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HOWARD MURRY: PAINTINGS OF VALLE CRUCIS, 1930-1968

A Thesis

by

MARY MARGARET CHEEK

Submitted to the Graduate School

Appalachian State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 1993

Major Department: History

HOWARD MURRY: PAINTINGS OF VALLE CRUCIS, 1930-1968

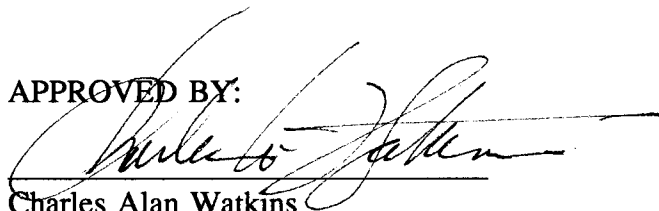
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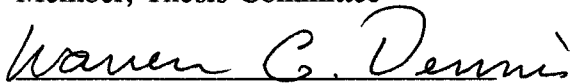
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ABSTRACT

HOWARD MURRY: PAINTINGS OF VALLE CRUCIS, 1930-1968

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Artist Howard Murry (1891-1968), originally named Howard Murray Dumbell, documented the lives of the people of Valle Crucis, North Carolina, in his oils and watercolors. His works depict the natural beauty of the mountains, the architecture of the area, and the everyday life of the local people. However, as this study of Valle Crucis, Howard Murry and his art reveals, he did not paint a true picture of the community. He chose to eliminate all signs of change and progress. Murry's nostalgic paintings of rural life in Appalachia are part of a long tradition of American landscape and genre painting which by the 1930s culminated in the American Scene movement.

Because Valle Crucis is a small community and Howard Murry was a relatively obscure artist, this project required both traditional and nontraditional research methodologies. Records of the most significant institutions in Valle Crucis, specifically the Mission School and the Mast General Store, and local newspaper

articles provided the most specific information on the history of the town. The biography of Howard Murry was constructed primarily from interviews with his family and friends, Murry's small collection of personal papers, his publication Salt O' Life and newspaper clippings. Hundreds of paintings were examined in order to analyze his work and discuss it within the national art scene.

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INTRODUCTION

This project is the result of research associated with a retrospective exhibition, **Howard Murry: Paintings of Valle Crucis, 1930-1968**, featured May through August 1992 at The Appalachian Cultural Museum in Boone, North Carolina. The Museum encourages research and exhibitions that interpret art and artifacts to give a realistic view of the region. Appalachia has long been considered a folk society where art is confined to handicrafts. Research on artists of the region has been primarily limited to discussing and cataloging the work of traditional craftspeople. Very little scholarship has been dedicated to the fine arts produced in the area, possibly due to these common misconceptions about Appalachian culture.

The purpose of this work is to examine for the first time the paintings of Howard Murry, an artist who spent much of his life in the small community of Valle Crucis in Watauga County in northwestern North Carolina. Murry passed into obscurity after his death in 1968, but the recent exhibition of his works revealed that he was a talented painter. He displayed and sold his works in North Carolina, South Carolina, Washington, D. C. and Maryland. His abilities excelled far beyond those of a "Sunday afternoon painter." Although untrained, he developed a unique style with oil and watercolor.

Murry's works are primarily depictions of the landscape and people of Valle Crucis and the surrounding area. In order to interpret his paintings, one must understand the history of Valle Crucis and how it compares to traditional views of Appalachia. One must also consider Murry's personal philosophies concerning life and art and then examine his paintings within the context of the American art scene.

The research for this project proved challenging. The initial efforts included extensive reading in the field of Appalachian Studies in order to understand the history of the region and how it has been perceived by outsiders, who wrote most of the early accounts of the area. This study also included a survey of recent scholarship which examines traditional stereotypes and their sources.

The next step required an investigation of the history of Valle Crucis. This was difficult because Valle Crucis is a very small town which had a population of less than one thousand during the period studied. Therefore, few primary documents pertaining specifically to the history of the town exist. The most extensive records are those of its major institutions, the Episcopal Mission School and the Mast General Store. The history of the Mission School itself has always dominated scholarly inquiries about Valle Crucis and most accounts of the community's past fail to address any biases present in the Episcopalian literature. Many of the local histories previously published have depended upon local stories and only a skeleton of facts. The records of the Mast General Store, the oldest business in the town, had never been examined. The present owner, John Cooper, located as many as possible and made them available for analysis. These records, although dirty and

mouse-eaten, illuminate the history of consumerism and the growth of technology in the valley. Articles in the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat reveal how the local people saw themselves and their community. Although personal interviews provided enlightening anecdotes, many statements had to be carefully evaluated and substantiated.

Because Howard Murry was not a nationally known artist, relatively little information about his life as a painter remains. He left very few personal papers; therefore, much of his biography has necessarily been constructed from the memories of his relatives and acquaintances. This required persistent questioning and comparison of accounts in order to get specific facts correct. Also, Murry's children were grown and no longer living with him at the height of his career as an artist and are not able to thoroughly discuss much of this period in his life. Fortunately, Murry wrote quite eloquently, so the few papers that do exist, along with his publications, illuminate many facets of his character. Newspaper articles, several of which contain interviews with the artist, provided most of the data concerning his professional career as an artist. Unfortunately, many of the interviewers made similar inquiries and many questions that today seem significant were never asked.

Murry began painting in the 1930s when the country was suffering through the trials of the Great Depression. This had a profound effect upon the nation's artists, including Murry. He fell into step with other Regionalist painters who looked back to the values of rural America for the salvation of the country. His

works show a reverence for nature, cooperation between individuals, manual labor and craft skills.

Howard Murry painted prolifically; hundreds of works were examined for this project. Although the collections studied provided ample information, no doubt many paintings are yet to be discovered that will lead to an even greater understanding of the artist and his work. Murry did not date his paintings and apparently only gave them titles when they were being shown. This makes a chronological analysis of his work very difficult. Also, he experimented with different styles of painting, but there is no specific data showing how other artists and events stimulated his endeavors. The lack of specific facts, however, has been overshadowed by the strength of the paintings themselves which clearly reflect the artist's talent and sensitivity to his subject matter.

CHAPTER 1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VALLE CRUCIS

Valle Crucis is a small North Carolina mountain community located in Watauga County on Highway 194 between Banner Elk and Vilas and below Grandfather Mountain (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Today the town is a melting pot of descendants of original settlers, people who have been around so long they are considered locals, university students just passing through, and tourists who come to enjoy the natural beauty of the valley, the hospitality of the bed and breakfast inns, and the goods offered by the local "time capsule," the Mast General Store. Valle Crucis had its "golden age" of growth, prosperity, and modernization prior to the 1930s. However, it failed to develop an industrial base and passed into the periphery of Watauga County's economic growth. Its revitalization has been carefully managed in order to maintain the quaintness and historical value of the community, the very qualities Howard Murry found so appealing.

Howard Murry (Figure 3) painted the landscape and people of Valle Crucis and the surrounding area from approximately 1930 until his death in 1968. In order to interpret properly his representations of mountain people and their homeland, one must first understand the common conceptions, or misconceptions, of the mountaineer as compared to the realities of the history of Valle Crucis.

Henry Shapiro, in Appalachia on Our Mind, explains that the traditional concept of Appalachia was an idea created by local color writers of the 1870s and 1880s; they produced articles about quaint "little corners" of America for periodicals, such as Harper's New Monthly Magazine. These publications were

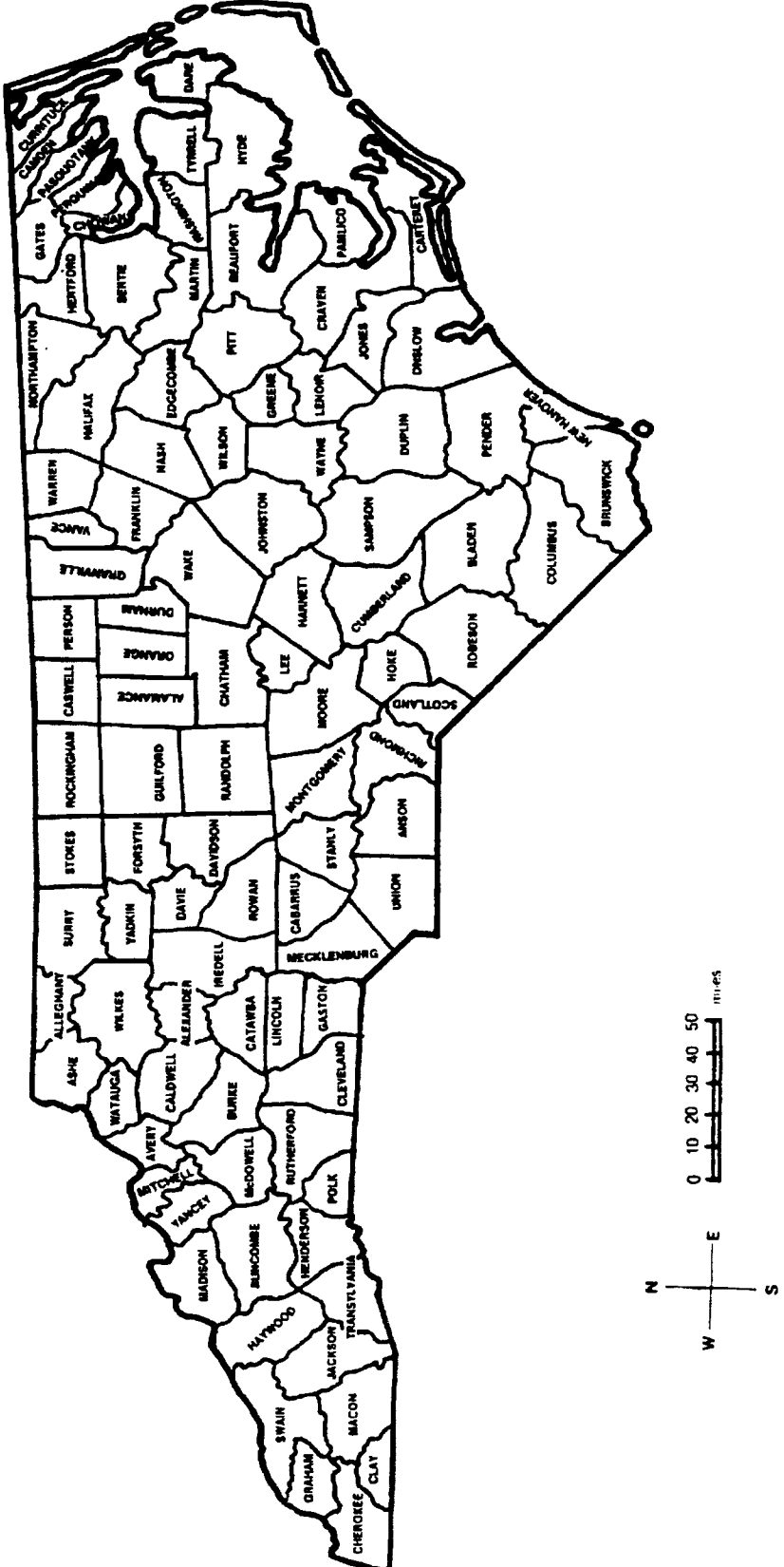


Figure 1. North Carolina Counties

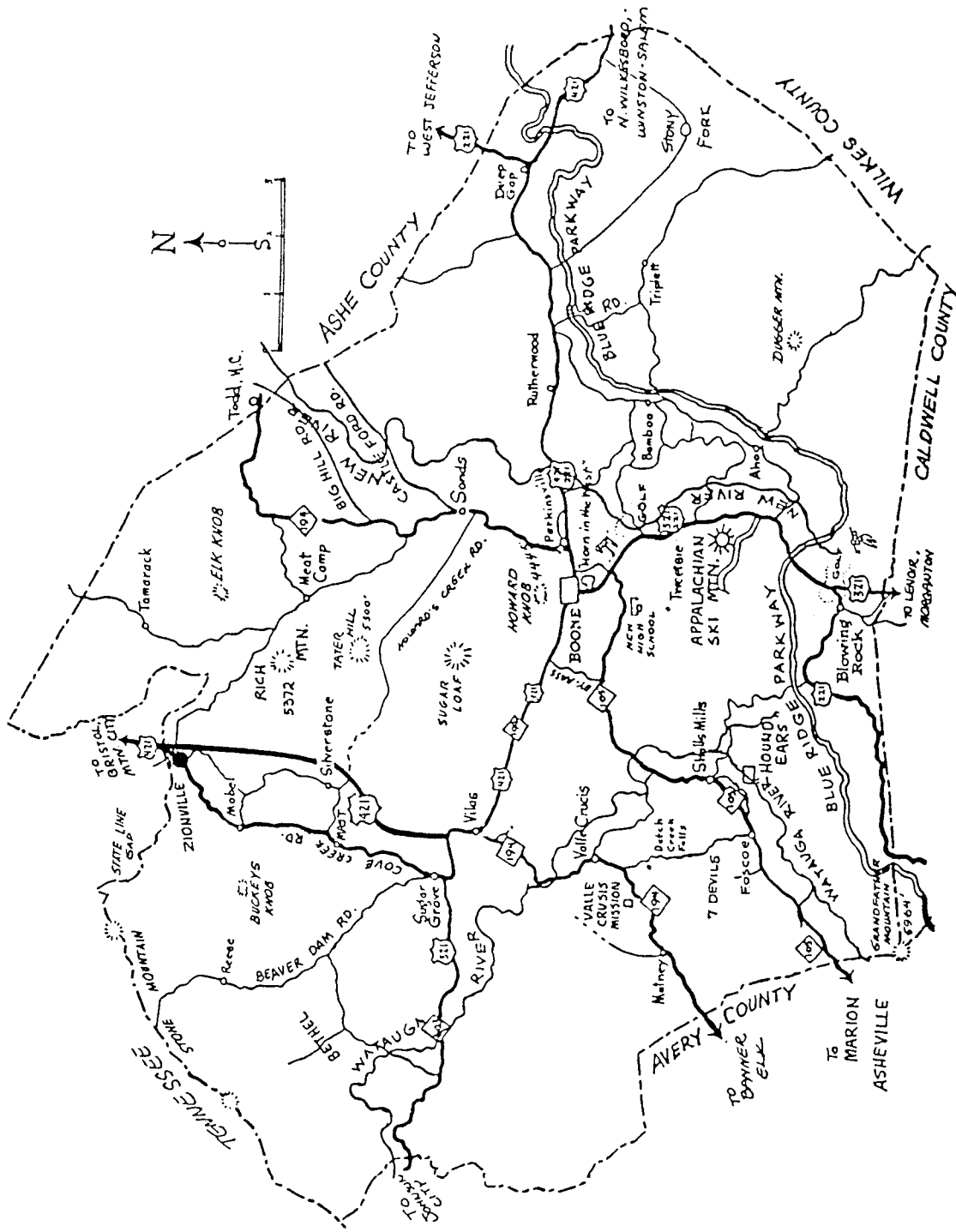


Figure 2. Watauga County

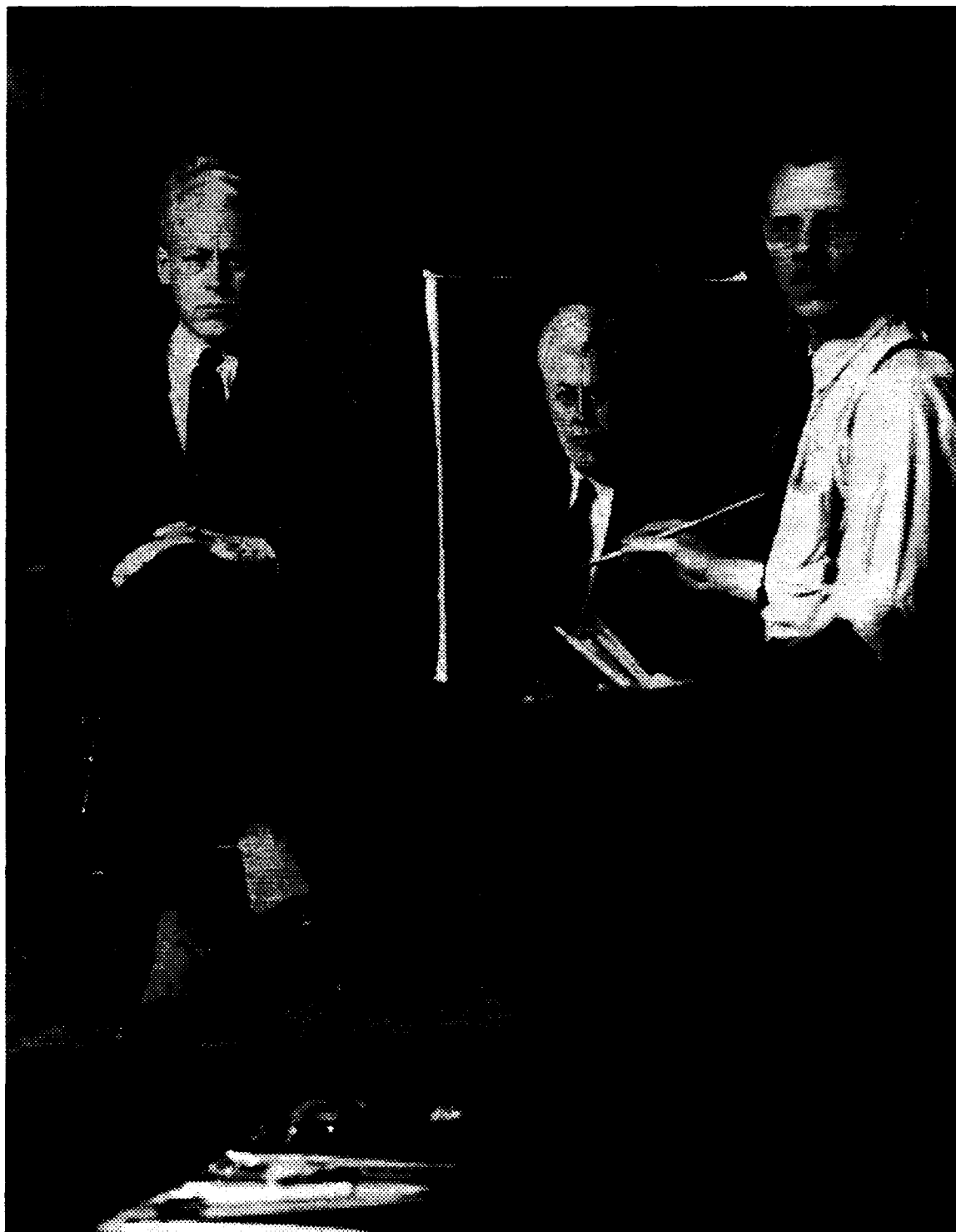


Figure 3. Howard Murry sitting for portrait painter Dayrell Kortheuer
Photographer unknown
Courtesy of Dayrell Kortheuer

