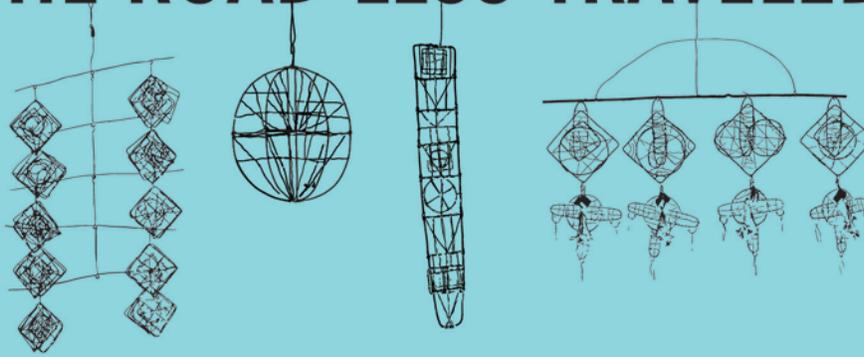


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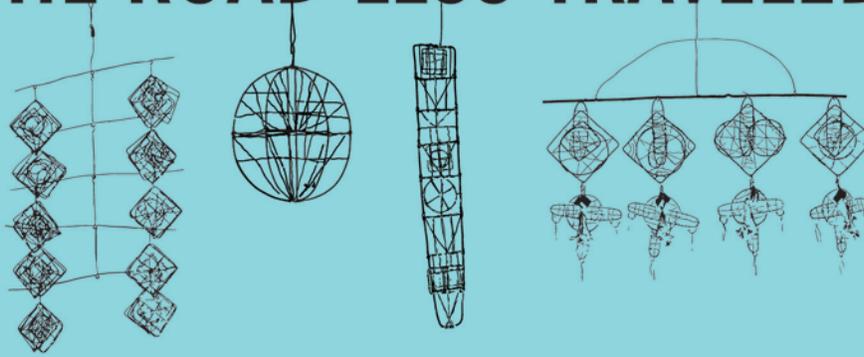
“Time Goes By...”: Obsolescence and Productivity in Vollis Simpson’s Whirligigs The Road Less Traveled 2017

Laura Bickford

Towering above Vollis Simpson’s former farm fields in Lucama, North Carolina, the whirligig affectionately known as “Satellite Tub” cast shadows that resembled spiders and spaceships that moved across the land as the sun sets. Comprised of various salvaged parts from sources as distinct as vintage muscle cars, obsolete washing machines, road signs, metal milkshake cups, bicycle wheels, and tobacco farming equipment, Simpson built “Satellite Tub” and an environment of twenty-nine other equally monumental whirligigs over the course of fifteen years, after his repair-shop partners settled into retirement. Seeming to grow out of the ground, taking roots in the soil leached from tobacco and sprouting branches of the remnants of the rapidly industrialized region, the whirligigs, like Simpson himself, are an undeniable product of the economic, political, and social structures of Wilson, North Carolina. Since spending the summer there in 2012 and several months sporadically since this time, I have met generations of Wilson residents, talked to Simpson for hours on his property about the whirligigs and his life (before his death in 2013), painted the surfaces of his whirligigs in the downtown conservation headquarters, and plotted to bring nationwide funders and folk art lovers to Eastern North Carolina.

This talk is a small portion of a much larger body of work that aims to contextualize the whirligigs into the Eastern North Carolina landscape instead of suggesting that they materialized from nowhere, the products of a visionary loner. It positions them as an instance, a material representation of a confluence of systems that are constantly moving and shifting. By starting with the whirligigs themselves—looking at their component parts and trying to understand where they came from and how they got to Simpson’s workshop, the ecosystem in which they spin comes alive. This integrated way of “researching”—combining oral histories, material culture, and social geography—has created a roadmap which has helped me to approach a variety of other sites I now spend time working on, such as Joe Minter’s African Village in America in Birmingham, Alabama, and Lonnie Holley’s home and studio in Atlanta, Georgia. This presentation, not having the luxury of space or time, will offer a brief history of the whirligig’s materials, maker, and conservation to suggest an object-based way of approaching an environmental site made up of found objects.

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Although the tobacco plant is quite versatile and can adapt its growing habits to most climates, the specific tobacco varietal that is utilized in cigarettes flourished in the coastal plains of North Carolina and Virginia.

