

THE PHENOMENAL VARIATION OF JIM COSTA'S COLLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Zoe Elizabeth van Buren:
The Phenomenal Variation of Jim Costa's Collection
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson)

This thesis explores the work of Jim Costa, a collector and restorer of 18th and 19th century handmade work tools and material culture in Summers County, West Virginia. Based on a collaborative documentary project with Jim, this thesis highlights one of his collection's central themes of "phenomenal variation," a term Jim uses to describe the unlimited scope and potential for human creativity as evidenced by the infinite aesthetic and pragmatic variations of the handmade. I explore Jim's collection and restoration work as communicative practices that evoke not only historical memory, but also a more timeless concern for human nature itself. This thesis engages questions of material culture, nostalgia, collections, and laborlore, using ethnographic methodology to complicate and expand upon the question of how the past lives in the present, and how concern for old things may also be concern for ourselves and our futures.

For Jim

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Figure 1. Jim Costa in his blacksmith's shop.

PRELUDE

Forest Hill, Summers County, West Virginia

Summer, 2016

At three o'clock in the morning, Jim Costa awakened to put an axe head in the fire. The axe head is small, no bigger than a postcard, and rusted to a pale yellow-gray roughness. When he traded for it with a friend, in exchange for a split-oak bottom chair, its eye had been fitted with a long narrow handle, too long for a pole axe like this one and not suited to its purpose. But Jim had eyed it for years, and on the summer day that I had arrived to document the collection of tools he keeps, it had finally come to him. It was the first thing he showed me as I stepped onto the porch of his cabin to greet him. Jim suspected that it would have hung from the belt of a man called John Ellison some 175 years ago—it never left the Ellison farm on Hans Creek, eight miles from Jim's home in neighboring Monroe County.

On the day of my arrival, Jim had broken off the end of the mistaken handle, but the splintered wood lodged in the eye of the iron head—wedged in place with an old cut nail—would not budge. The next morning, Jim told me that the night before, lying awake in the warmth of the summer, he could not put the axe out of his mind. He rose to place it in a citric acid solution that he learned about from a friend who had worked in the local water treatment plant. In his kitchen, Jim filled a Tupperware dish with two cups of water and a heaping tablespoon of citric acid, and placed the axe head in it to soak.



Figure 2. John Ellison's hatchet, before restoration.

He returned to bed, he told me, and as he slept the acid ate away at the rust, until it became a gritty slime that he would wipe away. In a few hours, Jim rose again. The metal was clean, but gray, and Jim returned the axe from the kitchen to the main room in which he sleeps, and placed it in the embers of the hearth.

As the little axe head began to glow, the flames cleansed and darkened it as they licked the metal surface. The remains of the handle burned up and crumbled from the axe's eye. In a charcoal bed, just 200 degrees of heat will flake away the heaviest rust. For a few more minutes, Jim slept, until the coals had done their work and he was ready to pluck the little axe from the embers. He set it to rest, until it would be cool enough to the touch that he could fetch a small steel brush and rub the last of the rust from the surface, pitted but dark and clean.

Days before, standing over the array of hatchets he had brought to me to photograph on our first day of documentation, Jim explained his methods and wondered how he might choose to clean this new Ellison hatchet. We stood around the dining room table in his son's house where I had been staying, just next door to Jim's cabin. I had set up a makeshift photo studio in the little room, with two umbrella lights, a tripod, and a ladder clustered around the paper-draped table. Jim, a man of medium build, his white hair swept across his forehead and his beard trimmed close, adjusted his round wire-rimmed glasses. With my audio recorder on, Jim spoke quickly but rhythmically, each point precisely and emphatically formed as he turned the hatchets over in his hands to consider them individually.

I'm a great person for restoration because
 I want to see these pieces to go on beyond *my* lifetime.
And, to me,
 in restoring them,
 you see the physical *character* of these pieces.
To me one old rusted item looks like another rusted item.
And I like to see, again—
 you find marks,
 you find names,
 you see construction techniques.
That's all hidden by all that heavy rust.
And I like to *handle* these pieces.
...
I have taken old broken up axe handles,
 say a big axe handle was broken,
 I'll just re-shave it, *repurpose* it, you know,
 and make it fit these pieces.
But I like people to see them in a *functional* stage, you know.
The way they would have been.¹

¹ From a conversation with Jim Costa on June 6, 2016. Future citations from Jim will be referenced in-text by their date and sequence. The lined transcription of speech used selectively throughout this thesis is known as "ethnopoetics." The concept was first developed by Dell Hymes, who argued for a way of recording narratives that preserves those patterns and rhythms of speech which display communicative competence, structural meaning, and the affective qualities of voice that are easily lost in print. "Human beings generally have ways of giving shape and point to narratives, ways that seem almost inherent in language" (Hymes, 1996, p. 191). Where I employ ethnopoetics, I hope to draw the reader to a more affective experience of Jim's speaking style,

In the morning, Jim took the little pole axe to his board-and-batten blacksmith shop across his yard. In the shop, Jim keeps crates of other hand-forged pole axes much like this one. He has restored each with the same care as this newest find, and he knows what sets each one apart from the others. Here, soon, he will see about that mistaken handle, and replace it with one from his collection of short handles for hatchets and axes, some original, some of his own making. With a clean head and a fitting handle, John Ellison's axe will be returned to its proper form—the way its maker intended it to be.

and to read quotations as full narratives. Line breaks indicate pauses for pacing, indentations indicate the pacing of layers of syntax within a clause, and italics indicate emphasis.



Figure 3. John Ellison's hatchet, after restoration.

CHAPTER ONE

“A Great Person for Restoration:” An Introduction

This thesis is both a portrait of Jim during our summer together and a reconsideration of the interplay between old things, the communicative power of collections, and an individual who stewards them through the present. Jim and I were first introduced in the spring of 2016, through the West Virginia Humanities Council’s folklorist Emily Hilliard; she had spoken with Jim about documenting his collection, but knew that his assemblage was so vast that it would take months to even scratch the surface. Being a weaver, knitter, and hand-spinner myself, raised in a family of handy types, I was drawn to the idea of a collection full of useful things that provoke feeling and creativity. In March, I went to visit Jim at his home to see the massive collection he has assembled of old tools and furnishings and relics of mountain life that predate the advent of modern manufacturing. We made plans then that I would return in the summer, and that together we would embark on the task of documenting his collection and the histories of labor and creativity that Jim tells through each piece he has collected and carefully restored to functionality. Drawn from our summer together, this thesis explores Jim’s profound respect for the skill of makers and good materials. In their uniquely vast scope, Jim’s assemblages reveal the infinitely varied aesthetics of work done by hand. Although each object is rooted in the past, Jim stewards them together into the future so that they may last beyond his own time, and continue to testify to the practice, aesthetics, and ethics of our collective creative potential.

The Collection

Jim's home sits on an oblong piece of land between the slope of a mountain and the unruly banks of the Greenbrier River, in a community called Forest Hill. Spread across his property in workshops and outbuildings, Jim's collection is vast, complex, and so thorough that he considers it to be essentially complete. It represents the material culture of nearly every aspect of rural agrarian, domestic, and workshop labor in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, accumulated almost entirely from estate sales, auctions, junk shops, and local families in the central Appalachians of West Virginia, western Virginia, and southwestern Pennsylvania. Inside the 19th century cabin he restored himself, Jim's relics become part of his everyday life, with hand woven baskets hanging from the rafters, fiddles and banjos lining the log walls, and cast iron skilletts living their ninth or tenth lives sizzling over his replica vintage stove.

As a lifetime resident of Summers County, Jim has learned not only from books and antique dealers, but also from oral history and the recollections of old folks he grew up knowing. His collection may map the material culture of 18th and 19th century West Virginia, but those objects given to him by friends and neighbors chart the relationships he has had in his own life, and those that have come before.

Only half of Jim's collection can be seen. The other half lives in his head, in the intimate knowledge he holds for each and every object that has ever passed through his hands, and in his interest in the families that carried them down through the years. His collection provokes imaginative reflection on both the mechanics and the ethics of skill and self-sufficiency, and what Archie Green describes as the social life affected by visions of labor (Green, 1965, p. 68).

Summers County and its seat, Hinton, were established in the 1870s and '80s to serve an expansion of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company along the New River. The relatively

late introduction of a railroad line to the area fostered a long culture of self-sufficiency and reliance on local tradespeople, the last of whom Jim knew in his own youth. Today, the railroad that runs through Hinton is in steep decline, made obsolete by automobiles and the sunset of coal. Jobs are few and far between. “The factory versions of course start being produced and nobody makes anything by hand anymore,” Jim explained. “It puts you out of work. It’s another example of how people are put out of an occupation” (June 8, 2016). Jim said he will collect every version of each type of tool up through the first factory made model, but it is the handmade objects that speak to him and populate his life. Jim is deeply versed in the patterns of trade and production that moved goods in and out of the mountain South. His collection displays its widest breadth of creative possibilities in the moments before the standardization and mass distribution of an industry, before the need for handwork and the diversity of vernacular design diminished with the flattening ubiquity of mechanization and cheap materials.

Jim is attuned to the minute details of the handmade. He told me that he began to notice the small differences, the aesthetic variations that set an object apart from others of its type, in his early years while repairing the tiny mechanics of clocks and guns. He has honed his eye for the diversity of form in everyday things that are conceived by the head and made by the hand of an individual, wholly unique in personality but taught and influenced by a dynamic social and environmental world. “I was always amazed at the variations of skill level in them,” he said of the great wheels we had set out on his lawn a few days before. Each had been fitted with a tensioning device similar in function but unique in design from the last, differently conceived in each maker’s understanding of how best to do something. “I just really get caught up in that thing of aesthetics. . . . It gets redundant, but it’s not redundant if you look at it in the context that

I do” (July 27, 2016). If there is no such thing as a redundant human, there is no redundancy in the handmade either.



Figure 4. Jim explains the subtle variations in spokes, tensioning devices, and drive wheel posts on his great wheel collection. Some of these personal touches improve function, while others are decorative choices.

In this way, Jim has created a collection of what he has called “phenomenal variation”: a cacophony of unique but like types that are muted when seen on their own, but rich with significance when held together.² This variation emerges in expected and unexpected ways.

² It is worth noting that the word “phenomenal” can be meant in two ways: As an intensifier, meaning amazing or incredible, and also as a reference to the observable world, in the sense of the “phenomenological.” While Jim uses the word in the former sense, it is a meaningful coincidence that he should so often use a word that is also anchored in the observable qualities of the material world—the tangible qualities of objects that testify to the intangible qualities of their makers.

While the cut-out shapes in apple butter churner paddles, or the painted motifs on handmade dulcimers, are easily recognized as expressive design choices, perhaps even as folk art, Jim values the aesthetic diversity of even the most quotidian and utilitarian things he collects. He keeps a drawer of handmade corn shuckers, for example, and as he laid them out by the dozens on his kitchen counter to show them to me, he explained that that these small tools of everyday work are as close to touching these old folks as one could ever get. Each one by itself is a corn shucker. Together, they are the limitless varieties of creative possibility.

