



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Tape-recorded notes on Charlie Fields (Cedar
Creek Charlie)

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Notes on Charlie Fields

at The Museum of Appalachia, Norris, Tennessee

March 7, 1984

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "'cause," was transcribed as "because," "'fore" as "before," "'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

CF: Charlie Fields

WV: Willem Volkersz

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. M2-B]

[WV read notes from articles and other information posted at the museum. Some portions of the article omitted from the recording have been supplied by WV.—Ed.]

. . .to meet Charlie Fields, better known as Cedar Creek Charlie. To say the least he is one of the more interesting characters I have ever encountered in my mountain treks. Charlie, one of eleven children, was born near the small town of Lebanon, Virginia, some 100 miles up the valley from the museum. He never learned to read and write, and, after his father died and the other children left, Charlie stayed home to care for his mother. And when she died, he started his now famous hobby. The room you see here is a replica of his bedroom. I was able to secure these articles through the efforts of professor J. Roderick Moore of Fairham College, Fairham, Virginia.

Charlie Fields, known as Cedar Creek Charlie, was born in 1894. He is a retired farmer but has an annual tobacco crop and a comfortable income. Mr. Fields has never been married. He lives alone. His famous house is known to most people as the polka-dotted house. Charlie has lived in the house since he was a small child, but started fixing the house in dots during the past twelve years. He started with a collection of kewpie dolls and by

constructing things in his barn by using hand tools. Mr. Fields' home is located three miles east of Lebanon, among the rolling hills of southwest Virginia. The fifteen-acre farm stands among a grove of pawpaw trees and can be seen a quarter of a mile away. The walk leading to the house is concrete painted with red-and-white polka dots, with polka-dotted car tires on each side of it. The yard looks like a miniature circus, with airplanes, windmills, ferris wheels, and a churn with dolls to represent children. All of these are operated by the wind. The outside of the house is painted with red, white, and blue polka dots with stripes. Charlie's living room has all kinds of odds and ends. He has puppets on a stage that he carved himself. "You should see the children's delight when I make the puppets dance," said Charlie. He also has dogs and dolls in a glass case, two polka-dotted antique clocks, a doll in a wooden house, antique picture frames, an old fireplace with an unusual design, fox-skin rugs on the floor, beehives in an old phonograph so he can have honey and music at the same time, a pole in the middle of the room with diagonal stripes, and doll houses converted into beehives with pictures of pretty girls on them. "The bees are happier this way," explained Charlie with a wry grin.

The bedrooms have red-and-white rugs on the floor, the walls are painted with red-and-white dots with red stripes down the side, a Chinese design is on the door, and the bedroom suite is antique. Mr. Fields's kitchen walls are red, white, and blue polka dots and squares. His old gray Home Comfort coal range with a black stovepipe is polka dotted red and white. He has antique dishes, dough boards, and rolling pins. Charlie's back porch is concrete with red and white design on it. Red and white polka-dotted pop bottles are sitting along the porch railing.

Mr. Fields has turned down a great amount of money because he hasn't charged any of these 100,000 people who have visited him. He enjoys meeting people and likes to see children enjoy themselves. "Honey" is his pet name for everyone. He likes for people to visit him. He will greet you at the gate and conduct you on a tour of his home. Previous loneliness, love of people, and eagerness for people to visit him led to Mr. Fields to design his house in this manner.

—Written about 1970 by Mrs. W. B. McInturff

"Polka Dot Hollow," by Elinor Lander Horwitz

He was a gentle and soft-hearted man who loved children, although he never had any of his own. He never left home and he never married. He was one of eleven offspring of Bill and Dellie Warrick Fields, and his brothers and sisters always knew that it was he who should take care of Momma. When the brothers and sisters grew up and married and went off to work in the nearby fields and coal mines, Charlie stayed with his widowed mother in the small four-room frame house beside Cedar Creek.

Several of the boys left the mountains to go into the army in the First World War, but he was exempt because of his filial responsibility. He grew fifteen acres of tobacco and he always had a vegetable garden. When he was young he also raised turkeys. It is estimated that his annual income may have come to as much as \$1,000. He never learned to read or write, but he always enjoyed looking at the pictures in magazines. When his mother died, Charlie Fields was forty-five or perhaps 50 years old. Soon afterwards, he began painting the house, and he continued to work on it until his death.

One more biographical point should be mentioned. In his old age he became very fond of bees. He kept thirty-eight hives, although he rarely took the honey because, as he told everyone who asked, "the bees worked so hard to make it that it just didn't seem right." In accordance with the predictions of local folklore, when Charlie Fields died, on December 21, 1966, at the age of 83, his bees left the hives, flew away, and never returned.

