

## Introduction

The intersection of the American road, its roadside, and car culture is easily sentimentalized when the past is viewed from the present. Back then (whenever “then” was) things were simpler, better, even if they were not. “Back then,” automotive air conditioning was “4-40”: four windows down, forty miles an hour. In ninety-degree weather, that system’s inadequacies became clear at the first stop sign. Happily, modernization removed such hardships. Ushering in a new century, few things were unambiguously more modern than automobiles. Yet, mistiness persists with retrospection on the faded romanticism of yesteryear. The folksy, poetic corniness of sequential Burma Shave signs, for example. Or the cramped coziness of uninsulated tourist cabins set next to a lake—or a gas station. The same gauzy nostalgia explains some of today’s enthusiasm expressed by collectors bidding on kitschy, cartoonish early twentieth-century roadside advertising signs, replete with—by current standards—their amateurish persuasive appeals.

Maudlin memories, nurtured and held hostage by glossy, colorful coffee table–style books.<sup>1</sup> Their compelling photographs depict inventive and eccentric, curious, and occasionally perplexing roadside architecture. Visual magnets for passing motorists, the structural oddities were outlandish attractions intended as much for themselves as for what might be inside: something just weird enough to distract drivers’ attention from the task they were supposed to be performing and toward the purely optional curbside. And sometimes nearby, oversized lath and plaster figures—real or imagined—are stationary, mute observers beckoning the traffic flowing in front of them. High or low, “camp” as though intended to inspire Susan Sontag.<sup>2</sup> Memorialized in songs, movies, novels, pop art, and photography, the (mediated) world of yesterday’s cars, the roads they were driven on,

and the roadside driven by are symbols of American culture appropriated by the present even though experienced only in the past.

The story presented here revisits the intersection, this time further crowding it with additional avenues: a can of worms where narratives of transportation infrastructure and automobility (chapters 1 and 2) meet small-scale business and decorative arts history (chapters 3 through 9), funneling traffic in handcraftsmanship in a new direction (chapter 10). The intersection's location is in two small, upstate New York farm villages separated by about fifteen miles on the same highway.

Set in the economic turmoil of the Great Depression, an oil merchant initiates and underwrites two craft shops, Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith, employing a business model widely adopted seven decades later for a much different highway. The shops jump-start the evolution of Craft from lower- to uppercase and their makers from talented but mostly uncompensated amateurs to professional artists. Whereas most Craft histories locate Craft's elevation and professionalization to the third or even fourth quarter of the twentieth century, the narrative presented here identifies a much earlier date. The preposterous story is practically ripped from the script of a 1930s Hollywood screwball comedy, such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936),<sup>3</sup> though this one's ending was not predictable.

Like the movies, quirky characters populate the present story. They almost seem delivered by Central Casting: Clarence Wemett, a successful petroleum businessman who takes a fancy to homespun crafts created by artists he places on public display as though sideshow performers; Art Cole, a well-established metalsmith at a famous copper shop, who quits his job mere months before a quarter of the US workforce loses theirs; and Guy Daugherty, a potter with an exotic backstory who is persuaded to exchange temperate southern climes for wintry upstate New York. Theirs is a story of inefficient, labor-intensive handwork amid a highly mechanized and Taylorized industrial environment. Outwardly, the men resembled the ordinary but functional structures housing their workshops: Roadside Craftsmen's was an abandoned, century-old church, while Avon Coppersmith's was little more than a tool shed. Neither building was remotely like those in the coffee-table books referenced above. None of the actors set out to change the world, not even the small corner Craft occupied. Neither publicity-shy nor promotionally averse, their names pop up in news reports with some frequency. Each with a polychromatic biography, none sought self-aggrandizement. Newspaper stories about them serve the interest of the business enterprises, not the owner's or craftsmen's egos.

“Modesty” does not fully capture the essence of their personalities and the stoicism connoted by “reserved” may be a bit too deep into the cowboy movie hero stereotype: men who say little because they have little to say. In the end, Hollywood portraits of this story’s principals would be more impressionist than representational.

