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# Local Boy Makes Good?: Joe Tom Meador, the Quedlinburg Hoard, and the Source of Virtue

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Local Boy Makes Good?: Joe Tom Meador, the Quedlinburg Hoard, and the Source of Virtue  
by Ray Granade

As a small county-seat town in rural southwest Arkansas, Arkadelphia seems far from the kind of place that would have any connection to a court case with international ramifications. Nor does it, despite its two colleges, seem to be the kind of place that would have any connection to a court case involving art—particularly art looted from Germany toward the end of World War II. Nor does it seem likely that it would play a part in a long-running discussion about the source of virtue in American life. And yet, as improbable as it seems, all those things are true.

Americans have certainly always believed that virtue is a feminine domain. As late as 1920, when women finally gained the right to vote, Americans on both sides of the “Suffrage Question,” as most called it, used the same fact in support of their differing views. Each side agreed that women possessed more natural virtue, with those favoring female suffrage arguing that women would elevate the tone of politics while those opposing argued that women’s natural virtue unfit them for understanding and engaging in politics. Whatever virtue society might have could be traced to female influence. Not only were women more religious than men (though in most Protestant circles women could hold no church office, and were only “commissioned” to such service on the foreign mission field), but also they were more attuned to the fine arts. Women, not men, undertook a “finishing school” education where they studied music and painting. Women were more fitted for polite society thereby, and it was this understanding and appreciation of the arts that thrust upon them the role of social arbiter and therefore the responsibility for elevating society’s tone. [See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1977) for insights into this phenomenon.]

Perhaps as an offset to the belief in a female source of virtue, writers since the earliest European habitation of what is now the United States have spoken of the land itself as a source of virtue. Those closest to the land, and particularly those who owned their own parcels and lived on and worked them, partook of that virtue most. In contrast to that in “tired old Europe,” the unsullied New World land exuded virtue. Since towns first formed, Americans have engaged in a debate about the influence of large concentrations of people on moral life, a debate that has ebbed and flowed, but never disappeared. Thomas Jefferson famously opined that yeoman farmers were God’s chosen people, and as towns grew into cities many other Americans adopted Jefferson’s implied distrust of the aggregated and looked askance at them. Cities threatened virtue; they were places where particularly the young, and most particularly the female young, would be led astray. At the close of the 19th and opening of the 20th centuries, that old debate had been rekindled by the horror of serial killers—like Jack the Ripper in London’s 1888 Whitechapel and Dr. Henry H. Holmes in 1893 at the Chicago Columbian Exposition and World’s Fair (revealed in his 1896 confession)—whose stories the new “Yellow Journalism” cheerfully exploited. [Patricia Cornwell’s *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed* (New York: Putnam’s, c2002) and Erik Larson’s *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* (New York: Crown Publishers, c2003) offer good recent information on those two early exemplars of the “serial killer” phenomenon.] Even popular literature reflected American concern about the cities’ moral laxity, with the uproar over Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) being a prime manifestation. A common example of thinking that equated cities with moral laxness was the siting of most American higher educational institutions—beginning with Harvard, William and Mary, and Yale and continuing through the early 1900s—outside cities. Another was the “Country Life School” movement of the

late 1800s and early 1900s that sought to counter the adverse impact of cities on children, particularly those disadvantaged children less able to escape a city's moral depravity, by having them attend schools in very rural settings. So small-town Arkadelphia, away from urban blight, seemed a perfect place in the late 1800s to site two colleges. It would also, if one follows the Jeffersonian argument, be a place in which virtue would flourish.[See Jean B. Quandt's *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Individuals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1970) and Paul B. Thompson's *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000). As historian Frederick Jackson Turner observed in 1893 in his landmark paper "The Closing of the American Frontier," the 1890 census for the first time lacked a line of frontier that ran from northern to southern border. Not until 1920 did the majority of Americans live in towns of at least 10,000 population. Arkansas, in 1920, had only five cities in that category: Little Rock (65,142), Ft. Smith (28,870), Pine Bluff (19,280), North Little Rock (14,048) and Hot Springs (11,695).]

