



AUDREY HINGLEY PHOTO

## Eldridge Bagley, Folk Artist Extraordinaire

# *‘All Kinds of Things Are Still Possible’*

As Eldridge Bagley surveys the 60-acre farm he’s called home his entire life, pointing out an ancient tree and outbuildings he wants to restore, his love for place is evident.

Named Artist of the Year in 2011 by the Folk Art Society of America, the unfaillingly polite, soft-spoken Bagley, 71, admits his journey from third-generation tobacco farmer to acclaimed artist surprised him, explaining, “I did not dream this would unfold the way it has.”

His work is a smorgasbord of people and places, filled with everything from pastoral landscapes to farm harvests, pickup trucks and lonely buildings, often with vivid colors. Like life, some pieces are joyful, some evocative of a simpler time, some haunting. He works from imagination and memory, each piece telling a story.

“One inspiration is the satisfaction of creating. But I’m also inspired that people seem to be so receptive to my work. It seems to speak to them, and that inspires me to want to continue,” he says.

Bagley, wife Beth, 58, and son Wade, 20, live on the land where he grew up, smack in between Lunenburg County’s only two towns, Victoria (pop.: 1,725) and Kenbridge (pop.: 1,253), in a modest 1915 white farmhouse moved to the property in the 1970s. An addition was added later, as was a separate studio behind the house where Bagley creates the artwork that catapulted him to art-world fame.

Along the rural drive to Bagley’s farm, neighbors’ mailboxes are adorned with biblical scriptures like “to be carnally-minded is death” and “to be spiritually-minded is life and peace.”

The atmosphere seems fitting for a man who talks about being raised by godly parents, his Christian faith and his passion for preserving rural life.

“My vision is to tell the story of this land, especially this rural part of Southside Virginia and the people who inhabit it, ordinary people; but when you look and think about their lives, they are anything but ordinary. They’re extraordinary and unique,” Bagley says.

He remembers stories his parents told him about the 10 years they went without electricity, explaining, “When [electricity] came, the house was illuminated with the flip of a switch; water came into the kitchen and bathrooms on call. Before, they toted water from the spring up the hill to the house; suddenly, they had a refrigerator, lights and running water.”



Bagley grew up in a modest bungalow, now vacant, adjacent to his current home; he muses aloud that Wade may want to live there someday. Homeschooled by his mother, Wade has an associate degree in agribusiness from Southside Virginia Community College and works at Waverly Farms in Burkeville, an organic CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm.

Bagley says his sister, Ann Hancock, a retired nurse, and brother, Grayson, who became a teacher and school principal, always knew what they wanted to do. Bagley had no idea what career to pursue, so he continued working with his parents on the farm after high school.

At 19, farm life was interrupted by basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, when he joined the National Guard. Shortly before training ended, two soldiers beat and robbed him as he took a nighttime walk, resulting in a broken jaw that required six weeks of recuperation with his jaw wired shut and a military trial with one suspect convicted. Once home, southern Virginia “had never looked so good.”

He’d always loved drawing but never considered art as a career until he read an article about famed artist “Grandma Moses,” who began painting at age 76.

“I was taken by the idea that an elderly lady with no [art] training or experience was able to put down her ideas and become world-famous. It was astounding to me,” he recalls.

He went to Victoria’s local dime store, Harold’s (the building is still there), looking for art supplies. Finding only paint-by-numbers sets, he bought those.

“You got brushes, paint and a canvas panel with a pre-drawn design. I painted [original art] over [the design],” he explains. “I discovered what it was like to create something from your imagination, and wanted to do more.”

At age 27, after completing four paintings, he decided to offer them for sale at the log-cabin-turned-antique shop behind his parents’ home. In a few months, all had sold — for six dollars each. He kept farming and painting, selling his work wherever he could.

Former neighbor Everett Winn, 63, owner of Everett Winn CPA in Mechanicsville, recalls, “I remember walking into a [Lunenburg] bank where he had a one-man show ... his work was not as refined as it is now, but you could see the potential and the quality.”

*Smoke and Ashes, 2007*



*Redbuds, 2009*



*Sharing Lunch, 1989*





"He would take pieces of Masonite®, and if you had a family home place, he would paint a picture of your home on the Masonite®. I have one my parents had him paint."

In 1981 Bagley connected with Helen Levinson, then-director of Richmond's Cudahy's Gallery, who agreed to offer several of his paintings. The paintings sold quickly, Levinson asked for more and Bagley was included as one of four artists featured in Cudahy's 1981 new artist show.

The floodgates opened, and in those early days it was not unusual for throngs of people to line up to buy his work. He continued annual shows at Cudahy's until 2003 when the gallery closed. His parents, described by Bagley as "always encouraging," lived to see his success: his mother Patsy Hardie Bagley died in 1993, his father Waverly in 1997.

