

UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE
TAPE 11 OF 11; 1988-102

INTERVIEW WITH: Harlan Hubbard
CONDUCTED BY: Joanne Weeter
DATE: [August 17, 1987?]
LOCATION: Payne Hollow, Kentucky

[There is no sound for the first part of the tape, five minutes or more, then Mr. Hubbard's voice begins in midsentence.]

HARLAN HUBBARD: . . . he showed some writing ability which crops up quite often in the Swingle family. So I want to give a little time to Calvin, Uncle Cal. Here is an extract from an old Chicago newspaper entitled "From Engineer to Author." Started as coal heaver. "Career of Calvin F. Swingle, an inspiration to working men. Pullman, shop man, his authority" – no, I take that back – "Pullman, shop man is author of several works on engineering. Books published by Frederick J. Drake and Company, Chicago, publishers of self-educational books."

I knew Uncle Cal well from several early visits to his Chicago home. He kept a talking parrot, which is a great curiosity to me. In 1924, long after Aunt Zylph died, he came to Fort Thomas with his second wife, Marie Tuvison, a Swedish lady, who had long been his housekeeper. It was on one of those early visits, I don't know how old I was, but I was still a boy, that Uncle Cal took me downtown to the Drake Publishing Company, who published his books. It seems that he had an office – had a desk in the office so he probably did his writing there. He – he showed me his books and gave me some of which I was very

proud and kept for a long time but where they are now we could not tell. Mr. Drake took some interest in me, too, after Uncle Cal had introduced us. He asked about me and he offered me a book out of his long list of publications, whichever one I wanted. After some thinking, I chose one called *Light and Heavy Timber Framing*. That seemed like a curious selection for a boy but maybe it was the only one in the whole lot that interested me because even then I must have had some interest in wood construction.

It might have been on that same visit to Chicago that Aunt Lucy took us over to the gate of the Pullman Company -- she lived in West Pullman, which was right close by -- and introduced us to George Smith, her son-in-law, who was gatekeeper for the Pullman Company. When George was informed that I could draw, he said, "Can you draw a picture of a Pullman car?" and gave me a pencil and a piece -- sheet of paper. To draw a Pullman car was a snap for me because I was used to drawing just about everything that went along the railroad but when I showed it to George he could hardly believe his eyes. It was quite a surprise to him.

My mother was a great person to go about and visit her relatives and friends, some long journeys like this one to Chicago, and some in the neighborhood of where we lived. In those days, of course, we had no -- the automobile was not used. In fact, there were none when I first started out. So all the travelling must be done by streetcar or afoot and I can remember some of the long trips that we made when I was just a boy. I'll tell you about some of them later.

I'll go on now reading from this account. [apparently his unpublished "A Hubbard Manuscript."] "Our mother's sisters, Mary, Julia, Ellen and Lucinda -- the indomitable

Aunt Lucy, the only one we boys knew -- had all married before Rose Anne. Previous to her marriage, she lived with her oldest sister, good-hearted Aunt Mollie. Rose supported herself by working for the *Champaign Gazette* as typesetter, an unusual accomplishment for a girl in those days. Its influence marked the rest of her life. She remained a staunch Democrat because the *Gazette* had supported that party and, until her last illness, she wrote a column of local news for a Cincinnati newspaper. Both Frank and I have seen evidence of literary ambition but all she left us was her diary, begun in 1906 and kept up without a break until 1943, the year of her death. I guess it was begun just about the time her husband died and kept up the rest of her life. One never read a less personal diary; the entries are brief and matter-of-fact records of housework; old, same old routine; frequent trips to the city -- a street car connected Bellevue and Cincinnati -- visits with friends, made and received; all written without emotion, not a word which reveals her inner life. Yet these brief, unadorned sentences tell much of her character. One senses her strength, drive and ability, a power which I think she longed to exercise in a larger field, hence her restlessness and dissatisfaction. She never liked housework but she accomplished it in a slapdash fashion. And -- and she never failed to do her duty, whatever was called upon. She was consoled in -- well, Louie's success in the world, of which she was as proud as if she had achieved it herself. She loved us all, however, in one way or another."

