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Calling a Star by Name

> *He determines the number of the stars*
> *and calls them each by name.*
> (Psalm 147:4)

Throughout the editing process for my contribution to *The Individual and Tradition*, Tom Mould kept pressing me to make one particular individual a star. I confess that I frustrated Tom by continually refusing to do so, insisting that the particular tradition which was the focus of my contribution, the modern crawfish boat, was the product of a constellation of stars and what fascinated me was how the diverse ideas projected by a diffuse group of individuals could have coalesced into such a sleek, intentional form.

Over the course of the project, I have been impressed by how working with recent history has made it possible not only to delineate individual contributions but also to begin to understand the roles that life experiences, character traits, and other "ineffables" become quite effable when glimpsed through the prism of a small bore engine harnessed to steel and aluminum.

Forged in such stuff, the effable is so material as to obscure the ineffable, but the goal of drawing from the material those patterns which reveal human intention must go on. Whether we call it culture or consciousness, what interests us is the mind that not only makes the thing but makes it matter. But how to access the mind, its experiences, its traits of thought and action, its preoccupations, and its *projets*? By the life the individual has lived? By the things the individual has said or done? By the world the individual has created?

By none of these things alone, of course, but by some composite of them we might glimpse a facet of what the richness of human being must be like for someone else, for others not ourselves. Today, to honor my friend Henry Glassie, and to give a bit of peace to my friend Tom Mould, I am going to sketch out for you the life experiences, the inhabited world, and some of the things made by one particular maker.

I am speaking today about Gerard Olinger because Henry and Pravina [as well as Lee and Melita] have met him, and thus they will perhaps share a glimpse or two of recognition in the occasional bit of description, and also because Gerard has been my steady guide to a world of work where hands and mind are in constant conversation, where muscle meets metal and each discover the other's strengths and limitations, and where sometimes the best writing gets done in soap stone and is most easily glimpsed on steel with a light dusting of rust. In this world, grease on your hands does not mean you haven't been thinking: it means you have wrestled with machinery and objects capable of easily maiming, and perhaps killing, you and that you have won. You have wrested from the machine its own failings and given it new life or new functionality. Your reward for such work is to momentarily straighten your back and gaze at the far horizon, usually blindingly bright from the dark chamber of the shop's interior, before turning to another piece of gear in need of your attention and needed in the field the day before yesterday.

Oinger is not alone in doing this kind of work, in thinking simultaneously with his hands and mind. He is joined in the present by other crawfish boat makers like Kurt Venable, who is the competitor of the group, and Mike Richard, who is the finest raconteur I have ever known. In the past, the two men who brought the crawfish boat into being were Ted Habetz, an engineer by nature and training, and Harold Benoit, a career military man and vocational teacher. In other parts of the book these men are joined by men like Warren Coco and K. P. Provost, makers of engines and boats now known as "shallow water drives," an international market segment that Coco invented and Provost refined.

What I offer you today is a small glimpse into one of these individuals. I don't have a grand plan, nor am I ready to proffer grand conclusions. But I have a lot of data, and it seems to offer us the chance to glimpse into the nature of the relationship between culture and creativity, between the individual and the world he or she must negotiate with others. This glimpse begins in *biography*, then turns to an account of the shop as an *inhabited world*, and ends with an *artifact*.

BIOGRAPHY

Gerard Olinger lives and works in Roberts Cove, Louisiana, which is an area northwest of the town of Rayne that was settled by Germans and German Americans starting in the late nineteenth century. The Cove, as it is affectionately known by its older residents, is as filled today with doctors and lawyers from nearby towns and cities seeking comfort in the rural landscape as it is by the people who originally settled here and helped to create the commercial rice industry in Louisiana. The Olingers were themselves from Indiana, and were like other Germans from Illinois and Iowa at the turn of the previous century, one of the reasons you can find I-houses, as Fred Kniffen once called them, along the roads the wind through the Louisiana prairies.

Olinger grew up one hundred yards from where he works today, in a house his parents had moved to what is now Olinger Lane, so that his father could help his grandfather farm the family land. Gerard is the oldest son of Ambrose and Margaret Olinger, who had six children in all, three boys and three girls, that they raised in a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house that was one of only three houses on a road that otherwise wound its way into rice fields. Born in 1955 at the American Legion Hospital in nearby town of Crowley, Gerard was eleven years old when he first began to help his father in "the shop."

