

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE  
TAPE 9 OF 11; 1988-102

INTERVIEW WITH: Harlan Hubbard

[part of a series of interviews by Joanne Weeter. Ms. Weeter is not heard on this tape, which is instead a monologue by Mr. Hubbard. He may have been repeating part or all of a narrative from an earlier interview that was not successfully recorded.]

DATE: [July 14, 1987?]

LOCATION: Payne Hollow, Kentucky

HARLAN HUBBARD: . . . this reel, I'll try to say it over again. After Anna died and I was left alone and theoretically I was free to do anything that I cared to do. This is the time I might have realized some of those longings which I used to have more completely than I had so far. Those longings to live a life in the wilderness, closer to nature and more independent of the world of today, and without obligations or contact, to any great extent, with people. [pause] But somehow, I did not feel any strong urge to do so; it seemed more natural to go on living here in Payne Hollow. Maybe this is what I wanted anyway rather than a wild life, especially in the long run. [pause]

Anyway, [pause, some noise in the background] sometimes I think this place is a little too elaborate for me and I think I might have a smaller place which would be simpler to take care of and more efficient, but then I think it would take a long time to find that place even, if I wanted to leave here. And I can't imagine building another place right here and settling down in another house. I think maybe my dreams of a life in the wilderness were perhaps somewhat romantic and not in line with what I really wanted. [pause] It might be all

right to live in a cave with a dirt floor and other drawbacks such as a lack of light and ventilation and [pause] small. I think I would always want a wood floor and glass windows and a tight house, that could be heated efficiently, and I'd like a place with [pause] well, absolutely nothing done in the way of design or decoration that wasn't utility first. This place was built that way and it turned out well. [pause] Then just to make over another house or build a new one would take a long time. It would be expensive. [pause] So I've been quite contented here; nothing bothers me about the place, nothing I want to change especially. We have so many associations with the past, even with Anna, this place is so much hers that she seems still like a part of it. Maybe that's one reason for staying here, I don't know.

I'm surprised at how busy the days are, though, and surprised how much time it takes -- just the chores and keeping the place clean and well ventilated, my clothes clean, and then -- meals. With my standards of not living out of tin cans and paper boxes and prepared food, it takes time. And there's work to do outside, even though I have some help with that. So I get up early in the morning, do the list of (?) chores and this season of the year I do the outside work in the morning while it's cooler, take care of, work in the garden; [pause] there's always something to repair, something new to build.

Of course, my chief work is in my studio. I've been giving much time and consideration to painting since I've been alone, looking at it more critically than I ever did before, and maybe that was -- that is a mistake, maybe. But all that I've done so far has been -- that was the natural thing to do. I was deeply moved by the landscape and the weather and the sky, the birds, the trees and so forth, and I've just tried to reproduce that on canvas as

simply as possible. It was quite successful, too, I think. The work – the work of mine that pleases most people and is most in demand is what I did fifty years ago in that golden age when I was living in Fort Thomas and I had those outposts in the country, first at Brent; and then up at Ross, and later in the one-room studio in the backyard of Fort Thomas. Of course, in those days my mother was active and she took care of the house, cooked the meals. And we had more conveniences now -- than I have now, labor-saving devices, electricity, of course; all that made it easier. Perhaps what I need now is someone to take my mother's place, but I recoil from that idea, much as I feel sometimes that I need female companionship and the graces that a woman would bring into the house. She would also bring complications and expenses, and I feel that I can do the work with less expenditure of labor and time, do it myself for myself, than if I brought in some help. [Tape shut off momentarily, then resumed, background noise ceases]

