

The View From Right Field. By Rick Ohler October 1, 2020

A Magical Echo System

Have you ever heard your public self agreeing, out loud, in front of witnesses, to take on a project, when your inner, more rational self is saying, “Whoa, what are you doing? Dude, you are gonna be in way over your head.” I certainly have. In my painting contractor days, now blessedly behind me, a customer might ask if hanging wallpaper was one of my services, to which I would reply, without thinking, “Absolutely. I’d be glad to take on your wallpaper project.” And then, in a panic since I had never, ever, hung wallpaper before, I’d quickly find out everything I could about the process and hope the customer would go out for the day and not see me involved in serious OJT (on the job training). Note: It was only years later that I concluded that hanging wallpaper is actually impossible and should be avoided at all costs.

The same thing happened when faux finishes became the rage. Hopefully, most of those walls have been painted over by now.

Occasionally, my impulses have rewarded me. In 1984, then East Aurora Schools community education director Dan Brunson asked if I would run a creative writing class. “Sure, I can do that,” I heard myself say, as I hurried to the library in search of how-to books. Thirty-six years later, I’m still learning, but still teaching.

This time, though, I might have done it. In a moment of elation after watching my sweetheart’s triumphant performance at a John Ruskin conference called “19th Century Visionary—21st Century Inspiration,” centering on the British polymath (RIP Snake) and inspiration for Elbert Hubbard’s Roycroft, I was drawn into a conversation with other scholars from the Pasadena conference. They began talking about staging a similar event, this time in East Aurora on the Roycroft Campus. The focus of the conference would be the Arts & Crafts Movement and Ruskin’s influence on our own Fra Elbertus Hubbard, whom scholars agree is partly responsible for the success of the movement in America at the turn of the last century. Somehow my name came up as a possible presenter at this conference. And somehow, I heard my public self, in front of witnesses, agree to participate, while my inner, more rational self said, “Whoa, what are you doing? Dude, you are gonna be in way over your head.”

But that was back in December. October, now upon us, seemed so far away.

That familiar sense of panic is taking hold of me. What in the world do I have to say about the Roycroft or Hubbard or Ruskin or Arts & Crafts that is even remotely scholarly? The conference, relegated to Zoom instead of South Grove Street as organizers had hoped, is called “Ruskin, Roycroft and the Arts & Crafts Movement.” There are eight presenters speaking on the Zoom platform throughout the five Saturdays of October (roycroftcampuscorp.com for information). Dr. James Spates of Hobart-William Smith College is a leading American Ruskin scholar; Dr. Peter Burman is a distinguished British Ruskin expert. My sweetheart, Kateri Ewing, a Ruskin-inspired, Roycroft artist-in-residence and teacher works with art students worldwide.

Then you have rare books collector Robert Knight from Canada, Roycroft Print Shop superintendent Dr. Joe Weber, Roycroft photographer-in-residence Peter Potter and Alan Nowicki, program director at Roycroft. And me, whose lofty title of Roycroft writer-in-residence is more a function of a studio rental than any literary distinction.

Honestly, I know precious little about John Ruskin, except that the Snake word polymath befits him, since he was fluent in art, architecture, philosophy, social criticism and the sciences and more. And until I was well into what passes for adulthood, I thought arts and crafts involved making plaster of Paris creations with Mrs. Ruapp in the basement of the Boys Club, instead of a philosophy summed up by the Ruskin motto: "Life without industry is guilt; industry without art is brutality." I know some stuff about Elbert Hubbard; you would be hard-pressed to have lived here all your life (well, not yet) without absorbing plenty about the man, the myth, the legend.

But I am no Roycroft or Hubbard scholar; I'm just a kid who grew up on Oakwood Avenue, with the Roycroft Inn practically in my backyard, our personal playground in the '50s. Now I'm an older kid with a studio in the Roycroft Print Shop and seven decades of Roycroft under my belt. When I have my captive Zoom conference audience in a few weeks, I'm going to tell them that if you want to understand Roycroft, just listen. Listen to the magic of echoes. How's that for scholarly?

Yes, echoes. Take a walk around the Roycroft Campus someday, with a tour or on your own. Be sure to visit my favorite place on the stone steps in front of the leviathan, north-facing oak door of the Print Shop, the door with the carved inscription, "Blessed is that man who has found his work." Have a leisurely coffee at the picnic table between the cottage-esque Copper Shop and towering Power House where I am right now composing this column in the fall sunshine. Take a seat in a Morris chair in the Inn's Salon surrounded by rich, dark oak and Alexis Fournier's worldly murals, or park yourself on one of the benches along the Appian Way (P.S.—across from the second bench in from South Grove, you'll find a memorial brick for my parents; I lunch with them often). Everywhere on campus, you can feel the stirring of what happened here so magically 125 years ago. From an 1894 visit to England that included an afternoon with Ruskin, a soap salesman named Hubbard conceived a notion to start a little printing business and publish a small magazine called *The Philistine*. Success came and soon magnificent stone and timber buildings arose on South Grove, where, if you listen carefully, you can hear echoes of the artful industry of 500 workers, printing, hand-illuminating, binding and shipping books; building distinctive mission-style furniture, fashioning copper into all sorts of wares, tooling leather goods, creating all manner of artistically beautiful, utilitarian items. You can imagine the world beating a path to Roycroft, lodging at an inn made necessary by Hubbard's popularity and charisma. You can sense not only the entrepreneurship of Hubbard, but also his commitment to quality of product, fair pay and decent treatment for all, including even the lowest employee's access to education, enlightenment, sport and music. What a contrast from the horrid conditions the Industrial Revolution had made commonplace for millions of non-Roycrofters.

You might hear the echoes of the Roycroft's hard times, too, the roller coaster ride—heydays plunging into bleak Great Depression valleys, roaring back up into prominence until the ultimate nadir of the late '80s when the shuttered Inn was about ready to fall down, its roof so porous that mushrooms were growing on upper floor carpets, the Power House a burnt out pile of rubble, the Copper Shop closed. The campus might have—probably should have—crumbled, had it not been for a certain magic.

Magic, alone, didn't bring the inn and campus back from the brink; millions of dollars in grants and donations helped a little, too. But the two go hand in hand, neither much good without the other. I realize not everyone will join me in calling what happens at Roycroft magic; not everyone will hear the echoes of Ruskin, William Morris, Hubbard and legions of Roycrofters resounding in the stones and timbers and oak doors. You're excused. After all, you haven't been around here as long as I have. But give a listen: the echoes will come, as if by magic.