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MISSOURI ARTIST JESSE HOWARD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Ann Klesener

It was a warm September's evening, just before dusk, and my family and I were visiting friends in Fulton. The topic of folk art entered our conversation because I was interested in studying a local traditional artist for a field reserach project in my Material Folk Culture seminar taught at UMC by Howard Marshall. My friend got up from the table and asked me to come with her. We hurried to the car, and she drove me to the "Old Jeff City Road." About a quarter of a mile down the road, she slowed her car and pointed to some old boards on a fence by the side of the road. "This is Jesse Howard's place. The fence used to be covered with signs." She then drove up the road about a block and crept to a stop. "You see that little house back there? When I was in high school, I heard that Jesse's son had died in the war, and he [Jesse] had his body in there. He guarded it with a shot gun at night." I knew the story was probably false. Darkness had settled, making it difficult for me to see, but her story sparked my imagination. After making a U-turn on the narrow road, she pointed to signs that appeared to be hanging on a fence on the opposite side of the street. Although I tried to read them, it was impossible because of the darkness.

After we returned to my friend's home, I decided to telephone the Howard's home to try to get an appointment for an interview. Mrs. Howard answered the phone, and I discovered she was not initially receptive because she felt that "an interview would just stir Jesse up and he is so hard to handle now." I assured Mrs. Howard I would not upset Mr. Howard and would respect their wishes and conditions at the time of the interview. I also assured Mrs. Howard that I enjoyed talking to elders and that I anticipated problems that could occur. Despite her reluctance, she agreed to a meeting the next week. My first step toward shaping an interesting research project had taken place.

The Material Folk Culture seminar was the only course of that nature that I had taken in graduate school; as a result, I was very inexperienced in ethnographic reserach. I had been given a small book of field research in folk arts entitled Folklife and Fieldwork a Layman's Introduction to Field Technqiues by Peter Bartis. The contents of the book included folklife and fieldwork, what to collect, whom to interview, how to do it, what to do with the results, and model tape log with model field work data sheets. I modified the tape log and field data sheets to my expected needs and brought these sheets with me, along with a tape recorder, an extra set of batteries, and tapes.

I did not know what to expect when I pulled up in front of the house. Across the street, beyond the fence of signs, several sheds stood in the yard. The weeds had taken over and the signs and sheds were weathered. The yard looked as if it had been abandoned for several years. In spite of the disarray, the area appeared to be some type of planned aesthetic environment.

Maude Howard met me at the door. A beautiful, thin woman, she was wearing a tailored cotton dress, and her hair was wound into a bun; however, her posture was bent and her eyes were suspicious. As we talked, her eyes changed. They became kind and accepting. She invited me in to talk with Jesse. In her living room, pictures were placed on the piano, and a portrait of her mother hung on the wall. Mrs. Howard, then 87, discussed each picture and told me of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Jess Howard came out of the dining area and she introduced us. He was 97 years old then, but I would have guessed him to be younger. He was dressed in new bib overalls and a starched blue, long-sleeved shirt; he had a stubble-covered chin, and his weathered face had few wrinkles for his years. Mr. Howard is a short man, with unusual hands that could be a farmer's or a watchmaker's. When he laughed, he suppressed it, except for the corners of his mouth which turned up in a half-snicker. He hobbled toward me, shook my hand, and stated that there was no one else in Missouri who does what he does. "You'll never see another man just like me." Maude threw up her hands and laughed.

I did not photograph or tape record the Howards at the first encounter. Their comfort with me was important, so the first session was a "get to know each other" visit. I did take notes when returning to my automobile to assure description of what had occurred.

During my second visit to the Howards, Jesse gave the "Grand Tour" to some members of the UMC Art and Art Education department staff and me. We photographed his work and the environment he had created over the last thirty years. Jesse gave the history of each piece of work and a history of his ten buildings he worked in. Jesse would not allow us to go ahead of him or rush him in anyway.