I'm going to read a few selections from Mom's diary which is, as I said, begun in 1906: "March 15, cleaned floor, ironed, very cold; March 16, swept, cleaned; March 17, went to see May Morgan, also to city; March 18, Sunday, church, A.M.; distributed envelopes" -- the church was a Calvary M.E. Church, Bellevue, Kentucky; "March 19,

washed, rained then snowed.” Then it skips on. “March -- May 30, Decoration Day; went to cemetery with Mrs. Jansen and Harlan” -- I kept going to the cemetery with her until she died; “October 26, went to Cincinnati in A.M., Frank sick” -- that's the first mention of Pop's last illness; “December 16, Lodge men called, also Mr. and Mrs. Yarwood, Frank better.” But then “1907, March 26: Frank died, 5:40 P.M.” Well, the diary goes on. “June 16: went to Mount Healthy with Harlan” -- now this is how we got there and that's one of those trips I was talking about -- “took streetcar from Bellevue to Cincinnati, a Cincinnati car to College Hill, [pause] then the traction” -- that's what is usually called the Interurban, I think, it's sort of a streetcar that runs between nearby cities -- “traction to Mount Healthy where Mr. and Mrs. Buck lived;” returning we walked to College Hill, several miles probably, probably because we had missed the traction. A trip like that would take a good long day. I don't remember ever getting tired, though. “November 19: my birthday, very cold;” and here's a significant entry, “September 22, 1912: Louie decided to go to New York” -- that broke up this whole situation, our living in Bellevue. After Louie left, it was all different and it wasn't long before Frank went to New York, too. And then Frank got married and Mom and I went to New York, so everything was the same again.

I'm going back now to Mom's early life which I -- from which I was diverted. I do not know how long our father, mother and Frankie lived in Chattanooga -- Frank was born in Chattanooga -- they moved on to Georgia, for Mom has told us of Atlanta and Rome but these places may have preceded Chattanooga, for all I know. Few details have come to us of their life in the South. Mom said she once had a little black girl named Shug, short for Sugar, to help her about the house. I gather that Shug was of little practical use but she was

all the help that Mom was to have until late in life when Shug's place was filled more efficiently with mechanical aids that Mom could buy, thanks to the generosity of Frank and Louie. Since Louie was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, on December 1889, our parents lived in the South for less than four years. The job as paint salesman seemed to – seemed not to have outlasted that period.

The family soon left Cincinnati where Pop considered Rittenhouse in the west end of the city as a poor place for boys to grow up in. They moved across the Ohio River to Bellevue, Kentucky, where they lived first in rented flats on the main street, not far back from the river, first in Mrs. Pillars' house upstairs. Frank has told me about that Pillars house, how much he liked to live there because the kitchen in the back of the house overlooked the river and there was a roof under it so that the boys could open the windows and sit there in the window and look across the river and see the steamboats go by. And right across the river was the Cincinnati Marine Ways and there was always some new boat building there or some old one being repaired and that is where Frank's interest in steamboats began and, of course, I inherited that from Frank.

Later they lived in the Balke Opera House, upstairs, whatever the Balke Opera House was. Evidently a theater remodeled into flats and stores. I remember it as a large, brick building, so gloomy and forbidding that as a boy I wondered why anyone would choose to live in it. [pause] In back of the main building were two small brick houses set within an iron fence in a courtyard of paved brick. It was in one of these houses that the Hubbard family lived briefly. By the time I came into the family, the Hubbards were living at 332 Grandview Avenue, in the two-story frame house that my father and his carpenter

friend, Otto Buck, had built. Well, [laughs] I take after my father there, I guess, I started to build houses when I didn't know anything about it, too.

Its design -- the design of this house could hardly be more simple; from the sidewalk you stepped up to a small porch and into the parlor, which had a coal grate for heat; a door led into what might have been planned for a dining room but never used as such as I remember; its central position and a coal stove made it the warmest place in the house so we all sat there in winter -- on winter evenings around a large table with our best oil lamp in the center; I can remember that all very well. One time or maybe more than once, the lamp -- oil in the lamp was used up and the lamp went out and we had to sit in darkness while Mom went out in the kitchen and filled the lamp and brought it back in. Sometimes I wonder what we did then; Frank and Louie, of course, would be reading books. Louie's reading was all very pointed because he was ambitious and wanted to learn things that would help him to earn more money. Frank had no such ambitions but he -- his reading was more about art and painting because that's what he was ambitious to be.

At the back of the house was the kitchen, distinguished by a coal range and a sink with a cold water tap. That was all the conveniences in the house. Smoke from the heating stove in the middle room passed up through a hole in the ceiling and on up through the bedroom above, heating it slightly by an expansion in the pipe called a drum. The front bedroom may have had a grate like the one in the parlor below but I do not remember its use. Such was the house as I recall it. It had no windows on the side toward the east -- no, toward the west, I mean -- because the house was right on the edge of the lot there. The house was -- the lot was twenty-five feet wide. [pause]

Through the years in Bellevue, my father made a living for his family by house painting and paperhanging. It wasn't a very rich living but they managed to get along. But he did not even enjoy this for very long nor the house he had built, for his life came to an end in 1907 at the age of forty-eight or thereabouts. The cause of his death, I heard someone say years ago, was painter's colic, as lead poisoning was called then. At least this could have been so since he was a painter, but Frank informs me that Pop died of a brain tumor. I can remember the doctor was a lady named Annie Wolfram and she looked like a witch as she sat there in her black clothes saying nothing, doing nothing, probably didn't know what to do, what to make of it. But that was the state of the medical -- medicine in those days.

