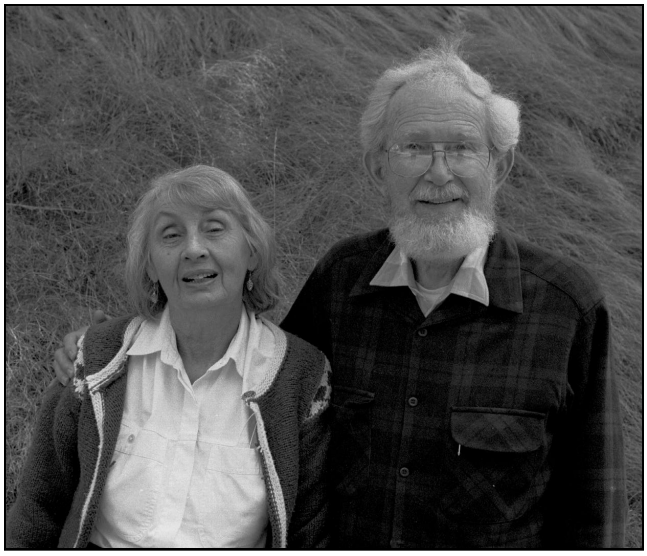
THE GEORGE AND HELEN SPELVIN FOLK ART COLLECTION

by Beauvais Lyons, Director of the Hokes Archives

Visiting George and Helen Spelvin's modest yellow split-level house in Lenoir City, Tennessee, is like making a pilgrimage to a sacred temple of American Folk Art. While their neighbors purchased bass boats, home entertainment systems, recreational vehicles, and patio furniture, the Spelvins were quietly amassing a significant collection of contemporary folk art.



Helen and George Spelvin

In 1998, when the collection outgrew the size of their home and their capacity to maintain it, they donated over 900 works to the Hokes Archives at the University of Tennessee. Placing the collection the hands of the state's major research university, they wanted it to "serve as a study collection and teaching tool." This traveling exhibition offers a significant opportunity to realize this objective.

Any collection of art reflects the taste, values, and ideology of the collectors. Just as the biographical text panels accompanying the work in this exhibition offer stories about each of the artists, the collection as a whole tells us a variety of things about George and Helen Spelvin.

In 1979 the Spelvins met Lucas Farley while searching for land to buy near Roanoke, Virginia. Rather than purchasing property, they ended up convincing Mr. Farley to sell them a collection of his painted records. Farley created the records the previous year following the death of his mother Estella. This purchase sparked the Spelvin's enthusiasm for folk art. They began spending every summer traveling throughout a six-state region searching for new folk art "discoveries."

The Spelvins seldom purchased work through art galleries. Instead, they believed it was important to establish relationships with the artists whose work they acquired. As an agent for State Farm Insurance, George Spelvin loved to meet people and had a way of making the artists they encountered feel at ease. However, observers in the field of folk art such as Arthur Blade contend that it was actually Helen Spelvin who was the driving force behind their collecting habits.

Arthur Blade also contends that the obscurity of this collection reflects the mod-

esty of the Spelvins. While most collectors seek to promote the careers of the artists they collect, thus increasing their market share, George and Helen Spelvin were private people of middle class means who quietly admired this art. The appeal of folk art for them is its authenticity. The significance of this exhibition may be found in the purity of intentions of this couple from Lenoir City, Tennessee.

Some common characteristics may be found in these works: many of the pieces show a mastery of representation, an emphasis on portraiture, a strong sense of contrast and design, and a concern with craftsmanship. George believed the universal trait of all art is a commitment to craft. He privileged art which showed discipline and a strong work ethic. Helen shared this philosophy but also chose artists whose work offered moral or spiritual lessons on the power of the individual to cope and overcome adverse conditions.

As an elementary school teacher, Helen believed that artistic creativity is learned by example and that aspects of art could be taught. She disliked the term "Outsider Art," claiming that many of the artists in their collection play a stronger role in their communities than most academically trained artists.

Helen Spelvin's belief that art allows its maker to cope and survive is reflected in the theories of Roger Manley. Manley wrote that many folk artists begin making their art after "the loss of a job through illness, injury or retirement; death of a spouse or elderly parent; religious doubt, social ostracism, imprisonment." He claims that these events precipitate their transformation from "ordinary" farmers, loggers, or textile workers into artists. Many of these late blooming artists measured their self worth through "jobs in which they were able to see a tangible, very physical product or result at the end of each day's labor." For several of the artists in the Spelvin collection, the creation of art was a response to such a void in their lives.