Theoretical Perspectives

This thesis engages scholarship on material culture, nostalgia, collections, and laborlore, within and beyond the field of folklore, and uses ethnographic methodology to complicate and expand upon the question of how the past lives in the present. Historian David Lowenthal has argued that the past is a foreign country, a place in which we do not live (Lowenthal, 2015). Seen through the experience of Jim's collection, I push against the idea of the past as an inaccessible Other, or a dangerous fantasy. Instead, ethnographically approaching practices and affects of collection and feeling for the past can sensitize and destabilize overly-scripted critical approaches to the functions of the past in the present. This requires us to do as folklorist Henry Glassie asks and "get up, go out, and find the things that will help us learn how others manage in the world we share" (Glassie 1999, p. 3).

A vernacular creativity—vital, skilled, and vividly unruly—reveals itself in both hand-manufacture and the restorative work of Jim's collection. I temper the seeming orderliness of "collection" with an appreciation for the unruliness of passion that drives Jim's life's work. Feelings of interest, wonder, and responsibility can be overwhelming, consuming, and mysterious to even those who know them best. These are the affects, felt daily, that Kathleen

Stewart argues “are more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings. They are not the kind of analytic object that can be laid out on a single, static plane of analysis” (Stewart 2007, p. 3). An ethic of respect, recognition, and wonder for labor and ability draws Jim, and those to whom he connects, into a kind of moral universe that resists analytical flattening.

I am greatly influenced by folklorist Ray Cashman’s work on grassroots collectors and critical nostalgia in Northern Ireland, particularly for his work in re-formulating an ethnographically informed approach to nostalgia that rejects academic distance and detachment (Cashman 2006). However, while Jim and his collection certainly do communicate a positive evaluation of the past in light of the rapidly changing present, I refrain from assuming that Jim’s collection exists in order to “critique” the modern condition, or to overtly incite particular thought or action. Instead, by ensuring the non-erasure of rural lives, human creativities, and skillful intentionality, Jim’s collection and the life he lives with it carve out a space for the moral universe of the skills of self-sufficiency. Jim’s respect for human skill leads me to ask instead how concern for the past can restore value and remind of possibilities, rather than argue against the present.

On vernacular design in Scottish basketry, social anthropologist Stephanie J. Bunn argues that “the concern for skill evinced here [by non-practitioners of craft] is not primarily one of nostalgia, but one that reaches further into practice, knowledge, and the kinds of social memory that we hold in our bodies” (Bunn 2015, p. 37). Jim’s collection does not deny the possibility of analogous work and skill in the present; reading into skill, in all its degrees and manifestations, is a portal to social history, ongoing and inclusive of our own contemporary lives. “There are also more ways than one of thinking about past time,” argues material culture scholar Judy Attfield.

“The context and the purpose of recollecting, recording, reconstructing or memorialising the past does, of course, introduce a degree of contingency which negates the possibility of reaching a single accurate version — what among historians used, at *one time*, to be called an ‘authoritative’ interpretation” (Attfield 2000, p. 233). Rather than generating “a fixed historical representation,” borrowing from Bunn (2015, p. 38), Jim’s concern and reverence for variation has produced an inclusive, flexible, and multi-vocal display of local history.

Jim’s collection is not static, and his work with it is a daily practice, a creative and often meditative expression. During our summer project, I was interested in documenting not only how he stores and arranges his collection, but also how it is itself the product of Jim’s own skill and labor. Standing in the shade of his back porch, I watched and filmed as Jim fitted a new handle in an old axe head, repainted a mowing cradle to its original orange color, or varnished a wooden parlor table. As Jim restores each object that he obtains, he himself becomes a part of its story. The contents of his collection are patinated with meaning not only by age but also by the efforts and sentiments of those like Jim who have stewarded them through the years.

The work of tradition is done by many hands, but tradition-bearers are often defined as individuals steeped in a single genre or practice. Among artists and performers, there are also those who appreciate, collect, and communicate about the work of others. These stewards are as much a part of the driving force of tradition as dedicated tradespeople and artisans. Collectors and enthusiasts are more than auxiliary players in the transmission of knowledge, practice, and style through time. Enthusiasts who keep, display, and receive knowledge can be critical holders of metaknowledge without themselves becoming full practitioners.

Similarly, stewards of the past may be generalists rather than specialists, engaging with systems of work and life beyond single genres of practice or occupation. Like the pioneers he

admires, who had to generalize to survive, Jim is himself a multi-faceted fabricator with a broad toolkit of skills that enable him to accomplish any work he sets out to do. He is part of a tradition of generalization itself, defined by the ability to be “jack-of-all-trades.”

Jim leaves imprints of himself on the objects he preserves. Much of Jim’s collection is marked with two dates: the date of manufacture, and the date he restored it, printed in black sharpie or tied with a label, signed with his initials “JVC” to credit his own hand in their preservation “in case they end up in California or something,” as Jim once mentioned. The boundary between himself and his collection blurs, the identity of each object linked closely to his own. But Jim restores with an eye for functionality and original aesthetic intent, compelled by a sense that the stories these tools represent are larger than any one life. “Something has survived that long, and I was just compelled to see it survive longer, beyond my period of life,” Jim said. “Especially, that’s why I’m so much into restoration, fixing these things, stabilizing and restoring them. . . . Whether they’re ever used or not, again, they have survived, they’ve been restored, and they’re functional” (July 27, 2016). The labor of restoration layers on top of the labor of original craftsmanship, and includes restorers and caretakers like Jim in the material culture and lifespan of an object.

As Jim has learned how to see individuality in the material world, and has learned how to fix and repair everything from fiddles to buildings, he has learned how to understand and do the work he admires in others. Although he does not count himself as equal to the mentors who have taught him traditional trades and knowledge throughout his life, Jim’s restoration of the past is an act of creativity in the present. As Jim works and literally lives amongst his collection, transferring objects from workshop to home and back as he determines his need to access or use them, his embodiment is an integrated part of the collection itself, as a conductor to a chorus.

Attfield writes that social relations are enacted through the material world, manifested in things that are experienced through both the body and the arc of time. While the individuality of human bodies has been conceptualized in material terms as a means of expression, “the material world also has effects on people[.] [I]t stores memories and interrupts the flow of time to restore a sense of continuity as well as to reflect change and contain complex and apparently irreconcilable differences” (Attfield 2000, p. 264). Jim himself is the link that connects each object to their reason for being in the present. His work not only restores structural integrity, but also the context of understanding in which each piece has a reason for being, a line in a larger story about both the past and the human-material possibilities that will never be past. Jim has no interest in patinas of rust and neglect that show age before purpose and the maker’s original intent. Cleaned, repaired, and set against others of its kind, the whole of his collection underscores the phenomenal individuality of the one in relation to the functional universe of the many. As Jim invites others onto his property, brings pieces of his collection to educational events, and shares his knowledge with those who will lend an ear, he links the stories within his collection with those in the present who surround him. Jim’s collection of things and histories form a story about the landscape around him, storing memory and forging continuity.

Attfield (2000) argues that the modern world is made human through the interactivity of everyday manufactured objects. Similarly, the past is made human through the continual interactivity of its physical remains. The past may be a foreign country, but it is still a human place. We cannot go to it, but it is perpetually coming to us.

Chapter Outline

Reflecting on lessons learned from Jim and his collection, my first chapter introduces Jim and asks what drives him to assemble and care for a collection of such variety. While situating

him and his collection in their particular place and time, I draw from our interviews and two months spent in daily company together to contemplate Jim's influences, his vision, and his affective experience of his life's work.

Turning then to the contents of his collection, the following chapter explores Jim's universe of handmade variation and the ethics and aesthetics communicated through both the physical dimensions of Jim's collection and his narratives about it. I ask how Jim's assemblage constitutes a unique view of the past and a larger view of life, and how Jim illuminates functionality, variation, and material in the collection to reveal that vision. I illustrate how Jim's attunement to the aesthetic variations of the handmade make him witness to the possibilities of human and material potential, evidenced by the past, affected by changing systems, but ultimately undiminished by time.

In the final chapter, I return to the life that Jim leads in and through his collection, and how he himself, as steward, creator, and teacher, stands at the interstices of the past and the present. I explore his role as a teacher and mentor to others, and the various ways in which he communicates his collection's meaning to the outside world. Lastly, I consider how the collection is integrated into Jim's everyday life, where he savors the affective experience of his work as well as the challenges of responsibility to it. The collection's deep integration into Jim's life and self makes it a powerful place of communication, teaching, and wonder—the collection is both a source of personal enjoyment and a way of acting in the world.

Methodological Note

I consider the project that Jim and I shared as its own expressive activity, an extended storytelling event in which Jim's collection was arranged into combinations and permutations of its components according to the direction of our mutual interest. I attempted to avoid a directorial

role, and repeatedly deferred to Jim's expertise and desires to see one collection documented before another. However, our friendship was deepened by shared enthusiasm for each other's personal interests and hobbies, and our daily conversations often determined which parts of his collection would jump into Jim's mind. I am reflected in every turn of events and every arrangement of objects laid out for discussion, whether actively through my explicit requests to see his spinning wheels and sewing notions, or passively through my intention to never refuse any of Jim's suggestions. In light of this, and my relatively short appearance in Jim's life, this thesis does not claim to represent Jim's collection in its entirety. Neither does it claim to be anything near a complete narrative of Jim's life, relationships, and motivations. Instead, I offer a discussion of Jim's collection as he opened it to me, of his activities to the extent that he included me, and of the expressive communication of his work as I saw it unfold. Michael Owen Jones argues that "the procedure of focusing on the activities themselves, and of submitting one's own thoughts and acts to critical assessment, is needed especially when a researcher is part of the data base" (Jones 1975, p. 210), as he was in his work with chairmakers in southeastern Kentucky and I am in this telling of Jim Costa—historian, star, and renaissance man.

CHAPTER TWO

“That Stuff Just Fascinated Me:” The Making of a Collector

Summers County, West Virginia

Jim was born James Vincent Costa on July 29th, 1949, to Vincenzo “Jimmy” Coste and Hellen Jones Coste³ of Bellepoint, West Virginia, a small community below the Bluestone Dam on the New River, near the towns of Hinton and Talcott. Hinton, the seat of Summers County in the southwestern corner of the state, just an hour from the Virginia line, sits on a bend in the New River just above its convergence with the Greenbrier. About 2,500 people live in houses sloping up the side of the mountain above the town and snaking down along the riverside into Bellepoint below, where the two rivers carve away at the eroding banks. From bridge across the northern tip of Bellepoint, one can see the two rivers meeting, the muddy Greenbrier pushing against the crisp blue of the New.