It's strange that I, being seven years old at the time, remember so little of my father. The impression that remains is of a gentle, quiet, rather sad man, who joked sometimes and at times was kind to me but not much interested. This did not bother me at all; I thought that was normal, I guess, and never expected much attention from anybody. But I think he had an inner life that no one knew much about. I do not know where -- where his happiness lay or what he longed for, nothing about it. This I can only imagine from the blurred but unfading picture of him that remains in my mind, from what Frank has told me and by putting myself in his place. No doubt I imagine too much, but I think he had the sensitivity of an artist, with no outlet for his feelings. He did not seek worldly success on his own account, but a degree of it would have been most welcome, enough to have gratified the woman he was married to and to place his family in easy circumstances. These unrealized desires and no greater reward for his labor must have been frustrating. An old friend of his

told me that my father was a socialist. A socialist in those days was not what they are today; and it would have been natural for him to lean in this direction, perhaps toward the populist movement of the day that promised a more equitable distribution of the world's goods. This would explain the rash and unpractical ventures he sometimes undertook to earn a better living in an easier way.

One of these I remember, or at least its aftermath, a collection of small iron rods and scraps of oil cloth, which I put to my own uses. Originally this was a material from which the Keystone Bath Cabinet was constructed. A slight, folding framework of iron rods, covered with black oil cloth, just large enough to enclose a wooden chair on which the bather sat, with his head sticking through a hole in the top. Steam was generated inside the cabinet by small tin lamps burning alcohol. The idea was good but the Keystone Bath Cabinet did not sell. Pop was ahead of his time, as dreamers often are. The name sauna was unknown in Bellevue then.

My father's life had the elements of tragedy but he conducted it with a light touch, never revealing his inner tensions to the world. I admire all the more the kindness and consideration toward everyone, the broadminded tolerance, the patient cheerfulness with which he went about the work that was expected of him, the moderation and dignity of his life. [long pause, some background noise; tape is stopped, then resumed]

As I have said, my mother's name before she was married was Swingle. [another pause] From what I know of the Swingle family, they are at the opposite pole from the Hubbards. They are a clannish folk, strong on genealogy and family records. I was impressed by their integrity. They were, without exception, good citizens, responsible in

family and business matters, honest and industrious, through ability and perseverance they often rise to high positions. I never heard of a Swingle, who was poor and totally unsuccessful. These admirable traits can be carried to extremes, however, producing an individual who is too conservative and cautious and inclined to overrate bigness, progress, fame, is intolerant of people whose standards are based on other values. It is strange, or perhaps there is some logic about it, I do not know, to find a Hubbard married to a Swingle. Both our father and mother must have found it trying at times but they seemed to get along well together, recognizing each other's qualities and being strengthened by them, putting up with what was against their natures, Pop, by his even temper, Mom by her sense of duty, both deriving a common joy from their growing family. [significant noise in the background from movement, microphone moving around] . . . increasing bigness of man's dominion over nature, once as unquestioned as the Bible, are all becoming suspect now that environmental disaster has brought about . . . [tape is stopped, then resumed]

JW: [very distant and faint] Testing one, two, three, four. I guess I rewound it all the way.

END OF TAPE 11, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 11, SIDE B

JW: Both you and I know how our voices come across on the tape recorder. Yeah, I figured we could go ahead, you and I could just make sure that both of our voices pick up on it.

HH: You need the mike right there?

JW: Right. For the time being. So what should we talk about today? [laughter]

HH: Well, I guess we can talk about me, mostly. You can either ask questions or listen.

JW: Yeah, we can keep it quiet for just a minute and maybe even see if we can pick up the birds.

HH: Boat coming. I can hear it.

JW: Do you know which one it is? [pause]

[Unidentified man present speaks:] I'm not sure how accurate the needle monitor is. I see it jumping a little bit.

JW: Yeah, it was jumping when it was playing before.

[Other man:] You might take note of that on the recording and be able to tell from that if it's getting too loud or too soft.

JW: Yeah, and we also need to start the counter when we, when we rewind it.

[To Harlan Hubbard] Do you know most of the towboats that go up and down?

HH: No.

JW: No. Not any more?

HH: I'm not so much interested in these diesel boats.

[Other man:] Do you want to see what we've got so far?

JW: Yeah.

[Other man:] I'll let you do it.

[long pause during which we hear pots banging, birds chirping, etc]

END OF TAPE 11, SIDE B