The Wooden Bed Frame

In 5th grade, after sharing a bunk bed with my brother, in a room the size of a closet, for 11 years, my family built a new house on the same property in which I was finally able to have my own room. Along with a new room, I received a new bed. By “new” bed, I meant new for me. I was told that the double bed frame that I had acquired was a family relic with a rich history. The only thing I remember being told about the bed at the time was that my great-great grandfather was born in a bed with my bed frame. Until now, I have not fully understood the significance of this frame and of my role upholding a piece of deep rooted oral history. At that time I could be compared to many of the men in “The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, for they acknowledged the physical weight of the things they carried during the war but did not necessarily understand the historical and emotional significance. Through this project I have come to have a greater understanding and appreciation for my family history and family members with this bed frame as a sort of symbol of our togetherness. Memories can live on without material objects, but this bed frame serves as a reminder of these memories. It makes me feel connected with the generations preceding.

The bed frame currently rests in my room at my parents’ house in Dakota, Minnesota. This frame is eloquently simple. The head board has a carved center piece and carved feet, about a foot high. The foot board also has a carved centerpiece with carved, symmetrical, legs on each side. All 6 carved points on the bed look like upside down bells with a small knob on top. When comparing this style to other Victorian style frames online, this one is much more simple than most, yet still has the elaborate carvings, and shape unique to this era of furniture. This frame was made out of walnut wood, so originally looked extremely dark, almost black. My grandmother has since re-finished the wood and it is now a light brown. The wood is very smooth with minor scratches which accentuate its age and rich history. This bed frame has not traveled with me as I moved to Eau Claire to study for it is very heavy and potentially fragile, in its old state. While the exact date and method of manufacture is uncertain, it can be assumed that this frame was hand-crafted sometime in the 1890’s, the late quarter of the century, for before that was the high Victorian era which had more fancy carvings. Furniture became less ornate later in that century. It can be assumed that this was a hand crafted piece because it was built before the Industrial Revolution where items such as this would be mass produced. During this time, furniture was crafted one piece at a time by a single skilled person. The value of the bed frame at the time that it was purchased is uncertain. I do know however, that my great - great Grandfather, who assumingly bought the bed, owned a bank that flourished before its demise in the Great Depression. He was a white, “middle class” business man, so I can infer from this information that the bed frame cost a significant amount. The bed frame now would be of very little worth. As they would say on the Antique Road Show, a valuable antique item must be kept in its original condition in order to be valuable. My bed frame was re-finished by my grandmother as well as widened and extended using metal rods by my grandfather. The frame had to be adapted to fit a bigger mattress and taller people as bed sizes and the size of people has shifted into the present day. If Dee, from “Everyday Use,” were to have this bed frame, she would disagree with adapting the frame to make it more functional.

In fifth grade, when I acquired this bed, I did not understand or appreciate the family significance of the artifact. I have now learned that this frame maintains family memories that date back at least five generations and a couple hundred years. My great-great Grandpa, William Grosser, who lived in Forest Park, Illinois, is assumed to have bought the bed-frame. His son, Walter, was born at home in a bed with this frame. At this time, William Grosser was the president of a bank and lived in a big home. When the Great Depression hit in the 1930’s, after his son, Walter, was grown and working with insurance, William’s bank went bankrupted and he was forced to sell his house and move in with his in-laws. He sold much of his belongings, but that bed frame, in which he held dear to his heart, was put into storage in his son’s house. His son kept the bed frame of his father’s and used it for his own children, one being my Grandmother, Bonnie. At the time, the bed was 48 inches and was between a double and single mattress size, if comparing it to today’s mattress sizes. Grandma Bonnie’s little sister, Jean, was born in 1932, and during their childhood, the two of them shared the bed.

My grandmother told me a story about how when they shared this bed, they would often stick chewing gum to the back of the head board. The girls would like to chew gum before bed, but their father insisted that they must not get out of bed for any reason once it was bed time. They were scared to get in trouble to go spit out their gum, so they began to stick it on the back of the head board. This simple memory has stuck with my grandmother because year after, when she was an adult in possession of the bed, she had to chisel off gum before re- finishing it. My grandmother does not see her sister Jean very often, but in listening to her tell this story, I could sense that she had wonderful childhood memories with her sister, and in thinking back, those stories cheer her up, bring her closer to her family.

