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Article Summary: Hansen and Willer, successful immigrant artists, decorated interiors in the Art Nouveau style popular at the time in Europe. They were the only decorators to use that style in Nebraska.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Charles Hansen, James Willer

Nebraska Place Names: Diller, Fairbury, Wymore, Beatrice, Reynolds

Diller Buildings with Interiors Decorated by Hansen & Willer: Anna C Diller Opera House\*\*; Andrew H Colman House\*\*; E L Loock House; Thomas Price House\*; Colman Hotel

Other Buildings with Interiors Decorated by Willer: Gilbert Theater (Beatrice); D D Loock House\* (Beatrice); Joe Goldberg House\* (Beatrice); Dr H M Hepperlen, Sr, House (Beatrice); Richardson County Courthouse\* (Falls City); Zion Lutheran Church (Gage County)

Keywords: Art Nouveau, stenciling, graining, free-hand painting

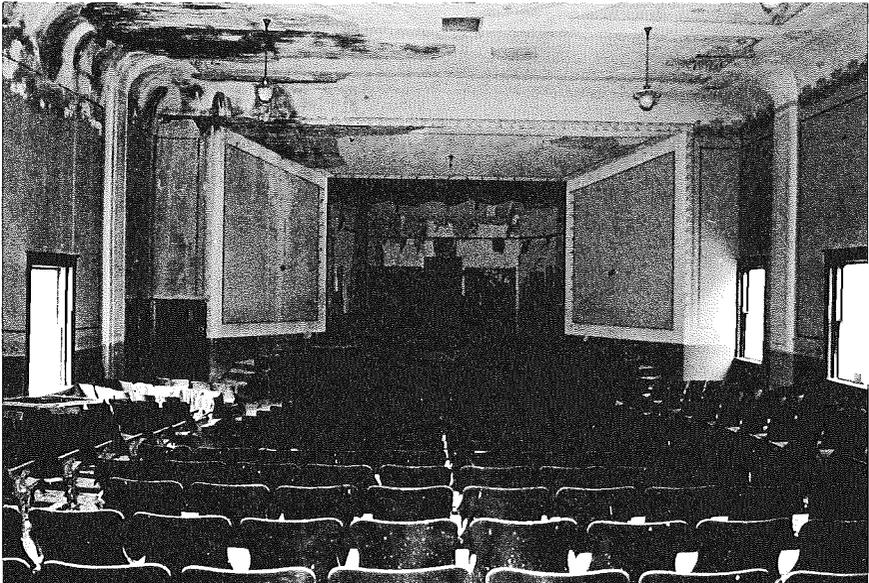
Photographs / Images: Anna C Diller Opera House; interior of opera house theater area; stenciled designs (2 views); stenciled and hand-painted designs (2 images); advertisement for Hansen & Willer (*The Diller Record*, October 11, 1912); exterior of Andrew H Colman House; dining room of Colman House (4 views); library ceiling in Colman House (2 views)

\*building still extant, decoration no longer visible

\*\*building extant, decoration still visible



*The Anna C. Diller Opera House, erected in 1912-13. . . (Below) Interior of opera house theater area. Located on the second floor of the building, it seated about 500 people. The walls are divided into bays by decorative pilasters.*



# Charles Hansen and James Willer: Danish Interior Decorators in Diller, Nebraska, 1909-1915

*By Joni Gilkerson*

The Anna C. Diller Opera House and the Andrew H. Colman House, both located in Diller, contain striking interior decorations by two immigrant artists who established a painting and decorating business in Diller in 1909. The firm of "Hansen & Willer, Painters and Decorators" was founded by Charles F. Hansen and James F. Willer, both natives of Denmark. Their artistic abilities gained them recognition and prominence throughout southeast Nebraska.