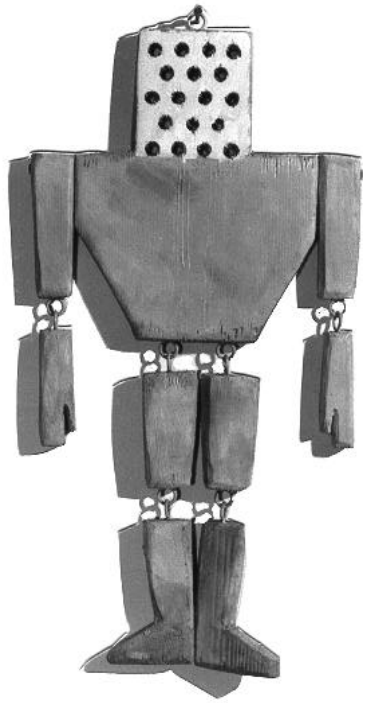
The Spelvins made a conscious choice not to collect art by mental patients, social misfits, or sexual criminals. They did not share Jean Dubuffet's passion for "art brut." In 1945, seeking an authentic, uncultured art, Dubuffet visited psychiatric hospitals and prisons in Switzerland. There he encountered the work of Adolf Woolfi, as well as the collection of psychotic art owned by Geneva psychiatrist Charles Ladame. These experiences offered a paradigm for Dubuffet's concept of "Art Brut," which stressed madness as the quintessence of inventiveness. Although one might contend that E. B. Hazzard's "Alien Communication Device" has much in common with "Art Brut," most of the art prized by the Spelvins was by everyday people who found meaning and self-worth in the making of artistic objects.

Unlike many other folk art collectors, the Spelvins did not consult Herbert W. Hemphill's *Twentieth-Century American Folk Art and Artists* (E. P. Dutton, 1974) as a guidebook for their collecting practices. Their collection, then, has very few works by Edgar Tolson, S. P. Dinsmoor, Joseph Yoakum, Minnie Evans and other folk artists who have been recognized as classic examples of the field. Other than the work of

Lester Dowdey and Emma Whorley, this collection is comprised of work by artists who are mostly unknown.

It is remarkable that a group of artists of this magnitude could be unknown to most folk art collectors and curators. Yet, the field of folk art is uncovering new artists all of the time. The architectural draftsman Achillies Rizzoli, who created elaborate drawings depicting a utopian world, which were found in the ceiling rafters of a San Francisco home, is an example of such a discovery. Likewise, the national tour of this collection has the potential to be the major folk art story as we begin the new millennium.

Many of the artists in this collection created work only over a brief period, often discontinuing their art production as circumstances in their lives changed. This fact makes this collection especially valuable. Once discovered, much of this art was netted though "sharecropping," in which the Spelvins acquired the pieces for relatively small payments. This is a common pattern in the provenance of folk art and may explain the increased critical and curatorial attention given to this field.



"Old-Timer" by Lester Dowdey

Eugene Metcalf and Kenneth Ames have criticized the nostalgic and "rusticophilia" aspects of folk art, which appeal to the cultural elite's yearning for "non-modern people, places, experiences, and artifacts with which to have the 'natural' and 'authentic' relationships that give substance and meaning to their lives." The Spelvins certainly fit this stereotype; George is an avid collector of Delta Blues music, and Helen still drives a 1963 Volvo station wagon because of its "simple charm." Their choice to live in East Tennessee where they maintain a large garden and keep two goats also reflects similar values.

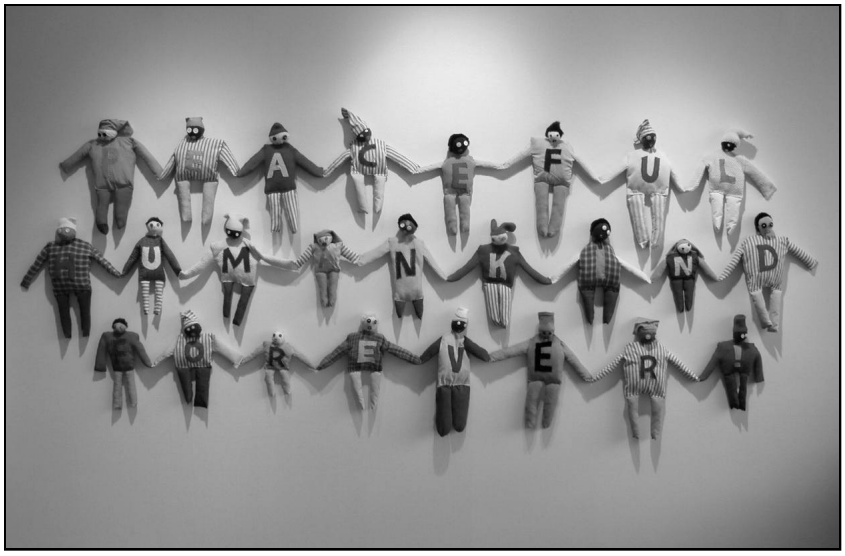
In her brilliant book *The Temptation: Edgar Tolson and the Genesis of Twentieth Century Folk Art* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), Julia S. Ardery makes the case that many folk art collectors are motivated by a romantic white liberalism, attempting to reform culture while striving to retain aspects of an "authentic" past. While George and Helen Spelvin's social values and taste reflect these contradictions, it could also be said that, more than anything else, they learned to love folk art and formed a deep respect for the people who made it. This exhibit offers a record of this affection.

