

Tom Kelly Interview

July 8, 2020

Mineral Point, Wisconsin

(Bill McKinney) This is Bill McKinney interviewing Tom Kelly on July 8, 2020 in Mineral Point, Wisconsin. So Tom, why don't you tell us about how you came to Mineral Point and what it was like living here in the earlier times?

(Tom Kelly) Okay, well, I had been living in Horicon, Wisconsin where I was actually working in the John Deere factory for three years. My parents lived in Horicon, my dad was a teacher and my mom got me the job because she was the receptionist at the plant and she had some give and take on that one but I worked there for three years and I was getting sort of bored and I was dating a woman that was I met at UWM where I got my Art Degree and the woman I met was at UWM and then she was in Platteville. And we were talking one night and I was grumbling about oh, working in a factory and doing that sort of stuff and she said, "well, why don't you move down to Mineral Point?" And that was Marianne Meyer who was another artist who lived at the Foundry. And so, you know, being footloose and fancy I guess I said, "yeah, that sounds great." So I moved to Mineral Point in 1975 I think it was late summer, perhaps. And I moved into the Foundry a lot of people still know it as the Foundry although it was a bookstore, but first of all it was a wayward home for poor artists it was owned by an art professor in Platteville and I'm forgetting his name, but that can be filled in. And so right across from Popolo's there's this big parts thing and there was a glass studio in there and I had a big studio in the front where Gayle used to have her office. And so what we did was we all had a studio and we shared the bathroom, I mean a really small bathroom and the kitchen. So it was sort of like a commune almost but we never called it that.

(Bill McKinney) So how many artists shared that space at the time?

(Tom Kelly) Let's see, I think at that point when I moved in I lived in the front where all those little clear story windows are, I lived there. I think Gary Cisler may have lived there. Marianne Meyer lived there, Julia Suits who has gone on to be a cartoonist for the New York Magazine and I think there are a few other people and their names are sort of lost in memory right now. I think if I think hard enough I may be able to come back up with them, but not currently but life was quite interesting it was fun. Dave Krebs lived there for one point, Bruce came in after I moved out and had his studio there

(Bill McKinney) That's Bruce Howdle?

(Tom Kelly) Bruce Howdle, yes. Roland was around because he came just right in 70 just a little before I did in 1975.

(Bill McKinney) And that would be Roland Sardeson?

(Tom Kelly) That is that's correct Roland Sardeson.

(Bill McKinney) So you lived upstairs?

(Tom Kelly) I did and had a studio on the ground floor, street level and then we shared the kitchen and the bathroom and the gallery space and it seemed to work out somehow. I mean, we had little tiffs once in a while but we ended up doing a lot of fun stuff. On the side of the brewery the Brewery Creek we used to hang I think we had sewn two sheets together and hung up down that stonewall and we'd sit on the porch and watch movies somebody had a projector. Another crazy thing we once did was somebody's friend was a lobster fisherman in Maine. So we got this crazy idea and said why don't we have a lobster feed at the Foundry in Mineral Point? And basically it was just at first for the artists there. Well, it was so successful and we had all invited maybe a friend and that word got out and people were hounding us to do it again. But that used to be all parking lot a lot of it, it wasn't forested like it was a little later and we'd set up these long tables with paper and I drew red lobster is all over the paper and we had a big pot we'd boil them but I think after three of them it was no longer any fun because all we were doing was working and acting as waiters and not having any of the fun. So I think it lasted for three glorious years but that was one of the kooky things we used to do there.

(Bill McKinney) So I've heard there's rumors of ghost stories in the Foundry. Did you ever experience anything unusual there?

(Tom Kelly) I did once and it was during a iced out blizzard sort of thing where no electricity, we were all over at the Walker House which is where artists went it was sort of their bar. But eventually after the candles burn low we all had to go home. And it was, you had to be careful because there were live wires on the ground and there was ice all over the place. But that night I went upstairs and then I had a bridge way to another small set of stairs and it was like a warren really, but it was wonderful. And I slept on a second level where I could go out onto the roof and I was up there sleeping and all of a sudden I got awakened. I felt like I'd stuck my finger in a socket, it was just this electric sort of thing and at first I thought, Oh my God, what was that? And then I had this feeling that there were very, very wild spirits in my room. And I had come to find out that horses had been a livery at one point and horses had died in a fire there. And, you know, it's sort of felt like that but to turn off my light I had to lean out a bed reach down but I was so freaked out I couldn't get out of bed. The bed was my sanctuary and it seems like I fought with this spirit and it felt somewhat crazy. And it seemed like I was fighting all this until I was really tired and I finally looked up and there were clear story windows and the light, it was becoming dawn. And as soon as I saw it was dawn everything just went away just poof you know. Now I don't label that because I don't really know what it was but bad food the night before, maybe. I don't know. But that was the one experience I'd had there.