James Willer was born March 8, 1886, in Burso pr maribo, Denmark, to a family originally of Dutch extraction.<sup>1</sup> More is known about him than about his co-worker, Charles Hansen, who preceded Willer to the United States and encouraged his younger colleague, already a journeyman artist, to join him in Nebraska. Willer left Copenhagen on October 3, 1907 and arrived in New York thirteen days later. From New York he proceeded to Nebraska, where he and Hansen established a painting and decorating business in Fairbury, the county seat of Jefferson County. The two artists advertised themselves as "Hansen, and Willer, the painters and decorators" and invited the public to "call evenings, 809 3rd Street, phone 773."<sup>2</sup> In October of 1909 they moved to Diller, fourteen miles southeast of Fairbury, to continue their interior decorating work on the E.L. Look house (no longer extant).<sup>3</sup>

Diller census records for 1910 indicate that the town had a population of 506.<sup>4</sup> Charles F. Hansen was listed as forty-two years of age and non-English speaking. In 1911 Willer returned to Denmark for his wife Henrietta and three-year-old son, Robert.<sup>5</sup> The Willers were to have two more children: Elizabeth, born in 1912, and Ellen, born in 1913.<sup>6</sup>

Hansen and Willer worked not only in Diller but throughout southeast Nebraska, including the towns of Fairbury, Wymore, Beatrice, and Reynolds.<sup>7</sup> Research has thus far documented five properties in Diller decorated by the two: the Anna C. Diller Opera House, the Andrew H. Colman House, the Thomas Price House, the E.L. Look House (non-extant), and the Colman Hotel (non-extant). Only the

Diller Opera House and the Colman House still contain the work done by Hansen and Willer.

The Nebraska Historic Preservation Office initially recorded the properties in August 1976 as part of the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey.<sup>8</sup> On-site inspections were made in 1981 by Preservation Office staff members in order to prepare nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>9</sup> The work of artists Hansen and Willer merits further investigation, and it is the author's hope to eventually identify all Nebraska properties painted and decorated by them. This major undertaking would require concentrated research and intensive fieldwork on those properties still extant.

Following the stylish trends of the day the two did much of their work in the Art Nouveau or "new art" style, which originated in Europe during the late 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>10</sup> The movement stressed interior decoration and in the United States called for a revival of handicrafts and applied art.<sup>11</sup>

If Art Nouveau is to be characterized by a single term, it would have to be linear. Line is all important as during the Rococo style, but it is less abstract, being based more upon natural plant forms than was found in Rococo. In Art Nouveau interiors, and on furniture and accessories, lines are everywhere and, regardless of the materials—wood, iron, plaster or stone—suggest vines, climbing stalks, and clinging tendrils of exotic hot-house plants. Certain motifs occur again and again, the lily, the peacock, the sunflower, the lizard and the snake. The peacock feather is used more than the whole bird, and the lily pad and stem are used more than the flower. The female figure, although frequently seen, is not as prevalent a decorative motif as is just the head and the long flowing hair.<sup>12</sup>

The Diller Opera House and the Colman House represent excellent examples of the Art Nouveau movement in Nebraska. The interiors display curvilinear and geometric designs and incorporate many of the motifs that characterize the style. The techniques used by Hansen and Willer in the decoration of these interiors include stenciling, graining, and free-hand painting. The background and border work found in the two Diller structures was achieved through the use of stenciling, a process that involves painting through patterns cut in paper, wood, or metal. It is by no means a modern invention and has been used for decoration in America since colonial times. Stenciled decoration reached its zenith in the late Victorian era but continued to be popular after 1900 when the arts and crafts and Art Nouveau movements came into vogue for interior decoration.<sup>13</sup> Through stenciling, homeowners were able to achieve striking effects without using wallpaper.

Hansen and Willer cut their stencils out of heavy paper and then coated them with paint or shellac. A margin was left around each stencil to protect the wall, and care was always taken to insure that the underside was kept free of paint that otherwise might transfer to the wall.<sup>14</sup> Some of the patterns used by the two were original designs and

others were probably purchased through mail order catalogs.

Another technique used by the two artists was that of graining, a process which creates the appearance of natural wood. This type of work is a highly developed craft and requires considerable expertise.<sup>15</sup>

