

EDWARD HOPPER HOUSE MUSEUM & STUDY CENTER

COMMUNITY MYTHS & LEGENDS

stories of Edward Hopper
as remembered by his hometown

Win Perry

[chatter]

Win Perry (WP): But at first it was hard to get people involved. Edward Hopper was not as well known as an artist in the 1960's and 70's as he is today, after his death, but it was really the artists of the county who first pitched in to work on the acquisition of the house. I was not involved at that stage. I had some friends among the original group and once they had acquired the house and had it for a while I said how come you had this house for a year and you haven't fixed it up yet? Rain is still getting in through a hole on the roof and it's doing a lot of damage. So, a month later, I guess as a result of that comment, I had found that I had been put on the Board of Trustees and made Chairman of the committee to restore the house, which was a great adventure. We didn't have much money, but lots of people pitched in with work and contributions and support. Do you want me to tell that part of the story or do you have it already?

Juliana Roth (JR): So, you could say a little bit more about that...well, what was it like to start to see people showing up in that way? Was that something you expected?

WP: Well, it was quite gratifying when people did. The Rotary Club took on the job of landscaping the backyard and created that little performance platform in the corner, put shrubbery and fencing around, and actually it was because I was president of the Rotary Club at the time. The president gets to choose the project for the club for that year.

One of the most productive parts is that the community college agreed to teach a course for people who wanted to learn how to restore an old house and they sent the head of their maintenance department over to teach the course and they gave people course credit for scraping and sanding and painting. And it turned out that one of the vice presidents of the college for community involvement was the son of a painting contractor and had worked for his father summers when he was in school. So, he came over and got up on the ladder and did a lot of the painting.

JR: Oh wow. That's wonderful.

WP: We found a young artist, Michael Delia, and his wife, who agreed to live in the house--wanted a place to live, needed a place to live, and agreed to work on the house in exchange for being allowed to live here. And they created this kitchen, that's now your Artwork Lab on the second floor. Michael put on a new roof. He insisted on putting skylights in the north sloping roof over the attic, which were not historic, and we didn't really want them, but we let him do it because it was the kind of change that's reversible and can be corrected. And it has been corrected. So, he did a lot of work. Roofing. Gutters. Did a lot of painting. People came and learned how to patch the plaster.

JR: Was Michael, was he aware of Hopper as an artist at that time and influenced by him?

WP: Oh yeah, sure. He was happy, even enthusiastic about being able to begin his career in Edward Hopper's boyhood home. As it turned out, he--I think--eventually went into business instead, but he had a good beginning career as an artist.

JR: As people were working on the house throughout the years how did Hopper's legacy change at all? Was he becoming more well-known as a figure in the community?



WP: Yes. I mean, I'm not an Art History major, and I can't really judge, but let's see...the big coffee table book. Was it Lloyd Goodrich, I think, who edited?

JR: Yeah.

WP: It came out about that time. And Gail Levin got the job as curator of the Hopper collection at the Whitney and published a catalog...so, yes. Hopper was gaining in the general public eye, and that rubbed off on Nyack.

JR: Do you think that changed people, how they saw the house?

WP: Yes. Sure. Once we started working on it, people said why, and we told them. So it was a lot more than just seeing the work going on generating more interest.

JR: So what was the community understanding of Hopper and Marion at the time? Did people know just as community members who they were?

WP: Well, yeah, some people knew about them, some people didn't. The prevailing comment was Edward Hopper was born and grew up here, but he got away from Nyack as soon as he couldn't because Nyack was a studgy and old-fashioned Victorian town. There's some truth in that.

JR: And what about Marion who stayed behind?

WP: Well, she was very quiet, almost a recluse. She stayed in the house. I did actually, I'm pretty sure, I got to meet her once. I went into the house for some reason. Delivering something. And there was a general dark brown atmosphere to the house. Dark drapes over the windows, and trinket, tchotchkes everywhere on the mantelpiece and old Victorian furniture. So, not many people really knew her, or knew of her.

JR: When you were restoring the house did you find anything surprising architecturally or even left behind by the family or anything like that?

WP: Oh, yes. Several surprises. Down in the basement there was a big central hot air furnace, big round tin thing with octopus branches coming out to feed into the registers in the floor, and next to it was an empty coal bin, coal had been delivered and put into the furnace. But at the end of her lifetime, there was no coal left, but there were broken chairs, pieces of chairs, that she had fed into her furnace, so she must have been living in what we call genteel poverty here.

WP: Another surprise was that when we were working on the landscaping in the backyard, we discovered a brick lined cistern underground, a big brick tank--about six feet in diameter, five feet deep, to collect rainwater. It had been originally used for...I don't know what, probably pumped into the kitchen for dishwashing and cleaning or used to water the garden. It was a common thing in old houses around town, and a bit dangerous because after a hundred years the bricks began

to collapse and every once in a while a child would fall into one if they didn't know it was there. That was an interesting surprise.

We hoped to find things in the attic, but the house had been pretty well explored and examined by that time. We found one woman's shoe small.

[laughter]

WP: And a small box of nails down between the beams, but nothing really bearing on Hopper's boyhood or the family. It had all been found already.