directed at the growing new urban middle class, and were primarily responsible for making Appalachia a "strange land with a peculiar people." The mountaineers came to be seen as a group quite distinct from the rest of America and their "otherness" seemed a natural result of their perceived isolation. Not only did this literature create a people who were isolated, but mountaineers also emerged from it as ignorant, poor, lazy, heathen and limited to an agricultural subsistence economy.¹ In short, well into the twentieth century, many Americans fed on these local color stories and considered mountaineers to be uncivilized. The history of the development of Valle Crucis shows the distortion of this image.

Valle Crucis is one of several communities along the Watauga River settled during the time of the Revolutionary War. The rich bottomland along the river attracted farmers and the rugged terrain of the mountain frontier lured some individuals who wished to escape military service. This was the case with the Hicks (Hix) family, which is traditionally regarded as the first to settle the Valle Crucis area. David Hicks, who had Tory sentiments, came to the area around 1777 with at least four grown daughters and his son David, Jr. His older son, Samuel, arrived later. Hicks built a palisade, possibly to defend himself from a perceived Indian threat, but soon moved further up into the mountains to the area of what is now Banner Elk. He never owned his "improvement" there, but in 1791 received a state grant of 300 acres in the area of Valle Crucis.² In his will, Hicks mentions only one son, Samuel, living on this property. Samuel inherited 50 acres from his father

¹Henry D. Shapiro, Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870-1920 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 13-18.

²John Henry Hicks, Mattie Hicks and Barnabas B. Hicks, The Hicks Families of Western North Carolina (Watauga River Lines) (Boone, NC: Minor's Printing, 1991), 1, 12, 18. David Hicks received this land through State Grant number 32 which states that he paid ten pounds for each 100 acres.

and received 126 acres along both sides of the Watauga River through a state land grant dated December 13, 1798. In 1801 he obtained another grant for 100 acres on the north side of the river near the mouth of Cove Creek. He later sold these 100 acres to his son-in-law, James D. Holtsclaw (Holsclaw).³

Wards, Ashers, Farthings, Bairds, Shulls, and Linvilles also settled along the Watauga River in the Valle Crucis vicinity around this time and were soon followed by the Townsends, Masts, Taylors and Churches. Many of these families acquired extensive land holdings and played important roles in the development of the valley.

Joseph Mast and his wife Eve Bowers came to Watauga County in the late 1780s and built a home on the Watauga River near Valle Crucis. His son, John, born in 1786, had fourteen children with his wife, Susanna Harmon. Many of John's descendants became prominent citizens in the Cove Creek and Sugar Grove areas. His great-grandson, William W. Mast, became C. D. Taylor's partner in what is now known as the Mast General Store.⁴

Henry Taylor came to Watauga County in 1849 peddling Seth Thomas clocks. In 1851 he married Emaline Mast, daughter of John Mast. A few years

³Ibid., 7, 19, 22-25. By the end of the nineteenth century the Hicks family often confused Samuel Hicks with his father David. Traditional histories of the area, such as John Preston Arthur's History of Watauga County (1915), also make this mistake; most sources say Samuel first settled the land. However, the 1778 records of Washington County (now a county within the Tennessee border) show that David, Sr. not Samuel first settled the Valle Crucis area. Although the exact date of Samuel's arrival is not known, he was in the area by 1783. He was paid for militia service against the Chickamauga Indians with Revolutionary War Vouchers, issued in his name June 1783 and signed by John Sevier. (Sevier was one of the most important militia leaders in the Watauga area. In 1784 he was elected governor of the unrecognized State of Franklin. He became the first governor of Tennessee and later served as a U. S. Congressman from that state.) Also, according to legend, Samuel sold most of his Valle Crucis land holdings to Benjamin Ward for a rifle, a sheepskin, and a dog. However, there are no records showing that Benjamin Ward purchased land from either David or Samuel.

⁴Sanna Ross Gaffney et al., The Heritage of Watauga County North Carolina, vol. 1 (Winston-Salem: The Heritage of Watauga County Book Committee with the History Division of Hunter Publishing Co., 1984), 271.

later they moved to Valle Crucis where Henry opened a general store and farmed. Two of Henry's sons became prominent in the history of the valley: Charles Davis (1861-1937) took over the general store which was later sold to W. W. Mast, and Thomas "Hard" Hardester (1863-1922) expanded the family homesite.⁵

There is little other documentation on the early history of Valle Crucis except that pertaining to its most significant institutions, particularly the Mission School (Figure 4) and the Mast General Store (Figure 5). The most detailed account of Valle Crucis in the nineteenth century is found in Susan Fenimore Cooper's 1890 publication, William West Skiles: A Sketch of Missionary Life at Valle Crucis in Western North Carolina 1842-1862; it describes the work of Rev. Skiles and other Episcopalian missionaries in the Watauga River valley. Susan Fenimore Cooper, the daughter of James Fenimore Cooper, wrote this text upon the request of Bishop Thomas Atkinson, who became Bishop of the Diocese of North Carolina in 1853. There is no evidence that Cooper visited the mountains. According to her Preface, the text is based upon materials provided by Jarvis Buxton, Henry Prout, George Wetmore, William Glennie French and George Evans, all Episcopal clergymen who lived and worked in the Valle Crucis area.⁶ The text is significant for two reasons:

⁵Ibid., 340.

⁶Susan Fenimore Cooper, ed., William West Skiles: A Sketch of Missionary Life at Valle Crucis in Western North Carolina 1842-1862 (New York: James Pott & Co., 1890), 3. The details of Cooper's relationship with the bishops of North Carolina are unknown; however, one can make a few tentative links. Bishop Ives, who began the mission work in the valley, spent the last years of his life working with Catholic philanthropic organizations in Westchester County, New York. Although at a much earlier date, Cooper spent time as a child with her family in Westchester County, the home of her mother's relatives. Throughout the Civil War and during the early years of Reconstruction Bishop Atkinson obtained aid from northern cities for the needy in North Carolina. In 1866 he received clothing for the destitute from Cooperstown. Cooper, who helped start a hospital and orphanage in Cooperstown after the war, may have been involved with such activity. Anna K. Cunningham, "Susan Fenimore Cooper: Child of Genius," New York History 25 (July 1944): 339, 343, 347; Marshall DeLancey Haywood, Lives of the Bishops of North Carolina from the Establishment of the Episcopate in That State Down to the Division of the Diocese (Raleigh: Alfred Williams, 1910), 134, 178.



Figure 4. Mission School Conference Center, 1982
Valle Crucis, North Carolina
Photograph by the author



Figure 5. Mast General Store, 1993
Valle Crucis, North Carolina
Photograph by the author

it provides the most comprehensive view of Valle Crucis during the 1800s and exemplifies how the widespread conceptions of the mountaineers provided a rationalization for mission work in Appalachia.

According to Cooper, around the year 1840, an unnamed botanist exploring the Blue Ridge mountains visited the Watauga River valley in search of exotic plants. Much impressed with the beauty of the region and concerned about the "religious privations" of the native population, the traveler described his experiences to Levi Silliman Ives, Episcopal Bishop of North Carolina.⁷ Ives visited the area and held his first service in the Watauga River valley on July 20, 1842. He later reported, "And while my sympathies were deeply excited in view of their great spiritual destitution, my admiration was at the same time awakened by the simplicity of their character and the deep earnestness of their petition for instruction."⁸

Although the Bishop considered the people of the valley spiritually destitute, this was not exactly true. A small group of German Lutherans may have been in the upper part of the valley as early as the middle 1800s. They built a log church, Friedens Kirche, near Dutch Creek. Also, although a considerable distance to travel at that time, residents could attend Cove Creek Baptist Church, established in 1799.⁹

At the time of his visit, Bishop Ives promised to send a missionary to the region, and Rev. Henry H. Prout arrived in December. Cooper describes Prout's first service in the valley:

⁷Cooper, Missionary Life, 6-7.

⁸Lawrence Foushee London and Sarah McCulloch Lemmon, ed., The Episcopal Church in North Carolina 1701-1959 (Raleigh: The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, 1987), 186, citing Journals of the Annual Conventions, Diocese of North Carolina (NCDJ), 10.

⁹Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 75; W. Paul Bingham, "Growth and Development of Education in Watauga County" (M. A. thesis, Appalachian State Teachers College, 1950), 43.

The service was held in a cabin at the "Lower Settlement." It was well attended. Men and women came straggling in, many on foot, some on horseback, the wife in sun-bonnet and straight, narrow gown, riding behind her husband. Here and there a woman was seen mounted on a steer, with a child or two in her arms, while the husband, walking beside them, goad in hand, guided the animal over the rough path. The women all wore sun-bonnets, or handkerchiefs tied over their heads. Some were bare-footed. There were many more feet than shoes in the congregation. The boys and girls, even when full grown, were often bare-footed. This was no doubt the first service of our Church held in that region. And it was declared to be the first religious service of any kind held in the valley of the Watauga for seven years.¹⁰

The reader must be wary of such descriptions of poverty, ignorance and religious destitution. They may hold some truths about the Watauga valley, but they also served to rationalize the activities of the missionaries and stir the hearts, as well as open the purses, of northern philanthropists.

Such missionary endeavors were typical of the Episcopal Church as it struggled to secure a foothold amid the other denominations active during the Second Great Awakening. This early nineteenth-century religious movement was led by evangelical Protestant groups who competed with one another in attempts to use religion as a means of bringing social order and a sense of community to the frontier. Episcopalian missionaries, as well as those of other denominations, attempted to "civilize" the natives through education and church doctrine. The view that religious training leads to social improvements is evident in Cooper's account of Valle Crucis:

. . . as a consequence of the naturally civilizing effect of a reverent and dignified Christian worship, the people began of their own accord to wash

¹⁰Cooper, *Missionary Life*, 10-11, 13. Cooper obviously is not counting Bishop Ives's initial visit as a church service and no doubt had no knowledge of the meetings of other denominations. Her reference is probably based upon Ives's own mention of the seven year lack of preaching in the area at the 1844 Convention. London and Lemmon, *Episcopal Church*, 186. The "Lower Settlement" refers to the area along the Watauga River in the direction of Sugar Grove.

and mend their clothing more carefully, to aim at a more respectable appearance in public for themselves and their children.¹¹

Following his 1843 visit to the area, Bishop Ives noted at the Convention of the Diocese that the native people could not be "overmatched in spiritual destitution by the inhabitants of any other known land" and proposed sending a minimum of two school masters to help Rev. Prout. He also recommended buying some land for a farm to support the mission. The Mission bought approximately 125 acres of flat land for \$1,500. Later purchases of land, suitable for grazing and valuable for timber, increased the size of the mission to 2,000 acres. Ives proposed making the valley an important center of work for the Diocese. He wanted it to include "a Missionary Station, a Training School for the ministry, and a Classical and Agricultural School for boys."¹² Some sources say he was responsible for naming the site of the mission, Valle Crucis, because two creeks, now known as Clark's Creek and Crab Orchard Creek, flowed into a third, Dutch Creek, forming a cross.¹³

Under the guidance of Bishop Ives and Rev. William Thurston, the first rector of the school, the mission expanded. Beginning in the late summer of 1843, several buildings were constructed, including a sawmill, tannery, blacksmith shop, grist mill, log kitchen and log cabins. The missionaries also erected a large barn and a framed building with boarded walls containing a dormitory on the top floor,

¹¹Cooper, Missionary Life, 14.

¹²London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 186, citing NCDJ 1844, 18-19; Cooper, Missionary Life, 12, 17.

¹³The earliest reference found to the naming of the valley appears in Cooper, Missionary Life, 16. However, the source does not specifically state that Ives named the valley. All other secondary sources, beginning with Haywood's Lives of the Bishops (1910), seem to have made this conclusion without documentary support. Due to the 1940 flood, the creeks no longer form a cross. It is interesting to note that there was also a town with religious affiliation in Great Britain with the same name.

school room on the ground floor and a chapel in the basement. They built an adobe dining room and house, but these structures, fabricated with clay and straw, began to crumble within a few years after being infested with "humble bees" [sic] that bored into the clay.¹⁴

Shortly after Bishop Ives's initial visit, the Mission had seven candidates for the ministry who covered a circuit of approximately thirty-five miles and by 1845 also had thirty boys enrolled in the school, the first in what is now Watauga County. Some of the students performed well, but others were sent to the Mission as if it were a reform school, and they were expelled due to their lack of discipline and subordination. Individuals in the area who opposed the Church claimed that the Episcopalian religious teachings prompted the boys' misconduct.¹⁵

According to Cooper, the missionaries received a more favorable review from the community for their work with the local black population, which she notes was "not large" in that part of the state. In reference to the "small coloured flock," Cooper remarks that ". . . the Missionaries were cheered by the marked improvement in the moral, and religious tone of the people as shown in their daily life. This was a frequent subject of remark, among those familiar with the country."¹⁶

William West Skiles, an experienced farmer who had previously worked as an overseer in lumber mills, came to Valle Crucis in 1844 to direct the agricultural work at the Mission. He cared for the expensive livestock sent from Pennsylvania; supervised the crops which included wheat, buckwheat, clover and hardy vegetables

¹⁴Cooper, Missionary Life, 18, 32, 37.

¹⁵Ibid., 18-19; Bingham, "Education in Watauga", 53.

¹⁶Cooper, Missionary Life, 75.

such as cabbage; and tended the orchards of apples, peaches and cherries. The farm provided food for the Mission and also functioned as a model farm for teaching proper agricultural techniques to the local population. The Agricultural School was the first of its kind in North Carolina.¹⁷

Skiles's other duties included store-keeper, postmaster, treasurer, and general superintendent. Cooper notes that goods "brought with great toil over the mountain roads from Morganton or Lenoir" arrived very seldom and in small amounts. The store as she describes it was no doubt the first in the immediate area:

. . . tea, coffee, sugar, mustard, pepper, salt, farm tools, nails, screws, etc.; a few packages of the more common medicines for the dispensary, boots and shoes, school-books, paper, pens, ink, with a very modest supply of general stationery; needles, pins, thread, tape, buttons, with perchance a few pieces of calico, flannels, and shirting, such were the usual contents of the invoice directed to William Skiles. Every primitive country "store" contains an odd medley, but the shelves at Valle Crucis, with their post-office pigeon-holes, their medical and literary corners, could show even a wider range than usual. But limited indeed was the space allotted to each department; the entire building was a mere box.¹⁸

This account shows that the people of the valley had access to ready-made wares and were certainly not entirely isolated.

