

7-15-1998

## The Ghost in the Stacks

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### Recommended Citation

Bennett, Michael J., "The Ghost in the Stacks" (1998). *Published Works*. 30.  
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# The ghost in the stacks

Close encounters in the West Brookfield Library

## Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

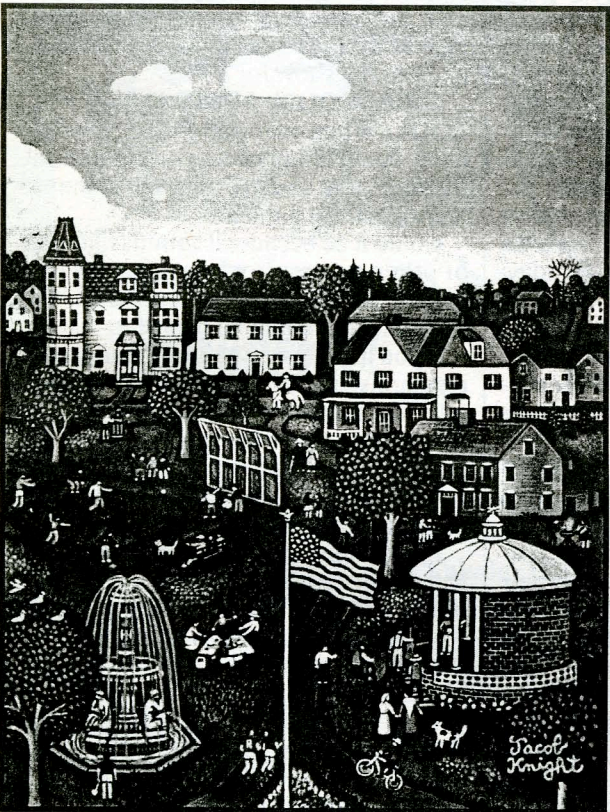
By Michael Joseph Bennett

Here in West Brookfield, the library is 118 years old, people meet at the post office and the bank tellers quietly count back your change without rush (If you take the drive-through, they will even slip a couple of dog bones your way for the puppies in back). The town common unfurls itself slowly like an open palm as one makes one's way through town. The library sits just off the common. Retired librarians compare years of service in decades as they amble in the shade, and I am the new guy in the old building, edging toward year one on the job.

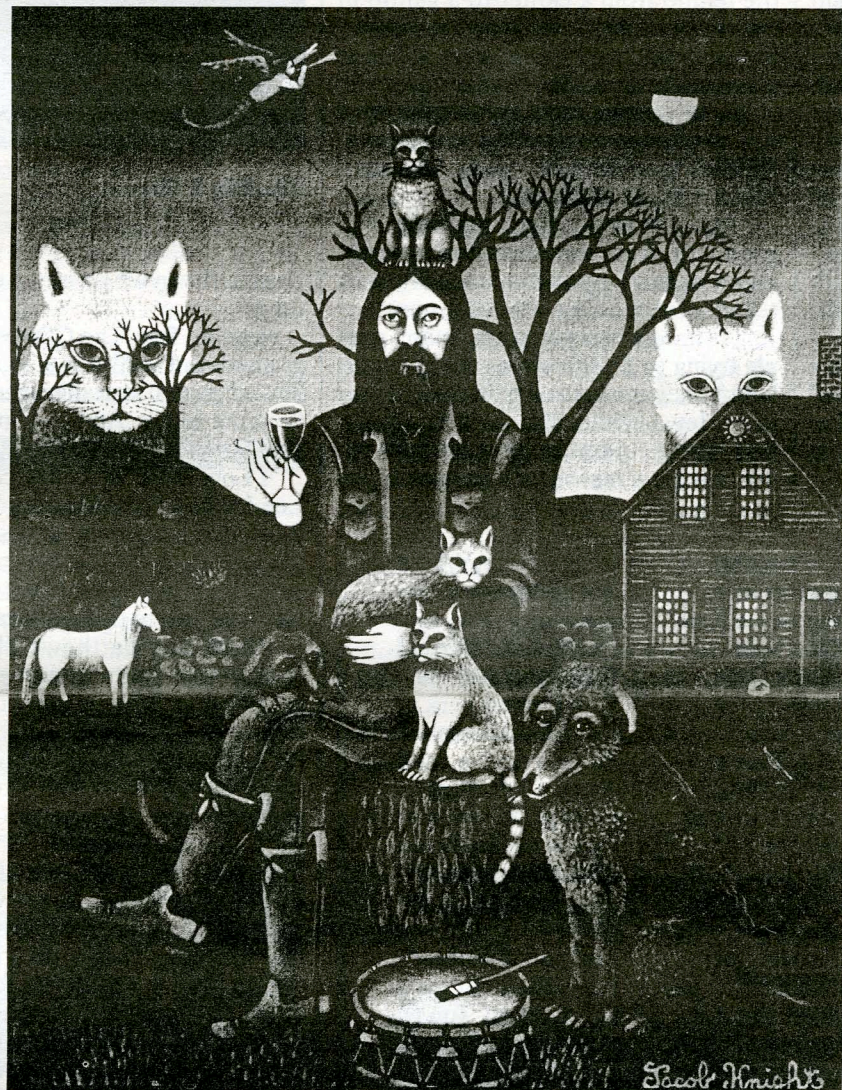
After we close for the day, I often sit in the solitude of my first-floor office and listen to the bump and creak of bookcases above. Upstairs, we house general nonfiction in old, metal stacks and keep the priceless local-history stuff locked behind sliding glass doors. Sometimes, when I hear the cases twitch back and forth, I have to remind myself of the building's age and how the top floor actually swings in the wind.