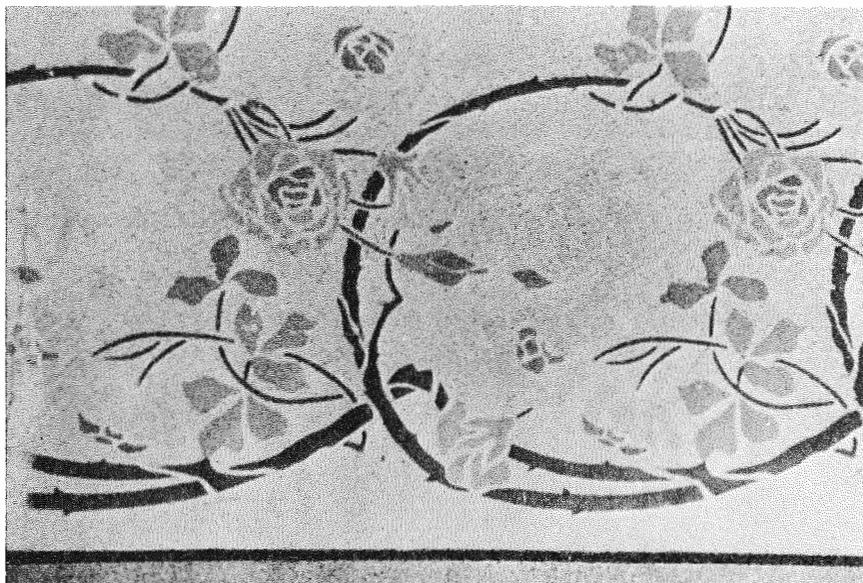
The Diller Opera House, located on the main street of Diller, has long been a town landmark. Like opera houses in other Nebraska communities, it served as a center for social and cultural activity. Civic dinners, public meetings, political rallies, and high school graduations as well as dramatic productions were all held in the opera house.<sup>16</sup> The three-story brick building, 44 feet by 120 feet, was constructed in 1912-13 by Anna C. Diller (daughter-in-law of Samuel Diller, for whom the town was named) to replace the Looch opera house, which burned on February 16, 1912.<sup>17</sup> On October 31, 1913, *The Diller Record* announced:

The formal opening of the new opera house is an event in the history of Diller which will linger as a bright spot in the minds of the larger portion of its citizens for years to come. . . The curtains, according to the most modern methods and all, including the ceiling and walls, have been handsomely decorated by our home artists, Hansen and Willer, who are experts in this line.

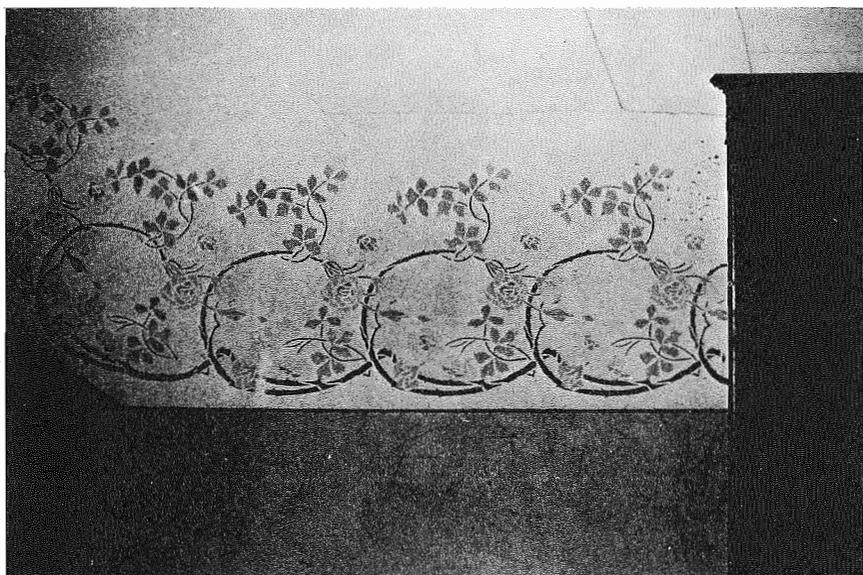
Artistically the opera house interior is exceptional. The theater itself, which seated about 500 people, is located on the second floor of the building.<sup>18</sup> The dado (lower portion of wall) of the stairway which leads from the street entrance is painted a moss green. The space above is adorned with an elaborate motif of stenciled plant forms incorporating tendrils, leaves, and roses. Soft colors of brown, green, yellow, and pink are included in the design, which exhibits many features often associated with the Art Nouveau style: soft flowing movement, curving lines, and motifs based on nature. A pink and green geometric border adorns the walls near the ceiling.