Portions of the story, like some of Hollywood’s, seem goofy. Goofy ideas are not a commodity in short supply nor is there much demand for them. Because, well, they are goofy and, unsurprisingly, frequently unsuccessful. In East Bloomfield and Avon, the two craft shops launched as the Depression tightened its decade-long grip on the nation. Roadside Craftsmen’s and Avon Coppersmith’s products appreciatively looked backward for aesthetic inspiration while the decorative arts experienced the tension of contradictory design styles: the comforting but derivative Colonial Revival and the jazzy, machine-age Modernism.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the businesses predicted a novel, if fanciful, optimistic model for consumer behavior. Hollywood-like in its contrariness, at precisely the wrong time for such things to happen, the improbable business idea achieves traction. The Roadside Craftsmen/Avon Coppersmith story weaves together threads from an anachronistic decorative arts style and those of a future composed of concrete and cars. The story’s craftsmen produce discretionary products for a consumer market characterized by 25 percent unemployment, and their story is a chapter in the prehistory of modern Craft. The shops’ longest-lasting contribution is the most subtle: a critical historical bridge that spans objects individually created for personal use to the work pioneering a national movement professionalizing, commercializing, and ultimately raising and enhancing Craft’s status.<sup>5</sup> Not single-handedly, of course. Rather, as part of a geographically dispersed, uncoordinated “movement,” one that did not coalesce until the postwar years and under the aspirational and financial stewardship of another New York visionary, Aileen Osborn Vanderbilt Webb. The shops’ narrow stories tell a wider one of Craft’s ascension and professionalization.

This is not a Great Man story. This is a Great Idea story, even if it is not entirely a Great *Original* Idea story. It is a risk-filled story of entrepreneurial capitalism begun in the depths of the Depression. The scenario looks backward to handcraftsmanship and for aesthetic guidance while staring forward to industrialism for profit, all encapsulated within a fraught context of economic uncertainty and a “bifurcated political and social environment.”<sup>6</sup> Clarence Wemett’s idea was manifested first at Roadside Craftsmen and then a few years later at Avon Coppersmith. Both were

located at two nearby, tiny dots on the printed map of western New York: East Bloomfield and East Avon, respectively. The two craft operations are connected by Wemett's initiative, his financial underwriting and business model, and by the conjoined New York Route 5 and US Highway 20. The shops share overlapping highway and automobility history, concomitant developments in personal leisure and its "expenditure" on travel and tourism, and each is an extension of an element of the American Arts and Crafts movement. It is a story tied to a novel form of small-scale commerce, staffed by talented craftsmen. Members of a dwindling set of professions, their skills and creativity were touted as virtues as much for the craft (products) as the customers. Work was a form of theater, where craftsmen performed for customers on a commercial stage. Only with the benefit of hindsight do we say this is a story about elevation: raising public awareness and the status of Craft from the unnoticed and ordinary to appreciation and reverence for the material culture, never mind the "art," created.

Despite the commonality of financial underwriter, their geographic proximity and chronology, and an identical if unarticulated business plan, the Roadside and Coppersmith narratives for the most part are not interwoven and instead run parallel and largely independently. Neither shop was the first or only such enterprise. Others existed elsewhere, some earlier, many more later, but few survived as long. That the two craft shops were driven by the same individual underscores his entrepreneurship and suggests the merits of product diversification for similarly motivated, affiliated industries: attracting the business of itinerant travelers. To be sure, a dash of serendipity was involved: in this case, being at the right place with a good idea but at seemingly the wrong time. For bad luck to become good required the company of nerve and the wherewithal to execute and sustain: because at the moment of inception, each must have been seen by most observers as risky silliness. Only by the privileged but selective clarity afforded by 20/20 hindsight would one judge the enterprises an idea benefiting from "good luck."

