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Article Summary: Ernest E Stevens was among the struggling artists who benefited from federally funded art programs—the CWA in Nebraska and the WPA in Wyoming. Stevens created three oil paintings now in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society: *Buffalo Herd*; *Covered Wagon [Going West]* and *Building of the Log Cabin*. His best known and widely viewed paintings, the *Old West* murals, were painted for the Wyoming WPA art program in 1935-1936.

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Names: Ernest E Stevens, George W Stevens, Mary Monroe Stevens, Maud Belle Rice, Edward Bruce, Thomas R Kimball, Wilda Chase Reeder, Robert Brinkema, John Kelly, Harold Bishop, E E Lowry, Grace R Hebard

APPENDIX: Major Holders of Artwork by Ernest E Stevens

Keywords: New Deal; Civil Works Administration (CWA); Public Works of Art Project (PWAP); Nebraska State Historical Society; Torrington High School [Wyoming]; The Stagecoach Museum [Lusk, Wyoming]; University of Wyoming Art Museum [Laramie, Wyoming]

Photographs / Images: Ernest E Stevens in Washington, D C, 1908; Ernest E Stevens' historical oil painting *Covered Wagon or Going West*, 1934; *Portrait of Mr Fred Sullivan, Stagecoach Driver*, sketch, by Ernest E Stevens, 1937



Ernest E. Stevens in Washington, D.C., 1908

New Deal Artist Ernest E. Stevens

By Florence Canfield Burden

The New Deal brought government involvement in US economic affairs on a scale unprecedented in American history. Nebraska was most affected by new federal programs in agriculture—emergency farm loans, stabilization of marketing through government purchases, and improvement of farm prices through production control. However, farmers were not the only beneficiaries of government programs designed to bolster the nation's sagging economy.

In October 1933 the Civil Works Administration (CWA) was created to provide temporary employment projects during the winter of 1933-1934. It funded, among other programs, the Treasury Department's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), which nationally employed about 3,700 artists. When the PWAP ended in April 1934 art programs were continued through other projects under the Treasury Department and the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

Ernest E. Stevens was among the struggling artists who benefited from federally funded art programs—the CWA in Nebraska and the WPA in Wyoming. Stevens created in 1934 three oil paintings now in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society: *Buffalo Herd*; *Covered Wagon* or *Going West* (reproduced on the cover of *Nebraska History* magazine, Summer 1971); and *Building of the Log Cabin* (reproduced on the cover of this issue). His best known and widely viewed paintings, the *Old West* murals, were painted for the Wyoming WPA art program in 1935-1936.

A versatile artist, Stevens also worked in mediums other than oil—pastel, chalk, watercolor, pen and ink, pencil, crayon, embossing, etching, and engraving. His portraits (done in soft shades of pencil, pen and ink, or charcoal) capture the personality and character of his subject well.

Ernest E. Stevens was born on a farm near Aplington, Iowa, on August 29, 1872. He was the oldest of four children and on-

ly eight years of age when his father, George W. Stevens, died in 1880. Stevens's mother, Mary (Monroe) Stevens, then moved into Cedar Falls, Iowa.

Stevens had displayed artistic talent during his school years and in 1896 entered the Zanerian College of Art and Penmanship in Columbus, Ohio. Upon graduation in 1897, he returned to Cedar Falls and opened a studio. In 1900 Stevens used his share of the proceeds from the sale of the family farm near Aplington to enter the School of Art and Design, Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn, New York. Encouraged by a Pratt art teacher, Stevens decided at the end of his first term in June to study in Europe.

Between 1900 and 1902 Stevens lived in Paris, taking art classes at the Julian Academie and practicing his painting and sketching. When he returned to the United States he settled in Washington, D.C., where he lived for a time with an aunt and tried in vain to find financial backing for his own studio. Finally he took a job as a draftsman with a patent attorney's office.

In Washington Stevens became well acquainted with Maud Belle Rice, a Census Bureau clerk originally from Neligh, Nebraska. Stevens and Miss Rice continued their friendship after both left Washington in 1909, Maud to teach in North Dakota and Stevens to recuperate with his family in Iowa from typhoid fever. After regaining some of his strength, he worked in Minneapolis for a year but found the climate, like that of Washington, too cold and damp for his health.

In the fall of 1910 he and a friend traveled to the high, dry plains of Montana to look for homestead sites. Stevens staked out a claim four miles southeast of Sumatra in Rosebud County. Later his mother and sister moved from Cedar Falls, Iowa, to an adjoining homestead.

Maud Rice, who corresponded regularly with Stevens, decided in 1911 to give up her North Dakota teaching job and try homesteading near Van Tassell, Wyoming. For the next few years she struggled along on the prairie, with occasional assistance from her father, whose homestead was about 24 miles southeast in Sioux County, Nebraska. On May 20, 1914, she married Stevens and lived with him on the Montana homestead until the land was legally his. The couple then rented it to others and moved to Maud's homestead near Van Tassell.