In addition to seeing rural settings as sources of virtue, most Americans believed that Protestantism conferred virtue on any geographical area in which it held sway just as it did on individual adherents. This was not the sole purview of Puritans with their "city on a hill" mentality. By the late 1700s, such thinking was in the public domain and by the early 1800s was so pervasive that Americans automatically referred to someone possessing civic virtue as a "fine Christian" gentleman or woman without regard to faithfulness or denominational affiliation—or lack thereof. It was no accident that most early American attempts at higher education were undertaken by religious denominations, and that, even after the state university movement began, virtually all American higher education was governed by churchmen who served as trustees, teachers, and administrators. As a small town with a plethora of Protestant churches (over-churched and under-doctored, as one resident was fond of saying), where the earliest churches (Baptist and Methodist) were within a block of each other, and where each of those initial denominations strengthened their presence by founding a college in the small town, Arkadelphia would seem twice-blessed with virtue.

Finally, many Americans argued for education, and more particularly for educating women, as a means of instilling virtue in the body politic. As disparate a pair as Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann supported education for the good of the republic. The Founding Fathers so adamantly favored education that they could conceive of no way that democracy could survive without it. Arkadelphia, which local newspapers persisted in calling "the City of Colleges" and "the Athens of Arkansas," would thus seem to be thrice blessed. A small town in the "Bible Belt," with a succession of schools dominated by denominational interests (a pre-Civil War school run by a Baptist minister, a School for the Blind begun by a Baptist minister before the Civil War and continuing there until its remove a decade later to Little Rock, a post-Civil War Baptist High School, a Baptist and a Methodist college for whites and a Methodist and a Presbyterian college for blacks, as well as a business college and an early and thriving public school system), Arkadelphia must have seemed nothing short of a breeding ground for virtue.[The schools were Samuel Stevenson and James Milton Gilkey's Arkadelphia Male and Female Institute (1850), Arkansas Institute for the Blind (1859), Arkadelphia Public School System (1871), Arkadelphia Baptist High School (1876), Ouachita Baptist College (later University, 1886), Arkadelphia Methodist College (later Henderson State University, 1890), Bethel College (AME, 1891), the Colored Presbyterian Industrial School (1896), and Draughon's Business College (1891).]

The testing ground for any assumption about virtue inculcated by a small town such as Arkadelphia with its rural location in the Bible Belt, its plethora of churches, and its schools, would be in another small town, this one in Germany. In particular, the testing

ground would be a small town church's fabulous art collection.

Quedlinburg is a small and very old town in the Harz Mountain region of eastern Germany visually dominated by the Church of St. Servatius. The town enjoys national renown for its flowers—and among medievalists worldwide for its art. That art has been part of the church's treasury for about a thousand years, much of it given by Ottonian emperors and members of their families. First mentioned in the 10th Century and inventoried in the 13th, the church's treasure resided in a chamber called the "Zither" from 1170 until Allied bombing raids began in earnest during World War II. Though decreased somewhat by greed and need after the Reformation, the treasury remained largely unchanged between 1821 and 1945.

Although the church treasury had survived intact through the changing ideology and upheaval that shook Germany during the Reformation, it would find World-War-II-era ideology and upheaval more difficult to withstand. Heinrich Himmler viewed Henry I, first German king and founder of Quedlinburg, as a guiding star that National Socialists should follow. To that end, he sought to make the Church of St. Servatius a national SS shrine at which to hold an annual celebration on the July 2 anniversary of Henry I's birth. The SS held a millenary celebration in 1936; at the end of 1937, Himmler got the Zither key; the last wartime religious service in the church occurred on Easter, 1938. About eighteen months later, the SS packed up the treasure and moved it to a local bank vault. Almost four years later, in October, 1943, out of fear of Allied air raids on Germany, the SS took the precious art treasures to Altenburg cave, not far from the church. Crated up and locked away, they waited there in safety for the war's end.