Wemett understood symbiosis well before the term became a cliché, and he knew enough to stay out of the way while staying the course. When launching his enterprises, the manufacturing world had evolved well beyond the point where crafts might have been understood as emblematic, Luddite-like revolutionary forms of protest against the imposition of the machine and the disposition of the craftsmen. The machines were firmly in place and the craftsmen long displaced. There are no heroic proletar-

ians toiling anonymously in dimly lit, windowless sweatshop factories, producing cookie-cutter products for customers they would never meet. In most ways, in fact, the small-sized cast of Wemett craftsmen's story is just the opposite. Roadside Craftsmen's and Avon Coppersmith's workplaces were created as though intentional responses to complaints about the nineteenth-century industrial revolution's depersonalization: where craftsmen were tied to their labor and as separated from their work as they were their customers. Both Wemett enterprises were designed to foster close personal relationships between craftsmen and customers; virtues mirroring precisely often discussed but rarely achieved elements espoused by American Arts and Crafts—the early twentieth-century design movement underpinning Roadside and Coppersmith but that had long passed from popularity.

The story begins with Wemett's late-1920s "tin can" tourist road trip to the American South, a fortuitous excursion that inspired both Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith. On the road, Wemett became fascinated by a demonstration of clay throwing and pottery making. "See-it-made" became the marquee feature he emulated on Route 20—New York's throughway before there was a thruway. Coincidentally, the rural highway threaded between East Avon and East Bloomfield acquired federal status shortly before the two craft shops launched. Its two lanes, Wemett envisioned, would carry a caravan of cars, each filled with potential customers. "See-it-made" demonstrations at Roadside and Coppersmith would be magnets, Wemett believed, drawing drivers from the highway and into each shop as customers for the craftsmen. Italicizing the appeal, at Roadside Craftsmen, the potter and woodworker "performed" their craft-making outdoors during warm weather in the fresh air and under covered pavilions for all those who drove by to see.

This is much less a story about art and one more about commerce, though not at the sacrifice of creativity. For in the process, the two craft enterprises inadvertently nudged Craft's status upward. The story's commercial thread extends the contrarian impulse guiding the shops' establishment. The businesses commercialized traditionally home-bounded craft objects made of metal, clay, wood, and fiber—humble media used to produce functional products. Unbeknownst to those then working at their craft in the midst of the Depression, Craft was at a transformational point in its evolution, objects migrated from necessity toward luxury, albeit tinged with a hint of nostalgia. It was an ambiguous, somewhat uneasy place for creator as much as customer. Prior to the industrial revolution, after

all, “craft” was treated as a verb describing a behavior. Later it became a noun referencing objects people themselves made or traded other goods for in order to make living more hospitable, easier, and convenient.<sup>7</sup> In 1930, craft objects were neither assigned the label of “art” nor fit under its umbrella. But the establishment of the two businesses enabled, propelled, and empowered the transitional period for Craft well before the discipline, the work, and its media sought or were elevated further up the art hierarchy and to a museum’s pedestal. The commercial inspiration that produced Roadside’s and Coppersmith’s business success first relied on an appeal to and exploitation of customers’ better, loftier, other-directed motives and qualities: gift-giving. Second, to expand sales beyond the immediate ones, Wemett’s commercial acumen was combined with an intuitive appreciation for an emerging if not-yet-articulated theory of interpersonal influence. Together, they enhanced the size and reach of the craft shops’ customer base without diminishing the artistic impulse, all wrapped inside an environment where creativity was nurtured and channeled for profit.

Clarence Wemett knew his roadside businesses could not be sustained by relying solely on a local market. He speculated the provincial investment might draw interest from beyond the immediate communities. What would be the merchandise’s customer appeal, and how would his shops reach a wider market? His business model for the roadside craft shops predates the one widely adopted seventy years later for an even newer superhighway, the internet: grab a small portion from the huge volume of traffic flow. The craft shops, like the highway next to which they were situated, share an identical prophecy. Each anticipates what was expected to follow: travel and trade. Extraordinary as much for the economic audacity of their timing as the products each produced and the customers they sought, the two businesses survived and sometimes thrived. Both persisted through the Great Depression and a World War, as well as two dominant but divergent decorative styles; in Coppersmith’s case, it lasted long enough to welcome hippies. The initiatives were made possible by the foresighted oil vendor who saw business symbiosis among a recently adopted mode of transportation, a more recently paved, skinny highway on which to drive the cars, and a novel form of leisure recreation.