The sessions that occurred after the "Grand Tour" were interviews that were taped while we were sitting in his main workshop in the cold of winter. Jesse would answer my questions and give descriptions of the past while he worked. He often complained of his poor eye sight and labored movement, but never of the bitter cold.

Jesse and his twin, Etta Myrtle, were born June 4, 1885, to Lawson Thomas Howard and Martha Elizabeth Hunt Howard in a little town in Callaway County known as Shamrock, Missouri. They were the youngest in a family of ten children.

Lawson Thomas Howard, Jesse's father, was born July 4th, 1831, near Wheeling, West Virginia, and died November 25th, 1911, when Jesse was twenty-six years old. Martha Elizabeth Hunt was born July 10th, 1846, near Crab Orchard, Kentucky, and she died July 29th, 1899, when Jesse was fourteen years old.

Recalling childhood, home, and family, Jesse shared many warm memories with the listener. He recalled the one-room log home with dirt floors and clapboard roof. A small, boxed stairway led the children up to their sleeping quarters in the attic that had been converted into bedrooms. The house was finished with siding on the exterior and plastered walls on the interior. A

fireplace or a woodburning stove became the focal point to rest one's tired bones after a hard day of work.

Jesse's family was wealthy in all respects but monetary. The children respected, honored, and loved their parents. Martha and Lawson Howard's eighty acres of post oak land in Shamrock provided modest support and a place to make molasses to sell. The molasses was delivered in a spring-load wagon. From Shamrock, his family moved to a two-hundred acre farm four miles north of Calwood.

Jesse's father went West as a young man and had many adventures. Jesse recalled the stories his father shared with the family:

> During early days he once went West. Was kind of a roustabout. They would send him out to kill a deer or an antelope. He was a small man, like myself. He would bring a deer or something like that.
>
> I remember him telling about Indian times. He said he had killed this deer. Was skinning it and all at once Indians rode up about him. He wouldn't talk to them, he couldn't. He quartered the hind part of deer for himself. "You take this part." That's how he got by the Indians.
>
> Another time, went out West on kind of a furriery place and they seen a kind of a log in the road ahead of them. Somebody just thought they had lost a load of logs for fire wood and that thing just come a raising up and raising up and raising up. You know what it was? A big snake.
>
> Father was a good shot. I believe some one was with him, I don't know who. I heard him tell this, now.
>
> He took aim off of this fellow's shoulder, or something like that, and shot that snake. That snake just began to beat the ground and they runned from it. And he was a measure; that snake was twenty-seven feet. I don't remember what kind of snake it was.
>
> Every word that I'm telling you is the truth.

Jesse's mother died at the age of fifty-four when he was fourteen. Like his father before him, Jesse was a pioneer of sorts. On, October 14th, 1903, Jesse left home with fourteen dollars in his pocket to visit kinfolk in Curran, Illinois. He worked on the railroad driving spikes and helped with the chores at their place. He was weighing in at 103 pounds then.

In the spring, he left and ended up in Cleveland, North Dakota. One could call him a transient worker. In Cleveland, he was helping a man drill a well when a belt came off the pulley and pulled his employer into the engine. Jesse saved the man's life by freeing him quickly from the belt. The employer's wife gave Jesse a good meal and let him stay the night. It was Jesse's birthday. He was eighteen years old.

For two and a half years Howard traveled the western part of the states. He worked odd jobs with men he called "hoboes." Threshing was common labor during that period of history. Jesse spent the winter of 1904 in California touring Mt. Shasta and the foothills. Next, he went to a sheep ranch in Red Rock, Montana, where he tended sheep and put up huge amounts of hay from the "Big Hole Basin." From Red Rock, Jesse went to Yellowstone Park and worked on a tourist wagon as the cook's assistant. Remembering his experiences there, Jesse recalls the "most scared he had ever been, wet scared:"

> The park had only one way in at that time. The cook's wagon was on a road on a levee like. I was riding on the back with my legs hanging. Out of nowhere a bear come up on the wagon running after it. I couldn't get away. The wagon was full of goods and a stove (pot-belly) was next to me.
>
> When that bear reached up, I freezed. The bear grabbed for me but got that stove. It went rolling over, over, and over down that hill hanging on to that stove.
>
> You know if a bear is running after you, What is the best thing you can do? Run down hill. They are so big they will start rolling and rolling.

