

A Picture of an Old Country Store: The Construction of Folklore in Everyday Life^{*}

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Abstract: This brief essay provides a close reading of a photograph taken by Frank Hohenberger, an Indiana photojournalist. The image is of the “Old Country Store” a store adjacent to the Nashville House, a tourist destination in Nashville, Indiana. Through tracing the history of this site and the photograph of it, I probe the constructed imagery of these two related artifacts with the aim of understanding a portion of their complex production. This paper is not a search for the authentic or a critique of the fake, but rather an exploration of the art of authentication as a complex social process embedded in particular historical and intercultural settings. [Keywords: folklorization, traditionalization, heritage-making, authentication, semiotics, tourism, anti-modernism]

Introduction

As an undergraduate taking a folklore class at Indiana University, I was surprised when one of my textbooks had a picture from my hometown on its cover (Figure 1). Trickster Press has used the 1953 image of the “Old Country Store” in Nashville, Indiana on the cover of its popular student text *The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life* since 1990. Thousands of students have seen the black and white image, which reinforces nostalgic notions associated with American folklore: checker playing, white oak baskets, as well as “homemade candies, jams, bread and cookies” as a hand-lettered sign in the store/picture reads. However, there is more to this image than a historic photograph of a small-town store.

The photograph is a meta-artifact, that is, it is an object (photograph) about an object (store). In many ways, it is difficult to separate these artifacts, because they are so closely linked; one (the store) is bound by time and space, and no longer exists as it did in the winter of 1953, while the other is a shadow of that store; an image shaped by a photographer's gaze and a mechanical instrument (the camera). While one might feel that they are looking at the store when they study the photograph, they are really seeing only a thin page from a thick book that no longer exists. Nevertheless, as a product of the age of mechanical reproduction, the image has been replicated thousands of times in both print and digital forms, thereby making it difficult to really see the image, let alone the place that it pretends to document.

In the pages that follow, I briefly trace the relevant history that directly gave rise to the creation of the Old Country Store and the photograph and explore the semiotics of these two entwined artifacts with the aim of understanding a portion of their rustically elaborate production. In this

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study, I avoid looking for the authentic, but rather seek to better understand the art of authentication. My approach focuses on viewing authentication as an artistic process—like traditionalization—that is embedded in particular historical moments and socio-cultural contexts (Hymes 1975). This paper is an extension of my work as the Director of Traditional Arts Indiana, the official public folklore agency for my home state in the United States. In this role, I understand cultivating a constructively critical perspective on the related processes of folklorization, traditionalization, heritage-making, and cultural authentication—past and present—as essential to my practice as a scholar and public humanist. Focused specifically on a contextual reading of the “Old Country Store” (as destination and iconic image), this brief paper is an early foray into a larger project on the culture history of Brown County and its 20th century construction as a folklore-rich tourist destination.¹



Figure 1. “The Old Country Store” by Frank Hohenberger, 1953. Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

The Making of an “Old Country Store”

A.J. “Jack” Rogers created the Old Country Store as part of the Nashville House, a multiuse building that also housed a restaurant and craft shop when the picture was taken. A native of Bloomington, Indiana, Rogers had studied journalism at Indiana University (IU) and worked in newspapers, sales and advertising. Before building the Old Country Store, he had been the business manager and editor for the *Bloomington Daily Telephone*, was president of the

Bloomington Chamber of Commerce, served as a First Lieutenant in World War I and had been an intelligence officer in France after the war. I list these facts to show that Rogers was an intelligent and experienced entrepreneur, not simply an operator of a small town store (which he also was).²

During his years as a student at IU, Rogers had become friends with Fred Bates Johnson, the founder of the university's School of Journalism and a lawyer. Committed to Brown County as a tourist destination, the two successful businessmen partnered in purchasing and running an old 23-room hotel in downtown Nashville. This became their pet project to develop and promote. While the inn's structure dated to before the Civil War, the new owners "modernized" it in 1927 and reopened it as "The Nashville House." The old inn became a new tourist destination and in 1934 Rogers bought Johnson's share of the business and became the inn's sole proprietor.

