

The Tire Planter in Western Kentucky

Cheryl Powell

May, 1989

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The tire planter is a form of material folk culture indigenous to western Kentucky. Though made and displayed elsewhere, it is a form manufactured by a distinct cultural group within the area, people who are not even aware of their status as folk artists.

A tire planter is a tire that has had its lip cut off, it is turned inside out, placed on a base, filled with dirt and used as an outdoor container for plants (see photographs accompanying texts).

Central City is a town of about 5,500 people, located at the intersection of the Western Kentucky Parkway and U. S. Highway 431 in Muhlenberg County. Almost every resident is a coal miner, a retired miner, or a close relative of a miner. There are two main business streets, though Broad Street, formerly the business district, is deteriorating rapidly. Unemployment in the county as a whole is officially 17.5 percent¹, though it is estimated unofficially as high as 36 percent.²

Roy Cobb is a retired miner. He worked for the Island Creek Coal Company for 32 years as a tippie operator before his retirement in 1984. He is a widower with two adult children, both of whom are married and living within 10 miles of their father. His son, Roy Jr., is an unemployed miner currently attending community college.

Cobb made his tire planters himself. His manufacturing experience with them is typical:

RC: My wife and I were out for a drive one day, somewhere around Bremen [a community about three miles north of C. C.] and she saw one somewhere and liked it. So we came home and I made these about a week later. It weren't hard to figure out how to do. You just cut the

lip off a tire--

CP: The lip?

RC: This part that was here, the part where the tire meets the wheel. You cut that off--

CP: With what?

RC: I believe I used a tin snips. Then you cut these jags in the tire. One of these was a white-wall, which made it easier than the other to keep them straight. Then you turn the tire inside out, so the tread's not showing.

CP: What did you use for the base?

RC: That's the wheel the tire came off of.³

James Goff, a retired Pentecostal minister, has a similar tale to tell about his planters:

JG: Well, I was driving by somewhere and I saw them. I don't remember where. I thought well, they'd be easy to make. So I made one.⁴

Men are the builders of these planters. Those who choose to make these planters share several characteristics.

They are retired, or otherwise out of work. These and other forms of home-made containers for outdoor planting give these men a vocation of sorts, a way to justify being creative without having to speak of the activity as art or even recreation. The planters are a form of home improvement.

The makers also have worked in heavy industry (even Goff, who worked in area factories during the week while pastoring a church) and are comfortable working with their hands. They do their own

work around the house, and can be quite competitive about owning and using as many hand tools as possible:

JG: I get out in my garage and piddle around on anything I want because I have a cutting torch, I have a welder. I mean I can do just about anything if I can see someone else do it.⁵

These men are comfortable working with their hands. They also need an outlet for their creativity, though they will not speak of it in such terms. The tire planter provides them with such an outlet.

At least part of this do-it-yourself attitude can be explained by the informants' age. These are men whose earliest memories are of the Great Depression of the 1930s, a time when economics dictated doing it one's self or doing without. Both Goff and Cobb grew up in the coalfields of western Kentucky, an area particularly hard-hit by the slump. It was also the scene of several strikes during that time, when the United Mine Workers of America was establishing itself in the area. Both Goff and Cobb remember their fathers being out of work for long stretches of time in the 1930s due to miners' strikes or coal companies failing. Both also say they learned the importance of manual labor from their fathers' example.

The builders of these planters learn from example. Part of the tradition is for the owner to make his planters himself, with others' example as his only guide. I spoke with several others who have planters in the front yard, and all had built their own. As Cobb put it, "I might make one for a widow

lady or someone like that, but any man could make one of these if he know anything about tools.⁷

There is a definite gender-role division of labor, which is in keeping with the traditional Anglo-American view of "men's" and "women's" work. Men make the planters; they make the initial design decisions such as where to get the tires, what size to use, which way to cut the rim, what tools to use. Men and women generally share the decision of where to place the tires. Women decorate the planters. They may or may not do the actual painting, but they usually decide how to paint. The planters are seen as decorative rather than useful items, and decorative plants are placed in them.

While Cobb made his planters, it was his wife who was the gardener in the family. He said, "No, I don't used them anymore. My wife, you know she's passed, used to plant geraniums or marigolds in them every year. Now they are full of weeds. I ought to get rid of them, but it'd be too much of a bother. Easier just to let them be."⁸

Goff's wife Ruby is still living, and like Mrs. Cobb is the container gardener in the family. She has a pair of planters in her yard, one in front and one behind the house. After experimenting for several years with different flowers, she said she usually puts petunias out front, and impatiens, a low-light plant in the planter at the rear of the house.⁹

The planters are generally made in pairs and place on either side of a walk leading to the front porch, on either side

of the porch, or on either side of the driveway. They seem to be placed generally where visitors to the house will walk between them to enter (as opposed to family members or close friends, who generally use a side or back door to enter houses in this region).