Jesse returned to Montana during the wheat threshing season in the summer, and this was his last job out West. He had been alone for over two years working, learning, and seeing the West. Twenty years old in 1905, he returned to his farm in Calwood. Jesse's father died six years later.

In 1913 Jesse bought a Ford car. One day, after a rain, Jesse was taking Maude Linton, whom he had been dating, for a ride. Maude said that he spun his tires so long in the mud that the car burned up. That was the end of cars for Jesse.

On July 23, 1916, Maude and Jesse were married on the front porch of her father's house. That year they moved four times. Maude's father sternly advised the newlyweds and said, "Children, you can't do this." Maude said she wouldn't even get things unpacked, and then Jesse would want to move somewhere else. In 1917, Jesse and Maude moved to the Howard place and stayed there one year. From there they moved to Arkansas, where Jesse worked for the railroad on a bridge-building crew. Maude became deathly ill, and Jesse returned home in 1920 to find a place to live. Jesse bought a forty acre farm in Calwood called the "Old Downs Place." When the Depression hit, they sold the farm and moved to "the bottom."

By this time Jesse and Maude had five children, but they made ends meet. "I owned six pieces of property. Buy runned down, fix up and sell for a little profit."

Jesse moved from his fifth home north of town to his present home in October of 1944. The property consisted of twenty acres and was named "Sorehead Hill." When he named the property, he considered the discontented people of the world at those times and labeled his grounds appropriately after them (Charley Drace, 1961). Maude started working at the shoe factory on

St. Valentine's Day in 1944, and worked there until 1959 when she was sixty-three years old. She was the main source of income for the Howard family then.

Jesse became frineds with Ed M. Peacock who became nationally famous for his collection of old time farm machinery and steam engines. Jesse painted signs for the Peacock show, and they both entertained people with their humor and displays. Ed put on a weekend show each fall that people traveled from all over the nation just to see. Jesse said that the Peacock show was the "biggest show" he had ever seen and would be remembered by many for years.

Mr. Howard's Art

There are several reasons why Jesse Howard started building structures and painting signs, but if there is a primary reason, it is forever locked away in Jesse's mind.

First, Jesse was exposed to many handmade painted signs when he worked on the railroad and in his travels West. This form of communication was familiar and logical.

Second, the Peacock show inspired Jesse to create his own showplace to educate visitors on the Holy Bible and acquaint them with relics of the past. Since Jesse owned property and had entertained people with his signs at the Peacock show, he was capable of this task.

For example, in the early forties, at about the age of fity-six, Howard constructed a scaffold to represent the scaffold Haman was hung on. Jesse scaled the scaffold down (one inch equals one foot) which was described as fifty cubits high. The model gallows was his first know sculpture (Drace, 1961).

Jesse spent endless hours whittling out fine wooden model airplanes. He painted American quotations on them and then put them on display in his yard and across the street in his show place. Jesse constructed several burial places described in the Bible; these burial places were mounds of grass-covered dirt with wooden tombstones placed at the heads. A biblical scripture was painted on each tombstone as an epitaph (Drace, 1961).

Jesse's knowledge of King's Row written by Henry Bellamann is the third hypothesis as to why he continued his creations. Jesse liked the attention that was given to Fulton during that time and wanted the visitors to also notice his work.

The community rejected Jesse as an artist, a fourth reason he painted signs. Ten small buildings constructed from materials collected in the area housed his work. When an old law office was torn down in Fulton, Jesse acquired wood, windows, and molding and then erected the old "chapel" and constructed an arched doorway in the center room and a steeple on the roof. Soon his work started disappearing and being destroyed. Maude said Jesse became very angry when someone destroyed a small wooden airplane he had worked on for hours and displayed by the gate. He then painted his first

sign of anger.