Not nearly as famous, despite being almost a thousand miles longer, US Route 20 was to New York State journalists and their readers what Route 66 was to everyone else in America: an iconic “Main Street,” a highway of commerce. Mostly a two-lane strip across the top of New

York, Route 20 was “Scenic” before the city people or Triple-A deemed it as such. Alas, Route 20 was never memorialized by a popular song; and the handsome men in equally attractive Corvettes who sped along its straightaways, banked into gentle curves, and downshifted to climb modest hills did so without the benefit of a TV show. Journalists, though, were undeterred by any perceived second-class status. Traveling Route 20, they later rhapsodized, was a “road to history” forming a “ribbon of memories,” one filled with “roadside attractions.”<sup>8</sup> Privileging the leisurely, Route 20 was well-suited “for travelers who want to stop and smell the roses.”<sup>9</sup> Mary Hedglon italicized Route 20’s historical significance for late-twentieth-century readers: “the nation’s only remaining [original] transcontinental highway.”<sup>10</sup> First a Native American trail, Route 20 became the principal route for American colonists’ westward expansion and New York’s commercial growth, one heavily populated with mineral spring spas, taverns, and cabin courts.<sup>11</sup> “Since the 1700s,” Hedglon wrote, “When white settlers started dribbling through,” the seventy-mile stretch where New York Route 5 and US Highway 20 are conjoined, especially, was “a shrine to retail entrepreneurship.”<sup>12</sup> Her six-part, 1991–92 series for the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* introduced readers to that space, the one within which the present work is also located.

Common to Routes 66 and 20 were roadside businesses. Initially mom-and-pop operations, the amateur retailers sought extra income. By the first quarter of the twentieth-century, businesses lining either side of the highways sprouted in optimistic anticipation of a new, numerically large group of mobile leisure travelers. “Auto-tourists,” as the noncommercial drivers became known, required service industries for their machines and themselves, as had the earlier stagecoach, canal, and railroad industries and their travelers. Soon, colonizing Routes 66 and 20’s roadsides were nonessential, peripheral businesses of seemingly every kind, tempting those passing by on their way to someplace else to stop. In the southwest, “tourist trap” craft stores catering to the itinerant purported to offer homegrown goods such as Native American weavings, jewelry, and ceramics. Tourists could bring a little bit of their travels home with them—mementos and souvenirs, empirical evidence of their vacations. Still earlier, in the east, the Shakers were both subsistence farmers and commercial entrepreneurs who sold seeds and herbs at roadside stands. Later, a secondary market emerged when antiques collectors prized their furniture and accessories.

In New York State, ideas were peddled at the roadside nearly as often as consumer goods. Mac Nelson’s “walking tour” treatment of US

20 across the state documents the remarkable number of establishments selling homegrown salvation, redemption, and political realignment.<sup>13</sup> Equality of the sexes was promoted at John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community, east of Syracuse and founded in 1848, the same year the road later marked as Route 20 carried conferees to the Seneca Falls convention on women's rights. The Brotherhood of the New Life (Brockton), established in 1867 by Thomas Lake Harris, sold hay, nursery crops, and fruit, in addition to socialism. Spiritualists took advantage of the traffic Route 20 delivered, including the Fox sisters in Hydesville<sup>14</sup> and those at Lily Dale, farther west. Methodist education took place at the Chautauqua Institution and in Palmyra, Joseph Smith launched his Mormon faith. What later became the Route 20 highway facilitated travel for Auburn, New York "conductor" Harriet Tubman's "passengers" on the Underground Railroad. Utopians, socialists, and religions of many sects and inventions, as much as commercial retail establishments were savvy about locating their physical footprint near New York's Great Road.

