

Jack And Ruth Pentes: A Life Of Achievement.



The life of Jack Michael Pentes, Jr. (1931-2015) is an iconic American story. Born in Dothan, Alabama, Pentes moved as an adolescent from Columbus, Georgia to Charlotte with his parents in the early 1940s.¹ His father, a native of Patmos, Greece, came here to be a chef at the Purity Café at 400 E. Trade Street.² Jack Claiborne, retired Associate Editor of the *Charlotte Observer*, remembers Jack Pentes as a fellow student at Charlotte Central High School. They worked on the school's newspaper together. "Jack was a free spirit," Claiborne recalls. He was "liked by his classmates." He was "someone who encountered the world visually, not verbally." Pentes graduated from Charlotte Central High School as a 17-year-old Honor Roll student in 1949. He had no desire to go to college. "I hated school all my life, just despised it," he admitted. With only a few hundred dollars in his pocket, Pentes set out immediately after graduation to establish himself as an independent businessman. "He spent his life savings of \$300 when he was 17 years old to start his business," declared a member of the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce many years later.



The Interior Of The Purity Café In The 1940s Where Jack Pentes's Father Worked. Jack Pentes Retained A Concern For The Blue-Collar Working Class During His Entire Life. This Attribute Must Have Had Its Origins In The Economic Environment That His Family Experienced When He Was A Child. The Purity Café Was A Blue-Collar Eatery.

Pentes wanted to work for himself, not for anyone else. He was inspired to become a self-made and self-directed entrepreneur by what his father had accomplished while the elder Pentes had lived in Alabama and Georgia. Pentes told a reporter that his father opened a fruit stand in a 4-foot wide alley in Opelika, Alabama. "From that fruit stand," said Pentes, his father "opened a restaurant, and another and another." Jack remembered that he once asked his father why the family did not stay in Greece. His father answered: "What I had to do just to survive in the old country . . . with that effort transferred to this country . . . I would become a rich man." No better summary of the "American

Dream” can be made. No more precise statement of the values that undergirded Jack Pentes’s career can be imagined. Jack Pentes truly believed that the United States was the “Land of Opportunity.”

Pentes sought to become a commercial artist and designer. He never took an art course at Central High School. He never studied design. But he did have an innate ability to draw. He also had a robust imagination, an observant eye, and a fierce determination to succeed. All would contribute to his business successes. Pentes would receive many accolades during his business career. Charlie Pittman, who worked with Pentes in the WBTV Promotions Department in the 1970s, said Jack Pentes “was the most creative person” he ever met. In May 1971, the *Charlotte Observer* called Pentes a “designer-genius.” When the Land of Oz, a theme park designed by Pentes, opened atop Beech Mountain in Avery County and Watauga County in 1970, the *Charlotte News* insisted that only Jack Pentes could “dream and do it.” “I doubt you could find a more creative person in Charlotte than Jack,” said his business associate Thomas Barnhardt III in 1982.



Photograph Announcing That Jack Pentes Will Give A Chalk-Talk At The Charlotte Nature Museum On January 15, 1950.

The 1950s and 1960s were decades of exploration and experimentation for Jack Pentes. He worked incessantly and explored many ways to get money. He made lots of “chalk talks.” What were they? Let’s say he chose to talk about butterflies. As he spoke, he would draw detailed illustrations of butterflies on a portable chalkboard. Audiences at the Charlotte Nature Museum, at the Mint Museum of Art, at birthday parties, or at other gatherings enjoyed seeing the exuberant teenager display his talents. Jack also got cash for producing logos. Among them were the logos for the Festival In The Park and for the Charlotte College basketball team. He fashioned display signs for stores and banks. He even illustrated books.



Jack Pentes had a boyish spirit. This propensity contributed to one of his most successful early ventures. Jack became a clown, a real professional clown with full costume and grease paint.

“Everybody – I think has wanted to be a clown at one time or another,” Pentes declared. “It’s like losing yourself. You become another person.” Pentes named his clown character “BoBo.” “BoBo” was seemingly ubiquitous. “BoBo” went to the hospitals to give cheer to children who were long-term patients. “BoBo” appeared regularly on WBTV. “BoBo” even traveled with Jack to Korea during Jack’s U.S. Army service in that country from 1954 until 1956. Pentes asked an elderly Korean artisan to make “Bobo” a pair of over-sized shoes. In 1957, backers of the Carousel Parade, a festive celebration held yearly in Charlotte on Thanksgiving Day, asked Pentes if he knew other clowns who would participate. Jack’s response was to establish Carolina Clowns, a group of dues-paying performers that endures to this day.