JR: So, what would you like to see for the [Edward] Hopper House moving forward? Ten years from now, a hundred years from now?

WP: I think something that interprets Hopper's youth and boyhood in Nyack. Some of his early work. Occasionally, some of his later work too, for that matter. I mean...it's a bit of a trek to get into the city and to the Whitney. If we could occasionally see some of his mature work here, for which he is famous, I think that would be good. Due to the fact of its value, we can't expect to see much of it, but his early drawings and some of his illustrations, maybe. Things about Nyack of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century. He was obviously very interested in the river. I am too.

When we were doing an early exhibit about his boyhood, we actually found a boat that he had made. It had belonged to an antique dealer and we couldn't come up with the money to buy it, but it was very interesting. It was a racing shell row boat, a one-man shell, made of very lightweight wood. Now, of course, they're plastic. I wish we could find that, you know? Somebody bought it from the antique dealer and we don't know where it is now.

We have his bicycle, that's interesting. For a long time, nobody was interested in the old broken bicycle. It was in somebody's garage for ten years and they were going to move and they didn't need it anymore. I put it in my barn for another ten years. Finally, the bike shop owner in the next building to the south agreed to put it in his window. Eventually, it got back here. People were interested in displaying it.

JR: Yeah.

WP: I think bicycling was a big thing during his boyhood, probably his main means in getting around town.

JR: How would that have, you know, given how Nyack is now obviously more industrialized, how would his bike riding have factored in--where might he have gone, if you can imagine that?

WP: Well, okay, we often bicycle now to Hook Mountain and Nyack Beach State Park. That was still a working quarry during his boyhood so he wouldn't have gone down to the river there, but

he might still have biked to the end of the road and back. Rockland Lake was not yet park land, it was a resort area. It didn't have a nice road to bike around the lake the way we can now. He might have biked on the road that goes east of the lake.

JR: Can you imagine if maybe there were some shops that he would have gone to in town as a kid?

WP: Yes. There have always been ice cream parlors and I don't know if he visited them or not. He didn't mention it in anything that he wrote that I know, but it's reasonable to assume he did. In my boyhood, which was fifty years later, Schmitt's was the high school hang out, where we go after school for ice cream sundaes or something like that. The YMCA existed but the present building had not yet been built so they didn't have a real gymnasium or swimming pool. It was more geared toward, you know, character building and religious education. It was still the Young Men's Christian Association.

[laughter]

WP: It hadn't become the YMCA with the letters not really meaning much.

JR: And you mentioned the river too, that he was drawn there.

WP: Yes, a lot of his early drawings are obviously done from the point of view of being in a boat on the river and I think he did write that he spent time in Smith's Shipyard, which was right at the foot of Second Avenue here, you could practically see it from the window.

My father, who was just a little younger than Edward, about twelve years younger, liked to go canoeing on the river. He had a good friend who he went with, and one of their favorite things was to paddle out into the channel, which was way over on the other side of the river and meet up with a string of barges behind a tugboat. In those days, tugboats pulled a long string of barges instead of pushing them, like they do now, and because tugboats were slower in those days, it was a long slow trip up the river. They had a cut little shack on the last barge where a crew member lived, sometimes with their family. So, my father and his friend would latch onto that last barge, and get on board and visit with the crew man. Then, ride up the river to, oh maybe, Haverstraw or Stony Point. And then when the tide changed, they would come back with the falling tide. They had to time the trip to catch the tide going the right way.

That would have been part of Hopper's life too. If you're out on the river, you're very much aware of the fact that the water goes three or four miles an hour one way for six hours and then the other way. And, if you're rowing or sailing, it's very smart to plan your trip so that you can drift back with the tide when the wind dies down. So, that would have been part of his life too.

A lot of it at this point is supposition: he might've done this, he might've done that. We don't know very much about what he did what, what influenced him.

JR: So, how might this space influence the younger artists or the community in some way? I think everyone comes here, like you're saying, with their own imagination of who Edward Hopper was and what he might have done, so why do you think people are so drawn to that and to coming here?

WP: Well, Edward Hopper helped wake us up out of the Victorian era. In the Victorian period, people enjoyed lots of different style--historic styles of architecture. They enjoyed ornate furniture, cluttered rooms, like Marion Hopper maintained. And, you know, Hopper and the other realist painters painted simple shapes and forms, and really prepared the way for modern art and modern architecture, that was in a way a rebellion against the clutter of the Victorian age.

And I think his leaving Nyack in a way was getting away from what was still a Victorian community, in large measure, and came out into the larger world where new ideas were floating around.

JR: Great, yeah.

WP: I thought it was quite remarkable that some of his work was included in the famous Armory Exhibit that introduced European artists to the United States. I've never seen which of his works were in the show, I'd be curious to find out, and how that happened.

JR: Do you have anything else you want to say just about what you hope for the house moving forward or where you think it might be going?

Yeah, well, since I was involved in not only the physical restoration of the house, but also in trying to find a role for it in the community, I've always considered it as one of my children that is doing well in the world, thriving, and actually going off in its own direction, but something that I've helped start that I'm very proud of.

JR: Well, thank you for talking with us today.

WP: You're welcome, Juliana.