Bagley's wife Beth, a former registered nurse in Richmond who married Bagley in 1991 after meeting him through a friend, is the daughter of a Methodist minister and had lived all over the country. Once the duo became serious, she explains, "It wasn't that he refused to move, it just became apparent that wasn't an option. It would be like trying to transplant an oak tree. Where he lived was more remote than anywhere I had ever lived before, but now I love it here."

Today Bagley's work is in private and corporate collections and has been exhibited in places like the former Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia, and traveling art exhibits. His originals retail, on average, for \$1,500 to \$4,400. He did his last limited-edition prints a few years ago; those still available at galleries are \$85. When the recession changed the art world, Bagley changed with it: He began experimenting with sizes other than his traditional 18-by-24s, allowing him to sell smaller paintings for smaller prices.

"I began offering paintings in a variety of sizes at the galleries, with 11-by-14 being the smallest, and it went over really well," he explains.

B.J. Kocen of Richmond's Glave Kocen Gallery, has been carrying Bagley works since 2010 and notes, "His support is still very strong. At any given show we sell 80 to 90 percent of his paintings. People still have an urgency to collect him."



EIDRIDGE BAGLEY PHOTO



EIDRIDGE BAGLEY PHOTO



AUDREY HINGLEY PHOTO





Kocen says the size mixtures seemed to reawaken Bagley's senses, adding, "It changed the way he looked at things. There was more detail in his work when he went to smaller sizes. People who collected his work really took note. It infused a new passion in him and fired up his [old] clients."

Jarrod Ferguson, who offers Bagley works at J. Ferguson Gallery in Farmville, says, "The response is all positive; some people come in just to look for his work. For some his work is nostalgic, others just appreciate the quality."

Although smaller sizes were innovative for gallery showings, Bagley has been doing tiny original paintings he calls "miniatures" (Kocen calls them "baby Bagleys") for years. Sold at festivals and local outlets only, the 3-by-3 works retail for around \$80. Buyers often group them on walls or give them as gifts. They are not unlike the tiny paintings he's done as annual Christmas ornaments/gifts for his son.

Nothing in Bagley's life seems static. A book, *Eldridge Bagley: Son of the Soil* (1997), features reproductions of, and stories about, his artwork. He's authored two books of "recollections," *Hounds Creek Chronicles* (2004) and *Hounds Creek Chronicles Vol. II* (2007). He's done video projects marketed locally, such as *Journey of the Heart*, which traces a tobacco crop from planting to harvest (1990s); *Hometown Christmas* (2001), celebrating Christmas in a small town and filmed by Bagley in Kenbridge, Victoria and Farmville; and a five-minute CD/DVD "Lunenburg" (2013), featuring Bagley's original song and images of Lunenburg.

Songwriting may seem new, but Bagley says he's been writing songs since his tobacco-farming days. He writes words and music, while Beth arranges the songs on guitar and performs them in churches and coffee shops.

"He's a storyteller. He tells stories on canvas, on video, in song lyrics, in books," she notes. "He has the ability to see things that people don't even seem to notice."

**'My vision is to tell the story of this land, especially this rural part of Southside Virginia and the people who inhabit it, ordinary people, but when you look and think about their lives, they are anything but ordinary. They're extraordinary and unique.'**

Bagley says, "The way of life I grew up with has changed more rapidly than I thought it would. I knew change would come, but I did not anticipate how quickly life on small family farms would change. I knew my story was not just my story, it was the story of many other people. My motivation was this is too priceless, important and precious to let it slip away."

With no plans to slow down, he adds, "I really think all kinds of things are still possible." ■

## Lifetime ROOFING

by VACAROLINA BUILDINGS, INC.

**1-800-893-1242**



**SAVE NOW!!!**

**We are still offering our Spring deals, but not for much longer! Don't wait! Call today for the best price on a new Lifetime Metal Roof!!**

**Our Lifetime Metal Roofing is unmatched in durability, with an unmatched guarantee.**

**Never worry about your roof again. Virtually Storm Proof. Call us today to find out why our metal roofing is the best option!**

**Lifetime Warranty  
Competitively Priced  
Financing Available W.A.C.  
Licensed & Insured  
Energy Efficient**



**FREE ESTIMATE!**

**www.metalroofover.com**  
**1-800-893-1242**  
**Call NOW for a FREE roof inspection!**

**MobileHomeRoofing.net**  
by VACAROLINA BUILDINGS

**Roofing  
Vinyl Siding  
Windows**

**FINANCING AVAILABLE! (w.a.c.)**

**CO-OP  
MEMBER  
DISCOUNT!**



**Call for a free, no obligation estimate!  
CALL NOW! 1-800-767-1591**