

## **TWO MAGNETIC ARTISTS I HAVE KNOWN: GRANT WOOD AND BOB TABOR**

MELVIN C. DORSETT

It is indeed a pleasure in life when one's path crosses that of a creative person who inspires others. Grant Wood, well-known for his painting "American Gothic" and for many other portrayals of the American scene, was such a person. During my lifetime it was my good fortune to have had two meaningful contacts with Grant Wood, the first time in person and the second time through the life of another artist. My first experience sold me on Grant as true artist, wise teacher and generous friend. The second involved his making possible a beginning artist's telling a timely, tragic story effectively to our nation.

When we study the art, poetry, and music of any period, we find the interests of that era which will last. The decade following World War I was marked by flighty behavior and financial speculation, with many investment projects which were doomed to failure during the depressed thirties. One exception to this was found in the Cheley Colorado Camps, which in 1927 had their first permanent lodges ready for use just off the South St. Vrain road near Estes Park. A Saint Louis book publisher, knowing the contribution of the dynamic Frank Cheley to the International Y.M.C.A. and to the fast-rising Boy Scouts of America, had provided the financial backing to make the Cheley dream a reality—a youth education program, close to nature and motivated in free-choice, democratic activities—which has thrived through the depression years and which still thrives today.

Surely it was fortunate that the already nationally known young artist, Grant Wood, came as a guest to the Cheley Camps in its early years. Grant had just spent four tedious months working on an indoor mural in New York City and he was ready for a freer experience. His coming was welcomed, but it was only the second day after he arrived that he sprang a surprise. He had made arrangements to climb Long's Peak, using a saddle horse to go as far as the Boulder Field. While Grant was a strong man of thirty-five, he was not in good physical condition and had just arrived from sea-level. We tried to tell him that the 14,000 foot peaks would wait for him to prepare to climb them, but we found him a very determined man. We should have known that a man of his mettle would go as planned. He went and he made it, his way, but he was forced to embarrassing inactivity for days after his climb.

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MELVIN C. DORSETT is a graduate of The Iliff School of Theology, class of 1923. His career was spent largely in camping programs, nature study and "informal, democratic education," and more recently in writing campfire stories for the Audibon Society. This vignette continues a tradition of our journal publishing occasional pieces related to regional history, which began in the second issue in 1944 with Levette Davidson's article, "Pioneer Preachers of the Rockies."

His next travels on foot were on the camp property as he gathered a varied pile of gnarled roots and tree limbs which he put by the Ski-Hi Lodge in the middle boys' camp. The large dining room was locked and he went to work within it. Finally an invitation came for the curious group of campers and staff members to be enlightened. There stood Grant at one side of the huge stone fireplace, gazing at a rustic scene. Above the large mantel stood an old man, created out of the roots and limbs that Grant had gathered. The twisted figure bent over, leaning on his walking staff. In serious tone Grant impressively read the statement which had been carved on the wooden face log of the mantel: "Beware, ye climbers, of the old man of the mountain, who leads you on to your doom." Turning to the group Grant said, "I have paid my penance! Thank you," and he walked from the room.

Grant Wood was very friendly and everyone enjoyed his company. In addition, he had that rare gift of seeing unused potential in others and had the interest and skill that it takes to help promote growth in those who are reticent. It was during this vacation visit that he saw potential talent in the wife of the caretaker of the camp property. "Pop" and "Mom" Enyeart were loved as friends and respected for their caretaking work. When "Mom" expressed interest in learning to paint, Grant encouraged this. Because of the insight of Grant Wood and of his confidence in her, "Mom" found a challenge in art which brought camp leadership and status to her that she enjoyed through the rest of her life.

Being an artist, Grant found beauty in all of nature, including the lowly horse mint family which is many times considered a weed. In his painting, "Wild Bergamot," the horse mint became a thing of beauty under his touch and the picture brought lasting joy to the home of his camp hosts. Other memories of Grant's summer visit to the Cheley Camps could be recounted. I lost contact with him for a while, but I was to learn more about Grant later through interesting months spent with a man who had found fame during the depression years of the thirties and by whom the influence of Grant was much appreciated.

This artist who came under Grant's influence during these hard times was Bob Tabor, an Iowa small-town farm boy from the Cedar Rapids area. Bob was introduced to me in Kiowa, Kansas by the town's librarian as "our most famous citizen." She added that his very first painting, which was created in the early thirties, hangs in the White House in Washington, D.C., and has influenced the course of American History. Bob accepted the introduction modestly, but I wanted to learn more. We set a time for a get-acquainted talk, and here is the story that I heard.