Hinton and its county were formed to serve the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company as it carried coal, timber, and passengers through the mountains and across the country. At the end of the Civil War, the entire territory of what is now Summers County had been owned by two families, the Ballengees and the Hintons. Without a railroad, Jim explains, the area still

³ Jim’s father changed the spelling of the family name from Costa to Coste, and sometimes Cost, in an effort to Americanize and conceal their Italian roots. Jim changed the spelling back to Costa. According to Jim, the early 20th century was a difficult time to be an Italian Catholic immigrant in the area. The Costa family were considered “undesirables,” Jim explained, and a woman on their street once called the Ku Klux Klan to burn a cross in the family’s front yard. (July 27, 2016.)

supported a vital local system of tradespeople and small workshops long after such networks had vanished in better connected areas of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Manufactured goods made their way through the mountains on long, expensive trips by Conestoga wagons and packhorses. “So still,” Jim explained to me, holding an axe made in a local blacksmith’s shop, “we’re out here in the backwoods, so to speak. It’s still very practical for a blacksmith, and he can sell these axes. He doesn’t have the competition yet of all these manufactured axes” (June 10, 2016). In the tumultuous post-war years, the C&O Railroad plotted a rail route through the area, and began lobbying for the eventual 1871 creation of Summers County. In nearby Talcott, the Great Bend Tunnel, dug through the mountain for the C&O, is said to be the site of John Henry’s contest against the mechanized drill, and an imposing statue of the legend himself stands, gripping a hammer, in front of the cold, blustery opening of the now defunct tunnel. Today, the Norfolk Southern Railway runs through a new tunnel, built only yards to the left of the John Henry tunnel. By the time of its formal incorporation in 1880, Hinton had gone from three houses to an up and coming city of 1,000 people. Through the turn of the 20th century, Hinton became a prosperous and rapidly developing hub of commerce and culture, boasting the only opera house between Washington, DC, and Cincinnati, Ohio.

The downturn of coal and the decline of passenger trains in favor of private automobiles changed Hinton’s fortunes in the years of Jim’s youth. In the mid 1950s, the C&O trains switched from coal-fired steam power to diesel, rendering hundreds of Hinton railroad workers obsolete nearly overnight (Trail, 2013). Jim remembers Hinton as a peaceful and happy place to grow up, but today, economic challenges push young people out of the region to look for work. On the eve of the Great Depression, 70 percent of working people in Hinton were homeowners (Long, n.d.), but in 2016 seasonal tourism drives the economy, camps and summer homes dot the

banks of the Greenbrier and New Rivers, and many of the downtown businesses are shuttered and silent. “Jobs, jobs, jobs,” promises a campaign poster on the road from Hinton to Jim’s property. “Tired of being 50th?” reads another. In downtown Hinton, a handful of small businesses hold fast to their hope for the town’s future.

The Costas

Jim’s mother came from an old Anglo-Saxon family in Summers County, and his father was born in West Virginia to a family of recently arrived Italian immigrants. “His parents had come here,” Jim said. “And my grandfather, who was a shoemaker, he learned the trade in the old country, when he come over here with his father and his brother, I think as early as 1898 or 99; they were working in the woods then. But he eventually settled in Hinton in 1918, my dad’s father, and went to his trade of shoemaking again. And he could do any kind of leather work, harness work, whatever needed to be done. And in those days, there were like a thousand men laboring in the shops in Hinton. It was a big railroad town, population was probably about 7,000—today it may be 2,500, 3,000” (July 27, 2016).

In the late 1890s, Jim’s great-grandfather, his grandfather Lario, and his great-uncle Joe began to make trips from their native Calabria, Italy, to find temporary work in America. At Ellis Island, Jim explains, agents for timber companies paid new arrivals to work the timber woods of West Virginia. They travelled from Calabria to West Virginia four or five times, where his great-grandfather plied his blacksmithing trade and his grandfather worked as a foreman on a crew of Italian railroad men, building rail grades for Thomas and John Raine’s logging railroad. “He and an Italian crew helped build the railroad grade for a little spur line that was called the Sewell Valley Railroad. And boy if you can find any relics from that railroad, it’s rare stuff” (July 27, 2016). In the spring of 1914, the Costas settled permanently in West Virginia, bringing over their

wives and children. Six months later, Jim's father was born in Fayette County, and by 1918 the family had relocated to Hinton, where his grandfather was finally able to quit public works and return to the cobbling trade.

Jim describes his father as a progressive and modern man, an admirer of Thomas Edison, Michael Farraday, and the pioneers of flight. He was always the first to own new technology, Jim recalls, and before opening an electronics store in Hinton, he had worked as a technician for the government, installing radar in aircraft. Both Jim and his father were handy people, and consummate tinkerers, but they were cut from a different cloth. "He wasn't one to much talk about the past," Jim said, "and he just was always ever-present, in the present, pretty much. Dad was like that. We never had any set-down long talks about [the past]— my grandfather, his father, and I did. Of course he was gone by the time I was 16, my dad's father. But yeah, Dad was very much in the present" (July 27, 2016).

Jim's mother Helen had attended business school, and later opened several antique stores, first in Bellepoint and later in Lewisburg, with another small shop at a nearby airport. Her people, the Joneses, were a longstanding family in the area. Helen—the daughter of a railroad conductor and a school teacher—was born in the small community of Upland on Elk Knob mountain above Hinton. The Jones family sold their land to move down to Hinton when Helen was four years old, and she spent her youth in the Bellepoint community where Jim would later be raised.

With his grandparents on both sides so close by, Jim grew up around the objects that they had carried with them through life.

Both my grandfathers had old bureaus—what they called a bureau or chest of drawers—in their bedrooms. And both of them had a drawer that had been a catch-all for all these old things from worn out pocket watches and insignia on my grandad Jones' side. All these old railroad insignia, and switch keys from the

railroad and political buttons, and just all kinds of old stuff like that. . . . My grandfather Costa did the same way. He had a drawer. They didn't mind. I'd just pull it out and look at all this, and for some reason I was intrigued with all this stuff. And my grandfather Jones had more of it, and I would pull his big old drawer out and pull it all out and lay it all out on the floor. (July 27, 2016)

In his grandfather Jones' garage, "Grandmother kept her canned goods and stuff all in jars. And there was things in there like old oil lamps and old sad irons they used to heat on the top of the stove. And that stuff just fascinated me. And even before Mom had an antique shop" (July 27, 2016). Jim recalls throwing a tantrum until his grandmother Jones let him keep a worn old apple butter kettle she kept in the garage. His collection was beginning.

Learning to Mend

"I just had this thing of cleaning things up, I don't know why," Jim said. "And I like to take things apart. There's some home footage of me when I'm about three or four years old, and I picked up a screwdriver and Dad had a little old air compressor. And it was there on the driveway and I started trying to take the screws out of it. I'm there in my diaper, can't hardly stand up, and I've got this big screwdriver. It's just so strange" (July 23, 2016).

As Jim entered his teenage years, he became fascinated by old muzzle loading fire arms. At twelve years old, he started to take them apart and repair them, learning his way around the tiny mechanisms until older people took notice. "Then I started fixing guns for other people," Jim recalled. "Old family relics they'd had that were dysfunctional. The main springs were broken, they weren't fireable, or functioned in any form. So I'd clean them up and refinish the stocks and clean the gun barrels out and make a ramrod for them if it was missing, and repair the gun lock or the triggers until whether they ever shot it again, it was *functional*" (July 27, 2016).

At the same time, Jim was learning how to play fiddle and banjo from older mentors. But in order to have an instrument of his own, he needed to restore one himself.

The first banjo I got was pretty much part. It wasn't in playable condition. My mentor had played it and then it just kind of sat around and lost the keys. So I was about fifteen and I'd already worked on stuff, so I thought here's something else I've never worked on, but I'll figure something out. . . . So I just started learning little things like that on my own. And again, a lot of it was out of necessity because if I was going to have a banjo, I never thought of buying a new one. And I had this old piece of one. I figured, well, it's like some of these other old things I'd fixed up by that time. I figured it could be resurrected and made into a playable instrument. (July 23, 2016)

At fourteen, Jim bought an old farm wagon. "I thought my father would have a fit," Jim says. "He comes home from work, and there's this big four horse wagon setting in the driveway, you know. What in the hell are you going to do with that!" Jim had bought it off of a neighbor, a retired railroad superintendent who restored player pianos and pump organs. Jim still has a photograph of himself at fourteen, thick black rimmed glasses on his face, brush in hand, painting the wagon its original bright hue of poppy orange-red. Jim kept the wagon until it sold, but a wagon is a difficult thing to keep. "I said I just can't get into wagons and buggies. They're great but somebody else is going to have to collect those things." Instead, Jim used his gun repair skills to begin working on old clocks.

About 1972 or 3, the first old clock I got. And I had an old fellow show me the fundamentals. He was a jewelry man, worked really good with watches, but he had worked on clocks but he didn't like to work on them anymore. And he said, 'I'll show you the fundamentals of this mechanism.' He said, 'This is a good clock to learn on because it's a simplistic form,' but he said 'Once you know this form, you'll know the more complex forms of these mechanisms.' So anyway he showed me what I needed to do to restore this old clock and make it functional. It's sitting on my mantle-board right now. First one I ever got. So anyway that was kind of how— I had some older fellows. (July 27, 2016)

Hand-To-Hand: The Older Fellows

Jim's parents sent him to a nearby military school when he was a teenager. He jokes that they wanted him to stop spending all his time hunting and fishing and spending time with old people. From these early years, Jim surrounded himself with older friends and mentors,

immersing himself in a cultural environment of traditional tradesmen who had worked the tools that Jim was beginning to collect. Jim would not go on to become a blacksmith, or a carpenter, or to work for the railroad, but the influence of his early mentors set the course of his life.

“You live in a cultural environment,” Glassie (1993) writes, “and the air you breathe circulates through you to emerge in actions that are yours alone but can be called traditional because you created them out of the general experience of life in some place. Your works will be like those created by others who breathe the same air.” Glassie (1993) suggests that tradition can be “centered, not on the fact of transfer, but on the act of creating unavoidably in the atmosphere of influence” (p. 529). Indeed, Jim suggests that his life’s work has had a certain inevitability. During our first drive together to his weekly jam session in Narrows, VA, Jim related the skills of his forefathers to me. “I got it through my blood,” he guessed.

Nevertheless, Jim has always benefited from the fact of transfer, that which he learned or received from his relationships with others. Insofar as tradition has a physical form, it is the material representation of human relationships. When folklorists speak about the process of hand-to-hand transference, it becomes “a metaphor for the transmission of metaknowledge along with the practice itself: what it means, how it is to be used, everything that is shaven off when it is packaged as a product or an entry in a database” (Noyes 2009, p. 248). Jim has spent his lifetime seeking those shavings of metaknowledge lost in the reduction of the past’s legacies only to physical things. The elders in Jim’s community handed some old things down to Jim, but it was their knowledge and memories that were invaluable, and allowed Jim to find meaningful “relics” amongst the decontextualized flotsam of flea markets and house sales.

And I found all these basically at flea markets and homesteads, because again I knew what I was looking for and what I was looking at when I saw them. I knew what they were, I’d educated myself. And some things, it’s obvious what they are, or it is to me. Some things you learn from older people who have just given you

these oral descriptions, and these descriptions were so well—they would stay in my mind and as soon as I'd see an item, I'd say, "Okay that was described to me, I know exactly what that piece is. I know exactly what it is." Because of having a conversation with some old-timer on a specific topic, and they would describe things to you. (June 20-a, 2016)

Jim told the story, for instance, of Old Man Vansickle, one of his first mentors, who worked for the C&O Railroad and kept a woodworking shop in his basement. "Mom and Dad, from age 15 on, if they wanted to know where I was after school, you could figure I was over at Vansickle's shop. . . . He was a hunter and a fisherman and he had this great woodworking shop, and he let me do anything I wanted to" (July 27, 2016). Jim still has a copy of an interview he did in his early twenties with the Vansickles as they reminisced about their elders and exchanged funny stories. Jim keeps recordings of his elder neighbors and relatives reflecting on their long lives, good stories, and everyday work. Others have relied on Jim as a conduit between the generations. One of his oral histories was later transcribed by a group of students for a summer youth theater program in Hinton. "They were interesting people, all those older people that I knew," Jim said (July 27, 2016).