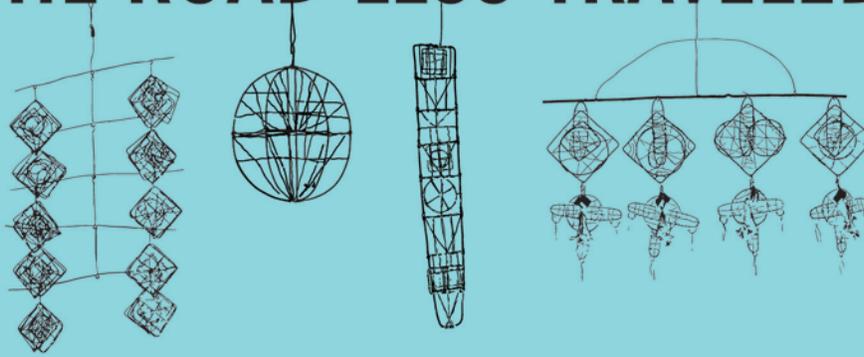
An extremely labor-intensive crop, each acre of flue-cured tobacco required approximately 450 hours of labor. Because of this, most families operated small farms of five to seven acres, populations in this region were the densest of any rural region in the United States, and the tenant labor system, operating with unmechanized methods, lasted well into the mid-1960s.

The first tobacco market was inaugurated in Lynchburg, Tennessee, inviting local farmers to bring their crop to a central warehouse district to be auctioned off to buyers for tobacco companies. Wilson's market opened in 1895, and quickly reigned as the largest in the country. During the weeklong markets, in late July or early August, the host towns took on a carnival-like atmosphere. Farmers came from miles around to drink, dance, play and hear music, and show off their harvest. In the 1920s, however, tobacco prices at market began to plummet. A saturated market, countless competing warehouses, and inferior product ended the Brightleaf Golden Age. Prices further plummeted with the onset of the Depression.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco was founded in 1875 by the son of a prominent tobacco merchant who had left Patrick County, Virginia. Arriving in what was then Winston, North Carolina (the closest town to Patrick County with a railroad connection), Richard Joshua Reynolds saw the town's advantageous location at the center of the burgeoning tobacco markets and bought a former church building from the Moravians and opened "the little red factory" staffed by seasonal workers. In the company's first year, they produced 150,000 pounds of processed tobacco; by the 1890s, that number had increased to millions of pounds. A force in the city, which eventually became Winston-Salem (after the two towns were merged), the R.J. Reynolds factory buildings became the largest structures in town and the first to bring in new technology such as steam-powered machines and electricity. By the early 1900s, Reynolds had bought all of the competition in East-Central North Carolina and was producing 25% of the nation's chewing tobacco.

Today, RJR, still partially located in Winston-Salem, is the third largest cigarette company in the world. Their United States cigarette-production has been consolidated into one plant located outside Winston-Salem in a town called Tobaccoville.

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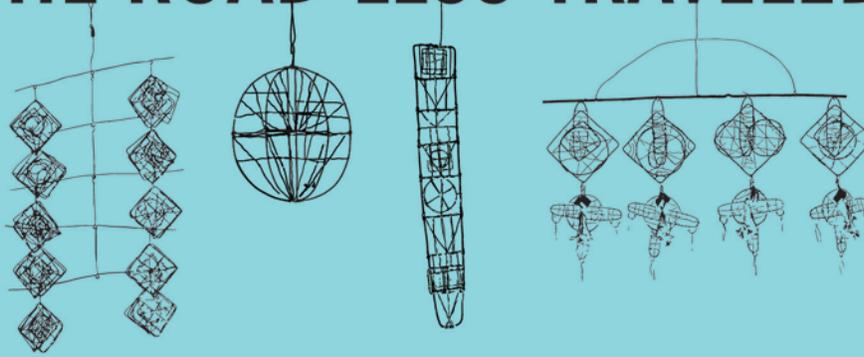
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With the increasing influence of large tobacco corporations, farmers in the 1960s began to look to industrialized farming methods to increase efficiency and output. During the early years of this transition, many technologies were rapidly introduced, but would just as quickly become outdated, often even before farmers could become comfortable with them. North Carolina State University's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences became an incubator for experimental farm technologies, many of which were imported directly to the farmers in Eastern North Carolina, implemented for a short while, and then tossed aside for the next new instrument. Farmers that could not afford the new technologies, or the increased land that was required to make use of the equipment properly, quickly were outgrown and didn't receive contracts from tobacco companies. As the need for the public auction system vanished, so did the market for independent farmers selling their crop. They were forced to sell their land to other big farmers, aiding in the creation of the large superfarms that now dot the region and solidifying the corporate grip on the area economy. By 2000, agriculture, which was the largest employment sector in North Carolina in 1950, had slipped to sixth place, providing only four percent of adults with employment.