Gerard's introduction to the shop was sharp and urgent: his father had broken his back when a loaded A-frame lift in the shop had gotten its wheels caught on something and it came crashing down on him. Because his father's mobility was severely limited, Gerard spent that summer in the shop, and he proved so useful that he spent subsequent summers and many afternoons after school there, too. It was his first job and, with the exception of a few summers spent working for farmers, his only job. There was never anything formal about the arrangement; it was just understood that after school he would get off the bus, grab a sandwich and a drink that his mother had waiting for him at the house and he would continue down the lane to the shop. When he graduated from high school in 1973, he began working full-time.

Gerard Olinger left the Cove in 1975 after he married his wife Debbie, and they moved into a house in Rayne that belonged to her parents. All three of their sons — Mark, Matt, and Paul — were born there, but they, like their father, did most of their growing up in the Cove because in 1985, Gerard and Debbie built a house between his parent's house and the new shop. The old shop no longer stands, but it had once been his grandfather's equipment shed. Gerard's father, Ambrose, had slowly converted it into a repair shop over the years.

Ambrose Olinger had intended to be a farmer like his own father, but as his reputation for repairing machinery grew, and more and more farmers began to line up outside the shed with equipment to be repaired, the shed slowly became Olinger's Repair Shop. By the late nineteen seventies, with Gerard now working full-time in the shop and Gerard's own expertise as an extraordinary machinist becoming established, the father and son business had outgrown the converted shed and they moved into a new, custom building one hundred yards southwest of the old one.

In 1987, Gerard Olinger took over the shop, buying out the business' inventory and paying his father rent on the building. In 1989 he was joined by his younger brother Dale, who had been a successful manager at a bank branch in nearby Church Point until its parent bank failed and he lost his job. Dale's availability came at a crucial time for Gerard, who was busier than ever, but his long-time partner, his father Ambrose, had already retired officially and wanted to stop working, too. Dale agreed to come help out but insisted that he didn't intend to stay for long. Gerard responded that as long as he wanted to work, he had a job. Gerard noted to me, "We haven't talked about it since."

The shop's personnel, and rhythm, has remained unchanged in the intervening two and a half decades. Third hands have come and gone, depending upon their dependability as well as the amount of work coming into the shop, but Gerard and Dale are now the Olingers of Olinger's Repair Shop. Ambrose Olinger's name remains on the office door, but Ambrose himself died last May, leaving no one to circle around the shop to make sure work was getting done, and done right, or to wonder why university professors ask so many questions while people are trying to work.

THE INHABITED WORLD

Gerard Olinger lives his work in ways that few of us can readily imagine. First, he lives on the same landscape as his customers: his house and shop are surrounded by working fields filled, depending upon the year, with rice, soybeans, and/or crawfish. Second, he himself once farmed on a small scale and had up until recently suffered all the travails of keeping always aging farm machinery running so that he could gamble on the vagaries of crops, natural disasters, and the commodities price index along with his fellow farmers. Third, his house is less than thirty yards from his shop. His morning commute consists entirely of walking out his backdoor and down the short stretch of concrete driveway that gives onto the tail end of Olinger Lane which ends, thirty feet later, at the front door of the Olinger Repair Shop.

The shop itself is a simple steel building on a fifty foot by one hundred foot concrete pad. There are three twenty-foot-wide roll-up doors, two on the front, and one at the back, that allow entrance for machinery, equipment, and supplies and three doors for people, one in front, one in back, and one on the far side of the building.

Just past the front door, on the west side of the building, are the human spaces Olinger's office and — beyond racks of bolts, bushings, and hydraulic fittings — a small kitchen area with an always-on coffee pot and a few old lawn chairs and cable spools for seating. On any given morning there is a small gathering of a mix of regulars and drop-ins that spend a half hour of so before the start of their day to discuss immediate concerns like the weather, intermediate concerns like mills and the commodities market, and more distant concerns like politics and the news. The personal intermingles easily in all these conversations, with births, deaths, marriages, and divorces giving way readily to the life cycle of crops, of ideas, or of news.

The morning meeting breaks up slowly as individual farmers announce the need to get to work, rinse out their coffee cups, and place them gently in the dish rack to dry. Their departure is announced by the rumble of a large diesel pickup truck roaring to life followed by slow crunching of gravel as the truck makes its way back down the lane.

