

OXFORD

FREE DVD * FREE DVD

FREE DVD

A WRITER'S DAUGHTER IN *DELIVERANCE* COUNTRY BY BRONWEN DICKEY



*** AMERICAN ***

THE MAN WHO TAMED KING KONG BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

PROUDLY PUBLISHED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ARKANSAS

THE SOUTHERN MAGAZINE OF GOOD WRITING

BEST OF THE SOUTH 2008

ODES TO THE BEST...
VANDALISM, PLAY, USED BOOKSTORE, PISTOL, AQUARIUM, FIREWORKS, CATHOUSE, COWBOY BOOTS, BASEBALL NOVEL, ACTOR, WAR ART, FRIDAY NIGHT, HOME REMEDY, DAIQUIRIS, YOUNG HUNTERS, ETC.



\$6.95 USA | \$7.95 CANADA

8 2 >



DISPLAY UNTIL SEPTEMBER 2008

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO PRISON FOOD BY SEAN ROWE

+ THE BEST DAMN SPORTS BOOK BY JOHN JEREMIAH SULLIVAN

The Collector of the Everyday

Visiting the hometown of the great New Yorker writer Joseph Mitchell.

On an April morning in 2005, I picked up the photographer Frank Hunter in Chapel Hill and drove a few hours to Fairmont, North Carolina, a town of twenty-seven hundred people. The trip took us from the hilly, red-clay Piedmont region down to the western edge of the state's black alluvial Coastal Plains, fifty miles from the ocean, where three hundred years ago the jungle was cleared for tobacco and cotton fields. Our goal was to find the grave of *The New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell.

Beginning with his childhood in Fairmont in the 1910s, Mitchell himself maintained a fondness for graveyards, and visited them often. In the beginning of his 1956 story, "Mr. Hunter's Grave," Mitchell wrote:

When things get too much for me, I put a wild-flower book and a couple of sandwiches in my pockets and go down to the South Shore of Staten Island and wander around awhile in one of the old cemeteries down there.... Invariably, for some reason I don't know and don't want to know, after I have spent an hour or so in one of these cemeteries, looking at gravestone designs and reading inscriptions and identifying wild flowers and scaring rabbits out of the weeds and reflecting on the end that awaits me and awaits us all, my spirits lift, I become quite cheerful, and then I go for a long walk.

Mitchell has been one of my favorite writers since I first read *Up in the Old Hotel*, his 1992 collection of documentary stories that were originally published in *The New Yorker* between 1938 and 1964. After dropping out of the University of North Carolina and moving to New York City in 1929 to become a reporter, Mitchell chronicled a tough and rugged yet sweet and comic urban vernacular that began to fade from New York and other American cities by mid-century. He explored New York's down-

trodden neighborhoods looking for ordinary people with stories that were all but ignored by the mainstream press of the day. He frequented the docks and seaports of South Street, the Fulton Fish Market. He haunted Bowery saloons, dank restaurants, and the back alleys of downtown Manhattan and the outer boroughs. He found and wrote about a street preacher, a bearded-lady sideshow performer, the owner of a flea circus, bartenders and ancient patrons at Irish taverns, a Dutch shad fisherman on the Hudson River, Russian gypsies, a colony of Caughnawaga Mohawk steel workers in Brooklyn, a dance club for the hearing-impaired, an Italian seafood restaurant owner on Fulton Street, and African-American oystermen on Staten Island. His writing had subtle traces of what he called "graveyard humor," influenced by the Mexican broadside artist José Guadalupe Posada and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

The writer and former *New Yorker* editor Charles McGrath once wrote that Mitchell told his stories in a voice that was "at once classical and vernacular, that seemed to come out of nowhere (or maybe the part of nowhere that Twain also sprang from).... If Mitchell wasn't the single best writer who ever appeared in *The New Yorker*, then it was a tie between him and E.B. White."