“BoBo” In His Korean-Made, Over-Sized Shoes



“BoBo” Always Had A Good Time Interacting With Children.



In 2002 The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Senior Centers Awarded Jack Pentes Its Lifetime Achievement Award. Members Of The Carolina Clowns Gathered Around Him.

A transformational event in Jack Pentes’s life occurred on July 20, 1957. He married Ruth Emerson Jones (1933 – Present). Like her husband, Ruth was a graduate of Charlotte Central High School – two years after Jack. Unlike Jack, Ruth continued her education and earned a degree from the University

of North Carolina. Ruth resigned her job at the Mecklenburg County Welfare Department in 1961 and became Jack's secretary. Thereafter she brought an indispensable set of skills to Jack's business. Ruth Pentes had an analytical, structured mind that complemented her husband's sometimes impulsive, impetuous behavior. Truly, Jack and Ruth Pentes became a "team."³

Ruth's family was far superior to Jack's in terms of social standing. Her father was Art Jones, a Senior Vice President of Public Relations for North Carolina National Bank and a civic activist. Jones was largely responsible for the establishment of the Charlotte Nature Museum and Freedom Park. He came to Charlotte in 1939 from Newark, N. J. to work as the head of the Charlotte Parks & Recreation Commission and secured voter approval for a major increase in park funding. Among Art Jones's many projects was purchasing land on Sharon Hills Road in 1944, where he created an idyllic rural-like home retreat, which he named Shaggybark. "If you can pick parents, I picked a good one," said Ruth about her father. "He was warm and engaging and reaching out, not only to his family, but to many, many other people – and probably in the process taught his children a great deal about concern for other people."



*Ruth And Jack Pentes With Wedding Cake.
July 1957*



*Art Jones Bought A Log Hunting Lodge In 1944
And Expanded It As His Family Home*



Ruth Emerson Jones Pentes (2020)

Jack and Ruth Pentes rented an apartment in the first years of their marriage. Money was tight. “When I look back on it, it was hell,” Ruth declared in 1970. She described her husband as more than an “idea man.” He also could see the business side of issues, she insisted. Jack disagreed. He described himself as “a creative genius and a fiscal idiot.” Regardless, Ruth, who worked side- by-side with Jack for 40 years, did complement her husband’s talents. She had excellent contacts in the community. Her “people skills” allowed her to be a superb administrator. She was a self-taught photographer.

Jack’s reputation as an innovative graphic artist and designer did grow in the late 1950s and the 1960s. He was never a slacker. He always worked hard. The *Charlotte News* noted that Jack often labored “until midnight.” Jack built large, complicated sets for events at Ovens Auditorium and other venues. The *Charlotte Observer* commented on the sets he fashioned for a musical comedy fundraiser sponsored by the Charlotte Junior Chamber of Commerce. “I heard a lot of talk about the sets too,” stated the reporter. “Jack Pentes did a terrific job on those.”

Jack received lots of public notice. The press published feature articles describing an innovative painting technique he used to produce a “modernist” mural in 1958 for the Esso Standard Oil Company Building near the Park Road Shopping Center. The *Charlotte Observer* reported that Jack had “set Charlotte art on its collective ear by evolving a painting technique that utilizes rollers . . . and plastic squeeze bottles that once held barbecue sauce.” On February 8, 1959, Pentes described this technique at a meeting of the Guild of Charlotte Artists at the Mint Museum of Art. He took paint rollers and squeeze bottles with him. Not brushes.

In 1969-1970, Jack and Ruth Pentes acquired a lot from Ruth’s father at Shaggybark and built an A-frame house on it. They had two young children, a son Dorne and a daughter Danna. This was the first home the couple owned. Ruth and Jack wanted a rustic house, but they built what they could afford. Ruth spoke frankly about the family’s finances. “People think we have a lot of money,” Ruth told a reporter, “but we don’t.” The problem was not the volume of business. During the 1960s Jack was routinely hired to construct elaborate animated displays for department stores and shopping malls. The problem was that most of his displays were custom built, meaning that they could not be easily duplicated. They were also expensive to produce and install, making the profit margins narrow. “It just didn’t pay off – the time, labor, material – there was no money in it,” Ruth explained.



