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OBITUARY: WARREN EVERETT ROBERTS (1924-1999)

Simon J. Bronner

Followers of gravestone, folklife, and material culture studies have lost a guiding light with the death of Warren Roberts. His essays on recording material culture are still required reading in the field, and his presence is still felt in the many students who remember his classes and the colleagues who know his contribution to several organizations. Besides his service as an editorial board member for *Markers*, he also served in leadership positions for the American Folklore Society, Pioneer America Society, Early American Industries Association, Society for the North American Cultural Survey, and the Hoosier Folklore Society. I remember and honor him as a teacher, dissertation director, friend, and fellow fieldworker.

Warren Roberts invited students from his graduate seminar on folk material culture at Indiana University to his house at the end of each semester. They admired his reconstruction of a New England saltbox house majestically proclaiming his roots in Maine as well as his fidelity to preindustrial life. They usually stood in awe at the furniture he made with his own hands and gawked at his extensive antique tool and basket collections. He was a marvelous host and a dedicated teacher who graciously extended himself to students and colleagues. He gave of himself for this field of material culture that was also something of a cause for him. On one occasion in the late 1970s, the students had a token of appreciation to give him. It was a bumper sticker, and he beamed as he read aloud its message: I brake for cemeteries.

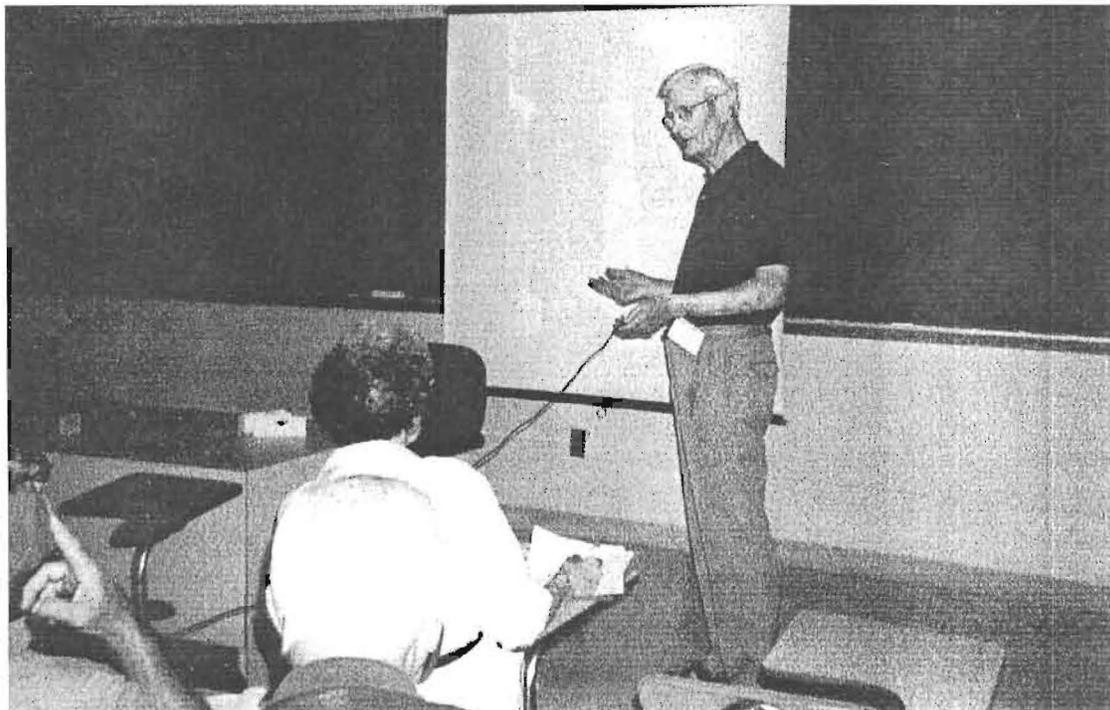
It was about this time that he was turning his attention more fully to cemeteries and gravestones in his consideration of American material culture. I believe that his turn joined the areas he had covered in his passage through several material worlds. He had built a reputation for architectural and craft studies, well represented in his chapters on architecture, craft, and recording material culture for the seminal textbook *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, edited by Richard Dorson (University of Chicago Press, 1972).¹ He referred often in his essays to the functional integration of objects in an ecological system of labor and land. His primary concern – finding instrumental roles that objects fulfill in forming a traditional “way of life” – became known as the “functional approach.”² He had in