. . . early May until June thirteenth. In the meantime [pause] I had very helpful friends that scouted around and gotten a couple of stones from the riverbank which would mark the grave -- the grave was to be right in front of the house -- in the shady spot overlooking the path that comes up from the river, looking across at the Indiana hills. [pause] I was determined not to have a large assembly at this ceremony. [pause] I kept them -- I succeeded; there were only twelve, all of them very close friends, all of them local except for Warren and Patricia Staebler who came down from Richmond, Indiana. We stood around, or they did, on the sloping grass while Richard [Strimple] and Paul [Hassfurder] and Ray Munier with a post hole digger dug a suitable hole in the ground. They had to go through one ledge of rock, which delayed them a little bit, but with very little trouble. Then

the ashes were brought down from where they'd been resting all this time up on, up on the table in the house and we put them in the hole and covered it up. I tried to make a little talk. I guess it would have been better if I had kept still. Anyway. [pause] Then we all came up to the terrace and sat around the rest of the afternoon conversing with much pleasantness and good feeling toward everyone and cheerful talk. [pause] Patricia and I went in the house, she played the piano and I tried to play on the violin -- the song that Bach wrote for Anna Margalena [Magdalena] entitled "Bist du bei mir," a beautiful, simple song. Nothing could be more appropriate for the moment. I doubt -- I don't know if anyone heard it or recognized it or knew what it was all about, but anyway it was done. [pause] That's about all there is to say about that day.

On another day, it was the Fourth of July, the day that Mike Skop, a sculptor from Fort Thomas, brings his summer of class of students down -- he's been doing it for fifteen or twenty years -- and when he saw the stone and I mentioned my intention of inscribing Anna's name on it, [repeats "Anna's name on it"] he said, "I'll do it. Where's the chisel?" So we looked up a chisel that would do and Mike, in a masterly fashion and very quickly, inscribed both our names: Harlan, Anna, and the date, 1987 [1986]. That stone was quite remarkable. It almost suggested a hewn stone, for the purpose of a gravestone, but it was beyond any doubt just a natural stone from the riverbank, a piece of what I call sandstone because it comes in big chunks, and this had rolled all the way down from the cliffs at the top of the bluff, four hundred feet above the river. They say at a time when they were taking the stone from that point to build the dams, wing dams along the river, to concentrate the current in the middle, hoping to keep the channel deeper; anyway, it was up the river a ways and it took all

four of us to get the stone down to the -- in a boat to get it down to the landing and up to the site. And at the same time, we brought another stone, which was a rather broad, flat stone full of fossils, which was just a background for the gravestone. [tape is stopped, then resumes]

The transition from living with Anna, forty-three years of it, very closely, too, to living by myself was made with less difficulty than one would imagine. I was -- I realize now that I was in a state of mild shock; it was hard to concentrate, hard to get simple things done, and so many new things to do that I had -- facing me. But I never experienced a deep mourning and excessive grief that I've known men to suffer in that situation. I was helped partly by a feeling that I had that we should be thankful that Anna made such a clean and decisive break with life. I knew she would be pleased to have done that instead of lingering a long time in a semi-helpless condition or even in a slightly impaired condition, compared to the way things used to be.

I even feel, looking back on the hospital experience, that Anna wanted it that way, and willfully brought it about. The doctors were pleased with the operation and predicted that she would return home after a period of recuperation, but instead of getting better, she remained about the same. The reason, one reason, seemed to have been because she refused to eat, and all the persuasion and cajolery that her friends used was ineffectual; she just wouldn't eat. Of course, she was kept alive by transfusions, but -- not transfusions exactly, but by the IV machine, but there's a limit to that, and finally she began to get worse and the disease that she had spread through other parts of the body. She didn't suffer any, not a great deal, and she never complained or never wished anything was different. But she died very

peacefully and as I have said, she looked beautiful to me to the very end. [tape is stopped, then resumes]

