

Visitor's Guide to the **Beer Can House**

*Annotated History of the Environment's Creation and
Guided Tour*

By Marks Hinton

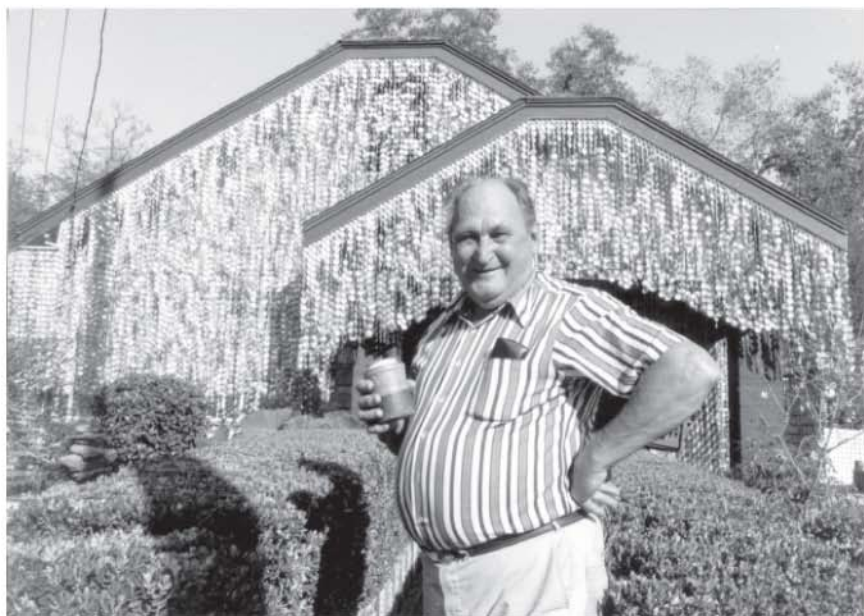


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The Beer Can House

222 Malone Street
Houston, Texas 77007
www.beercanhouse.org



A Permanent Site of
The Orange Show Center for Visionary Art
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History of the Beer Can House & the man who created it

John Martin Milkovich
1912 - 1988

“Some people say this is sculpture but I didn’t go to no expensive school to get these crazy notions.”

The Early Years

John Milkovich was born in Houston, Texas December 29, 1912 in his parents’ small apartment off Washington Avenue. His arrival was not heralded by memorable cosmic events like exploding supernovas or mysterious shimmering lunar rings. In fact, his childhood and most of his adult life were uneventful. There was no indication that this jolly, beer-drinking Houstonian would experience a creative epiphany in his retirement years. But his latent artistic talent, combined with a fervent imagination fused, erupted and manifest itself in a monumental work of visionary art that rivals any like it in the world. John’s Beer Can House has been praised by folk art collectors, museum directors, writers, photographers and film producers. It is one of Houston’s most beloved cultural icons. And yet this modest man often said, “I had no idea people would be so interested in beer cans. I wouldn’t go around the block to see it.”

Within a year of his birth John’s parents, John and Marie, purchased a lot at 319 Malone and began construction on a one-room house where the boy was raised. (John was to reside here until his marriage in 1940.) Young John first attended a “make-shift” school at Washington Avenue and Birdsall. From there he went to Roberts School (located in Camp Logan, a World War I emergency military training center located where Memorial Park is today); Stevenson Elementary (5410 Cornish); and left school after attending the 8th grade at George Washington Junior High (now demolished). During his teenage years he earned money as a golf caddie, landscaper and draper.

His father greatly influenced the impressionable boy, instilling in him the virtues of good character, giving a day’s work for a day’s pay and most important – securing a steady job. The lessons proved invaluable as John was to grow up during the Great Depression. The father suggested his son learn to upholster. John apprenticed at Hoiden Upholstery Shop, a neighborhood business.



In 1940 John was offered a job as an upholsterer for the Texas & New Orleans Railroad Company which merged into the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1961. He worked on passenger cars and Pullman sleeping coaches until his retirement in 1976. The ever-industrious John plied his trade at

Brook Mays Piano; Myers-Spalti Manufacturing Company (a manufacturer and wholesaler of furniture that offered upholstery services); and his old employer, Hoiden Upholstery, during lay offs and strikes against the rail line.

