

**Exploring Rural Kentucky Through Documentary Art:  
Unit 2 - *Irvin Store, 1920s* - Documentary Art Interactive  
Directions to The Artist - *Irvin Store, 1920s*  
- For the Student -**

**Introduction**

Video producers who are documenting a community's history want to use compelling visual images to help their viewers picture the past in their minds. Historic photographs help to tell the story. Occasionally there might even be a film clip that can be inserted. But there are rarely enough strong visuals from the time period to bring the past to life. Producers often purchase the right to use paintings that add visual interest to the story they are telling.



In the video *Creelsboro and the Cumberland: A Living History*, producer/director Tom Law used a well-balanced mix of historic photographs and artwork. However, he wanted two specific scenes that no one had ever painted, so he commissioned an artist to create them specifically for use in this video.

He provided the artist, Dennis Thrasher, with details about what he wanted included and what mood he wanted the paintings to convey (see below - the handout Tom Law provided Dennis Thrasher). Law also provided historic information and any existing visual imagery that would help Thrasher make the paintings reflect the time period as accurately as possible.

Thrasher was free to make his own artistic choices, however, about style, colors, focal points, contrasts, perspective, etc. The resulting paintings - *Creelsboro Landing, 1890s* and *Irvin Store, 1920s* - add a vibrancy to the video, the feeling that you could almost step into the past.

## *Irvin Store, 1920s*

**Size:** 40 inches wide x 22½ inches high

**Medium:** Archival boards

J. D. Irvin's General Store was the center of community life for many decades in the Creelsboro valley. James Douglas Irvin (1865-1952) established the Irvin Store in 1885 after purchasing it from the Dunbar family. James Irvin expanded the store, joining it to his house.

His son, William Kenneth Irving (1907–1978) took over the store in 1928. During the 1920s, people would come from all over the region to buy goods there. The steamboat trade was beginning to give way to trucks, but the poor roads in the Creelsboro valley kept the store going. The Irvin Store closed by 1983. It remained abandoned and was later demolished.

**Goal:** To show the Irvin Store as the center of life for area residents during its heyday on a Saturday afternoon in the fall. The focus is on the people – their dress, activities and relationships during an important part of weekly life for this rural community.

**Setting:** A Saturday, late afternoon, mid-October (fall color), as everyone is shopping and getting ready for family dinner, a night out, or simply hanging out with friends.

**Point of View:** Exterior.  
A ground level or slightly above perspective from the crossroads of Creelsboro, showing the busy streets and activities on the southeast corner of the store.

### **Elements**

**Irvin store:** see photograph of Irvin Store 1989 Corps of Engineers report

(above); and sketch of Irvin/Polston stores by Jerry Reeder, 2006 (below).

**Vehicles:** One Ford Model TT truck (see photographs in Creelsboro Digital Media Archive) driven by James Irvin with dry goods and shoe boxes (based on oral history Francis Scott Andrew), dozens of wagons, buggies, horses, a mule (coming and going, stopped and at rail, clogging the roads).



*Figure 1: Photograph of Irvin Store. Credit: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, CEO Report, 1988.*

**Porch:** A 1920s Coca Cola cooler, baskets, kerosene (and lamps) and rockers for sale on the porch.

**Work activities:** A wagon unloading dry goods from a steamboat on the side of the store, a truck with shoe boxes, another wagon passing with a load of hay, a shoe salesman saying goodbye to one of five store clerks (age 55), Kenneth Irvin (age 13) sweeping the porch. A horse and wagon/buggy (family transport). A few horses with saddles tied to a rail. A woman walking with a basket of eggs to sell or swap. A boy trying to coax a stubborn mule. A few oil workers dirty from work at the nearby refinery from the 1920s oil boom (since the refinery shipped by barge, there were no oil trucks).

**Local residents:** Seniors playing checkers, a group of middle-aged men discussing an important subject (farming or politics), a pastor greeting a couple with a newborn, a doctor checking out someone's ailment (rash), a few young men admiring J.D. Irvin's "new" truck going by, a group of women also

discussing a serious topic, another group of men sharing a joke, another group of women receiving good news, younger children playing tag, older teens courting, etc. A few musicians setting up for a later community dance (held outdoors on main street crossroads).

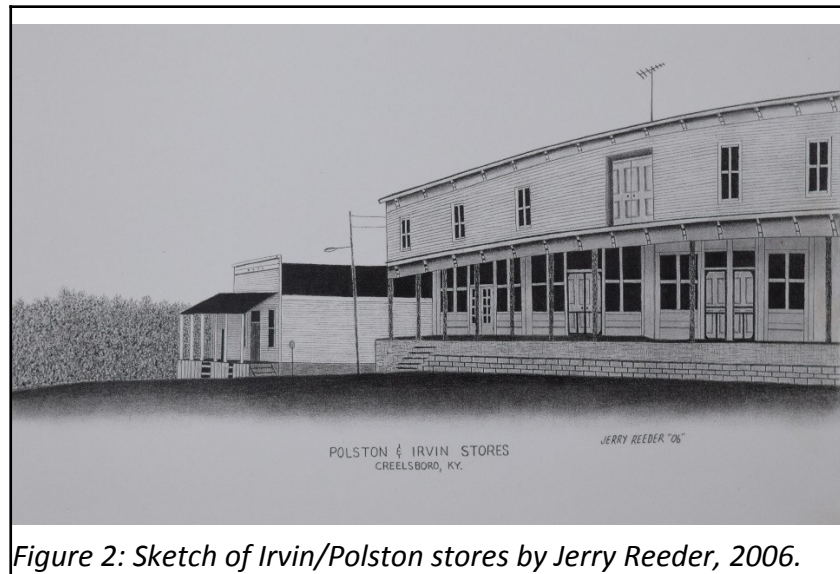


Figure 2: Sketch of Irvin/Polston stores by Jerry Reeder, 2006.

## Resources

**Photographs:** See artwork archives for photos of the store (none earlier than 1960s).

### Books:

*Don't Go Up Kettle Creek: Verbal Legacy of the Upper Cumberland River*, William Lynwood Montell, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1983 (2nd edition 2000).

Some comments by Kenneth W. Irvin, who recounts life at the store.

Note: Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY, has an oral history by Kenneth Irvin that we are trying to secure.