He is survived by one octogenarian brother named Rob and remembered by many people in the nearby town of Lebanon in the southwest corner of the state of Virginia. One old miner says that three days before his death, Charlie, who had not been a church-goer, had himself baptized down at the creek. "He died happy," the friend says insistently.

Now one knows why he painted the house like he did, but Creek Charlie was a good man, they tell you. A few people worried about their children going to visit because you can't tell about old men who live alone sometimes, but there was never a problem, not a single whisper. It may look like a kind of peculiar business to an outsider, they tell you, but no one's going to say anything bad about Charlie Fields because he's dead now, and he never hurt anyone in his whole life. He loved his mother and took good care of her until she died. After that, he just stayed home and painted polka dots on the house. Nothing wrong with that.

The house has been empty since his death. To go there, you drive a few miles out of Lebanon and then turn onto a dirt road, and just about the time when you suddenly hear the loud rushing of the creek, you will see it sparkling red, white, and blue against the green hillside. You must leave your car on the road and walk across the broad creek on the footbridge, one person at a time, and watch how you step. Charlie built it to replace the

old swinging bridge his daddy had put up, but that was maybe thirty or forty years ago, and now the new bridge is decaying and you have to take care, or you could right through a rotted board. From the bridge a path leads to the house.

When he died, Charlie left the house to his brother, who lives over the mountain in the village of Cleveland, and who can't get by often to see to things. The other brothers and sisters have all died. "I's the baby," says Rob, laughing at the joke. In September the pawpaws ripen by Charlie's house, and Rob goes over to gather the fruit when it falls from the trees. It troubles him to see the weeds growing up to the windowsills and the wonderful ferris wheel out over the gate fallen into ruins and the mess in the front room. The house was ransacked by vandals five years ago, but what can Rob do? He means to find a boy to cut the grass, it looks so bad. It just doesn't seem right. Charlie always kept the place so perfect, everything so fresh and tidy.

The house, which Charlie's father built when the children were young, is painted, inside and out, with polka-dotted designs. Each board is painted, the tin roof is painted, the window frames are painted, and so is the chimney. Inside, the walls, floors, ceilings, doors, are completely covered with striking, sometimes intricate patterns. The colors are ordinary house paint, and, because friends brought him their leftovers, a few sections of the house have touches of brown and green as well, but the color scheme is almost entirely red, white, and blue.

"Charlie, he sure liked Uncle Sam," says Rob. A vivid American flag is painted on the upper part of the front door, and to the left of the door the mounted head of a deer, a gift from an old friend, hangs weather-beaten and decayed, staring with ruined eyes at the haunting remains of the front-yard playground. Rob sits and chews tobacco on his front porch and reminisces about the time, so long ago, when Charlie started his painting. "Well, you know, it had to be after Momma died. She wouldn't never have let him do it." He makes a gesture of astonishment. "To tell the truth, I didn't know what to think when he started in. None of us did. We thought he might be losin' his mind. First he started a-dottin' and a-dottin' the outside, and then he started a-dottin' and a-dottin' the inside! You know what he did then? He started a-dottin' the furniture. Even the clocks!" Rob shakes his head with the wonder of it all. "Momma wouldn't never have let him do that!" [quoted in Elinor Lander Horwitz, *Contemporary American Folk Artists* (J.B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia/New York, 1975).

As the years went on, Charlie Fields felt completely under the grip of his remarkable compulsion. He painted his bright stripes and squiggles and wavy lines and squares filled with crosses and targets and, most of all, polka dots on everything he owned. He built beehives in the form of small models of his own house, and he painted them with red, white, and blue polka-dotted designs. Six of the hives were built inside the house with passages through the wall to the exterior. Glass panels allowed him to view the bees at their work. On the front and side porches he used Coke bottles as horizontal members between narrow wooden railings, and he painted them white with red dots, or sometimes red with white dots. His bedroom has brilliant red, white, and blue floors, painted in concentric circles. The walls are striped with red and dotted, and the ceilings have a fresh, bold red-and-white pattern. The stovepipe is dotted, the chairs are dotted, the tables are dotted.

The house has been stripped of many of its furnishings. At one time it was filled with model airplanes which were suspended from the ceiling. Only one remains. Charlie fashioned an arbor of painted pipe and large-sized grapefruit juice cans to decorate the front room. He twined paper roses around it, and a few still hang there limply. He picked up hundreds of old dolls, and discarded toy soldiers, and cheap ceramic animals, and he painted them with polka dots and set them around the rooms. He made collages with pictures he clipped from magazines and calendars. His favorite subjects were mothers with children, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Some people around Lebanon say that he talked to the dolls. A strange painted wood carving of a minstrel show seems to be his only piece of original sculpture. The figures jiggle up and down on wires, and two old paper dolls and one small tin doll have been incorporated into the group.