As part of his project, Rogers fostered several local industries to make products for the inn and invited handicraft enthusiast Portia Howe Sperry to open a "Brown County Folks Shop" in the lobby. Tourists bought locally made baskets, rag rugs and canned goods. Rogers purchased large quantities of sassafras roots from local diggers and brewed sassafras tea for his customers; he also put together hundreds of small packages of the roots, which he sent throughout the United States to promote the Nashville House. It worked. Rogers had converted an old inn into a successful tourist attraction. Nevertheless, tragedy was just around the corner. In 1943, a fire completely destroyed the famous old structure.

The devastating fire left only the fire escape and the old stone chimney standing. People from throughout the region came to see the smoldering ruins. Many locals and tourists wondered if Rogers would rebuild the Nashville House, and one reporter noted that after the fire several locals were "boosting for the building of a larger Nashville House." The supporters hoped the entrepreneur would include an art gallery in his new building to exhibit paintings by Brown County artists (Anonymous 1943). While Rogers would rebuild a bigger version of the Nashville House, he had other plans for retooling his tourist destination. Nationally known as a Midwestern art colony, Brown County artists helped draw tourists through the 1930s; however, by 1943, the tourist appeal of the Art Colony had begun to wane, probably because of the loss of its most prominent figures: landscape painters T.C. Steele, Will Vawter and Gustave Baumann.³ To attract tourists, Rogers would turn not to the fine art of American impressionists but to the folk crafts and foods of nostalgic Brown County.

Since the fire struck during the war-years, materials and labor were scarce, which forced Rogers to wait until 1947 to begin rebuilding and expanding the Nashville House. In many ways, the second building was Rogers's interpretation of what tourists thought Brown County architecture should be. Designed by Rogers and architect Ed James, the structure was a new building, camouflaged as an old structure. As one reporter commented during its construction, the Nashville House began to "cloak itself in its pre-1943 look of friendliness, and the hotel corner, so vacant and so badly missed for four years is once again... making the town look like Nashville is expected to look (Anonymous 1947a)." Though visually and architecturally different from the original, the new building was the simulacrum of the old. It both copied and superseded its antecedent.

By destroying the original, the fire created the possibility of not just reviving the Nashville House but also revising the structure and infrastructure of the business, which allowed Rogers to execute his vision for the tourist destination. While the old building had an aura of history and the patina of age, its structure was experientially limited as a tourist attraction. Rogers constructed his new building to better accommodate the various aspects of his business. He did away with rooms for overnight lodging, greatly expanded the dining room, built a designated room for the Brown County Folks Shop, and created a large lobby area. The lobby became the Old Country Store, a space where tourist could buy fresh baked goods and browse local gift items.⁴ Since the new structure had no physical connection with the past, Rogers decorated the store to revitalize the nostalgic conceptions of the earlier business. One journalist described the Old Country Store as a “replica of the old-time stores where our granddads traded: hanging lamps, old-time scales with scoops, spice boxes, string holders. The loafer’s delight—a pot-bellied stove with a checker board handy (Paddleford 1950).”

Having briefly outlined the events that brought Rogers’s Old Country Store into existence, I will limit and direct my focus back to the store/photograph. In future work, I hope to explore the entirety of the Nashville House complex and related operations, but for now those are quite literally out of the picture.

The Image of an Old Country Store

The Old Country Store photograph was taken by Frank Hohenberger, a photojournalist, who had popularized many people and places in Brown County in his weekly *Indianapolis Star* feature, “Down in the Hills of Brown.” While this 1953 image was among the last of his works taken in Nashville, he had first come to the county in 1917 and had spent most of his adult life living and working in this rural community (Byrd 1993:1-5). His photographic subjects were usually abandoned cabins, rural landscapes, and people engaged in practices associated with Indiana’s European pioneer (settler) past. He crafted iconic images of people making brooms, playing fiddles, weaving rugs and swapping stories and these images came to represent the idealized folk of Brown County. For tourists in the 1950s—many of whom had seen these images—Brown County became a place frozen in time. The “real” Brown County was the Brown County of Hohenberger’s photographs, most of which had been shot 20 to 30 years earlier and were even then consciously nostalgic. He would write in his diary, “Photograph the old things which are fast disappearing... When you picture something that takes the observer back to boyhood days on the farm, you have hit the vital spot in the region of their pocketbook (Hohenberger n.d.:114-115).” (For additional background on Hohenberger, see: Bustin and Hohenberger [1982], Hohenberger [1952], Hohenberger and Byrd [1993], and Sylvester [1976].)