The Olingers themselves make their way from the corner kitchen to the shop beyond, with Dale moving to what everyone simply knows as "Dale's area." Gerard's place is a bit more flexible: he may start in the office or among the machining tools in the middle of the shop or on the north side of the building, across from Dale's area.

The main shop, then, is divided into three general spaces: humans and parts are at one end, machines for creating parts are in the middle, and general purpose work areas are at the other end. The physical dimensions of these spaces split the shop in half, with humans, parts, and machines on one side, and work areas on the other.

The openness of the shop is somewhat unusual among the fabrication shops in the area, with most being much more crowded or with more specialized areas defining the overall plan of the shop floor. To some degree the openness of the shop can be explained by the size of the equipment that needs to make its way inside to get worked on: grain carts and tractors are wide, tall, and wide. This also explains why much of the equipment and work surfaces in this area is on wheels, easily moved about to accommodate a particular project.

The most commonly used equipment is itself paired: allowing each man not to worry about their being in use when they need them. Paired items include MIG welding units, acetylene torches, air hoses and drivers, and work tables made of heavy steel on which they can weld, grind, cut, and hammer to their heart's content. They share another wire-fed welding unit, an arc cutter, the A-frame lift, and a wide variety of hand tools.

Stationed around the shop, practically lining its walls are a wide variety of stock pieces. Some sit in racks, either their original length or of a length that can be further cut down. Other pieces lie on tables, usually too short to be cut on further but potentially just the right size for a project, and so they are laid out or stocked up in hopes of seeing some use.

One such table where pieces lie is known as the red table, though the last time it was red is open to debate. It remains the red table however and reveals the tip of an esoteric reference scheme that is at once useful and self-deprecating. The area where Gerard usually works in the general work area is, for example, sometimes

called “Bay One.” The reference is, of course, to more formally organized spaces and shops which have numbered or named bays. The humor is in the contrast to be found in a two-man shop, run by two brothers, that is frequented by a highly regular set of customers — so much so that when a new customer shows up and doesn’t understand where to drop something it sometimes causes momentary confusion and even some embarrassment on the part of one of the brothers, when they actually have to show someone where something goes. There is no Bay One nor Two. There is no tractor bay nor welding bay. In a similar vein, the paint shop is simply a spot outside where a lot of painting and power washing of parts gets done.[1]

Anything more involved would not only be unnecessary but would also probably be understood as trying to be fancier than their neighbors, who are, after all, also their customers. Distinction among this tight-knit group of Cajun and German rice farmers is to be found in hard work and its results. Their cousin and steady customer, Dwayne Gossen, who farms their grandmother’s land distinguishes himself by his steady high yield in the fields he cultivates. The Olingers distinguish themselves in the reliability of the tools and machines they create. Anything more than that and an individual might be considered arrogant or thought to imagine himself better than others.

The reverse distinction is preferred: one’s failures are often foregrounded in an effort to establish common cause with the travails that all of us face. Two years ago, when the season for soy beans had been especially harsh — with lots of rain creating shallow-rooted plants that then fared poorly in a long dry summer — Jerry Leonards drew appreciative nods when he responded to the outlook for his crops that he was going to take a disk to his fields and just plow them under: it wasn’t worth the cost of the gas to operate his combine.

[1] It helps to know that paint shops in most instances are very involved affairs with complicated ventilation systems refreshing the air within a sealed area so that the potentially toxic paint fumes can be dissipated. The Olingers simply use the breezes which blow pretty consistently across the prairie as their ventilation system, and they have gotten pretty good at positioning themselves between the direction from whence the wind comes and the piece of gear to be painted or power washed.

ARTIFACT

The Olingers operate a repair shop, which means they are pretty open to what they will work on, and I have seen a variety of jobs come in and go out its various doors. That is not to say there are not patterns to their business and there are not things for which they are known.

Every autumn, Dale outfits a steady parade of tractors with side plows. The Olingers did not invent the side plow, but theirs has come to be the standard by which all others are judged. You can, in fact, order a tractor from the dealer with a side plow pre-installed, but it's a sure bet that when you do the tractor will have made a side trip to the Olinger Repair shop before being dropped off at your farm.

Shortly after Dale begins outfitting tractors with side plows, Gerard will begin construction on this year's power-take-off, or PTO, ditchers. Around this time crawfish boats will start arriving for repair as well as orders for new boats, of which Gerard still makes a handful every year.

