

Some Colorful Anecdotes

Grant Wood's recollection of his early childhood was very vivid and many of his pictures were painted directly out of memories of his early years on the farm. "Dinner for Threshers," for example, and "Arbor Day," were subjects the artist knew from early experience.

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Many older residents of Cedar Rapids remember Grant Wood as a painfully shy youngster who raised the earliest tomatoes and sweet corn in town and sold them from door to door.

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When Wood returned to Cedar Rapids from his first trip to Paris in 1920, he amazed the townspeople by the red beard he had grown on the trip. Despite the ribbing of his friends and despite the discomfort of the stiff and unruly whiskers, the artist kept his beard for several months.

"I finally shaved it off," he chuckled, "when I heard that my junior high school pupils were taking up a collection to buy me a razor."

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Once, when he was living in Cedar Rapids, Grant Wood needed some work done on his teeth

and he arranged to trade his family dentist, Doctor McKeeby, a painting for the dental work. The painting the dentist selected was of a famous bridge that Wood had sketched in Paris.

"A bridge for a bridge," chuckled the artist. "That's a square deal."

Doctor McKeeby was the man who posed for "American Gothic."

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At the art exhibition at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines one year, Grant Wood saw an old farmer standing in front of the artist's famous landscape, "Stone City."

"The farmer would get up close to the picture, inspect it, and back away shaking his head," said Wood. "I thought if I went up and stood by him, he would say something about the painting. Sure enough, he did. Pretty soon, he shook his head vigorously and said: 'I wouldn't give thirty-five cents an acre for that land'."

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Grant Wood had a keen sense of humor and was one of those rare persons who enjoy a joke on themselves.

Conscious of the fact that his snub nose and pink face gave him the appearance of a cherub, he once went to a costume party in Cedar Rapids as an angel—with wings, pink flannel nightgown,

and a halo supported by a stick thrusting up from his back.

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Wood had a friend in Cedar Rapids who had a big double house he had redecorated but which, for some reason, he could not rent.

"What that house needs is personality," Wood counseled his friend. "Try something unusual—say, goldfish."

The friend followed Wood's advice. He installed the goldfish and put a large sign in front of the house, advertising: "A GOLD-FISH IN EVERY ROOM."

Almost immediately the friend rented his house and his troubles were ended.

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When Grant Wood was painting his fantasy, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," he wanted a model for the horse and had found nothing that suited him. One evening when he was visiting at the home of a friend, he noticed a rocking horse that one of the children had left in the living room.

"There's my Paul Revere's horse," said Wood, and forthwith took it back to the studio and used it in his painting.

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Once at a dinner in New York, Wood found himself seated next to a vague and fluttery eastern woman who was under the impression that Indians

still roamed the Iowa prairie. Her ideas of farm life, too, were a bit vague and urban.

"Oh, Mr. Wood," she said enthusiastically, "I am so fond of your pictures—the one entitled 'Luncheon for Threshers'."

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Once Grant Wood told Henry A. Wallace that he had a plan to raise the clover crop in America by a quarter without increasing the acreage.

"What is your plan?" asked the then Secretary of Agriculture, greatly interested.

"I would grow four leaf clover exclusively," said Wood.

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The painting Grant Wood was planning, shortly before his death, was a portrait from memory of his father which the artist had hoped to complete as a companion piece to his famous portrayal of his mother, "Woman With Plant." Wood's Quaker father, Francis Maryville Wood, died when the artist was 10 years old.

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Because so many visitors came at all hours to the artist's studio at No. 5 Turner Alley in Cedar Rapids, Grant Wood painted a whimsical clock on its glass panel with a pointer to turn to indicate that Grant Wood—is in—is taking a bath—is out of town—is having a party.

Grant Wood died thinking he was a year younger than he actually was and as a result the obituaries at the time of his death listed his birth year as 1892. Even his gravestone carries the 1892 date. The error was later discovered and it was then recalled that Grant as a boy of 8 had scratched an inscription on a stone in the cellar of the family's home near Anamosa which read: "Grant Wood was born here February 13, 1891."

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Grant Wood's portrait of his mother has been known by two names, "Woman With Plant" and "Woman With Plants." Even though the plural form is written in Grant's own handwriting on the back of the painting, Nan, his sister, believes he absent-mindedly put the S on it. In the portrait, his mother holds only one plant, so the singular form has become common usage.

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As a Christmas greeting one year, Grant made plaster-of-paris casts of a sculpture he had done of his own face and sent them to friends without identification. But so perfect was the likeness that no one had to guess who it was.

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Grant had great respect for a local carpenter, J. L. Coon, who did considerable work in his house

in Iowa City. Though the carpenter always called him Grant, Grant always called the carpenter, Mr. Coon.

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Art Critic Thomas Craven, in an article in *Scribner's Magazine* in 1937, told of the time when Grant was 23 and lived with his mother and sister for two poverty-stricken years in a shack Grant had built himself. Describing the first Christmas in the shack, Craven quoted Grant Wood as follows:

"I wanted to paint pictures but I had no time and no materials; my sister, Nan, was at the age when a girl should have pretty things—she had none; and Mother, who was always ailing, wanted better health. We had been living on rabbit meat—I had trapped the rabbits and roasted them in an outdoor fireplace. I could never look another rabbit in the eye. We longed for something more like Christmas, and Mother, who was blessed with a grand imagination and a sense of humor, had an idea; we would create a duck! I brought home a piece of round steak and a smooth, hard stick. She wrapped the steak around the stick and covered it with muslin, making the body neat and firm and carefully stitching the edges of the cloth together. Then I carved the end of the stick into a duck's head, carved it beautifully, gave it lots of style and design. After the meat was roasted and basted to

a golden brown, I touched up the head with bright water color. We were all so amused and merry—and so hungry—that we imagined we were eating a real duck.”

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It was Thomas Craven, a well-known art critic of the 1930's, who called Grant Wood's portrait of his mother, "Woman With Plant," a "veritable masterpiece."

"In draughtmanship and in sheer control of the medium," Craven wrote, "this picture is superior to Whistler's Mother; and in vitality and the enduring substance of sacrificial devotion, it reduces the Whistler tribute to a fragile silhouette."

Craven selected "Woman With Plant" to represent the Iowa artist in "A Treasury of Art Masterpieces" which he edited.

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Grant Wood brought his Mother a cameo brooch that he had purchased in Italy because the face in the brooch looked like his sister, Nan. He had Nan wear the brooch when she posed for "American Gothic" and his Mother wore the brooch earlier for "Woman With Plant." The brooch was purchased in recent years from Nan by the Davenport Municipal Art Gallery and is displayed there.