

EDWARD HOPPER HOUSE MUSEUM & STUDY CENTER

COMMUNITY MYTHS & LEGENDS

stories of Edward Hopper
as remembered by his hometown

Joan Dye Gussow

Juliana Roth (JR): Okay. So can you start by telling us your name?

Joan Gussow (JG): Yes, my name is Joan Gussow.

JR: And how did you become connected with the Edward Hopper House?

JG: Well, my husband was an artist and he died about 23 years ago, so it was a long time ago. It seems to be that he heard that they were thinking they were going to tear it down and build something else. He thought that was a really terrible idea. And, so I think he was involved. There was a movement, wasn't there? A group of people who worked to save it, I think. These are all very long ago memories. When was it first opened?

JR: We're actually approaching the 50 year anniversary of the reinterpretation of the house. So, 50 years, almost 50 years ago is when this whole project that you're mentioning began.

JG: So, he was involved and he was a person who, as he used to say, if you wound him up and set him up, he could talk about anything. People always called on him to be a spokesperson for things. Undoubtedly, he didn't do a lot of work but he may have gone out and done some presentations. Frankly, I just don't remember. All I remember is that he was involved in trying to save it.

They had an auction at one point, after, before, I don't know whether they were auctioning off the furniture--I don't know whether it was the Hopper House people who finally took it over. It's run by an association now, is that right?

JR: Yes, we are a museum and study center.

I don't know whether they had taken it over or under what circumstances, but I know they had an auction and they sold off some of the furniture. We ended up with one of the pieces, which we still have downstairs in our home.

The only other thing that I remember, I think I remember it right, is that they hired someone to fix it up, to do the basic original changes to fix it, make it structurally sound. I think it was in fairly decent condition but like all old houses it had some things wrong with it. They hired someone who lived upstairs, that's my recollection, and he was a carpenter and he worked on the house while he lived upstairs, rent free or something.

JR: So, what do you think the draw was to become involved in the house? Was it just because it was a town project or was there something about Hopper that drew him in?

JG: I'm sorry. I'm not so--

JR: Why do you think he was, like you said he was just that type of person, was there anything specifically about Hopper--



Joan, pictured in front of an armoire she and her husband Alan purchased on auction to support the saving of Edward Hopper House; to Joan's right side is one of Alan's paintings.

JG: My husband was an artist, so he thought saving Hopper, and he knew Hopper was an important artist so he thought saving the house Hopper had worked in. I don't even think...I'm not hearing very well for some reason. I don't think people were clear at that time even how much--they knew Hopper had lived in the house. I think they thought he had been born in the

house. I'm not even sure that's the case. I don't even remember, certainly I didn't know, how much time Hopper had spent in that house. Was it that he did most of his work there? Which he did not, you know, but Hopper was very well known. He's always been a very well known American painter, maybe not at the very beginning.

I actually have a very separate story I could tell you about Edward Hopper, which is very funny.

JR: Yes, I'd love to hear it.

JG: I worked for *Time Magazine*.

JR: Oh wow.

JG: Between 1950 and 1956. I was the art researcher, and we interviewed Edward Hopper. Alex Elliott, who was my boss, the writer, we interviewed Hopper and Hopper was very taciturn. I mean, he just didn't talk. He wasn't a valuable person at all. And his wife Jo was very talkative, did all the talking. And so, we went to lunch, somewhere, I think at that point they lived in the village. I don't know why I think that, but I know that we somehow went to lunch near where they lived and Jo, who realized that my boss, the writer, was the important person, you know, pinned him down and started talking to him.

Edward and I sat there by ourselves, effectively, and so I just started talking to him. We had a great chat. I mean I had a tendency when I was interviewing people to chat away and talk with them and get them started. I learned, and he told me at that point, which I think is very well known, that Jo posed for the dog in the picture of the couple upstairs in a bedroom, I think, with a dog lying on the--Jo posed for the dog. Jo posed for everything.

Anyway, so I had this conversation with Edward Hopper when he was very, very hard to get to talk. So, that was very funny.

JR: Do you remember your impression leaving that conversation [with] him? Did it change?

JG: No. I was in my twenties. I was not busy thinking about long-term impressions.

JR: I think that's fair.

JG: I mean, I still have the interview. It's not for you to use, but somewhere I have the interview written up.

JR: Oh, that's great.

I know you said you weren't directly involved, but how do you think restoring and keeping that house has made an impact, or has it?

JG: I think it's very important that was done. I mean I think it's really added something to Nyack, you know, it would have been stupid to just you know--we are a country that has a tendency to do this sort of thing. I mean for one think it's a place for exhibits. It's a place where he's remembered. While I don't think all old buildings ought to be saved, I just think it would have been a shame in that it's a small lot, it's not a big lot, like you would've put up some ugly duplex or something. I think it would have been a shame. I think it's very good they kept the house. What have they done with the upstairs now? Is the upstairs still used as an apartment?