Bishop Ives visited the valley in June 1847 and at that time established the Order of the Holy Cross, a monastic institution. Under his direction activities at the Mission became strictly religious, centering upon a Divinity School and mission activities. The school for boys disbanded and the store closed, the goods being sold at cost or given to the poor.¹⁹ Members of the Order took vows of chastity,

¹⁷Ibid., 21, 25-26; London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 188, citing NCDJ, 1846, 17.

¹⁸Cooper, Missionary Life, 22, 27-28.

¹⁹Ibid., 56. Newspaper articles and other publications refer to this monastic order as the first after the Reformation of the Church of England. However, students from the General Theological Seminary, under the influence of Bishop Hobart and the Oxford Movement (see note 21), established a monastery, missionary center, and seminary at Nashotah, Wisconsin shortly after 1841. George E.

poverty and obedience. The establishment the Order of the Holy Cross, so similar to the institutions of Rome, for five years caused an uproar within the Diocese.²⁰

In 1852 Bishop Ives traveled to Rome, announced his intention to resign as Bishop of North Carolina, and converted to Roman Catholicism. The General Convention deposed the Bishop, the first time such action had been taken in the history of the American Church, and the Diocese nominated Rev. Thomas Atkinson of Baltimore to replace him.²¹

Bishop Ives's establishment of the Order of the Holy Cross proved fatal to the Valle Crucis Mission. Although the Order was actually in existence just two years and involved only eight followers, including Rev. Skiles, the Mission's reputation became shrouded in mysticism and misunderstanding. Conflicts with the Convention resulted in the loss of funding for the ministry. Students at the Mission basically abandoned their religious studies in order to work on the farm, which provided their livelihood. Gradually students left the Mission in order to pursue their studies and to teach. By the end of 1849, the number of Mission residents

DeMille, The Catholic Movement in the American Episcopal Church (Philadelphia: The Church Historical Society, 1941), 22-26.

²⁰For more on the specific activities of Bishop Ives and the response from the Diocese, see London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 202-216 and Haywood, Lives of the Bishops, 111-136.

²¹London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 216-217, citing NCDJ 1853, 15-16. DeMille, The Catholic Movement, 56. No other members of the Order of the Holy Cross abandoned the Episcopal Church. Efforts to explain Bishop Ives's behavior involve two important factors: his extended physical illness during which he experienced a high fever and his belief in the doctrines of the High Church. Ives received his education under Bishop Hobart, a prominent leader in the High Church movement. The Oxford Movement, active in England and to some degree in the United States in the 1830s, influenced Ives. Concerned with the need to reaffirm the Church of England's historical position as a branch of the Roman Catholic Church, followers condemned the abuses of the Church, not the content of its beliefs. Bishop Ives mentioned the movement specifically in his address to the Convention in 1842 and also in discussions with individuals during the following years. London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 197-200; Cooper, Missionary Life, 64.

totaled only twelve, including one "coloured student."²² Three years later, Rev. Prout and Rev. Skiles were the only Episcopal ministers in the Watauga valley. The land and livestock of the Mission were sold to cover debts.²³

The new owner of the property, Robert Miller, allowed Rev. Skiles to remain on the premises. Skiles continued his mission work by traveling through the valley holding religious services and providing medical aid; he also maintained Sunday schools and day schools. He additionally served as a legal adviser, reading and writing business letters, family correspondence, and legal documents for the neighboring population. Since Skiles traveled extensively within Western North Carolina and made trips to his original home in the eastern part of the state, he provided an important informational link between the people of the valley and the surrounding area. In a letter he wrote to Mr. French dated May 21, 1850, Skiles mentions a previous visit to Raleigh and also notes that

I was in Boon [sic] Tuesday, and saw a great crowd; it was Court week, and I witnessed an amusing scene. There was a man intoxicated, who was very rude, and treated the Court with contempt. For want of a jail to put him in, the Court ordered him taken out and tied to a wagon wheel until he became civil.²⁴

One of Skiles's most lasting contributions to the community was the establishment of St. John's Church; Bishop Atkinson consecrated it in August of 1862, just a few months prior to Rev. Skiles's death. Twenty years later, church members moved the

²²Cooper, 68, 75-76. For more information on the ministry to Negroes in area see Haywood, Lives of the Bishops, 101-102.

²³Ibid., 99-100.

²⁴Ibid., 104-110, 79-80.

building from its original site on the Lower Watauga to its present location on the hill closer to Valle Crucis.²⁵

Other religious denominations became active in the valley during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Methodist circuit riders held services initially in an old log school house and later in private homes, including those of Henry Taylor and Franklin Baird. In the 1870s the Methodists built their first church, a log structure, on the same site as the present white frame church, which was constructed in 1894. The Seventh Day Adventist Church, one of the first in the Southeast, was organized on Dutch Creek in 1882. The Baptist and Presbyterians were not particularly strong in Valle Crucis. However, the Baptists established a church on Clark's Creek in 1898. The Lutheran congregation moved several times and Anglicized its name to Friendship Church, then later changed it to Holy Communion.²⁶

After the death of Rev. Skiles, Episcopalian mission work in Valle Crucis remained dormant until the 1890s when Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire began efforts to revitalize the Mission. As previously mentioned, Cooper's text was published in 1890 and her glorification of the early work at the Mission no doubt prompted Bishop Cheshire to reconsider the opportunities for the Church in the valley. In January 1894, he wrote Milnor Jones, then living in Oregon, asking him to come to North Carolina to revive the old Mission. He chose Jones for the job because he was "rough, plain spoken." In a letter to his wife dated October 2, 1901, Bishop Cheshire described his feelings about Jones: "If I had a wild mountain

²⁵Ibid., 125-137. After the death of Rev. Skiles, the church did not have a minister until 1883. Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 55.

²⁶Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 74-75; John Preston Arthur, A History of Watauga County, North Carolina (Richmond: Everett Wadley Company, 1915), 96-107.

country full of moonshiners, I think I would like to have him, but for anything more civilized he is too savage."²⁷ The fact that Bishop Cheshire felt that such a man was necessary to rebuild the mission indicates that he held the opinion that the Appalachian mountaineers were a crude, uncivilized folk, desperate for the social reforms offered by the Church.

Milnor Jones, just like the earlier missionaries, used such tales of the needs of the mountaineers to raise funds in the North. He constructed schools at Valle Crucis and Beaver Creek. On a few acres purchased from C. D. Taylor (originally part of the Mission property), he also built an eight-room mission house to accommodate a missionary teacher and pupils. This building is still standing on the Conference Center property and is used by guests. By 1898, according to the report to the Diocese Convention, the school had forty-eight scholars and two teachers. Jones put his greatest efforts into working directly with the poor in the mountain area around Valle Crucis. The Baptists and Adventists opposed the Episcopalian's work and stories circulated about his "rude wit and rough pleasantries." The Methodists, primarily the wealthier members of the community, usually supported the Mission. They no doubt recognized the need for more schools in the area, regardless of the denomination or personality associated with these new efforts.²⁸

In 1880 the county had 48 "public" schools with an enrollment of 1,618 and in 1885 had 41 schools with 3558 pupils. Most of these schools were small, one room institutions for elementary grades and they operated only about 3 months of the year. Academies, forerunners of high schools, provided most of the secondary

²⁷Lawrence Foushee London, Bishop Joseph Blount Cheshire: His Life and Work (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 57, 60. Citation notes that letter is part of the Cheshire manuscripts owned by Mr. J. B. Cheshire, Jr. of Raleigh, NC.

²⁸Joseph Blount Cheshire, Milnor Jones, Deacon and Missionary (Raleigh: Mutual Publishing Company, 1920), 61-64; London, Cheshire: His Life and Work, 59.

education during the first decades of the twentieth century. Students in Valle Crucis could attend Cove Creek Academy, established in 1885, or Walnut Grove Institute, founded in 1903 and also located in Cove Creek. They could also go to Watauga Academy which B. B. Dougherty and D. D. Dougherty established in Boone in 1899. Around 1909 an academy was built in Valle Crucis across from the present site of the Valle Crucis Elementary School. Principal supporters of the school were W. W. Mast, T. H. Taylor, T. C. Baird, J. M. Shull, D. F. Mast, W. E. Shipley, C. D. Taylor, W. H. Mast and D. F. Baird. It offered an alternative to the Mission School for those who could not travel to Cove Creek.²⁹

The Mission, however, remained the primary educational institution in the valley. Bishop Horner, head of the newly formed Missionary District of Asheville, purchased 450 acres of the Mission's original land for \$3500.00 in hopes of developing an industrial school.³⁰ Enrollment at the school, which provided classes from first grade through high school, grew steadily during the early 1900s: from fifty-five in 1904 to ninety-nine in 1911. According to Bessie Davis, who was a student at the school, Bishop Horner was so determined to help the children in the area that he bought a truck and drove through the valley picking them up and taking them to school. Boys attended as day scholars, often earning their way by working on the farm, and most girls attended as boarding students. In addition to standard

²⁹A Bicentennial Committee, comp., Development of Public Education in Watauga County North Carolina, ed. Tom Corbitt (n.p., n.d.), 4; Bingham, "Education in Watauga," 34, 45, 93. Watauga Academy was the forerunner of what is now Appalachian State University.

³⁰Registered in Deed Book 1, page 592 on December 5, 1903. Details of the purchase are available in Black Mountain in the Archives of the Diocese of Western North Carolina. For more details on the establishment of the Missionary District, which later became the Diocese of Western North Carolina, see London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 296. The name of the Mission School technically changed to Valle Crucis Industrial School, but the term Mission School, which is still used by the local people, will be utilized throughout this text for consistency.

academic courses, the school offered training to girls in housework skills and native weaving.³¹

Due to the growth of the school, Bishop Horner had two new buildings constructed around 1910. Auxiliary Hall contained class rooms, a large dining room and the kitchen; the community also used it as an entertainment center. The local people collected money for a "moving picture apparatus" with which the school, for a small admission fee, presented movies for the community each week.³² Fire destroyed Auxiliary Hall on the night of June 1, 1919. Local help kept the fire from spreading to the other new building, Auchmuty Hall, which was the dormitory. The community raised \$1,000 in cash and pledged \$1,000 in labor to help rebuild Auxiliary Hall which was originally valued at \$16,000. Auchmuty now functions as the main building of the Conference Center and the rebuilt Auxiliary is now called the Annex.³³

The Mission School flourished as a significant commercial enterprise in the community. Rev. Floyd W. Tompkins, Jr. helped some of the local women gain an income by teaching them to make bedspreads by adding embroidery and French knots to factory made cloth.³⁴ The Mission workers reestablished the poultry farm,

³¹Bessie Davis, Interview by author, November 20, 1991. Davis received all of her education at the Mission School and later directed the kitchen. James B. Sill, Historical Sketches of Churches in the Diocese of Western North Carolina Episcopal Church (Asheville, NC: Publishing Office of the Church of The Redeemer, 1955), 96-97.

³²Lucy A. Fitch, "The Vale of the Cross," The Spirit of Missions (September 1917): 643.

³³Sill, Historical Sketches, 97-98; "Fire!" The Spirit of Missions (October 1919): 675; Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, June 15, 1919. Miss Miller, a domestic science teacher, and Clyde Philmon, a seventh grader, lost their lives in the fire.

³⁴Fitch, "Vale of the Cross," 643.

replanted the apple orchards, and brought in Holstein cattle for the dairy.³⁵ In 1913 the orchard included over sixty-five acres of apple trees; 1500 trees were old enough to bear.³⁶ According to James Davis, who worked on the farm as a boy and lived there most of his adult life, the orchards produced over 30,000 bushels of apples one year. The Mission employed almost anyone it could find to help with the harvest.³⁷

The school's dairy and other small businesses also proved to be successful. The dairy provided milk, cheese and ice cream for the students and people in the community. Davis said that people would come all the way from Asheville to purchase the ice cream. The workers packed it in five gallon cans, then put it in barrels filled with ice. The ice cream and other milk products were sold out of the dairy barn which is today called the apple barn.³⁸ The building adjacent to it, commonly referred to as the bunk house, was actually the apple barn. The school also ran a sawmill, a blacksmith shop and a wagon factory. In 1934, while the country was suffering in the Depression, the Valle Crucis Orchard and Farm showed a small profit and provided employment for its students.³⁹ The farm contributed to the community through the goods it produced, the advanced farming techniques it taught, and the employment it provided for the valley population.

³⁵Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, November 6, 1913; London and Lemmon, Episcopal Church, 476.

³⁶"Vale of the Cross," The Spirit of Missions (October 1913): 663, 666.

³⁷James Davis, Interview by author, November 20, 1991.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Katherine H. Richardson, "District Nomination of Valle Crucis Conference Center at the Historic Mission School, Valle Crucis, NC," n.p., 1992.

During the 1930s education in Watauga County, specifically in Valle Crucis, improved when the state assumed support for a six month school term in 1931 and an eight month term in 1933. The Education Equalization Act passed by North Carolina in 1933 insured better public education in the poorer counties of the state and in 1939 the state began providing free textbooks for students in public schools. In 1930 the State High School Department of Education gave an examination to high school seniors in every standard high school in the state. The average score across the state was 70.1. Cove Creek, the closest high school to Valle Crucis, scored 93.8 and Watauga County averaged 86.3, higher than any other county in the state. Consolidation of schools in Watauga County reduced the number of public schools from 52 in 1930 to 32 in 1940. The reduction in the number of schools meant that funds could be used more effectively, resulting in an improvement in the quality of education in each institution. WPA projects involved building new facilities for several of the schools in the county, including the elementary school in Valle Crucis which is still being used.⁴⁰

In 1936, due to the improvement of roads and the public education system, the Mission School dropped its first six grades and also stopped accepting boys. A 1941 bulletin describes the institution as a college preparatory school for girls. It lists the entrance requirements, the course of study, equipment (dress), expenses, officers and staff, and the calendar for the year. The cost for the school year was \$500.00 and included all expenses except piano lessons and textbooks, which were to cost no more than ten dollars. The Mission School functioned as a boarding school for girls until 1942. At that time the effects of World War II were felt in the

⁴⁰Bicentennial Committee, comp., Development of Education, 31; "Watauga Schools Lead the State in February Examination," Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, October 20, 1930; Curtis Smalling, ed., The Heritage of Watauga County, North Carolina, vol. 2 (Winston-Salem, NC: The Heritage of Watauga County Book Committee with the History Division of Hunter Publishing Co., 1987), 5.

form of insufficient funds, low enrollment, a scarcity of teachers and a shortage of gasoline. After the school closed, the farm and orchard continued to operate until around 1960. Also, the Diocese conducted a summer training institute for seminary students and used the facilities as an inn. The development of the ski industry in the area in the 1960s aided the success of the inn. Today the Mission functions as a conference center and is planning to reestablish the farm as an agricultural education center.⁴¹

In addition to the schools and churches in Valle Crucis, the Mast General Store, being the oldest business institution in the valley, provides important insight into the history of the community. Henry Taylor established the company and his son, C. D., built the original section of the present building in 1883. After being trained in merchandising by working at his uncle Newton Mast's store in nearby Sugar Grove, W. W. Mast began helping C. D. Taylor and by 1897 had become a partner in the business, which at that time was known as Taylor and Mast. In 1902, W. W. took his bride, Emma Baird, to Blowing Rock where he managed another store. However, his father-in-law, D. F. Baird, encouraged him to return to Valle Crucis and gave him land upon which W. W. built a home in 1903. W. W. rejoined C. D. Taylor and bought Taylor's half of the business between 1906 and 1910. Around 1942 W. W.'s son, Howard W., Sr., bought the store from W. W. and his son-in-law. Howard and his wife, Anne, operated the store with the help of their sons, H. W., Jr. and Frank, until their retirement in 1971.⁴²

⁴¹Valle Crucis file, Black Mountain archives; James and Bessie Davis; Valle Crucis Mission School files, Valle Crucis Conference Center, Valle Crucis, NC.

⁴²Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 279-280; Invoices of the Mast General Store, 1897-1910. The name of the business changed from Taylor and Mast to W. W. Mast between 1906 and 1910. The invoices between these years are missing.

The Mast Store supplied the citizens of the valley with almost anything they could want. It offered the standard hardware, groceries, farm equipment, medicine, sewing machines, cloth, clothing for all ages and caskets for all sizes. The store also functioned as the social center of the community. In a 1976 interview Anne Mast reminisced: "Sometimes when it was below zero and the snow was blowin' in under the door there would be fifteen or twenty farmers in there, exchanging stories."⁴³

Much of the business was carried out on the barter system. The locals brought potatoes and other vegetables, as well as herbs, roots, bark and ginseng to trade for the goods they needed. When they did not immediately take their balance in trade, the Masts gave credit at the store by giving out coins, known as lightweight, they had made in ten, twenty-five and fifty cent denominations. During the 1930s the WPA projects brought more paved roads to the area, and contact between the Valle Crucis residents and the "outside" improved. Local residents found cash-paying jobs away from the valley and trucked their produce off the mountain to be sold for cash. These developments put an end to the large scale selling and bartering at the Mast Store. In the emerging cash economy, locals could purchase goods at supermarkets and specialty shops in Boone which offered a larger variety of merchandise. Only personal service, convenience and credit kept some of the locals returning to Mast Store.⁴⁴

⁴³Records of the Mast General Store; P. G. Clark, "Masts Recall Times," The Boone (NC) Appalachian, April 27, 1976.