John and Mary

On May 19, 1940 John married Mary I. Hite. The newlyweds initially lived in a duplex in the Heights and then in a three-room house at 319 Birdsall. The elder Milkovisch owned a three-bedroom bungalow at 222 Malone which John and Mary rented until deciding to purchase the property in 1942. This modest house would eventually morph into our cherished Beer Can House. But that story will come later. John and Mary lived in the house the remainder of their lives, raising three children – Marcia, Ronald and Guy. While John worked on railroad cars, Mary was employed by Foley's Department store on Main Street as a beauty advisor in the cosmetics department.

John suffered a severe stroke in 1987 and passed away February 4, 1988. Following cremation, his ashes were scattered at his



beloved Beer Can House. In addition to the Beer Can House he is remembered by a memorial marker in Houston's Woodlawn Garden of Memories (1101 Antoine). Mary continued living in the Beer Can House until moving to an assisted living community in 1997. She died on March 18, 2002 at the age of 86. Mary also has a memorial plaque at Woodlawn.

Now, when we scarce have time to even note a passing, great epitaphs have become relics of the past. However, John unknowingly wrote one for himself when he said, "They say every man should leave something to be remembered by. At least I accomplished that goal."

"I don't think he wanted to mow the grass."

-Mary Milkovisch

The Genesis

In the beginning there was concrete. If John had a grand plan he never disclosed it. When asked about the ongoing transformation he said, "It's just a pastime. But sometimes I lie awake at night trying to figure out why I do it."

In 1968 the Milkovischs installed a patio cover in the back yard. John constructed a floor under it - creating a shady spot to have a beer after work. John collected marbles, at one time amassing almost 28,000. He purchased approximately 14,000 marbles from a local novelty shop and, over time, transported them home in his father's wheelbarrow, a vehicle about which we will learn more on the tour. Then he designed a whimsically colorful patio fence that he placed along the rear property line. He took 4-inch wide redwood slats, bored 5/8-inch holes and embedded 40 to 90 cat-eye marbles per slat. Mary grew quite fond of the fence saying, "When the sun would come up in the morning, the light would shine through the holes and the marbles would sparkle in multicolors." Unfortunately, this original fence was destroyed during Hurricane Alicia in 1983. However, John liked the marble technique and used it many more times as the metamorphosis of the property progressed.

A sidewalk connecting the patio to the drive was next. Then John turned his attention to the driveway. The front yard, sidewalk area, side yard and back yard followed. You will learn more about these projects on the self-guided tour.

Until his retirement from Southern Pacific in 1976 John mainly worked on the grounds and house after work, on weekends and holidays. Then free from his 8-to-5 job, he devoted considerably more time creating his monument. From

the start, the Beer Can House was a one-man show. Over the years many people offered assistance as well as ideas. John would listen, quietly nod and then continue to follow his own vision. John was an early riser. Usually awake by 4:30 A.M., he generally worked in the morning. Afternoons were saved for knocking back a few cold ones on the patio with Mary, friends and neighbors. Dinner was early, around 5:00 P.M. and he hit the bed around 6:30.

“I guess I just thought it was a good idea. And it’s easier than painting.”

The Epiphany

And then there were beer cans. John hated waste so he began to save empty beer cans – for 17 years, according to an interview he gave Joseph F. Lomax in 1983. He and Mary stored the cans in their attic and garage as well as the attic of his mother’s home on Malone and Feagan. “While I was building the patio I was drinking the beer. I knew I was going to do something with them aluminum cans because that was what I was looking for... but I didn’t know what I was going to do...”

John’s first efforts with beer cans were rather modest. He strung some together like people string popcorn on thread for Christmas decorations. Then he hung the garlands in the trees. He made an arch over the driveway with Budweiser cans but it did not last long. He tried hanging the plastic holders that wrap around the necks of a six-pack from the eaves of the house but shortly brewers changed the formulation of the plastic so it would deteriorate rapidly and not cause environmental problems. It was then he decided to use the tops, bottoms and pull tabs for curtains and the flattened cans as aluminum siding.