mind an ambitious project of developing an outdoor folk museum at Indiana University and scoured the countryside for examples of traditional buildings, tools, and crafts to display. He moved several buildings and waited for his dream to become a reality. And he kept waiting, and ultimately became frustrated with the obstacles to the project's progress. As his dream of an outdoor museum faded, he found public outdoor displays of traditional life already in place. They were craftsmen's tools on tombstones, and he found them in cemeteries near his Bloomington, Indiana, home. I well remember his excitement over his discovery, and more than a few times he invited me to join him in the quest for more examples. My impression was that he thought of those cemeteries as the most revealing museum of cultural function. They featured engaging artifacts that brought together landscape, craft, custom, and design; they offered insights into the relation of individuals to society, community and region, ritual and life, ethnicity and labor. He published a note on them in 1978 in the journal *Pioneer America* (vol. 10, pp. 106-11) and followed with a host of essays on gravestones and their carvers. It marked a turning point in his research, and indeed in his career.

That career sadly came to an end on February 1, 1999 at the age of 74. He held the distinction of being the first Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University, and he remained at the university to teach for almost fifty years. The significance of his instruction in the folklore department and work for the Folklore Institute was his advocacy for material culture studies. His specialty when he began his degree was in oral traditions. His undergraduate thesis at Reed College in 1948 was on the ballad, and his doctoral dissertation was on the diffusion of folk tales. In 1958 he published his dissertation as *The Tale of the Kind and Unkind Girls* (W. De Gruyter, 1958; republished Wayne State University Press, 1994). In 1959, he was awarded a Fulbright grant to study in Norway and while there he became involved in the prominent Scandinavian folklife and outdoor museum movements. Upon his return, he introduced material culture seminars into the curriculum at the Folklore Institute and expanded his communication with American material culture scholars and institutions. He taught a two-semester sequence of folk architecture followed by folk crafts and folklife. He also led a "field" school during many summers where he brought graduate students to Dubois County, Indiana, to engage in folklife fieldwork. A regular stop was the Catholic cemetery in Jasper, where he showed students tree-stump tombstones (the subject of

several articles he wrote) and German metal markers. Many names who would become leaders of material culture studies generally and grave-stone studies in particular came out of those seminars (e.g., John Michael Vlach, Michael Owen Jones, Howard Marshall, and Tim Evans). His students and many colleagues honored him with a festschrift in 1989 entitled *The Old Traditional Way of Life*, edited by Robert E. Walls and George H. Schoemaker (Trickster Press).

The title of the festschrift refers to his "credo" that he espoused in his essay on "Investigating the Tree-Stump Tombstone" in 1985. Based on his research of stone carvers of gravemarkers in the unusual shape of tree stumps, he stated that "if the goal of folklife research is to study the traditional way of life of the preindustrial era, it should also be our goal to study the ways in which that way of life persists into the present and the influences of that way of life on modern life. In such a study we can hardly ignore the owner of the artifact."³ In his reply to Michael Owen Jones, he distinguished his view of folklife studies from other branches of culture studies with which he was once associated: "folkloristics tries to deal with only a few elements, mainly tales and songs, and ignores the rest. Folklife research concentrates on one society. Some of its research goals have been and should continue to include discovering how homogeneous



that society was. Folkloristics, however, includes the study of all human societies, and behaviors that transcend cultures."⁴ From his study of tombstones, then, he articulated the mission he set out for folklife as a cultural reconstruction of communities living in tradition.