During the Montana and Wyoming homesteading years, Stevens could not devote as much time as he wished to his art work. He sometimes sketched or painted in the evenings and drew cartoons or caricatures of himself as hayseed farmer "Tom Thistle," which reflected his frustration in farming. He also did sketches of horses and a few portraits of his neighbors.

Finally in 1925 Stevens left farming and moved to Denver where he again worked as a draftsman and between 1927 and 1929 did free-lance drawing for the *Denver Post*. In 1929 he moved to the Neligh, Nebraska, farm of Maud's parents so that Maud could care for her aged mother, who died in 1933.

After her death Stevens moved into Neligh and again sought work in art: landscape or portrait work, designing, or even the lettering of signs and posters. But during the stagnant years of the Depression, few jobs of any type were available. Stevens did a few portraits for Neligh people, several oil landscapes of the Elkhorn River Valley, and a large oil mural, *Bend in the River Jordan*, for the Church of Christ in Neligh.

In October 1933 the federal government created the Civil Works Administration (CWA), an agency which funded temporary employment programs for the winter months of 1933-1934. By employing people in small public works projects for a minimum wage, the agency could take them off direct relief. Edward Bruce was made national director of CWA relief work for artists.¹

Bruce, a personal friend of President Roosevelt, was a silver expert, art connoisseur, and former advisor to the United States Treasury. He divided the nation into 16 regions, each with a Treasury paymaster and volunteer selection committees.² Omaha architect Thomas R. Kimball and Fremont artist and art teacher Wilda Chase Reeder selected the Nebraska participants. Kimball supervised projects in Omaha, and Mrs. Reeder, "to whom a great deal of credit for the success of the work is due,"³ took charge of out-state artists and their work.

Stevens applied and in his January 11, 1934, notification of acceptance received from Mrs. Reeder the following instructions:⁴

The Civil Works Administration has set aside a certain sum of money to be used for the employment of artists. Artists shall be classified in two groups: Class A and Class B. Those in Class A shall receive \$42.50 per week for 30 hours of work, and those in Class B shall receive \$26.50 for 30 hours per week.⁵



Ernest E. Stevens's historical oil painting Covered Wagon or Going West (1934) was reproduced in color on the cover of Nebraska History, Summer 1971. It is now in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

It is the intention to put deserving and competent artists to work at once. Craftsmen and sculptors are also included in the project.

Requirements:

1. Ability.

2. Necessity—It is the desire to give employment to those artists in need of employment. However, some artists will be employed other than those in actual need of work, depending upon their ability. It being understood that this measure is not a dole. Artists so employed need not have this work interfere with their regular employment so long as they put in 30 hours per week for the government. Employed artists under this plan must sign an oath of office before a notary at his own expense. He must furnish his own materials. (It is expected that material houses will extend reasonable credit.)

Employed artists at present are left free to render 30 hours of service each week without supervision, but later the work will be supervised and inspected. Work produced by employed artists will become the property of the government.

Employed artists will report each week to Mr. Thomas Kimball, 2236 St. Mary's Avenue, Omaha, Nebr. Checks will be issued from the St. Louis office (head for this region). Checks may be delayed for a week or two.

Employed artists: They shall be allowed to carry out their own original ideas. However, it is suggested that a proper inspiration will be found in our contemporaneous life, and in the activities which are now going on.

Ernest qualified as a Class A artist and was to receive \$42.50 per week. He had submitted to Mrs. Reeder sketches in response to her request for Stevens's ideas for "stage-curtain painting for the Fremont High School."⁶ His plans approved, Stevens traveled to Fremont, where he worked for four weeks on the design and painting of the high school stage curtains. He was assisted by Omaha theater painter Robert Brinkema and Fremont residents John Kelly and Harold Bishop.⁷

After completing the Fremont project, Ernest returned to Neligh where he continued work for the Nebraska CWA. In March and April 1934 Stevens did a pen and ink drawing entitled *Going to Work* and three historical oil paintings: *Building of the Log Cabin*, *Buffalo Herd*, and *Covered Wagon or Going West*. The painting and other works of art produced under the PWAP were entrusted by the Treasury Department to the Nebraska Emergency Relief Committee.⁸ They were later displayed at the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha,⁹ and at the 1935 Nebraska State Historical Society annual meeting.

The CWA was terminated in April of 1934,¹⁰ leaving Stevens again without a job. For a time he painted signs, did a few portraits, and worked occasionally for Maud's brother at

the Rice family farm near Neligh. He researched and had privately published a map of Antelope County, selling copies for \$1.00 each to meet living expenses.

