

# LIFE & WORK ON PEPPER RIDGE ROAD

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Pepper Ridge Road lies on an idyllic stretch of land, just outside Cleveland, in the suburb of Pepper Pike. Architect Robert A. Little designed 11 of the original houses, some of the first modernist homes in the area. Little, along with his wife Ann, and friends Franny and Seth Taft, and Billie Jane and Sam Stubbins, purchased the land in 1950, and conceived the community as a cooperative venture.<sup>1</sup>

In 1953, artist Leza McVey and her husband William, a sculptor, moved to Pepper Ridge Road, where they would live and work for the rest of their lives. Visiting the homes today, one can find McVey's ceramic and textile works throughout, sitting comfortably in the modernist spaces. At the Little house (Robert passed away in 2005, Ann in 2012), a wall hanging (*Untitled*, 1980) situated between the library and the kitchen, pulses with a pattern of bright circles. On a coffee table, *Ceramic Form No. 7-24* (1967) shares something of the textile's energy: lively, bubbling, almost psychedelic. The most striking work still in the community—a large hooked rug—sits in Franny Taft's living room. Worn, radiant, its compact pattern of squares and triangles creates a colorful patchwork warmed by light from the adjacent window, which overlooks a pond. Each color is rich, seemingly unique; there's no symmetry to the design, only little blocks and triangles that form striking moments of mini-composition in the rhythmic field. It calls up the Bauhaus weavings of Anni Albers and Benita Koch-Otte, playful asymmetry and roughhewn geometry.<sup>2</sup>

Franny graciously agreed to loan the rug to *Realization is Better than Anticipation*; this is the first time it has left her home. She wrote the story of the rug for this catalog:

One year Leza did not get accepted into the annual May Show at the Cleveland Museum of Art—a terrible goof. I knew she was hurt and disappointed and I had always yearned for one of her exquisite rugs. I brought her down to our house, sat her down in the living room and told her that I wanted a 9 x 9 foot hooked rug. She was to design it, choose the colors and the pattern, and feel no pressure about getting it finished.

It was to be my present to the whole family whenever it was finished. That was 1972. I talked with Leza now and again and knew she was working on the project. Suddenly Christmas 1974 was upon us and Leza indicated that she was almost finished. I went to her studio to approve and was thrilled with the rug: the design, the colors, the pattern, and the overall impact. She told me it was constructed mostly from Bill's old wool trousers that once worn, she took and cut into thin strips and then dyed different colors. Keeping the design she had created in her head, she began hooking. Leza, due to an early encounter with undulant fever, was slowly losing her sight and by this time she was legally blind. She listened to records for the blind as she hooked away in her studio space. She had a rug hooker's frame, which she put over her burlap base to hold it firm as she plunged her needle through the burlap and pulled up the loop. Most artists make a pattern, transfer it to the burlap or whatever the base may be, and follow it as they hook. Leza kept this complicated design of triangles in her head and controlled the pattern as she went. A remarkable achievement. Two years of persistent, craftsman-like work, inch by inch, produced a superb work of art, ours to enjoy for the next 40 years.

The Taft's shaped their home from the ground up. Seth did the carpentry, Franny did all the painting and tiling, and together they designed and built the furniture. McVey's rug speaks to a particular mind-set, the joy of doing, care in labor, and the relationship between good design and a good life, the concepts Pepper Ridge Road was founded upon.

The rug is intimately connected to the lives and bodies of this community; one can imagine Bill's pants, slowly becoming tatty, perhaps splattered with the residue of his studio, meticulously unraveled by Leza, carefully died in small batches, slowly integrated into the overall structure. The thing itself is so much and yet, so quiet. Intense effort and thoroughgoingness put into an item that is functional, underfoot, supporting. This is a living, breathing artwork—in the Museum, its energy, its condensation of time, permeates the galleries with a thick warmth.



<sup>1</sup> In a 1950 manifesto of sorts, Robert A. Little laid out his vision for this cooperative community: "The AIMS of the project are to provide, on a practical basis, the things that seem desirable for a small community just beyond the noise and smell and traffic of a big city—FOR INSTANCE: Some of us want tennis—Gardens—Room for breathing, seeing the sky, chopping a tree—Variety of people—Water for the kids to play in—Common land for playing softball—& maybe room for a couple of these [horses]—And, tho in range of schools, outdoor, open areas for FREEDOM of kids up-growing—BUT—All planned so that anyone, adult or child, can also have PRIVACY"

<sup>2</sup> Albers' statement applies to McVey's natural proclivity to ceramics and, later, textiles: "How do we choose our specific material, our means of communication? Accidentally. Something speaks to us, a sound, a touch, hardness or softness, it catches us and asks us to be formed. We are finding our language, and as we go along we learn to obey their rules and their limits. We have to obey and adjust to those demands. Ideas flow from it to us and though we feel to be the creator we are involved in a dialogue with our medium. The more subtly we are tuned to our medium, the more inventive our actions will become." *Anni Albers: Selected Writing on Design*, ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 73.



Leza McVey, *untitled*, 1974, wool rug, commissioned for the living room of the Taft family on Pepper Ridge Road. Photo: Jennifer J. Smailes.



ABOVE: Sign of house names of Pepper Ridge Road, ca. 1950. Image found in Franny Taft's *Folk Tales of Pepper Ridge Road*. Courtesy of Franny Taft.

BELOW: Road Pool at Pepper Ridge Community, ca. 1950. Image found in Franny Taft's *Folk Tales of Pepper Ridge Road*. Courtesy of Franny Taft.



Leza McVey, *Bird Form Bottle*, 1959. Glazed ceramic, 14 1/4 x 6 inches. The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund, 1959.141.



Leza and Bill McVey with *Untitled*, 1980, wool, 74 x 39 inches. Photo ca. 1980, found at the home of Ann and Robert Little. Courtesy of Sam R. Little.