Jim attended Concord College for a year until he was accepted into the Glenville State College forestry program, but he never went. Instead, he married a girl from an old local family in 1970 and had a son named Larry, after his father Lario. Jim worked briefly in a liquor store, and continued to clerk in his father's electronics store, occasionally setting up antennae on old country houses too remote for cable TV. All the while, Jim played fiddle and banjo for programs around the state and refinished and repaired antiques. The seed that had been planted in those early days of sifting through his grandparents' things had begun to take flower, and what had begun with guns and clocks began to expand.

You know you start finding out that they had accessories, so then you start learning about the accessories, and yeah it just snowballs, it just keeps snowballing. When I was finding gun stuff, well I was totally oblivious to spinning wheels and looms. It was like, it just wasn't in the make of my interest at that early time. But then everything of that era became important to me, and when I would see something and understand what I was looking at, and gee that's more of the story, there's more of the story, this period that I'm really interested in. (June 6-b, 2016)

At flea markets, Jim bought forged tools for nickels and dimes, searching out anything that represented the work of self-sufficiency. "I didn't care if it was a *nail*, if it was homemade" (June 8, 2016).

Building the Collection

In 1974, Jim undertook a major restoration project that would shape the rest of his life. In the nearby town of Green Sulfur Springs, the home that Civil War veteran Jim Duncan had built in 1868 was falling into disrepair, and Jim decided to salvage what he could of the original log structure and transport it with the help of friends to his property. The cabin would have been a little camp for Jim, but when he and his wife parted, he knew "it was going to be home to me" (July 27, 2016). There was only one room at first, with no plumbing or electricity, and Jim used gas lamps to light his way. By 1978 he had added a kitchen, a bathroom, and a little washroom behind the main room, though he still relies on a red outhouse a few yards uphill from his back door. Jim began to plan two shop buildings on his property, in which he could work and store his collection, but a new and more pressing mission soon consumed his time instead. The old country store in nearby Talcott was being demolished to make way for a new bridge, and Jim threw himself into saving the original structure.

I tore this old country store down in, I want to say '94. Maybe as early as '93. Zoe, I've stayed in such a tear all my life that it is hard for me to separate dates sometimes. . . I was trying to live up here and run the roads and do programs and elder hostels, and just going to festivals, and boy, if anybody's ever multitasked, boy that's a title that applies to me. And I'm still doing it.

But yeah this old store came up—they were going to bulldoze it, and at that point my plan was just to have these two old shop buildings, and then this thing came up . . . I used to say, I needed that project like a hole in the head, but it just killed me to see that it was the oldest building in that community of Talcott, so I just committed myself to it. It was on a bridge right-of-way, a modern new bridge construction, so I literally went over there the morning the fellow came with his equipment to push it over and burn it up, and he said, “You can have it,” and gave me a certain period of time I needed to get it out of there.

So that really upset the apple cart so to speak, because *man*, when you tear an old frame building and try to number all the pieces and the parts, and haul all the pieces—I said I’ve handled every piece of that building four or five times. . . . So I was going in so many different directions, and still trying to pick up antique relics and fix up things for myself and other people. (July 27, 2016)

By 2001, Jim had finally completed the two workshops that stand beside his cabin home today, and he outfitted them with tools and equipment. Until recently, he kept a stall at an antiques mall in the nearby town of Lewisburg, where he could outlet his collection as it began to overflow, and place his things in the hands of people who needed or appreciated them. But quickly, the collection filled every new space that Jim could build for it, branching further, and in more directions, than Jim says he could ever have possibly anticipated.

* * *

Inside Jim’s blacksmith shop, he keeps all manner of iron tools and implements hanging from the rafters and nailed in order of type to the white-painted planks of the wall. The tools Jim has collected exceed the square room, and Jim says he regrets not building it just a few feet deeper. Iron hand tools, wagon fixtures, and farming implements are piled in boxes, stacked atop the forge on the western wall, and propped against each other in nooks and crannies until the floor can hardly be seen. On the walls, despite the clutter, the orderly arrangements he has hung there create a striking contrast of wrought iron black against bright white paint.



Figure 5. Jim leaving the blacksmith's shop.

Jim's woodworking shop stands a few strides from the blacksmith's shop. Their doors face each other across the short stretch of grass, almost a mirror to one another. Inside the woodshop, light slants through drawn curtains and catches particles of wood dust kicked up from the floor. As in the blacksmith's shop, Jim has arranged his collection of woodworking tools and wooden implements along the workshop's walls, but the softer tones of poplar, hickory, oak, and pine warm the room. Up in the rafters, Jim stores examples of house shingles and fine trelliswork that he has salvaged over the years, taken from old houses that he has cherished but could not save in their entirety. Against the northern wall, Jim's treadle lathe is built into the very frame of the room, as Moses Fleshman, or perhaps his son Abraham, of Monroe County, had designed it

to fit on their farm in 1820. It took 80 hours of work to restore it, Jim estimates, but it turns once again.

On the western end of the property, towards an oblong pond and below the spot where the sun sets in the crux of two mountains, the two-story general store is mostly empty. Its white boards and handsome green trim have been touched up, and its original front door stands slightly ajar onto the porch. Jim knows who owns its original lock, but has yet to acquire it. “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Jim said, but he hopes to turn the general store into a small museum. In his older years, upkeep of the collection has become more challenging, and he tells me that the collection has already exceeded his wildest expectations, and he wants for nothing to complete it. His home and outbuildings contain as complete a representation of early Appalachian life and work as one could ever find, and the time may have come for him to choose the best examples of each tool and arrange them for viewing. As much as Jim would like to simplify his collection for display in the general store, he says that curatorial task is daunting. “You start looking and it’s like, ‘Oh but look at the variation! Look at the variation! Can’t get rid of this one!’ The little variation on something gets me all hung up,” Jim explained, standing over our photography table strewn with heavy hewing axes (June 13, 2016). No two look alike, but Jim has collected so many over the years that he can see patterns and stories in their slightest transformations of shape and size, tracing the development of technological innovations alongside personal lives through details as small as the shape of the eye that grips the handle. Removing even one would disturb the story of the phenomenal variation of the handmade.

VARIATIONS: Three Powder Horns



Figure 6. Bone spouted powder horn.

Look here—

This is the original horn to this pouch.

They took a piece of bone, Zoe,

and they took a piece of bone and added it to this horn for their spout.

And another way,

see,

they'd use leather on these things.

Lots of times they're wooden, but a lot of people would make leather.

They'd take old sole leather, and do that.

But see,

look at the difference in sizes.

This is when, again, you're living out in the *woods*, buddy.

But that is such a *wonderful*—

There again, all this *uniqueness* of people making things, you know.
Everything's different.
This guy took a big chunk of bone to make that pieces.
And that maybe—
I'll tell you,
it's been turned on a turning lathe.
You can't *do* that by hand,
that's a turning lathe.
And see,
it'll wear off where the horn's been up against it—
(I oughta have that with its pouch.)



Figure 7. Hornsmith's powder horn.

Now *here's* one.
Here's one I was telling you the bugs got in it.
But isn't that a pretty thing?
And see, he has taken *other* horn to do this.
This is not part of *this*.
There were horn smiths,
and this ain't no farmer making a horn.
This is a horn smith's work.
That's just *grand*.

I mean that is *really*. . .
I mean, this is the kind of stuff they've tried to collect.
People were going after this stuff years ago, and ignoring something.
(Oh there's another nice one)



Figure 8. Powder horn with carpet tacks.

They were ignoring these old plain ones, you know.
Look at the work on this thing.
And that one was on. . .
(Which pouch? I've got the pouch, here, it's this pouch.)
It was on that pouch right there.
See where—I remember it was all split.
They had done it with carpet tacks, and all that was left, I did that graft.
But I said *buddy*,
I'm fixing you up,
because you're a *grand example* of early work.

(June 6-b, 2016)

CHAPTER THREE

“The Human Beings Themselves:” On Phenomenal Variation

“Civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials, that is, from materials in their original form. For the process of shaping these is so divided into separate steps that one person is rarely involved in the whole course of manufacture, often knowing only the finished product. But if we want to get from materials the sense of directness, the adventure of being close to the stuff the world is made of, we have to go back to the material itself, to its original state, and from there on partake in its stages of change.”

—Anni Albers, *Work with Material*, (1959)

Storied Things

Intimate details emerge in Jim’s narrations of meaningful objects—intriguing hints at the private lives of people who have faded into obscurity. Jim points to one of five long-handled felling axes in the squared off American pole-axe style and tells me that it is a favorite of his. He found it in the rafters of an old house in Wythe County, VA, just before it was demolished. Before explaining why he favors this axe, Jim told a story about the house it came from:

There was an old house on the Gap of the Ridge Road in Wythe County, Virginia, and it was the old Walker Ward Wilson [house]. Three generations, the Wilsons yet own it today. And their ancestor bought the place in about 1840 or 50. Well, Doug Wilson is a very good friend of mine. He and his father Buster— Buster’s gone, him mom just recently passed. And they let me plunder this old farm, as I call it. And oh I found some grand old stuff. The weaving loom was still up in the attic, still set up. And in this little old building, there was an old woman that lived there. Some of the oral history got lost over there, which surprised me. But anyway she may have been— I don’t know if she was a slave or what, but she had this nice little board and batten house with a beautiful fireplace and mantle in it, about three rooms, and it’s set away from the big main house. In the downstairs, there were two little old steps and you stepped up on them and opened up the door and you went into the attic of this little house. I’d say it was a 16 x 18 building, all

tongue and grooved inside, really nice little building. Well anyway there was this gorgeous loom still up there, totally complete, set up. (June 10, 2016)

Only then did Jim explain the axe itself. He showed me that the cutting edge is made of a dark steel, higher quality than the wrought iron in the body. He has cleaned the axe so well that the line where the two metals meet is discernable. Jim explained that the steel likely came from a worn-out furrier's rasp or a steel file. "I'll tell you what the old timers loved," he said. "Rasps and metal files. . . . That blacksmith knows what he can make out of those old worn out files and rasps" (June 10, 2016).



Figure 9. Second from bottom, the Wythe Co., Virginia axe is one among many, yet wholly unique.