A-frame House At Shaggybark (1970)
Designed By Fritz Schmitt Of A. G. Odell Associates

Jack and Ruth did see some improvement in their family's lifestyle in the 1970s. A major reason was the money Jack received for his design and construction contract for the Land of Oz Amusement Park. In 1967, Harry and Grover Robbins, developers of Tweetsie Railroad, invited Jack Pentes to accompany them to the top of Beech Mountain in Avery and Watauga County, North Carolina. They wanted Jack to consider how the mountaintop and its ski resort could be made into a year around tourist attraction. They had no suggestions except that the terrain should be left as undisturbed as possible. Jack was challenged to bring all his skills into play. He would have to call upon his playful imagination. He would have to draw upon his sense of color, shape, texture, and image. He would have to recruit a team of specialists to compose music and assemble animated statuary to create a fantasy land. What a challenge for someone who had had no formal training in art or design. He was dependent totally upon his reputation as a diligent, competent, and inventive thinker. Charles Crutchfield, General Manager of WBTV, recommended Jack for the job. He knew Jack because of "Bo Bo" having appeared frequently on a television program hosted by "Big Bill" Ward, a local celebrity.

Jack's imagination was fully engaged when he made his first visit to the top of Beech Mountain. For the park's theme he seized upon the story and characters made famous by the Movie "The Wizard of Oz." "The trees grabbed me – those beautiful trees that couldn't be anywhere except for the feeling that I had seen them," Pentes remembered. "They seemed to have faces. The limbs seemed to be reaching out to me." Jack walked through the woods and spotted a cave. The cave was perfect to be the home of the "Cowardly Lion." "There was no question that this was Oz," Pentes proclaimed. The Land of Oz Amusement Park opened on June 15, 1970. Actress Debbie Reynolds cut the ribbon to the "Yellow Brick Road" on July 3rd.⁴



Jack Pentec sometimes rattled the cages of Charlotte's elite. He could be irascible. Jack Pentec spoke to a group at the Charlotte Y.W.C.A. in February 1971. His message sounds remarkably contemporary. He expressed great concern about pollution. He stated that he had been reading books about the impact of pollution on the environment. "I've gone through the worst depression of my life," he exclaimed. Pentec said that the view from atop Beech Mountain revealed that the air had become noticeably less pristine in the last five years. He ended his program by showing a film his company had produced entitled "The Sky is Falling," shot mostly in Charlotte. The *Charlotte Observer* described its content.

Garbage was spilling out of the alleys. Beer cans, pop bottles, and candy wrappers covered the roadsides. Smokestacks stood silhouetted against the sky, belching great clouds of black smoke. Cars, trucks, and buses jammed the highways and jets streaked through the skies – all of them trailing noxious fumes. Old washing machines and cars were rusting in fields that must have once been green.

Pentec singled out Duke Power Company for its alleged slowness in abandoning the operation of coal-burning power plants. Jack also criticized City leaders for adding additional lanes to highways and streets as the principal means to reduce traffic congestion. He ended by calling upon the citizenry to demand fundamental changes in behavior. "Ecologically speaking, Henny Penny is right," Pentec proclaimed, "the sky is falling."

In 1971, Mayor John Belk and the City of Charlotte announced that the trees lining Sharon Lane would be cut down to create a four lane thoroughfare so shoppers could drive more easily to Southpark Mall. Jack stated that, if necessary, he would chain himself to one of the trees to prevent such a travesty from occurring. He pounded his fist on the table when he spoke to a reporter. "Damn it we have to draw the line somewhere and I think the line is Sharon Lane." "I don't care who lives in those houses or how rich they are," he continued. "They are our trees, they are God's trees." City policy did not change. The trees were all cut down in 1972.