As a school teacher, Helen Spelvin believes that folk art provides lessons on aesthetic intelligence. Helen has observed that every person possesses an innate creative ability that needs to be stimulated by example and honed by experience. In college she read the theories of John Dewey, and as an educator, she made art a regu-

lar activity for her third grade students.

She dislikes the term “self-taught” and claims that we all have some creative influence in our lives. She has pointed out that Lester Dowdey’s uncle J. C. Burris made limberjacks, Charlotte Black took art classes in high school, Rufus Martinez was an apprentice to a potter, Juanita Richardson’s father was a sign painter, and Emma Whorley had done needlepoint since she was a child.

The Spelvins were conscious of building a collection that represented a range of materials and processes. Before discovering the work of Rufus Martinez, they made several trips to the Carolinas looking for a potter to add to the collection. The acquisition of Loretta Howard’s “Inter-racial Rag Doll Friendship Chain” resulted from a tireless search for a unique fabric piece. While they did not make an attempt to find a set of velvet paintings, their discovery of Charlotte Black’s “Bride Paintings” offers an example of an art form that is generally ignored by folk art “experts.” George and Helen Spelvin viewed these portraits and Arthur Middleton’s images of United States Presidents as examples of the importance of the individual in American culture.



“Inter-racial Rag Doll Friendship Chain” by Loretta Howard

The Spelvins believed that each work of art resonated its true meaning when paired with similar works by the same artist. This is one reason for the visual continuity in the collection. Although many folk artists create a “production line” of similar works to fulfill market demands, few of the pieces in this collection were ever made for a commercial market. George Spelvin liked the serial nature of the collection because it provided tangible evidence for the value of human labor.

The limited number of sculptural items in the collection reflects the Spelvin’s finite storage capacity. The collection was constantly rotated between their garage, attic, and various walls throughout their modest house. Their decision to donate most of the collection to the Hokes Archives at the University of Tennessee will ensure that it remains intact and allows the work to be seen by a significant audience. This modest document is one effort to realize this objective.

LUCAS FARLEY
POPLAR HILL, VIRGINIA

George and Helen Spelvin abruptly pulled their Volvo station wagon over to the side of the road as soon as they spotted Lucas Farley's house. Surrounding the small, two-bedroom structure were fifty painted records hanging from the fence. Each of the collaged and painted 33 rpm records sported a strange comical face, some of which included cigarettes dangling from their mouths. It was the most unusual thing the Spelvins had ever seen.

Lucas Farlrey

The year was 1978, and the Spelvins were in the area looking for land to purchase. Instead, they encountered the work of Mr. Farley and developed a passion for collecting contemporary folk art.

The previous year Farley's mother, Estella, had died of lung cancer. Farley began painting records and placing them on his fence as a tribute to her. Among the records were the sound track from the movie "To Sir with Love" and two albums from Percy Faith and his Orchestra. Since his Mother never liked secular music, turning the records into paintings may have served as a form of penance.

Although the *Virginian Pilot and Ledger Star* ran a story on the painted records, most of the neighbors thought of them as "Halloween decorations that had been left out too long." Several had even been vandalized by local youth.

The week before the Spelvins appeared at his front door, Lucas Farley had been laid off from Turnipseed Greenhouse. He was thrilled to sell the records to the Spelvins. Farley used the money to buy an 8-track sound system for his Chevy Nova.

Farley house with painted records

In 1992 Mr. Farley died of lung cancer, just like his mother. They both smoked Camel Lights.

ARTHUR MIDDLETON
SEYMOUR, TENNESSEE

Arthur Middleton at the Seymour Optimist Club

Arthur Middleton was the product of a broken home. He believed that he could be a better father than his own, who left his mother when he was only three years old. He strived to "do better" for his young sons William and Thomas.

In 1979, Arthur Middleton enrolled his boys in the Cub Scouts and later assumed a leadership role in the Great Smoky Mountain Council of the Boy Scouts of America. In 1910, the Boy Scouts of America was founded on the premise of "teaching boys moral and ethical values through an outdoor program that challenges them and teaches them respect for nature, one another, and themselves."

