

EDWARD HOPPER HOUSE MUSEUM & STUDY CENTER

COMMUNITY MYTHS & LEGENDS

stories of Edward Hopper
as remembered by his hometown

Ursula D'Auria & Arthur H. Gunther

Juliana Roth (JR): You grew up in Nyack and you knew Marion.

Ursula D'Auria (UD): Yes. I grew up in Nyack on Marion Street, which is not named after Marion Hopper by the way, it was named after a general I think, if I'm correct. But we had a little grocery store in town and I would go and pick up little items and on my way back I very often would see Marion outside. And she was in this rickety old wicker chair out on the front lawn with her Siamese cat on a leash. So, I always stopped to talk with her and she was very pleasant, didn't have much to say and I don't even recall what the conversation was about except for cats. We talked mostly about cats and I told her where I lived. And that would go on for years. I would go back and fourth to the store and then stop and say hello to her. Edward Hopper, I never really...I think I met him once but I would only just see him on the porch very hunched over. I mean, he was tall man. Always fidgeting for his house keys to get into the house here. But, over the years I think I met him at a gathering once, he and Josephine, but that is a vague memory.

JR: And what was the mythology in Nyack at the time around the [Edward] Hopper House. Did you feel like people were curious about the Hoppers or did that come later know?

UD: You know we had so many notables living in Nyack that it didn't mean anything, really. Helen Hayes used to pass the house all the time and stop and talk, where we live around the corner. I actually used to see Hopper painting down on the river, that was years ago when we didn't have the apartment buildings, I used to sit on the rocks down there. And he would just be painting. There were a lot of artists that used to paint down by the water and I can't recall that anyone would stop and say, Oh, there's that famous artist, or anything like that. It was just, you know, one of our neighbors.

JR: Do you have any memories of that, Art?

Arthur H. Gunther (AG): I'm a third generation Rockland-er so when I was a kid Nyack was the shopping district. So, we would actually park in front of here, but the house is really run down in those days. Edward inherited the house after his father and then his mother passed away and he really didn't take care of the property. The two houses in the back were rental income to

help secure this house but by the time Marion died, there was no furnace working in the system. She was breaking up furniture and putting it in fireplaces. And, I think it was his age and just kind of his upbringing. I never saw Hopper, I never saw Marion but we knew the area very well. There was a big theatre up the street called the Rockland Theatre so all of Rockland would come here. And, again, the shopping district so.

I did become involved in the [Edward] Hopper House. I worked for *The Journal News* for years and one of the reporters I assigned was Virginia Parkhurst so later became the Nyack historian. And, in fact, there's some information about [Edward] Hopper House in the Nyack library because of what she wrote down. She wrote a series of articles about how this house might be torn down for a parking lot for a youth center and she helped save the house and help get Win Perry and others involved there at that time. You knew, Virginia, probably.

UD: Yes, I did. Did you know that the Hoppers owned the two houses on Marion Street on Marion Street? That was a source of income for Marion. Well, also for Edward because he would come back and forth from the city.

AG: Because in those days there was no social security, no pensions for these people because they hadn't—Marion had never worked, and her [father] who died around 1916 was a shopkeeper and there were no pensions, there were no savings or anything so in other words to survive here they had to have some income so they had those two homes in the back.

UD: I was friends with the people that lived there, the Bradshaws, and probably, I used to sit downstairs on Saturdays, and probably about 7 years ago, George Bradshaw came to visit me here at the [Edward] Hopper House and he told me a story about how he came over to pay the rent 'cause they were renting the house in the back there from the Hoppers. And, Edward said sit down, kid, I want to do a drawing of you. So, you know, he came by to tell me the story. He said he still had the drawing and I said what a wonderful memory. I said, keep that, you know. And some other story I wanted to tell you now of course I can't remember but in any event his family lived there, the Bradshaws, and someone else—

AG: And he kept the drawing, did he show it you, the sketch?

UD: No. He didn't bring the drawing with him when he came. Over the years, several people would come in that lived in the area. I think I told you about the one person who said she actually got invited in for tea and cookies. I never did.

[laughter]

We only had conversation outside, so that was annoying.