Through one axe, Jim illuminated not only the economic context of its maker but also an entire cast of characters populating its transference through time, including Jim and his neighbors

in the twenty-first century. As Jim narrated the axe's history and acquisition, doors opened onto the private worlds of both an old local family and a woman who labored among them in obscurity. A way of life, of axes and looms, skill and inequality, beauty and harshness, becomes, if not fully knowable, at least imaginable in a single story of an axe. The texture of experience rises to the surface and a complex community comes into view.⁴

"All right," Jim said after a short pause as we arranged the next group of axes. "The oldest axe we've got here, I call it my 1830 axe, and it came out of Monroe County. Came over here out of a little community called Greenville. A good friend of mine was moving back to Arizona, and he was cleaning up and pitching and sorting and man, I saw this thing. . . ." This time Jim told the story of the first factory axes to circulate among the hand-forged styles, imported to the mountains from Connecticut and suited well to cutting roots and clearing new ground. "What hard work," Jim marveled. "I've talked to people that did it. And you would grub and pull and chop and eventually they'd pile these stumps up in these huge piles and burn them. So anyway, the axe, it's so important. Gosh it was one of those tools that was a necessity" (June 10, 2016). My untrained eye could barely decipher the differences, but they are so rich with layers of knowledge that Jim seemed to see each one as distinctly as faces in a room.

Phenomenal Variation

According to Jim, it is precisely this "phenomenal variation" that pulls him deeper into his work of collecting and restoring. The collection contains multiples of each tool and implement in such abundance and variety that they can be seen in their diversity of manufacture,

⁴ Joëlle Bahloul discusses the ways in which practical objects bear symbolic memory through the evocation of their daily use. Telling stories about objects that were once integral to everyday life gives narratives of the past a sense of social life and economic conditions. "Remembered objects and places are made historiographers, sociologists of the past" (Bahloul 2004, p. 129).

style, and intention. Alone, each object is a relic of the past, but together they comprise a complex matrix of life through time and space. Placed amongst their contemporaries, the objects reveal a diverse ecosystem of interconnecting lives. Rearranged as an evolutionary spectrum, they show the transformations of time and the shifting socioeconomics of labor. The collection breathes with the wild vitality and meaning of lived experience.

Each time I would run into something that was different, the least little something jumped out at me. Detail. I just have that kind of eye. I think it came from working on clocks and guns. You visually have to discern a lot when you're working on small stuff. So that same application to these larger items—oh gee now that's different from what I've got. And it just jumped out at me. A lot of people wouldn't even *see* that. But it did to me, early on. All these variations of the same things, and what does that mean? Does that mean an evolutionary thing, or does that also mean just a design, a specific design by specific companies or individuals when it got to be handmade things? (June 20-b, 2016)

Phenomenal variation emerged time and again in my conversations with Jim, and became the organizing principle of our documentary strategy as Jim created groupings of tools to document together, and narrated them piece by piece as parts of a whole.

Early on, I was a stranger to Jim's collection. While these group images that I was taking were aesthetically appealing to me, I initially wondered whether or not they suited the mission, set forth for me by the West Virginia Humanities Council, to document the collection object by object. Erring on the side of caution, I often pulled out single tools after a group image to re-photograph them on their own, where they could be appreciated as unique and storied objects. Jim was clear, however, that the groupings were a critical part of the story. I began to notice the difference between documenting the *content* of a collection, and its *meaning*.

We gathered like categories of tools together on the table, or propped them up against the wall of the general store for group portraits of eighteen smelting ladles, eleven cane knives,

or seven rolling pins in a row. The images of groupings are palpably different from the single portraits of artifacts—they expand the gaze beyond physical form and towards a glimpse of the social worlds of self-sufficient labor and the personalities of the individuals who made their tools of survival and self-expression from materials at hand.

Archaeologist Carol Kramer (1977) admonished that pots are not people, warning that material culture should not be mistaken for the totality of culture, ethnicity, and identity. But the similar though phenomenally varied objects in Jim’s collection question the divisions between past and present, and human and material. It is precisely the people themselves, the makers behind the objects, that ignite Jim’s admiration for their material things. Displayed in rows, crowded in boxes, hanging from his ceilings, and clustered together on the mantle of his fireplace, the collection evokes a curiosity about the world that, as Jim describes it, is deeply rooted in the embodied human experience and the practices and ethics of living in the physical world. Speaking with Jim about the unwieldy expansiveness of his collection, I began to understand that each object in the collection is made meaningful not only by its individual history, but by its representation of one of an infinite number of possible variations on its kind. Like their human makers, handmade objects conform and diverge in both purpose and personality. As Jim said:

The collection just amassed larger than the wall space— I’ve got stuff hanging clear to the peak of the gable! You know it starts out with all these old homemade chains and horse spreaders and all, and oh gosh. And again, it gets redundant. But it’s not redundant if you look at it in the context that I do—that this chain is different from that chain because it was handmade, and yet it serves the same purpose.

ZvB: And when it’s handmade nothing is redundant!

Yeah exactly! And look at the variations—how this guy made his set of spreaders as opposed to the way this man made *his* set of spreaders. So that’s where I get all caught up in this stuff. (July 27, 2016)

As I see it, Jim's collection has taken on its exhaustive dimensions because of Jim's attunement to not only the preciousness of old things, but also the marvel of humanity itself. Borrowing from literary theorist Kenneth Burke, folklorist Marjorie Hunt describes masterful competence as "the 'dancing of an attitude'—an elaborate and carefully crafted performance of identity, experience, and values" (Hunt 2011, p. 50). Skilled craftspeople delight in the ability and technique of others, and in the "poetic qualities of workmanship" itself, while balancing creativity with received notions of correct form and expression (p. 48). Jim admires the small details in simple forms, like a decorative notch on an axe, a touch of delicate lathe work on a horn, or an innovative tensioning device on a spinning wheel, which reveal what he refers to as "that unspoken way of doing," which transmits best practices and standards of excellence from generation to generation. Even the most miniscule touches of aesthetic preference indicate the affective qualities of labor. "It's somebody that's really proud of their work," Jim explained (June 6-b, 2016).

For each type of tool that we documented together, Jim highlighted the amateurishness of a roughly constructed object alongside examples of mastery with equal interest and curiosity. The crudest items are as integral to each assemblage as the most expertly fabricated pieces, and each array that Jim selected for documentation reflected not only a diversity of form, but also of skill and aesthetic sensibility. The eighteen hand-forged smelting ladles Jim brought from his

blacksmith's shop represent how the single task of pouring lead might have been performed and experienced by eighteen unique individuals.



Figure 10. Smelting ladles. Of the sixth ladle from the left, Jim says: "That is the most primitive ladle by far that I own. But it worked, you know? It melted and poured lead just as well as one of these aesthetically pleasing pieces worked. It served the purpose." (June 6-a, 2016)

Crudely made tools are also valued voices in the collection because they speak most directly to the socio-economic realities of early settlers in the mountains and the work ethic that their circumstances required. Eight rolling pins lined up in a row prompted me to ask whether Jim suspected it was lack of skill or lack of resources that produced the most rudimentary ones in the group. Jim replied:

Well, a lot of people lived very isolated and rural, and they didn't have any money. A lot of people just had no money. They would sell enough things to pay

their taxes . . . or to buy schoolbooks or something. They had come from so many generations of self-sufficient people that when you needed something, most people were a pretty good hand at trying to make what they needed. If they couldn't, they had neighbors that would specialize, like a leather [worker] or cobbler in the neighborhood, or a blacksmith, or somebody that had a really decent woodworking shop with all these hand tools. But somebody living out in an old primitive log cabin with a dirt floor, they had so very little. They had an axe and a few manual gardening tools, and a hatchet and a draw knife, butcher knife, or pocket knife. And a lot of people in the earliest times were like that. That's where they found themselves, so they just whittled it out. Something primitive. (June 27-b, 2016)



Figure 11. Rolling pins. The first three are lathe-turned, while the last four are whittled.

A complex ecology of class, skill, and style emerges from the collection. Generalists, specialists, amateurs, and factories are all represented in the collection to such an extent that their work can be seen overlapping and exchanging in networks of manufacture, use, and reuse. A



Figure 12. Corn and sorghum cane knives, made from recycled mowing scythes. Of the knife on the far right Jim marvels: “This is just so impractical. I’d hate to be handed that at a corn cutting. I’ve often wondered if it was a joke. I just can’t imagine being that desperate, not being any more creative or having any more skill or talent than to come up with something that crude.” (July 11-a, 2016)

broken factory-made pole axe was taken to a good blacksmith, who welded a new cutting edge onto the body. “That’s a good example of a factory axe that saw the handwork of a blacksmith,” Jim explained as we placed the hybrid axe amongst the hand-wrought shop-made grouping on the table (June 10, 2016). The transformed piece complicates the handmade assemblage and sheds light on the inner workings of an ecosystem of skill, exchange, and manufacture in its time and place. Most importantly, these ecosystems are networks of individuals, different in situation and skill, from specialists to amateurs to those who called on others for work they could not do for themselves.⁵

Phenomenal variation extends the “dancing of an attitude” into all handmade work, even those of limited mastery. Attitude emanates from the handmade at every degree of

⁵ Folklorist John Laudun describes the creative ecology of vernacular manufacture that becomes visible through the comparison of like handmade forms: “Each of the individuals in a community has to be understood as someone, not only with particular abilities and self-perceived roles—only a farmer, a farmer who occasionally fabricates something when he needs it, a farmer who actively fabricates for himself and others, a fabricator who farms, or strictly a fabricator—but also in terms of personal proclivities. For example, one fabricator is a tinkerer by personality, another is a born competitor and must win in whichever domain he enters, and yet another is a raconteur of exceptional abilities. Together they make up, not a homogenous community, not even a cohesive one, but rather a loose network of individuals who, through their presence, maintain a network of ideas that have evolved over time.” (Laudun 2011, p. 283).

craftsmanship, and is made most visible when held up against the attitudes of others. The collective striving towards a common goal of functionality becomes the central aesthetic communication of the material culture of labor, with variations in style, form, and material representing the embodied humanity of that labor. A picture of a community slides into focus through, as folklorist John Laudun writes, “eyes adjusted to the landscape and adapted to seeing the differences that matter as well as the commonalities that bind everyone together” (2011, p. 283).

Well-made objects delight Jim in their ingenuity, and the use of creativity towards practical goals. In his storage barn, Jim tipped a tall skein winder on its side to show me how the woodworker set its legs into beveled edges to pitch the pegs at a stable angle as it stands on the floor:

A lot of guys would just have a flat plank
and bore a hole and try to get the right angle on the hole.
But this, [Jim laughs to himself in amazement]
 this
 is the way to do it.
I just really—
 you know you look at these things,
 and I’m just one of these people for details.
And I really *study* and *look* and think,
 man,
 that is a great way to make something.
That is a great way to *accomplish* that kind of pitching. (July 5, 2016)

Material culture, when closely studied, shatters what folklorist Tom Mould calls the “false dichotomy between expressive and instrumental culture,” revealing the aesthetics of utility itself (Mould 2011, p. 139).

Bringing homemade fiddles and banjos onto his porch to play, Jim turned their aging tuning pegs and plucks their temperamental strings. As he settled one strangely long-bodied fiddle under his chin, he hunted along its conversely shortened neck for the positions of its notes

and strikes up an old tune. As his bow moved across the strings, he reminded himself of the peculiarities of this fiddle, so different from the one he had just finished playing, and explained to me what he sees in the uniqueness of each instrument in his collection.



Figure 13. Jim plays a handmade fiddle of unusual proportions.