JR: No, it's now--his bedroom has been restored and they have one of the easels he built for himself up there, and then we have an archive there, so this is a project from the archives. So, all of his childhood journals, you know, I've looked through his high school notebooks and seen his doodles in the margins and that kind of thing. And then we also have a teen leadership program that helps teens learn how to be museum curators or to lead programming, so they're doing a lot of different sorts of tangential programs from his legacy. So, this is one of them, of thinking because he continues to be an icon nationally, but also I think in our region, there's like a special love--

JG: In American art history, he's a very important painter and it would have been a shame had we just let that go. I mean it's not like every painter's house ought to be saved, but he is an important painter. I don't think there is another place in the United States. I mean, he lived in the cape a lot, right?

JR: Yes.

JG: I don't know what's saved up there, but I don't know that there's any place in the United States where Hopper is honored except here. Do you know that?

JR: I think that that's true. You know, he has some paintings in Maine, because he did a lot of lighthouses, and in Cape Cod, but I don't think...you know there's a special...I guess I could ask you: why do you think having his childhood home is special, especially as someone who lives in this region?

JG: As I say, I don't know that people knew at the beginning how much of his life had been spent there, but I don't think that's really the point. I mean the point is that it's become the center for Hopper things, it's become a sort of Hopper museum, and there isn't any other thing like that in the States and I think he's an important enough painter that it makes it important to have saved it.

I don't know whether he came back there as an adult, at all. Do you know?

JR: Very infrequently. So, his sister lived in the home until her death.

JG: Oh really?

JR: Yeah, Marion. It seems like he would come back every now and then.

JG: So he held onto it? It belonged to him?

JR: Yes.

JG: Until his sister died?

JR: Yeah. And they died within a year or two within each other.

JG: And then it was sold to somebody or it was sold to a developer? Was that when it was going to be torn down?

JR: So, that's kind of the window when everyone came in. It was just left to decay. There was a family friend who had all of his archives and his works, so there's a lot of myths and legends around what happened there. I don't think it's totally known. That's sort of the project is about..is figuring out--

JG: So, when the group organized, can you remind me, how did they organize to make money to save it? Did it have to be bought from the Hopper Estate or had someone already bought it from the Hopper Estate?

JR: I don't remember because the Historic Society originally got involved. So, the Historic Society is the one who took ownership. I think Nyack sold for like a dollar something because they just wanted to have the home restored. So Winn Perry, I don't know if you know him...

JG: Yes, yes.

JR: He led that and formed partnerships with kind of everyone. He got students from RCC to donate time and all these different groups to do it.

JG: It was kind of fixed up on a volunteer basis, wasn't it?

I just have a decided memory of Alan getting involved because the talk was that they were going to tear it down. It was beat up and they were just going to tear it down.

JR: As someone who's a resident here, do you find Hopper in surprising places? For me at least, I know when I walk in any store I'll always see something Hopper. Do you have experiences like that?

JG: Do you mean a painting of his or something that reminds you of Hopper?

JR: Either one.

JG: Well, you're probably closer to Hopper right now than I am, frankly, I haven't been to the house in years, I have to confess. I'm pretty old and I don't do a lot of just travelling around, touring kind of stuff. So, I don't think I've been to the [Edward] Hopper House since Alan died. I don't remember.

JR: Do you remember when Alan was working with the restoration if there were parts of it that were difficult for him or most interesting for him?

JG: I don't think he was directly involved with the restoration. He did not, like I say, he did not tend to do the work. He tended to get other people to do the work. He gave lots of ideas. What stuck with me most was that they managed to find someone with lots of carpentry skills to live upstairs and do all the restoration--I thought that's good. It's wonderful to realize it's lasted fifty years and that it's got a director, who's an official museum director, because it was started as a very simple saving gesture.

JR: That's beautiful. Is there anything else you might like to say about Hopper or the house or what you might hope for it moving forward even?

JG: Well, I certainly at least another fifty, well I hope the planet lasts another fifty years. That would be good.

[laughter]

JR: That would be nice.

Joan Dye Gussow: Born in 1928 in Alhambra, California, Gussow grew up in a California landscape dominated by clear skies, orange groves, peach orchards and lines of eucalyptus trees. She graduated from Pomona College in Claremont, California in 1950, with a BA (pre-medical) and moved east to New York City. Gussow spent seven years as a researcher at Time Magazine and five years as a suburban wife and mother. After becoming a researcher at Yeshiva's Graduate School of Education, she returned to school in 1969 to earn an M.Ed and an Ed. D. in Nutrition Education from Columbia's Teachers College. Shortly after graduating, she was hired by Teachers College to become the chair of the nutrition department, creating the legendary course, Nutritional Ecology. In 1971, she testified in front of a Congressional

Committee about the poor quality of the foods advertised to children on television. Her testimony was also published in the Journal of Nutrition Education scandalizing significant portions of her chosen profession. (Here is a video of Joan speaking on organic life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRFjtLyI22U>) In 1956, she married Alan Gussow (1931-1997). He was awarded the Prix de Rome at only 21 years old. He was the youngest ever to have won the award at that time. By the time he left New York to study at the American Academy in Rome from 1953 to 1955, Gussow had learned printmaking from Stanley William Hayter, and was already heavily influenced by Paul Klee, Arshile Gorky, and Stuart Davis.