AG: Now, when Hopper died, at the newspaper, we really just had a small obituary for him. Even the *Times*, which had had a prepackaged, pre-written obituary, it wasn't on the front page. At that time, there were only six people at Hopper's funeral at Oak Hill. And the reason for that really is the Hoppers didn't have a wide art circle and being a Realist painter in this Abstract

Expressionist time...it wasn't his time. It would take fifteen years after his death before he was rediscovered. In Hopper's time, he never ever got more than \$8,000 for a painting that now go for \$96 million dollars so you can understand that when his passing came it wasn't the biggest deal in the world, you know.

JR: So, when you came to be involved with what the Edward Hopper House is now, did you bring any sort of expectations to it? Did you have a sense of why Hopper was important to you or the community?

UD: Very few places exist any longer. Nyack really went through a very difficult time tearing down too many places. In 1970, when the D'Leia's were saving this place with a group of other people, my brother and I were trying to save the old Rockland movie theater and that came down 6 months after--we just pleaded that they hold on to that. And now it's apartment buildings...Victoria Mews, that's where the old movie theater was. And Hopper used to go there all the time.

AG: As well as the Chinese restaurant.

UD: And the Chinese restaurant down the street. Well, Hessel Graves was right next door, to the Chinese restaurant. But also, over the years, so many people did come here and they would give me little tidbits of information. And, one of the most fascinating stories to me was that, their Lillian Blauvelt, the Hoppers were related to the Blauvelts, Lillian Blauvelt was an opera singer and she introduced Marion to an opera singer. And, supposedly she a nice affair with the opera singer.

AG: Marion never married, so.

UD: No. So, this I think is nice, at least some love happened in her life. And then, over the years, a man who is a scholar told me she's actually the woman in the painting of the front porch, the couple on the front porch, even though she's in shorts, something she probably would never wear. But that, that was her and her lover, the opera singer. And the picture of Lillian Blauvelt is so wonderful, I don't know what happened to that photograph.

AG: Well, it's on the internet so you can see it.

UD: Oh, you can see it? But we had a nice framed photograph of her.

AG: Maybe it's here somewhere.

UD: Yeah.

AG: But at the time Hopper died, Nyack, like most villages was in decline because the shopping malls had opened up so downtown shopping was disappearing. Nyack was going through what was called urban renewal, tearing down buildings, old buildings, and putting in housing instead and Section 8 housing and that kind of stuff. Nyack was kind of run down, yeah, and they weren't

really thinking about history. In fact, Helen Hayes had already sold her house to be torn down for an apartment house, but the Village quickly changed the zoning and she stayed. That's why Gedney down there has all the high-rises. The Village determined they didn't want any more of that after that happened.

UD: Oh, where you live, down there?

JR: Yes.

[laughter]

UD: Oh, well that's where Hopper used to sit, down on these wonderful rocks—

AG: That was all shipping and storage tanks. It was an industrial street. Hopper would go down there to look at the ships because he wanted to—



UD: Yeah and actually I said to George Bradshaw, I wonder if I was in any of his sketches since I sat there and watched him so often doing his work. Well, a lot of artists were always down there, all along the water, painting.

AG: Nyack and Rockland always had a lot of artists, actors.

UD: Well, the old Saint George Hotel used to be a residence for actors.

AG: And several presidents have stayed there.

UD: Yeah, the Tappan Zee Playhouse, which is now the Brickhouse down in South Nyack.

AG: In Hopper's day, you could get to New York City by the railroad from South Nyack. It's no longer here, it's a walking path so this became a commuting community long before any other in Rockland. In fact, that's how Hopper got to art school for years. He took the train and then the ferry from Weehawken into New York City.

UD: This table, by the way, was saved from Hopper's studio.

AG: Apparently built by him.

UD: As I said, I used to sit downstairs, this older gentleman came in and he said, I was a professor at NYU and I was passing Hopper's studio in '67, the year Hopper died, and they were emptying out his studio and they put this out on the street and he said, I took it and did research and found out that Hopper actually built this table.

AG: Yeah. He was a craftsman.

UD: So he said would you like it? I said definitely. And so the next weekend he came with this table. He said he's going to a nursing home. So, I said how in the world are we going to get this in? It's so heavy. I got these two buff guys off the street. I said, Wanna come in? Free admission if you just help us lift this table. Again, I don't know where the documentation...I wrote everything down, the man's name and the story so hopefully you have that somewhere.