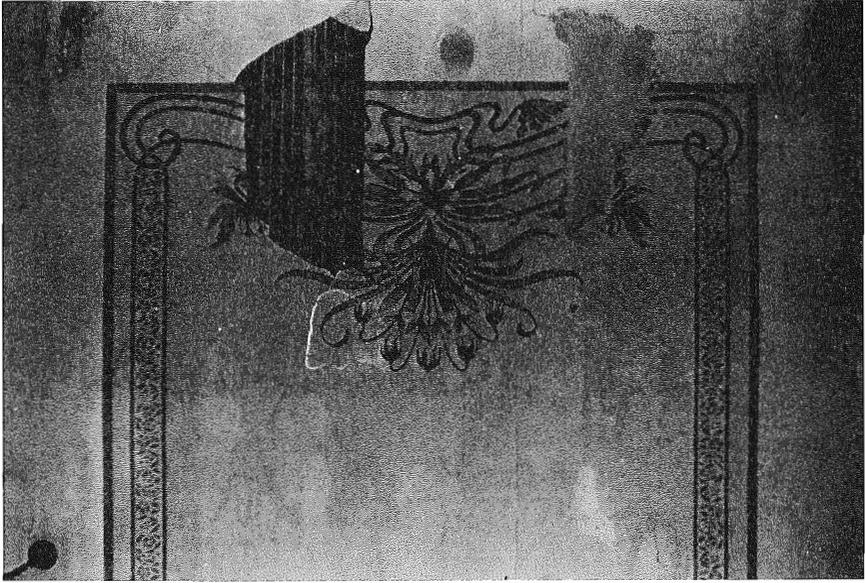
The auditorium walls incorporate stenciled borders of geometric and organic patterns and are divided into bays by decorative pilasters. Each bay displays a painted green wainscot and various stenciled patterns, the most elaborate consisting of geometric designs and interspaced with grape motifs and leafage. Colors of purple, green, gold, and blue are used. Similar decorative techniques are also used in the area surrounding the stage.

The auditorium ceiling is an elaborate array of stenciled and hand-painted designs and consists of a central oval medallion surrounded by decorative panels. Solid and stenciled borders enclose two large floral "bouquets" situated at each end of the oval. These floral "bouquets" are free-hand paintings and consist of roses and other flowers and their foliage. The side panels are devoid of excessive ornamentation and utilize only a solid outline with a small border of foliage design. The end rectangular panels display elaborate borders and a floral motif

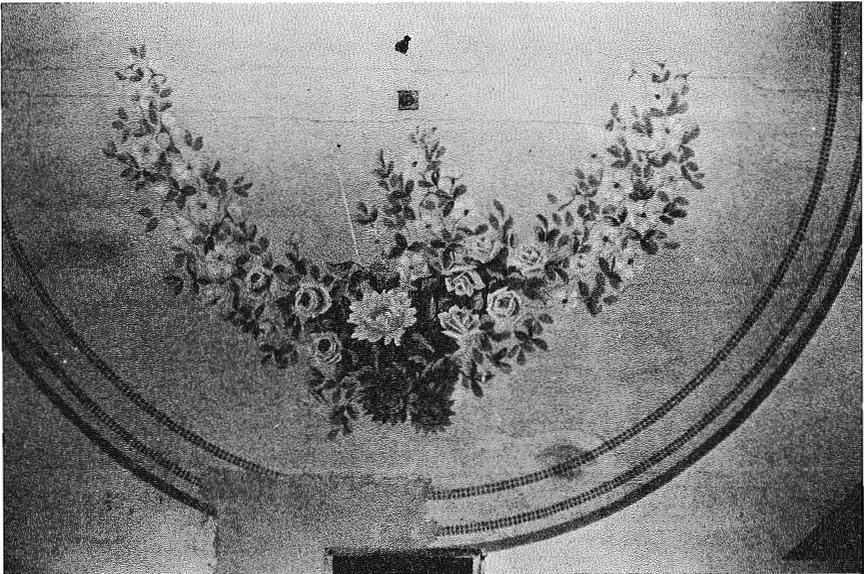


*Stenciled designs incorporating tendrils, leaves, and roses in hallway leading to opera house auditorium. Brown, green, yellow, and pink were used in the design, which exhibits the soft flowing movement and curving lines so often associated with the Art Nouveau style.*





*The auditorium ceiling is adorned with stenciled and hand-painted designs. Situated at each end of a central oval medallion is a free-hand painting (below) of roses and other flowers and their foliage. Solid and stenciled borders enclose each of the two large floral bouquets.*



incorporating lilies and soft flowing tendrils. Colors used include blue, green, pink, and gold.

