

Still Climbing After All These Years

by Dennis Payton Knight

The golden years are often portrayed as the culmination of a life in its waning years, a time to step back, a time to settle into a rocking chair as the reward well earned, a time for rest.

But I don't see it that way. Yes, I am past the point where I go into an office each day, and past the point where I expect myself to earn a living. But no, I haven't moved to a rocking chair. I am as active as I have ever been, and it's a trajectory still on the rise.

Anna Mary Robertson Moses, as a child in the 1860's, drew pictures and colored them with the juices of berries and grapes. After her husband's death, Grandma Moses turned to embroidery, and then, as arthritis crippled her hands, to painting. At first, she copied postcards and Currier & Ives prints, then, in her seventies, she began creating original works of her own. At the age of 80, she painted "Apple Pickers" and "Sugaring Off in the Maple Orchard." Her American Primitive style gathered immediate favorable reviews and some of her paintings were displayed in a show of contemporary, unknown artists at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Soon the wonderful works of Grandma Moses were being sold and reproduced in books, hung as prints and adorning greeting cards. Her paintings are still enjoyed today in those and other forms.

Bill Traylor, born a slave in about 1853, virtually homeless at the age of 85, began to draw for the first time. He took up a pencil and a scrap of cardboard, then a paintbrush, and whatever else he could find to make his pictures. For the next years, working the sidewalks of Montgomery, he produced nearly 1,500 pieces of art.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum extolls Traylor, saying "The simplified forms of Traylor's artwork belie the complexity of his world, creativity, and inspiring bid for self-definition in a segregated culture." Traylor is now regarded as one of the most important artists of our country, an eyewitness to the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation. He would not live to see the civil rights movement before he died in 1949, but he was among those who laid its foundation.

Perhaps because they were contemporaries, self-taught and late-starters, Grandma Moses and Bill Traylor each painted in a naïve, primitive, yet profound style of their own, producing priceless works of art that tell powerful stories.

Have you ever noticed the climb is easier than the descent? Going down is fraught with hazards, the steps are tentative, and the view can be hellish. The climb, though challenging, is filled with promise, and every step, if but an inch, is an accomplishment.

Grandma Moses and Bill Traylor have set the predicate for this essay and for me. I'm now in the middle of my eighth decade, the golden age, and still climbing after all these years.