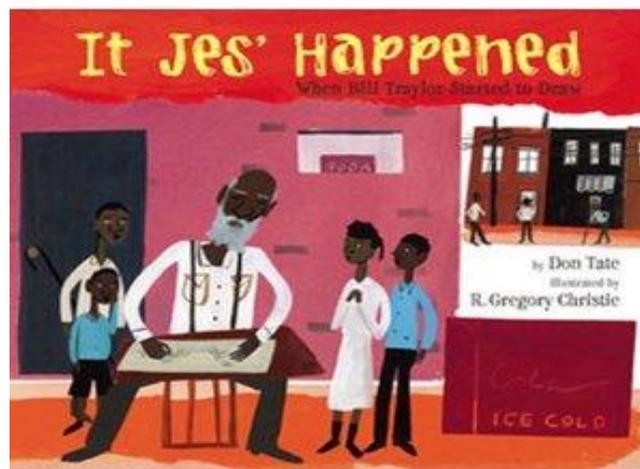


An Activity Guide for

It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw

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Discussion Questions

They jumped into the cool river water and waved at the steamboats passing by. Without realizing it, Bill saved up memories of these times deep inside himself.

1. A memory is an image, a joy or sadness, a thought that is stored in the mind, a specific thing remembered long after the event took place. Imagine that you were Bill Traylor as a child, and discuss his memories of:
 - a. Being a young child working in the fields alongside his family.
 - b. Taking his master's last name instead of his father's.
 - c. Swimming in the Alabama River with friends and family.
2. What are your memories of being a young child?
3. How are your memories similar to young Bill's?
4. How are your memories different than young Bill's?

They rebuilt their home and continued to work the land for many years. Bill saved up memories of these times deep inside himself.

1. After the Civil War ended Bill Traylor's family opted to sharecrop their former masters' land. Instead of leaving the farm as freed people, they chose to remain on the farm to work and share the profits of their labor with their former master. Imagine how this situation affected young Bill.
 - a. Do you think that he might have wanted to leave and make a life of his own?
 - b. Do you think he was glad to stay and work in a familiar place, one that he had always called 'home'?
 - c. What would you want to do if you were Bill Traylor during that time in his life?
2. The Traylor's lived in a violent place during and after the war. At various times Southern and Northern soldiers attempted to and eventually succeeded in destroying their farm.
 - a. What kind of memories would Bill keep inside of him during this angry time?
 - b. How do you think Bill's family felt during this angry time?
 - c. How would you feel if you were Bill Traylor back then?

Some animals even had personalities that reminded Bill of people he know. Bill saved up these memories deep inside.

1. Think about the different personalities of animals. Do you know of someone whose nature is similar to a certain animal?
2. Think about a snoozy, sleepy cat. Know anyone like that?
3. What about an active, silly puppy?
4. A pesty gnat? A graceful swan? A noisy rooster?
5. How would you draw these images?

With praises of joy, they clapped and raised their hands to the sky. Bill saved up these memories deep inside.

1. Imagine being joyful and happy in worship, like Bill's family was.
 - a. What sounds would you hear?
 - b. What colors and shapes would you chose to express happiness?
2. In contrast, what colors and shapes would you use to express sadness?
3. How would you draw these images?

He missed his family, his farm, his animals. Deep inside he found all those saved up memories of earlier times.

1. What do you think about Bill Traylor becoming an artist so late in his life?
2. Where so you think his talent came from?
3. From where did his inspiration come?

Bill's pictures danced with rhythm unlike any drawings Charles had seen.

1. Why do you think Charles Shannon took an interest in Bill Traylor?
2. What do you think Charles Shannon saw in Bill's drawings?
3. Do you think he saw the history of one man, or of a nation of people, unfolding with each drawing?
4. Why do you think Charles Shannon worked to preserve Bill's artwork? To showcase his art in prestigious galleries?
5. In what ways were Charles and Bill similar?
6. How were the two men different?
7. In what ways are you similar to Bill Traylor?
8. In what ways are you different?
9. In what ways are you similar to Charles Shannon?
10. In what ways are you different?
11. What do you think Bill Traylor was trying to say in his art?
12. Are you listening with your eyes? And in your heart?

“Where I’m From” Poetry

Bill could not contain his memories. One day in early 1939, he picked up the stub of a pencil and a piece of discarded paper and began to pour out his memories in pictures.