John never chronicled the “engineering methodology” for the Beer Can House

construction. Like every other idea he kept the plan in his head. Mary once said, "...he just started putting them up." After John passed away Mary was asked to recall what she knew of the process so it could be recorded for posterity. What follows is Mary's word-for-word description:

"John began to imagine various ways to use the beer can in his designs that would also serve a function. One of the first was to cut the ends off the can with a tile knife, cut them between the label, flatten them and stack them until he had a supply of several hundred. With the flat part of the can he stapled the four corners, using aluminum tacks to make sheets of cans about 2 ft. by 4 ft., which he used to cover the house like aluminum siding. He even covered some of the windows to help cut utility bills. While covering the house, he was accumulating can ends and pull tops. He developed a technique using a straight pin to tie the ends, tops and tabs together. On the pull tabs he would punch a hole on the tongue and using the straight pin, wire them together end to end and hang [them] in long streamers from the eave of the house to give the appearance of a curtain." (Editors' note: Dated photographic evidence indicates that, contrary to Mary's recollection, the curtains were attached to the house prior to it being covered in the sheets of cans.)

"The tops were special, in that he cut the inside from the rim, later wiring the inside to the rim, giving the appearance of a dangling ring. He would also wire them together in long streamers and hang them in various places to resemble a curtain. Some of the tops were also hung in the trees and on fences along the side of the property."

"The bottoms, being more sturdy and solid, required 24 to 20 AWG solid wire to secure end to end. These were hung along the front eaves of the house, which have become the symbol or recognition for the 'Beer Can House.' The ends can also be found in trees and fences on the property."

Guided Tour

“Well it’s different.”

The Tour

This tour consists of four parts. First we will learn about and have the opportunity to enjoy the yard art. Next we will cover the addition of the beer cans. Then we will visit the interior of the house and view the exhibits. And, for those who want more information, a final segment serves as a catchall for the “loose ends.”

Part 1 - Creation of the Yard Art

“All these crazy things come to me during sleepless nights.”

Suggested Route

Our tour begins in the patio behind the house. Just walk up the driveway and turn left into the backyard.

Before starting the tour, look at the 1968 photograph (page 2 of this brochure). It shows the house prior to John beginning work on his creation. The house at 222 Malone was just another indistinguishable bungalow among a neighborhood of similar homes. As you gaze at the house today, contemplate the magnitude of his creative genius.

Patio

This is where it all began. In 1968 the Milkovichs bought the patio cover you see here. John wanted a solid floor underneath so he purchased rectangular concrete stepping stones that he arranged in patterns. He painted these stones pastel colors. Some of the original paint remains today. In the spaces between them he poured wet cement that he decorated with marbles, brass and a doorknob he dated “1968.” The end result was this arte brut mosaic floor.

Rear Sidewalk

A curving sidewalk made of 10 of the same 12 x 24-inch concrete stepping stones was laid down connecting the covered patio to the driveway. The same construction process and decorative patterns were employed here.

Driveway

This was John's next project. Using techniques similar to those in the backyard he embellished the driveway and carried the process along into the front yard. He also began pouring his own concrete blocks. As time passed, John's patterns became more and more complex. In addition to squares and rectangles he added diamonds, ovals, shields, triangles, parallelograms and flowers. Also he expanded the choice of materials embedded in the wet concrete. First he used the wheelbarrow to transport colorful stones that he picked up along the railroad tracks where he worked. Look carefully at the drive, yard and concrete mounds and you will see bricks, oyster shells, rubber gasket cutouts, wood, wire mesh, broken glass and ceramics, indented winebottle bottoms and a second, smaller brass doorknob dated "1969." John inscribed the address twice in the drive. A third of the way up he wrote "222 Malone" with small black pebbles cemented in a galaxy of marbles. Where the drive meets the front sidewalk he added "222" in marbles that he surrounded in a larger concrete block decorated with black and tan stones.

Sidewalk Area

Between the curb and the front of the sidewalk he poured concrete and inserted rubber center cutouts from industrial gaskets and flanges. Skipping over the sidewalk he built a beer-can step capping it off with more cutouts. Over the years John placed a series of planters, a toilet seat and a cement turtle (all gone today) on top of this shelf. Behind this was the original fence (the rusted stanchions poking out of the concrete are all that remain). From the walkway to the front door to the drive on the south was a short picket fence decorated with inlaid marbles. On the north side he constructed a low beer-can fence that extended almost to the property line. Both of these gave the property a light, airy and open look that was destroyed by the bulky, unwelcoming security wall erected in 1989 after John's death. The beer can top gate was placed across the driveway at the same time.

Large Sidewalk Planters

In 1985 John placed these two large planters on the sidewalk in front of the house. Of course they contained his favorite ornamental plant, boxwoods. After covering the planters in flattened beer cans, he added enigmatic phrases made of cut out cans - ME YOU *SHE, OK NO GET *, HE IOU IT AM, etc. This is an example of John's quirky humor. The words are meaningless. "He just did that so people would ask," said Mary.