Jack was a proponent of encouraging the use of bicycle ridership and was frustrated by the absence of bike paths in Charlotte. "Charlotte is a city without a single cyclist's warning sign, bike route or bike lane," he told the local press in July 1973. He helped organize a series of bike rallies that summer to demonstrate that there was another way to get uptown. Office workers gathered in the parking lot of Westminster Presbyterian Church at the corner of Colville Road and Randolph Road and pedaled to the center city. "These rallies," Pentec promised, "will continue as an active but silent demonstration of the cyclist's concern and desire for recognition and accommodation throughout the city."



Sharon Lane Before Trees Were Removed (1971)



Workers Biking To Work In The Summer Of 1973

Jack reacted angrily to the refusal of the Charlotte City Council to fund Greenways. A group of backers met with Council members and the Park & Recreation Commission in August 1971. The press reported that Jack Pentes used “the strongest oratory in the meeting.”

Where is your vision? Where are your guts? Are you going to let nit-picking things stand in your way?

Go ahead – kill it. Let the developers come in with their Planned Unit Developments and jam the land full of high rises.

At heart Jack Pentes was a Liberterian. He was suspicious of politicians and bureaucrats.⁵ On November 15, 1990, the *Charlotte Observer* published a Letter to the Editor from Jack. In it Pentes bemoaned the fact that incumbents had won a recent election and were returning to Congress.

As a result, we will get more taxes, more spending, more debt, more interest and more deficit.

There will be a few more things. More homelessness, more poverty, more unwanted pregnancies, more drugs, more AIDS, more crime and more prisons – all the result of more ignorance.

The *Charlotte Observer* noted that Pentes Design, Inc. had a low profile locally and that 80 percent of its business was done outside Mecklenburg County. The newspaper pondered whether this was partly due to Jack’s outspoken persona. It suggested that Jack might be a “prophet without honor in his own country.” Ruth Pentes rejects that contention.⁶

Jack’s hope of honoring his father’s legacy by achieving financial security for his family occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. His company was able to construct an administrative and design building in 1980 on Hill Road off South Boulevard. Ruth and Jack hired Charlotte architect Murray Whisnant to draw plans for the structure. Like Jack and Ruth, Whisnant was a graduate of Charlotte Central High School. All three had known each other as students there.



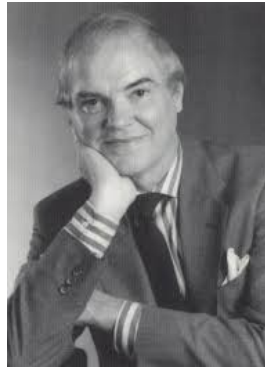
The Pentes Design Company Building. (1980)
The Parking Lot Is Gravel, Not Asphalt



Jack And Ruth Wanted A Window In Every Office
And To Save As Many Trees As Possible

Murray Whisnant (1932-Present) graduated from the North Carolina School of Design in May 1956. Whisnant was deeply influenced by the teachers he encountered at N.C. State. “As an 18-year-old ‘Green’ Southern boy from a small town, I was surrounded” he said “by a cosmopolitan group of

architects from all over the world.” The faculty included such luminaries as Eduardo Catalano, Duncan Stuart, and Visiting Professor Buckminster Fuller. All were recruited by Henry Kamphoefner, Dean of the N.C. State School of Design. “We never talked about style,” said Whisnant. His teachers emphasized design as a rational process of problem solving, not as a method of determining how a structure or other objects should look.⁷



Murray Whisnant (1932-Present)

Murray Whisnant returned to Charlotte after graduation and has adhered throughout his career to the architectural principles he learned at N.C. State. Buildings, he told the *Charlotte Observer* in 1970, should be “responsive to specific problems of the client instead of stereotyped plans.” They also should “react more to the site they’re put on and the environment they go into.” Among his early institutional structures in Charlotte were the Red Cross Administration Building on Park Road, the Mecklenburg County Office Building on East Fourth Street, and the Oliver Rowe Fine Arts Building at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. But perhaps the most illustrative example of Whisnant’s approach to design was his award-winning residence on Sharon Hills Road, which he first occupied in 1968. Whisnant became a nearby neighbor of Ruth and Jack Pentes when that couple moved into their A-frame house at Shaggybark.