The inspiration for Bill Traylor’s folk art came from 85 years of memories. You, too, have years of memories to use as material for artistic expression. In this lesson, we will make a list of your memories and craft a poem unique to you, much like the one printed below.

As you read the poem below, consider the world that the poet was born into. From the topics that she chose to include in the poem we get a sense of her interests, tastes, personality, and desires. It’s also interesting to note that she uses no capital letters in her poem. This is a stylistic choice made by the poet, much like folk art was a stylistic artistic choice made by Bill Traylor.

After considering Halle’s poem, why not create one of your own? Complete the Questionnaire found on page 6. Answer the questions listed as fully as you can. Then use your answers to craft your very own “Where I’m From” poem. Once your poem is complete, illustrate your memories in an artistic style all your own!

where i’m from

I’m from cub scouts
and demolay;
from tiddly winks,
black licorice,
and bazooka bubblegum,
from “squeeze my finger”
and “just try it – you’ll like it,”
from *harriet the spy*,
lacrosse, and blackberries behind the house,
from crosby, stills, and nash,
robison and friedman,
elvis,
and dinah washington.

I’m from thirty years in california,
smiles in a pink photo album,
the twinkle in your eye.

~ Halle Herz

Memories Questionnaire

Your Name _____

Age _____

1. What toys did/do you play with?
2. What sports and games did/do you play?
3. What were/are your hobbies?
4. What singers or groups did/do you listen to?
5. What celebrity or public figure did/do you admire?
6. What candy did/do you buy?
7. What was/is your favorite TV show?
8. What was/is your favorite book or series of books?
9. What was/is a saying or expression people use or were using when you were younger?
10. What did/do you want to be when grown up?

Reference: Atwell, Nancie. *Naming the world: a year of poems and lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Firsthand, 2006. 46-9.

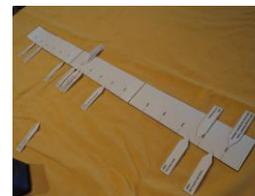
Historical Timeline

Bill saved up memories of these times deep inside himself.

Bill Traylor's incredible story is founded on the passage of time – from his birth to his death – and his artistic interpretation of life experiences he had buried deep in the folds of his memory. In this lesson we will note defining moments in this great man's life and in the eventual public awareness of his art.

Materials needed:

- Scissors
- Tape
- Timeline (page 7)
- Date/Event tabs (page 8)
- The book *It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw*



The Historical Timeline

Procedure:

- Read the story and the Afterword carefully paying close attention to the dates referenced.
- Print Timeline and Date/Event tabs.



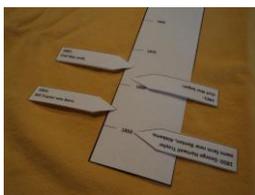
Cut out Timeline strips and Date/Event tabs.



Overlap strips using dotted line a guide and tape together.