⁴⁴Downs Matthews, "Saving Mast Store," Exxon USA, XIV, no. 4 (1975): 10. The business of the Mast Store declined steadily during the 1970s, threatening the survival of the historic institution. John and Faye Cooper bought the store in 1979 and continue to operate the business as a general store with an emphasis upon friendliness, great customer service, and a respect for the community. It is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is a major attraction for visitors in the area.

Around 1909 R. L. Lowe and Co. of Banner Elk erected a second general store, known as Valle Crucis Supply Co., across from the Methodist Church. The following year C. D. Taylor and his son-in-law, Dr. H. B. Perry, bought the store and renamed it the Valle Crucis Company. In 1914 Richard Aubyn Farthing became the manager of the store and he and his brother eventually became partners in the business. Upon the death of postmistress Vickie Taylor in 1928, the post office moved from the Mast Store to Valle Crucis Company and Aubyn became postmaster. The post office moved back to the Mast Store after Aubyn's retirement in 1963. Aubyn Farthing was the sole owner of the store from 1948 to 1958. The business changed hands several times before his son Ray bought it to use as an antique store. The building now functions as the Annex of the Mast General Store.⁴⁵

The records of the Mast Store and articles in the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, which began publication in 1888, help to elucidate the early development and "modernization" of the valley. Taylor and Mast were buying oil from Standard Oil Company (now Exxon) as well as other companies in 1897. They were ordering gasoline from Standard Oil by 1910. It is difficult to establish just what gasoline was being used for at that time in the valley, but a receipt from Standard Oil dated July 23, 1899 advertised Pratt's Deodorized Stove Gasoline for Vapor Stoves (cooking stoves). In 1912, fire destroyed the wagon factory at the Mission School. The fire, which caused \$5,000 to \$10,000 in damages, "started from a spark from one of the engines." The October 17, 1912 Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat mentions in the news briefs on Valle Crucis that J. B. Horton used his ten horse power gasoline engine to cut the feed to fill the silo of W. E. Shipley. The same

⁴⁵Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 80.

column noted that, "The auto truck purchased by Bishop Horner to haul for his farm and school is doing a good business hauling apples to Elk Park and coal back." From these examples one may easily conclude that mechanization had reached the valley by the turn of the century.⁴⁶

The truck used by Bishop Horner was probably one of the first in the valley. Advertisements for automobiles do not appear in the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat until 1914 when the Metz car was offered by F. M. Richard of Banner Elk. Just a month after the appearance of this ad, the Valle Crucis column in the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat notes that Mr. C. D. Taylor, Dr. H. B. Perry and others "left by automobile for Charlotte." Hodges and Carlton, who offered Overlands for \$695, were among the first automobile salesmen in the county. In 1916 W. H. Wagner of Valle Crucis represented the Ford company and took orders for cars for future delivery. Valle Crucis also had a "modern" garage for working on automobiles. During this time motor vehicles could usually be used only during the summer due to weather and road conditions.⁴⁷

At the same time the number of automobiles increased in the valley, electricity also spread. The Mission School built a hydroelectric facility on Crab Orchard Creek in 1912. It also had an electrical wheelwright and blacksmith shop.⁴⁸ The following announcement appears in the Valle Crucis column of the February 18, 1915 Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat:

If you don't believe it come see for yourself, yes, you can see if you do come at night, at either Mr. T. H. Taylor's residence, W. W. Mast's store, Ex-Sheriff D. F. Baird's and W. H. Wagner's residences, for you will find all

⁴⁶Mast General Store Invoices; Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, September 26 and October 17, 1912.

⁴⁷Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, 1914-1916.

⁴⁸Spirit of Missions (October 1913): 665; Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, December 18, 1913.

these houses brilliantly lighted with electric lights, and in a short time a number of other homes will be aglow with electrical splendor.

This prediction came true; within the next few months, the Valle Crucis Company Store, Mr. D. F. Mark's home and barns, the Methodist Church and the Valle Crucis Bank had electric lights.⁴⁹ In 1920 only 34.7% of the residences in the United States were wired for electricity; thus, Valle Crucis was a very forward thinking community.⁵⁰

Some sections of the region, however, probably did not receive electricity until much later. In the meantime, Delco Lights, small electric generators run by kerosene, were used to supply power on some individual farms.⁵¹ Contracts dated August 24, 1929 gave the Valle Crucis School Power Plant permission to "put its poles and string its wires over a right-of-way" through the property of D. F. Mast, Charles Rowe, and J. M. Shull. The Northwestern Carolina Utility Service, which served Blowing Rock, bought the Valle Crucis School Power Plant, as well as other small hydroelectric plants in the area. This company served the Watauga River Valley until it was bought by Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation in 1937.⁵²

In 1895 Pete Mast started the first telephone service in the area; the switchboard was located in his home at Cove Creek. In 1900 it became Watauga

⁴⁹Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, February 18, 1915 and March 18, 1915. Around this same time Pete Mast built a dynamo at his Cove Creek Mill and extended electrical service in that area. Also, the Appalachian Training School built a power plant.

⁵⁰Thomas J. Schlereth, Victorian America: Transformation in Everyday Life, 1876-1915 (New York: Harper Collins, 1991; reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 115 (page reference is to reprint edition).

⁵¹Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, October 30, 1919.

⁵²Contracts of the Valle Crucis School Power Plant, Valle Crucis Mission School files; Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 47.

Telephone and Telegraph Company and, with an improved switchboard, service was extended to Boone. After being incorporated in 1907, the company began servicing Newland, Elk Park, and Lenoir. Also, telephones may have been in Valle Crucis as early as 1897. That year the Mast Store purchased one hundred telephone "insulators" and one hundred telephone "brackets."⁵³

The East Tennessee and Western North Carolina narrow gauge railroad enhanced communication and transportation between the mountain communities. This line, commonly known as Tweetsie, brought household goods and farm equipment to the mountains. It also functioned as the gossip link from town to town, carried the mail, and transported passengers who were often picked up as "wave downs" along the tracks. By 1881 the line was complete from Johnson City, Tennessee, to Cranberry, North Carolina, home of the Cranberry Coal and Iron Company. From 1897 to 1916 many goods for the Mast Store were shipped by train to Elk Park, the next to the last stop on the line, 18 miles from Valle Crucis. W. W. Mast hitched a team of mules to his freight wagon loaded with local produce and headed for Elk Park, about a two days journey. The produce was placed on Tweetsie to be shipped to cities, and Mast then collected the goods for his store and returned home. The ET & WNC lines expanded to Shull's Mills, a major lumber camp at the time, and on to Boone by 1917. The goods for the Mast Store were then more conveniently shipped into Shull's Mills. The railroad helped the developing summer tourist business of Linville (Eseeola Lodge), Blowing Rock, and even Valle Crucis.⁵⁴

⁵³Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 47; Records of the Mast General Store.

⁵⁴Clyde J. Dellinger, Tweetsie and the Clinchfield Railroads Crossing the Blue Ridge Mountains (Morganton, NC: The News Herald Press, 1975), 10, 13, 25, 29; Lon Harshaw, Trains, Trestles and Tunnels: Railroads of the Southern Appalachians (Asheville, NC: Hexagon Company, 1977), 76; Matthews, "Saving Mast Store," 10.

Owners of large homes in the Valle Crucis area began accommodating summer visitors shortly after the turn of the century. Unlike the tourists of today, these visitors often came in the early summer and stayed through the season. Most ventured to the higher elevations in order to enjoy the mild climate, as well as the hospitality and simple lifestyle offered by the "resort" communities. These guests, many of whom were from the Piedmont, frequently returned to the valley year after year. During August 1915, Valle Crucis hosted fifty to sixty summer visitors and many others had to be turned away due to a lack of accommodations.⁵⁵

One of the first homes used as an inn is now the popular bed and breakfast Mast Farm Inn. The property, locally referred to as the Finley and Josie Mast farm, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and consists of ten dwellings which tell the story of early homestead life. David Mast built the original log dwelling around 1812. When M. C. Church built the large frame house for Andrew Mast in 1885, the log house was converted to a weaving cabin and housed three looms. Mrs. Josie Mast and her sisters became well known weavers. Her works were ordered by Mrs. Woodrow Wilson for use in the White House. Other buildings on the grounds include a spring house, wood shed, wash house, meat and apple house, blacksmith shop, and a large barn. David Finley Mast, son of Andrew Mast expanded the "big" house in order to accommodate more summer guests.⁵⁶

The second home of Charles D. "Squire" Taylor was completed in 1912. At that time the house had thirteen rooms and a bath. The Taylor family began

⁵⁵Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, August 12, 1915.

⁵⁶Betty McFarland and Peggy Polson, Sketches of Early Watauga (Boone, NC: American Association of University Women, 1973), passim; Ina W. and John J. Van Noppen, Western North Carolina since the Civil War (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1973), 187-189; Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 75; Dale Gaddy, "Masts, Early Settlers, Helped Open Valle Crucis Section," Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, June 27, 1963.

accepting summer guests in their home in the 1920s. C. D. Taylor had a lumber mill and grist mill on Crab Orchard Creek. The house, now owned by Chip and Roland Schwab, has been totally renovated and is known as The Inn at the Taylor House.⁵⁷

Hard Taylor and his wife Vickie also welcomed guests into their home. Hard's father, Henry, built his first house, a log cabin, on the east side of the present Mast General Store. Before the Civil War, he built a two room brick structure on the hill across from the cabin. Hard later incorporated the brick home into the large white clapboard house which is still standing. The bricks were made either at the Mission School or in the yard of the house. Lumber for the enlarged structure came from the Taylor property and was sawed at the Mission School. This eleven room house was the first in the valley to have indoor plumbing and central heat, which was installed around 1912; it was also one of the first houses in the valley to have a telephone.⁵⁸

As previously mentioned, W. W. Mast built his home in 1903 across from the Mast Store. His family shared their home with clerks of the store, workers on the farm, and students who lived too far away to commute. Also the "drummers," salesmen who frequented the store, stopped in at mealtimes. Fire damaged the home in 1918; it was rebuilt the following year. The Masts enlarged the home in 1925, partially to help accommodate the overflow of summer visitors.⁵⁹

⁵⁷Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 76; Chip Schwab, interviews by author, October and December 1992. C. D. Taylor's first house was located across the road from the one built in 1912. This original home was destroyed in the 1940 flood.

⁵⁸Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 77. This home is now a craft shop.

⁵⁹Ibid.; Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, February 6, 1919.

The David F. Baird farm was originally owned by Reuben Mast who sold the property to John Gragg, who in turn sold it to David Wagner. Wagner gave the property to his daughter Elizabeth and her husband, David Franklin Baird, in 1873. The large Baird home is thought to have been the first white painted house on the river in the Valle Crucis area. The Bairds welcomed the Methodist circuit riders, the teachers of the public schools in the community and any visitors who happened to need shelter for the night.⁶⁰

Visitors to Valle Crucis during the first few decades of the century found a thriving agricultural community with modern conveniences and amenities. Many of the large homes not only had electricity, but also modern plumbing, "proving to a certainty that modern conveniences can be enjoyed even in rural districts."⁶¹ In the June 11, 1914 issue of the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, in reference to the proposed Blowing Rock-Valle Crucis Turnpike, the town boasted, "Come! See Valle Crucis grow." The town could brag that it had even been considered as a possible site for the seat of the county, formed in 1849.⁶²

In addition to the general stores and modern, hospitable homes, the town was able to offer a doctor's service, a jewelry business and a bank. From 1905 to 1924 Dr. H. B. Perry served the medical needs of the valley. He originally had his office in the Mast Store. He later built a home on a hill on Highway 194, just across from the Methodist Church, which functioned as a hospital. He performed operations on the first floor and the patients recuperated in the upstairs bedrooms. Dr. Perry also visited patients in their homes. The Walker's Jewelry Store, now located in Boone,

⁶⁰Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 77.

⁶¹Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, March 18, 1915.

⁶²Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, June 11, 1914 and March 18, 1915; Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 39.

actually began in 1906 in the Valle Crucis home of W. C. Walker. The Valle Crucis Bank opened in 1914, but was bought out by the Watauga County Bank in the late 1920s.⁶³

As the economics of the county changed, so did the structure of the agricultural based community. As indicated, by the end of the 1920s, the farmers of Valle Crucis and the rest of Watauga County began to depend on a cash based economic system instead of a barter and borrow system. Farmers were encouraged to develop cash crops, such as Irish potatoes and cabbage, to be sold at wholesale markets. After it was introduced in North Carolina in 1929, burley tobacco also became recognized as an important potential cash crop. In 1929 the kraut factory in Boone bought farmers' cabbage for \$12.00 a ton. That same year E. E. Eller Produce Company of North Wilkesboro opened a wholesale produce station in Boone.⁶⁴ This move saved some farmers the added expense of trucking their goods out of the immediate area. Agricultural production improved with the use of modern machinery, better seed, and fertilizer. However, small time farmers, who could not afford modern machinery and often had poor hillside acreage instead of rich bottom land, found it difficult, if not impossible, to survive in this competitive, cash based system. The large scale destruction and loss of top soil during the 1940 flood also hurt some farmers. All of these factors, added to the large scale unemployment of the Depression, made it necessary for many to seek employment

⁶³Gaffney et al., Heritage of Watauga, 39, 80.

⁶⁴Van Noppen, North Carolina since Civil War, 277; Paul Salstrom, "Appalachia's Path to Economic Dependency, 1730-1940," TMs [photocopy], passim, Center for Appalachian Studies, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC; Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, May 30, 1929 and June 13, 1929. Salstrom notes that in preindustrial Appalachia subsistence farming really did not differ from market farming because the farm products of that era (livestock and grains) were suitable for consumption and outside demand. From the late 1920s through the 1930s the Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat has many articles concerning how to improve farming techniques and profits.

outside the community. Farming became a necessary supplement for those who did remain in the valley.

With the improvement of roads and the need for employment after the late 1920s, many of the youth of Valle Crucis, along with farmers and other residents, began migrating to other areas. Between 1940 and 1960 Watauga County lost 14.4% of its "young productive" residents (between 20 and 34 years of age). The number of children under the age of five decreased by 28.8%, and there were 12.5% fewer school children between 5 and 19 years. However, the county's retired population, those over the age of sixty-five, increased 58.8%. By 1964, 74.8% of the farmers in Watauga County were over the age of forty-five; the average age of farmers was 54.4. Although families may have been getting smaller at this time, this data indicates that young people were leaving the county farms in search of a more prosperous livelihood.⁶⁵

Boone, the county seat, became the business center of the area. During the nineteenth century court days and elections brought the county people together for social activity and trade. Therefore, Boone became a more attractive location for new businesses. Its population and economic activity multiplied while that of Valle Crucis and other local communities declined. Between 1920 and 1930 the population of Boone jumped from 374 to 1,295, an increase of 246.3%. Watauga Township, which includes Valle Crucis, had a 17.2% decrease in population during the same period. This trend continued. Between 1950 and 1960, the Watauga

⁶⁵Watauga County Board of Commissioners and Watauga County Planning Board, Report on Watauga County Comprehensive Study As To Population, Economy, and Water and Sewerage Requirements to 1990 (Asheboro, NC: Moore, Gardner and Associates, Inc., n.d.), 17, citing U. S. Census of Population 1940, 1950, and 1960. For an extensive list of Valle Crucis residents who worked outside the community or left the area for professional employment see "Valle Crucis Has Place in County's 100 Years Progress," Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, July 14, 1949.

Township population dropped 41.6%. As of 1960, the population of Valle Crucis still had not matched that of Boone in 1930.⁶⁶

As a result of outmigration and the lack of business and industrial development, Valle Crucis remained a small agricultural community. The Mission School, Methodist Church, Mast General Store, and Valle Crucis Company continued as the primary institutions after the late 1920s. The bank, hospital, jewelry business, and car dealership all moved to Boone. The prominent, wealthier families such as the Masts, Taylors, Bairds, and Shulls maintained their positions of leadership in the town. This more elite class, which took advantage of the modern conveniences of electricity, indoor plumbing, and telephones early in the century, contrasted greatly with the poor farmers of the hills surrounding the valley. During the Depression, the WPA built 300 privies in Watauga County, and the Rural Electrification Authority was still trying to get electricity and telephones to some local residents.⁶⁷ These economic and social differences are still evident to anyone who cares to explore the backroads of the area.

