SPOTLIGHT: JOHN W. PAYSON

John W. Payson was a Trustee from 1975–2011, and served as Chairman of the Board from 1981–1988. He retired this year, and has been given Emeritus status. The interview printed below was first published in our newsletter in 2006, and we thought it warranted another look on the occasion of John’s retirement.

SKOWHEGAN: How were you introduced to Skowhegan?

JOHN PAYSON: A girlfriend of mine named Joanie Adams told me about this wonderful arts school in Maine that I really ought to get to know, and my sister Sandra knew Jack Eastman. I ended up going out with Sandra and Jack Eastman, and Jack gave a good sales pitch for the school and so the next thing was, I had a meeting with King Cummings and he invited me to join the Board.

S: How has Skowhegan kept you engaged for 31 years?

JP: It’s the people! The reason you stay involved is love! I do love what goes on up here. It’s electric. It’s people giving of their innermost self to this school.

S: Are there any experiences with Skowhegan artists over the years that stand out for you?

JP: The most laughs I got was from the “moo” girl. She had these little boxes and you’d squeeze them and they’d do different things. And she bought a whole bunch and altered them so they sounded like cows. And she made costumes of cows and got other participants to wear these costumes and walk around the campus, going “moo, moo, moo.” And she made it down by the field and the cows came over and she’s mooing and the cows are mooing and her friends are mooing—it was a real happening!

During another summer, I was also impressed with a tent-like structure a Native American participant had constructed on the upper field. Because the demands and differences among the student body tended to naturally separate them at the start of the session, this artist invited the participants to enter the tent in diverse groups and place at the base of the tent pole an item which would symbolize either their ethnicity or religion and speak to the others on its meaning to them. In the end, the participation of each artist and their contribution of personal symbols brought them closer together.

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S: You have listened to a lot of the artists’ lectures over the years, are any—for better or for worse—particularly memorable?

JP: How about if I do one of my least favorites first? John Waters… that’s not my cup of tea. Favorites? Louise Nevelson! She was a wonderful one. She gave this superb lecture and at the end of it, she is standing on the stage, surrounded by students, I mean in awe, these kids are! And she is having the time of her life. She loved young people!

S: Did you know any of Skowhegan’s four Founders personally?

JP: Sidney [Simon] I got to know very well and adored. He was delightful—a character—he loved telling stories. I remember he told me one story: one of the New York School artists, [Frank] Stella, had come up as a Visiting Artist and he gave this talk to the kids. About what a hard scrabble life it was to be an artist. Sidney said his sneering started, and built up almost to a crescendo because parked outside was the car he’d arrived in, a brand new $110,000 Ferrari! I never knew Bill [Cummings], but everything that I hear about him was all that that man cared about was the School, the good of the School. These guys, they had a dream that was very unusual, saying, “let’s start this school for artists by artists,” and from the very beginning got some of the top people involved. So we can never forget Cummings, Simon, Cutler, Poor.

S: Do you think they would be happy with Skowhegan today?

JP: Oh yes!

S: What advice do you have for new Skowhegan Trustees?

JP: You want Trustees that love the School. I would tell people that, you know, it’s a grand place.
Tell us a bit about your passion for art.

JP: I never studied it formally, but both of my parents’ families collected, and my mother owned an art gallery in Long Island and part of another in Palm Beach. She was a serious collector and her family had collected. She collected mostly European art, impressionism, post-impressionism, modernism. My father preferred marine or sporting art. I have a Winslow Homer print that was owned by his uncle if I recall, along with a letter from Winslow Homer—kind of an annoyed letter at the uncle for apparently not paying for a painting and more or less saying why don’t you give me the painting back if you don’t like it and I’ll give you a print instead, or sell you a print, and I guess that’s what happened because I have the print, not a painting. Our house often had artist visitors, one of which was the Art Deco painter Charles Baskerville, who designed an entire powder room off my parents’ Manhasset entry foyer. So I was, and am, interested in the arts as a dealer/collection myself.

Are you on other Boards?

JP: Yes. I’m on the Florida Arts Council, where we oversee the giving of all the State monies for the arts. I’m on the President’s Advisory Committee for the Arts. My favorite outside of Skowhegan is the Cleo Head Transportation Museum (Rockland, ME), which is old aircraft and airplanes and automobiles, which is my hobby, I collect vintage cars and memorabilia.

How has Skowhegan enriched your life?

JP: You get inside people’s souls, here. And as such, you open up your own soul. And it’s the only environment I’ve ever seen that’s like that. Unless you talk about a shrink’s office, and there of course, you’re paying for it. I treasure my time here.

Are there enduring friendships that you have made through Skowhegan?

JP: I was going to pull your chain and say no, I never had any social life here, it’s strictly business. But since I’ve already said you open your soul here, that ain’t gonna fly! Mildred [Brinn, Trustee]—I adore her. She’s absolutely one of my favorite people on the face of this earth. I was already friends with David Driskell before I came here, but I think Skowhegan has strengthened our friendship over the years, working together for the same cause. He’s one of my greatest friends today. Anne Arnold I see. Lois Dodd I see. Yvonne Jacquette we see. I consider them friends. Others I did for a while—Janet Fish, although unfortunately I don’t see her and Charles anymore, but I really enjoyed our time together. So yes, there are friendships that I have that relate to the School.

What would you hope for the future of Skowhegan?

JP: I think we’ve got to continue the outreach to South America and Europe. I’d like to see we grow from that standpoint. I don’t think I want to see us grow in terms of student body. You can get much bigger and it loses its panache. You know, several times we’ve had Trustees ask us to look into expanding. And I think that would be a mistake. I think this school is a gem just like it is.