Even good, sensible ideas sometimes have to percolate before a confluence of discoveries, processes, and understanding converge for their realization. That imperfection or failure can follow preliminary, tentative attempts is as certain as the aphorism about finding love: You have to kiss a few frogs. Ancient Egyptian mathematician Ptolemy, for instance, is often credited as first to envision motion pictures. With a better understanding of optics, chemistry, and technology, Thomas Edison realized the idea almost two thousand years later. So, too, retail commerce beyond a manufacturer's physical geographic locality awaited developments and improvements in transportation and delivery systems, maturation of the persuasion industry, and, among customers, the affluence that affords disposable income. Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith drew business lessons, wittingly or not, from Arts and Crafts movement impresario Elbert Hubbard and other mail-order merchants, though largely without their mediated apparatus. The craft shops adapted earlier business models for merchandising and extended them to the peripatetic. By the third decade of the twentieth century, paved highways and the broad diffusion of automobile ownership personalized and liberated leisure from its once primarily homebound location: a customer base for roadside entrepreneurship Wemett's commerce in crafts at once democratized the product and professionalized its producers.

Road-building and paving impacted virtually every facet of American life, though this may be difficult to appreciate today. Contemporary con-



templation of the highways built long ago parallels how so-called “digital natives” think of the internet: “It has always been there, right?” Of course, neither highway nor internet *had* always been there. A glow of understanding for the wide significance of road development begins for some with the “Plank Road” street sign’s meaning. A short-lived, mid-nineteenth-century innovation in road surfacing, much more than an enigmatically colorful description, the sign once discriminated between the road paved with boards laid side to side like those at a seashore boardwalk and all the others that were little more than rutted, muddy paths.

While people’s leisure time and auto ownership both began expanding in the early 1900s, the proportion of passable highways lagged. “Outrageous” was one 1897 driver’s assessment of road conditions across upstate New York on what eventually became Route 20. Four years later, the founder of the Hudson Motor Car Company duplicated the trip, but took the Erie Canal’s towpath for 150 miles “because it was better than the roads.” As early as the 1820s, New York led the nation in turnpike building.<sup>15</sup> But, by 1916, little more than 10 percent of all American roads “could be described as ‘surfaced.’”<sup>16</sup> World War I military needs stimulated construction of improved roadways. President Woodrow Wilson signed the first Federal-Aid Road Act into law in 1916. (History repeats itself forty years later during the Cold War with the 1956 Federal Highway Act that created the Interstate Highway System.) Following the war, and with the initiation of road improvements, “what had been a trickle of tourists grew into a deluge.”<sup>17</sup> The twentieth-century novelty was the intertwined personalization of transportation, the integration of automobility on interconnected paved highways, and the availability of otherwise uncommitted time for people to combine the two.

Route 20 began as a private turnpike enterprise. Land speculators, seeking to profit from farmers anxious to expand the market for their crops, pressured the state to develop the road as an “opportunity to participate in commerce.”<sup>18</sup> Roadside service industries, including taverns, inns, blacksmith shops, and stables, emerged to meet the travel needs of the stagecoach’s passengers and animals: lodging, fuel, and food. Traffic volume on Route 20 increased dramatically and annually between 1930 and 1950.<sup>19</sup> Hard-surfaced highways led to ever more novel, discretionary forms of roadside retailing. By the early twentieth century, “Roadside strip development and billboards grew without control.”<sup>20</sup> Abetted earlier by the advent of railroads in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, tourism became an increasingly popular middle-class leisure activity.

Although roadside entrepreneurship was no novelty, the twentieth-century difference for its merchants was twofold: The inventory morphed from cast-off personal possessions that had survived personal utility and surplus crops to goods created specifically for sale and intended for profit to a customer base of itinerant strangers from remote locations. And instead of spontaneous, one-off events, roadside businesses meant continuous, predictable days and hours of operation for vendors as much as customers. The challenge faced by roadside businesses was their reliance on passing customers whose stops at their shops were rarely intended. Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith were places customers happened upon rather than sought out. Purchases were more spontaneous than intentional. The two crafts shops prospered without the supportive marketing, advertising, and publication muscle of Arts and Crafts movement merchandisers; theirs was not mass marketing, it was serendipitous, point-of-purchase salesmanship. The one Coppersmith and Roadside market discriminator was *how* its products were produced.