A reasonably small town bypassed by railroads, Quedlinburg had no manufacturing or transportation importance that would attract the attention of Allied bombing planners. It and its art treasures escaped the war unscathed. They were not so fortunate in the peace that followed. Immediately after the fighting, before the Soviets enveloped Quedlinburg, an American serving as a forward observer for the 87th Armored Field Artillery Division looted the cave and, using the US postal service available to servicemen, sent a dozen of its priceless treasures home. [The story of the Quedlinburg Hoard, as it came to be known, is presented in detail in a case study of the theft contained in Elizabeth Simpson, ed., *The Spoils of War: World War II and Its Aftermath: The Loss, Reappearance, and Recovery of Cultural Property*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, c1997), 148-158; and William H. Honan, *Treasure Hunt: A New York "Times" Reporter Tracks the Quedlinburg Hoard*. (New York: Fromm International Publishing Corporation, c1997).]

Although Lieutenant Joe Tom Meador, for such was the forward observer's name, grew up and lived in northeast Texas with his parents (they called Whitewright home), the family's roots were in Arkadelphia. His father, who usually went by his initials C.J. (particularly among those who frequented his Whitewright hardware store) but was known to family and some college chums as Claude, was born and grew up in Arkadelphia, one of the nine children of Mary F. Bledsoe and James Benjamin (Ben) Meador. Ben was a livestock dealer and race horse breeder with a mule barn on Main Street between Third and Fourth, and his advertisement for his "Livery, Feed and Sale Stable" in the *Southern Standard* promised reasonable terms on "good, safe saddle horses for the ladies" and on the "best outfits always kept ready for the traveling public and especially commercial men." [See the July 22, 1885 and following issues.] Born at the very end of Ouachita Baptist College's founding year, 1886, Claude had attended both the preparatory department and the college and then graduated there in 1915. While a student, he had joined the Hermesian Literary Society (and served it as treasurer) and worked as circulation manager for the *Ripples* literary magazine. [*Southern Standard*, July 5, 1957 1:1; Wendy Richter, ed. *Clark County Arkansas: Past and Present* (Arkadelphia: Clark County Historical Association, 1992), 628; US Census, 1910,

174; *Ouachitonian* 1909-1915. Claude Joseph was born 31 December 1886. See the tombstone inventory of Oak Hill Cemetery, Whitewright, TX, at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~txfannin/ceme-oakhilllo.html>. Claude was also the second generation in his family to be born in Arkadelphia.]

Joe Tom's mother was Arkadelphian by adoption rather than birth. Ouachita Baptist College boasted a Conservatory of Fine Arts, housed in the campus's third building (erected in 1898). One element of that Conservatory was an Art Department staffed by a succession of young, single women who came with outstanding credentials and stayed a short time before they married or moved on. Initially, those young women were Ouachita graduates, like Annie Black (class of 1897, the school's second Art graduate)—who studied in New York before returning to her alma mater but remained only until her marriage to Gus Haynes and departure for Hope. Later, Conservatory head Dr. L.H. Mitchell hired graduates of other Baptist institutions like Shorter College (GA) or Baylor Female College (TX); women with advanced degrees or post-graduate individual study; or, after 1906, those with prior collegiate pedagogical experience (or some combination of the three). In 1914, he hired Maybelle Manning. [Mitchell hired Brownsville Female College graduate (A.M.) Daisey Anderson in 1905; Shorter College (GA) graduate Blanche Fleetwood (Cooper Union and Columbian University) two years later; Miss F. LeRoy Sands from Buford College (the first art teacher with prior pedagogical experience) in 1909; Gwendolin Watkin (Art Institute of Chicago graduate with teaching experience) in 1911; Baylor Female College graduate Mary H. White (lured away from Howard Payne College) the next year; and Lucille Shelby and Katherine Fulkerson in 1913. Official documents list Manning as Maybelle; to her family and friends (and the church), she was Mabel. See, for example, the sketch by her daughter, Jane, in Grayson County Frontier Village *The History of Grayson County Texas* (c 1981) II:304 or the First Baptist Church Arkadelphia *Minutes*.]