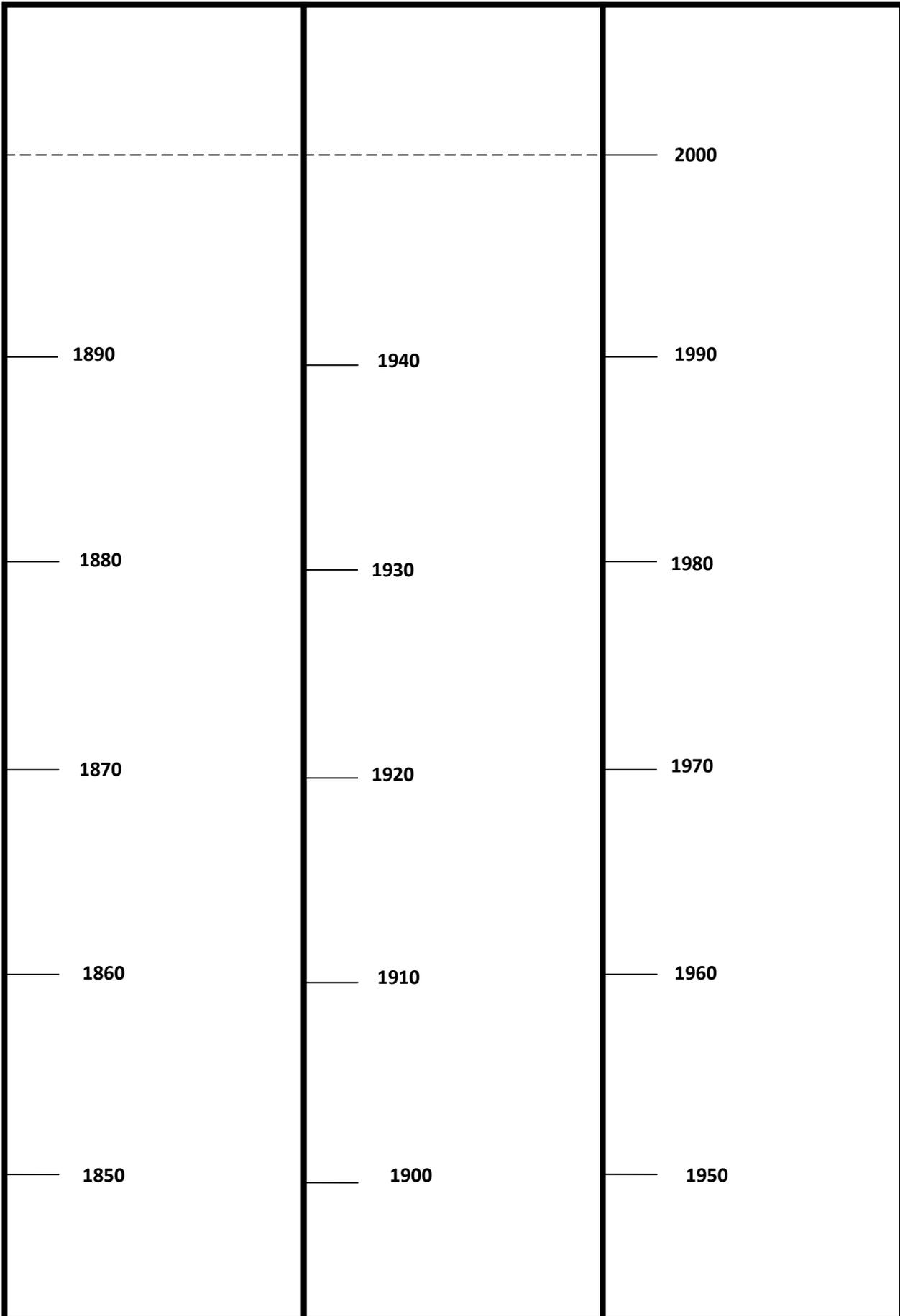


Lay out Timeline on a flat surface.



Read tabs. Note the date references on the tab. Place tabs near the appropriate year printed on the Timeline.

Thumb through book to verify dates and events.



1854:
Bill Traylor was born.

1949:
Bill Traylor dies at age 95.

1861:
The Civil War began.

1946: Charles Shannon completes
military service.

1850: George Hartwell Traylor
owns farm near Benton, Alabama.

1982: Traylor's work on exhibit in
Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC.

1865:
The Civil War ends.

1996:
Charles Shannon dies.

1914:
Charles Shannon was born.

1935: At age 81, Bill Traylor
became homeless.

1939:
Bill Traylor begins to draw.

1939: Bill Traylor meets Charles
Shannon.

1940: The show *Bill Traylor-
People's Artist* opened.

1942: Charles Shannon goes to
war.

A Letter from an Admirer

On a summer morning in 1939, a young artist named Charles Shannon caught sight of Bill sitting on his crate, drawing. Charles was intrigued as he watched Bill's hand make its marks, then fill them in. Bill's drawings danced with rhythm unlike any drawings Charles had seen.

An admirer is someone who has a high opinion of someone, regarding that person with respect, wonder, and approval. Charles Shannon was admirer of Bill Traylor's artwork, probably of the man himself, as well. He observed Bill's style of painting. He purchased supplies for Bill. He even worked to share Bill Traylor's work with the world.