When Howard Murry first visited Valle Crucis in 1929, he found a community which had already begun an economic decline that was to last until the 1980s when the Mast General Store became a successful historical attraction. As a summer tourist, however, this was not his concern. The opposite was the case. He perceived Valle Crucis to be a quiet, warm and welcoming community with residents who had admirable values and a compelling relationship with the land. The mountain landscape, local architecture, and indigenous population inspired the artist for remainder of his lifetime.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 9. The census lists towns which have a population of over 1,000; Valle Crucis was not listed in 1960.

⁶⁷Boone (NC) Watauga Democrat, November 14, 1935; Smalling, Heritage of Watauga, vol. 2, 4.

CHAPTER 2

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF HOWARD MURRY

"How fortunate I am for here I am in this beautiful country doing the thing I want most to do."⁶⁸ In this statement, written from Valle Crucis around 1950 to his friend Dayrell Kortheuer, Howard Murry expresses his contentment as an artist living in the small mountain community. He was indeed a fortunate man; by the early 1940s he had successfully made the transition from a prosperous businessman to a recognized artist. Primarily known as a landscape watercolorist, he exhibited works at numerous galleries in North Carolina as well as in major cities along the east coast. He later became a writer, primarily relying upon aspects of his own life to create works of fiction. His lone publication, Salt O' Life, is a collection of anecdotes about life in Valle Crucis. Along with his paintings, it gives valuable insight into his values and perceptions of the mountain people.

Howard Murray Dumbell, Jr.⁶⁹ was born July 3, 1891 in Memphis, Tennessee and lived in the nearby town of Covington until about age five. At that time his father, an Episcopal clergyman, moved his wife, Anna Sherrod, and their children to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, a small community in the

⁶⁸Howard Murry, Valle Crucis, to Dayrell Kortheuer, [Charlotte], ALS, September 29, 1950 (?), possession of Dayrell Kortheuer, Charlotte, NC.

⁶⁹Although born Howard Dumbell, the artist always signed his paintings Howard Murry; however, he was referred to as Howard Dumbell in reviews of his exhibits throughout the 1940s. He legally changed his name in 1947. "Still Gets a kick out of Exhibition," Charlotte Observer, August 10, 1948. For consistency, the name Howard Murry will be used throughout the text.

Berkshires.⁷⁰ Murry's unpublished manuscript "Under the Round Collar," although written as a humorous piece of fiction, provides significant insight into his childhood. While growing up, he felt the ever present eyes of church members who were quick to spot the faults of the minister's sons. His father ruled his five children, Murry being the oldest, with a stern hand, but rarely failed to exhibit the humor often needed in raising rambunctious boys. Murry's father taught him to respect all individuals regardless of their status or occupation in life. This set of values played an important role in his life and is evident in his paintings as well as his writings.⁷¹

Instead of pursuing formal higher education, Murry went to New York City and began what became a very successful business career. His first job placed him as a "runner" in a bank, but later he became employed by McFadden Brothers, a cotton brokerage. He met his first wife, Algie "Kitty" Ware, while working in Montgomery, Alabama as a McFadden Brothers representative. They moved to Savannah and then to Norfolk where their first child, James, was born. The cotton business then took the family to Europe. During the next few years, they lived in Bremen, Stockholm, and Amsterdam. After returning to the United States, the family settled in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Murry continued to represent McFadden Brothers. The couple's second child, Marjorie, was born in 1923 in Charlotte. Murry later began working for Volkart's, a Swiss company that imported long staple cotton from third world countries. Small wars that sprang up around the

⁷⁰James and Marjorie Dumbell, interviews by author, April 1992 and February 1993.

⁷¹Howard Murry, "Under the Round Collar," [1962], TMs, passim, possession of James Dumbell, Charlotte, NC.

world in the 1930s extinguished this foreign supply of cotton. As the cotton business demanded less of his attention, Murry devoted more time to painting.⁷²

Murry and his family had a long association with the mountains of western North Carolina. Like other tourists, they valued the mild climate and were attracted to such towns as Blowing Rock, Linville, Highlands and Cashiers. Lowlanders with sufficient economic means often vacationed at these mountain resorts to escape the summer heat and enjoy the fantastic views, waterfalls and other beautiful natural features. Some came to the mountains to recover from tuberculosis and other respiratory ailments. The town of Asheville became particularly well known as a health retreat, advertising its assets of clean air and water in addition to the mild climate. Murry courted Kitty Ware during her summer vacations at Little Switzerland, an exclusive resort established around 1910 that was located between Blowing Rock and Asheville.⁷³

After their marriage, Murry and his family made regular trips to the Appalachian region. During the summer of 1929, he discovered Valle Crucis while traveling from Highlands to Blowing Rock. As the evening was approaching, the family stopped and spent the night at the home of C. D. Taylor, who welcomed travelers and summer guests. The beauty and serenity of the valley captured Murry's heart. He and his family returned to the community regularly for summer vacations and continued to rent from either C. D. Taylor or members of the Mast family.⁷⁴

⁷²James and Marjorie Dumbell.

⁷³Van Noppen, Western North Carolina since Civil War, 373, 377, 379, 404; James and Marjorie Dumbell.

⁷⁴James and Marjorie Dumbell.

In 1934 Murry built his own cabin in Valle Crucis and gave it the Indian name, Ontaroga, meaning place of hills and rocks (Figure 6). The log cabin served only as a summer home until Murry moved to Valle Crucis permanently in 1948.⁷⁵ Murry's cabin came to symbolize his love of the native architecture and the craftsmanship of the indigenous population:

My house is quite as much a creation of mine as are my paintings. I was my own architect and, in fact, did a great deal of the work. Last winter I became interested in the artifacts created and used by those remarkable and admirable people, the pioneers who moved into and settled this mountain country when it was a practically unbroken forest of virgin timber I find that few people know what a froe is It was used in making "boards" or "shakes," laid on roofs in shingle fashion. My house, being of logs, simply had to have such a roof. After a few years they twist and curl, casting dramatic shadows which give a wonderful textured effect. They would seem utterly inadequate to turn aside rain, yet mine have served splendidly for 18 years and probably are good for many more.⁷⁶

Murry completed many of his paintings in an upstairs room of this cabin. Still tacked to the wall is the large paper on which he tested his colors, bearing witness to the many hours he spent by the natural light of the window. His watercolor *Valle Crucis Methodist Church* (Figure 7) is the view from his window.

Murry drew with pencil and crayons as a child in the Berkshires, but he did not pursue art seriously until the cotton business deteriorated in the 1930s. He started painting with oils, but later found watercolor to be a more enjoyable medium. He had no professional training; however, he received some critical direction from Elliot Clark, a landscape artist from New York City.⁷⁷

⁷⁵James and Marjorie Dumbell; Elizabeth Dumbell (daughter of James Dumbell), interview by author, February 1993.

⁷⁶Helen Fetter Cook, "Artist Murry's Home Reflects Creativeness," Charlotte Observer, August 10, 1952.

⁷⁷"Charlotte Artist Wins Place as Landscapist," Charlotte Observer, July 25, 1943.



Figure 6. Howard Murry's cabin, 1993
Valle Crucis, North Carolina
Photograph by the author



Figure 7. Howard Murry, *Valle Crucis Methodist Church*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell

During his summers in Valle Crucis, Murry spent many hours in the countryside, capturing the landscape at different times of day and observing farmers at work. Murry, who has often been described as a somewhat gruff and stern man, got along well with the common people who lived in the hills surrounding Valle Crucis. Friends, including fellow artists Dayrell Kortheuer and Philip Moose, often accompanied him on painting excursions in the countryside. Kortheuer, a portrait painter from Charlotte who sometimes exhibited with Murry, remarked that he often walked ahead to find a good spot to paint while Murry chatted with the mountain people they encountered along the way. While painting from nature, Murry frequently made quick oil studies to record the weather, light and subject and then executed watercolors based upon these studies after returning to his cabin or to his home in Charlotte.⁷⁸

Even though he had no formal training and started to paint relatively late in life, Murry rapidly became a recognized artist and was a founding member of the Guild of Charlotte Artists. In 1941 he won first place in the watercolor division for *The School Barns* and honorable mention in oil for *Roof Tops* in the third annual regional exhibition of artists of the Carolinas at Charlotte's Mint Museum of Art.⁷⁹ In the summer of that year he also exhibited paintings of the North Carolina mountains and a few of New England in the Civic Art Gallery of Greenville, South Carolina. News releases for the Greenville show referred to Murry as a "well

⁷⁸Marion Wright, "Art and Artists," Charlotte Observer, May 4, 1941; Marjorie Dumbell; Philip Moose, interview by author, February 1993; Dayrell Kortheuer, interview by author, March 5, 1993.

⁷⁹In 1936 the old Mint building in Charlotte was dedicated as the state's first art museum. The Hickory Museum of Art opened in 1944. The North Carolina Museum of Art was not established until 1956. Ola Maie Foushee, Art in North Carolina: Episodes and Developments, 1585 -1970 (Chapel Hill: Ola Maie Foushee, 1972), 51, 92, 97.

known North Carolina artist" and "one of the South's noted artists."⁸⁰ The Mint opened its seventh season with a show of twenty-four Murry watercolors, and in 1944 his *Sandspray* placed second in the watercolor category at the museum's annual spring national exhibit. Murry was named head of the annual juried exhibition the following year and won the fifty dollar purchase prize for his watercolor, *The Warming Earth*. In 1946 Gutman Gallery in Charlotte exhibited thirty-five Murry paintings which included not only his familiar renditions of the North Carolina mountains, but also scenes of the South Carolina low country where he sometimes vacationed. Three years later Murry had a one man show at the Mint with forty-five new watercolors, some framed for exhibit and others just matted but available for purchase. He also exhibited at the Mint in January 1951, October 1953 and January 1956.⁸¹

Murry had several shows in the North Carolina mountains. During the summer of 1948 thousands viewed his exhibit of nine oils and twenty-one watercolors at Mayview Manor, a major hotel in Blowing Rock. His works were shown in Blowing Rock in 1952 at which time Marjorie Daingerfield Lundeen, daughter of Elliott Daingerfield, North Carolina's most famous painter, advised him to submit *I Am the Resurrection* to a watercolor show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The following year he displayed forty-five new watercolors in Blowing

⁸⁰Charlotte Observer, May 4, 1941; "In the Gallery," Greenville News, June 22, 1941; "In the Gallery," Greenville News, July 6, 1941; "North Carolina Artist," Greenville Piedmont, July 4, 1941.

⁸¹"600 Attended Seventh Art Museum Opening," Charlotte News, October 13, 1943; "Spring Exhibition to Open at Museum," Charlotte Observer, April 26, 1945; "Five Local Artists in Mint Exhibition," Charlotte News, May 4, 1945; "Local Artists to Exhibit Water Color Collection," Charlotte Observer, November 17, 1946; "Mint Museum Displays December Exhibitions," Charlotte Observer, December 4, 1949; Helen Fetter Cook, "Guild Show to Open at Museum Thursday," Charlotte Observer, January 21, 1951; "Guild to Show Work of Murry and Pace," Charlotte Observer, January 24, 1951; "Mint Reception Will Be Given Murry," Charlotte Observer, October 11, 1953; "Mint Plans Exhibitions, Tea, Music," Charlotte Observer, December 30, 1956.

Rock. Murry's works were also exhibited in Statesville, Davidson and Hickory, North Carolina.⁸²

Aside from exhibiting, Murry painted on commission, taught art classes and lectured to civic groups. In 1943, Mr. B. C. Black of New York City commissioned him to paint views from his Blowing Rock vacation home which overlooked John's River Gorge, locally known as the "Globe." During the fall of 1945, Murry organized a group of art students to study landscape painting with him in Valle Crucis. After this group returned to Charlotte, Murry started teaching watercolor and oil painting at the Mint. He also taught at the John Brady Art School, founded in 1954 in Blowing Rock. While addressing a Charlotte women's club, he stressed the importance of the layman's role in the arts--for the public provides both the appreciation and the support for the artist's work. In addition to some stock market investments, Murry depended upon selling his paintings and teaching art after fully retiring from the cotton business.⁸³

Murry's large exhibitions reveal that he painted prolifically. He had his own explanation for his diligent work:

The artist who waits for inspiration might as well give up. I feel that we humans move in a sort of inner cycle. When we are "on top," we are capable of our best work, but it is significant that we can seldom if ever know when we are on top. Then, too, things have a way of happening that break and change one's rhythm; so the only safe thing is to work daily as a matter of habit. Keep that up long enough, and though you may do a string

⁸²"Art Exhibition to Be Held at Mayview Manor," Blowing Rock (NC) Blowing Rocket, July 30, 1948; Charlotte Observer, September 7, 1952; "One Man Watercolor Show Opens," Blowing Rock (NC) Blowing Rocket, July 17, 1953; "Murry Exhibit Is at Museum," [Statesville] unidentified newspaper, September 29, (1950s ?); "Murry's Art Being Shown at Davidson," Charlotte Observer, January 11, 1952; "Exhibit Scheduled," Hickory Daily Record, October 18, 1958.

⁸³Charlotte Observer, October 11, 1943; "Course in Art to Be Offered," Charlotte Observer, September 12, 1945; "Art Classes Scheduled to Open Here Saturday," Charlotte Observer, October 16, 1945; Mary Linn Collins, "Mr. Murry Sees Emphasis on Abstraction a Great Mistake," Salisbury Evening Post, May 15, 1960; Foushee, Art in North Carolina, 89; Mrs. V. J. Guthery, "Women's Club Comment," Charlotte Observer, January 13, 1946.

of bad ones there will be some work certainly as good, and perhaps better, than the earlier work.⁸⁴

Murry needed to produce successful paintings for his own livelihood; nevertheless, he placed more emphasis on the act of painting than on the final outcome. He developed this philosophy after reading the Bhagavad-Gita, the great Hindu religious text. Murry stated that, "The Brahmins lay great stress upon doing the work for the sheer joy of the creative act--freeing one's self entirely from the fruits which result. That has much meaning for me."⁸⁵ The fact that Murry produced such a large quantity of works also allowed him to sell and distribute them as he wished, never hesitating to give his paintings to friends or to young people who could not afford to purchase his work.⁸⁶

During the mid forties Murry began to exhibit and to gain recognition outside the Carolinas. In January of 1944 he had a one man show of at least fifty paintings at Artists, Incorporated, a gallery located at Connecticut Avenue and Q Street in the nation's capital. In her Washington, D.C. Sunday Star column, art critic Leila Mechlin noted of Murry: "Especially commendable are his small rapid studies done with great directness and clever precision. In quite a number of these figures are introduced most successfully." The following spring, Murry opened a one man show at The Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore. The critic for the Baltimore American remarked, "The show . . . introduces to Baltimore one of the most promising water colorists in the country--Howard Murry of Charlotte, N. C." Another reviewer stated:

⁸⁴Charlotte Observer, August 10, 1952.

⁸⁵Murry to Kortheuer.

⁸⁶Marjorie Dumbell.

. . . we can think of no one at present who handles watercolor landscape with greater sweep, more intense feeling for dramatic effects of nature, or subtler interpretation of its poetic and mysterious moods. His color is always lucid, whether in strong primary effects or in tender derivative harmonies.⁸⁷

His show must have been very well received; indeed, during the fall of the same year he had a second show at the gallery. In the spring of 1948, he again had a one man show in Washington, D. C. at Connecticut Galleries.⁸⁸

In addition to admirers from Blowing Rock and Charlotte, art collectors began to show an interest in Murry's work. Jane Wyatt, Sidney Greenstreet, Harold Vermilyea, Dr. Morris Lazaron, Edward G. Robinson and Norma Shearer all owned paintings by Murry. According to several sources, Etta Cone bequeathed a Murry watercolor to the Baltimore Art Museum.⁸⁹

Much of Murry's success with sales and exhibitions outside of North Carolina may be attributed to his natural entrepreneurship and also to the help of Barney "Toga" Robinson, a Charlottean who acted as his agent. Murry married Toga shortly after his first wife died in 1946. They lived in New York and Baltimore before moving permanently to Valle Crucis. Toga died due to complications from a stroke after she and Murry had been married only a few years.⁹⁰

⁸⁷"Exciting Watercolors," Gardens, Houses and People, April 1945, n.p..

⁸⁸Contemporary Gallery opening invitations, possessions of James Dumbell, Charlotte, NC; Washington, DC Sunday Star, March 21, 1948.