As the above quote reveals, Hohenberger was both talented and entrepreneurial. His interpretive work, like that of Rogers, created and sold nostalgic products. Besides distributing his images commercially to newspapers, he also sold individual prints to tourists. Both Hohenberger and Rogers realized that many middle class urbanites wanted to “reconnect” with their rural past and with nature. Through these entrepreneurs’ creative work Brown County provided this new leisure class with images to look at and a place to visit that are similar constructions. While the

photograph renders its subject as a flattened sign of itself, the store assembles and stages signs as part of a living diorama, where visitors came to see and experience these markers.

John Urry noted that while photography seems “to be a means of transcribing reality,” and despite the fact that images may appear to be a full and accurate rendering of a person, place or event, photographs are actually “miniature slices of reality (1990:139).” While the Old Country Store photograph captured a “slice” of a particular moment in time, from a specific perspective, looking at the image without examining its fabrication can be misleading.⁵ Hohenberger’s photographs are very popular and highly collectible. At least three full-length books have been published on his work but rarely have previous writers on his work addressed the nostalgic focus of Hohenberger’s lens. As Urry cautioned: “Photographs are the outcome of an active signifying practice in which those taking the photo select, structure and shape what is going to be taken. In particular there is the attempt to construct idealized images which beautify the object being photographed (1990:139).”

Hohenberger consciously constructed each of his photographs, often experimenting with new equipment and supplies. For much of his career he kept detailed records of his shutter speeds, exposure times and written reflections about the people and places that he committed to film. However, by the 1950s his entries into his journal were few. In fact, the last three pages of his diary contain his notes about and lists of the photographs he printed and matted for Rogers to display in the Old Country Store. It is unclear why he took the 1953 picture of the store; however, on that same day he photographed several other storefronts and churches in Nashville. Perhaps, he took the snapshot when he stopped in to see the images that he had supplied to Rogers, or maybe he was shooting the photograph for commercial purposes. Either way, the photograph is yet another example of Hohenberger’s continued pursuits of nostalgic images of Brown County. To view this photograph and similar images unreflexively as direct visual records of people and places both underestimates Hohenberger’s skill and aesthetic, as well as the general constructedness of all photographs. (I will address this point specifically later in this paper).

Markers and Signs

The Old Country Store, as depicted in the photograph, is a complex of signs that attempts to authenticate it as what it claims to be: an “old country store.” From its timber frame and potbellied stove to its hand-lettered signs and locally made baskets, its markers orient visitors to the special construction and “authenticity” of this place. However, Jonathan Culler notes the paradoxical problem with authenticity. How can an object, practice or place be “experienced as authentic” if it is marked as an “authentic site” because once it is marked “as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself and hence not authentic in the sense of unspoiled” (1981:132)? For example, no “real” old country store would erect a sign labeling it as an “Old Country Store.” However, I contend that all stores are constructed and use markers and signs to communicate how they want to be perceived. The scholar’s true quest is not to uncover the illusive manifestations of authenticity, but rather, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Edward M. Bruner advise, they should study the vernacular processes of authentication (1992:304).

Stores require both literal and figurative signs. There is a 1927 photograph of the Walker's country store in Spearsville, a small community that is also in Brown County. The image shows Mr. and Mrs. John Walker sitting on the porch of their establishment; however the front of the store is covered with tin signs advertising Lucky Strikes Cigarettes, Starr Tobacco, Arbuckle Coffee, and other products. While these signs are for products presumably sold in the store, they are also markers telling potential customers that the establishment is a general merchandise store and that it carries the products that customers (may) want (Byrd 1993:46). Similarly, Rogers's store displays signs for "home made" bread and jams communicating to their customers that this site carries the old-fashioned products that urban tourists desire.

All of the hand-painted signs in Rogers's store were created by local artist and sign painter Norman Ulery. From the large sign that proclaims the business's name to the smaller sign that promotes the store's "double smoked hams and bacon" each piece is both a literal sign and a sign of itself. While the painted board simply names the product, the style and construction communicates how those products are to be viewed. Ulery's signs reflect the complexity of these seemingly simple communicative acts, which mark the site and its products as old-timey and quaint. While his distinctive hand-lettered signs were brushed with a folksy quality, he was also a trained modern artist who created post-surrealist works, which he called "cosmic art." Prior to moving to the county, he had worked in Los Angeles, where he was an assistant to Grace Clements, an important artist and spokesperson for the avant-garde movement in Southern California in the 1930s.⁶