Front Yard

Much of 1970 was apparently devoted to the front of the house. Archival photographs show this area was completed by the end of 1971. John “flooded” the front with his hand-poured concrete blocks consisting of circles with marbles, rectangles with stones and filled-in areas with rocks, broken glass and gravel. One section of interest is the row John placed over the water main leading from the street to the house: These were all removable so there would be no destruction of his creativity in case of emergency repairs.

John erected planters along the driveway, the north side of the property (both later removed) and the edges of the sidewalk leading to the house. These planters were also made of concrete blocks imbedded with alternating patterns of black and tan stones, marbles of various colors and topped with wooden boards decorated with more inlaid marbles. (John later re-covered these tops with flattened beer cans and rubber cutouts). He must have been very proud of this creation because he signed it with his initials, JMM, on a block of the interior wall paralleling the sidewalk to the house.

It is in the front yard that decorated concrete mounds first appear. Conical in shape, they are embedded with larger rocks and marbles and topped with a different type of rock. These creations are part of the Beer Can House mystery. John never spoke about the mounds, leaving their rationale as a subject for speculation among visitors.

Ideas have ranged from the zany (John was a closet Zen Buddhist) to the more likely (the form appealed



to his sense of creativity). There is reason to believe that the genesis of this initial mound stems from John having concrete left over after a day's work. Not wanting to waste it, he formed the cone and decorated it with the supplies at hand. Most likely he returned to the mound later, inserted an iron rod into it and mounted some of the more beautiful rocks on the top as additional decoration.

In front of the mound in the front yard is a mysterious hillock of decorated concrete that rises a few inches above the surface of the rest of the yard. It

appears in 1971 photographs so it was part of the original paving. Its meaning, if any, is unknown.

Ladder of Success

On a visit to downtown Houston, John saw Joan Miro's monumental sculpture, "Personage and Birds," and said it inspired him to create his own soaring work. In 1983 he poured a concrete-shaped diamond, imbedded it with marbles, clad it in flattened beer cans and attached a tall yellow ladder, originally owned by his father, pointing skyward. John called it the "Ladder of Success." Attached to the top by means of long wires, are aluminum stars and the moon. Please note the fourth rung. The one painted black. John said it symbolized that the climb to the top is tough and that "most people don't make it." In 1985 he crowned the sculpture with the placard stating "Amen." It is a word the few who succeeded might utter. The initials on the ladder, added after John's death, are: JM (John Milkovich), RM (Ron Milkovich) and LS (Ladder of Success).

CCXXII Malone

In 1983 John added this sign featuring the Beer Can House address in Roman numerals. CC is 200, XX is 20 and II is 2 – together resulting in the house number 222. To this installation he attached two faucets. "I got a hell of a sense of humor," John once said, and this is an example.

He and Mary enjoyed going to Galveston. They would arrive early when the beach was deserted. John would go to the water's edge and stick a water pipe topped with a faucet into the sand. Then he sat in his beach chair and enjoyed watching other bathers attempting to draw water from the tap.

Live by Golden Rule

John was very busy in the front yard in 1985. He attached the "Live by Golden Rule" sign (Do unto others as you would have others do unto you) on to the pole with CCXXII Malone. John chose silver letters on a green background not unlike road signs visible along Houston's freeways. Was he making a reference suggesting that both road signs and his sign were offering good directions? The lettering forming these three signs were cut from beer cans, what else?

Culprit

This wheelbarrow is one of the most important artifacts associated with the Beer Can House. It originally belonged to John's father who owned a home

at 319 Malone, just to the north. When John was a boy he was assigned many chores, among them was to help pave the driveway and sidewalk of their home. It was not his favorite chore. He would push the wheelbarrow to the railroad tracks and pick up stones, bricks and other paving materials. Years later John inherited the barrow and eventually employed it in the creation of the Beer Can House. Once again it was used to collect and move construction materials. By 1985 the yard was finished and there was no further need for the wheelbarrow. So John retired it to the front yard, planted flowers in it and named it “Culprit” because it was responsible for much hard work during his lifetime.

North Side Yard and Beer Can Wall

Due to the proximity of the property line, this area is the smallest that John decorated. The path running along the north side of the house is a continuation of the concrete work seen in the front yard. Paralleling this walkway is the oldest and most complete of the beer can walls built by John. The beer can tab curtain hanging from the house is a recreation. The original was removed and sold for scrap after John passed away.