Arthur Middleton was obsessed with his son's fulfillment of merit badge requirements, which are considered to be a "character-building tool." In 1983, the 40th President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was awarded the Silver Buffalo Award for Distinguished Service to Youth. The award inspired Middleton to initiate an ambitious series of portrait paintings of U.S. Presidents in order to help his sons fulfill the Art and American Heritage badge requirements.

Using small reproductions of paintings from the 1982 Colliers Encyclopedia and referring to a book titled Portrait Painting Made Easy, Arthur Middleton produced a series of thirty-nine acrylic paintings on masonite. Few think that the Middleton boys had much to do with the creation of these paintings. When completed, the series depicting George Washington to Ronald Reagan was installed in the Community Room of the Blount County Optimist Club.

In 1987, Arthur Middleton, who worked for Goodyear Tire was transferred out of state. The following year, George and Helen Spelvin bought the complete series at a rummage sale sponsored by the Optimist Club. Twelve of the paintings have been selected for inclusion in this traveling exhibition.

CHARLOTTE BLACK
UNION CHURCH, MISSISSIPPI

Going to her wedding on May 5, 1987, Charlotte Black knew something was wrong. As it turned out, she was right. Her fiancé Sam Gaines never arrived at the Chapel of Love in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. His mother later told her that "he got cold feet."

Bride painting by Charlotte Black

Supported by her friends and family, Charlotte Black went on with her life. She invited Emily Pepper, her best friend to accompany her to Tahiti for the ten-day honeymoon vacation at the Beachcomber Parkroyal Resort in Moorea. Only a few days into their vacation, they became bored with lounging in their "Garden Suite Bungalow," twice taking the lagoon excursions, and eating every variety of salad in the two resort restaurants. Since Emily Pepper could not swim, they had no use for the "Dolphin Quest" scuba diving center .

The morning of their sixth day, they rented mopeds and began to explore the island, finding an art gallery featuring the paintings of Edgar Leeteg. Called the "American Gauguin," from 1933-1953, Leeteg produced over 1,700 works on velveteen, becoming rich from tourist patronage. Leeteg is credited with making the "first" black velvet painting, though the method actually dates back to the British painter Francis Town (1738-1826).

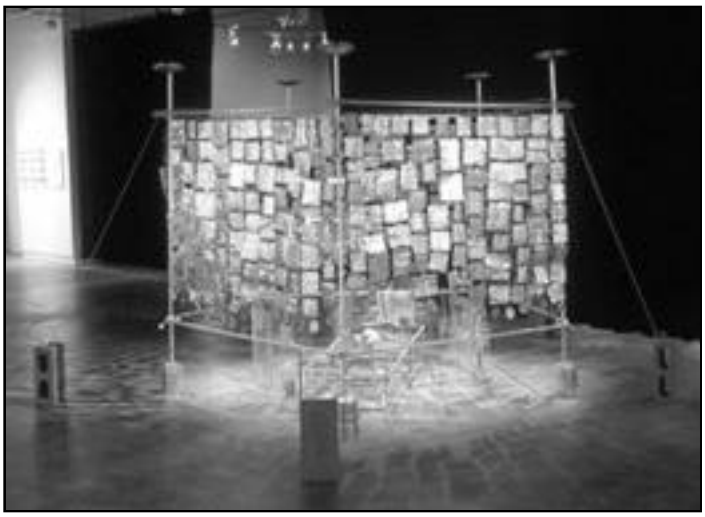
Charlotte Black had taken two art classes in high school and was inspired by the sculptural use of light in Leeteg's representations of Tahitian women. She decided that she would take up painting on her return home.

The idea of painting brides came to her while looking through the wedding listings in the Sunday Southern Style section of the Clarion Ledger. Hoping to be married herself someday, she identified with the smiling women dressed in white. Her paintings were faithfully copied from the newspaper photographs. She had completed almost twenty bride paintings before meeting and marrying Charles White. Mr. White, who makes furniture as a hobby, helped her frame the paintings using Mississippi Poplar finished with silver enamel spray paint.

She continues to paint in her spare time, mostly pet portraits and horses. Happily married, she has chosen not to make any more bride paintings.

E. B. HAZZARD
OLEANDER, ALABAMA

In 1994 E. B. Hazzard claimed he had been kidnapped by aliens and taken to the planet Noolicalaki, where he was forced to marry an alien woman. From their union, Hazzard fathered two inter-galactic children. After thirty-four months, he was returned to Earth for reasons he could not explain.



