

Fine art adorns Placid post office

by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, September 1, 2006

LAKE PLACID — The next time you mail a letter at the post office, look up.

Affixed to the wall above the P.O. boxes and service windows are five fine murals depicting winter sports, painted in the realistic American Scene style predominating among the New Deal public art projects during the Depression.

Like us, you've probably looked at these paintings many times and have wondered about the story behind them: Who painted them, and when, and why?

This summer, we searched out the answers to those questions. This week, we'll share them with you.

THE STORY starts on May 16, 1936, when the cornerstone was laid for Lake Placid's new post office.

As a federal building, the post office would have been slated for the installation of an original

mural created specifically for its walls. That was the job of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture, later called the Section of Fine Arts.

Created during FDR's first year in office as part of his sweeping "New Deal" assault on the Great Depression, "The Section" held 190 competitions over the course of its 11-year history to choose artists and designs for the "democratic art galleries" it wanted the nation's post offices to become.

"The general theme was to reinforce people's sense of pride and place and identity," wrote Carol Van West, author of "Tennessee's New Deal Landscape."

"The New Deal philosophy was that we should restore hope and pride to America after the Depression. The artwork that resulted reflected that Americans do, in fact, have a past and a place

that we can be proud of."

Once an artist won a competition for a specific post office, they were strongly encouraged to visit the town that would be receiving their mural, examine the space available for their work, and learn a little about the community.

Each post office was given a mural budget equal to about 1 percent of the building's total cost, and the Section tried to pay its artists \$20 per square foot for the work they created. At that rate, the Lake Placid Post Office mural would have cost the government a little over \$1,000.

THE PAINTER chosen in 1936 to decorate our new post office was Henry Billings, 35, a muralist of some little renown.

Billings was born to a well-to-do family in Bronxville, Long Island in 1901. He was the grandson of John Shaw Billings, a famous medical bibliographer,





first director of the New York Public Library, and designer of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

“After only a few years of formal education that terminated when he was 17 in what he describes as ‘general confusion,’ the artist served a short apprenticeship in various architectural offices,” wrote Art Digest editor Peyton Boswell Jr. in his landmark 1939 book, “Modern American Painting.”

“But he soon left to study at the Art Students’ League, a decision which he says was ‘an appalling choice from the family’s point of view, inasmuch as I obviously had no talent.’

“At the League he studied with Boardman Robinson and Kenneth Hayes Miller on and off for about three years,” Boswell wrote. “Then, in 1921, he went to Woodstock.”

Half a century before the famous hippie music festival of the late 1960s, Woodstock was home to several artists’ colonies, including the summer retreat of the Art Students’ League.

“Billings gave his first one-man show in 1928,” Boswell con-

tinued, “and three years later held another exhibition of decorative panels, the designs of which were based on machinery.”

The 1931 exhibition captured loads of critical attention.

“Mr. Henry Billings, 29, is a slightly gloomy young man who lives in the fantastic toy village art colony at Woodstock,” said an art magazine in a story about that 1931 show.

“He is not sure himself when first he became interested in murals, although for the past two years the subject has engaged him. ... Recently, he exhibited his designs in New York. Unable to find a gallery, he took a floor in the Squibbs Building and showed them there.”

“The press was enthusiastic,” said Time magazine in a Feb. 16, 1931 story about the Squibbs show. “Henry Billings’ pictures average about ten by six feet apiece, all are based on modern machinery. ... It is the Billings theory that colorful, firmly painted abstractions, based on worm-gear drives or air-cooled radial engines ... are more suitable for modern buildings than nymphs, satyrs or

Red Men standing on the site of Number Six smelter.

“Even the most cautious critics admitted last week that the Billings murals were different, decorative. Artist Billings’ good friend Murdock Pemberton of the New Yorker went further, called them ‘as thrilling as anything in town at present’.”

MACHINERY, however, is not the subject of Billings’ surviving works of public art, including:

- a mural of a crouching panther, painted on the wall of the ladies’ lounge on the third mezzanine level of Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan;

- “Maury County Landscape,” a mural painted in Columbia, Tennessee, where phosphate mining was a major industry at the time Billings’ work was executed, showing a billowing smokestack in the midst of a rural setting;

- “The Golden Triangle of Trade,” a three-panel mural in the Medford, Massachusetts post office depicting Medford’s shipping trade and rum industry, both historically fed by African slavery, and



• two triangular murals in the old post office in Wappingers Falls, near Woodstock, portraying the town's first mill on Wappingers Creek, ca. 1780, and its textile mills, ca. 1880.

Billings was a visiting art instructor at Bard College, also near Woodstock, when he won the competition in 1936 to paint a mural in the new Lake Placid post office. The Nov. 13 Lake Placid News briefly describes Billings' initial visit to the Olympic Village, two days earlier:

"Henry Billings ... who has been designated ... to execute a series of murals in the new Lake Placid post office, was in town on Wednesday making a preliminary survey of the project. During his

stay he interviewed local residents concerning the subject matter of the various Lake Placid scenes to be reproduced.

"Either winter or summer sports subjects, or both, will be utilized, it is expected."

Winter sports won out — and not just because of the Olympic Winter Games that had been held in Lake Placid nearly five years earlier.

To be sure, one of the panels depicted a four-man bobsled team riding the Olympic track on Mount Van Hoevenberg, a track built expressly for the 1932 Olympics.

Another panel, however, portrayed an alpine skier — an event popular at Lake Placid Club com-

petitions, but not included in the Olympic program until 1936.

The other three panels showed: a figure skater, a sport for which Placid had become famous; a hockey court like the one formerly set up on the LPC rinks; and speed skaters on an open lake, like those who had raced in the extraordinarily popular competitions on Mirror Lake in the 1920s.

As was the pattern for all the Section of Fine Arts murals, Billings' work was completed in his studio, and the finished canvasses were brought to Lake Placid for installation. That event was reported by the Lake Placid News in a Page One brief on July 23, 1937.



FORTY-TWO years later, as the Winter Olympics approached, the U.S. Postal Service asked several artists and art conservators — including Billings himself — to submit bids for the restoration of the Lake Placid murals.

The winning bid came from Linda Tucker of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

In her Nov. 12, 1979 evaluation of the murals' condition, Tucker wrote, "The murals are painted flatly using white, blue, earth browns and reds to create the winter scenes. The paint is thinly but opaquely applied in most places. There is little brush stroke texture and no impasto [thickly applied paint]. Some of the faces are painted only with washes. In some areas the yellowed ground shows through, contrasting with the white surface paint."

Tucker thoroughly cleaned all five of Billings' panels, removing specks of household paint that had strayed onto the canvasses over the years. To protect the murals, she sealed them with a single thin coat of picture varnish.

For her work, Tucker was paid

\$1,400 — substantially more than Billings had been paid for the original compositions.

Henry Billings died in Sag Harbor in 1987, fifty years after

painting the Lake Placid murals. His work is still on display in the village post office, that "democratic art gallery" created in 1937 by a New Deal public art program.