Now let us return to the driveway where the tour will continue.

Front South Side Driveway Fence

This fence first appears in photographs from 1985. What you see is a reproduction. The original deteriorated in the years following John’s death.

Driveway Mounds

There are two concrete mounds along the southside of the drive. Both are larger than the earlier mounds John installed in the front and back yards. The rear (or third) mound first appears in a photograph in 1974. The front (fourth and final) mound is the most elaborately decorated, with its top knot of beer can strands that sway in the wind. John placed a potted plant on the top of the mound.

Rear South Side Driveway Fence

By 1986 John had completed this fence. Because of the poor condition of the original, we had to reconstruct it. It is an exact replica and does contain some of the original parts that were salvageable.

Driveway Planter

Midway down the drive is a large planter clad in flattened beer cans. This

is an original piece of John's work. It shows up in photographs beginning in 1982.

John's Rock Pile

Almost from the beginning of the project, John stored rocks he brought home beneath this tree. Most of these he picked up along the railroad tracks just north of Washington Avenue near where he worked, or from the tracks on the west side of Memorial Park. On some of his treks John carried a large leather pouch similar to a postal mail sack. He would fill this up with what appealed to his artistic eye.

Back Yard

By early 1973 John had completed the majority of his creation in the back yard. The areas that were not flowerbeds had been covered in decorated concrete blocks similar to those in other parts of the yard. Added attractions included: the second conical rock mound in a small round bed; an irregularly shaped planter containing a stack of four interesting rocks (dramatically altered after 1988); a rectangular planter along the garage (restored); the totem-like cowbell arch (under which the OSCVA's first executive director, Susanne Demchak, married David Theis, in 1990); a gaslight for atmosphere; and several constructions that no longer exist including a short, marble-inlayed picket fence separating the driveway from the back yard and John's octagonal wishing well.

John loved to spend time in the backyard and named it "Little Africa." He chose this moniker because of the greenery. In addition to flowerbeds and planters there were numerous potted plants. From a large tree beside the back door he hung coconuts covered with Spanish moss, chains of beer can tops and tropical plants in hanging baskets. (The tree had to be removed during restoration as it posed a danger of falling into the house.) Scattered throughout the yard were three birdbaths, garden ornaments and tropical bird statuary that John collected over the years.

Plastic Lemon Tree

Once the transformation of the yard and bungalow began, John and Mary reached an agreement. "I told him to do whatever he wanted on the outside of the house but the inside was mine. No beer cans on the inside," she told him. However, Mary wanted to claim a bit of the exterior so John allowed her to display her plastic lemon juice bottle tree in a black and yellow ceramic pot in the backyard. This is the original tree (with a new crop of lemons) that has been

in the yard since about 1980. Mary proudly pointed it out to every visitor.

In Summary

When asked why he covered the whole yard in concrete, John simply replied, “I got tired of mowing the grass.” Somehow I believe it was much more than that but John was never one to show many of his cards.

Part 2 - The Dream of the Beer Cans

“The curtain idea is just one of those dreams in the back of my noodle.”

Timeline

Clearly the most difficult segment of this restoration project was attempting to accurately lay down the timeline between the culmination of the yard creation and the completion of the beer can house as a covered structure. As strange as it may seem, virtually no photographic record has turned up that documents covering the house with the curtains and the can siding. A snapshot from 1972 shows the house with no can work. The next available picture is from 1978 with the south curtain wall in place. In addition to a lack of visual evidence there are other problems in presenting a clear history. These include: the two most knowledgeable sources are deceased, as is documentarian Joseph F. Lomax; memories of secondary sources have faded over the past quarter century; and oral and written evidence often presents contradictory dates. With this caveat in mind, what follows is our most educated guesses based upon considerable research and discussion of the information available. We believe it is close to accurate.

1975-1977

In the 1983 Lomax interview John was asked, “At what point did you start using them (beer cans) as shingles over your siding?” His response, “I would say around seven or eight years ago.” For lack of any other evidence we will assume John commenced the beer can phase of the house in 1975 or 1976. This effort most likely imitated the progress on the yard – starting slowly and then accelerating as he honed his skills. When Mary was asked to give her initial reaction she said “I thought he had gone crazy.”