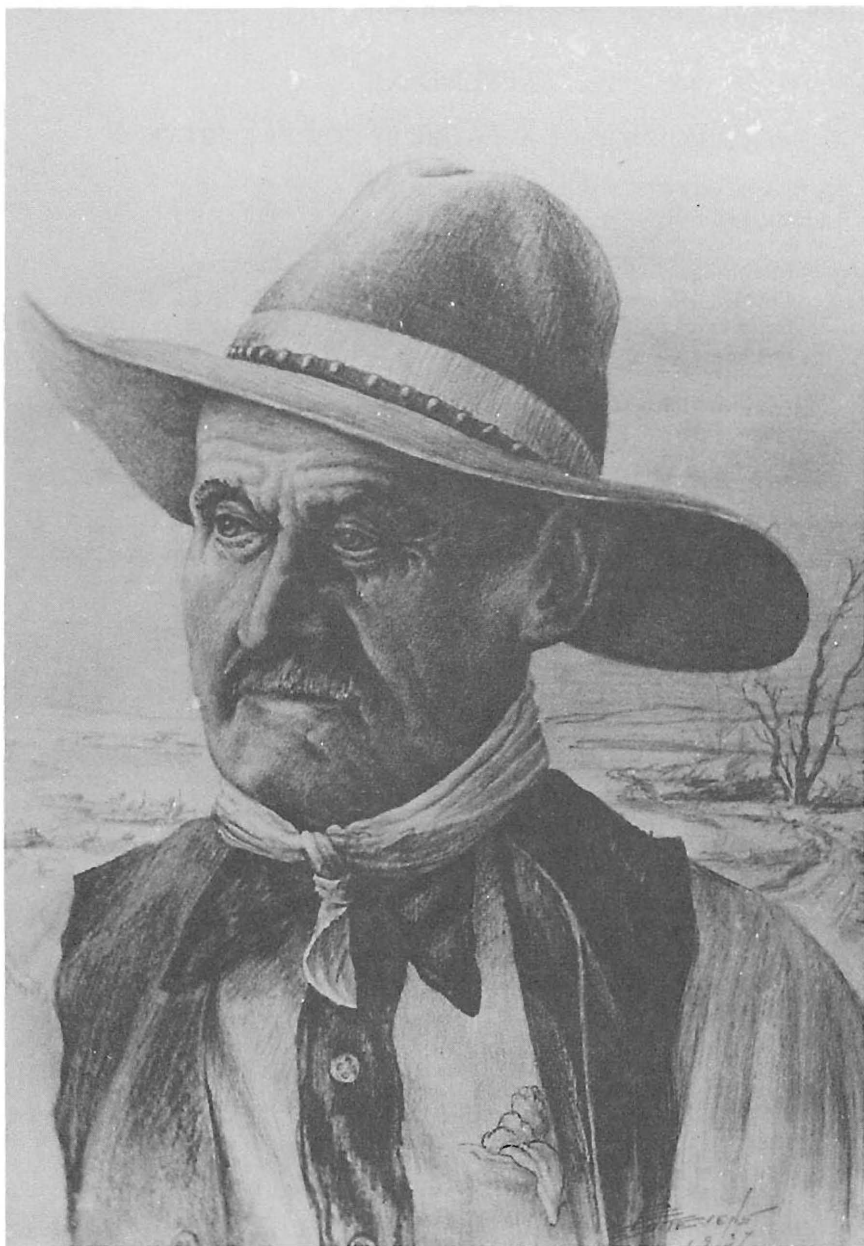
Finally in the spring of 1935, the Stevenses decided to leave Nebraska and return to their Van Tassell, Wyoming, homestead, which they had left for Denver in 1925. Here Stevens began sketching in pen and ink, did portraits of his friends, and began to paint more in oils.

In the fall of 1935 Stevens accepted a position with the Wyoming Works Progress Administration (WPA) art project, directed by E. E. Lowry, head of the University of Wyoming art department. Stevens was asked to paint stage curtains for the Torrington, Wyoming, high school auditorium and four large murals for the auditorium walls.¹¹ Grace R. Hebard, professor of history at the University of Wyoming, was one of the collaborators for the historical *Old West* murals, now among the best known of Stevens's works.¹²

Three of the murals depict scenes in Goshen County: *Old Fort Laramie*, *Laramie River at Fort Laramie*, and *Pony Express*, *Cold Springs Water Station*, *South Torrington, 1861*. *Deadwood and Cheyenne Trail* depicts a stagecoach and trail in Niobrara County south of Lusk.¹³ Painted in oil on heavy muslin, they were glued to the walls of the Torrington, Wyoming, high school. When a new high school building was constructed, the murals were removed from the old building, cleaned and restored, and mounted on aluminum panels. They are now displayed in the new Torrington high school building.¹⁴

In 1937-1938 Stevens continued work for the Wyoming WPA. Five of his pen and ink historical drawings are still displayed in the Stagecoach Museum in Lusk, Wyoming.¹⁵ He exhibited his works at art shows in Omaha, Rapid City (South Dakota), and the University of Wyoming.