The work on plows, ditchers, and boats will continue into the early spring when farmers will also start bringing in various implements in preparation for planting. As spring gives way to summer, the work turns to puddlers and then augurs and finally the much-dreaded grain carts as well as the occasional grain truck to be improved upon.

None of this steady stream of regular work precludes any number of small or odd jobs that regularly pass through the shop doors. I have seen Gerard take on jobs just for interest sake, with full knowledge that there was no way he could charge someone for all the time that he invested. This is some part due to the fact that he is arguably the greatest tinker I have ever encountered. If, among his fellow boat makers, Kurt Venable is a dedicated competitor and Mike Richard is the finest raconteur — once holding me spell-bound for half an hour with the story of getting his outboard motor repaired — then Gerard Olinger is someone who enjoys hard problems.

Which is probably one of the reasons why Gerard is drawn to make machines. If there is motion driven by hydraulics or gear work, then his interest is immediately piqued. While Dale has become the man behind the Olinger side plow, the PTO

ditchers, with their complex array of sprockets and chains driving a solid steel cutting ahead have remained within Gerard's arena.

The ditchers begin as nothing more than a rather large collection of stock materials, with the only pre-made component being the chains, the gears, and the hubs that hold the gears in place. Everything else is made from scratch, with as many of the year's ditchers being beginning life as a series of holes cut into fifteen-foot long four by eight, three-eighths-inch thick tubing. The holes are cut with a plasma torch into the two basic pieces, made up of the tubing, the top tube and the down tube.

With these segments made, they are welded together at a right angle. Each top tube is married to a particular down tube, because tractors differ in height and farmers often have their own preferences when it comes to the width of the wheels. To be effective, the ditcher must run directly behind the right rear wheel of the tractor, leaving a smooth shallow ditch with no ridge of any kind to keep water from running into the ditch and out of the field.

With the two principle pieces assembled, Olinger attaches the lower spindle mount points, which he has turned himself out of hardened steel. The rest of the framework is attached at this time as well. The frame consists of the arms and braces to allow the ditcher to be attached to a tractor's three-point hitch as well as a dirt shield to keep the ditcher's spray for being thrown into the back of the tractor.

The machine, for the ditcher is a machine and not a tool, is now outfitted with the parts that transfer the power from the tractor's PTO to the cutting head. At the PTO junction and at the ditcher's elbow, two hubs hold an axle upon which a gear spins. Heavy chains are threaded through the tubing and are tensioned properly.

Because each ditcher varies, it's something of a trick to get the distances on the number of links right and to get the gear in the right place, but Olinger has hit upon a quite ingenious solution to the problem: each gear is adjustable, making it possible to adjust the chain after installation and as part of a regular maintenance program. The tension is drawn from the same bolts that attach the maintenance covers to the main body of the ditcher. With the chains in, lubricating oil is pumped into the ditcher's body, the machine is painted, and the cutting head is mounted.

[Time for the "Jimmy hole"?]

CONCLUSIONS

The PTO ditcher is an amazing machine, and, like the crawfish boat, it has enjoyed a series of refinements that were the direct product of makers and users working in close cooperation. These two devices have literally re-shaped the landscape upon which they work, making it possible for farmers to draw greater wealth from poor land.

One of the minds at work upon this earth is Gerard Olinger. At work in five thousand square feet of metal building for forty years now, the machines he refines or invents have slowly transformed, if you count up all the farms, a few thousand square miles of Earth. One life, thousands upon thousands of acres.

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LEFTOVER

This kind of close collaboration amounts to a kind of intellectual commons, in which a great deal of knowledge is tacit.

But tacit knowledge is still knowledge, knowledge that draws upon years of experience, years of common experiences and common expectations.

Such knowledge has long been the purview of anthropologists and folklorists but we find now a myriad of others interested in how it works and how it is attained. Our goal must remain a description and explanation that keeps the role of the individual foregrounded so that the tacit knowledge of men and women who work with their minds and hands may not be lost to yet more time and motion studies or

attempts to turn their work into so many algorithms or automated steps. Tedious work is not lightened by being automated, it is lightened by the human transaction which it instantiates. It is lightened by the human heart that thrills to the thrum of the lathe as a piece of metal is turned into something useful.