(Bill McKinney) Did anyone else live in the Foundry with you?

(Tom Kelly) Oh yeah, we all had these little rooms. You'd walk up the stairs and across this little bridge and there'd be a tiny room over there. And then you get on this bridge and walk over here and to get into my room there was a big I-beam there and I hit my head over once or twice so I put a big pillow on it, it wasn't up to code let me tell ya, and Colleen Ott lived there and often, you know she had the main central space for her glass furnace and every once in a while you would walk down there like you were walking to the kitchen and our living room and she'd be blowing glass topless so which I thought was always quite interesting but you know, that was Colleen so. And there were a huge number of artists that went through the foundry, Bud Wall was the art professor owner of the building. And it really was an incubator for artists. He was way before his time when it comes to that. So, Julia's Suits lived there, Gary Cisler, Roland was always around although he didn't live there, Colleen just a whole bunch of people that rotated all the time. Julia Suits lived there when I was there and so, you know, and life with that many artists all at once can get really interesting. I tell ya, but going back a little bit when I moved to town to Mineral Point this was not brand new to me because I've had relatives in Mineral Point since probably the 1850s but everyone thought I was a newbie. And back then it was, oh, you're one of them, not one of us. And I was in the Midway one night and I ran into a couple of farmers or I don't know what they did maybe they worked at Cummins or something like that. But they got in this argument with me and it wasn't physical but this guy was saying, no, you're one of "them" you know, they thought we're all odd and weird. So he had this argument and he wasn't a very good debater so he got to the end of his argument in a big hurry and he didn't know what to say so he put his hands on his hips and said, "well, my family's been here since the 1880s" meaning his family was here longer so he trumped me somehow. And I said, you really want to play that stupid game? And I said, "my people were here in the 1850s or sixties." So I said, "who just won that silly game?" And he just looked at me didn't have a word to say, turned around and walked away which I thought was absolutely hilarious but I would know people on the streets and say, hi and they'd look at me like, how do you know me? Oh, well, you know, my Aunt Doris or Uncle Jack Harker, you know, that sort of stuff. It was an odd introduction to Mineral Point.

(Bill McKinney) So tell me again what town did you grow up in?

(Tom Kelly) Horicon, Wisconsin, that was the first teaching job my father had after World War II and he was a biologist and a Ag teacher. And then my mom worked as the receptionist for there was a big John Deere plant up there for 20 years which she loved because she was a social butterfly like I am so it worked.

(Bill McKinney) So tell me again, all those artists who lived in the Foundry did they all support themselves with their art at the time, or were they.

(Tom Kelly) Well, a lot of them were young and wet behind the ears and starting their careers. Chris Ries was also a glassblower and he went on with his career to be quite famous. You would see him in, you know Arts and Crafts of America magazines and stuff like that. But yeah,

everyone plied their either they had a gallery some place or you know sold their work there. After I left Bruce moved in and he was quite a presence and then it really sort of after a while I'm not sure how long it was really became Bruce's studio.

(Bill McKinney) Oh, is that right?

(Tom Kelly) Well, I think so sort of, I'm not sure when it ended being sort of a communal artist thing that part I'm still fuzzy about.

(Bill McKinney) So at some point Bruce then moved to or purchased a building down the street on Commerce, right?

(Tom Kelly) Yes, that belonged to Roland Sardeson and all of those I think there were three buildings there. I think Cutler's Bar was in one of them and Roland was in one and I think Bruce took another one and they eventually Roland really did a lot of work to save that part of the street in Mineral Point. And Bruce did too, he was collecting hardware and doors and everything and anytime anyone needed it for restoration they come to Bruce. Sort of like, I need a lock or I need a plate that's of this era and you know, he rummage around in his basement his later studio.

(Bill McKinney) Did Roland consider himself an artist at the time? Or was he doing stone work? I heard that he was a potter at one point as well?

(Tom Kelly) He was a potter, when I first moved here, Roland was the potter up at the Potter's shed at Felly's, Felly then owned it. This was the guy that made a lot of money sending flowers by wire. And he had, I think everyone knows about that place. He had it turned into a garden with walks and there were some other artists there I think from time to time, Bob Camardo had a shop down there. Roland had a potting shop up in the pottery shed which I think it still is, so that's where he sort of hung out but he'd hang out in the Foundry too because we're all of like mind so to speak. And you know, we all sorta acclimated, I ended up marrying a woman from Mineral Point, Kathie Landon. A lot of people know her from her father I guess who ran a car dealership. So I'm sure there's a variety of fondness connected with him, but

(Bill McKinney) Was this car dealership in Mineral Point?