But sometimes when I hear the cases swaying I push away from the desk and make for the stairs. Unlocking the glass cases, I pull out the Jacob Knight collection and give the guy some fresh air.

Jacob Knight, regarded by many as the foremost folk artist of his time, lived out on Wigwam Road until his early death at 56 in 1994.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANN PARKER NEAL



Above: Jacob Knight, self portrait.

Left: The West Brookfield town common.

and additional classes farther down the Old Post Road at Leicester Junior College. On the quick heels of graduation at the still tender age of 19, a cross-country meander lay in store. Amid sun-baked California hills, he found Hollywood and while there decided to try his hand at acting. John August — as he called himself during this period as professional movie extra — would be the first curious pseudonym of this curious man.

With time, however, he began to feel the magnet pull of the paint brush. From California he returned East, dropped the John August and gave sign painting a go. This he did poorly. Inherent to the work was a precision of line and limit of focus that seemed to freeze his hand up tight, stifling a creative heat ready to flame.

Next on the map appeared the New York of the early '60s, a place of coffeehouses, Bob Dylan and an explosion of the arts. Amongst the New York brownstones he took up his brush again, and with it he took a new name for himself. A flame was kindled. Jacob Knight was born.

For almost a decade, he traveled throughout the Northeast, developing an intuitive style of depiction, a primitive brand of folk art all his own. Dream and outside world met to form a shimmering reality on his canvas. Soon people began to take notice. Offers for illustration work in the slicks began to arrive from such places as *Playboy* and *Good Housekeeping*, offers that paid well and were certainly a long poke from the gritty black of the *Spencer Leader*.

Toward the end, though, the Old Post Road would bring

him back to Central Massachusetts. Once settled in the geography he could never quite shake, he began to take on a series of commissioned canvases of the Brookfields and nearby hamlets of his youth. Today it is this body of art by which people in the region remember him best.

The town pieces are works of massive scale that depict with affection the lives and landscapes of the artist's quietly striving neighbors. They became his life work. Operating out of his 200-year-old farmhouse on Wigwam Road, Knight would play out the remainder of his days here, working primarily on these mammoth projects and countless found-object sculptures that filled his yard — living close to the bone on the sporadic income he gleaned from the exercise of his talent.

I never had a chance to meet the man. But like a town monument, his memory lives clearly in those I encounter down at the post office or here at the library.

Upstairs in the Jacob Knight collection are random newspaper clippings, obituaries, magazine covers and handbills. I find an old photograph of the man with the poet's eyes and crazy hair, and I think of the times I have asked people if they knew him.

You mean Jake?

Yeah, I tell myself during these instances: Guess that's what I mean.

Then, as always, just as the silence really settles in, a smile will bloom surprisingly over even the grimmest of hard-bitten faces, a deeper timbre takes hold of the voice: Now there was quite a guy.

Again I glance at the photo and there he is, a big bear of a man who contributed his intricate and burnished vision of rural Massachusetts to such magazines as *Yankee* and *Smithsonian*, who made sculptures out of TV dinner trays, doll heads and car parts from the dump, and who took in any and all stray animals at his tumble-down farmhouse.

When they really open up, this is what people in town tell me: You know, he loved the library. ...

I flip to another picture, this one from a 1980 *Ware River News* piece. Here, behind a prophet's beard and cheap reading glasses, he signs prints during the building's 100th anniversary. I watch his hand grip the pen and focus upon the paper, his eyes afire. Could this be the same table? I ask myself, smoothing the surface where I sit. I read through more clippings. Slowly the bookcases stop their nervous sway and fall quiet behind me.

Back downstairs again and time to go. Before I leave, I change the date stamp at the circulation desk and file away a few more papers. Outside, it looks like rain in the gray afternoon sky. I close the windows in my office and turn out the lights.

Once more, upstairs, the bookcases start their nervous sway. Walking over, I yell up the stairwell, my voice an echoed flight through the years.

Hey — my voice a shade louder than I had intended — is that you again?