Although industry had long been a part of the state's economy, particularly the more rural areas, WWII and the Cold War brought unprecedented numbers of businesses and manufacturers to the region. Governor Luther Hartwell Hodges, still the state's only businessman-turned-governor, used his corporate connections and enacted a policy of "smokestack-chasing" during his terms. Today he is credited as almost single-handedly putting the state on the radar of national and international manufacturing companies. Nicknamed the state's "first salesman," Hodges conducted countless trips around the country, meeting with company heads and creating tax incentives to lure industry southward. Although credited with opening one thousand plants during his seven-year term, Hodges initiated a system that relies on, and perpetuates, a steady supply of unskilled workers willing to work for low wages. As these jobs are rapidly being outsourced to foreign countries, the state is once again saddled with one of the country's largest uneducated, and now unemployed, populations.

One of the companies attracted to North Carolina during the post-WWII industrial boom was Firestone Tire Manufacturing. Opening up a plant in 1975, the factory has always been a major employer for Wilson County; in 2007, its campus covered five hundred acres and employed 2,150 workers.

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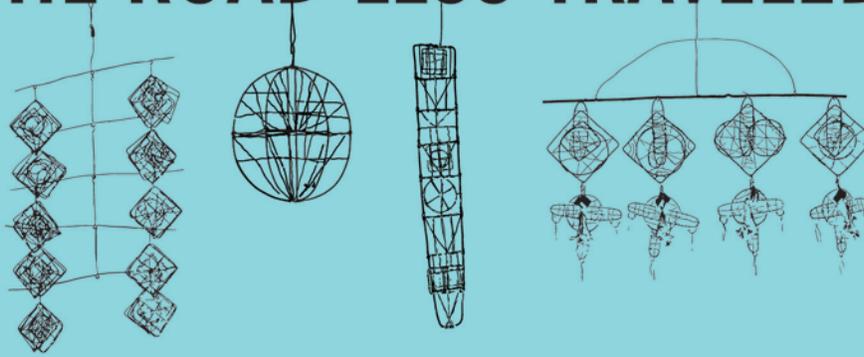
But Firestone's presence in Wilson is itself a part of the globalized economy that has characterized much of the country's manufacturing in the twenty-first century. By the mid-1970s, several automobile companies set up outposts below the Mason-Dixon line: Nissan and Saturn were in Tennessee and General Motors was in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. Adding to the race to the South to take advantage of the region's cheap labor, land, and materials was the industries' adoption of the Japanese system of production known as "lean production." With increased mechanization and output, factories' build-up of inventory had begun to cause problems; when parts sat for months at a time, they could become unorganized, making it harder to identify production mistakes and leading to large amounts of waste. Instead, Japanese, followed by U.S. companies, adopted a "just-in-time" mode of supply and demand, meaning that parts were delivered and then almost instantaneously incorporated onto the production line. This meant that factories producing parts had to be located geographically close to factories producing automobiles. So states like North Carolina, who had not attracted automobile assembly plants, became ideal ground for parts manufacturers like Bridgestone Firestone.

In June of 2012, no tobacco market opened in Wilson. For the first time since its inception over two centuries before, the market's shuttered auction houses broadcast the final demise of tobacco's once Golden-era. The warehouses formerly enlivened by the market stood derelict and decrepit.

In Wilson, unused tobacco barns, empty automobile parts manufacturing plants, and idle farm equipment spot the landscape. Reduced to the status of ruins, these ghostly structures serve as daily reminders of the end-result of the promised progress of politicians like Luther Hodges. The industry brought to the region through "smokestack-chasing's" promise of cheap labor and ample resources has now been lured away by promises of greater profits elsewhere.

Lying in waste, these remains, have been reduced to "garbage." Technically speaking, "garbage is leftover matter. It is what remains when the good, fruitful, valuable, nourishing, and useful has been taken." More philosophically, garbage is a culturally and socially constructed categorization of matter that allows humans to engage in the myth of modernity, and the quest for unending progress. The various methods designed to eliminate its presence are intended to keep it from encroaching on our everyday lives as thoroughly as possible. But

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in Wilson, where the threatening garbage in question is not simply a broken toaster or a banana peel but a three-acre factory or a cluster of ten rotting tobacco barns, it does not disappear from consciousness or lose its potential use-value quite as easily. It remains, permanently.