Howard was misunderstood by the people of Callaway. Slander, rumors, and lies circulated about Jesse. Students and others destroyed his work over and over again. Jesse could not stop them, and the police seemed to pay little attention. When a fire started and looked like it was going to wipe out the neighborhood, the fire department would not come. Jesse and his neighbors put the fire out. Violence and savagery continued, and the community would not let up on Jesse. They solicited names for a petition to have Jesse committed to an asylum in 1952. The neighbors would not sign, so the petition was rejected.

In May, 1954, Jesse went to Washington, D.C., to attempt to get protection from the stealing and violence. He wanted to see a Missouri representative about the problem, but instead he was removed from the Capitol by two detectives and placed on a bus back to Fulton.

In March of 1983, Jesse became ill with the flu, and by June of 1983 at the age of 98, he developed pneumonia. Both daughters from Arizona and Maude were attending Jesse at his bedside at home. Jesse did not like hospitals; he was most happy at home with Maude and with his work. Jesse Howard died before Christmas, 1983.

An exhibition of Mr. Howard's work at the University of Missouri-Columbia, September 11-30, 1983, sold out. Mr. Howard's work was featured in "American Folk Art," an exhibition in the Kemper Gallery at the Kansas City Art Institute in May of 1984. Mr. Howard's work at the Kemper Gallery also sold out. Mrs. Howard often stated she wished Jesse knew how well his show went and how nice the articles were about him, but he was very ill and she didn't think he would be able to understand her.

Jesse was one of the Callaway's self-proclaimed philosophers. "I know the Bible from A to Z," Jesse would state. Forgotten times of Fulton could be found on his eight acres, refrigerators, broken wagons, bells, rusted farm tools and shoe soles could be found scattered about the small area. People from other parts of the country stopped to see Jesse's place—and to gawk at him. His signs were everywhere, hung on the fence, from his hingeless gates, propped against the buildings, and nailed to anything that did not move.

The signs proclaim the many opinions that Jesse had about his world. Lawyers, judges, and the people Jesse had met in his life are represented in his signs. The signs are painted with black paint on a white background, and the words are pressed together like the "space" was never born. The words all run together, and there are some breaks with pointing fingers or red lettering. All of the signs were painted by Jesse and are fine representations of print.

When shuffling through his property, he did not like to be hurried and would let no one get ahead of him. He pointed with his cane made from the handle of a shovel, and the willing victims had to be ready for an eight-hour tour! At the age of 97, Jesse Howard was still working all day on "Hell's Eight Acres." Jesse said he could not hear well, walk well, nor see well. "Ain't worth nothing." Jesse's audience would stay for a while in the first

shed signing his guest book, "Print your name in big letters and make a comment," Jesse would order. The guest books were located on a long workbench. His declarations were made with anger or laughter, and he asked questions on the Holy Bible and then answered his own questions.

"I get no cooperation at all."

"IKE PLEDGES TO CLEAN UP CORRUPTION AT ALL LEVELS. DEAR IKE. I REC'D YOUR LETTER OF AUG. 25, 1952 & WANT TO CONGRATULATE YOU FOR THIS FINE LETTER HEAD. AND LUCK TO YOU. NOW, IKE, I HAVE HAD SOME EXPERIENCE WITH CORRUPTION, THOUGH NOTHING LIKE WHAT YOU ARE BUCKING INTO. . .

"IKE TO ATTACK 'WASHINGTON MESS.' NEW YORK. SEPT. 1. MESS YES A MESS. IT IS GOING TO BE A BIT WORSE THAN WASHING BABY'S SOILED CLOTHES. WHY SO? BECAUSE BABY DON'T KNOW ANY BETTER & ADULTS SHOULD."

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