As with highway landscapes, handcraftsmanship is a source of nostalgic affection, appealing to old-time, preindustrial “traditional” virtues and values: quaintly primitive expressions imbued in equal measure with innocence and idiosyncrasy. “Craft” is also associated with utility and purpose, although at least some portion of craft work, like “art,” was perfectly functionless, created as robust acts of expression. “Just for nice” is a nineteenth-century Pennsylvania German colloquialism for objects made for the maker’s own pleasure irrespective of functionality.<sup>21</sup> Handcrafted products fluidly cross boundaries, muddling definitions among such post hoc categories as “folk art,” “naïve art,” “self-taught art,” “rustic art,” “indigenous art,” and “outsider art.” In each instance, the creator’s untutored status modifies the artifact’s significance. Traditional connotations of art are softened, diluted, or manipulated and the object’s form either “excused” or “explained” by the term preceding it. Nostalgia-motivated buyers—today’s or yesterday’s—of handcrafted work can alternately view their acquisitions as self-congratulatory lifestyle enhancers, status symbols, or as acts of philanthropy, demonstrating their support for the community and its “natives.” Handcraftsmanship may seem uncomfortably incongruous when nested adjacent to the very epitome of modern, industrial efficiency (the highway), as was Roadside Craftsmen and the Avon Coppersmith.

At the same time Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith peered into the future, anticipating a novel kind of customer, the two enterprises drew on established educational traditions and from an even older craft

“movement.” Coppersmith and Roadside are grounded in New York State’s history in crafts. The number of New York State Arts and Crafts operations is striking—and teeming with talent. Coy Ludwig’s exhibition introduced readers to New York products and people driving the Arts and Crafts movement, including smaller, more intimate manufacturers. The state’s educational institutions also emphasized commitment to craft by training talented craftsmen for the workforce: from Alfred University, one of the oldest clayworking college curricula in the nation and Mechanics Institute in the west, to Syracuse University in central New York and Troy School of Arts and Crafts in the east, and downstate at Teachers College at Columbia University and Pratt Institute.<sup>22</sup> But the Avon Coppersmith and Roadside Craftsmen enterprises were initiated at the distant cusp of the Arts and Crafts movement. By the time each shop was founded, the public’s taste in decorative art had changed. The most profound influence of Arts and Crafts on Wemett and his two craft shops was not the movement’s philosophy; it was on the products, product nationalizing, and craft’s customer base. At best, only aesthetic influences lingered.

Roadside Craftsmen and the Avon Coppersmith’s story connects the aesthetics and business of the turn of the century’s Arts and Crafts movement to Aileen Webb’s multipronged postwar activism on behalf of Crafts. Slowly, imperceptibly, Craft’s quiet migration began after World War I: some carpenters became woodworkers and some clay-throwers ceramists. Their homework became public work once it moved from occasional front-yard stands to permanent, year-round structures, including those at the roadside. Skill training in Craft, once guildlike and occurring exclusively on the job, evolved to formal education with Craft as part of a curriculum that could be taught, learned, and adopted as a lifetime career.<sup>23</sup> Craft’s professionalization occurred in disparate locations, and in fits and starts, until finally coalescing at midcentury under Webb’s generous umbrella. But Roadside and Coppersmith were founded well in advance of America House, Mrs. Webb’s all-craft Manhattan retail store.<sup>24</sup> Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith retained traditional handwork processes, eschewing the industrialization widely adopted by other industries. The shops contrasted with big-city department stores serving urban citizens who arrived by mass transit to purchase mass manufactured goods. Roadside and Coppersmith served unique products to individualized shoppers delivered singly in their automobiles.

The evolution and maturation process that led eventually to Craft’s enhanced status did not possess the organizational structure associated

with other, better-known social movements. Beginning in the 1940s and nearly single-handedly, Aileen Webb made it her life's mission to spearhead and underwrite the elevation of Craft. She legitimized Craft by linking together the seemingly ordinary with the undeniably exceptional. Her cue was the Arts and Crafts movement that overtly connected the formerly separate world of Art with Craft. There, each element cast a halo on the other, enhancing the other's legitimacy and bridging "the sometimes bitter antagonism between the 'fine' and the 'useful.'"<sup>25</sup> Arts and Crafts conveyed a democratic sense of accessibility and inclusion. The functionality associated with Craft would no longer be relegated or confined to the humdrum. Carefully designed and executed objects held aesthetic appeal without abandoning their utility. The hedonic, psychic rewards previously restricted to Art that was hoarded and jealously guarded expanded to embrace Craft, including its makers and owners.