That's all in the past now and here at this point, several months beyond a year, I'm doing much better. I'm quite pleased that I was able to regain my command of things, and I grew stronger, could do more physical work, and even all the details of business that I'd never had to bother with before because Anna did it all -- had done it all, I at least managed to get through somehow, and now I think I keep things going better. [pause] I think I was a natural for living alone anyway, and that talent had been obscured by all the years that it was not -- didn't have a chance to show itself. But now, when I was faced with living alone, I made the transition very easily. [pause] I think the thing that, the condition that made it much easier was that I was very busy, my mind was occupied, and I had things to do every day, all day long. And especially my interest in painting had increased and the excitement of it all, of the new vistas and new ways to follow and my interest in all that. Without that, I don't know if I would have done so well. I've been helped by my interest in music, too. I might say, in general, my life alone has tended toward the primitive. For instance, I've given up the rather complicated system we had for supplying running water in the house, and I find it simpler and almost as convenient to go outside to dip up a bucket of water from the cistern when I need it instead of filling that tank up on the hill so the water will run down in the house by gravity. I filled that tank for, I don't know, twenty years, I guess, by carrying the water from the cistern up to the tank in five-gallon plastic buckets. They weren't quite full, they were about two-thirds full. But I found that by putting three ten-gallon buckets of water into those two plastic buckets and carrying with a yoke, I only had to make two trips up to

the cistern and that would be enough for the day. So it was not hard to keep up with it. I would carry a little more to make a surplus, and that way I kept up the supply of water without a great deal of trouble, but it was a daily chore which I don't have to do any more now. I only have to carry the water from the cistern in here. Of course, this is for myself, I use so much less water, it makes a great difference. [pause]

Another thing I've practically abandoned Anna's cook-stove, preferring to cook on the fireplace or at a cooking place outside. Even in this hot weather in summer, I cook out there. The stove was very efficient, though, and I find that for certain things, it's – it's way ahead of the other method of cooking on an open fire, if you want to do canning, for instance. You have to keep the processor going at a certain point, and it's much easier on the stove than it is on an open fire. On the whole, I think I've managed to make the housekeeping much simpler.

I think, too, of those long years when I cut all the wood that we used, the fire wood, by hand and brought it in in the wheelbarrow and at quite a distance, too, a distance which, the wood cutters, who help me now, wouldn't consider -- wouldn't consider moving it that far. And of course, I had no power tools, no chain saw; I cut it all with, I used a cross-cut saw until the bow saws came onto the market, which were so much easier to handle, and efficient, too; they use such a smaller blade. But they didn't have the durability and ruggedness of the old ways and they were expensive, too, buying new blades. But I learned to sharpen even them, so that helped. But anyway, I look back over those long years of toil. I didn't mind them then, I was very happy and I felt that I was working out of doors and nothing ple-- I always did like working with wood and I never got tired of it.

All through those years, though, there was a feeling that it would be nice if I had more time for other things, especially painting. [pause] One thing we did keep up, which is gone now, which I regret very much, is the music that Anna and I . . .

END OF TAPE 9, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 9, SIDE B

HH: When I started to paint, above all that purpose was to reproduce on paper or canvas what I saw. And the reason that I wanted to do that was that I didn't paint anything that I wasn't moved by the sight of it or very much interested in it so the picture of it would have great value for me. I went on that way for quite awhile and I began to see that there were lots of other ways to go about painting. I was in New York at the time, a young student – [tape is stopped, then resumes] I went on under that principle for a long time. The first interest I ever had of something in painting beyond that was a show I saw at the Metropolitan Museum, it must have been a post-Impressionist show or maybe it was Impressionism.

Anyway, when I first saw the paintings of Cezanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and I knew at once that here was something different, something beyond just mere representation. I did not know what it was exactly and I didn't worry much about it. But something of that -- get into my work. I began to think of the design of the painting, apart from its representation. This is something quite different from the old idea of composition, which they just tried to balance the different parts of the painting, so it wouldn't look lopsided or so it would have some sort of center. It was a whole new idea and I began experimenting. I don't know as I tried to imitate any of the painters I mentioned, but I did try to sometimes make a formal

design or make the painting into a formal design, which meant some tampering with realism.