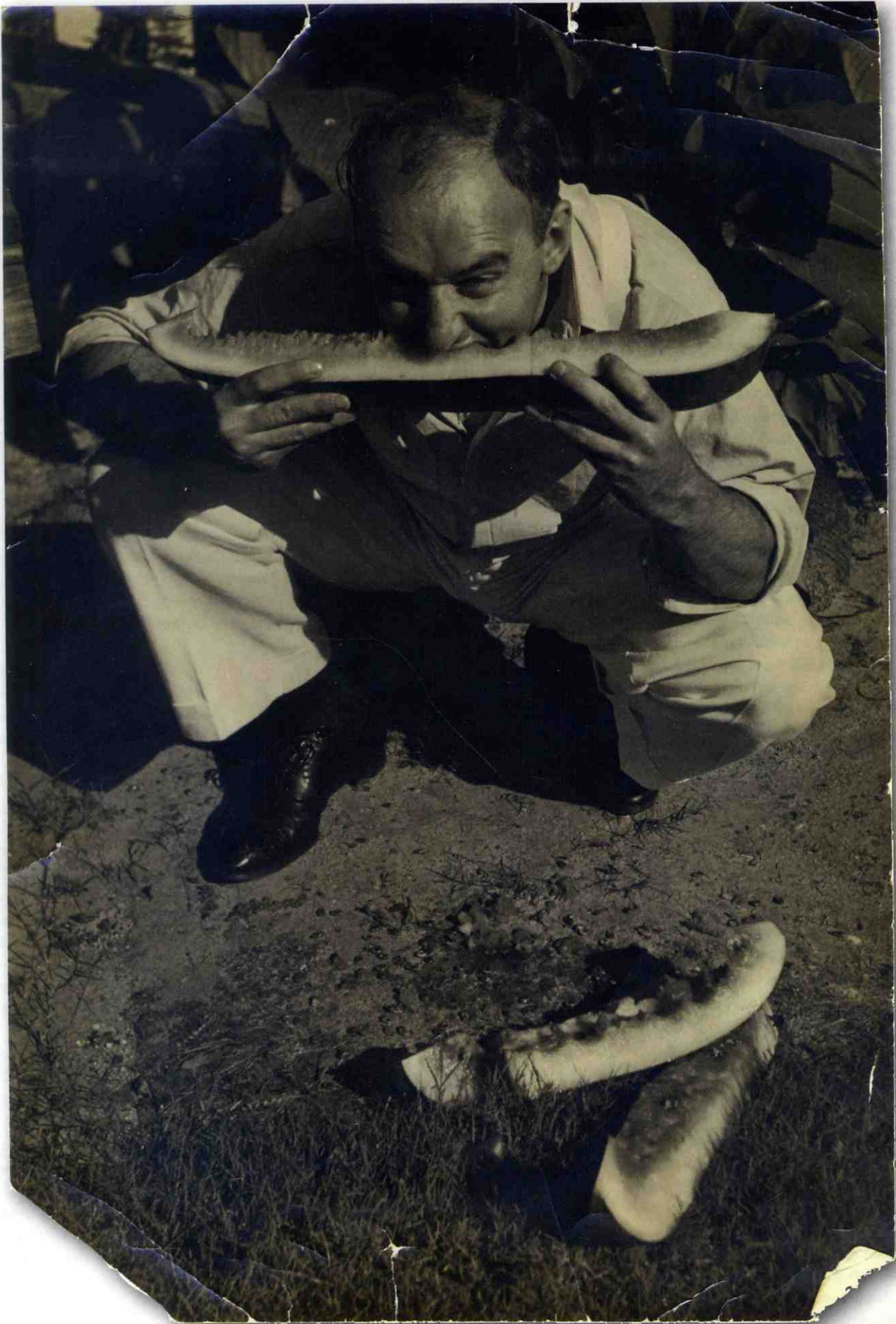
Mitchell's legend is deepened by his mysterious failure to publish any writing after his last story appeared in 1964, when he was fifty-six years old. For another thirty-two years he still reported to his *New Yorker* office every day, always looking dapper in a jacket and tie, with a newspaper folded under his arm, and a fedora or straw hat. He was heard tapping the keys of his typewriter behind the closed door of his office but nobody seemed to know—or ask—what he was up to; he never submitted another piece for publication. After Mitchell's death, his longtime colleague Roger Angell wrote, "No one made jokes about him, or expressed ill temper about him; there was pride, in fact, about working for a place that would

indulge such an epochal oddity. The piece, when it came, would be worth the wait." But the piece never came. This conspicuous absence may have been Mitchell's ultimate graveyard joke.

