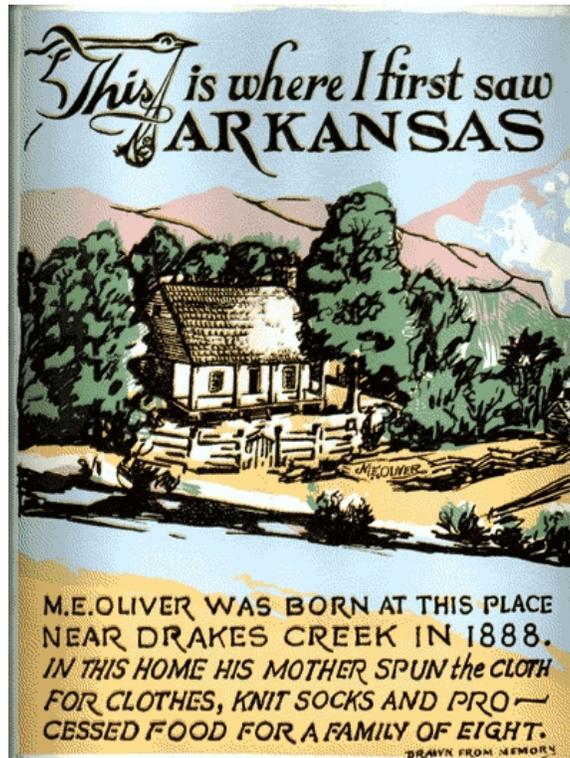


Donation of the Month

Object: M.E. Oliver's *Strange Scenes in the Ozarks*
Catalog #: 1992.62.1
Donor: Maupin Cummings

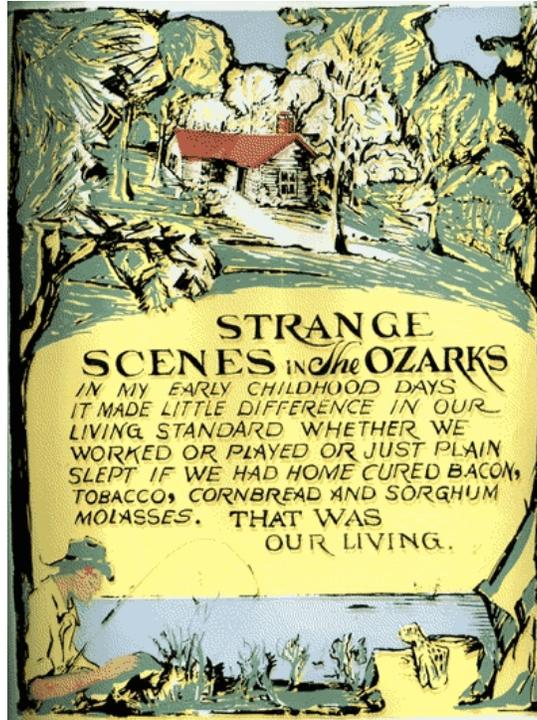


Like a parent with many children, we're not supposed to have any favorites, but we do. There are some things in the Museum's collection that appeal to us more than others. Maybe they remind us of a favorite childhood toy or they are marvelously splashy and spectacular. Or maybe they are cool, really cool, like M.E. Oliver's picture book *Strange Scenes in the Ozarks*.

Marvin Elmer Oliver (1888-1974) was born in a log cabin on Drakes Creek, a few miles southeast of Huntsville, Arkansas. His mother died when Elmer was a boy, so to lessen the strain on the family of eight he made a five-day, 160-mile journey, mostly on foot, to Viola, Arkansas, to live with relatives. As a young man he worked as a farmhand; later he moved to Oklahoma to work in a broom factory. Becoming interested in art, he signed up for a correspondence course only to have World War I interrupt his plans.

But art was never far from his thoughts. While serving in France as a company dispatcher and bugler with the 308th Battalion, 7th Infantry, he spent his spare time sketching. Even when he was wounded and sent to recuperate in a Little Rock hospital, he continued to sketch everything in sight. After his discharge he studied art as part of a vocational and rehabilitation program for veterans, eventually enrolling in the School of Fine and Applied Arts in New York City. Illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, famous for his "Gibson Girl" portraits, was one of his tutors.

After graduation Oliver worked as a free-lance commercial artist, illustrating book jackets and magazine covers for publisher Harper & Brothers and the *Magazine of Wall Street*. He also worked for a short time with a Dallas advertising agency before returning to his beloved Ozarks.



In 1927 he wed Bessie Simmons of Combs, Arkansas, and for many years the two ran a successful 140-acre fruit farm near Japton, southeast of Huntsville. But the remote location of the farm and the amount of money spent maintaining the dirt roads meant that the couple rarely made a profit. They moved to Huntsville in 1940 where Oliver went to work for the Selective Service. He later served as a state revenue inspector and as a municipal judge.

Oliver retired in 1954 and once again turned his attentions to art. Wanting to preserve the old pioneering way of life that was fast disappearing, in 1955 he self-published *Strange Scenes in the Ozarks*. Part oral history and part "Ripley's Believe It or Not," *Strange Scenes* used wonderful images and quaint lettering to convey an Arkansas that was. With its depictions of panthers, bears, saw mills, log cabins, shooting matches, and country folk, *Strange Scenes* is like an early Ozark version of the "Foxfire" series of books which examined the old-time traditions of southern Appalachia.

Getting the details right was important. Oliver relied on his memory and that of his elderly country neighbors to sketch out a puncheon house (a log cabin made from halved tree trunks), a mountain rascal (a one-poster bed built into a cabin's corner walls), and a tub mill (a perpetual-motion-like device which used water to continually mill grain). He even built a small model of the latter to make sure it would work; based on Oliver's design, the folks at Silver Dollar City built a larger version for their pioneer-themed amusement park in Branson, Missouri.

Strange Scenes has whimsical elements as well. A stork carrying a baby in a sling flies through the title "This is where I first saw Arkansas," above the image of the cabin where Oliver was born. An angler braces himself against the strong pull of the fish he's managed to land in the pond near "Hawkins Mill." A clown scampers ahead of a circus elephant in "Jumbo and Drakes Creek." And a man covers his eyes as a bucking steer plunges its rider into a stream on the book's final page, "Tale Ends."



The Museum's copy of *Strange Scenes* is inscribed by the artist to "Judge Maupin Cummings for the splendid service he has rendered to our community." It's likely that the two men knew each other through Cummings' position as a circuit court judge of the 4th Judicial District from 1946 to 1978. A University of Arkansas graduate, Cummings was a state representative and state senator prior to his Army service in World War II; after the war he served as a commander with two National Guard units.

We're so glad Judge Cummings donated his copy of *Strange Scenes* to the Museum. It's a marvelous document that provides a glimpse of some of this area's rugged pioneer traditions. But the book is also a wonderful testament to an artist who cared enough about history and creativity to leave behind a unique, personal, and visually pleasing publication.

CREDITS

M.E. Oliver's biography in *Arkansas Lives: The Opportunity Land Who's Who* (1965); Bob Edmisten's article "Huntsville Artist Re-Creates History with Painting" in the *Springdale News* (March 31, 1967); Dorothy Mitchell's article "Strange Scenes in The Ozarks" in the *Ozarks Mountaineer* (September 1967); the uncredited article "View from the Hill" in the *Ozarks Mountaineer* (December 1974); Andrea Mulder-Slater's article "Serigraphy" for the website "What You Need to Know About" at <http://arthistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa051200e.htm> (2000); and Robert Edmisten's article "Artist Recorded Ozark Way of Life" in the *Morning News* (December 24, 2000).