As thoughtful as she was tireless, Webb adopted a strategy that took four complementary, integrated, and mutually reinforcing forms. She founded a professional organization to encourage collegiality as much as advocacy; a school to teach the Art and skills as much as how to earn a living at Craft; a store located at the heart of the world's retailing capital that exclusively sold crafts; and a museum to certify the objects' movement from sales and cupboard shelves to pedestals and vitrines. At the vanguard, predating Webb's initiatives by a decade, were Roadside Craftsmen and the Avon Coppersmith. They exploited the symbiosis of art and craft by positioning their products as gift items, an appeal to a sense of philanthropy and altruism embraced by all. Differently, the Roadside-Coppersmith Craft story is devoid of patronizing "wealthy people" as silversmith Jack Prip later dismissively if ironically noted about midcentury Craft work.<sup>26</sup> Whereas Webb had an agenda she sought to advance and fulfill, Wemett had a business and financial success as his goal. Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith's achievement advancing craft to Craft is that they did so unselfconsciously, for so long, and with the talents of so few.

It is unlikely Wemett or any of the Roadside or Coppersmith craftsmen were aware of the broader drama their narrative was part of and motivated: Craft's movement up the hierarchy and into the province of Art. Aileen Webb's advocacy on behalf of Craft was consciously driven. But a decade earlier, Wemett held no such plan. Any cognizance Wemett had that his craft enterprises were breaking new ground was in a way not so different from the string of gas stations he founded. His businesses exploited and served an emerging group of customers. The craft shops were extensions,

satisfying less the motorist's need and more the tourist's interest, or maybe their impulse. For Wemett, handcraft was a means to a business end for which the unintended consequences held more profound virtue. That Craft would see its status raised was a by-product of his initiative, not his intent. This is not to say Wemett was dispassionate about craft; the 1929 motor trip when he was inspired by see-it-made demonstrations belies any such notion. Recounting Wemett's role is less hagiography and much more an examination of innovation, entrepreneurship, and adaptation of business practices for the new age.

The received history of Roadside Craftsmen and Avon Coppersmith is fragmented and fugitive. Aside from products, neither left much from which to learn their stories. Though Coppersmith and Roadside each produced product brochures and what were generously defined as catalogues, they were issued with no apparent publication schedule and, most likely, were only reprinted when extant stock dwindled. But, as Tom Cole, son of Coppersmith's founder, remarked dryly, "The product line didn't change much."<sup>27</sup> No one alive today is a firsthand, from-the-beginning witness. Absent the architectural excesses found in coffee table-style books, their physical buildings, like the products they sold, were inconspicuous and unostentatious. Contemporary Route 20 travelers will find no physical evidence for one, and the other is so well disguised by renovations that passersby are none the wiser. A distant memory for a few, the structure housing Roadside's business goes unnoticed and is unfamiliar to most.

Much that is reported on the following pages is pieced together from scattered, brief, and often mundane reports in local newspapers. The papers were civic boosters and purveyors of minutia and trivia, as the professionalization of journalism as we now know it did not begin until about 1945. Community newspapers published columns devoted to happenings of local consequence and insignificance, liberally mixing the two. Bulleted "community notes" reported on day-to-day occurrences involving their citizens. Who visited whom, who had dinner where and in whose company, who traveled to this place or that, who had surgery or was recovering from what after how lengthy a convalescence: all of these events were itemized, often in Western Union style. Loosely arranged, often by locality rather than theme, the information was usually volunteered by the subject. Rarely was anything momentous reported: tragedies were few and triumphs (no matter their slightness) prevailed. The kind of chit-chat that might today compose a newsfeed on social media, perhaps without the pejorative associated with bragging. Byline columnists were

more stenographers than reporters and the columns a kind of over-the-backyard-fence grapevine given permanence by the printed page though intended for consumption as rapidly as their disposal. More a public diary, stitched together they form a selective, quasi-documentary snapshot of a community—or at least the literate part of the community who had the time to note the ordinary. A narrative of the two shops' emergence and persistence unfolds in snippets. Some story arcs doubtless remain invisible.<sup>28</sup>