In March of 1938 Stevens accepted the directorship of a federal art gallery in Torrington, where works of WPA artists were exhibited. On May 30, 1938, he suffered a heart attack and died shortly thereafter.¹⁶



Portrait of Mr. Fred Sullivan, Stagecoach Driver was sketched by Ernest E. Stevens in 1937. Courtesy of Stage Coach Museum, Lusk, Wyoming, and Dr. Kayo Smith, Torrington, Wyoming.

APPENDIX

MAJOR HOLDERS OF ARTWORK BY ERNEST E. STEVENS¹⁷NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Lincoln, Nebraska

Oil Paintings (1934)

Covered Wagon or Going West
Building of the Log Cabin
Buffalo Herd

Pen and Ink Drawing (1934)

Going to Work

TORRINGTON HIGH SCHOOL
Torrington, Wyoming

Old West Oil Murals (1935-1936)

Old Fort Laramie
Laramie River at Fort Laramie
Pony Express, Cold Water Station, South Torrington, 1861
Deadwood and Cheyenne Trail

THE STAGECOACH MUSEUM
Lusk, Wyoming

Pen and Ink Drawings (1937)

Portrait of Mr. Fred Sullivan, Stagecoach Driver
Portrait of Mr. Frank DeCastro, Old Timer
Hat Creek Stage Station
Running Water Stage Station or Silver Cliff Stage Station
Stage and Guards Delivering Gold

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING ART MUSEUM
Laramie, Wyoming

Charcoal Drawing (1937)

R. A. McHale at His Forge
(Donated by G. Edward Pendray)

Oil Painting

The Pendray Homestead
(Donated by G. Edward Pendray)

Collection of E. E. Stevens Art

(Donated by Dr. William Ward)

NOTES

Much of the information in this article is based upon Maud Rice Stevens's papers and memorabilia, now in the possession of Stevens's niece, author Florence Canfield Burden of Torrington, Wyoming. These papers and Mrs. Burden's personal reminiscences of Stevens and his work are included in her 1983 biography, *Prairie Artist, Homesteading with E. E. Stevens* (Torrington, Wyoming, 1983).

1. "Federal Sponsorship Inducing Creative Work of High Merit," *Sunday Journal and Star*, April 1, 1934.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Ernest F. Witte, "The Nebraska FERA Art Exhibit," *Nebraska History* 16 (January-March, 1935), p. 57.

4. Letter from Wilda Chase Reeder to Ernest E. Stevens, January 11, 1934. Maud Rice Stevens Collection.

5. "Those classified under A . . . are finished craftsmen; those in B have lesser ability, or have had less opportunity to develop it through continued work, which in the end makes for excellence." *Sunday Journal and Star*, April 1, 1934.

6. Letter from Wilda Chase Reeder to Ernest E. Stevens, January 11, 1934. Maud Stevens Collection.

7. A Fremont newspaper clipping dating from February of 1934 in the Maud Rice Stevens collection described the difficulties encountered by Stevens and his associates. The curtains are no longer in the Fremont high school. They were probably removed and destroyed when the stage was remodeled into classrooms. Letter from Robert K. Melick, Superintendent of Fremont Public Schools, to Florence Canfield Burden, May 20, 1985.

8. Witte, "Art Exhibit," 58.

9. Letter from Wilda Chase Reeder to Ernest E. Stevens, April 10, 1934. Maud Rice Stevens Collection.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Torrington (Wyoming) Telegram*, September 30, 1935.

12. Letter from Grace R. Hebard to Ernest E. Stevens, September 19, 1935. Maud Rice Stevens collection.

13. *Torrington Telegram*, November 21, 1935; April 30, 1936.

14. Letter from Larry L. Armstrong, Goshen Heritage Committee, 1979, to Florence Canfield Burden. *Torrington Telegram*, August 22, 1979; July 18, 1981. *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, June 25, 1980.

The Torrington stage curtains painted by Stevens were used from 1937 until 1944 where a fire destroyed the west wing of the high school, and the backdrops were ruined. *Torrington Telegram*, September 27, 1945.

15. Interview, 1980, with Mrs. Annabelle Hoblit, curator of Stagecoach Museum, Lusk, Wyoming.

16. *Torrington Telegram*, June 2, 1938.

17. The University of Wyoming Art Museum at Laramie has the following non-WPA artwork by Stevens: *R. A. McHale at His Forge* (charcoal) and *The Pendray Homestead* (oil), donated by G. Edward Pendray; and a miscellaneous collection donated by Dr. William Ward.