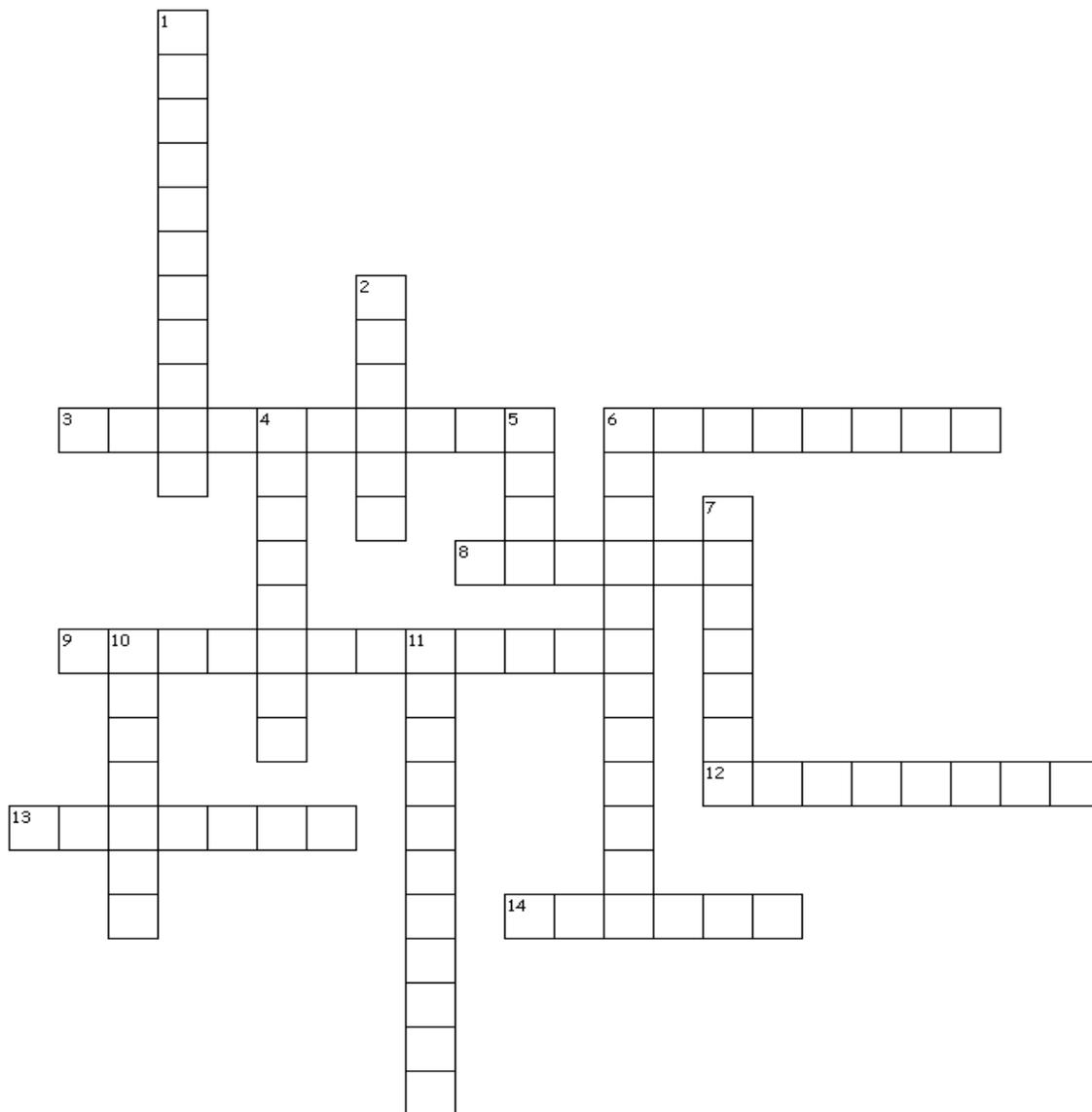
Imagine if you were Charles Shannon and you wanted to tell Bill Traylor how much you admired him as an artist and a human being. What would you chose to say to Bill? How would you express your feelings for him? If you were to write him a letter, what words would you use to let him know how much you admired him?

In this lesson you are to write a letter to Bill Traylor from Charles Shannon's point of view. Pretend that you are the young artist who first met Bill in 1939. Predict what Charles would say as he observed Bill Traylor created his folk art. If you were Charles, what would you say?

Print the following page and write a Letter from an Admirer – a letter from Charles Shannon to Bill Traylor. Feel free to flip through the pages of *It Jes' Happened: When Bill Traylor Started to Draw* to find inspiration.

Rather than writing a long, laborious letter, find one or two specific attributes Bill Traylor exhibits and focus on those. Are there particular aspects of Bill Traylor's life that you find interesting or admirable? What are they? Describe them in a way that you think Charles Shannon might have years ago.

