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Frost on the Windows

Pat Kourt

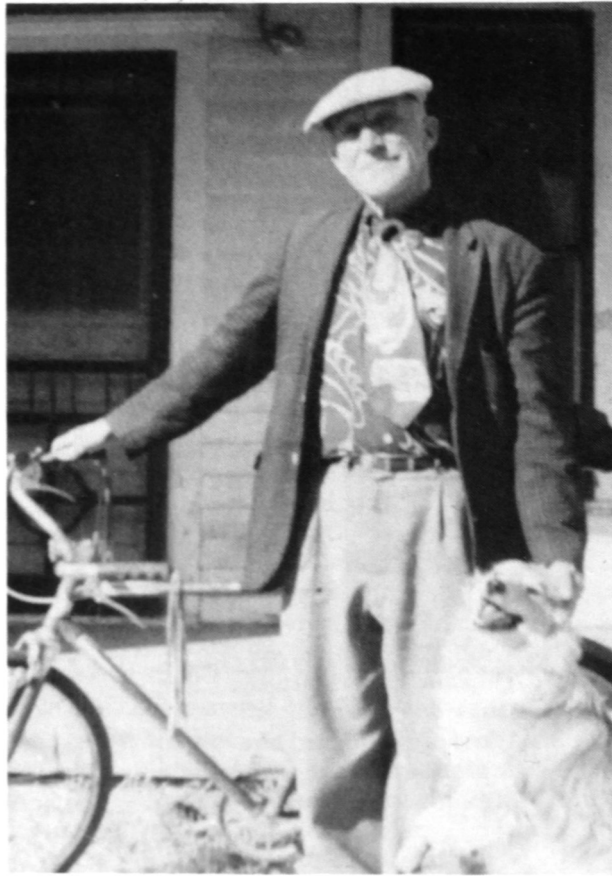
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"JACK" FROST, 1964

FROST ON THE WINDOWS

By Pat Kourt

“Welcome, Alumni”; ‘Howdy, Folks’; ‘Merry Christmas’; or ‘Happy Holidays’ are just a few of the numerous greetings that Western Oklahomans enjoyed for more than half a century. These colorful phrases adorned the windows of almost every business in several friendly communities, and they were the freehand artistry of a gnome-like, stoop-shouldered gentleman affectionately known as “Jack” Frost.

Mr. Frost, whose given name was Willard, became known as “Jack” when he started transforming colorless storefront windows in 1928. Like the legendary sprite after whom he was named, Mr. Frost enjoyed surprising and pleasing people with his unique lettering and scenes that fitted the holiday or celebration. “Pleasing folks is just more important than charging high prices,” he chuckled jovially.

The eighty-three-year-old fellow related that his initial interest in his unusual illustrations began in the late twenties when he watched a neighborhood grocer paint prices on his store window. “The brushes are the key — red sable’s the best,” he said.

So Jack acquired a few basic supplies — brushes and colorful tempera-paints — and began his lifelong vocation.

Although he was born in Iowa, he moved with his family to Fargo, Oklahoma, where he attended school through the tenth grade. It was in Fargo that Jack labored in his toughest situation — lettering the town water tower that was 117 feet high!

Going from Fargo, he busied himself in Enid and Watonga and eventually settled in Thomas, where he resided with his wife, Marian, until his death.

In his home, he had a collection of more than fifteen antiquated mirrors, his most valuable from the old Chicago Theater. Also, in his backyard he had bicycles from many eras; in fact, he learned to ride one of the high-wheel bikes at age 70.

Many Thomas residents recall that

Jack used his antique collections for everyday living as well as for enjoyment. Often perched on his nose was a pair of double-lensed spectacles, and a slate-gray derby of rabbit fur covered his yellow-white hair. The hat, along with Jack’s shaggy white beard, was as historic as the man himself.

Daily routine was the key to the Frosts’ active lives. Probably the octogenarian’s most dominant physical feature was his strong, agile hands, made so from years of lettering and painting.

When Mr. and Mrs. Jack Frost climbed into their small car each morning, their destination was no more than thirty or forty miles away and was repeated each day except Sunday. Most of the art jobs paid from five to twenty-five dollars, most of which was put away for further traveling. Through the couple’s frugality, they migrated across the United States four times, and Jack was especially happy that he had been baptized in the Jordan River during one of their trips to the Holy Land.

Additionally, Jack loved to tell stories about the numerous celebrities he visited during his painting and traveling ventures. They included at least six governors from different states; “Spanky” McFarland of the “The Lil’ Rascals”; and “Oh, yes, the American Party presidential candidate Sheckleford is my wife’s first cousin!”

Although childless and with no close relatives, Jack and Marian enjoyed meeting people together and felt “the folks of Western Oklahoma are the salt of the earth, and we’re proud to be thoroughbred ‘Okies!’” Active in the Thomas Senior Citizens Club (for which Jack lettered the building front), the Frosts enjoyed group singings and outings. During the 1979 Pioneer Days celebration, the Senior Citizens dressed in authentic early-day fashions, and Jack was voted “Most Original Beard.” He said, “I was so flattered by the honor that I just decided to keep it!”

Not only did his mischievous eyes sparkle when he related the beard

incident, but the little window painter also sincerely beamed when he remarked that his greatest accomplishment was “my decision to become a Christian as a young man.” That decision influenced him each day since he and his wife became ordained ministers of the gospel. Although they didn’t actively preach sermons in a local church, both were called “avid Bible scholars” and attended church services several times a week. Jack loved to play the piano at revival services — “all by ear too!”

Busy — and only once in his eighty-plus years did he remember not painting. “During the Depression, store owners didn’t have any extra money for my kind of work so I just did what I could get — pitching bales, street work.”

“But those days are past,” reminded the positive-thinking fellow. “Our country, especially Oklahoma, is one of surging progress, and the people here maintain a great ‘Okie’ spirit of moving ahead.” Consequently, the optimistic painter, collector, preacher, and people-lover talked of planning to write a book about his life, traveling to new places, and, above all, making someone’s hometown more colorful. However, Jack wasn’t able to realize the dream of his book before his death in 1981.

Perhaps the Canadian poet Bliss Carman was speaking of the Jack Frosts of the world when he penned: “Set me a task in which I can put something of my very self, and it is a task no longer; it is joy; it is art.”



WILLARD “JACK” FROST AT HIS SHADE TREE EASEL.