Ulery and his family moved to Brown County in 1947. The traditional art colony responded negatively to his contemporary work and he was rejected and not allowed to join the locally influential Brown County Art Gallery. Instead, he turned his talent and training to designing tourist maps, postcards, menus, and playbills for Rogers and other shop owners. While his fine art was viewed as modern, his signs and advertising art were distinctively anti-modern. His lettering had a hand-painted, rustic quality and his postcards, maps, and print publications were embellished with stereotypical rural characters, log cabins and other icons of the past rendered in a countrified style. My hope is that highlighting the complexity of Ulery's creative biography not only increases our sense of the complexity of the signifying work that he and his contemporaries were doing in Brown County but that it also highlights the complexities of creativity and motivation underpinning the activities of all involved, including the tourists and locals of Ulery's day.

Another marker in the store, and one of the most striking elements of authentication, is the south wall of the store where dozens of black and white photographs hang. Each image portrays past residents of the county whom Hohenberger photographed in the 1920s and 1930s: Valentine Penrose, a 100 year old fox hunter; Allie Ferguson the proprietor of one of the old inns; and Joe Bohall, a local basket maker, are just a sampling of the more than thirty portraits on display. However, to the tourist the particulars of whom these people are is inconsequential to the development of the site as authentic Brown County. Knowing too much about these people/images would intrude into the site and complicate their iconicity (i.e., representation through simplification). This great crowd of witnesses, staring down from the wall, watch as if to approve and authenticate Rogers's Old Country Store. In 1953, though most of these people would have been deceased, they would have been remembered as family, friends and neighbors

by many of the locals; however, to tourists, who, as Culler explains, are “interested in everything as a sign of itself,” they would view these people as representatives of native Brown County (1981:127).

Hohenberger had photographed the store three years earlier, from nearly the same vantage point as he did in 1953 (Figure 2). In comparing the two images, one can see that the sheer number of signs and markers had grown exponentially in that short time. There were more literal-signs, but also more photographs from Hohenberger’s collection of images. In 1950 there were only two rows of portraits, but by 1953 there were five rows of faces for tourists to see. Culler notes that the “proliferation of markers frames something as a site for tourists (1981:132).” While locals may have bought baked goods and items from the store in earlier years, by 1953, the site was overtly constructed for tourists. Every surface was embellished with rustic signs of the past. These veneers have little to do with the materiality of the products for sale in the store, but rather augment the spiritual aspect of these tourist wares. They were telling the tourist how to read the space. These layers in both words and artifacts are installed to communicate the “home made” quality and “authenticity” of the products for sale.



Figure 2. “The Old Country Store” by Frank Hohenberger, 1950. Courtesy, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Culler insightfully explains that the tourist destination “is not the souvenir itself but the information about” these products that are for sale, and “thus the marker of a marker becomes

the principal sight (1981:139).” While some of the items displayed in the picture are thoughtfully arranged artifacts, which helps maintain the image of the Old Country Store (i.e., rocking chairs, checker board, antique clock), other items are the *raison d’etre* for the store—products to be sold. However, these items also contribute to the site’s “old country store-ness.” Visitors fulfill the construct by buying items from the store, because that is what one does in a country store—purchase country store products. It is this touristic retail cycle, which has helped make the Country Store a standard tourist sight (and site) in North America.

On the table in the middle of the room are several other souvenirs, including what appear to be two carved sculptures of hunting dogs. Similarly, one can see jars of canned goods and display cases of baked goods, but the photograph obfuscates most of the details of the products sold. However, Clementine Paddleford, then the food editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, provides an enthusiastic description of some of the food products in her 1950 review of the store:

One entire section is given to the Homemade jellies and jams. Homemade cookies in the bake case. Sassafras always on hand to brew a blood-rousing tea. The sorghum is light in color, mild in taste. Bushels of black walnuts here, hickory nuts as big as plums. The Hoosier ham hickory-smoked, double-smoked, the baked apple butter, the stone ground meals are sold by mail in 48 states. Hankering for horehound or pink wintergreen candies these can be bought a nickel’s worth at a time to carry away in a striped candy sack. [Paddleford 1950]

Paddleford’s description not only lists products for sale, but tourist experiences in earnest. Drinking tea, buying hams and carrying away candy in striped sacks are all part of the tourist interactions crafted by Rogers.