That's just a good example of these variations,
the endless applications of people's concepts of,
you know,
aesthetics
and how they want to *make* something.
And like I said,
I love homemade items,
and they really show that aspect of,
I guess,
human creativity.
And they make things with the materials at hand,

they mix all these materials up that may be nonsensical to someone,
especially in the true . . . “academia” professional field.
They really fascinate me.
Just a classic example
of such a diversity of craftsmanship and shape. (July 23, 2016)

Early on, Jim told me that he is often frustrated by what he sees—and doesn’t see—in
other people’s collections. Collections that begin with manufactured tools omit the role of
individual and vernacular creativity in the development of functional style and form.

They’re content and that’s fine with what they have, but there’s no way to
acknowledge an earlier version of these items because they don’t have them. So I
don’t know if they even knew that they existed. They may have a manufactured
version and think that’s the first one that was invented, and not realize that no, it’s
a continuation from an earlier time, when the equivalent of that was already here
but it was handmade. And there were all these phenomenal variations. Nobody
had settled down to what they thought was a most efficient, or typical, design. . .
It’s how ingenious people were, that came up with all these varieties of designs
for the same item, because everything’s being individually made. They’re all
making something the way it works for them. (June 8, 2016)

The vernacular creativity that Jim values is defined by innovation with materials and the
willingness to play with the physical world in ways that are inconceivable once a form is
standardized. A similar creative relationship to materials is reflected in the tray of corn shucking
tools that Jim keeps in his washroom and brings out to show me one morning. Of the thirty-eight
little implements, each meant to fit on the inside of the palm to catch the husks of corn and spare
the hand from fatigue, no two are identical. Where some are thoughtfully lathe-turned from wood
and fitted with customized leather finger straps, others are made from reused can openers, nails,
suspender straps, scissors, and spoons. *This*, said Jim, is as close as you can get to these old
people. Here, among some of the simplest and most mundane objects in his collection,
phenomenal variation transforms them into testaments to the reality and existence of their
makers.



Figure 14. Jim holds a corn shucker from his collection.

Amongst all the parts of Jim's collection, I felt the authority of past lived experience the most powerfully through these unruly objects that were too mundane to pass into the self-conscious preservation of "heritage," and too specific to the daily labor of a pre-industrial economy to make sense without context. "The everyday is the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden," writes philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1987, p. 9). It is the common denominator of human experience, and the root of both the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Seeing self-expression in even the most utilitarian of tools reorients their context to the creative and self-sufficient potential of humanity itself. When a box of corn shuckers is experienced as a portal to the humanity of their users—as close to touching the bodies of his forebears as Jim says he can imagine—then the objects themselves are not frozen in amber. The multiplicity of these small, ordinary things makes them interactive social actors in real time, not just because they invoke desire for ancestors but because they humanize those ancestors, drawing them out of the misty romance of the past and into the complex physicality of the ongoing material world.

Timeless Humanity

Phenomenal variation pushes on the boundaries of the past.⁶ Visions of history centered on human character are equally visions of the present and the future. Our most inherent human capacities are unbounded by time and space. Creativity is not constrained by historical era. In the midst of a long day spent photographing hewing axes, Jim turned to marvel at material things as evidence of our innate potential for good work and excellence as living beings.

And again, it's the human being *themselves*. Weaving, you look at some of this phenomenal weaving these women did, and then these men that were itinerant weavers. And you'll see some plain, real utilitarian piece of something, and then you'll just see all this phenomenal—it took so long just to even set the loom up, physically to do some of this. I bet it took them weeks or days, to set a loom up to do some of the weaving that you'll see in some of these old coverlets. It's just amazing.

⁶ The practice of keeping and collecting historical relics has attracted strong critique from some scholarly corners. Lowenthal's claim that "[o]bsession with roots and relics, heirlooms and mementoes, pre-empts concern for the present" strikes a particularly broad note of finality (Lowenthal 2015, p. 133). Lowenthal argues that memorializing the past neuters its potency and sequesters it from the present, but as Cashman (2006) notes, theoretical critiques of collecting often lack an ethnographic perspective to check theory against the lived reality of those actually engaged in the practice. Cashman compares material culture collection to a form of oral history, equally capable of prompting dialogue about change, identity, and memory within a community. Objects trigger memories of lived experience and become touchstones for "writing" oral and visual narratives of the past that foster health and wellbeing for those in the present, as they move into an uncertain and unsettled future.

The meditation on materials suddenly opened as Jim grew theological, and talk of our best potential invited recognition of our worst. Still standing in the dining room looking over the table of axes, Jim continued:

I never cease to be amazed at what human beings can do in a positive sense, but then it's so sad that they can be so self-destructive to one another in the other extreme. If you just focus on the positive aspect of what a human being can do, and I really believe that we were created, it's so sad to see—

I can't think of an all-knowing God seeing what his creation can do to the two extremes, you know. And the inhumanity towards one another because of whatever the reason. Their religion or their sex or their belief or their color, how people can be just—Yeah sometimes I wonder . . . Christ on the cross, there was one point where he said, "Father why have you forsaken me," in a desperation outcry. (June 13, 2016)

Jim's awe for human potential implies neither a rosy view of history or an idealized vision of human nature. Jim suggests that he is saddened even more acutely by inhumanity, having witnessed firsthand the "positive aspect of what a human can do." As he contemplates Jesus's moment of crisis, when the weight of mankind's sins divided him from God and drove him to voice the fears of all humans who feel abandoned to the evils of the world, Jim presents a vision of history that contains extremes and contradictions but carries through it the undiluted fact of possibility. Implicit in the moment of Jesus's crisis is the fact of his ultimate willingness to die for humanity, because of our potential that was then and is now.

When we speak about human potential for the best and the worst, we are speaking about ourselves independent of the time that separates us from our forebears. The living and the dead stand side by side for both inspiration and judgment, because as far away as the past may be, it was populated by people not so different from ourselves. Each person's time on earth is short and fleeting, but the evidence of our existence is left behind in material things. I believe that Jim is able to envision the past as a human place that matters deeply in our evaluations of our current

condition, because he is able to see the human condition in materials. Forgetting who we have been constrains our ability to understand who we are now.

A Feeling for the Past, A Path to the Future

Nevertheless, time changes the systems in which life and culture are formed, often to radical and socially traumatic degrees, and the values of the past and present quickly differentiate. Qualities of lived experience are lost and gained, and Jim often expressed concern for the absences of the present. If he had his choice, he would like to have lived in the last decades of the nineteenth century, which he describes as a heyday of local self-sufficiency and skilled craftsmanship. “People, they had all these skills. They *had* to have all these skills,” Jim said when I asked what made that period special to him. “I just think there was a great camaraderie, a great social camaraderie at that time,” he explained. “I’ve talked to these old people—when there was so much manual work that had to be done on these farms, boy you knew your neighbors very well. You knew all the positive and negative aspects of them. And there was a great camaraderie and sharing that came with that culture, be you man or woman.” He went on to tell a story about the man who came to bale and buy the hay from his land—one man who rode in the cab of his air-conditioned tractor, while his wife sat and waited in the air-conditioned truck. Earlier that week, we had stopped along the road to chat with Jim’s neighbor as he put up hay by hand with three local boys in the 80-degree heat. For him, Jim explains, doing it the old way was still practical. It’s hard work, but social. “The machine’s pretty well done away with the social aspect of a lot of that,” Jim said (July 27, 2016). He sounded mournful, but realistic. Above all, work must be practical, but there is a practicality to camaraderie too.



Figure 15. Jim wears a yoke for carrying buckets of water.

Even if mechanized labor has loosened social bonds, Jim does not take a wholly pessimistic view of modernity. When I inquired as to whether Jim still saw the kind of ingenuity and handiness of the rapidly disappearing older generations, he guessed that it was being applied somewhere else, and that perhaps people get the satisfaction of hand-work elsewhere today. Similarly, when I asked Jim if it was important that people remember the old agrarian skills of self-sufficiency, he was not concerned that humans could ever really lose the skills to survive.

I don't know that it is or not. If something happened, push came to shove, they would re-learn it. If it became a necessity they would re-learn it real quick. People would figure out real quick how it was done if they had to go back to those techniques, as long as they had to the tools to do it with. (July 27, 2016)



Figure 16. Set amongst older examples of handmade spoons, the second from the left is a modern spoon, made by a late friend of Jim's.

Indeed, Jim often told me stories of great craftspeople he has known in his own life, whose work he holds on par with the best pieces in his collection. Amongst the woven baskets that hang from his ceiling, his favorite was made by an old neighbor during Jim's lifetime. In an array of carved wooden spoons, Jim included one made by a late friend of his. "He really had an eye for aesthetics and shapes and all," Jim mused. "He was just really good" (June 27-b, 2016). Once, Jim told me a story about the time his friend, a chairmaker, had tricked Jim into guessing a weathered ladder-back chair had been built seventy years ago. "Jim, I made that about four years ago," the friend had said. Jim laughed at himself as he remembered his surprise. "I learned a great lesson about going by dirt," he said (June 6-a, 2016). I was so often struck by Jim's confidence that no matter how much may change, the spark of creativity and ingenuity will not

abandon us. Modernity has carried us far from the systems of life and work that produced the material culture of agrarian self-sufficiency, but the instinct for function and the capacity for creativity follow humanity through time. We are not yet done reaching our potential.

Cashman (2006) argues that concern for the past harnesses a community's "collective resources of material culture . . . for coming to terms with massive economic, social, and cultural changes associated with modernity" (p. 144). The very survival of old things "grants them authority to bear witness. When once familiar objects take on a second life as symbols through display, they may index a wealth of experience and even contradictory evaluations" (p. 148). Reading the phenomenal variation of Jim's collection reconciles some of the tensions of a desire for the past, an appreciation for the present, and hopes for the future. Respect for skill and knowledge of materials are not constrained by era, but rather are perpetually available communal resources. Concern for the past does not inherently pre-empt concern for the present.

As it unifies the fact of human potential both laterally across communities and vertically through time, I hear the collection speaking in a kind of ethnographic present—a continuous present tense that synthesizes the lives of many into a single temporal point where the importance of the past makes itself felt in the now. Here, that temporal point of synthesis is Jim's own time on earth, where he himself is the agent between past, present, and future.⁷

Anthropologist Mary Douglas and economist Baron Isherwood define the tense of the ethnographic present as a "two-way filter being used in the present to sort out from the myths and dreams some sets that plausibly interlock as guides to action" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979,

⁷ Judy Attfield calls this "existential time," which "provides a way of looking at how individuals form their relationship with time by observing how their subjectivity is objectified in material form." She quotes John Macquarrie's argument that "we would not *exist* . . . if we lacked this peculiar kind of temporality whereby we transcend the now and unite, to some degree, the past, present and future." (Attfield 2000, p. 217)

p. 10). While the ethnographic present, as Douglas and Isherwood admit, assumes a degree of constancy within a society, the fact of systemic change is built into the lens of phenomenal variation, which locates the continuous present in human possibility rather than the specifics of social or economic context; it sheds light on the past that lives in the now through the products of our own unchanging ability to craft functionality and creativity from the world around us in our everyday lives. The past lives in the now and through knowledge and relics that continue to affect evaluations of the present. The very concept of the everyday, as Lefebvre argues, does not indicate a single system, but rather a point of reference common to all systems. The everydayness of the things Jim collects is enhanced by their variety, as “everyday life has always existed, even if in ways vastly different from our own” (Lefebvre 1987, p. 9). The systems of social life and work that produced the handmade economies of Jim’s interest have decidedly ended, but our capacities for resourceful creativity, self-sufficiency, and skillful use of the physical world have not.