The Goff's placement of their planters (already mentioned above) is unusual only if it is seen in regard to the house. There is one in front and one behind. But their house is in an unusual location. It faces where the Greenville-Central City Road used to enter town. The street, now Resevior Avenue, was moved several years ago and no longer runs in front of the house but along the side. The planters sit in the yard near the road, and visitors in effect have to pass between them to enter the house.

The aesthetics of recycling play an important role in how these objects are perceived. The tires don't come off an old automobile possessed by the builder. The tires and the rims come from the junkyard. It is still "...something to do with old things that would just be thrown away. These tires were laying around a junk yard. If I didn't use them, they'd still be trash. Now they're not. I think it's important to get as much use of things as you can before throwing them out."¹⁰

The builders of tire planters estimate the form is no more than 30 years old. It's already too late to discover who invented it or why anyone made the first one. The form is dynamic though, and its builders are using their talent on new forms. Goff has built at least one more planter made from found objects, a planter

his wife designed:

RG: It was my idea for that one. I like it better than
I do the others.

JG: ...I had to go to an old farmer and get a wagon wheel rim
and make that...the tank part was taken from an old hot
water heater...¹¹

The Goffs, as co-builders, are experimenting with new forms in
much the same way other folk artists do. This new partnership
may also symbolize a coming to terms with the blurring of
gender roles in society at large.

Neither Cobb or the Goffs have ever considered their planters
as a form of folk art. In spite of that, it can be seen as a
form, distinct and indigenous to the area and used or at least
approved of by members of a group with similar backgrounds,
tastes, and traditions. While new forms of yard art are being
introduced into the area, the tire planter may have already seen
its heyday. In spite of heavy unemployment in the area, I have
no evidence that any new planters are being built. The planters
already in the yards of men younger than Goff and Cobb were
generally built by their fathers, or left there by previous
owners. Like every other form of folk art, it has evolved
to its present state, and will continue to change to fulfill the
needs of its makers until it eventually dies out.

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Notes

1. Kentucky Department of Labor statistic, Mar. 17, 1989.
2. A county official who prefers to remain anonymous.
3. Roy Cobb interview Oct. 10, 1988.
4. James and Ruby Goff interview Mar. 1, 1989.
5. James Goff Mar. 1, 1989.
6. Phone conversations with J. Goff and Cobb, April 17, 1989.
7. Cobb Oct. 10, 1988.
8. Cobb Oct. 10, 1988.
9. Goff Mar. 1, 1989.
10. Cobb Oct. 10, 1988.
11. Goff Mar. 1, 1989.

Ten minute transcript

Interview with Reverend and Mrs. James (Ruby) Goff

March 1, 1989 Central City, Kentucky

Interviewer: Cheryl Powell

J: James Goff

R: Ruby Goff

C: Cheryl Powell

Recorded and transcribed on a Sanyo Cassette recorder

(no model number)

[Bro. goff's speech is so full of hesitations i have had to exercise some judgement in editing. I have left those hesitations and false starts i deemed necessary for a full interpretation of speech patterns.]

[opening announcement]

J: [chuckles] I don't know if I'll play golf or not because--

R: [from kitchen] The ball game is coming on.

J: It's still a bit chilly out and of course Kentucky plays this afternoon-020

{ C: And Kentucky plays this afternoon.

{ J: So I want to see that.

C: Can you tell me when you made these?

J: I made those about four five years agao, wasn't it, when I made those?

R: [has entered room] Something like that yeah.

J: Okay.

C: Where did you get the tires?

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J: Well I just went to the junkyard and picked those up. One of them I already had. Now it takes a tire already mounted on a wheel.

C: It already has to be mounted on the wheel?

J: That's right, uh-huh. It must be mounted on the wheel.

R: It wouldn't have a stand if it wasn't.

J: Because the metal wheel [pause] that's the foot of it.

R: Yeah.

C: You have to have both of them.

J: 033 You have to have both of them. And it's, and you, turn it up on one side. You turn it over. The side would be exposed to the viewing area. In other words, if the car was mounted, if the tire was mounted on the car, it would be the part that's turned up. Then you would start from the metal rim, go over about three or four inches and cut all the way around it.

C: Now what did you use to cut that with?

J: Well I used a sharp knife on one, then I had a scroll saw, with a blade, and I used that on and I made it easier with the scroll saw.

C: The scroll saw, that was easier.

J: It was easier than it would be with a sharp knife.

C: Okay. What kind of paint did you use on yours?

J: Now we just got paint at Wal-Mart. I didn't [J laughs]

C: Like an exterior latex?