My grandma took the bed frame with her from her childhood home when she moved to Hinsdale and married my grandfather in 1956. I asked her why she, and not one of her two sisters, acquired the bed. She explained that her sisters were in the least bit interested in the bed, but she was. I wonder why her sisters did not want the bed. Perhaps they did not understand the history of the bed. Perhaps to them, it was just a bed, like any other. This is one way in which this artifact serves as a functional object rather than one to be marveled. If one does not understand the history of the artifact, it can be assumed to be a standard, cheap, bed-frame, easily replaceable. Its worth is clearly in its history and stories and not in its appearance or material value. In referencing, “Everyday Use” again, Dee would probably react to the bed similarly to my grandmother’s sisters. Perhaps if the bed had been more exquisite, more materially valuable, they would be been interested in taking it.

The bed remained in my grandmother’s attic until the 60’s when the attic was turned into a bedroom so that her four children, as adolescents, were able to have their own bedrooms. At this time, the bed was then given to her only daughter, my mother, Laurie. She has very wonderful memories with the bed. Her cousin, Ava, used to visit my mom for entire summers and together they would share the bed. This became her bed throughout her entire childhood right up until she went off to college. After this, the bed went in and out of storage at her parent’s home, as my mother lived in small apartments that did not have room for the bed. For a time, my grandparents used the bed as their own when they first moved from Illinois to Wisconsin. After marrying my father, Jeff, my mother and him used this bed for a short time as well. This long historical tracing of this bed, being in ownership of many family members, leads me to the present day. I am extremely honored to be able to contribute to the history of this bed frame and hope to pass it on to my kids and my great grandchildren.

The bed frame is an extremely functional artifact. Each person of my family, whom possessed the frame at one time or another, used the bed. If it wasn’t being used, due to space constrictions, it was in storage. At no time was this bed a piece to simply be marveled at. The survival of this frame indicates that my extended family had enough money to not only buy it, but to keep it trough the great depression when many valuable objects were lost. At the time, to buy a bed frame like this meant one had a comfortable living at the least. It did not, however, ever be used in a guest bedroom. This indicates that my family could not afford to have an extra bedroom in their home. Additionally, this artifact reveals that the users were not only of a comfortable class, but also white, with a great deal of privilege.

It has been wonderful learning about the unique stories that have been passed on along with the frame. My great grandfather was born in it, my grandmother chewed gum with her sister and plastered it to the back of the frame, and my mom had numerous sleepovers with her cousin. Now, I have stories and will continue to create stories that will be passed along to the next family member with the bed. Most memorably, I remember sleeping in that bed with four of my best friends in middle school. There wasn’t so much sleep as there was laughter and elbows in faces and extreme body heat. Ultimately, because of these stories and the sentimental value, this be frame is priceless. There are some bed frames for sale, antiques similar to my own, that cost thousands of dollars. Because this bed was re- finished and elongated wit metal rods, it would not have the same value as those beds.

Through the analysis of the three stories, “The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, “Shoeless Joe Jackson,” by W.P. Kinsella, and Alice Walker’s, “Everyday Use,” along with a critical look at my family history with a historical artifact as the object, It can be concluded that the worth of a historical artifact is intricate upon its memories and stories. While, yes, my bed frame is heavy, the burden is not its physical weight. The burden is in memories and the people. For the men serving in the Vietnam War in O’Brien’s story, the tedious measurement and attention to the physical weight of the objects the men carried, is a very surface understanding. To be so focuses on that physical weight almost serves as an escape from reality, an escape from truly understanding one’s self and one’s fears. The Character of Ray in “Shoeless Joe Jackson contributes to this discussion of historical artifacts and emotional weight, as he wanted to build the baseball field, not for the baseball but for the memories. It seems almost impossible to separate an object from a feeling. The Characters of Dee and Maggie serve as the conflicting ideas about the significance of historical artifacts. My historical artifact, a wooden double bed frame, is, and should continue to be, treated the way that Maggie treated the quilt. This bed frame maintains its sentimental value through its practicality. It would not have such an interesting past if it were to just sit in a spare room, with the door shut. It would not have such meaning if a beautiful quilt was constantly draped over it. The stories, the meaning, are in the scratches, the gum wads on the back, the ruffled sheets. The bed frame brings me closer to my family, which makes the “things I carry” both emotionally, and physically (the bed itself), a blessing.