution. A brief swing through high Cuchumatan towns to the

north failed to uncover evidence of the “sacred book” always said to be in the “next town.” *The Year Bearer's People* will show that archaeological scouting often served as an excuse for ethnological work.

As the party returned to New Orleans on a United Fruit Boat, the wireless brought news that Lindbergh had landed at Le Bourget. An era was passing, but we did not know it.

A year spent in working up his Jacalteca material at graduate school brought La Farge the M.A. from Harvard in 1929. To his amazement and pleasure, Brown University awarded him an honorary M.A. in 1932. He was a fellow of the American Anthropological Association, a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1953.

La Farge's interest shifted from archaeology to ethnology early in his career. Although the Navajos were his first love, his contributions were in the ethnography of Maya tribes, particularly in their calendric systems, religious practices, and divination.

His success as a writer brought him things he could not otherwise have had, but it also brought with it a remorseless feeling that he should get on with something else to satisfy his editors. *Laughing Boy* was such a hit that for a time it was difficult for him to sell stories unless they were about Indians.

During the war he rushed to sign up, but this man who had lived with the Navajos, climbed all over the Cuchumatanes, and traveled the jungles with Blom was rejected as unfit. He became Civilian Historian to the American Expeditionary Forces but was ultimately commissioned Captain. He was separated as a Lieutenant Colonel at the close of the war, having logged over 80,000 miles in the air, visited every theater, been under fire, compiled the official history of the Ferrying Command—Air Transport Command—Military Air Transport Service, and prepared a number of documents for restricted distribution.

He was elected a director of the Eastern Association on Indian Affairs in 1930. Merger of that group with the American Defense Association formed the American Association on Indian

Affairs, of which La Farge was president from 1932 to 1941 and from 1947 until his death. His work in this respect is too well known to need mention. Even when he was gravely ill he dragged himself out of bed to devote his last energies to protecting the rights of the people of Taos to the sacred Blue Lake area.

La Farge's last years were marred by illnesses, often severe. He died in Bataan Memorial Hospital, Albuquerque, August 2, 1963, after an operation. His death followed that of Frans Blom by less than six weeks. To his funeral came throngs of Indians, and messages from Indians came from all points between Alaska and Florida.

Although La Farge was a prolific writer of fiction, his scientific bibliography is short.

- 1926-27 (with Frans Blom) *Tribes and Temples: A Record of the Expedition to Middle America Conducted by the Tulane University of Louisiana, 1925*. Tulane University Press, New Orleans.
- 1927 Adaptations of Christianity among the Jacalteca Indians of Guatemala. *Thought*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 476-95. New York.
- 1928 The Ceremonial Year at Jacaltenango. *Proceedings of the 23rd International Congress of Americanists*, pp. 656-60. New York.
- 1931 (with Douglas S. Byers) *The Year Bearer's People*. Tulane University of Louisiana, Middle American Research Series, Publication No. 3. New Orleans.
- 1934 Post-Columbian Dates and the Maya Correlation Problem. *Maya Research*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 109-24. New York.
- 1940 Maya Ethnology: The Sequence of Cultures. In *The Maya and Their Neighbors*, edited by Clarence L. Hay and others, pp. 281-94. Appleton-Century, New York.
- 1947 Cuchumatan Textiles: The Course of an Error. *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology, Carnegie Institution of Washington, Division of Historical Research*, No. 82, pp. 166-69. Washington.
- 1947 *Santa Eulalia: The Religion of a Cuchumatan Indian Town*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

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