Mitchell's method of amplifying the everyday through journalistic detail underpins his 1956 story "Mr. Hunter's Grave." George Henry Hunter, eighty-seven years old when Mitchell interviewed him, was a renowned cook, an amateur naturalist, and the caretaker of a historic cemetery in Sandy Ground, Staten Island, a black community founded around 1850 by freed slaves. The founding men of Sandy Ground all worked for white oystermen, and the women did laundry for white families. Eventually, the Sandy Grounders saved money and bought sloops and started their own oyster businesses. When Hunter moved there with his mother in the 1880s, the community was teeming, but by the time he crossed paths with Joseph Mitchell in the 1950s, the community had all but disappeared. The water had gone bad from pollution around the turn of the century and, in 1916, the New York Department of Health condemned the oyster beds when cases of typhoid fever were traced to the oysters. Hunter was one of the last survivors from Sandy Ground's heyday. He remembered the old oystermen, the people buried in the cemetery, the food they ate, and he knew the habits of every plant and bird that lived in Sandy Ground.

Early in the story, Mitchell asks Hunter whether a wild flower called "pokeweed" is poisonous. Here is his response:

It's the root that's poisonous, the root and the berries. In the spring, when it first comes up, the young shoots above the root are good to eat. They taste like asparagus. The old women in Sandy Ground used to believe in eating pokeweed shoots, the old Southern women. They said it renewed your blood. My mother believed it. Every spring, she used to send me



out in the woods to pick pokeweed shoots. And I believe it. So every spring, if I think about it, I go pick some and cook them. It's not that I like them so much—in fact, they give me gas—but they remind me of the days gone by, they remind me of my mother. Now, away down here in the woods in this part of Staten Island, you might think you were fifteen miles on the other side of nowhere, but just a little ways up Arthur Kill Road, up near Arden Avenue, there's a bend in the road where you can sometimes see the tops of the skyscrapers in New York. Just the tallest skyscrapers, and just the tops of them. It has to be an extremely clear day. Even then, you might be able to see them one moment and the next moment they're gone. Right beside this bend in the road there's a little swamp, and the edge of this swamp is the best place I know to pick pokeweed. I went up there one morning this spring to pick some, but we had a late spring, if you remember, and the pokeweed hadn't come up. The fiddleheads were up, and the golden club, and spring beauty, and skunk cabbage, and bluets, but no pokeweed. So I was looking here and looking there, and not noticing where I was stepping, and I made a misstep, and the next thing I knew I was up to my knees in mud. I floundered around in the mud a minute, getting my bearings, and then I happened to raise my head and look up, and suddenly I saw, away off in the distance, miles and miles away, the tops of the skyscrapers in New York shining in the morning sun. I wasn't expecting it, and it was amazing. It was like a vision in the Bible.

This passage contains elements of everything Mitchell loved to write about: remembered people, remembered places, inventories of local names of things—often things to eat—that were learned through custom and habit, and a little bit of harmless human folly that might be part and parcel of those habits.

When “Mr. Hunter’s Grave” ran in *The New Yorker* in 1956 it contained 12,056 words. Over nine thousand of those words were directly attributed to Hunter as quotations. Does anybody really believe that George Hunter said those words verbatim, as Mitchell quoted him? No. Mitchell worked before portable tape recorders were readily available. His practice was to find a suitable subject—someone with a prodigious memory for local history and lore—and befriend that person. He would make repeated visits over a period of weeks or months or even



years, and then write up his encounter as if it took place last week. This is why Mitchell's voice seems to “come out of nowhere,” as Charles McGrath put it. It originates from Mitchell's varied subjects, but is blended implicitly with his own cast of mind. This is also why Mitchell worked so slowly, publishing only fourteen pieces during 1944–1964, the two decades of his prime.

If Mitchell took some liberties with the words of his subjects in the name of journalism, does it matter? Thomas Kunkel, the Dean of the University of Maryland's College of Journalism, thinks not. He is currently working on an authorized biography of Mitchell, a follow-up to his acclaimed biography of founding *New Yorker* magazine editor, Harold Ross. “Looking back, some people knock Joe for conflating language,” said Kunkel, “but he was dead accurate in a larger sense of Truth with a capital T. The underlying truth in his work was never in question. Those people he wrote about were those people as he rendered them and no one ever complained.”