(Tom Kelly) Yes, it was, it was up where the Renovation Kitchen is now.

(Bill McKinney) Oh, up on Dodge street.

(Tom Kelly) Yeah. That was his showroom but earlier he lived in the building, it was the corner of Fountain and oh God, it's the last street before it hits Commerce And there were always big Pontiac signs and stuff out there that was a workshop and he owned, Ulrich Sielaff now owns it. And I think the hospital has maybe has taken over the front part of it as a gym or rehab or something.

(Bill McKinney) Interesting.

(Tom Kelly) And the apartment Kathie and I used to go up there and there were all auto parts, but the old stage was still up there with the lattice work and it was called I think something beer garden but you have to go up this rickety steps on the outside that would never pass code these days. And it was a dance hall and I think it was a roller rink at one time. And you know, just a lot of different things as many buildings in Mineral Point were.

(Bill McKinney) Did her family live there or was it strictly for the dealership?

(Tom Kelly) That was for the dealership is mainly the auto workshops. I think his display room was probably there for a while, but then he built a new one up on Dodge. Kathie's parents lived on North Iowa Street in that big red Victorian and cream house right across from a lot of people known it as Mrs. Potterton's house now the Beaman house. So I got to know a lot of people through them a lot of local people that I wouldn't have known before. So I sorta walk between two worlds and it was sort of interesting.

(Bill McKinney) At what point in time did you end up purchasing your house on Liberty?

(Tom Kelly) I moved into my house on Liberty. I think I only spent about a year or a year and a half at the Foundry. I continued to have my studio there for a little while and then I moved on to Liberty where it was stone first floor and log second floor. And I spent a lot of time trying to rehab it and it ended up burning down unfortunately. I put it back up with a guy who builds log cabins as a living a friend of mine. And we found an old cabin in Boaz, North of Richland Center. And I bought it and we'd go up every weekend and we took the house back nail by nail. So he's salvage to all the wood and all of that and in the kitchen which was a 18 by 18 foot is probably the whole house at one point the floor needed to be dug up because it needs to be a crawlspace and stuff. Well, we start taking the Oak flooring which was like you know, almost two inches thick off the floor. They were resting right on log joints which were resting right on the ground. And that's an Irvin's Addition, which is like I think the oldest addition in Mineral Point just south of Fountain Street basically and so forth

(Bill McKinney) Did the fire destroy the entire log cabin portion of that building.

(Tom Kelly) It did because well, the stone, I guess it was an electrical, which was puzzling because I had put in all new electrical, I guess they thought maybe a rodent had gotten in or something and chewed some wires. And nobody saw it because the rock was going to stand like the rock and everything could burn out. And you could, and same thing with the logs they were beautiful squared off logs, deep and so it burned inside a long time before it went through the roof and that's why nothing was really sort of saved out of it. But I remember getting the call I was, I hope I'm not telling tales out of school but I was with Kathie then and we were living in her house and I got a phone call at midnight saying, Tom, your house is on fire. I won't forget that day had in a long time.

(Bill McKinney) Who called you?

(Tom Kelly) A neighbor I think, but nobody had seen it for a long time because it was contained by all this really heavy material.

(Bill McKinney) Wow.

(Tom Kelly) Yeah, I had a lot of beautiful 19th century painted furniture. I had a beautiful 18th century gate leg table, some great Windsor chairs but boom. It's funny how ethereal things can be sometimes.

(Bill McKinney) So true.

(Tom Kelly) Yeah, but I continued collecting.

(Bill McKinney) So part of your career if I'm not mistaken was restoring furniture like that.

(Tom Kelly) I worked for Bob Camardo first which was if you turn to Fountain and are going down the hill there's the Polkinghorn building on the left which is all rehab now and I believe all Ulrich Sielaff did that. And then there was a big gravel open space and then this brick industrial building, you know iron framed windows that was Bob Camardo's restoration. So, but the Polkinghorn building was really cool because nobody was living in that when I was at the foundry and working at Camardo's so we would go spelunking underneath there because there were two or three stories underneath and we came to a doorway once that was drifted shut with sand. I mean, it looked like you were in Europe or in Egypt. And we crawled all over that building for a while it was I think the farmer's store which was a supply store for all sorts of stuff in. They had a robbery once which is, I don't care for the robbery but the guy wasn't real smart either because he got in to the story above and then found a way down and he saw this thing that dropped down. Well, it was a lathe and plaster ceiling and he didn't land on the joints so he went right through the ceiling and when the cops investigated the next day there was this whole sort of body print face down arms akimbo or arms out and then these dragging movement movements away from it. I thought, oh boy, only in Mineral Point it was one of those again, I think they probably did catch him too, probably checked the hospital first. Yeah, that was pretty fun, got a good laugh about that. And then a lot of other artists moved in, you know, all over the place. I would say Max and Ava were some of the first to really be artists and Edgar probably he was an artist, Bob, well, of course they did Pendarvis everyone knows that.

