

The Objects of Our Lives

Installment 3

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We say “things” are not important, it is the people and experiences of our lives that make it rich. But is that always true? This is the question we put to Guild writers, asking them to craft a story—fiction or nonfiction, prose or poetry—about an everyday object that represents an



Photo by Jim Tegman

important part of their life. The project was inspired by a *Harvard Gazette* essay by Leslie Jamison (read it [here](#)).

We are overjoyed by the number of writers who participated. Rather than creating one large document, we are serializing these pieces. Several pieces will be posted each week for our readers to savor and contemplate.

Our objects this week are handcrafted by men with a quiet care—grandfathers, an ex-father-in law. In the case of Bruce Krug’s object, though the object is not handcrafted, the stories are.

Maribeth
RBWG Executive Director

Papa's Wood Carving. Circa 1958. Emily Yeager.

My paternal grandfather was so profoundly affected by the Great Depression, losing virtually everything and struggling to feed his family, that he suffered a nervous breakdown. My father's family regularly moved from one tiny, "free-month's-rent" Bronx apartment to another while my grandfather partially recovered in a state mental health facility. I assume he was treated with shock therapy as my childhood memory of him was of a very sad, loving man with little affect, kind eyes and few words. Though he was able to resume his career as a tailor, my father told me Papa was never the same after his breakdown.



His lifelong hobby was whittling. As a child, our family occasionally traveled from Cleveland to visit his tiny Mohegan Avenue apartment. Three-inch wooden figures were Papa's specialty. Now and then, he would bestow one to a grandchild. This carving, cherished for at least 60 years, reminds me of his struggles and of the hobby that amused and distracted him against a backdrop of hard times.

I recall those visits with wonder at the spirit of Papa and others like him. His lifestyle and surroundings were in stark contrast to my family's comfortable life in Cleveland, and later, in Pittsburgh.

When I reflect upon those days, life's seeming simplicity is appealing.

Norwegian Cradle. 1976. Susan Towers.



You can't miss the blue-grey, clunky wooden cradle standing in the corner of my wrap-around porch. Its rockers protrude from either side, making sure there is a good deal of space between it and anything else. With no infant to use it, the cradle stands silent as the repository for a large-leafed rubber plant, reaching for the morning rays.

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If you didn't know, you'd assume the cradle was Scandinavian, with its traditional, colorful rosemaling painted on its sides and headboard. But I know it's Norwegian. My father-in-law Ingvald Hellerslien built and painted the cradle in 1976 for my first son. The second son used it two years later. It was a traditional design, Ingvald told me, one that represented the mountain areas from which he came. The Hellerslien family can be dated back to the Reformation through ancestral records kept at the wooden stave church in Roldal, Norway. The church was built in the thirteenth century, and I imagine Hellerslien roots date back with it.

My two sons are grown, and I still have the cradle, hoping there will be grandchildren to use it. Sometimes, I look at the cradle and recall those nights when I sat in a chair next to it while one of my sons lay inside. I'd move the rockers ever so slightly with my foot so the cradle would rock side to side.

Grampa's Walking Stick. Circa 1928. Russell Reece.

I don't know the wood. Pine maybe—there's lots of it in Western Michigan—but it's rough-carved with a swirl extending half-way down the staff. Grampa's name, Jack C. Anderson, and the date he made it, 1928, are scratched into a flat spot just below the handle. I often imagine him sitting by the fieldstone fireplace in his drafty old farmhouse, carving the stick.



Each year when I was growing up, we drove from Delaware and spent summers at his farm. The stick leaned in a corner of Grampa's workshop, always handy for our hikes through the woods or down the old Indian path to Stony Lake. Grampa was a quiet, hard-working man who introduced me to fishing, woodworking, football, Jack London, and so much more. He was my coach, my teacher, and a major guidepost on my sometimes rocky road to adulthood.

In 1968, forty years after carving his stick, Grampa lost a leg to diabetes. He soldiered through it, as if it didn't matter, insisted on standing at my cousin's wedding, made plans for future projects. But then he lost his other leg and shortly thereafter, his life.

Today the walking stick leans against my desk and is held with a degree of reverence that would embarrass Grampa. 'It's just an old stick,' he'd say, and that may be so. But when I'm lost in thought and absentmindedly fiddling with it, I often conjure him up and, like the old days, he helps me find the right path.

Panama Hat. Circa 1963. Bruce Krug.



The funny thing is I don't remember either of us ever wearing the hat. The hat had belonged to Old Croc, the most famous crocodile hunter in the Florida Everglades.

Old Croc, conceived in my grandfather's mind, lived an exciting, dangerous life for 20 minutes one Sunday every month. Granddad spun the words that brought Old Croc to life; my seven-year old brain provided the technicolor. We sat knee to knee, Granddad and I; he in his leather desk chair and I in a ladder-back chair of wicker and wood.

Old Croc lost one leg early in his career but weeks later wrestled the appendage from the belly of the crocodile that had dared to take it. Other crocodile hunters worshipped Old Croc while the true residents of the Everglades, the crocodiles, fled in fear at his approach.

Looking back, I'm not sure what I valued most: Old Croc's adventures or the 20 minutes that my grandfather devoted only to me. On a Sunday when families came together for riotous conversation, to be invited away from the chaos was a gift greater than any other.

After years of Sundays and 30-plus Old Croc adventures the unthinkable happened. Granddad and I assumed our honored places and...

Granddad asked, "What has Old Croc gotten himself into this time?"

I gasped.

Granddad smiled. "It's your turn."

And so I frantically crafted my first story.