1978

The first major change occurred when John hung the can-top curtain from the eaves along the entire south side of the house. In addition to the decorative value, the curtains provided shade from the strong south and west sun. Previously he

had made a screen of Budweiser can labels that had been on the driveway. He moved this to the south side of the house and placed it among the two halves of the can top curtain. Another can screen was placed on the south side of the front porch to shield the porch swing from the sun.

1979

John employed the bottoms of the cans to create a curtain for each of the gables on the west side of the house. The pull tab curtain was hung along the north eave. The curtains hanging from the rear eaves are very different from the others. John made these by combining two squares cut from a beer can. The larger square was folded over the smaller one and forged into one piece. They have a very distinctive tonal quality from the other curtains. We are unsure of when these curtains were hung but articles state he completed installing all of the curtains prior to placing any cans on the house.

1980-1981

By now John had perfected his process of creating the 2 x 4-foot flattened can screens. The process of attaching the cans to the structure began.

“How long did it take to cover the whole house?” He initially enwrapped the house from the bottom of the wooden siding up to the bottom of the windows, placing black tar paper between the house and the sheets of cans for additional insulation. This phase took about four months. John said, “After I had gone all the way around the house below the windows, it didn’t take me no more than seven months to get the rest done.”

1982

Photographs from this point forward show the house was now totally covered in cans including the front porch walls and ceiling. The front of the shed is also completely sided with cans.

Subsequent Years

John continued working on the house every day until his stroke in 1987. In 1983 he added a second curtain of can bottoms in the front gables. He found a cache of Bicentennial beer cans from 1976, formed a screen and hung it from the lower front gable. Unfortunately, they were not aluminum and eventually rusted away. However, another screen created out of these cans that hung on the south wall of the house is on display inside. In 1985 he added a tall beer-can-and-wooden-slatted wall (with marbles of course) along the northside of the back patio. The wall you see today is a reproduction. The same year he

constructed a can-and-bottle wall along the south side of the driveway. Over the years the elements took their toll on that structure. What you see today are two sections that have been reproduced as exact replicas of John's design. Some of the materials are from the original fence. In 1986 John built the bench where many friends had a cold beer with this visionary man. He also began covering the house windows to reduce the heating effect of the sun even more.

Can Count

In 1991, Ripley's Believe It or Not visited the Beer Can House. At that time they estimated it took 50,000 cans to complete the project. In this case you should elect to *not* believe it. Two, more-detailed counts of cans on the house were subsequently made (one by Ron Milkovisch and another by the restoration team). The Milkovisch total was 11,330. Our count was statistically the same. However, this ignores cans used in or on fences, walls, eaves, planters, windows, doors, trees, work shed, etc. The restoration team estimates the total is nearer to 30,000 cans.

Part 3 - The Interior

"...as long as he doesn't start on the inside."

-Mary Milkovisch

222Malone

This clapboard bungalow was constructed in 1939. John Milkovisch's father owned it and used it for rental property. In 1942 John and his wife Mary purchased the house. It was fairly typical of the type of home in this post-World-War-I neighborhood. It consists of a kitchen, breakfast nook, utility area, dining room, living room, three bedrooms, a short hallway and a full bath.

Kitchen, Breakfast Nook & Utility Area

With the exception of repainting this area with the original colors, what you see is exactly how this room looked when John and Mary lived here.

We already know of John's penchant for collecting a wide variety of materials – marbles, rocks and other found objects. In addition he saved linoleum scraps left over from flooring the coach and Pullman cars he upholstered. Mary asked John if he would use some of this material to floor certain rooms in the house. As you can see he began this project with simple patterns used in here and in the bath area. As time went on and John floored more rooms, his creativity took over just

as it did on the yard and exterior of the house.

Note the bulletin board in the nook on the wall opposite the large double windows. Here you will see photographs taken at various times over the life of the house. Of particular interest are: the original picket/marble fence in the front yard; the backyard wedding of Susanne Demchak and David Theis in December



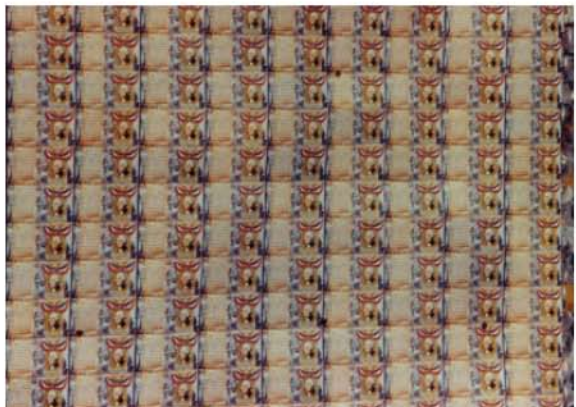
Photo © Janice Rubin 2001

of 1990; the interior of the garage that John used as his work shed (the fold-up table he devised to construct the beer can siding is visible on the wall); the south side driveway wall and the Budweiser can curtain that hung along side the “spinner” curtain on the south eave of the house.