When Rob left the mines and went to work as a prison guard, he brought Charlie a carving of the Crucifixion made by one of the prisoners. Charlie liked it. He put it on the mantel, painted it with polka dots, and wired it with Christmas tree lights. Then he wired the exterior of the house with more little colored lights, and he built model airplanes, a carousel, a ferris wheel, and some mechanical wind toys to decorate the front yard.

He lined the path with old tires, standing them on end, and he painted them red and white. Today the tires extend to the gate. At one time they went all the way to the bridge. "When he got older, I'd go up to the house every week and bring Charlie groceries," Rob says, "because he didn't have didn't have anything to eat except what he grew, and the carp he fished out of the creek. Momma kept two good milk cows, but when she died, he sold them. I used to tell Charlie things would be a lot easier for him if he got married and had someone to cook his supper. He had a girlfriend for about twenty years, but then she got to knowing he wasn't the marrying sort and she married another fellow.

"After Charlie got the house all painted, he had a girl in town to write him a sign saying 'Come on in. You're welcome in here.' And he put the sign by the door. Sunday was the day for visiting. He never kept a lock on the

door, and people came, I tell you, people came from all over.

Charlie would wear his polka-dot suit and greet the guests down by the gate or at the spring. I can't even tell you what that suit was like. It was a regular shirt, a pants, and shoes, and a hat, and then he took his brush and painted them all over with polka dots. Charlie had the guests to sign a big book he had, and there must have been thousands of names. It was thirty or forty years, you know, that people came a-visiting. He painted the house over and over, so it was sometimes different from now, and he built new things. He let the children play with everything, turn the ferris wheel and the merry-go-round, and pick up all the toys. There was about twenty dolls a-setting on that merry-go-round, and the dolls and toys on the ferris wheel and in the airplanes. When a mother spanked a child for touching things, he'd say, 'You smack on me when you do that.' He loved children, Charlie did. He loved for people to come to his house. He said there was no place like his house in the whole world."

The Sunday suit still hangs in the bedroom. No one knows quite what to do with it. Some people remember that in earlier years the outside of the house was painted differently. At one time it was striped, at and another period the design was all-over checkerboard pattern. But Charlie kept returning to polka dots. A young man from Lebanon says his father told him he went by one day and saw Charlie painting big dots with his fingers, just dipping them in the bucket. But Rob is shocked by the idea and fastidiously insists he always used a brush.

In 1960 a newspaper reporter from Bristol, Tennessee, interviewed Creek Charlie and wrote a story about the house. When he asked the remarkable artist why he had created this fantastic fairy-tale environment, Charlie said he just didn't know. He thought maybe he'd done it, "to make the young people laugh."

Rob reports that Charlie left home on only one occasion. Two boys from the local area had to be escorted to a prison farm near Richmond, and Charlie took the job. "He went all the way to Richmond on the Greyhound, and I tell you, he liked that trip. When he come back he said the boys was no trouble and the people in Richmond, they fed him real good. But he never left home before that, and he never left after that, not ever again."

Until his death, Charlie Fields stayed down by the noisy creek painting and repainting the little house with total absorption, patience, and devotion.

There is something intensely moving about the site of the deserted structure on which decades of loving attention were lavished. If Creek Charlie was lonely six days a week, there is no question about the fact that on Sundays he was a happy and expansive host, who responded with delight to the wonder and admiration of his guests. Each Sunday he would don the polka-dotted suit, straighten the dolls, hoist the airplanes, give the ferris wheel a twirl, and walk towards the bridge to greet the first visitors of the day. No one has reported that his ghost still walks along the bottomland down by the creek, but it is impossible to disregard his presence. On a Sunday morning, when the sun hits the red, white, and blue paint on the front of the house, and the wind jogs the propeller of the remaining front-yard airplane, and the shadowed ferris wheel gives a plaintive screech, you can stand by the bridge and squint your eyes in just the right way, and, if you have a mind to, you can see Creek Charlie coming down the path to shake your hand.

WV: There's also a story by Henry Mitchell in the *Washington Post*, on Sunday, July 13, 1975, and a catalogue called *A Virginia Sampler, 18th, 19th, and 20th Century Folk Art*, produced by Fairham College and the Roanoke Fine Arts Center. Exhibition was held March 14, 1976 to April 24, 1976, by the Roanoke Fine Arts Center, Roanoke, Virginia.