Hazzard's device shown at Carnegie Mellon University

In an attempt to be "reunited with his alien family," Hazzard has constructed several "Alien Communication Devices." The example from the Spelvin Collection is comprised of a modified tent pole frame, electrical conduit, hub caps, a folding metal cot, refrigerator shelving, duct tape, a six-volt battery, and over 300 flattened tin cans. Hazzard claimed to have received communications from his wife on Noolicalaki, but reported he was unable make the device properly transmit his messages. His fifth and final design employed three car batteries, which induced his fatal heart attack.

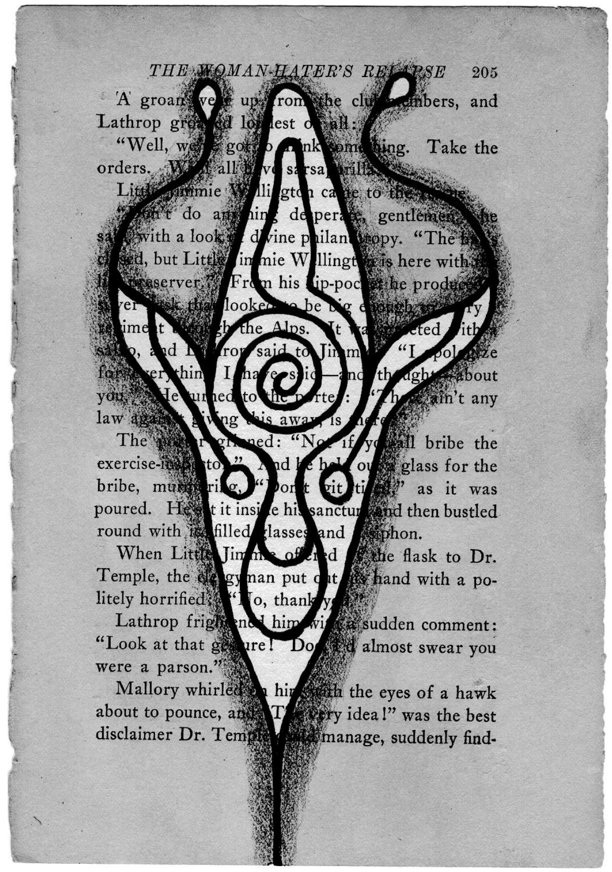
Though never institutionalized, it is likely that E. B. Hazzard was schizophrenic. His contraption recalls the perpetual motion machines of Heinrich Müller created while he was a patient at an asylum in Switzerland during the early 20th century. Like Müller, Mr. Hazzard regarded himself as more of an engineer than an artist.

Of the artists in this collection, Hazzard is most closely aligned with Jean Debuffet's concept of "art brut." Debuffet has claimed that "madness is a positive value, a fertile and precious resource... something invigorating and desirable." E. B. Hazzard and his devices seem to fall into this category.

E. B. Hazzard

George Spelvin was a good judge of character from his years of investigating insurance fraud. He believed that Hazzard was just a prankster and not psychologically unstable. As Mr. Spelvin was fond of saying, "E. B. had an imagination that was out of this world."

EMMA WHORLEY
CHERRY FORK, OHIO



Helen and George Spelvin

Emma Whorley, who worked as a librarian for forty-seven years, began painting and drawing on book pages on her 75th birthday, April 1, 1982. She later described this as “against both my nature and my training.”

The previous year she had found a copy of the novel *Bought and Sold* among the possessions of her younger sister Helen, who had died of leukemia. The book told the story of two college co-eds seeking adventure and romance as they traveled cross country to San Francisco. Emma felt that Margorie, the protagonist in the novel, had a remarkable resemblance to her sister as a younger woman.

As Emma Whorley read the yellowed, brittle book, the binding broke and it fell apart in her hands. While the archivist in her considered having the volume restored, another part of her had a epiphany about doing something quite different to the fragile object. Using black enamel paint, Emma began to apply simple, abstract floral patterns on each page of the book. She completed the designs with watercolors and colored pencil. This was her first of many series of book paintings. The designs recall textile patterns from Cambodia where Whorley had spent two years doing missionary work. Her style is also informed by her practice of doing needlepoint since she was a young girl.

While the alteration of books has precedence among Modern artists, particularly the Surrealists, Emma Whorley’s transformation of books was not a rebellious act but one of reverence for the meaning of the original text. By making visual images out of books, she hoped to compete with color television, which she believed was a cause of illiteracy.

Emma Whorley‘s best known work is her rendition on Herman Melville’s 19th century novel *Moby Dick*, now in the permanent collection of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, DC. She died at the age of ninety-one on June 3, 1998.