Through his collection, Jim gathers, preserves, and amplifies the possibilities of both human potential and the material world as they have been, and therefore always could be, put to use. His stories of makers, users, and keepers populate the collection with human lives in the past and present, entwining the commonality of everydayness with the phenomena of individuality, mediating between generations and shortening the distance between the living and the dead.

IN CONCERT

Charleston, Kanawha County, West Virginia

Winter, 2017

In January, the winter after our summer project, I return to West Virginia to present a concert and talk with Jim in Charleston, in the historic building that houses the West Virginia Humanities Council. We have only spoken on the phone in recent months, but when Jim arrives in his denim overcoat and wide brimmed hat with a truck full of tools and instruments in the cab, not much time seems to have passed at all.

The program is booked to capacity, and every chair is filled between the two adjoining rooms of the house where Jim will stand before a fireplace in one while a slideshow of my photos loops in the other. The audience is a mix of young and old—some strangers, but many of Jim’s friends, neighbors, and distant family. I read aloud from a short essay about our project before Jim presents; he has pieces from the collection, humorous stories, and songs to play on old instruments. With only twenty minutes to show and narrate a sampling of his collection, Jim must speak quickly, centering the evening on the entertainment of storied objects more than their variation. The unfamiliarity of obsolete tools substitutes for the finer points of aesthetic variation and manufacture, the pieces with the grandest stories selected from their close cousins. Nevertheless, as I had helped unload his truck, I had seen that even with little time to spare he brought *three* different kinds of lamps, *three* calling horns, and a basket full of axes.

Jim's narratives to the audience balance personal stories of old friends and collecting adventures with precise descriptions of manufacture and purpose. "I like folks to be able to handle some of these items, and mentally dissect them," Jim says, as he passes the first object around the room. At rapid-fire pace, Jim conducts a deep dive into the material culture of the 19th century: a shoe, a boot, a grease lamp, a cottage-industry lamp, a miner's candlestick, three horns, a "make-do" bullet mold, a smelting ladle. Holding up the smelting ladle, Jim reminds the audience of the phenomenal variation of the handmade which they cannot see from this one piece. "I think I have 96 of these," he says, chuckling to himself as the audience breaks out into wide grins and delighted laughter. "Again, that's where I get caught up in this type of collecting. *No two of them* look alike, because they're all made by whatever was at hand. . . . Boy, if these things could talk, the tales they'd tell." Watching from the side, I notice a shift in the room. Jim has them now, riveted, and those who didn't know him before are coming to understand what, and who, they are experiencing.

Jim continues, checking his timing and sizing up what remains to be shown: a masterful hearth shovel, an early toaster, two roasting forks, two serving "skimmers," one made of brass and finely decorated, two spatulas, tomahawks and axes I remember photographing. There among them is John Ellison's axe, sporting its new handle, completing its circuit from abandonment, to repair, to presentation. It passes around the audience in their folding-chair rows, a time traveler made useful again. Although Jim would be happiest to see his tools at work again, he has made them all into teaching tools nonetheless, passing from hand to hand, impressing itself on each new holder.

Jim puts down the final axe. "So these are just some of the things I've found in my life," he says, like a runner crossing the finish line, dusting the iron buildup off his hands. "Oh I've got

one more thing!” There is one last thing to show: a telephone operator’s switchboard made of homemade capacitors, recovered from an old hotel. “Actually,” Jim says, “that’s a story.” Time is up, but who could stop him now?



Figure 17. Before playing a song at the concert, Jim tells a story about Old Man Vansickle, who taught him to play the harmonica.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Those That Have Endured:” Life, Through the Collection

*What we value most in life
The years may change somehow
What once seemed so important
May not matter to us now
For over time we learn and grow
And find as we have matured
The things that mean the most to us
Are those that have endured*

—poem by Jim’s cousin, found written on a
manila envelope in a box of family documents.

Sharing and Teaching

As a collector, Jim has become an expert, and as an expert, he has become a teacher of both information and ethics. Jim shares his collection in different ways to different audiences, drawing out objects and stories to fit the occasion like a puzzle that fits together many ways. Like any performance of competence or knowledge, Jim’s communicative work varies from audience to audience, negotiating spectrums of interest, familiarity, and allowances of time.

Returning to Michael Owen Jones’s (1975) reminder that the researcher is part of the database, phenomenal variation is the lesson that *I* learned from my own pedagogical experience of Jim’s collection as he taught it to me and, importantly, as I asked questions of it. I owe my interpretation of the project’s expressive communication to the amount of time I was fortunate to have been able to spend with Jim amongst his things, during which time I saw myself as both documentarian and student. The lesson I received, of the ethics of phenomenal variation, comes

from the intersection of Jim as speaker and myself as listener. Nevertheless, each time I experienced Jim presenting his collection to an audience or a visitor, I recognized the respect, wonder, and inherent hopefulness for what we *can* and *could* do that I drew from our own conversations. “At the moment of contact when the creative act gains an audience . . . the individual is on display,” write folklorists Cashman, Mould and Shukla (2011). “The most competent individuals may linger in our minds long after the transitory performance, and even longer in the enduring object” (p. 7). Even unintentionally or indirectly, Jim teaches a way of being in the world that lingers amongst his audiences and students, and that sticks to the objects so carefully restored and labeled with his name and that of its maker. Each lesson learned offers a way forward, a roadmap for the values, aesthetics, and labors of life.

Jim presents his collection in different contexts for different audiences, including railroad festivals, elder hostels, elementary schools, and cultural events. The occasional visitors that come to see him at his home are their own kind of audience to Jim’s expertise. The guests who drove up the dirt driveway to Jim’s house during the summer of our project were old friends and admirers, some of them young enthusiasts who turned to Jim for mentorship. They all came for two things: Jim’s company, and consultation. In mid-July came old local friends seeking knowledge about log cabin building. They passed hours consulting Jim’s photographs of long-gone houses and barns that he had documented, pouring over the joinery, the roofing, the supports. They examined the corners of Jim’s cabin, and toured through the woodworking shop. I came across the yard to meet them when Jim called me over from my porch. The elder friend, a historian of Summers County by the name of Stephen Trail, told me that to him, the most important thing about Jim’s collection is that it’s eclectic and evolving—evolving both in its scope and in the changes shown in each kind of technology through time, varying along the axes

of time and space. “He’s a national treasure,” said Stephen as we followed behind Jim, and if Jim heard him, he didn’t show it. Jim, ever modest about his own accomplishments and quick to self-depreciate, may hold his mentors and fellow historians up as the true stars of the community, but others turn their heads towards him, and listen.

Those who come to visit Jim’s collection share in his affecting sense of wonder at the complexities of the material world. In late July, two visitors arrived from North Carolina—Doug Elliott, whom Jim had met on a cultural program panel, and his son Todd. Todd was a woodworker, and he had come to see Jim’s railroading hammers to understand how the handles were made, so that he might improve his own work. Their visit, meant to be a quick stop, stretched on through the gripping heat of the day and into the evening as they explored the collection, taking in all that they could from Jim as he showed them around, pulling out objects for them to consult and admire.

Three days later, a young friend named John arrived from up north near Elkins, where he restores engines as a machinist for the historic Cass Railroad. Jim had hired him to do some work for the day, using a sandblaster on ironware awaiting restoration. John wore overalls with a railroad cap on his head, shoes that matched Jim’s, and a golden watch chain clipped to the front of his bib, looking much like a young Jim down to his dark beard. When he finished work, John stood on the back porch looking at Jim’s old autoharps, while Jim varnished butter paddles. It was Jim who had taught him how to play the autoharp years ago, John said. I stood with them a while, enjoying their good company as they discussed the autoharp and the Carter Family.

Passing time with Jim for so long, I saw that he was always teaching, and always learning. He handled every object in his hands with wonder, from the heirloom rocking horse in a dear friend’s home to the forks in restaurants. Jim was a generous host to me, and invited me

on trips to the homes of his friends, interspersing our days of documentary work amongst the objects of the past with trips to visit the craftspeople he most admires. If I was a sort of pupil of Jim's, my education was in both the good works of the past and the good works of the present side by side. We visited chair makers, luthiers, furniture makers, and antique buggy collectors, and Jim marveled in his luck to have them as friends. Often, on drives through lush summer hills and valleys to run errands and go visiting, Jim expressed his deep gratitude for these friends, and the people has been able to know in his life. Jim powerfully respects those who maintain skills of handwork, or are stewards to their own family relics. He himself embodies both these identities, and it is both makers and keepers who enable his collection's existence. The ethics of the collection forge bonds of friendship between Jim and his community, and heighten Jim's admiration for the lives and work of others.

The Collector in the Collection

Although it is imbued with ethics, lessons, and history, Jim's collection is not primarily a rhetorical device. Rather, it is integral to his own everydayness, and the color of his existence as a man of skill and curiosity. It is a map of his personal relationships, sense of place, and the affective experience of a life's devotion, best felt by immersion in the wholeness of the collection and its integration with Jim's daily life. The power of Jim's communicative impact as a teacher is heightened by his enthusiasm and personal enjoyment of his life's work. Both spring from Jim's infectious ability to savor the wonder in the world that is always present.

The act of collecting is itself an act of sentiment—a feeling for the things in the world that changes the course of both human and material life through time. Heirlooms preserved by family sentiment, stamps gathered into books, artifacts mounted on museum walls: all are guided through time by stewards compelled by a spectrum of feeling for things. As Jim explains:

I think some of these items, probably somebody was real sentimental to them, and then once that person dies, that just goes. That sentimentality, it's disconnected, so it's just a thing. And then people have auctions where they gather up all this stuff, and for some reason they think, "Maybe we shouldn't throw this away, we'll take that to the flea market," you know. And I think a lot of it just survived kind of haphazardly. But somebody could have kept it for a while, knowing it meant something to them, some sort of sentimental attachment. It was their mother's or grandma's, or they remembered using it as a child. I'm sentimental myself, I guess to a large degree. (July 27, 2016)

Objects can absorb the displaced (or simply *replaced*) affections of human relationships. Jim refers to himself as sentimental too, keeping the objects of strangers with a similar familial affection, as though all of the old folks of Appalachia were his own, their presence now felt through the things saved by sentiment.