⁸⁹"Mint Reception Will be Given Howard Murry," Charlotte Observer, October 11, 1953; Blowing Rocket, July 30, 1948. Several articles mention that Etta Cone, one of the world's most significant collectors of twentieth century art, included a Murry in her bequest to the Baltimore Museum of Art; however, the museum has no record of the painting. It is possible that Cone, whose family had a large estate in Blowing Rock, owned a painting at one time and Murry assumed that it was part of her large bequest. Representatives of the museum said that she gave many paintings to her friends before her death.

⁹⁰James and Marjorie Dumbell; George and Kaye Thompson, interview by author, October 18, 1982.

After the death of his second wife, Murry began to court Sue Hill Taylor, the daughter of C. D. "Squire" Taylor of Valle Crucis. For many years Sue worked for the United States Department of Agriculture, traveling to third world countries as a home economist, and later was employed in a similar position by the Rockefeller Foundation. Murry married her on September 2, 1953 at the Church of the Holy Cross in Valle Crucis. She continued to travel extensively due to her work, but Murry preferred to remain in Valle Crucis. He moved into the bark cottage beside the home where Sue was raised, now known as The Inn at the Taylor House. He also kept Ontaroga, but sometimes rented it to friends.⁹¹

Sue and Howard planned to start a bed and breakfast, to be named Murry Meadows, in the Taylor house during the mid 1950s. They printed a brochure which Murry illustrated with haystacks, a popular subject in his paintings. "If you are tired of busy days," Murry stated in the brochure, "a crowded city and bustling traffic, you can have a real vacation--one that is different--away from summer throngs!" Murry thus perceived Valle Crucis as a summer haven instead of a tourist spot. Compared to resorts like Blowing Rock, Linville, and Little Switzerland this was, of course, true. The brochure also advertised that art instruction was available from Howard Murry. For morning sketch groups, he planned to charge three dollars per person, ten dollars for five consecutive group activities and two dollars for additional group sessions. The Murrays never opened the inn because Sue broke her leg while trying to chase down a neighbor's hog.⁹²

⁹¹James and Marjorie Dumbell; Watauga County Index to Marriages from 1873-1974; Howard Murry, Arlington, to B. Hagam King, Montgomery, TLS, n.d., Chip Schwab files, Inn at the Taylor House, Valle Crucis, NC.

⁹²"Murry Meadows," (n.p., n.d.), passim; Kaye Thompson; Marjorie Dumbell.

By the 1940s, Murry considered himself an integral part of the community of Valle Crucis. He designed and built welcome signs and placed them on all the roads approaching the town. He was instrumental in starting the community club which met regularly to discuss the needs of the townspeople. Vehemently opposed to development, he campaigned to maintain the natural beauty and quaintness of the valley. In a letter to B. Hagam King of Montgomery, Alabama, Murry discussed the idea of having an airport in Valle Crucis. He wrote, "Phooey, that would make me sick, but I don't think it will happen. Seems to me that from a commercial point of view, there would be no inducements." Murry's role as a concerned citizen won him the unofficial title of "mayor" by the early sixties.⁹³

Due to his interest in the native architecture, he supervised the construction of several log cabins in Valle Crucis. He built the cabin Tearoga, very similar to his own, for his brother and also designed and directed the construction of cabins for two of his neighbors on Clark's Creek. He preferred to purchase old local structures no longer being used, number the logs for reconstruction, and rebuild them on new sites. Murry was very particular about maintaining the authentic architectural style of the cabins while putting the original structural members to their best use. For example, he used cherry boards which formed the roof of an old cabin to construct a corner cupboard and the interior trim for his neighbor's log home. In reference to this cabin, fabricated from two old structures, Murry commented: "Someday soon historic associations, artists, architects will bemoan the passing of

⁹³James, Marjorie and Elizabeth Dumbell; Murry to King; "35 Years of Service," Winston-Salem Journal, June 30, 1963.

these lovely old houses. I am thankful to have the opportunity of doing my small bit toward preservation of one at last."⁹⁴

Murry approached the land and people of the valley not only with the eye of an artist, but with the appreciation of an historian. His fascination with the "old time" mountaineers' lifestyle led him to collect local artifacts, which he sometimes stumbled upon while out painting and visiting. In a Charlotte Observer interview Murry remarked:

I started with a Dutch oven. Then came an ancient iron tea kettle, rapidly followed by cookpots of brass and iron, wooden spoon, a shaved hickory scrubroom, a muzzle-loading squirrel rifle nearly as long as I am tall, with accompanying homemade shot pouch and bullet mould. Then came a number of primitive tools, including a froe.⁹⁵

Murry, always the businessman, often traded his paintings for the antiques he wanted.

During the 1960s Murry spent most of his winters in Washington, D.C. where Sue had returned to government employment. They lived in a high rise apartment in Arlington, Virginia, which was too small for a painting studio. This situation forced him to concentrate on writing as a creative outlet.

In 1961 Murry published Salt O' Life, a collection of small anecdotes he had accumulated through the years in Valle Crucis, which he calls Dutch Cross in his stories. The book is illustrated with black and white reproductions of Murry's watercolors. Although the names of individuals were changed, Murry so accurately describes life along the Watauga River that any reader familiar with the area can easily recognize many of the characters and locales. Through these stories, written

⁹⁴George and Kaye Thompson; "Guild to Show Work of Murry and Pace," Charlotte Observer, January 24, 1951. Murry's quote, reprinted in this article, was taken from a letter written to Mrs. Esther Skeen. Murry built the cabin for Kaye Thompson's family.

⁹⁵Charlotte Observer, August 10, 1952.

in the local dialect, Murry expresses genuine respect and admiration for the hard working mountaineers and at the same time shows how a little "salt"--humor--helps them through hardships. Murry states:

The life of these people has few frills, but they plod along and seem even more content and better satisfied than do many other people who encounter less arduous conditions and have more of material possessions.

It soon became apparent to me that the saving grace was humor and a keen appreciation on the part of the people of the small everyday drolleries of life.⁹⁶

Murry gained this insight not only through his own observations but from a wise local gentleman who told him that, "I don't believe I could endure life were it not for the small ridiculous things that happen. A man has to have things to laugh at. That is the salt of life."⁹⁷

Murry presents a variety of images of the mountain people; some are complimentary and some are not. In a few of the anecdotes the local individuals appear to be somewhat isolated and simple-minded in their ideas. This version of the mountaineer, however, most often appears in stories told by the locals themselves about "ol' times." Murry developed some of his stories by listening to members of the "Jot-'Em-Down-Club" who spent many hours sitting around the big wood stove in the community country store. Murry explains that this club got its name because most of the members had their names "on the books" of the store which gave farmers credit until they could pay their bill at harvest time.⁹⁸

In several accounts Murry shows how the local people, aware of outsiders' stereotypes, outwit them with tricks that reflect the visitors' ignorance. For example, in the chapter "Fecundity," he relates the story of two women enjoying

⁹⁶Howard Murry, Salt O' Life (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1961), vii.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid., 23.

their summer visit at a local boarding house. One of the ladies had visited the area many times before and took great pride in being able to introduce the newcomer to the ways of the mountain people. The innkeeper, who perfectly fits the description of C. D. Taylor, tells the story:

Yestiddy mornin' they started walkin' up to the falls. They was passin' Will Butler's house, an' Will overheard the knowin' one sayin' to the other one, "An' My Dear, the mountain people have so many children; now look at that little house yander," Pointing to Will's. "I wouldn't be surprised if them people have six or seven childern."

So soon as they got around the bend in the path, Will lit out all over that neighborhood, a'borrowin' young-uns. He got all sizes, from growed down to one jus' a few months old. When them old ladies come back down from the falls, Will, an' his woman a'holdin' that least un, was a'settin' on the porch with twenty-nine young-uns aroun' 'em. That knowin' lady nudged 'tother one, an' spoke up to Will:

"Good mornin' Sir, it's a fine day."

"Yes Mom," says Will. "Sho is."

"Are these all your children Sir?" she asked him.

"Oh no Mom," says Will, "just a part of 'em. Sally is married an' livin' in Bristol, Johnny is workin' over in Kingsport, an' I disremember whether they's three or four of the boys went to Detroit."

Will says you never saw the beat of the way them ladies' eyes bugged out.⁹⁹

Murry also addresses the fact that "a good many" people were coming into the valley and buying land for summer homes. This was making some of the "old-timers," including Murry, uneasy. Many of these new people came from Florida, but some of them decided not to stay. Murry recounts a local man's encounter with one such gentleman:

"Sure are a lot of mountains around here."

"Yup."

"A lot of cows too."

"Yup."

"And a lot of ignorant people with nothing much to say."

"Yup, but h'it'll come a frost soon, an' they'll git gone back to Floridy."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹Ibid., 61-62.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 137-138.

Salt O' Life received very favorable reviews in many newspapers including the Greensboro Daily News and the Winston-Salem Journal and Sentenial in which Sherman Shore wrote, ". . . Murry has captured something here of a rare and sparkling quality--the capacity to laugh with these weatherworn but sturdy mountainfolk, not at them." The reviewer for the Norfolk Virginia Pilot describes Murry as "an interpreter of the fugitive moods of the North Carolina mountains" and notes that the publication is as "down to earth as a well-prepared old-fashioned country boiled dinner, it is at the same time a poetical evocation of the Dutch Cross [Valle Crucis] community."¹⁰¹

Although Murry's use of local dialect along with the content of some of his tales may make the mountain people seem too much like a quaint "folk" population, he did this in an effort to be true to the mountain speech and to portray the individuals he found interesting and hoped others would find entertaining. In a letter to his publisher dated May 5, 1965, he discussed possible changes for the second printing of the text. He refused to make certain changes suggested by the publisher because he felt they would not be true to the mountain dialect.¹⁰² Murry did not try to make the mountain people seem backward or lacking in modern conveniences. He mentioned the fact that telephones were available before World War I and also describes automobiles and other examples of mechanization that are absent from his paintings. The book provides a nice balance to his art work in this regard.

¹⁰¹"Book of the Week," Greensboro Daily News, September 17, 1961; Sherman Shore, "Between the Lines," Winston-Salem Journal Sentenial, August 27, 1961; George H. Tucker, "Tidewater Landfalls," Norfolk Virginia Pilot, n.d.

¹⁰²Howard Murry, Arlington, to John Blair, Winston-Salem, TLS, May 5, 1965, Chip Schwab files.

Murry wrote several other manuscripts, but none were accepted for publication. "Dutch Cross Days" was basically another collection of anecdotes similar to Salt O' Life but criticized for being "less sparkling." He made an effort at science fiction in "The Alaskan Cave Plates," and, as previously noted, described his boyhood in Massachusetts in "Under the Round Collar." Murry also had an intriguing idea for a story in which avant garde artists paint a junk car "graveyard" from the air.¹⁰³

Murry's writings reveal a complex, philosophical man who held very set opinions on many subjects. "If our conception of man and his nature is to survive," Murry stated, "we must be about the business of building up ourselves, not only materially, but in feeding and fostering the spiritual, mystical side of our nature."¹⁰⁴ He built his own character by reading voraciously and developing his art. He devoured books on philosophy, religion and history as well as great works of literature. He also kept abreast of world events and the latest developments in the art world. He admired the great achievements of the Greeks and the painting and sculpture of the Renaissance. "It is exposure to such art that encourages learning, develops taste and broadens understanding of life," he said.¹⁰⁵ In a speech delivered at Appalachian State Teachers College in 1951 Murry discussed

¹⁰³Howard Murry, Arlington, to John Blair, Winston-Salem, TLS, May 25, 1964, Chip Schwab files; Howard Murry, Arlington, to John Blair, Winston-Salem, TLS, April 29, 1964, Chip Schwab files; Howard Murry, Valle Crucis, to John Blair, Winston-Salem, TLS, June 17, 1965, Chip Schwab files; James Dumbell.

¹⁰⁴Howard Murry, "Man Lives Not by Bread Alone," speech presented at Appalachian State Teachers College, Boone, NC, July 11, 1951, possession of James Dumbell.

¹⁰⁵Salisbury Evening Post, May 15, 1960.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's views of art and nature. He agreed with Emerson's conviction that art should be a reflection of the Universal Soul.¹⁰⁶

Murry's move to Valle Crucis as well as his writings and paintings reveal his identification with and longing for the Transcendentalist simple life. In his book, In Search of the Simple Life, David E. Shi states, "Only those who have too much can aspire to have less. Only those surrounded by bigness can decide that smaller is more beautiful."¹⁰⁷ Murry had found great success professionally and financially as a cotton broker. Also he had to move in high social circles in order to market his art in Charlotte, Washington and Baltimore, but he preferred the easy pace of Valle Crucis. "I guess I have had a pretty eventful life," Murry reflected, "I have scaled great height, I have plumbed more than one great depth--so--perhaps I have learned a wee bit--at least enough to say confidently that the greatest values in life are in no way attached to the dollar sign."¹⁰⁸

Murry distrusted mechanization, even to the point of hating television. He particularly feared the mechanization of man that he saw as a result of industrialization and totalitarianism. Murry stated,

Under the influence of the prodigious performance of shaft, gear and belt impelled by gas, steam and electricity, there has grown up a school of thought which would mechanize man also, denying the democratic conception of man's divine rights as an individual being, possessing a soul, and in greater or less degree related to divinity Not content with peaceful evolvment there are tremendous forces in our world today which seek by brute might to enforce upon all men their Pagan rule under which men would be compressed, moulded [sic] into a vast machine in which the

¹⁰⁶Murry, "Man Lives Not by Bread Alone."

¹⁰⁷David E. Shi, In Search of the Simple Life: American Voices, Past and Present (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1986), 7.

¹⁰⁸Murry to Kortheuer.

individual man would be swallowed up, emerging, if at all, only as a small cog cam or bolt.¹⁰⁹

This hatred of mechanization and admiration of nature and the simple life is the primary theme evident in Murry's writings and paintings.

Murry made every effort to explore nature and interpret life in a meaningful way. He considered himself a nonconformist and had a very enlightened definition of success. "I resent being dependent upon things--situations--people. If one can minimize those things--listen for the beat of the master's baton and fall into rhythmic step with the pulsation of the source of Life then surely that is success."¹¹⁰ Judging by Murry's standards, most would say he had lived a successful life.

¹⁰⁹Murry, "Man Lives Not by Bread Alone."

¹¹⁰Murry to Kortheuer.

CHAPTER 3

AN ANALYSIS OF HOWARD MURRY'S PAINTINGS

During his lifetime, Howard Murry was primarily known as a landscape artist, recognized for his sensitive depictions of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Today critics note that some of Murry's most successful works are genre scenes--views of everyday life. While living in Valle Crucis he illustrated the activities of the mountain people, documenting traditional crafts, farming methods and religious practices. He romantically portrayed Valle Crucis as a community where modern technology had not yet contaminated the delicate relationship between humanity and nature.

Murry's paintings are part of a long tradition of American landscape and genre painting instilled with a sense of place. Until the early 1800s and the emergence of the Hudson River School, Americans painted few landscapes except those found in the background of portraits. With the exhibition of his landscapes in 1825, Thomas Cole (1801-1848), now recognized as the founder of the Hudson River School, began the movement in American painting which revered nature as the physical manifestation of God and celebrated the grandeur of the nation's wilderness. Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), Thomas Moran (1837-1926) and others traveled through the great expanses of the American West, sketching the magnificent peaks, gorges and rivers which they later painted as romanticized landscapes

beckoning Americans westward.¹¹¹ During the nineteenth century landscape painting became respected as "the highest art form, a form infused with the spirit of intellectual search, natural observation, and creative power."¹¹²

During the Jacksonian Era genre painting became a prominent art form. William Sidney Mount (1807-1868), more than any other artist of the period, was responsible for creating an art reflective of middle-class America. Unique among his contemporaries, he refused to study in Europe for fear of contaminating the distinctly American qualities inherent in his art. Mount's paintings reveal the "morality, reformism, and middle-class yearning for social and cultural homogeneity" which emerged during this period in response to industrialism, immigration and urbanization, all of which seemed to threaten the existing social order.¹¹³ Mount, a native of Long Island, painted the common people and landscapes of his own rural environment. "My best pictures are those which I painted out of doors," he stated, ". . . one true picture from nature is worth a dozen from the imagination."¹¹⁴

Another important genre painter of the era was George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879). Bingham celebrated the democracy, adventure and vitality of the American frontier. In his election series, for example, he recorded the social and political activities of ordinary people in a heroic manner. He did not make political

¹¹¹Alan Gussow, A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land, with an Introduction by Richard Wilbur and a Foreword by David R. Brower (New York: Friends of the Earth, 1979), 28-29; William H. Truettner, "Reinterpreting Images of Westward Expansion, 1820-1920," Antiques March 1991, 542-544.