AG: NYU might have some photographs.

UD: No, I'm saying we should even have that this was given to us by this man, this professor. And also as I said the easel that Gloria Paul.

AG: He built the easel.

UD: And she bought at an estate sale.

AG: I think he built all his easels actually.

UD: Well she bought it at an estate sale of Hopper's things. She had an antique shop on upper Main Street and what's there now...oh, a pet grooming place, and there was a flood on Main Street and she lost all the documents about the easel, but she said I'd like you to have it on loan.

JR: Wow.

UD: So that's why that's there.

JR: From what you remember of the restoration project what, what do you think brought everybody together to save the house?

UD: Just, you know, just because we loved the old house. And there were a few of us that just wanted to keep Nyack the way it was. And, I don't know, I think they had more financial support here than we had trying to save the old movie theater. I don't know. I was very angry when we met with the men who owned the movie theater and they said listen you can do anything you want with this but you can't use it as a theater, make little craft shops inside and you know gift shops. And I said no, I want to resurrect the old movie theater. Why would I want all kinds of little craft shops inside here?

AG: The effort here was to save the house, not because it was the Hopper House but because it was an old house and it was secondary that Hopper was involved because at that time again he was almost a forgotten artist.

UD: No, but I think they had that intention.

AG: That had that intention, but only to get enough money through the art shows to keep this going on a volunteer basis, so that, that was the pull.

With Hopper re-discovered with the Parisian exhibits and so forth, the focus has now turned around to Hopper rather than the house itself.

JR: So, what would you hope for the [Edward Hopper] House in the future? We're moving towards the 50th Anniversary of the Reinterpretation. What do you see—

AG: Ursula has some very strong thoughts.

JR: Yes.

[laughter]

JR: Where do you see it going? What would your dream for it be?

UD: I would really like for it not to be come too modern. I'm unconcerned about putting an addition on it, I'm not sure, I think it'll take away from history in a way. I would like it to stay



pretty much the way it is, maybe a little more things in the memorabilia room. We have a lot of things that we could have on display in the memorabilia room. And, just keep it a little more eccentric because that's how I remember the Hoppers. They were eccentric. Very parsimonious, just didn't you know, just didn't really live a fancy lifestyle.

AG: Not at all.

UD: I think the house has to reflect that.

AG: I hope it because a source for historians, though. For study of Realism and Hopper, and I think that's important going ahead, which it is developing with this room.

JR: And why do you think for people to see that area of Hopper's life, him younger, growing, evolving?

AG: Because you can't understand his art until you understand his life. He said in his paintings I'm always looking for myself, so that's his whole life. From the time that's he's birthed in that room there and the light shines on his face when he's first born, coming up Second Avenue, wakes up every morning in that light. His whole life is about painting in light so it is totally intertwined. So, the more study you can look at his early life, the more you'll understand the art.

JR: Well, that feels like a good place to end. Thank you.

[laughter]

AG: Thank you. Very good interview.

[laughter]

Ursula D'Auria serves as a member of Edward Hopper House's Visitor Services through which she regularly speaks with the public about Hopper's life and the history of Nyack. As a Nyack native, Ursula has championed historic preservation in the village for decades.

Art Gunther is a retired editor of the Editorial Pages, columnist and staff photographer of the original Journal-News in Rockland County, New York, where he served with the newspaper for 42 years. He began his career in 1964, first in the mailroom and then in the 53 Hudson St., Nyack, newsroom, eventually working his way through various positions. Gunther wrote more than 6,000 pieces for the newspaper, including about 2,500 weekly columns. In 2006, a collection of those essays was published by The Historical Society of Rockland under the title, "The Column Rule." As a newspaper photographer, he took more than 8,000 pictures. In retirement, he produces and exhibits abstract/primitive paintings at various galleries and art centers. He also publishes a weekly essay at thecolumnrule.com. A third-generation Rocklander, he was named literary and visual artist of the year in Rockland, 2005 and 2010, respectively. Gunther is a former trustee of the Edward Hopper House in Nyack and serves on the Rockland County Historic Preservation Board as well as in the volunteer Rockland Breakfast Program as Tuesday chief cook.