(Bill McKinney) What kind of art did Edgar do?

(Tom Kelly) Toward the end of his life, he did a lot of collage work.

(Bill McKinney) Really?

(Tom Kelly) Yeah, I guess it must've been easier because I do collage work right now so I think that's sort of the mindset sometimes. I don't know what he did early, he did all sorts of little bits and things. I think his main art project was really restoring Pendarvis. I mean, he had the help of a Cornish mason that lived in town he was old when I saw pictures of him. But I even remember going to the restaurant Bob had at Pendarvis or at that site, it wasn't in Pendarvis it was in a different buildings, a small one and, Oh God we sat down and Bob came out in an apron and there were all these pasties and he had all of this china, you know most of the day antique and he loved doing it, you know, he liked being on the stage a little bit and that was a treat. I only went there once and it was before I moved here, actually. But I got to experience it and it was really nice. I think Heinz came through and made up, wrote about it like Heinz 57 variety that kind and became quite famous for a while I think.

(Bill McKinney) I think that's true.

(Tom Kelly) Yeah, but to be in there sitting in a Cornish cottage and antique furniture with antique cutlery and maybe the cutlery wasn't, but the china sure was that was really cool.

(Bill McKinney) Did you interact with Max and Ava at any point?

(Tom Kelly) Oh God, yes. Yes, Kathie, she was married to Ted Landon and at that time they were in the little brick house right next to Ivey's which Lisa Hay owns now. And they lived in that as their house, the kitchen and the living room was downstairs. Ted had a, sort of a studio on the first floor and he did etchings and that sort of stuff besides paintings, etchings were his bread and butter and this is left to give Kathie credit because once he did the plate, he was done with it. She inked them, she wiped the plate, printed them all mounted them all, framed them all and took them to art shows too. So Ted was along for the ride right in many senses, but yeah and I got to know Kathie as a friend years before that we ever got involved it was after she was, she and Ted were divorced. But yeah, that was a cool little place.

(Bill McKinney) So when approximately did the Max and Ava live there?

(Tom Kelly) They lived in the what is currently that Tim Freeman house I think or Mary and Tim, I think they lived there long before I did, I think they lived there in the thirties even, they had moved out from Milwaukee. and if you go to Milwaukee I was at a antique place once and it showed a lot of Max's drawings of Milwaukee you know, charcoal drawings, which was sort of a shock because you think of him as a Mineral Point artist and Ava was quite the gal, chain smoking redhead just wilder than wild, I won't go into all of the details and she did all these fabulous pots, you know these really crazy off the wall stuff. And Kathie used to take all her babysitting money and we'd go downtown during Maxwell Street Days and buy all the Ava pottery she could or figures or whatever. So we have quite a collection of it at home although yeah, it was really beautiful. I think we're going to sell some of it soon.

(Bill McKinney) Yeah, that's interesting to me that Max and Ava were kind of a bridge to like the community of artists that you were part of.

(Tom Kelly) Right.

(Bill McKinney) Kind of a continuation.

(Tom Kelly) I think Bruce and Roland and I were sort of the beginning of the new era. There had been Max and Ava, there had been another woman that lived up right across from the row house in Pendarvis that was an artist, there were other unnamed artists or maybe their name then I just don't know them but and they were here because of Max and Ava or Bob and Edgar. So they all brought stuff to the table and I think I want to say now that I don't think people realize how important the artist community has been to Mineral Point, because, you know, starting with Max and Ava and Bob and Edgar and a few others and then all of us come in, you know it was comfortable for artists. And even though it was, oh, you're some of them not some of us, but you know, anyone can get around that. You're just nice to them, you know, but I would say they have to be given credit for being here first. I think Max and Ava came during the depression, I think and it was really quite rough and tumble. I mean, they had kids, you know how do you make income being an artist during the depression? So my hat is all up to, off to all of the older groups that forged ahead before we got here. So they all made it easier and consequently we all hope that we've made it easier for newer artists but maybe that's a little too egotistical but just saying.