Some of the products and displays physically seen in the photograph are produced locally. The oak-rod baskets on the floor are a local style of basket that is not found in other parts of the state. Made almost exclusively by members of the Hovis and Bohall families in Brown County, the large containers, originally made to gather and store corn, were now used to hold and display souvenir items. The oak-rod baskets on the floor are similar to the one being made in the photograph of Joe Bohall, that hangs on the south wall. There is an intermediation between the object and the image. The picture informs the artifact and enhances its capacity to authenticate the store.

Similarly, an antique checkerboard hangs on the wall, a group of men play checkers around an old cracker barrel, and the south wall presents a photograph of Scott Moser and Bub Henderson playing checkers. Roger’s construction is not to just show tourists the items, as in a museum, but rather to encourage them to experience the place by playing checkers and buying homemade goods. The signs and markers in the store are intratextual, their meanings are cumulative and relational. While each has its own communicative role, they resonate collectively as they work to authenticate the site as an assemblage.⁷

People in the Picture

To this point my discussion of signs has been limited to constructed objects: wooden signs, framed photographs, handmade baskets and old checkerboards. Briefly, I want to look at the people imaged and imagined in this photograph, those whom the photograph render as signs—symbols, icons, and indexes—of themselves. At the center of the image are three men playing checkers with a wooden checkerboard placed atop a cracker barrel. These men are not just playing checkers, but are performing for the photographer. One notices that the men avoid looking at the camera by consciously looking like they are playing the game. One can infer this because the women in the background, who are in the picture but are not its primary focus, are obviously aware of the camera; they are smiling and staring at the camera as if both simultaneously in and out of the photographers frame. While the men seemingly ignore the camera, the women look at it; nevertheless, all of the people perform their interactional roles as players, customers and clerks.

In addition to the three men playing checkers, there is another man sitting with his back to the camera, warming himself by the potbellied stove. Did he not know he was being photographed? This man was Jack Rogers. He was quite aware of the photographer! He, like the other people in the picture, was fulfilling his semiotic function for the camera. At that moment he became yet another symbol within his construction. Without people the scene would be incomplete; but with people, Roger's store becomes a life size diorama, which Hohenberger miniaturized and packaged into a five inch by seven inch negative. It is in this silenced black and white state that the scene most completes its aim to authenticate. If the site of the physical 1953 store evoked the past through its complex system of signs and markers, the photograph succeeds even more by glossing over the complexities of the moment and being packaged as a proof of itself. This photograph of the Old Country Store joins other images in the Hohenberger collection, which have often been deployed iconically to represent Brown County and Indiana's rural past as well as the what the editors of my undergraduate text—in what was a progressive scholarly move in that moment—called the *Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life*.

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Notes

1. Two generous peer-reviewers of this paper, along with the journal's editor, converged in suggesting that the initial version of this paper needed to either proceed further into a more in-depth consideration of the vast literatures on tourism, heritage, authenticity, and cultural representation and display or take the form of a briefer case study offering a close reading of the

“Old Country Store” case as a prelude to further work by myself and others. In revision, I have adopted the later strategy and look forward to pursuing further work of wider compass.

2. All of the biographical and historical facts about A. J. Rogers and the Nashville House that are given here were compiled from several newspaper accounts. See Anonymous 1943, 1947a, 1947b, 1959; Paddleford 1950).

3. T.C. Steele died in 1927 and Will Vawter passed way in 1939. Gustave Baumann permanently moved to the Santa Fe, New Mexico art colony in 1919. While there remained several other highly regarded artists, none had the popular appeal of these three. For discussion of the art colony, see Letsinger-Miller (1994).

4. At this point I am unclear whether Rogers developed this business model independently, but he was among the first to build the combination tourist restaurant and store, a model popularized by Cracker Barrel Restaurant and Old Country Store®, a national chain with franchises along most interstates in the United States.

5. Like construction, I use the term fabrication without its negative connotation often associated with the term.

6. Information on Norman Ulery comes from Anonymous (1942, 1976, 1991) and www.helfenfinearts.com/biogs/clementsFset.html, accessed September 23, 2010.

7. On the power of inter- and intratextual relationships in communicative life, see Briggs and Bauman (1992). On complex material assemblages, see the final chapter of Shukla (2008).

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