JUANITA RICHARDSON
DECATUR, GEORGIA

As a child Juanita Richardson lived above a tavern in Baltimore, Maryland. She learned to hate the smell of beer, associating it with drunken brawls, the acrid oder of urine and a life out of control. Her alcoholic uncle Henry Carson died when he steered his 1972 Cadillac into a bridge support. During the same summer her father, a sign painter who had a weakness for gin, left with the family station wagon, never to be seen again.

Juanita Richardson

Seeking a better life, her mother moved Juanita and her four siblings to Macon, Georgia, to live with relatives. While central Georgia was removed from the dangers of urban life, Juanita felt out of place in her new surroundings and embarrassed by her rural cousins. She was torn between the excitement of Baltimore and the stability of her new home.

Following her graduation from high school, Juanita moved to Atlanta where she took a job as a cake decorator at a Winn Dixie grocery store. It was here she began to think of herself as a visual artist.

Juanita first started painting beer bottles in 1985. As she claimed in an interview on WGCL, an Atlanta CBS affiliate, “I wanted to make something good come from something bad.” She mostly painted on returnable long neck bottles with the belief that turning them into art would mean they would no longer find a use as containers for alcohol.

Richardson painted a variety of subjects on bottles, including flowers, people, and animals. The Spelvins felt her boats were her strongest subject because they referenced her childhood experience of watching ships in the Baltimore harbor. The folk art critic Arthur Blade has written that her “bottle boats” represent a positive “re-imaging” of the African diaspora.

Twelve “Bottle Boats” from the Hokes Archives

LESTER DOWDEY
ALCOA, TENNESSEE


Lester Coleman Dowdey

Lester Coleman Dowdey made his first “limberjack” when his six-year-old niece Angela Cooper had a toothache. Using some discount paint and scrap lumber from the Lowes Building Materials where he worked, Dowdey created a puppet character with a sore tooth. Making the figure dance to his harmonica seemed to have a curative effect on the young Angela.

Word about his healing puppet travelled quickly throughout his neighborhood in Alcoa, Tennessee. Soon he was making varied puppets to cure ulcers, forgetfulness, arthritis, and other ailments. His most commonly used puppet was one he calls “Mr. Stop Smoking.”

Lester Dowdey’s uncle J. C. Burris had made limberjacks but used them to tell stories, often performing with them while playing his harmonica at folk music festivals. Unlike his uncle, Dowdey was never a professional musician.

Lester Coleman Dowdey’s limberjack puppets are an example of what anthropologists call “sympathetic magic,” which is based on the metaphysical belief that “like affects like.” It is the basis for most forms of divination, from palmistry and voodoo to the concept of karma. Even the Catholic practice of Communion to infuse the participant with divinity is a form of sympathetic magic.

Some anthropologists consider magical thinking a precursor to scientific thinking. It is indicative of a human concern with control over nature through understanding cause and effect. Examples of magical divination may be found in ancient India, Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome.

In 1989, Dowdey made a puppet to try and cure Willa Mae Polk of breast cancer. Despite her prior surgery and chemotherapy, Ms. Polk died three hours after Lester Dowdey’s limberjack danced at the foot of her bed. Feeling responsible for her death, he considered burning all of his puppets.

Instead, the following week he sold twenty of his limberjacks to George and Helen Spelvin.

LORETTA HOWARD
LEWISBURG, TENNESSEE


Loretta Howard

Loretta Howard was "brought up" to be a racist. Her maternal grandfather was a member of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and proudly displayed a portrait of Nathan Bedford Forrest in the living room. Howard's grandfather claimed to have participated in several lynchings in Rutherford County, Tennessee, during the 1930's and 1940's.

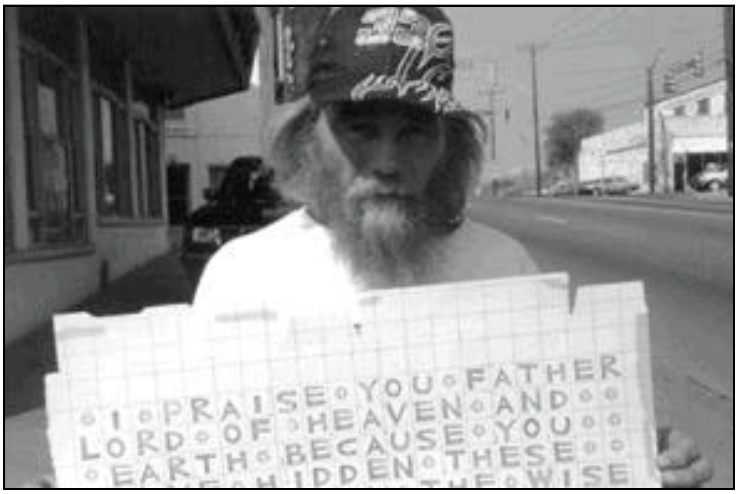
In 1982, at age of 36, Loretta Howard was abandoned by her husband of twelve years. With two children to raise, she was forced to enter the work place. Her first job as a cosmetics salesperson was short-lived. She then took a job as a shipping clerk at Shelbyville Printing that produces newspaper advertising inserts.