¹¹²Estill Curtis Pennington, Look Away: Reality and Sentiment in Southern Art (Atlanta: Saraland Press and Peachtree Publishers, Ltd., 1989), 113.

¹¹³William T. Oedel and Todd S. Gernes, "The Painter's Triumph: William Sidney Mount and the Formation of a Middle-Class Art," Winterthur Portfolio 23 (Summer/Autumn 1988): 111-114.

¹¹⁴Gussow, Sense of Place, 124.

statements, but captured for history the festive spirit of rural America during election and court days. Mount and Bingham, along with Winslow Homer (1836-1910), Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and others, formed a significant force in the development of American landscape and genre painting. The success of such painters depended upon the fact that the American public could recognize the subjects and comprehend or seemingly contemplate the content of the art. In the nineteenth century, the popularity of both genre and landscape painting spread through the mass publication of illustrated magazines and the dissemination of prints by publishers like Currier & Ives.¹¹⁵

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a small group of artists rejected the genteel romanticized view of rural America as depicted by landscape and genre painters of the 1800s. Robert Henri (1865-1929) and his followers advocated a more democratic art that reflected the realities of all American life. These artists, known as "The Eight" or "The Ashcan School," primarily painted Northeastern urban subjects like street scenes, city parks and barrooms. They challenged the conservative academicism of their day by recognizing contemporary urban life as a legitimate subject for artists. They scandalized the American art community with the "vulgarity" of their subjects, not through any revolutionary changes in style.¹¹⁶

The Armory Show of 1913 marked a turning point in the history of American art. Although the majority of the exhibition consisted of American works, this show presented, for the first time in the United States, a collection of art illustrating the evolution of European modernism. It included the works of Picasso,

¹¹⁵Milton W. Brown et al., American Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Decorative Arts, Photography (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1979), 219, 222-224, 273-276.

¹¹⁶Brown et al., American Art, 351-353; William Inness Homer, Robert Henri and His Circle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 158-160.

Matisse, Brancusi, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionists. Although the Armory Show shocked traditionalists in the American art world, it initiated a new freedom for the artists in this country who no longer felt compelled to paint realistic scenes of American life and considered themselves a part of the innovative spirit of the avant-garde.¹¹⁷

During the 1930s Americans faced the hardships of the Great Depression, the rise of Fascism in Europe and the threat of another world war. Artists throughout the country rejected the problems of Europe, as well as its art, and began to examine American life, "and they painted, it would seem, every street and farm between Maine and California."¹¹⁸ After the stock market crash of 1929, they intensified their search for the strength and soul of America in an attempt to assure themselves that the country could survive the difficult times and find solutions for the future. Place, politics, social change and history all became major sources of inspiration as opposed to individual consciousness and emotional introspection, which was central to European art at the time.¹¹⁹

The results of this impetus toward a national art became known as American Scene painting, the "Paint America" movement or "the American Wave." It was supported by Peyton Boswell, Sr., editor of The Art Digest, an influential publication which directed artists back to the objective realism and patriotic idealism of the Hudson River painters, as well as the works of great genre painters like

¹¹⁷Brown, et al., American Art, 379-383.

¹¹⁸Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 13.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 18, 21.

William Sidney Mount and Winslow Homer. The American Scene movement is often divided into two categories: Regionalism and Social Realism.¹²⁰

The Regionalists usually painted positive, somewhat romanticized nostalgic scenes of Americans on farms, in small towns and in cities. However, the term Regionalist is somewhat misleading; these artists focused upon localized subject matter, but they did not develop a distinct regional style. Also, even though Regionalism became associated with three Middle Western painters--Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood--in actuality the art did not represent a particular segment of the country. Thomas Hart Benton, for example, painted a broad cross-section of American life, not just that of one region.¹²¹

The Social Realists, such as Ben Shahn, were more concerned with making social and political statements about oppression in urban America. Prior to the economic crisis of the 1930s, social criticism had been limited to cartoons in the press and not addressed in the fine arts. "The Eight" had painted the urban scene, but not with vehement messages of political or social protest. In retrospect, Regionalism and Social Realism are sometimes incorrectly reduced to simply rural and urban art. Also, some artists classified as representatives of either the Regionalist or the Social Realism schools painted works that defy the standard definitions of the styles, making generalizations about either difficult.

The American Scene realists integrated with their own communities and painted their environments, but often interpreted them differently. In 1935, when asked what he thought Americans should paint, John Steuart Curry responded:

¹²⁰Ibid., 13, 18.

¹²¹Ibid., 18, 55; Nancy Heller and Julia Williams, The Regionalists (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1976), 17-18.

The artist must paint the thing that is most alive to him Thousands of us are now painting what is called "the American scene." We are glorifying landscapes, elevated stations, subways, butcher shops, 14th Street, Mid-Western farmers, and we are one and all painting out of the fullness of our life and experience.¹²²

The American Scene painters, whether reflecting upon rural or urban experiences, sought to make a statement about life and values significant to America at the time.

These artists adamantly believed that art should be not only of the people, but for the people. They stressed that art should be created in a way to be understood by the masses. Art historian Matthew Baigell stated:

Perhaps for the last time in this century, the American Scene attempted to develop a democratic art easily accessible to the ordinary person, capable of moving him nostalgically, politically, and esthetically, by means of commonly recognizable images presented in easily understood styles.¹²³

These ideas dominated the American art community when Murry began painting seriously in the 1930s.

Murry's art and his aesthetic philosophy paralleled that of the American Scene painters, particularly the Regionalists. He felt compelled to capture the essence of the Appalachian mountains and the lifestyle of the indigenous population. Like many other Regionalists, he traveled in Europe and spent a great deal of time in cities, but he settled in a community where he saw the embodiment of American values. Compared to the urban centers where Murry had lived in Europe and the United States, Valle Crucis was a seductive haven where he could paint and live by his transcendentalist philosophies. In his art and writing, he attempted to preserve the remnants of a lifestyle in Valle Crucis governed by the interdependence of the people and the land. Murry realized that the values inherent in such a relationship were threatened by increasing mechanization and industrialization.

¹²²"Curry's View," Art Digest, September 1, 1935, 29.

¹²³Baigell, American Scene, 18.

Murry glorified mountain laborers, rural architecture, farm animals and the land. In the first chapter of his book, Salt O' Life, he tells of sitting in a field painting a local farm. After examining the final sketch, the farmer's wife said, "Well I'll declare, He sho' has got h'it. There's that twisty ole apple tree, the leanin' outhouse, them flowers an' chickens. H'its so natural lookin', an say, h'its purty. I never knowed h'it was purty here."¹²⁴ Murry wanted the mountain people to understand his art and appreciate the beauty of their own environment as he reflected it. He shared the Regionalist philosophy that art should be for the common people:

Very often people who come to see my paintings will say to me--"I don't know any thing about art, but" They feel, but they are afraid to put trust in their own instinctive feeling. It is true that there are many things that go into the making of a piece of art and the artist may spend many painful years mastering them; but I do not think that the average layman need much concern himself about them. The test is Do You Like it? Does it suggest something other than mere surface appearance? In our Natl [sic] museum in Washington there hangs a self portrait of Rembrandt's. With me it is a favourite--not because of subject, or composition, or colour, or chiaroscuro but because of some strange transcendent quality. It is a mysterious something that seems to reach out and embrace me and draw me into close bond of union with God and all-man. The self of me seems to slip away and I enter into and become part of something glorious--a transfiguration as it were. It is rather an exposition of something the Hindus say--"Meditate upon the word and when understanding comes the word disappears." So . . . I would say to those who don't know anything about art--perhaps you know more than you think. Make yourself receptive and if feeling comes, trust it.¹²⁵

To Murry, viewing art should be a personal, almost spiritual experience, and the artist has the responsibility to create a work with something to say to everyone.

Murry, like other American Scene artists, painted events important in the lives of ordinary people, such as baptisms and funerals. Murry's interest in religious services may have stemmed from his Episcopalian upbringing. Not only his father,

¹²⁴Murry, Salt O' Life, 4-5.

¹²⁵Murry, "Man Lives Not by Bread Alone."

but also his uncle and one of his brothers were Episcopal clergymen. In his oil, *Baptism* (Figure 8), the event takes place in a mountain stream as was customary at the time. The season is early spring and the mountains are painted with shades of light green, showing that the leaves are just budding on the trees. The flowering bush in the center of the painting is locally known as a serviceberry bush. It blooms earlier in spring than most other mountain plants and is a symbol of rejuvenation and the beginning of the season of new life. Also it denotes the time of the year when the snowy and muddy mountain roads became clear enough for traveling preachers to reach the small communities to hold special services such as weddings, baptisms and funerals. The serviceberry bush is at the base of a tree which dominates the composition and appears to naturally grow in the form of the cross. On the right side of the painting are bystanders and those waiting their turn for baptism. A strong light rests on the preacher who lifts his arm toward heaven as part of the baptism ritual. On the left bank of the river are those who have already been baptized. They stand in the bright sunlight for they have already found the light of God.

Murry's *Funeral at St. John's* (Figure 9) depicts farmers carrying a casket out of the front door of a church to a hand dug grave. The church is recognizably St. John's, located in Valle Crucis on a hill overlooking the Watauga River. Although Murry never dated his paintings, this oil is no doubt one of his early works; the figures are very similar to those in his earliest oils.¹²⁶ They are simplified and have no facial detail, showing expression only through their posture. Also most of the men are dressed in overalls, the attire ordinarily worn by common farmers during the 1930s and 40s. Because the pallbearers are dressed this way, one

¹²⁶It is possible to approximate the date of a few of Murry's early oils because he wrote his initials as "H. M. D." on the back.



Figure 8. Howard Murry, *Baptism*
Oil on canvas
Collection of David and Nane Spainhour



Figure 9. Howard Murry, *Funeral at St. John's*
Oil on canvas
Collection of The Appalachian Cultural Museum

may conclude that they are burying one of their own social status.

Murry moved trees, buildings or other objects to create his desired composition. In this case he moved the cemetery from its actual location at the side of the church to the front of the building. The season appears to be late fall; only a few rusty brown leaves still cling to the trees in the background. The artist not only chose the season when so much of the life in nature comes to an end, but he also established a gloomy mood with the gnarled old trees in the foreground and the dark stormy clouds. The white horses, seen in the background, are common subjects in Murry's work and seem to often represent spirituality and freedom.

As previously indicated, Murry had a zealous interest in vernacular architecture. Barns, cabins, churches and shacks are all common subjects in his art. He also painted many of the larger, more prestigious homes in the area, thus providing an excellent record of architecture in the Watauga River valley prior to the 1950s. *House at Cove Creek* (Figure 10) is an example of a late nineteenth-century farm house. This two story white clapboard house is a variation of a standard design used throughout the area during the time. The three steep gables on the front of the building, along with the decorative woodwork, make the home distinctive from several others of similar style in the valley. A house of this size would have belonged to a comparatively affluent family, but through the use of the farmer the artist emphasizes that the home is part of an agricultural community. The old, white bearded gentleman steadies himself on his cane while leisurely feeding his chickens in the front yard.

The House with the Old Grapevine (Figure 11) is another prime example of Murry's architectural paintings. This work is no doubt one of his early watercolors. The price found on the back of the painting was very low in comparison to many of his other works. The structure of the house is very similar to that in *House at*



Figure 10. Howard Murry, *House at Cove Creek*
Watercolor on paper
Current location unknown

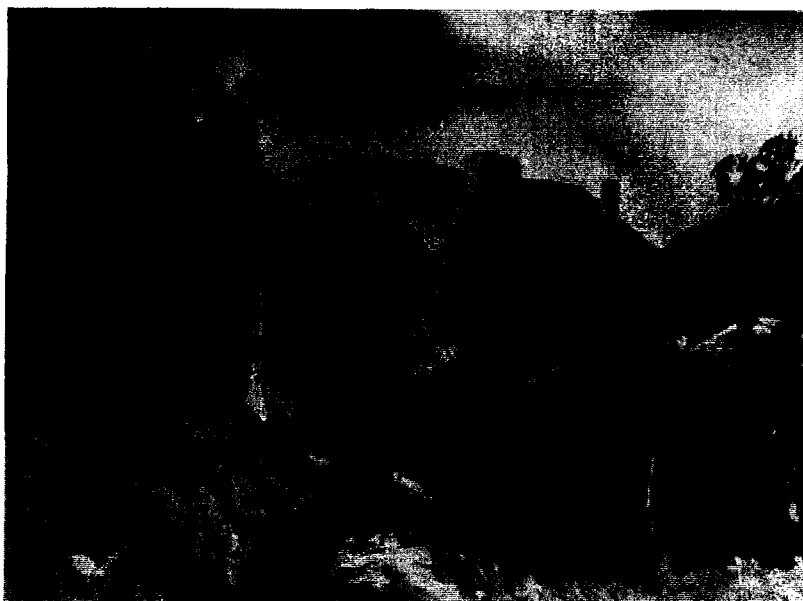


Figure 11. Howard Murry, *The House with the Old Grapevine*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of the author

Cove Creek. The original frame house has a projecting two story gabled porch, but this structure has a large addition on the back. This house appears to be much older and more simply built. The woodwork is not ornate; rather the posts for the front porch are hand hewn. This home does not have the nicely landscaped and manicured lawn as the dwelling in *House at Cove Creek*. The yard is a tall field of weeds and the old evergreen covers much of the front of the house. The grapevine to the right of the house grows unattended. The artist skillfully blends muted shades of green and peach to give the entire sunlit scene a peaceful aura.

Because Murry never dated his works, a thorough discussion of the development of his style over time is almost impossible. However, judging from his own comments and those of his family, most of his large oils were painted rather early in his career. During the 1940s, while exhibiting extensively, he was recognized primarily as a watercolorist. In 1952, an interviewer asked him what one should look for in a watercolor. He responded:

To satisfy me, the first requirement is that it should be fluid, flowing, spontaneous, more or less eruptive, painted in a definite water color manner--not an oil manner (which many people do). It should be bold, assertive--I don't want to see any pencil markings. I like it to be robust, vigorous, speaking in a good firm voice from deep within the chest and speaking from firm convictions of mind and soul. There should be something there more than intellect. That's why there should be a picture rather than words, for the simple reason that words would not have sufficed--often been totally inadequate. It should be extemporaneous and most importantly, clean and transparent.¹²⁷

Murry often painted the same subject in both oil and watercolor. In *Tater Grubbers I* (Figure 12), an oil, and *Tater Grubbers II* (Figure 13), a watercolor, the subject and composition are the same. The arched backs of the man and woman who are digging the potatoes echo the bent neck of the work horse as he pulls the plow guided by the farmer, accentuating the strenuousness of the labor. In both

¹²⁷Charlotte Observer, August 10, 1952.



Figure 12. Howard Murry, *Tater Grubbers I*
Oil on canvas
Collection of the late Ruby W. Dishman



Figure 13. Howard Murry, *Tater Grubbers II*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of George and Allen Antone

paintings the clouds appear dark and menacing, as if the workers must hurry to finish grubbing before the storm comes. In *Tater Grubbers I*, the field is brown and appears to be plowed, but in the watercolor Murry lightens the palette to include more green and the grubbers seem to be turning the soil as they progress through the field. Murry painted the oil in a more precise manner giving greater detail in certain areas, such as the tub and sack of potatoes and the horse. The watercolor, painted much more spontaneously, has the transparency the artist felt was so crucial to successful work in that medium.

One of the most persistent themes in Murry's paintings is the veneration of manual farm labor. He repeatedly painted farmers at tasks such as cutting tobacco, stacking hay, making molasses, sawing wood and working the fields with their horses or oxen. In his watercolor *Log Loaders* (Figure 14), for example, Murry depicts the physical strain of four men loading logs onto a horse-drawn wagon. Within this distinct triangular composition the artist gives the workmen expression through their posture, eliminating all facial detail. He illustrates the simple technology of rolling the logs up two supports to reach the top of the wagon. The horses, with strong broad necks, seem to be anticipating their challenge, and the logs on the ground show that the farmers have much work left to be completed before their day will end. In this painting, as in many of his other work scenes, Murry does not deny the hardship of the chore, but seems to emphasize the cooperation of the workers and the value of their close relationship with nature.

Another watercolor work scene, *Hillsmithy* (Figure 15), is the same size and palette as *Log Loaders*. In this work the blacksmith is intently working at his anvil. Painted mostly with shades of brown and grey, the viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the smithy's white shirt and the red hot iron with which he labors. This painting is exceptional in two respects: the artist has given the smithy facial



Figure 14. Howard Murry, *Log Loaders*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of The Appalachian Cultural Museum



Figure 15. Howard Murry, *Hillsmithy*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell

expression and the view is of an interior work scene. Murry usually did not give his figures distinct facial features. His children say he felt somewhat insecure about painting faces, but sketches found in the back of paperback novels (Figure 16), as well as drawings in his sketchbook, prove he was a capable draftsman. Thus the blanking out of faces was a stylistic device, perhaps suggesting anonymity or universality.