Today, Fairmont is a fading tobacco and cotton town typical of the coastal plains of North Carolina. According to the 2000 census, the population is fifty-nine percent African American, thirty percent white, and ten percent Native American. The town's economy has been bludgeoned by the constriction of the tobacco industry, the mechanization of farming, and pressures from foreign imports of textiles and frozen seafood. In stark contrast, there is tremendous suburban affluence just two hours away in the Raleigh-Durham/Chapel Hill area—the Research Triangle, a beacon of the so-called New South. But in Fairmont, the once-vibrant small-town economy is as gone as Mitchell's New York City street vernacular.

In a 1992 interview with Michael Skube of the *Raleigh News and Observer*, Mitchell compared his beloved seaports of New York City to the bustling Fairmont of his youth: “God-a-mighty, it was like home,” he said slapping his knee, “all that activity. It was the damndest thing. Something about it reminded me of Bulldog Avenue and those fish cafés (in Fairmont).” Bulldog Avenue is now called Center Street and its intersection with Main Street is the heart of downtown Fairmont. When you consider that a writer as attentive and careful as Mitchell once compared them to New York

City's bustling seaports, the emptiness of those streets today is haunting.

I knew from several publications that the Mitchell plot was in the Floyd Cemetery in Fairmont, and when Frank and I drove into town finding the plot took us fewer than fifteen minutes. I'm a native of North Carolina's coastal plains myself, and I had a clear image of what I thought Mitchell's gravesite would look like. This wasn't it. I was stunned by how banal it was. The Mitchell plot is in a field wiped clear of trees on the outskirts of Fairmont, in the suburbs—if a town of twenty-seven hundred can have such a thing. The oldest gravestones I found had burial dates of 1948, but most were dated from the 1970s onward and many of the tombstones still have a glossy sheen, not a weather-worn venerable look. There were no majestic elms or oaks or pines with roots splayed into the burial field, or with Spanish moss dangling from their limbs. There were no stone outcroppings breaking ground and harkening to a prehistoric age, and no thickets for rabbits to burrow. Any native wildflowers that sprouted would certainly be mowed by a riding lawnmower. Across the street there wasn't a pre-Civil War church but, instead, a prefabricated, corrugated-metal shell of a warehouse. I doubted that Mitchell would have sought out this cemetery for one of his therapeutic walks. Later on, I was surprised to learn that Mitchell did, in fact, choose this resting spot for himself.

I stared at the graves and thought about Joseph and his wife, Therese, returning to Fairmont every summer, knowing they would be buried there. I wondered if Joseph's father, who had been critical of his son's choice to become a journalist, ever asked Joseph, during the period in which Joseph was silent, if he was working on new pieces for *The New Yorker*. I wondered if Joseph's father ever realized that his son's work might be influential enough to inspire a pilgrimage decades later—two grown men driving over a hundred miles to see the family gravesite and pay their respects.

Frank and I left the cemetery somewhat disappointed, and we drove into downtown Fairmont looking for a place to eat. We went into Bill's B-B-Que, which was situated in a doublewide mobile home about a half-mile from downtown. We walked in around 2:30 P.M. while the owners were cleaning the restaurant between the lunch and dinner hours. Chairs were on tops



of the tables to ease sweeping and mopping. As we stood at the counter waiting for our barbecue sandwiches, I felt a tug on my shirt and a little African-American girl in pigtails, probably seven or eight years old, said, "Mister... mister... can you help me with this chair?" She was the daughter of the restaurant's owners and she had just arrived from school and needed a place to do her homework. I took a chair off the top of the table and set it down for her. She thanked me, sat, and opened a book, still barely tall enough to see and reach over the tabletop.

We left Bill's and went downtown, to the corner of Main and Center streets, where Mitchell recalled the fish cafés of Bulldog Avenue. There wasn't another soul in sight in any direction, nor any cars. I knew the address of Mitchell's childhood home—on Church Street—and I knew it had to be within a three-block radius of downtown. In these little towns, Church streets are usually off Main Street, and marked by a majestic church on the corner. I'd already spotted the First Baptist Church only three blocks away, so I figured that was it.

As Frank and I sauntered down Main Street, we heard the clippity-clap of horse hooves. We turned and watched, flabbergasted, as a black mare drew a hearse right past us. There was no funeral procession, just two black horses pulling an empty black carriage hearse and two drivers in top hats and tails. Frank was able to get two pictures of the hearse, thank goodness, or no Mitchell reader would ever believe what we had seen.