But I found that it wouldn't go; I found that the object that I was painting meant so much to me that I wanted it just as it was. I had such respect for it that I wouldn't consider distorting it to fit into any pattern or any arbitrary design. [pause]

That was why my paintings looked, you might say, old-fashioned. There is no design to them. No formal design, which sometimes interferes, often displaces the realism. [pause] This is a problem that I've never solved, but I kept working with it, and then it suddenly dawned on me, I saw that the paintings that I had been making, even from the very beginning, had a formal design. It was very evident, with the masses, the lines, the light and dark, the color were all part of a scheme that was independent of the realism but didn't interfere with it in the least. In fact, it furthered it. [pause] Then I began to look at old paintings and they all had the same theme, long before [pause] long before the modern painters began to think of design as something separate from representation. [tape is stopped, then resumes]

I had very little help from teachers of art. I think I had -- my fellow students, especially the older ones, were more helpful than the teacher, usually. Of course, there was my brother Frank, who was indeed a great help and a good teacher. And I remember of one other and that was Steacy Holmes. He was Frank's teacher when Frank left Bellevue, instead of going to Bellevue High School, he went to the Ohio Mechanics Institute in Cincinnati, where he could get all sorts of courses, including art. And my father thought, I guess, he might learn something useful, some useful trade, but I don't think my father had much use for artists. But Steacy Holmes was Frank's teacher in art there, and it seems like he

influenced him more than the other teachers and he gave more time to that, at least that's about all he ever learned, I think, at the Ohio Mechanics Institute. One time he brought Steacy home over to Bellevue where we lived and introduced him to the family, to me, too -- I was just a youngster then, very small -- but I'd already taken an interest in drawing and had some help from Frank. I looked on Steacy as a great artist, Mr. Holmes, of course. And he looked the part of it, typical nineteenth century artist, even his clothes with the big, soft-brimmed hat and mustache that looked like two strokes of a paint brush. He talked with great authority. I didn't see how he could be anything but a great artist. Frank thought -- thought so, too, and he was very grateful to him. I think later on Frank revised his opinion a little bit. My father never did like him; Frank said that my father called him a jackass, probably because he thought that Frank ought to be learning something else. Anyway, I remember very helpful suggestions that Steacy Holmes gave me at that time, and then the biggest thing he had for anybody was enthusiasm. He made them think that an artist's life was the greatest thing that anyone could ever expect to have on this earth, although his was never successful.

I don't know what he did through all his life; we had two or three glimpses of him. One was when I was in -- living in Fort Thomas, when I first moved there and I was working in a grocery store as a delivery boy and general assistant and Steacy came in one day carrying a suitcase and samples -- he was a salesman for a candy company in Cincinnati. Of course, we both recognized each other at once and were surprised to see each other and glad, too, I was and he was, too. I remember I invited him out to our house in Fort Thomas and he stayed there a few days and we went out sketching together. I think that was the last time I

saw him. Frank saw him again, I think it was about -- in 1933 when the New York City World's Fair was held and Steacy appeared in New York with several cameras strapped over his shoulder. I didn't see him but Frank said he looked very official, as if he had something to do with the fair but he didn't know what. But anyway, after that he disappeared. You wouldn't think that the little contact I had with him that he would have much influence on me; I think it came at a time when I needed it, and as I say, it was his enthusiasm for an artist's life that was the most valuable thing that he could give.

I have said that those were the only occasions on which I met Steacy Holmes but I remember two others, both when I was a young boy. One was when we were still living in Bellevue. I and some of the others -- some of my pals were out on the hillside, not very far from the house, I don't know what we were doing but anyway we were out there in the woods, and Steacy came to the house and wanted to see me and Mom told him where I was and he came out. Instead of walking up and saying, "Here I am, I'm Steacy Holmes," he came through the grass and behind trees so we couldn't see him, and as he approached, he imitated a screech owl, and he thought that we would certainly wonder about a screech owl in the daytime and investigate. But I don't know whether we even heard it or not, anyway, we didn't pay any attention to it until he got right up close to us and then he had to explain the whole thing. But he was very much interested in the outdoors and took an active part in the early Boy Scout movement. He became a Scout master and, attired as one, he appeared at the Bellevue High School, when I was a student there and addressed the assembly on the Boy Scout movement, which was quite new at the time and few people knew anything about it. He explained it very well and was very insistent to say that it was not a military

movement, it was entirely civilian. I guess he thought that since they wore uniforms and had a leader that it was military training. Well, he never got very far with the Boy Scout movement but. . . . [pause]