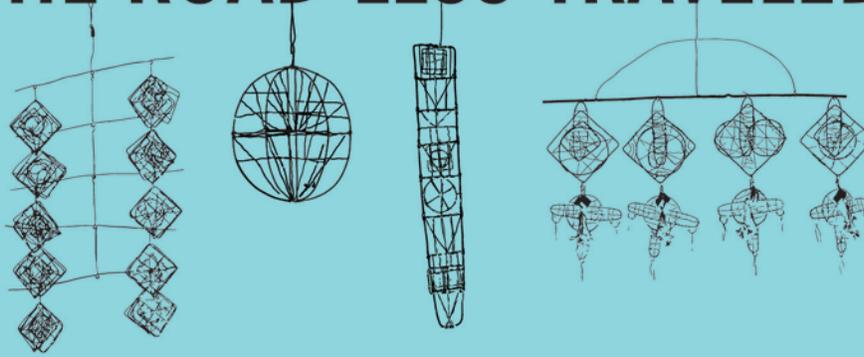
Vollis Simpson was born in 1919 to a family of twelve children in Lucama, North Carolina. Growing up, his father had a small farm, mainly for subsistence purposes, and primarily made his living as a building-mover and town handyman. “Growing up with my daddy, you learned to do everything real quick. Fixing things, planting food, tending animals. Learned to use a winch and drive a mule before I could read.”

Like many men his age, Simpson was drafted in 1940 at age twenty-one, and set to serve a year-term when World War II broke out. He ended up staying for five years in Saipan, Japan, where he “watched his best friend be blown all apart.” Raised with an appreciation and intuitive knowledge of machinery, Simpson had never seen the likes of the militarized equipment he was exposed to in the Mariana Islands. While stationed there, Simpson built a wind-powered washing machine to wash his fellow soldiers’ clothes. In addition, he built an operable motorcycle out of parts he salvaged from around the base, but was forced to dismantle it after only a few months.

Upon his return to Lucama, he opened a repair shop with several friends around 1950, repairing farm tools, broken factory equipment, cars and trucks, and sometimes, moving buildings. Often, Simpson would make both his own replacement parts and transport vehicles for use in repairs. “When the tow trucks got stuck in the mud, they would call me. I had made this tow truck tower out of an old tank, and I’d drive it down there and get whatever needed getting out, out.”

Constantly keen on finding usable parts, as early as 1952, Simpson began to save odds and ends, sometimes entire cars or decommissioned airplanes, in a series of outbuildings that dotted his Lucama property. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when most of the repair-shop work shifted from repairing machinery to emptying out closing factories, Simpson’s collecting increased.

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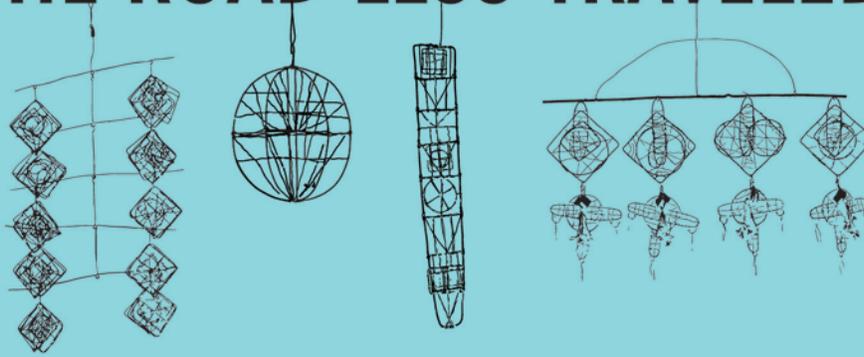
Creating a network of scrappers, junkers, repairmen, and observant locals, a majority of the obsolete farm tools, outdated factory equipment, fiberglass oddities, abandoned cars, and unclaimed bicycles of Eastern North Carolina likely passed through the Simpson property.

When his business partners retired in the early 1990s, Simpson couldn't adjust to his newly idle life. What Simpson built were thirty monumental whirligigs, some as tall as sixty feet and weighing five tons. He installed them throughout his property over a period of seven years, constantly adding components, decorating the surfaces, and greasing the bearings. Ranging in motifs from a mule-powered plow to a WWII-era bomber plane to a large ferris wheel, the whirligigs are comprised entirely of salvaged materials collected by Simpson from the eastern North Carolina landscape. In both their subject matter and their materiality, they document the history of the region. Composed of parts from tobacco farming equipment, tobacco-processing machinery, cotton mills, auto part factories, vintage Ford automobiles, and bicycles, they physically map the region's transition from an agricultural to industrial to a globalized economy.