Cross Word Puzzle



Across

3. Bill Traylor suffered from this condition
6. Place on Monroe Avenue that became Bill's make-shift art studio
8. Bill's father's name
9. City where the Corcoran Gallery of Art is located
12. Burned the Traylor farm
13. Admired Bill Traylor's folk art
14. Bill Traylor's wife's name

Down

1. Charles Shannon purchased for Bill
2. City of Bill's birth
4. Inspiration for Bill's art
5. Stubborn animal
6. Farmers that shared crops and profits with people who once enslaved them
7. Given to Bill by the U.S. Government to sell
10. State of Bill's birth
11. War that ended in 1865



An Interview with Author Don Tate



Dwayne Hills Photography

When did you first become interested in Bill Traylor?

An author friend, Diana Aston, suggested that I write about Bill. She had considered writing Bill's story herself, but felt it was my story to write. She mailed a newspaper article to me about Bill Traylor but at the time, I wasn't interested in or confident enough to write a story about anything. I pinned the article to a bulletin board above my drawing table. Two or three years passed before I found the courage to write Bill's story.

What aspect of the man is most compelling to you, his art or his life?

Bill Traylor's life as a slave, sharecropper and artist are all compelling stories. Definitely not easily separated. But I was most moved and inspired by his story of becoming not only an artist, but one of the most important artists of our time.

Bill Traylor was born a slave. He was emancipated after the Civil War. He lived out the majority of his life working on the very farm where he had been enslaved as a child. While that is a compelling story, it was pretty much the same story for most freed slaves of that time. The second part of Bill's story was not so normal. At 80-years-old in the 1930s, Bill had already lived beyond the life expectancy of most Black men. Yet at 80-years-old, he walked away from the only home he had ever known to live in an unfamiliar city, where he became a homeless street artist. An untrained artist whose works would later sell for thousands of dollars. Now that's a compelling story!

In what ways do you relate to Bill Traylor? As an artist? As a father? As a man?

When I began to research and study the life of Bill Traylor, I immediately felt a kindred spirit to the artist. With no formal training (or any artistic experience that we know of), Bill answered his calling to become an artist late in his life. I did, too. I've been drawing since I was old enough to hold a pencil in my hands, but I didn't discover a love of writing until just a few years ago, well into my 40s. And like Bill, I had friends along the way who helped me develop my new found love of words.

In the beginning, writing felt awkward to me, but at the same time I loved it. I wrote stories about my life, my childhood, experiences forgotten about long ago. Words have a way of finding your past. And so do pictures, as Bill discovered. When I write, I often find myself laughing, or frowning, or even on the verge of tears, as I recall childhood events. I imagine Bill did the same thing as he drew pictures from his life as a slave, as a hardworking sharecropper, as a homeless man living on the streets.

The term “Outsider art” or “Outsider artist” was new to me. The term was initially coined by an art critic as a way to recognize art and artists who exist outside the boundaries of the mainstream fine art world (art schools, galleries, museums). But the term has evolved to mean many things to many people. It's a muddled and difficult term to define, and even art critiques, scholars and museum professionals are at odds over the definition. Basically an outsider artist is a self-learned artist. An artist who does things his or her own way, unaffected or inspired by what is considered “normal” art in a culture or society. On some level, I feel relationship with that definition.

Charles Shannon took an interest in Bill Traylor and his art. Why do you think he did so?

Good question. In general, Charles Shannon, a white artist, took an interest in African American southern life and culture, something he later referred to as “black soul.” He photographed and painted African Americans. He lived and worked with African Americans. He went to their churches, partied with them late into the night. That was his thing. Charles once said of African Americans in his southern community: “I saw expressions of primitive souls. I came to love this land—the plants and the people who grew from it.” And while I don’t fully understand what was going on there, I’m happy that Charles stumbled upon Bill Traylor sitting along that Montgomery sidewalk. He helped Bill Traylor and that’s the most important thing.

Charles Shannon loved African American music—negro spirituals and the blues. He felt it had an expressive emotional power not found elsewhere. I believe Charles Shannon saw in Bill’s art what he admired about Black music: Emotion, spirituality, power, love, humor.