During her swing-shift dinner breaks, Loretta Howard developed friendships with her African-American co-workers. Her friend Mary Ellis, who had children the same age as the Howard girls, began inviting Loretta to join her at church and to attend family gatherings. Through their growing friendship, Loretta Howard began to confront her racist past.

In 1992 Loretta met Mary's father William Ellis, who was a freedom rider with Rev. Martin Luther King in 1960 and witnessed Dr. King's August 28, 1963 "I have a Dream" speech. Inspired by William Ellis' story, and out of shame for her own racism, Loretta Howard conceived of the "Inter-racial Rag Doll Friendship Chain." The piece began as a fifth grade Sunday School craft project. Adding to this project, Loretta created a compelling statement for tolerance and racial harmony. The completed work was carried in the 1995 Reverend Martin Luther King Day March in Nashville.

The rag doll friendship chain came to the attention of the Spelvins at a church rummage sale. Loretta sold the piece to the Spelvins when they made a generous contribution to the Southern Poverty Law Center in Alabama, a non-profit organization that combats discrimination through education and litigation.

MAX PRITCHARD
CORBIN, KENTUCKY



Max Pritchard

Max Pritchard found the Lord in 1986 at a Wafflehouse Restaurant in Berea, Kentucky. Mesmerized by the pattern of his oatbran waffle, Pritchard conceived of carving the twenty-six characters of the alphabet out of linoleum to produce a system to "hand-print the sacred word of God." Not a good student of history, Pritchard was unaware that Johannes Gutenberg (1398-1468) had used similar principles for printing the *Bible* over five hundred years before.

Pritchard was inspired by the life of Jesus, who could turn water into wine and could feed thousands of people from a single loaf of bread. Following Jesus' example, Pritchard transformed cereal and cracker boxes into biblical tracts. The most common cereal box he used was Nabisco Shredded Wheat.

In 1996 Max Pritchard discovered Promise Keepers, a Christian ministry dedicated to "uniting men through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world." On Saturday, Oct. 4, 1997, Promise Keepers convened a massive gathering in Washington, D.C., on the National Mall. Hundreds of thousands of Christians participated in "Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men." Pritchard was among them, but arrived late.

An avid NASCAR fan, ironically Pritchard did not own a car. It took him two days to hitchhike from Kentucky to attend the rally. Few drivers wanted to pick up a man carrying a bed roll and a stack of religious cereal boxes.

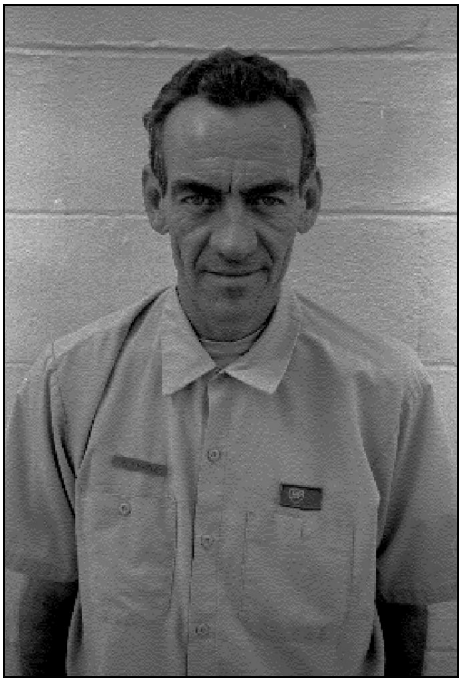
Max Pritchard felt out of place with the Promise Keepers, many of whom wore new clothes and carried cell phones. He wondered if Jesus Christ would own a cell phone and wear a business suit if he lived today.

Feeling slighted, he began to aggressively read aloud from his printed texts of new testament scriptures. Within a few minutes he was whisked away by security agents. After spending a night in the District of Columbia jail, Max Pritchard was placed on a bus to Lexington, Kentucky.

Since then he has never participated in any form of organized religion. He continues to print his religious tracts, often standing on street corners as a "human billboard for God."