In "Mr. Hunter's Grave," George Hunter describes a funeral he remembered in Sandy Ground, Staten Island in 1912. It was the funeral of Susan Walker, a mainstay in Hunter's church:

I remember Susan Walker's funeral very well. There used to be a white man named Charlie Bogardus who ran a store at the corner of Woodrow Road and Bloomingdale Road, a general store, and he also had an icehouse, and he was also an undertaker. He was the undertaker for most of the country people around here, and he got some of the Rossville business and some of the Pleasant Plains business. He had a handsome old horse-drawn hearse. It had windows on both sides, so you could see the coffin, and it had silver fittings. Bogardus handled Susan Walker's funeral. I can still remember his two big black hearse-horses drawing the hearse up Bloomingdale Road, stepping just as slow, the way they were trained to do, and turning in to Crabtree Avenue, and proceeding on down to the cemetery.

The horses had black plumes on their harnesses. Funerals were much sadder when they had horse-drawn hearses. Charlie Bogardus has a son named Charlie Junior, and Charlie Junior had a son named Willie, and when automobile hearses started coming in, Willie mounted the old hearse on an automobile chassis. It didn't look fish, fowl, or fox, but the Bogarduses kept on using it until they finally gave up the store and the icehouse and the undertaking business and moved away.

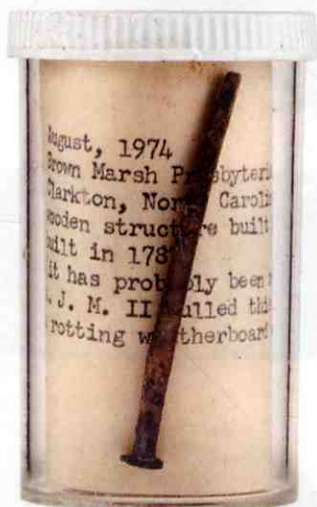
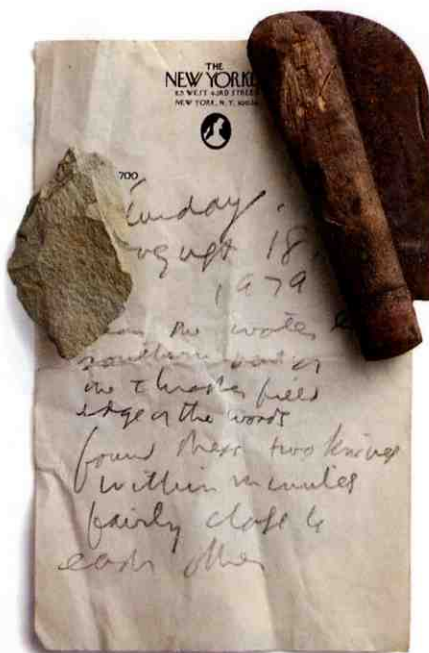
Several days later, I learned that the hearse was heading to the funeral of Mrs. Willie Mae Townsend, an African-American woman who had died a few days earlier at age seventy-four, survived by her husband, William Townsend, their six sons and six daughters, and twenty-three grandchildren, and ten great-grandchildren.

After encountering the hearse, we walked down Main Street toward Church Street. On the way, we passed Mr. G's Convenient Mart and we went inside for sodas. The two men behind the counter appeared to be Middle Eastern. Frank picked up a can of chemicals that was for beard removal on African-American skin. The can was rusted and looked like it had been there for twenty years. I asked the store attendants how long they'd had the store. "Seven years," one of them said with a significant accent. "Where are you from?" I asked. "Chicago," one of them answered. "Is that where you were born?" The other one said, "We're from Jerusalem." One of them asked us with a hint of hope in his voice, "Are you looking to buy some real estate down here?"

Frank and I finally made it to the house on Church Street, where Mitchell grew up. We were standing in front and Frank was taking pictures of the house when a minivan pulled up and a middle-aged woman with kids rolled down the window. "Can I help you?" she asked. "A famous writer used to live in this home," I said. "We're doing some research on this writer."

"That was my great uncle," the woman said. She was Laura Mitchell Borchert.