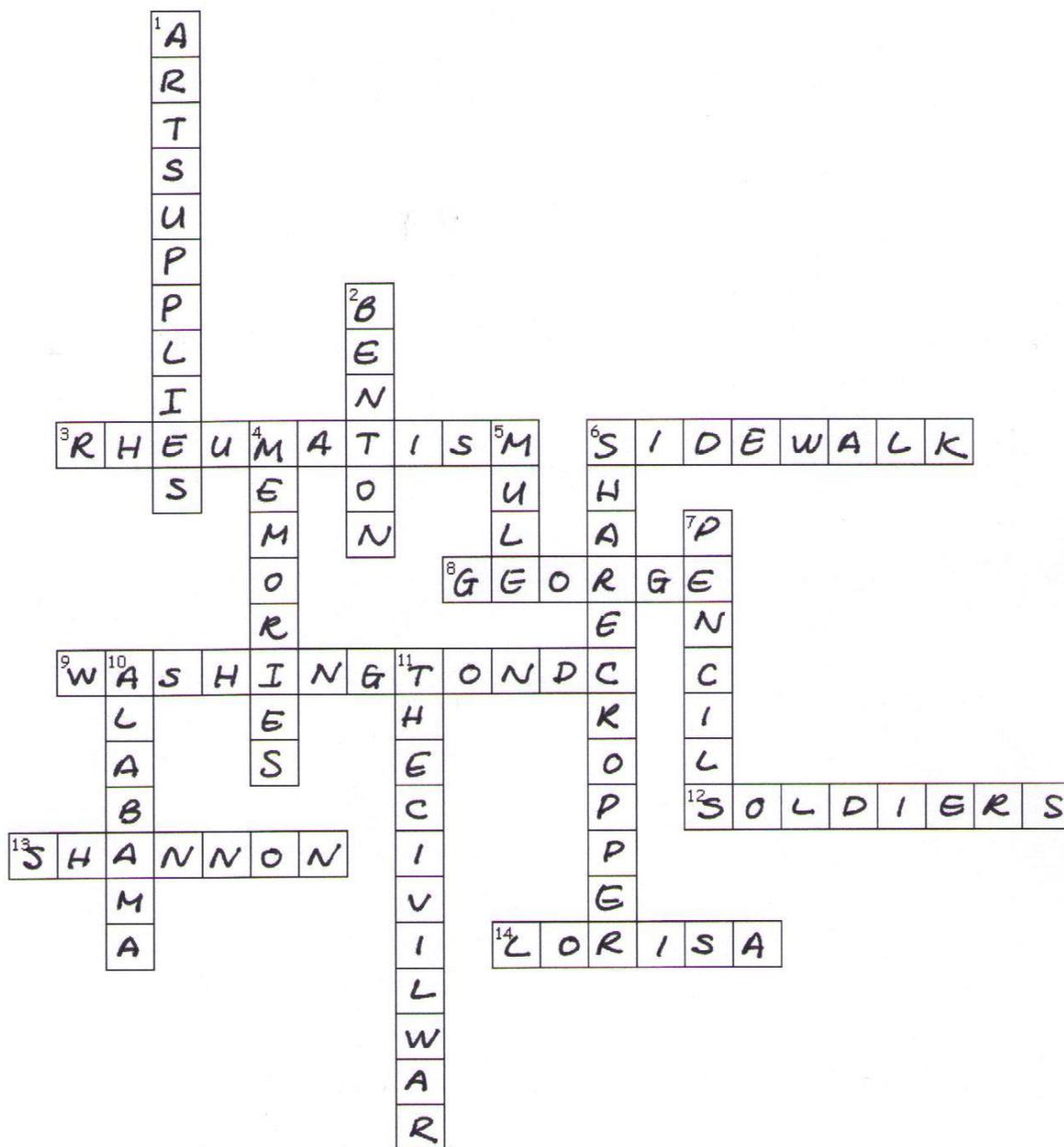
What is folk art?

Another term that is somewhat difficult to define, as it is closely related to the term “outsider art.” Here’s a way to look at it: Let’s say you have a group of people who live on a deserted island away from everyone else. Or it could be a group of people who live on the other side of town, way down in the valley and never come up. And let’s say these people make a lot of art. And let’s say none of these people have ever attended a high-falutin’ art school in New York or anywhere else. They create art from their heart, uninfluenced by current art trends or what the rest of the world says in real art. That’s folk art.

What impact has the study of Bill Traylor's life had upon yours?

I have a new story to share. Two stories, actually. One is the story of a humble man, an ex-slave who overcame great obstacles to do important things. The other is the story of another man, a longtime artist, who overcame great obstacles -- fear of words -- to do important things. Bill and me, we have a lot in common.

Cross Word Puzzle Answers



Acknowledgments

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www.debbiegonzales.com

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www.readerkidz.com