



10-15-1985

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, Kate Jackson (1985) "A Man and A Museum," *Westview*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss1/5>

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A Man And A Museum

This dialogue came from an interview between Fred Olds (FGO) and me (KJL).

KJL: Several articles about you and your work at the museum have been published. Can you suggest an area which you would like me to explore?

FGO: Yes! Write about the museum and the town--their historical attractions. We want people of Oklahoma to know more about what the place has to offer.

By Kate Jackson Lewis

I found it difficult to separate the man from the museum; therefore, I am including a brief biography which may be beneficial to people who are unacquainted with Olds.

The man, Frederick G. Olds, was born into an Ohio physician's home when times were hard and doctors' services were paid with produce, livestock, or promises.

Unable to send his sons through college, yet wanting all of them to study medicine, he encouraged Fred to take a proffered football scholarship and, at the same time, a job delivering ice.

During Fred's youth, the Olds family moved into Indiana not far from the university; so soon after high-school graduation, the young man found himself enrolled

at IU. Having no desire to study medicine and burdened with too strenuous tasks, he soon became a dropout. His dollar-a-day job at the iceplant offered no way to fill his lifelong desire to go West and be a cowboy, so Fred ran away from home. Having been offered \$35 a week for sketching for Disney Studios, he set out for California with meager funds.

The disillusioned fellow was "broke" by the time he arrived in Amarillo. He hired out at a dollar a day building fence on a West Texas ranch. "Cowboying" soon lost its allure for Fred, and he began thinking of another occupation. He enlisted in the Army Air Force where he served for three years; there he matured and formulated his future plans.

After the war, Olds returned to IU and this time stayed on to graduate. He later taught music and art, coached football, raised horses, and of course found time to draw and paint. By this time, he had married Flo, who turned out to be a versatile helpmate. She knew and loved horses, drew plans for houses, and was a skilled interior decorator. As soon as Fred had an accumulation of paintings, the couple took a few choice ones and some horses to a San Antonio stock show where they sold twelve paintings and two horses, winning some prizes on



Olds' painting "Frontier Cowboys Live It Up." (detail)

the animals.

On their way back to Indiana, they made a down payment on an Oklahoma ranch with the money made at the show. Next, they moved their four children, some horses, chickens, and household goods to their new place near Wynnewood. Before long, Flo had designed a cedar-log house, which they built and moved into.

Fred had always liked this part of the country, where his mother had lived with her family during territorial days. Fred said, "As we sat around the fire at night, my granddad's accounts of life farther west sowed seeds of desire in my mind."

With a family to support, Fred took on a teaching job in the local school where he drove a school bus. At the

ranch, he raised thoroughbred Appaloosas, did the chores after running his bus route, and still found time to paint at night. The beautiful Appaloosas made good subjects for painting. He made many of these for neighborhood people.

The reader will note that Olds' dream of becoming a Western artist—painting cowboys, horses, and Indians—came nearer fulfillment with each move the enterprising fellow made. Even the stint in the Air Force had given him opportunity to see the great art works of the world and inspired him to return to college to study architecture, painting, and sculpture.

After a year's teaching at Yukon, he moved to Weatherford where he taught at Southwestern Oklahoma State University. His older children now had access to



Fred's "Victorian Street Scene as Viewed Through the Sugar Plum Windows."

SOSU, and the family lived just outside of town where they could enjoy country living. Olds built a roping pen where college youth could practice their rodeoing skills, eventually establishing a team.

Six years later, the Oklahoma Historical Society hired Olds and his wife to take over the opening of the new Territorial Museum at Guthrie, where Fred is presently employed.

Now that the mists have cleared away and Olds' dream has become a reality, would the multi-talented man do anything differently if he had his life to live over? "I don't think I'd change a thing," he replied. "I do wonder how different life would have been if I had gone on to Disney Studios."

The Museum

Have you ever wished you had been around for the famous Oklahoma Land Run of 1889? Or for that matter were privileged to witness any of the many colorful events of the state's history? The next best thing is to spend some time in Guthrie. That's where Oklahoma really began!

Before the sun had set on that fateful day, Guthrie had sprung to life with a population of 15,000 people—all anxious for the chance of a lifetime. Whether the opportunists came for wealth, fame, or both, many left their trademarks. One—Joseph Foucart, a Frenchman—is still lauded for his castle-like buildings, which, still structurally sound, adorn Guthrie's streets, drawing thousands of tourists each year.