Whisnant House On Sharon Hills Road

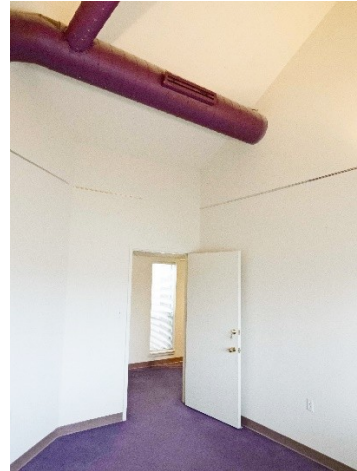


Olive Rowe Fine Arts Building UNCC

In August 1990, Richard Maschal of the *Charlotte Observer* wrote a feature article about Murray Whisnant. He asked Jack Pentes to explain how Whisnant responded to the need to fashion a building that would fit the needs of Pentes Design, Inc. “He knew he was doing a building for creative people,”

said Pentes. The offices have 21' high ceilings. Pentes explained: "This feeling of space overhead allows your mind to expand." Pentes called Whisnant "probably the best-kept architectural secret in America." In 1990, Whisnant won the Kamphoefner Prize, awarded to the North Carolina architect who made a "sustained contribution to the modern movement."

Whisnant was constrained by the size of the one-half acre lot set aside for the Pentes Design, Inc. Building. Instead of leveling the land, cutting down all the trees, and paving the lot with impervious asphalt, Whisnant produced a site plan of sophistication and environmental sensitivity. The building is placed in a grove of trees. The slope of the terrain is retained. The parking lot is gravel. The building is a narrow rectangle extending from the front to the back of the lot, thereby preserving an unobstructed view into the woods beyond the building. The grey cladding of the exterior makes the building unobtrusive,



Returning to Ruth's and Jack's business affairs, the Land of Oz closed in 1980, largely a victim of costly maintenance and the opening of Carowinds Amusement Park near Charlotte in 1973. But the sadness Jack felt because of the fate of the Land of Oz could not overshadow the fact that in the 1980s he and Ruth were making more money than ever before. Pentes Design continued to produce some custom design projects. Among them was a wind sculpture with fabric panels that were changed for each of the four seasons of the year. It was placed in a median on West Trade Street in Charlotte in 1986. In 1987, Pentes installed a "Fantasy Christmas World" with a German-built carousel in Southpark Mall.

But the principal focus of Jack's and Ruth's company and the venture that produced most of the expansion in its income was the production of "soft playgrounds."



Wind Sculpture On West Trade Street (1986)

In 1983 Jack Pentes produced his first "Playport," a 1000-square-foot playground that used soft plastic and netting instead of metal and hard rubber for its components. This was a "game changer" financially. "Jack and Ruth Pentes blazed the trail for the invasion of plastic playlands," declared the *Charlotte Observer*. "Putting zest back into kids' lives safely," the journalist wrote, "is what Charlotte designer Jack Pentes concentrates on these days." Jack noted that children had traditionally experienced suspense and excitement by visiting unfamiliar places, like swimming holes, rock outcroppings or swamps. Now those kinds of places were largely missing, especially for children who lived in urban areas. Jack and Ruth sought to restore a sense of wonder to children's play.



Jack Sitting On The "Playport" At The Burger King At South Boulevard & Marsh Road (1993)



Rising Income Allowed Jack Pentes To Buy A Boat That He Is Piloting On Lake Wylie (1995)

Fast-food restaurants, including Burger King, placed orders for substantial numbers of "Playports." They were sold internationally, even to Japan. Children could play unattended, and their parents could munch on French fries and burgers inside the restaurant. Most importantly from a business perspective, "Playports" could be easily replicated. Pentes Design leased a large warehouse and expanded its workforce to meet demand. Ruth Pentes traveled throughout the country and elsewhere to photograph "Playports" when they were completed. Pentes Design was growing by "leaps and bounds."

Jack and Ruth Pentes sold Pentes Design, Inc. in 1998 and retired. For years they had lived in the log house at Shaggybark, and they continued to reside there. They opened and operated an Art Gallery for a short period. Jack volunteered to entertain children who visited Charlotte's McGill Rose Garden. One year he designed and produced festive kites for the Southern Christmas Show in Charlotte. Jack remained active with Carolina Clowns. He took delight operating his boat on Lake Wylie. He bought a Royal Enfield motorcycle with a sidecar. Jack enjoyed giving rides to friends at high speed. He especially relished frightening them by suddenly lurching leftward so the wheels to the sidecar would come up off the pavement. Jack received awards and recognition for his accomplishments. Jack Pentes died on February 7, 2015, after several years of declining health. The *Charlotte Observer* noted that Jack "made his mark as the master of enchantment." Ruth Emerson Jones Pentes lives.