J: Outside paint, I don't know, we got some cheap paint.

C: 042 Have you repainted it at all?

J: She repainted it one time.

R: Repainted it one time, year before last.

C: Whose idea was it to make these, your idea or Bro. Goff's?

R: [back to microphone] He thought of it. [garble

]

J: Well, I was driving by somewhere and I saw them. I don't remember where I thought well, they'd be easy to make. So I made one.

C: Did you come back that day and make one?

J: No, it was a matter of a week or so before before I made it. But the one I seen didn't have those scallops on it, it was round and turned up.

C: I've seen several that way.

J: Well that's the one I seen, so I thought well I'll make mine a little different, and I cut these V's out in it [garble

].

R: Did you show her the metal one sitting on the rim?

J: Yes, I showed her that one.

R: It was my idea for that one. I like it [clock strikes once] better than I do the others.

J: 050 She wanted that, yeah. She wanted one. Well I had to go to an old farmer and get a wagon wheel rim and make that. Course that, like I told you, the tank part was

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taken from an old hot water heater. That's--

C: That's metal?

J: That's aluminum. Really, the basket part is. Aluminum.
Now a lot of people make them from half a barrel.

C: When I felt it, it didn't feel like it was metal. That's
because it's aluminum--

J: No. Aluminum. That's what it was.

C: Okay. What do you plant in this one out front?

R: I usually put petunias.

C: Usually?

J: You had--

R: I had [bloomers?] one year. Those
impatiens plants.

C: Yeah.

R: I put those. But they didn't do too good, too much sun.
So last year, I put petunias.

J: Now you had gladiolas, what are those, [J and R together]
geraniums [J] you put geraniums one time.

R: Maybe I did one year, I don't know.

C: What about the one out back, does it get different
plants?

R: I usually put petunias. I mean those little impatiens
plants out there in that one [garble].

I don't know why.

J: You had moss once.

R: And moss, it had moss in it. 060

J: She had moss.

R: But I never put nothing real high in it.

C: You said you made one for your daughter too. Did she, how did that come about.

R: No, our son.

J: Well, he's my son. Really, my daughter-in-law, she saw these. So they live in Chattanooga, out from Chattanooga. So we went down there, spent a week with them and while we were down there I made them one.

R: And he made Daniel one--

J: And I made my oldest son one. He lives here, out on [U. S.] Highway 70. And I, so, That's all I made, I mean, you know [pause]--

C: I was about to ask you [J laughs] do you think this is going to be a hobby?

J: No, no. [general laughter] I, since I retired, well, gardening (071) and playing golf that's about my only hobbies. And course I get out in my garage and I just piddle around on anything I want because I have a cutting torch, I have a welder. I mean I can do just about anything if I can see someone else do it. Why I can kind of get it in my mind and I can do it myself.

(205) end of interview]

Catalog

Interviewer: Cheryl Powell

Interviewees: James and Ruby Goff

Place: Interviewees' home, Old Greenville Road, Central City, Kentucky

Date: March 1, 1989

Equipment: Sanyo cassette tape recorder (no model number)

Electravoice 635a microphone

Tape TDK D60 side A

Description: One of a series of interviews with builders of tire planters in Muhlenberg County.

#	Catalog
000	I don't think I'll play golf this afternoon. It's chilly outside.
025	I got one of these tires out of the junkyard and the other one I had already.
033	You have to have the tire and the rim.
041	Interviewer asks what type of paint is used.
049	My wife thought of the one out back made of a wagon wheel rim, a tire rim, and half the lining from a water heater.
062	I made one for each of my two sons.
071	Since I retired, gardening, playing golf and working on the house are all the hobbies I have. I own a lot of tools,

and can watch someone else do a job and
then do it myself.

091 Most of the people I know who do this
sort of thing are retired and have time
to piddle around.

108 I've worked hard all my life. I've been
working since I was 14 years old.

120 I did all the panelling in this room
last summer.

150 I do most of the yardwork, but my wife
is who decides what goes in the planters.

171 I'll tell you who else you need to talk to.

205 End of interview

Catalog

Interviewer: Cheryl Powell

Interviewee: Roy Cobb

Place: Interviewee's home, 316 N. 4th St., Central City, Kentucky

Date: October 10, 1988

Equipment: Recorded on a General Electric cassette tape recorder, cataloged on a Sanyo cassette tape recorder

Tape: TDK D60 side A

Description: One of a series of interviews with builders of tire planters in Muhlenberg County