Manning offered impressive credentials to the young school. She said that she had studied Art at Baylor Female College (now Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, TX) in 1911. She said that she had also taken art lessons from Edward Gustav Eisenlohr (who had studied in Zurich, Switzerland and Karlsruhe, Germany, had a painting accepted for a Cincinnati Museum of Fine Art exhibit when he was 35 in 1907, and considered himself an American impressionist) as well as western landscape painter Alice Ray from Ft. Worth and an artist named Punch in Chicago. And she said that she had studied at the Kansas City Art Institute. Perhaps most importantly, she had taught art at Cumberland College for two years immediately preceding her arrival at OBC. [Baylor Female College had a fire in 1929 that destroyed their records, but some Mary Hardin-Baylor publications list Manning's art studies in 1911. Eisenlohr's biography appears in *Who Was Who in American Art* and in the *Handbook of Texas*, the online version of which is at <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/EE/fei2.html>. *Who Was Who in American Art* (though it lacks biographical details) mentions Dallas artist Alice Ray having last appeared in *American Art Annual* in 1914. There is no record of Manning having studied at the Art Institute in either Chicago or Kansas City, as she and her daughter claimed. Nor is there any evidence of anyone named Punch being an American artist of that era or teaching art in Chicago then.] Maybelle's background also featured another major asset shared by her predecessors. She was, and remained, a staunch Baptist, who would teach Sunday School almost until her death. When she moved to Arkadelphia, she joined the Baptist church that was nearer school—First Baptist Church—October 4, 1914, and her letter from First Baptist Church Leonard, Texas, arrived two weeks later. By doing so, she joined the same church into which Claude had been baptized after his profession of faith on April 22, 1903. [See the Arkadelphia First Baptist Church *Minutes* for those dates.]

The town to which Maybelle came would have been familiar because of its

resemblance to the one from which she had come. Leonard, in extreme southern Fannin County south-southwest of county seat Bonham, was a younger, smaller, non-county-seat version of Arkadelphia. It had begun in 1880 as a farm market (particularly for cotton and corn) and been incorporated in 1889 with a population of 400, where Arkadelphia had begun as a town in the late 1830s, incorporated in 1846, and had a population of 2,455 in 1890. The first three churches in both towns were Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian, and both had a denominational college. Leonard Collegiate Institute, organized in 1906, became Dodson College, then the Presbyterians took it over in 1908 and renamed it Manton College Institute. But where Arkadelphia sustained its colleges, that in Leonard closed the year that Manning moved to Clark County's seat. [Handbook of TX Online ([www.tsha.utexas/handbook/online/articles/LL/hj15.html](http://www.tsha.utexas/handbook/online/articles/LL/hj15.html)). Arkadelphia is Clark's county seat.]

Claude and Maybelle married September 21, 1915, after Claude graduated, and Maybelle left OBC to teach oil and ceramic painting from her home studio while Claude managed Patterson's, a local men's shop. He had tried government work, seconding as deputy his father's service as County Clerk from 1908 to 1912, and found it not to his liking. Nor had he been particularly taken by working in his father's livery stable. The first of their five children, a boy they named Joe Tom, was born in Arkadelphia June 30, 1916, almost exactly nine months after their wedding in Leonard—another reason for Maybelle to leave teaching. [<http://members.fortunecity.com/brattime/family/dat68.html>; Fannin County, TX Marriage Records Vol T (1913-1917), 407 records the license/certificate, attested by W.E. Davis, who the Southern Baptist Convention *Annual's* list of Texas pastors reveals briefly pastored at Leonard in the early-to-mid 1910s. Claude was 29 when they married and Maybelle 5 years younger, at 24. See also "Meador, C.J. and Mabel" in Grayson County Frontier Village *The History of Grayson County Texas* (c 1981) II:304.]