I still haven't told all the times that I met him. Once was, er -- when we were living in Fort Thomas and I was working in a grocery, between my years in art school, when I was a delivery boy and general assistant. One day Steacy Holmes came into the store carrying a big satchel, he was a salesman for a candy company in Cincinnati and he stopped there to sell some of his goods to the owner of the store. I recognized him at once and, of course, he did me, so the situation was rather strange and we were glad to see each other. I invited him out to the house. Mom and I were living in a little house that belonged to somebody else at that time and he stayed with us for awhile. I remember we went sketching together. Well, that's the last I did see of Steacy Holmes but Frank said that in 1933 when the World's Fair was held in New York that Stacy appeared there at his studio door one day in a uniform of some kind with a lot of cameras strapped over his shoulder, looking very important. Frank thought he must have something to do with the World's Fair but he never found out just what it was. After that he disappeared and no one, as far as I know, knows whatever happened to him. It was strange that a man should be such a lasting influence on my mind but somehow, he made himself, seem to me, as the typical artist and that he was a great artist himself. That's what I thought when I was a boy. And maybe that's more important for a teacher to give that to his students than so much technical knowledge and probably make it sound -- all sound so difficult and uninteresting that they don't know whether they want to be an artist or not.

I had one other influence of that nature when I was a little older. Clay Crawford had a friend in Cincinnati named Gus Eckstein, who was a well-known writer. In fact, he acquired quite a reputation before he died. He was a teacher of physiology at the University of Cincinnati. One of his first books was *Noguchi*, about the Japanese scientist who discovered the yellow fever germs; I've read that and it's a really fine book. And he also went to Japan later, I think by invitation, and stayed there -- lived there for awhile and wrote a fine book on Japan. [pause] And his most famous book, I suppose, was called *Canary*, which was the study of his dealings with canaries and experiences. But Clay told me that all the canary part of his life was due to his wife, Ben, Ben Eckstein. They lived in Fort Thomas together, that was when I was living there or just before it, and Ben had canaries in the upstairs over Dr. Crawford's office. They all got out one day and she went out on the balcony attired in a Japanese kimono playing her violin -- she was, I forgot to say, she was a violinist and an excellent one -- playing a familiar music trying to entice the canaries back into the house. I think she must have succeeded because they still had canaries.

But anyway, she moved to New York and one time when my mother and I were going to New York to visit Frank, Clay Crawford suggested I go and see Gus [Ben] Eckstein. That was after I'd taken up the violin and he thought that she might help me. [pause] So I went to the -- went to her apartment, she had me play, such as -- the best I could, I did the best I could but it wasn't much, but she at once gave me her theory that music, no matter who's playing it or what you're playing, you must play music, you must not just make a technical exercise of it. That sounds like a very elemental statement, but it goes very deep, and Ben claimed that most professionals didn't really play music, they just went through the

motions like a machine, even the virtuosi violists. She only rated three or four of them as real musicians. I remember Fritz Kreisler was one, and Huberman, Jacques Thibault; that's the only three I can remember.

But that idea was another one which has stayed with me like the Steacy Holmes idea, and it's been a great help to me just recently since I've been trying to take up the violin again. In the last year or so, I've lost every incentive to play or I -- with what little technique I had and I found that even physically, it was very difficult to play after that lapse of not playing. So -- I take up very simple things; it's good music, the best in the world, only it was written at a time when music was simple, in 1400 or 1500, and I find that it's very satisfactory and it's been a great help to me to try to play it as music and make it sound as nice as I can. I'm really very much encouraged how I have improved since I . . . I even had to make a new way to hold the violin; I won't go into that now but -- because it's only technical, but that's part of it.

I remember one time, another time in New York, this was -- just after Anna and I had married and we went there that winter and we went to see Gus [Ben] Eckstein and she made us play, of course, right away and produced a piano somewhere and somebody to play with. We hadn't played but two or three bars when she stopped us and made her speech again about "don't just play the notes, play music." It sounds very elemental but it's a great principle.

END OF TAPE 9, SIDE B