Previously, Michael Clark and Jill Thomas-Clark published the only longer-form article related to the present study: it focused on Avon Coppersmith.<sup>29</sup> For a number of years, their column, “The Best of the Rest,” was a regular feature in *Style 1900*, a magazine serving divergent Arts and Crafts movement interests including commerce in period antiques, the enthusiasm of fans and collectors, and scholarship. “Best of the Rest” essays discussed second- and third-tier movement manufacturers and craftsmen: factories and figures just outside the spotlight occupied by better known brands and personalities. Noting their efforts, Arts and Crafts historian David Cathers called the Clarks “pioneers” for making visible “a vast landscape [of] unknown territory.”<sup>30</sup> The histories and biographies contextualized and helped readers better understand the work produced, no doubt heightening awareness, broadening appreciation, and improving commercial values for work otherwise glossed over. Unsurprisingly, the columns focused heavily on “the work”: objects and the techniques required to produce them, comparative aesthetics, and the critical lens through which to appreciate them. The Clarks' column exploring Avon Coppersmith was longer than most.<sup>31</sup>

Living in Western New York, I drive New York 5 and US 20 frequently and have passing familiarity with its roadside. The conjoined highway once connected important sites of natural and man-made invention: from photographic film in Rochester to sound-on-film in Auburn and between them the condo-sized nests built by ambitious osprey in the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge. Today, the towns and villages lining the road, once thriving pockets of prosperity, are little more than shells of their former selves. Their evaporated grandeur is documented by elegant, occasionally palatial homes that sell for bargain prices and downtowns of frequently vacant storefronts that no longer see the foot traffic that once made them retail magnets. Sad reminders all of prethruway years of abundance. Annually, for more than thirty-five years, I make the mid-August pilgrimage to the Madison-Bouckville flea markets. For one week, a carnival-like two-mile strip of Route 20 highway is bordered on either side with up to two thou-

sand antiques dealers under tents, while cruising collectors slow traffic to a crawl. An extreme, contemporary example of curbside commerce where both vendor and customer are itinerant.

Objects were my first point of contact with the present subject. Work by the shops popped up as often at antiques stores as yard sales. Typically modestly priced, the objects are little more than curiosities for most: tchotchkes with sketchy histories. I wrote about the American Arts and Crafts movement for a few publications and organized a modest-sized exhibition of work tied to Western New York.<sup>32</sup> Included in the exhibition catalogue is a black-and-white photograph of a pair of hammered copper bookends and a pen tray. All were worked in a woodgrain, hammered pattern; bore a nearly identical, dark brown patina; and looked to have been made by the same hand. But the bookends carried a circular impressed mark, “Rochester Metal Craftsmen/Hand Wrought Copper,” though the pen tray was signed “The Avon Coppersmith.” The catalogue’s thumbnail description of Avon Coppersmith correctly identified Arthur Cole and Walter Jennings’s involvement and their relationship to Karl Kipp and Roycroft, though erroneously reported the business’s lifespan. As I began the present project, I misread clues promising good but ultimately unfounded stories. “Jennings,” for instance, was the maiden name of Clarence Wemett’s two wives. A little knowledge went a short way.

Mostly, the present project is motivated by my perception of the nearly singular focus of much published about Arts and Crafts: objects. At a 2017 Buffalo conference,<sup>33</sup> I paraphrased another scholar’s comments on a different subject:<sup>34</sup> Arts and Crafts research has gone from humble beginnings to more grandiose beginnings. But it always seems to be making beginnings. The focus on objects and inordinate attention to stars, studios, and surface was at the expense of other avenues of investigation. To broaden the scope of Arts and Crafts research requires transcending what often is the initial attraction: “The Work.”<sup>35</sup> The present project shares an interest with two previous studies: the context within which the objects reside.<sup>36</sup>