When Claude and Maybelle Meador left Arkadelphia in 1917, they went to Whitewright, Texas, where Maybelle's father Y.T. Manning offered Claude a job in their newly begun hardware and implement company with Maybelle's brother Lon. This town too would have been familiar: similar to Arkadelphia and a larger, more prosperous version of Leonard, fewer than fifteen miles to its southeast, but a much smaller version of Sherman, a dozen miles to its northwest and the Grayson County seat. Whitewright had been established two years earlier than Leonard in the middle of Grayson County's most fertile farming region. New York speculator William Whitewright purchased land in the path of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad, which was pushing its tracks through the county, and platted the townsite. Within a decade, the community had incorporated and, in 1900, boasted a population of 1,804 as well as Grayson College and the usual accouterments of small farm-market town life. Here Claude would become a pillar of the community, primarily through the proceeds of his International Harvester franchise and sharp eye for profit. [for information on Whitewright, see the Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/WW/hjw10.html>). Whitewright's population peaked in 1900 and settled at about 1,600-1,700 for the rest of the century. See also "Meador, C.J. and Mabel."]

Joe Tom inherited his father's business acumen and his mother's artistic proclivities (he studied art education at North Texas State, where he graduated in 1937, and taught art in Texas before joining the Army and after his return, until returning to Whitewright and the family business when his father became ill in the mid-1950s). And he seems particularly to have adopted Claude's reported belief that "he had a perfect right to take something if he needed it." [Honan, 148, 165. Claude's daughter, Jane, called her father "one of the shrewdest mule traders around." "Meador, C.J. and Mabel."] When he found himself briefly charged with protecting the treasures of Quedlinburg, he thought nothing of taking what he "needed" from the trove and sending the dozen pieces home to Texas.

Looting has always been part of wartime. Just as might allows an army to vanquish a foe, so might allows members of an army, particularly a victorious one, to take what they want. World War II's worldwide scope produced missing artifacts as disparate as the Peking Man bones in China and the bejeweled golden cover of the Samuhel Gospels which Joe Tom stole. Plunder is so acknowledged a part of warfare that the 1907 Hague Convention delineated what would be officially acceptable and what not. The Convention proclaimed state-owned movable property found on the battlefield "war booty" and open to appropriation, but it banned looting and spoliation. [See Elizabeth Simpson, ed. *The Spoils of War: World War II and Its Aftermath: The Loss, Reappearance, and Recovery of Cultural Property* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, c1997).]

The Allies began to realize the extent of the problem when, in April, 1945, members of the US 3rd Army discovered a mine in Merkers, Germany, containing hundreds of millions of dollars in German gold reserves and valuable artworks. It was quickly apparent that the Nazis had systematically looted assets from individuals and institutions all over Europe. [Between then and 1998, methodical efforts at restitution and repatriation continued on a scale that can only be hinted at by the fact that the gold recovered had a value of \$262 million. Most claimant nations finally relinquished their shares of the gold still held in trust to the Nazi Persecution Relief Fund to aid Holocaust survivors. See Greg Bradsher, "Nazi Gold: The Merkers Mine Treasure" *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 1999 31 (1): 6-21.] But the US government was not blameless in the story of art looted immediately after the war. Captain Walter I. Farmer, head of one of the Allied Collecting Points (Wiesbaden) for art at the war's end, wrote the Wiesbaden Manifesto after receiving a telegram from "the highest U.S. Command" dated November 6, 1945, to send two hundred premier German artworks to Washington. [See Walter I. Farmer, *The Safekeepers: A Memoir of the Arts at the End of World War II* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000) for that part of the story. Thirty-two of the thirty-four Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Officers signed this protest against official looting, which resulted in the return of those 202 items to Germany and solidifying the principle of protecting cultural heritage, even in wartime.]