We have placed a visitors' guest book on the shelf in the nook and would appreciate your signing it before leaving. The woodwork inlay was done by John.

Dining Room

Here we see three photographs from 1981 – a



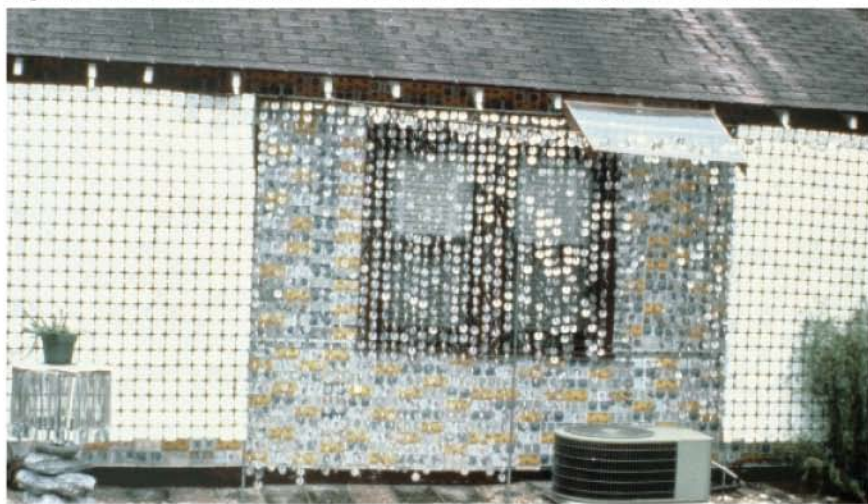
profile of John with a beer in front of the house, a shot of John and Mary, and John emerging from his work shed. In 1976 to celebrate the American Bicentennial, the Falstaff Brewing Company produced a patriotic beer can with a portrait of George Washington, the U. S. Capitol Building and statue of a Minuteman. The small case displays a mint condition example.

John collected a number of these Bicentennial cans and in 1985 created a curtain that he attached to the south eave of the house near where the air-conditioning unit sits today. He also attached a sheet of these cans to the top front gable (remains of which may still be seen today).

Unfortunately, they were made of steel, not aluminum, and they rusted badly. By 1987 he had removed them. This is the remains of the curtain from the south eave.

Living Room

This Budweiser curtain is one of the only remaining examples of John's early experiments with beer cans. He cut labels from the cans, flattened them and



attached the pieces together. The earliest photograph of this technique is from 1971 showing a beer can arch he constructed over the driveway. By 1978 he had added a similar curtain to the south eave.

As with other creations John was experiencing "on the job training" with this experiment. Two problems emerged. First, the bindings between the cans were fragile and suffered in strong winds. Second, he discovered red cans faded faster than other colors, resulting in the almost white curtain here. Consequently John

used few, if any, Budweiser cans on the house.

The large beer can planters that John placed in front of the house deteriorated badly over the years and we reconstructed them during restoration. One side of an original planter with the words “YES * WE KIT” was saved and is on display here. Note it is covered with “Southern Select” cans, a long-gone beer from the Galveston-Houston Breweries, Inc. of Galveston, Texas.

Now is the time to finish the story of John and Mary. John worked on the house daily until suffering a severe stroke in the fall of 1987. He was incapacitated and further additions to his creation were not possible. He passed away on February 4, 1988 and was cremated. His ashes were scattered here on the property.

Mary lived here until 1996 when she moved to an assisted living facility. Mary died in 2002.

John has a modest memorial marker at Woodlawn Garden of Memories. It says “John M. Milkovich 1912-1988.” It bears no epitaph. However, was one to have been written it could not have been any better than his quote on the wall – “They say every man should leave something to be remembered by. At least I accomplished that goal.”



