Most of us have a special or favorite place. The place we choose to vacation, where we dream of retiring, where we would live if only we could afford it. My favorite place in the world is the little beach town in Massachusetts where my grandfather had a house when I was a child. Artist Joe Jacobs’ special place, the place that inspires him, the place that he dreams about, is a world away from mine. It is Braddock, the industrial suburb just east of Pittsburgh.

Joe Jacobs woke up one morning in January of 1982 saying those words aloud. The night before, he had dreamt about his hometown, about the Braddock of his childhood. That dream and the memories it recalled inspired him to begin drawing, painting, and writing about Braddock.

Born in Braddock in 1925, Jacobs came of age during the Great Depression. His memories are of brick streets and frame houses, of tight alleys and wooden stairs, and of the ever-present steel mills that loomed over the town. Houses and hillsides and neighbors that spoke the languages of the Old World were part of his childhood reality and his adult dreams. The memories inspired his art and informed his interpretation and recollection of Braddock.

Jacobs’ parents were Eastern European Jews who immigrated to the United States around the turn of the century. Eventually they settled in Braddock, where Joe’s mother, Sarah Weiss Jacobs, had family. Many neighbors and town residents also traced their roots to Eastern Europe. In 1930, Braddock...
had a population of over 19,000. More than 60 percent of those residents were foreign-born or were the children of immigrants.

The Jacobs family lived at 1009 Cherry Alley, a place that figures prominently in Joe’s memories, his writings, and his art. The alley, packed with frame and brick homes, courtyards, and tiny gardens, echoed with the voices of the old country. It was Joe’s playground and his doorway to the world.

Within walking distance of the family home was Talbot Avenue. There you could catch the streetcar, which ran all the way to Pittsburgh. It was also on Talbot Avenue that many immigrant families, the Jacobs family included, sought solace in their faith. Braddock in the 1920s and ‘30s was a town of churches. The 1926 city directory reflects this, listing 31 houses of worship. Five were located on Talbot Avenue: Isidore Lithuania and Sacred Heart Roman Catholic churches; the First Congregational Slavonic Church; Holiday Memorial AME Zion Church; and the synagogue to which the Jacobs family belonged, Agudath Achim.

Agudath Achim was more than a house of worship to its congregation. It was a place to pass on traditions and to create and preserve community. And to Joe Jacobs, it was in a very real sense, his grand-father. Mendel Weiss, known affectionately to the family as Zaidy, was a devout Jew. He visited Joe’s home each afternoon on his way to Agudath Achim, stopping for a bowl of soup and to instruct his grandson in Hebrew. He appears
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"MAGIC MOVIE THEATRE," WATERCOLOR AND GOUACHE, 1982
in Joe’s art as a Don Quixote like figure, striding forward but holding onto the past. Zaidy was family and he was also community.

Framing the art, Jacobs’ memories, and the town itself, is the mill. Steel brought people to Braddock and it defined the town. The mills were a magical place for a child and Jacobs’ work retains that sense of wonder: “My seasoned eye saw a steel mill as if for the first time—a beautiful example of functional design—with a patina of weathering and years of use. I marveled at its large, simple forms and the delicate tracery made by its piping, ladders, and walkways. It had the presence of a cathedral.”

The Edgar Thomson Works in Braddock went into full operation in September of 1875. The first plant designed specifically for the technologically advanced Bessemer process, Edgar Thomson produced steel rails and big profits for owner Andrew Carnegie and his partners. Steel meant jobs, both in the mill and for those families such as the Jacobses who kept the mill towns running as grocers, salesmen, and small business owners. Steel defined the days and dirtied the skies. The mills were a constant on the landscape, embracing and overshadowing the community.

The art and writings of Joe Jacobs provide a tangible link to the Braddock of the past. Much of what he painted no longer exists, except in his memory and the minds of those who knew Braddock then and remember it still. Jacobs’ work is a labor of love, a way to return to the place in his dreams. He said it best. “Deep in my subconscious existed a longing to return to the town where I was born and lived until 1939. Where else do houses have front porches on the back? Where else are yards made of cement and walls so thick with mortar you can’t see the bricks? Where else do you walk through a saloon to play with a friend? And where else is the sky red and a noise from the mill echoes across the valley and shakes the floor under your feet? It was all there and more. And I did return.”