A first-time visitor to the famed town may wish to seek out Frederick G. Olds, artist-director of the Oklahoma Territorial Museum, adjoining the Carnegie Library, on whose steps the symbolic wedding of two territories--Oklahoma and Indian--took place on Statehood Day, and where the state's first governor took oath of office on the same day--November 16, 1907.

Olds has sculpted a statue depicting the wedding of Oklahoma and Miss Indian Territory which stands at the entrance to the museum as a welcome to all who cross its threshold. Just inside the door, a giant wall mural captures one's attention. It so realistically portrays an early Plains Indian buffalo hunt that the viewer can almost hear the animal hoofbeats and the shouts of the hunters. As he moves along, he sees a second scene that represents the great Land Run. Fred said that the individuals pictured are descendants of the people who actually participated in the land opening. A frontier farm scene--with complete soddy, plow, and period-dressed



This bronze bust of Will Rogers was presented by Olds to Governor Nigh.

frontier people--is equally as intriguing as the first two murals. Last is a much smaller representation of the "Nativity"--had it occurred on the Great Plains.

The 67-year-old artist, who admittedly wears many hats but says he's down to eight at the present time, refuses to take credit for the transformation of the museum from a bare, spacious building to the attractive showplace it has become. He explains that it all came about when, in 1973, the Oklahoma historical Society asked him and his charming wife, Flo, to take over the task of readying the museum for opening to the public.

"Flo deserves the credit--the museum is hers--I'm just a helper," the soft-voiced fellow said. He went on to tell that his lady with the brown eyes and beguiling smile had studied design in Eastern art schools. "She planned the interior layout for the placement of exhibits and the location of the murals, antiques, portraits, and collections. At the time I was out scouring the country for something

to exhibit."

Now, a decade later, Olds is still as busy as a robin with a nestful of birds. On Monday afternoons at the museum, he becomes an art teacher for the town's school children. On the same day, an adult group of art-minded people from all over the state spend the whole afternoon under the mentor's tutelage. In turn, these students assist in selecting a theme for the '89 celebration held in April.

Each chooses and develops a project relating to the theme for the yearly affair.

In April of 1981, "The 100 Years of Medicine" theme captured the interest of the area citizens. Olds said, "People from all over the state got involved in painting pictures of pioneer doctors, midwives, and Indian medicine men or did whatever they could do to help. Some researched for forms of medicine practiced in early Oklahoma. Others contributed financial support for certain materials." Olds and one student sculpted a statue of a frontier doctor on horseback.

But the show doesn't stop with one presentation. It travels to the state capitol at Oklahoma City for a showing--thence to Washington, D.C., ultimately returning to the museum.

Olds shares his work with other museums, institutions, and schools within the state. The statue of the frontier doctor was presented to Logan County's Medical Center, where it will be permanently located.

Busts of Will Rogers may be seen both at OTM and at the state capitol.

Once an individual sees firsthand the sculptures, portraits, and exhibits housed at the museum, he will agree with the Chinaman credited with discovering that a picture is worth more than a thousand words. Too, it is predicted that all who visit the place will return for a second look.

Reminded that he was building a legacy to leave Oklahoma people, Olds remonstrated, "But think of all I've learned from the people! They come in here and tell me how they were born under a wagon or lived in a soddy or some other experience they've had." Continuing, he told of a farm woman who said, "I've always wanted to learn to paint. Will you teach me?" Without asking if she could pay, the generous man with a special love for his adopted state told her, "I will if I can." Addressing me, he said, "It's all for the people of Oklahoma."

Olds suggests that viewers find their way to the "Sand Plum," a quaint dining room, for lunch. Located in the Victor Building constructed by Foucart, it was recently renovated and decorated by the Olds husband-and-wife team.

Through a long row of windows to the left as one enters, there's a huge Victorian Street Scene with a "3-D" look that is mystifying. The people painted into the scene were Olds' friends who happened to be around at the time. One person related that if you don't want to be painted into one of Fred's pictures, you'd better keep moving.

After touring the Victor Mall, the usual spectator wants to see the rest of the historical landmarks around town.

Kent Ruth, author of the OKLAHOMA TRAVEL HANDBOOK, recommends the use of an illustrated Green Line map folder, which is available at the Guthrie Chamber of Commerce. Ruth says, "It's a helpful map which gives much background on the state's first capitol."