In such an atmosphere, with fighting over, it seems petty to quibble over Meador's dispatch of a dozen art treasures to Whitewright. But Meador had the training and taste to make the most of his opportunity, and the dozen pieces he sent home were exquisite ones that would remain in his parents' home or store—or even the bank across the street—for half a century except for the times that Meador took them to Dallas. He "liberated" seven reliquaries, supposed to contain, among other relics, some of Christ's dried blood, a hair from the Virgin Mary's head, and wax from an Easter vigil candle burned at the lateran basilica in Rome and blessed by the Pope; an ecclesiastical comb; two manuscripts; a crucifix; and a 1513 Evangelistary. One of the reliquaries, the "Reliquary Casket of Henry I," was a supreme example of Quedlinburg goldsmiths' art done in gold, ivory, and precious stones. Shortly before Meador's death of cancer in early 1980, his brother Jack and sister Jane had him declared legally incompetent and took control of everything he had—including the treasures he had looted almost four decades earlier. [Simpson and Honan both offer great detail about the treasures; Honan tells the story of the recovery more thoroughly.]

Beginning two years after Meador's death, his two siblings began trying to sell the treasures—all but the gold crucifix and a crystal reliquary flask shaped like a bishop's mitre, which never surfaced but were known to have been taken by Joe Tom. Some of the world's leading art and rare-book dealers failed to question the items' provenance, and none alerted authorities. Eventually, with the collusion of the Dallas Museum of Art, which "preserved" the treasures while they were being wrangled over and exhibited them for six weeks and celebrated the display they called "The Quedlinburg Treasury" in a stunning catalog, the

treasures returned to Germany after careful negotiating, a court case, and at least one payment of \$3 million by the German Kulturstiftung der Länder (Cultural Foundation of the States).

The court case drew international attention and established precedent for dealing with wartime loot now in private hands in the United States (and elsewhere). It was the forerunner of the move to repatriate artwork stolen abroad and acquired by American museums, whether stolen by the Nazis or by US soldiers during and immediately after World War II. It presaged the current Stolen Art Initiative by American (and other Western) art museums and creation, by almost fifty participating countries, of The Central Registry of Information on Looted Cultural Property 1933-1945. [See Anne R. Bromberg, *The Quedlinburg Treasury* (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art, 1991) for a full description of the artwork (save for the fact that it was stolen) and photographs of the Dallas Museum's display. The art world, as well as the general public, has followed all this avidly, as even a cursory look at indices or the Web will reveal. To see the Registry, go to [www.lootedart.com](http://www.lootedart.com). This debate over artwork looted in World War II brought to the fore the larger question of repatriating exemplars of cultural heritage to the nation of origin. Hence the law proclaiming that Native American artifacts belong to the tribe producing them rather than to the current owners, the discussion between the British government and that of Greece over the return of the Elgin Marbles, or the Egyptian government's efforts to reclaim all antiquities from abroad. The debate also has prompted museums to be more chary of pieces with doubtful provenance as well as to inventory their collections for such items already residing within their walls. The devastating results from US troops' failure to guard antiquities repositories during and after the Iraq invasion has only exacerbated the debate and concern.]

While the case had huge implications for the art world and issues of looted art, the story itself illuminates the debate, raging again now at the turn of this century, about the sources of virtue in American life. These theories of the source of societal virtue have seemed to center on rural values, on Protestantism, on education, and on females in America, particularly on women who are more religious and more refined and more educated. Certainly rural women, by these lights, are more virtuous than their urban counterparts. And if there is any truth to these theories, then a man who was uncommonly attentive to his mother, who was educated in art, and whose interest in orchids bespoke his interest in "the better things of life" should have had a head start in moral virtue. A man born in a small town, a small town which fostered and sustained two small Protestant colleges, to parents born and reared in small towns, and who grew up in an even smaller one, should have been imbued with particular virtue. And above all a man should have special virtue when his father was a Baptist deacon and school-board president and his mother taught Sunday School in their Baptist church, art in college and at home, and whose name prompted memories in her children and grandchildren of the smell of turpentine and linseed oil and the heat from her kiln. Yet none of these oft-discussed sources of virtue was sufficient to keep Joe Tom Meador from stealing art treasures when the chance presented itself. None was sufficient to turn the local boy into a paragon of virtue.