Front Bedroom

Note the linoleum work here. John's patterns are becoming much more complex. The case in the center of the room contains objects on loan from the Milkovich family. Of note are: a jewelry box John crafted for Mary; two beer-can coasters; a leather belt with a beer can buckle; a photo of a bare-chested John at work in his shop;

two original stars from the Ladder of Success and a time capsule he buried in the yard.

The beer can tops hanging from the frail strip of wood were part of the original wall on the south side of the driveway.

John Siml, a long time friend and neighbor, put a “Bad Dog” sign in his yard, despite not owning a dog. As a joke, John Milkovisch erected this “Bad Cat” sign in front of the house although he and Mary had neither a cat nor dog. Just another example of John’s quirky sense of humor.

Middle Bedroom

This was John and Mary’s bedroom and John’s pièce de résistance as a linoleum installer.

The table and shelves are an installation from John’s work shed. The table folded down from the south wall of the structure. Note the pattern on the top. This is the grid he used for assembling the sheets of beer cans for installation around the exterior of the house. The small piece of a sheet shows how John attached the cans together with aluminum tacks. The boxes with beer can inserts on the shelves were originally pieces of the south driveway fence.

The case displays tools he used in constructing the environment. Tools were unavailable to perform certain jobs. So he manufactured a number of his own.

On the wall is a display of the wide variety of beer can curtains John used on the house, in the fences and in the trees. Not all of these are on the property today as John discarded some designs and replaced them with others.

Back Bedroom

Here you can watch a 10-minute video on the Beer Can House. It features interviews with John, Mary, Ron and Mark Milkovisch. This space is also used for temporary art installations.

Credits

The Beer Can House is preserved and maintained under the stewardship of the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art. It purchased the property from the family in 2001 and spent almost three years researching and consulting with experts about preservation and restoration techniques. Cleaning, restoring and reproducing some of the original artwork took another three years. The Beer Can House is now open to the public Saturday and Sunday, noon to 5 P.M. and by appointment for private tours.

The Orange Show Center for Visionary Art also preserves the Orange Show, a colorful maze-like folk art environment in Houston’s East End. We present the Art Car Parade, the oldest and largest parade of rolling works of art in the world.

We document visionary environments through our Eyeopener Tour program. We provide opportunities for people to experience their own creativity through workshops and field trips. And we celebrate the artist in everyone

Part 4 - Loose Ends

“...when I wake up and can't go back to sleep is when I think of this crap.”

Visitors Center

This structure contains the docent office, tour information, gift shop, donor wall (honoring those whose financial commitment made this project possible) and restrooms.

Originally, the bungalow's garage was on this site. John eventually turned it into his workshop and referred to it as the “shed.” He covered the front with beer cans and constructed a tall can top curtain extending the length of the north side of the building. In here were his tools, gridded drafting board (for assembling the sheets of beer cans), garden supplies, construction materials, found objects he incorporated into the project and assembly space for the beer can curtains. The shed was torn down in 1996 and replaced by this building which was renovated in 2007-8 to house the Visitors Center. All that remains of the original shed is the “French Quarter” sign that now hangs on the south side of the house.

Drill Bit Sculpture

One of the more interesting objects on display is at the head of the driveway. Mounted on a little pedestal is a tricorne rotary rock bit. It was a gift from his neighbor John Siml (who also provided John with the rubber gasket punch outs used in the front sidewalk area). This handy little gadget invented by the Hughes Tool Company of Houston, Texas in 1933, revolutionized the oil well drilling industry. The innovation that made the product revolutionary was the three rolling cone cutters that penetrated oil-bearing rock strata at very rapidly. This company was owned by another of our city's eccentric creators – Howard Hughes.

Refurbished Bench

In the mid-1980s, John poured the forms to construct this bench. He decorated the slats with his typical embedded-marble technique. John would sit here and drink beer with friends and visitors. By 1996 the weather had severely damaged the bench so Guy Milkovich saved the base and replaced the wood.

He decorated it with the abstract cutting of the house and the expressions, “Mary’s Spot” and “John’s Spot.”

Mark 1971
Directly under the bench are three patterns in the concrete resembling blazing suns. In the middle one is written “Mark 1971.” This is the name of John and Mary’s grandson.

Additions and Changes After John’ Death by His Sons, Ronald and Guy.

Front Yard Fence - 1989

Driveway Gate – 1989

Rusty Can Arch - 1994

Rear Yard Back Wall - 1996

New Shed – 1996

Backyard planter - 1996



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