#	Catalog
000	Are you sure this is some kind of folk art?
017	My wife and I were out one day and saw some planters someone had made, so I decided to make a pair.
028	My wife is deceased, so the planters stand empty now. I should take them out of the yard, but that would be too much trouble.
041	I used a pair of tin snips to cut mine out like that. The one made of a white-walled tire was easier to do.
056	These planters use a lot of dirt, but I don't remember exactly how much.
074	There's a lady over on Reynolds Street that has six or eight in her front yard.
090	I'm retired and I do a lot of work around the house.
102	Any man ought to know enough about tools to make one of these. I'd make one for a woman if she lived alone and wanted one.
130	My neighbor comes over to see what we're doing.
250	End of interview

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY FOLKLIFE ARCHIVES

INFORMANT/FIELDWORKER DATA FORM

I. INFORMANT

NAME: Ruby Carver Goff (Mrs. James)
 (Include fullest possible name -- first, middle and/or maiden, last)
 (For example: John James Smith; Mary Ann Franklin Smith (Mrs. John))

ADDRESS: Old Greenville Rd, Central City Ky 42330

PERSONAL DATA: Age 59/60 Date of Birth 2/14/29

Place of Birth Chicago, IL Sex F

RACE/NATIONALITY/ETHNIC BACKGROUND: white

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: (Include education, occupation, places of residence, religious affiliation, etc.)

Housewife. Lived in Chicago until 1954. Two children

II. COLLECTOR

NAME: Cheryl Powell
 (Include fullest possible name as described above)

ADDRESS, LOCAL: 308 N 4th St Central City Ky 42330

ADDRESS, PERMANENT: same

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE INFORMANT, SUCH AS COUSIN, FRIEND, EMPLOYER, ACQUAINTANCE, ETC.: informant's parents owned apartment

building collector's father lived in, 1948.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY FOLKLIFE ARCHIVES

INFORMANT/FIELDWORKER DATA FORM

I. INFORMANT

NAME: James Goff
 (Include fullest possible name -- first, middle and/or maiden, last)
 (For example: John James Smith; Mary Ann Franklin Smith (Mrs. John))

ADDRESS: Old Greenville Rd, Central City Ky 42330

PERSONAL DATA: Age 60 Date of Birth 7/4/28

Place of Birth Central City, Ky Sex M

RACE/NATIONALITY/ETHNIC BACKGROUND: white

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: (Include education, occupation, places of residence, religious affiliation, etc.)

Retired Pentecostal minister. Also worked in various industries.

Lived in Chicago, 1946-54. Two children

II. COLLECTOR

NAME: Cheryl Powell
 (Include fullest possible name as described above)

ADDRESS, LOCAL: 308 W 4th St Central City Ky 42330

ADDRESS, PERMANENT: same

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE INFORMANT, SUCH AS COUSIN, FRIEND, EMPLOYER, ACQUAINTANCE, ETC.: informant lived in same apartment

building as collector's father, 1948.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY FOLKLIFE ARCHIVES

INFORMANT/FIELDWORKER DATA FORM

I. INFORMANT

NAME: Roy Wayne Cobb
(Include fullest possible name -- first, middle and/or maiden, last)
(For example: John James Smith; Mary Ann Franklin Smith (Mrs. John))

ADDRESS: 316 N 4th, Central City Ky 42330

PERSONAL DATA: Age 67 Date of Birth 6/17/21

Place of Birth Bremen, Ky. Sex M

RACE/NATIONALITY/ETHNIC BACKGROUND: white

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: (Include education, occupation, places of residence, religious affiliation, etc.)

Retired coal miner. Lived in Muhlenberg Co entire life.
Completed 11th grade, Bremen High School, Bremen, Ky.

II. COLLECTOR

NAME: Cheryl Powell
(Include fullest possible name as described above)

ADDRESS, LOCAL: 308 N 4th Central City Ky 42330

ADDRESS, PERMANENT: same

PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO THE INFORMANT, SUCH AS COUSIN, FRIEND, EMPLOYER, ACQUAINTANCE, ETC.: neighbor

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

Photo Captions

1-3.

The aesthetics of recycling play an important role in the manufacture of tire planters. The potential planters shown in these photographs are the tires that are still mounted on wheels, which are used for bases. This tire patch is located outside the gates of a commercial junkyard on Weir Road in southern Muhlenberg County.

4-5

Two views of an electric scroll saw owned by James Goff. The informant says it is easier to cut a tire with this tool than with a sharp knife, which is what he used in his first attempt to make a tire planter. The tire is inserted between the arm of the saw and the base, in much the same way as cloth is positioned in a sewing machine.

6-8

The finished product, both in the Goff's front and back yard. The road runs on the opposite side of the Goff's garage; therefore visitors must walk between the planters to reach the house.

9-10

Another planter designed and built by the Goff's. This one is made of a wagon wheel rim, a tire rim, and half the liner from a water heater.