The Cowardly Lion At The Land Of Oz In 1970

Dr. Dan L. Morrill

April 7, 2020

1 The fact that Jack Pentes was born in Dothan, Alabama was happenstance. His father, Jack Michael Pentes, Sr., owned and operated a restaurant in Columbus, Georgia. Afflicted with alcoholism, he took his family to nearby Dothan, Alabama for treatment. Jack Michael Pentes, Jr. was born while the family resided there. Jack returned as an infant to Columbus and remained there until his family moved to Charlotte. Jack's father lost control of his restaurant in Georgia when he was arrested for selling liquor illegally.

2 Jack Pentes lived with his parents at 2016 Floral Avenue in the Dilworth neighborhood of Charlotte when he attended high school.

3 Jack Pentes worked as a soda jerk at Walgreens Drug Store in uptown Charlotte while in high school. Vic Jones, Ruth's father, met Jack there, became aware of Jack's talents as a designer, and hired him to fashion displays for the bank where Jones worked. Ruth Jones had met Jack at Central High School, but she was two grades behind him. Told by her father that Jack was a gifted designer, Ruth asked Jack to put together a display for the Charlotte Y.W.C.A., where she was employed. Jack agreed. That was the beginning of their life-long relationship,

4 Illustrative of Jack's creative instincts was a project he undertook at the edge of the lake at Shaggybark. One day when it snowed, Jack called his neighbors on Sharon Hills Road and told them to dispatch their children right away to Shaggybark. When they arrived, the children were escorted across the snow-covered ground to see a sculpture of a large foot that Jack had drawn in the snow at the water's edge to suggest that a giant had walked into the lake.

5 Jack Pentes's distrust of politicians might have arisen from a series of events in 1970. Charlotte Mayor John Belk appointed a Committee to consider redevelopment schemes for the "Blue Heaven" neighborhood, a former African American neighborhood that stretched from McDowell Street in Second Ward to Little Sugar Creek. Jack and Charlotte architect Crutcher Ross were hired to make a proposal for redevelopment. They recommended that a large park, called "Serendipity Park," patterned after Trivoli Garden in Copenhagen, Denmark, be built. The Citizens Committee recommended the scheme to City Council. City Council rejected the proposal.

6 Jack Pentes advocated for an array of issues. In July 1979, he and his son Dorne appeared before the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board to express concern about cutbacks in the Open School Program at West Charlotte High School. Jack Pentes signed a public petition in support of a woman's right to an abortion. This belief led to Dorne Pentes being arrested in September 1979. Anita Bryant, a popular singer of that day, was speaking to a large crowd at Northside Baptist Church in Charlotte. She was known to be a strong opponent of expanding the definition of a legal abortion. Dorne was arrested for participating in a protest at the church. He was carrying a pie which he allegedly planned to throw into Ms. Bryant's face. Jack sometimes spoke out about international issues, including U.S. Foreign Policy. In September 1982, the *Charlotte Observer* published a letter in which Jack chastised the United States for supporting many despotic rulers because they backed Washington's objectives. "I pray that enough love, compassion and decency survives (sic.)," Jack proclaimed, "to allow us to change our course before we make a substantial contribution to the destruction of all mankind."

7 In 1948, Henry L. Kamphoefner (1907-1990) came from the University of Oklahoma to Raleigh to become the founding Dean of the School of Design at North Carolina State, a position he held until 1972. The impact Kamphoefner had upon the built environment of North Carolina was profound. He was determined to recruit a faculty that would inculcate the principles of orthodox modernism into students who aspired to be

architects, landscape architects, sculptors, industrial designers, or practitioners of any endeavor that had physical design at its core. The results of Kamphoefner's pedagogical philosophy can be seen in structures erected in all parts of the Tar Heel state, including the Pentes Design, Inc. Building erected on Hill Road in Charlotte in 1980.