Bob Tabor entered the depression years as a pioneer salesman of visual education equipment. After several successful years he gradually found himself going broke, with his visual education line having become almost unsalable. His wife joined him as they searched for a way out of their dilemma. Finally she suggested that he look into the Works Progress Administration

program for those with artistic talent, but Bob insisted that he was not an artist. She reminded him of the many sketches of people he had brought home from the evenings spent in hotel lobbies during his salesman's travels.

While there were many facets to the W.P.A. program, Bob was reluctant to become associated with an organization whose initials, with some justification, were at the time commonly said to stand for "We piddle around." However, with his wife's urging and the hunger-wolf too close to their door for comfort, he finally agreed to look into the program. He went to the W.P.A. center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which was closest to their Oelwein, Iowa home and applied at the art department for work as an artist. The working artists were paid small wages for six hours of work a day, five days a week, with all materials and supervision being provided by the W.P.A. The work was available as long as the artists needed the income and produced acceptable work.

Grant Wood was the area art supervisor, giving unselfishly of his insights and talent to his nation as he worked to help people recover from the depths of the depression. When Bob Tabor was ushered in to meet Grant Wood, Bob was quite nervous. He assured himself that this director should be interested in him since Grant's home was originally in Anamosa, Iowa, a town about half the size of Oelwein. Grant's paintings featured Iowa people in relation to a portrayed theme. Bob reminded himself that his wife felt that his sketches made his hotel lobby associates very real to her, and that Grant Wood must be a person who understands and is considerate of others. Otherwise, he wouldn't be taking time from his established studio to help beginners like Bob.

Although he had been fearful about coming, Bob left his conference with Grant Wood with art materials in hand and hope for his future efforts. But *what* would he put on that canvas? As he thought about this, he decided to have a talk with his old friend, the retired town doctor. He made an appointment for the next morning, and then sought a good night's rest. When Bob made the appointment, he had given no thought to the fact that the doctor he was to see was totally blind.

The next morning Bob greeted his old friend with, "Doc, we are going to paint a picture." With smiling appreciation for the trust he was receiving, Doc answered, "Slow down, Bob, and tell me what this picture matter is all about." Bob settled into a chair and told Doc the story. When he had finished, Doc, with hope in his voice, said, "We just may do that, Bob. Let me think about it. Come back tomorrow morning about the same time and I'll give you my answer."

The next morning Bob arrived eagerly and expectantly, but also with some uncertainty. Doc opened with a question. "Bob, how much are you aware of the heart-breaking farm sales that are happening here in our community, and of what it means to all of us? I remember well, Bob, how apt you were as a boy in drawing a likeness of any of us; you even got into trouble sometimes with your skill. The picture I have in mind would require you to

portray the hurt of one of our most-loved families as they watch all that they own going under the auctioneer's hammer and being sold to strangers who are greedy to buy and to resell for profit. That would demand your most worthy effort. Will you do it?"

Bob responded with deep sincerity and feeling, and the two men dedicated themselves to start work the next day. The painting was to be called "Vendue," a public sale. Day after day the doctor outlined every object and every emotion that loving memories suggested as family members parted with their treasured belongings. At last the doctor asked, "Are we about there, Bob?" With assurance Bob replied, "I believe we are, Doc." "Then, Bob," Doc said, "tomorrow I want you to relate back to me every thought and detail that you have put on canvas, and we will try to decide what we have done." The session was an anxious one for Bob. Finally the doctor sighed and quietly said, "Well, Bob, we have painted a picture." The words stamped themselves forever in Bob's memory.

When Grant Wood accepted "Vendue," he told Bob Tabor that he had become an established artist. Bob did not learn for some time that his painting was working its way through channels. Finally it ended up on the walls of the White House, where it was hung to share its message with the many people who would study it. A later president asked Bob to paint a copy of "Vendue" for his home, but Bob told him that the painting was both Doc's and his work, and that he could not reproduce it.

Subsequently, Bob very generously spent several weeks in the Skyland Camp program of the Dorsett family in Gunnison County, Colorado. Like Grant Wood, Bob helped to make that summer one of happy growth for those who were fortunate enough to share it with him.

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