I showed Mrs. Borchert my business card and she escorted us next door, where she



introduced us to her father, Jack Mitchell, Joseph Mitchell's nephew. In 1937, Jack had been born to Uncle Joseph's brother, Jack, Sr., and sister-in-law. Jack moved to New York City in 1961 to study art at the Art Students League and the New School and he visited Uncle Joseph's apartment on West 10th Street often.

Jack told us stories about his uncle. "Even as a kid I think Uncle Joseph was obsessive about collecting knowledge and investigating things," Jack said. "His father was different. He was very smart but in a practical and utilitarian sense. You have to remember that Joseph's father was born in 1881. Back then they didn't have schools around here. When you were old enough, you went to work. Joseph was born in 1908 and things were a little different by then. His mother made sure he had plenty of books to read and he read everything. My father used to tell me that Joseph and my grandfather sat in rocking chairs on the front porch and would be at each other's throats arguing with each other about politics. Joseph would get so upset he'd kick the spindles out of the banister on the front of the porch."

When I asked Jack for his theory on why his uncle had stopped writing, he said: "He didn't stop. He wrote all the time. He wasn't writing articles, but he was writing. What he did was he started collecting things, objects, all kinds of objects that he found in New York or down here, and he wrote notes telling where he'd found the things and what they were used for."

In the early 1960s, Mitchell returned to the streets and back alleys of New York to collect thousands upon thousands of objects. Mitchell collected forks, spoons, and china from old restaurants; doorknobs; dozens of keyhole covers and pulls; rusty iron signs, glass bottles and broken bottlenecks; hundreds of screws and nails and bolts; bricks; fragments of tile; wires that he ripped out of decaying walls; stovepipes; water spigots; and other remnants of the past. Mitchell also visited the farms of Robeson County outside Fairmont where he collected Native-American arrowheads and pottery shards, stones, and even handfuls of dirt, which he poured into medicine bottles or envelopes.

Mitchell wrote notes and tied them with string to the corresponding objects, or he'd insert the object and its note into a jar or medicine bottle or a box.

In a seminal forty-page spread in a 2004 issue of *Granta* magazine, the writer Paul Maliszewski and the photographer Steve Featherstone displayed thirty samples from Mitchell's collection. They showed an ordinary stone with an attached note in Mitchell's script: "[S]tone (possibly hammerstone) picked up in the Hog Swamp field (Britt field, soybeans) August 1973 (picked up by Jack II)."

One note with a pair of metal spikes read: "Spikes from bldg at corner of Broadway and WPI (were used in masonry—brick or stone I don't know which, but they had mortar on them), three fleurons, four rosettes from Corinthian column up to second floor of second Broadway bldg from the WPI corner."

On a piece of *New Yorker* letterhead that accompanied a brass doorknob and a broken screw, Mitchell typed: "mutilated screw that came out of the MUNICIPAL BUILDING doorknob/see if I can find one to replace it."

This collection was, in a sense, a continuation of his literary project: to remind us that the ordinary is exotic, important, and worth careful attention.

It was getting dark. Before we left, I asked Jack Mitchell about the men from Jerusalem who ran Mr. G's. "They are Palestinian," Jack told me. "They are good folks. Their kids are in the schools here and from what I understand they are terrific kids. Last year the wife of one of them took their kids back to Palestine to see her parents—the kids' grandparents. And when they landed in Jerusalem they were put in jail for, I think, two weeks before they were put on a plane back to Raleigh-Durham. They never got to see their family, the kids never saw their grandparents. Can you imagine?"

On the way out of town, Frank and I stopped at Shirley's Diner, which we'd noticed earlier from across the street at Bill's B-B-Que. Shirley's was also located in a doublewide mobile home. Inside, we enjoyed two heaping plates of beef stew and mashed potatoes. I noticed hanging on the wall by a door in the back of the restaurant two clear plastic bags full of dry, brown tobacco leaves. When I asked the lady behind the counter about their significance, she said, "This is tobacco country. We're expressing our support for the farmers around here, that's all. It's our lifeblood."

About a mile from Shirley's Diner, in the Floyd Family Cemetery, there's an inscription on Joseph Mitchell's gravestone, taken from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73: BARE RUINED CHOIRS WHERE LATE THE SWEET BIRDS SANG. 🐦