P. J. HIPPLE
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

P. J. Hipple believes he always knew how to draw. As an eight and nine-year-old child he drew comic strips of invented superheros on mimeograph sheets using ball point pens. His mother, a secretary in a large trucking firm in Memphis, Tennessee, made mimeographic copies for the young P.J. which he gave away to friends at school. One of these comics was awarded a third place ribbon in the Student Art and Craft Competition at the Shelby County Fair in 1965.



P. J. Hipple

As a teenager, his interests turned to cars and girls. Hipple restored a 1954 Buick Special Riviera and fell in love with Cary Sue Blanton, whom he later married. He has admitted to "running with a rough crowd in high school," and was therefore tracked into vocational and shop courses. He later completing an Auto Technician Certificate through the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence.

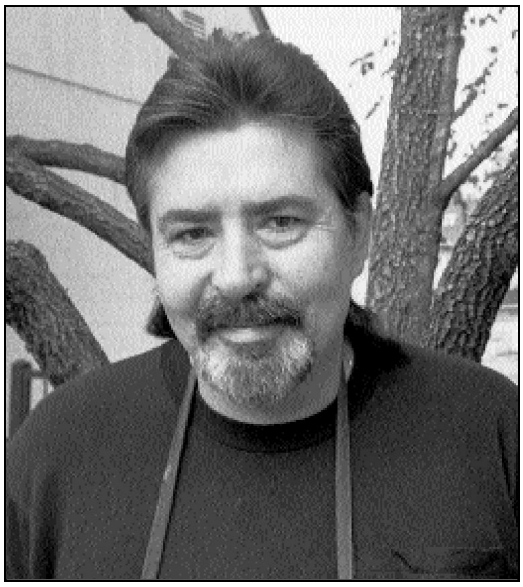
While he was working at Dobbs Ford, an engine fell on P. J. Hipple's left foot. Being forced to recuperate for over four months while receiving workman's compensation gave him the time to begin drawing again.

In most respects his drawing style had not changed much from almost twenty years before. With game shows and commercials in the background and advertising inserts from the daily paper strewn about him, P. J. Hipple made a series of "shopping mazes" on cream colored paper. Each drawing took him a week and required as many as two Pilot "fine-line" pens to complete. During his recuperation, he completed fifteen of these drawings.

When he recovered, P.J. Hipple returned to work at the Ford dealership. Three years later at his 20th high school reunion, he met Chad Carson, who studied illustration at the Memphis College of Art and Design. Carson took an interest in Hipple's drawings and sent slides of them to Art Directors in Memphis and Nashville. Unfortunately, nothing came from this effort.

As the manager of the West Junction BP gas station, he seldom has time to draw. In 1995 George and Helen Spelvin bought six of the "shopping mazes" from Mr. Hipple at "The Big One" Flea Market at the Mid-South Fairgrounds in Memphis.

RUFUS MARTINEZ
TUCKERTOWN, SOUTH CAROLINA


Rufus Martinez

Rufus "Sparks" Martinez was twenty-eight years old when Dean Hunt picked him up hitch-hiking just east of Orangeburg, South Carolina. Martinez, who made a sporadic living as a migrant worker on peanut plantations, melon farms and peach orchards, was hoping to catch a ride to Leesville where he heard there was work on a fencing crew. At the time, Martinez was an illegal alien who could only work "under the table," often at rates below minimum wage. Dean Hunt opened a door to another life for Rufus Martinez.

For over twenty years Dean Hunt had operated a successful pottery near Spartanburg. As a younger man, Hunt had traveled in Mexico and was fairly conversant in Spanish. He took an immediate liking to Martinez, and before dropping him off in Leesville, offered him a job as his assistant. Martinez knew almost nothing about pottery when he accepted the offer.

Dean Hunt's motivation to hire Rufus Martinez was not as pure as it appeared. He had employed a series of college ceramics students, most of whom were unwilling to put up with the twelve-hour, non-stop work days. In contrast, Martinez knew the meaning of work and quickly adapted to the physical routine of his new employer.

After six months of wedging clay, scraping kiln shelves, stacking and unstacking kilns and mixing glazes, Hunt showed Martinez how to throw pottery. While his hands were toughened from years of farm labor, Martinez had a natural affinity for directing the soft, wet clay on the spinning potters wheel.

Martinez accompanied Hunt to various arts and craft fairs. At one of these events he was introduced to the face jugs of Lanier Meaders. On his return home, Mr. Martinez began to create his own version which he calls "mug jugs." With a stylistic affinity to Aztec figures, these pots are a unique rendition of a traditional southern ceramic art form.

In 1987 Dean Hunt helped Rufus Martinez establish Mexican Tile Works and Pottery. Martinez is now a citizen of the United States and a successful small business owner. While his "mug jugs" continue to be popular, his tortilla warmers are his biggest selling item.