For American gravestone studies, his work had another significance. It raised awareness of memorial forms and their makers other than the "headstone," and regionally it brought more attention to areas outside of colonial America. His "Notes on the Production of Rustic Monuments in the Limestone Belt of Indiana" for *Markers* in 1990 pleaded the case for a functional approach in gravestone studies. Susanne Ridlen took up his challenge in her dissertation of tree-stump tombstones (directed by Warren Roberts) and reported her findings in *Markers* in 1996 as "Tree-Stump Tombstones: Traditional Cultural Values and Rustic Funerary Art." I reported on tree-stump tombstone makers in the journal *Pioneer America* and the book *Grasping Things*.⁵ But Roberts's influence is not just about naming and describing "tree-stump tombstones." He encouraged opening more types of gravestones for scrutiny. The title of his volume of essays states his view succinctly: *Looking at the Overlooked* (UMI Research Press, 1988). In his comments and papers, he applauded fieldwork to identify and interpret a diversity of forms and factors for gravestones within community, environmental, and cultural contexts. I view that effort in Richard Meyer's important books on gravemarkers and his production of this journal. Meyer credits Roberts with providing the inspiration for his own research concerning occupational imagery on gravemarkers.⁶

At the time of his death, Roberts was telling me about bringing together his work on craft and social function. His plan was to connect furniture makers and gravestone carvers, designs for domestic and public landscapes, and tools for the living and the dead. He espoused the folklife spirit to the end. It was about making connections, it was about the significance of the quest. He reminded us of the links of creativity and tradition, community and custom. I remember him and honor his spirit.

NOTES

1. For his important architectural and craft studies, see *Log Buildings of Southern Indiana* (Bloomington, IN: Trickster Press, 1984); "The Whitaker-Waggoner Log House from Morgan County, Indiana," in *American Folklife*, ed. Don Yoder (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1976); "German American Log Buildings of Dubois County, Indiana," *Winterthur Portfolio* 21 (1986): 265-74; "Ananias Hensel and His Furniture: Cabinetmaking in Southern Indiana," *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore* 9 (1983): 69-122; "Turpin Chairs and the Turpin Family: Chairmaking in Southern Indiana," *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore* 7 (1981): 57-106.
2. See Simon J. Bronner, "Concepts in the Study of Material Aspects of American Folk Culture," *Folklore Forum* 12 (1979): 133-72; Thomas Schlereth, ed. *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1983).
3. In *American Material Culture and Folklife*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 136. See also his reference to the "credo" in *Material Culture Studies: A Symposium*, ed. Simon J. Bronner, pp. 2-3 (special issue of *Material Culture*, vol. 17, 1985).
4. "Reply: Folklife Research and Folkloristics," in *American Material Culture and Folklife*, ed. Bronner, p. 152.
5. See Susanne Ridlen, "Tree-Stump Tombstones: Traditional Cultural Values and Rustic Funerary Art," *Markers* 13 (1996): 44-73; Simon J. Bronner, "The Durlauf Family: Three Generations of Stonecarvers in Southern Indiana," *Pioneer America* 13 (1981): 17-26; Simon J. Bronner, *Grasping Things: Folk Material Culture and Mass Society in America* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986). Also, a new work by Susanne Ridlen, *Tree-Stump Tombstones: A Field Guide to Rustic Funerary Art in Indiana*, is in press as of this writing, with a scheduled publication date in 1999.
6. Richard E. Meyer, "Tribute to Warren Roberts," *AGS Quarterly* 23 (Summer 1999): 2.

APPENDIX

Warren Roberts' Gravestone Studies

"Investigating the Tree-Stump Tombstone in Indiana." In *American Material Culture and Folklife: A Prologue and Dialogue*. Edited by Simon J. Bronner. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985; reprinted Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1992, pp. 135-143.

"Notes on the Production of Rustic Monuments in the Limestone Belt of Indiana." *Markers* 7 (1990), pp. 172-193.

"The Sincerest Form of Flattery: Originals and Imitations in 'Rustic Monuments' of the Limestone Belt of Indiana." In Warren E. Roberts, *Viewpoints on Folklife: Looking at the Overlooked*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988, pp. 145-161.

"Tombstones in Scotland and Indiana." *Folklife: A Journal of Ethnological Studies* 23 (1984-1985), pp. 97-104.

"Tools on Tombstones: Some Indiana Examples." *Pioneer America* 10 (1978), pp. 106-111. Reprinted in Warren E. Roberts, *Viewpoints on Folklife: Looking at the Overlooked*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988, pp. 133-144.

"Traditional Tools as Symbols: Some Examples from Indiana Tombstones." *Pioneer America* 12 (1980), pp. 54-63.