Also, the artist rarely painted interior scenes, but he was no doubt attracted to the blacksmith because his work required a disappearing skill and he provided a service necessary to farmers in the community who still depended upon their horses and wagons in their agricultural work. Although an interior scene, the open door and large windows provide views of the mountains and give the smithy a sense of being an integral part of his environment.

In *Hog Killing* (Figure 17) and *Hanging Tobacco* (Figure 18) Murry illustrates two agricultural activities which were once common in the mountains, but are now rarely seen. Murry's dark, ominous and extraordinarily stylized sky in *Hog Killing* shows that the farmers were busy with their task before dawn. The white hog, which contrasts strongly with the dark blue sky, has been scalded in the iron kettle and hung by his feet. This makes scraping the hair from the hide and butchering easier for the farmers. The figures in this painting are typical of Murry's work; they are simply outlined with no detail in the clothing or faces. The oval clouds are also distinctive of Murry's painting.

Hanging Tobacco depicts part of the process of growing burley tobacco, an important cash crop in Watauga County during Murry's lifetime. One farmer is guiding the horse-drawn sled piled with sticks of tobacco. The tobacco is hung on the frames in the fields before being loaded into the barn. Murry has painted the dark purple and grey hues, giving the impression that a storm is threatening.



Figure 16. Howard Murry, end paper drawing
The Passionate Journey by Irving Stone
Collection of The Appalachian Cultural Museum, gift of Chip Schwab



Figure 17. Howard Murry, *Hog Killing*
Watercolor on paper
Current location unknown



Figure 18. Howard Murry, *Hanging Tobacco*
Watercolor on paper
Current location unknown

Murry rarely gave women their own identity; they are usually shown only as companions and helpers to men working in the fields. One exception is *Woman with Yarn* (Figure 19). Here the artist records the craft of rug hooking. A young woman is sitting in the sunlight on the porch of a cabin intently sorting by color the fibers for her rug. Her basket of yarn rests on a crude bench made from a split log. This oil is probably one of Murry's early works; it differs from most of his other paintings not only in subject matter, but also technique. The paint is thick and opaque, creating a rough surface, and his palette is bright with cheerful colors of red, yellow, green and aqua. The artist repeats the rich colors of the rug in the logs of the cabin.

Murry shaped his view of Valle Crucis as a quaint agricultural community by omitting all evidence of modernization and mechanization from his paintings. His landscapes show no telephone or power lines. The farmers do not use modern farm equipment. They ride home in horse-drawn wagons, not trucks or cars. Valle Crucis certainly had all these aspects of modernization, but they did not satisfy Murry aesthetically. He only painted nineteenth-century technology, such as waterwheels and sorghum grinders. *Making Molasses* (Figure 20) illustrates the process in which the horse provides the power for grinding the sorghum, which is then boiled to make sweet molasses. To date, only one painting illustrating modern agricultural technology has been found among his works. This is a watercolor landscape in which a large red tractor dominates the view. The painting does not include people, as if farmers had no real connection with the machine. The tractor appears in glaring contrast to the work scenes in which farmers are dependent upon one another and upon their animals. The tractor may stand as a symbol of the schism forming between individuals and nature as a result of modern technology.



Figure 19. Howard Murry, *Woman with Yarn*
Oil on canvas
Collection of James and Nancy Dumbell



Figure 20. Howard Murry, *Making Molasses*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell

In Murry's view mechanization threatened the essence of humanity, so he painted his ideal conception of a virtuous lifestyle, unblemished by modern technology.

One sees Murry's distaste of modernization in his watercolor *City at Night* (Figure 21), one of the artist's few urban scenes. The city, possibly Baltimore,¹²⁸ appears dark, cold, windy and menacing, in no way welcoming to the approaching train. The only people in the painting are two railroad workers who are engulfed in the cold darkness and dwarfed by the locomotive, bridge and skyscrapers. After moving to Valle Crucis permanently, Murry increasingly deplored city life and often refused to accompany his wife, Sue, when she traveled.¹²⁹ *City at Night* reveals the artist's personal perception of urban life and is a stark contrast to the harmony of his rural paintings.

Murry's spirituality and appreciation for nature fostered his special relationship with the mountain landscape. He produced a voluminous amount of small oil studies from nature. Although many of these paintings are finished works in themselves, such as *Autumn Harvest* (Figure 22), Murry usually used them to prepare larger works. An exception to these small scale studies is *Study for Tobacco Cutting* (Figure 23). He painted this work full size and in brown tones as a sort of cartoon. By comparing it to the finished oil, *Tobacco Cutting* (Figure 24), one sees that Murry used the study to capture the basic landscape and the details of the farmers' task. In the final painting these features remain primarily the same, but he changed the composition somewhat by adding more depth and moving the horse to the background.

¹²⁸Marjorie Dumbell suggested that the city was Baltimore. Murry lived during the 1940s while actively painting.

¹²⁹Gilbert Taylor, interview by author, April 24, 1993.



Figure 21. Howard Murry, *City at Night*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell



Figure 22. Howard Murry, *Autumn Harvest*
Oil on canvas
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell



Figure 23. Howard Murry, *Study for Cutting Tobacco*
Oil on canvas
Collection of James and Nancy Dumbell



Figure 24. Howard Murry, *Tobacco Cutting*
Oil on canvas
Collection of The Inn at the Taylor House

Murry felt that a successful landscape should reveal the season, time of day and weather.¹³⁰ *Autumn Harvest* depicts a field with haystacks flanked by corn shocks. The strong shadows formed with shades of blue, red and brown contrasts with the golden sunlight on the fields. *Spring Blossoms* (Figure 25), used on the Salt O' Life dust jacket, captures the essence of spring by using a light palette of mint green and pale pink--fresh colors of new growth--contrasted against the blue and grey mountainsides where the trees have not yet sprouted their first leaves. Part of an old wagon sits under an apple tree. Although abandoned, the wagon wheels blend naturally with the rest of the farm scene, unlike the bright red tractor which, as previously mentioned, seemed like an alien object in the rural landscape. As typical of Murry, he gives the sprawling apple tree its own identity with rhythm and life. He painted many scenes in which he used apple trees, old dead chestnut trees or other local varieties to give the painting a specific mood.

Corn Shocks (Figure 26) also illustrates his ability to effectively paint the elements of nature. The farmer and his horse, which appears to be pulling a load of wood, fight the wind and snow as they trod home. The viewer knows that the house, which is painted a warm red, will be a welcome shelter against the storm. Smoke, blown horizontally by the fierce wind, billows from the chimney. The bare trees are bent against the wind. Although the winters in the Appalachians are often quite bitter, Murry found them inspiring, "I have found the country round here more beautiful in winter than at any other time. It is then one gets down to the bones of it--the structure shorn of frills."¹³¹ Against the snow, the design of the

¹³⁰Charlotte Observer, July 25, 1943.

¹³¹Murry to Kortheuer.



Figure 25. Howard Murry, *Spring Blossoms*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of The Appalachian Cultural Museum



Figure 26. Howard Murry, *Corn Shocks*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Martha Hay

architecture, the form of the trees and the gracefulness of the mountain landscape become particularly evident.

In addition to illustrating scenes of the Valle Crucis area, Murry also painted the low country of South Carolina where he often vacationed; these illustrations make an interesting contrast to his mountain works. He was fond of the islands around Charleston, particularly Edisto Island. While in South Carolina, he was attracted to subjects compatible with those he painted in Appalachia: the poor at manual work, the architecture, and the landscape. However, the palette of his coastal watercolors differs considerably from that of his mountains scenes. *Low Country Church* (Figure 27) illustrates the artist's fascination with religious architecture as well as the palette used in his low country paintings. He juxtaposed bright shades of orange, aqua, yellow, red and blue in ways rarely seen. In *Low Country Home* (Figure 28) the viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the African American woman's yellow dress which contrasts with the dark blue shutters on the white clapboard house. The man appears to be chopping wood while the woman stares off the porch into the distance. The spanish moss in the dead trees is native to the area and gives the entire scene a sultry, eerie feeling.

Murry's paintings show that he experimented with different styles and was familiar with the history of art. A few of his watercolors are very impressionistic, even though the subject matter is consistent with his other work. In several of his oils his subjects become simplified to the point of abstraction. *Sun on the Mountain* (Figure 29) shows the definite influence of Van Gogh in the palette, short brush strokes, and dark heavy outlines. In a very similar composition, *Haystacks* (Figure 30), Murry also simplifies the subject matter, flattening the haystacks, barn, trees and mountain until the painting becomes an abstraction through the juxtaposition of color planes. *Abstract Haystacks* (Figure 31) is one of Murry's few experiments



Figure 27. Howard Murry, *Low Country Church*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell



Figure 28. Howard Murry, *Low Country Home*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell



Figure 29. Howard Murry, *Sun on the Mountain*
Oil on canvas
Collection of Marjorie Dumbell

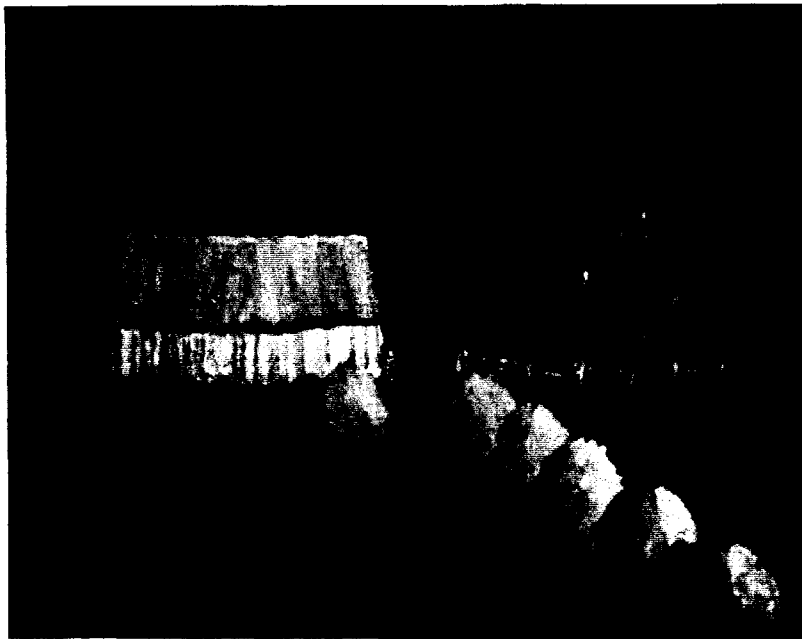


Figure 30. Howard Murry, *Haystacks*
Oil on canvas
Collection of The Inn at the Taylor House

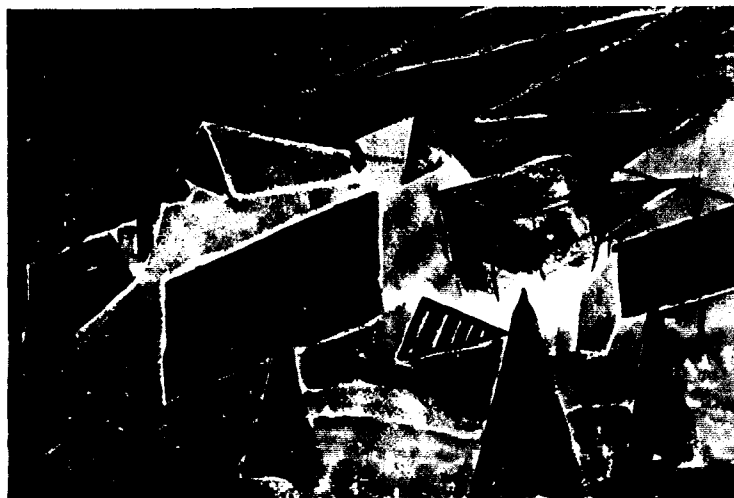


Figure 31. Howard Murry, *Abstract Haystacks*
Watercolor on paper
Collection of Charles and Margaret Watkins

with modern abstraction. The forms of haystacks, buildings, trees and power lines (the only example found to date in Murry's work) are distinguishable, but the straight lines, extreme angles, and bright bold primary colors are a sharp contrast with the artist's other works. Although Murry experimented with abstraction, he never identified with modern abstract movements.

By 1940 Regionalism had essentially ceased to be a significant movement in American art. It no longer seemed justifiable to maintain isolationist views while the world was in major turmoil. A generation of American artists had survived World War II, but faced the threat of nuclear destruction. Jackson Pollock (1912-1956), Arshile Gorky (1905-1948), Franz Kline (1910-1962) and others of the New York School led the nation into its own new art movement of Abstract Expressionism, or "Action Painting," which emphasized the felt experience of the act of painting, not realistic objective representational art.¹³² Murry, however, being a very conservative man, held on to the traditional values and ideals of the American Scene painters. In an interview in 1960 he discussed his feelings on abstract art and stated that he hated "the tyranny of the abstract." Murry no doubt realized that only abstract artists were being taken seriously by contemporary critics; artists like himself were reduced to "hobby painters." He said that the artist reflected his times and his work mirrored his experience. He explained:

We are living in a world of violent changes, of man-made thunder, of fear and anxiety caused by contemplation of man's potentiality to cripple and destroy. The resulting uneasiness has given us insecurity and has brought misrepresentation in many forms, notably in the arts.¹³³

¹³²April Kingsley, The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 11; Baigell, American Scene, 78; Brown et al., American Art, 477.

¹³³Salisbury Evening Post, May 15, 1960.

Murry maintained the dream of American Scene painters to establish an enduring American artistic style; he never thought it would be Abstract Expressionism. "It is just possible," he stated, "that America may be outdistanced in the technological race, even in military might; but if she develops a sureness of cultural integrity, America will have a kind of superiority and will make a gift to the world that cannot be surpassed."¹³⁴

Murry's failure to keep in step with contemporary developments in the American art community may have led to his failure to exhibit regularly after the early 1950s. Although his work was recognized locally, his disdain of major cities and preference for the slower pace of Valle Crucis also kept him from furthering his artistic career. After his death in 1968, Murry's art more or less drifted into obscurity. His wife's family sold many of his paintings at auction, where they brought prices pitifully low by today's standards. The Appalachian Cultural Museum in Boone, North Carolina opened a retrospective exhibition, **Howard Murry: Paintings of Valle Crucis, 1930-1968**, in May 1992, which sparked a new interest in Murry and his art. The paintings' expression of nostalgia for the agricultural way of life which once dominated Watauga County is possibly appreciated more now than during Murry's own life time.

¹³⁴Ibid.

CONCLUSION

Howard Murry is today recognized as a talented artist who painted the landscape and people of the Watauga River Valley with an unusual sensitivity. His art dispels many stereotypes of mountaineers. It does not depict them as lanky, lazy, ignorant or violent. It illustrates that the people of Appalachia are in many ways just like everyone else; they build nice homes, work together, practice their religion and face life's tragedies.

However, Murry chose to paint only scenes of Appalachia which fit into his concept of a utopian society. Through his paintings he created his own Appalachia--one that had neither reaped the benefits nor suffered the hardships of modernization. By viewing his works one would think that Valle Crucis never progressed into the twentieth century. In reality the community had businesses and a multi-class population employed in many areas other than agriculture. The townspeople had electricity, telephones, automobiles and farm equipment. During Murry's lifetime, the people of the Valle Crucis area probably did not see his art as a negative interpretation of their community. However, Carol Wharton's review of one of Murry's exhibitions March 25, 1945 in The Baltimore Sun states, "His works portray the way of living in isolated mountain areas." Thus Murry's paintings

perpetuated to those outside the region the fallacy of the isolated, backward mountaineer.

This inaccurate image of mountain life was not purposefully devised as an injustice to the region or its inhabitants. Murry respected the people of the Valle Crucis area and realized that the skills and methods they used to work the land would soon disappear. He chose to preserve through his paintings the picturesque landscape and the industrious pioneer who lived in a precarious balance with nature. Therefore, Murry's works tell one more about his own values and those of his time than the realities of the community which he painted. He lived during a transitional time in America; a period when individuals were forced by changing circumstances to turn from the land as their source of livelihood and seek employment by other means. Modernization and urbanization were transforming the countryside and the very nature of America forever. Howard Murry and his art must be interpreted with an understanding of these values.

Murry felt that art should not only be a reflection of man's environment, but that it should be presented in such a way as to be understood by ordinary people. Today a diverse public admires his painting not only as the work of a talented artist, but as the sensitive reflection on a rural lifestyle which, just as Murry expected, has almost been extinguished.

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