Still, even as Jim hangs baskets from his ceiling and adorns the walls of his workshops with valued but unused relics, he also lives *through* the tools of his collection. He cuts the weeds from his lawn with his favorite scythe, and performs on the fiddles and banjos that hang from his wall. He has fitted his doors with antique locks, and sits out at night on the sturdiest of the rocking chairs he has restored. He oils wood from a can of Dutch Boy older than he is, which he acquired from a friend in a box of antique metal fixtures. Folklorist Pravina Shukla argues that the only way to preserve the social context and deeper communications of material things is through actual use, an inherent dilemma in the nature of preservation. To lock a thing in a vault preserves its form but keeps it safe; to wear it, or use it, wears it down but keeps it alive (2011, p. 156). Within Jim's collection, however, it is *neglect* that destroys a thing, rather than overuse. The wear and tear of the mice that infiltrate his storage sheds if he forgets to check them bother Jim more than dulled axe edges or worn out bottoms of bread making troughs. Objects worn down by human reliance on them are not destroyed. They have been used, as Jim put it, by their "original intent" (June 10, 2016). Objects rusted and mangled from abuse and abandonment need

restoration, and saving. “All this rusted stuff just doesn’t interest me. I want to put it in some semblance of—“ Jim paused, and began again. “Just so much information’s covered up by all that neglect” (June 20-b, 2016). Jim’s work is active, living, preservation. The intentional care and use of the collection is both a source of pleasure in Jim’s life and a course of action in the world.



Figure 18. Using a pitchfork from his collection, Jim buries ironware in the embers of a fire to burn away their rust.

Getting into It

As Jim nurtures the lives of material things, they nurture him in return. Using the collection in his daily life is both an affective pleasure and a practical, economical act—like the objects themselves, a rebuttal of the dichotomy between beauty and utility. Maintaining and

attending to the collection is a daily labor, but it facilitates his livelihood and enlivens his spirit. The practice of restoration, the actions through which Jim's stewardship works, affect him and his sense of self. "I can get into something like this, and it relaxes me. Even though it's something else to do. And yet I like doing it, it's hard to explain it. I make work for myself by picking things up like this," Jim once told me, standing behind his home in the summer sun, running a brush of vibrant orange paint along a prong of a spindly grain cradle. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls this *flow*, when a person is immersed in deep focus and "optimal experience" of their intrinsic interests, one with the activity at hand and in balance between skill and challenge. Flow is a total involvement with life itself (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 3).

William Westerman (2006) argues that folklorists have not fully explored the feeling of "something" that traditional creative practice evokes in body and spirit, but that traditional craft is both a personal and a social activity that *does things*, for the self as well as for communities, on a deeply embodied level. As stewardship engages with tradition, and restoration takes on the knowledges of practice, the act of stewardship can become an opportunity for flow. Restoration, as a creative and practical act, can be a chance to experience the optimal harmonization of self and action. I suspect that in these moments of restoration, when Jim is deeply engaged in the stimulation of intellect and the exercise of skill, he experiences the same harmony of head and hand in service of function that he admires in the traditional handwork of his collection. He becomes another phenomenal variation on human potential.



Figure 19. Jim restores a grain cradle to its original hue.

CONCLUSION

The two of us sat on Jim's porch on a late July evening right before Jim's 67th birthday and the end of my time in Summers County. The hot summer sun had just begun to slip below the mountains when our conversation had started, and as the minutes on my recorder passed an hour, the whirl of cicadas began to rise with the settling darkness. In the thick blackness of the country nighttime, I could barely make out the outline of Jim's face as he spoke. Our conversation grew introspective as we lost our sight. As Jim considered the future of his collection, he hesitated. "It's like, gee I'd hate to let that go. I'd hate to break up the—but who else cares? Who else would even care? I care too much I guess. . . . I'm not sentimental at all hardly for my period of time, what I grew up in. . . . I'm sentimental for all this old stuff that had some sort of worth and meaning to their lifestyle. It was essential. All those things of that material culture to me, they show a skill level of people. They show someone's ability to *do* something. To physically be able to accomplish something, both mentally or physically, and how their hands created. . . . Those things really fascinate me, and I don't know why that is. I just can't figure it out. I don't know why they hold such a value to me. Not a monetary value, some sort of a . . ."

"Spiritual value?" I probed, thinking of callings and obligations, but my suggestion provoked neither clarity nor correction.

"Some sort of . . . I can't figure it out. I can't put my finger on it."

Still, as Jim contemplated his obligations to his life's work that night, I was reminded of the difference between "avocation" and "vocation," the former being a hobby taken up for enjoyment, archaically meaning distraction and diversion, and the latter often meaning a calling one is drawn to, uniquely suited for, and compelled to fulfill by duty and qualification. Jim often expressed ambivalence about the work he has taken on. The labor is endless, the upkeep is often futile, and the limits of physical space are a constant puzzle. He is even ambivalent about the virtues of the past he would have liked to have known:

It's like I have tried to save, or felt like I was on this crusade to save all this wonderful stuff that nobody seemed to appreciate. So I ended up like this packrat or a hoarder or whatever, but it's very focused. But it's so much stuff to deal with. It's still stuff. And you've got to—just like this leak I found in the shop, did I tell you about this? It's like here I've got a leak, so then you find yourself cleaning up stuff that you've already cleaned up once before. So you become, you really do, you definitely become a slave to all this stuff. If you have any appreciation for it you try to take care of it I guess, but in my actual lifestyle, I would have had very little, as far as material comes. I would have been a minimalist as they call it. But I have a real interest in that period of time I guess that I didn't get to live in. And some of it you wouldn't want to live in, you're lucky you didn't live in it. (July 27, 2016)

Recognizing both the quixotic nature of his "crusade" and the past's complexities and harsh realities, Jim still finds wonder in the lives of people who lived by the ability of their own hands, and those who yet do. But though Jim's work is a pleasure, it is also a burden that he carries. He imagines a version of himself without his collection, and calls it his "actual lifestyle." As folklorist Dorothy Noyes learned from traditional practitioners, "tradition is not at bottom either a badge of pride or an inheritance to display but a job that must be done" (2009, p. 248).

"Has it been a good thing to have in life?" I asked Jim that night. Is he glad to have the collection nonetheless?

"Well I've never been bored," he replied. "I get worn out and I get frustrated, but I can't say that I've ever been bored" (July 27, 2016).

A few days earlier, Jim had offered a metaphor for his life, in which he positioned himself as an intermediary between the abundance of the past and the needs of the future. Standing under the overhang of his porch to keep out of the drizzling rain, we were rifling through a box of ironware Jim had recently been given by a friend. He pulled out a rusting black and yellow can of Dutch Boy linseed oil and remarked that it might have been canned before he was born. “Interesting enough,” he said, “I needed some of this, and it’s not cheap anymore!” Holding the can of Dutch Boy, Jim related the theory about himself he had recently composed:

I was telling you, when I was a kid I read the story of Robinson Crusoe, and it really impressed upon me what he did. He was shipwrecked, and his ship did not sink for quite a while, so it got lodged on this reef. So he figured, “I’m out here in the middle of nowhere so I’m going to go back to that ship and get all the provisions that will keep me living, the necessities that I need, as long as I’ll be able to survive on this island.” So he built him a raft and he goes back and forth, and he gets the guns and he gets the black powder, and he gets everything he thinks he could possibly use, living on this island. And eventually a storm comes in and sinks the ship with whatever he didn’t get off of it.

So that’s been kind of a mantra, or a theory of mine, or a philosophy, to do the same things. The things I’m interested in, these old early things, I knew they were still out there and it was a matter of position, or by luck, or however it is I have been able to find and bring these things back, and kind of keep them in a state of preservation. And no one lives forever, and something that impresses me so, that is foremost in my mind and that I am so aware of, is how temporal we are, as a human. This stuff shows it right here. We aren’t here very long, and I won’t be either. So my theory is, enjoy these things, clean them up, they’ll be passed on to someone. (July 14, 2016)

Jim has dedicated his life to the continuity of the past’s presence, but he describes himself as a fleeting intermediary in time. The Crusoe metaphor Jim offers is limited by its narrative—what Jim does is more than a salvage mission, in which he is final beneficiary of rescued things. More than Crusoe’s salvage of goods for his isolated survival, Jim positions himself as a link in a chain, consciously retrieving from the flotsam of the past in order to ensure a future, not only for

his own needs, but also for our collective understanding of ourselves. He saves old things for his own enjoyment while striving to give people beyond his own lifetime the same opportunity to wonder at the things that he has adored. But retrieving from the past does not necessarily set its materials in amber, where they are gazed upon but never engaged. Like the iron chain links Jim hangs in his blacksmith's shop, all linkages are for pulling forward, connecting what could be disconnected.

Indeed, the threat of disconnection, and of loss, are motivating reasons to collect from the past. Jim does save objects from the neglect and abuse of the passage of time and obsolescence in the present. Passing a roadside tag sale on the way to sell at a consignment store one day, Jim once marveled at the ubiquity of mass produced goods and cheap tchotchkes that fill innumerable thrift stores across the nation, and wondered how the earth could possibly contain so many things. Jim's concern for the pitfalls of modern materialism brings him into larger ongoing discourses around the faults of the modern era. After all, much of the globe has entered into a period of unprecedented unsustainability and alienation from the production of the goods with which we fill our lives. Restoring the values and ethics of the handmade can indeed be interpreted as a critique of the modern condition, pushing back against the debateable "progress" of industrialization.⁸ However, as I have argued earlier, interest in the past does not necessarily amount to a rejection of the present. I maintain a distinction between the question of the systemic losses of industrialization versus the question of losses to the human condition. Phenomenal variation of the handmade critiques the mediocrity of the mass produced, but leaves open the promise of possibility, and of good work that is yet being made, reimagined, and made anew.

⁸ See Bill Ivey's *Handmaking America: A Back-To-Basics Pathway to a Revitalized American Democracy* (2012) for an impassioned defense of craftsmanship in the modern age.

Systems change, and can change for the worse, but the human capacity for ingenuity, creativity, and self-reliance maintains its phenomenal potential.

In the end, to relate ourselves to our forebears is to imagine many pathways for good life and good work in the future. We are temporary in time, but our work speaks about us after we are gone. Acutely aware of the fragility of human life, Jim's responsibility is not only to the people of the past, but also to the people of the future, who may recognize their own potential in the works of long gone hands. But this will be true only if someone cares enough to keep those works around. As Jim's collection lives and breathes, and as he teaches it to others, its contents remain alive in our consciousness, moving steadily through time. Its chorus of evidence tells about the creative and resourceful spirit, in its infinite variety. The hopefulness of that continuing presence pushes beyond the boundaries of Jim's collection, there beside the Greenbrier River, and out into the world.

On my last morning in Summers County, Jim gave me a spinning wheel from his collection. "Jon Henning flax wheel, circa 1830s, Greenbrier County," read the tag he had affixed to its axle. "Restoration needs to be completed." His ballpoint script lines out instructions for the proper materials to use: "Wheel port needs horn or bone bushing or bearings. Dogwood also good." At the end are the initials "JVC." As we carried the wheel to my car and I carefully packed it amongst my things, Jim explained exactly how I should restore its broken flyer and its missing arm, and gave me a good piece of leather that would do for new bearings. As we embraced goodbye I promised that I would fix it, and I would use it.

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Note: As many of the conversations between Jim and myself were held in the context of documenting categories of objects, these interviews are titled by type of tools on which each recording focused. As there were often many categories covered in a single day, multiple recordings from the same date are listed as June 6, June 6-a, June 6-b, e.g. Untitled conversations are not associated with photographic documentation, or are drawn from video footage.

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