Simpson's knowledge of these materials, once freed from their purposive tethers, was so ingrained in him that he was able to see past their former functions to their working mechanisms and envision new systems of combining them that could join a bicycle wheel to a 1965 Pontiac Firebird side view mirror and attach it to a washing machine tub suspended above a cotton mill roller, spun by the gears of a tobacco harvester. Viewing a rusted-out washing machine tub, not as a piece of scrap metal or as an old washing machine tub, but as the large-scale gear he needed to provide the revolution for the central axis of a whirligig, his ability to see potential and futurity in an object supposedly relegated to the past supplies a new understanding of productivity and utility.

For years, some residents of Wilson had recognized the potential in Simpson's whirligigs. Often listed as the number one tourist attraction in Wilson County and embedded in an impressive slew of urban legends, ghost stories, and conspiracy theories, the unofficial ambassadors to the area seemed to some to be going to waste trapped behind a fence on Simpson's property. Even unseen by all but the bravest of people intent on defying the local legends involving packs of dogs, shotguns, and four-wheelers, the whirligigs had a magnetism about them in Eastern North Carolina, and Simpson's farm unwittingly became a parking lot for many first dates, a pilgrimage location for folk art collectors and road trip wanderers, and a dangerous but jackpot score for metal thieves and scrappers. In 2011, with encouragement

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from longtime friends, Simpson finally agreed to let them go. Perhaps sensing his own impending mortality or suddenly invested in the idea of shaping his legacy to the area, he signed them over to the town and the process of moving them from his property has begun. Purchased by a consortium of private and public interests, thirty of the monumental whirligigs will be installed in a public park in downtown Wilson in a move that town leaders hope will bring much needed development to the historic tobacco district.

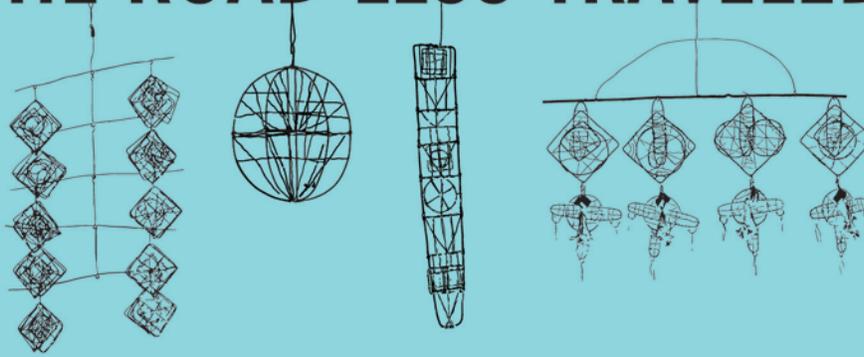
Before they can be erected, however, they are undergoing major conservation and repair work. Nearly thirty years in the air have taken their toll, and many of the gears became rusted, components fell off, paint chipped, and much of their celebrated movement is now only minimal. Each whirligig must be taken down from Simpson's field, assessed for movement, and then taken apart, piece by piece. Often new pieces need to be found or fabricated, the joints need to be replaced with stainless steel bearings, the surfaces need to be completely repainted, and new reflectors cut, bent, and attached.

From the project's inception, the goal of the Park has been to bring jobs, tourists, and income to the area. In this vein, a team of thirty "chronically unemployed or unemployable" citizens, who underwent a training session, has been hired to do all of the repair work. These workers are overseen by a team of core retired mechanics and engineers, many of whom spent their life working for Bridgestone Firestone or one of the area's other automobile parts manufacturing factories. The operation is massive, taking up nearly all of the interior space of a former tobacco auction warehouse, the use of which has been donated to the project by the descendant of one of the area's original resident-farmers.

In addition, the current ongoing conservation of Simpson's whirligigs has also demystified their monolithic quality. Suddenly, every individual component has a multi-layered story, the gear holding the central access of the whirligig affectionately called "Satellite" is actually an old tobacco-drying bin salvaged from the Wiggins tobacco farm after they sold to RJ Reynolds and their operation was mechanized. The giant rod that supports the representational vignette of the "Horse and Buggy" supported the entire interior of the Ford headlight assembly line that was once on Highway 301.

Since the beginning of the project in 2011, twenty of the thirty-one planned whirligigs have been restored and installed in new park space in downtown Wilson amidst the once-abandoned tobacco warehouses. Businesses, attracted to the now-vibrant public space, have

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been moving in, including a brewery and a café, occupying the ample available space around the park's borders.

What new meanings the whirligigs will begin to occupy remains to be seen.

It is best then to never see the whirligigs as complete. Although made completely out of objects designed for efficient production, they themselves produce nothing.

Monuments to ambiguity, the whirligigs suggest that the way forward, both for Wilson, its residents, the state of North Carolina, and all of us here interested in the study and preservation of sites like this may be to look closely, listen openly, and read history heavily.