In July of 1981 when the on-site inspection was made, most of the stencilwork and painting was intact. Since then, plaster in the ceiling area has fallen, destroying much of the artwork.

Only a few blocks from the opera house is a residential dwelling with well-preserved examples of interior decorative work by Hansen and Willer. The Colman House, a two-story frame dwelling, was built by Diller banker Andrew H. Colman for his wife Lillie in 1908 and 1909 and decorated by Hansen and Willer in 1912.<sup>19</sup>

In the front parlor the ceiling is adorned with a central medallion of floral designs intertwined with ribbons and a peripheral decorative band of linear ornamentation incorporating heart motifs, ribbons, and flowers. The artwork is executed in soft colors of green and apricot. Originally, the walls were painted with floral designs, ribbons, and vases. Despite later layers of paint the outlines of the designs in dimensional relief are still evident.

The dining room is the most formal area of the house and displays an elaborate band of still-life scenes on the walls above the plate rail and an intricate hand-grained ceiling. The still-life scenes, which consist of a variety of subjects including fruit baskets, game birds, and a cluster of grapes, are framed with stenciled designs of foliage interspaced with motifs of carrots and their leafage. The entire work is done in muted tones of peach, green, and shades of brown. The intricate hand-grained ceiling gives the appearance of parquetry and is executed in contrasting wood tones.<sup>20</sup> Pictorial landscape scenes representing the four climatic seasons serve as focal points centered above each wall in the peripheral band of hand-graining that frames the entire ceiling.

The character of Art Nouveau is probably best depicted in the library room. The artwork is gay, fanciful, and free flowing. The ceiling is adorned with a large symmetrical medallion incorporating designs of ribbons, lilies, foliage, and geometric shapes, all of which are often associated with the style. The corners portray women with long flowing hair, each symbolizing one of the four seasons. The women are surrounded with lilies and intertwining ribbons. A third motif, centered between the corners, incorporates lilies, foliage, and ribbons in a symmetrical arrangement. The designs are joined by ribbons and a solid borderline which encircles the entire ceiling. Soft colors of peach, blue, yellow, and orange are used.

From about 1910-15 local newspaper accounts indicate that Hansen and Willer lived in Diller and Beatrice, fulfilling contracts in both towns. It is evident that the two worked both as a team and as individuals. In November of 1915 the *Beatrice Sun* reported that they had been awarded the contract for decorating the Paddock Hotel building (no longer extant) in Beatrice. Apparently sometime after

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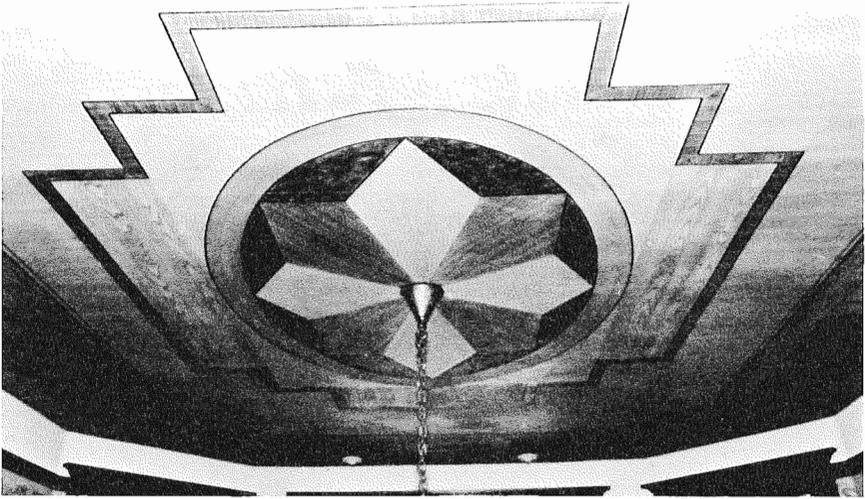


**HANSEN & WILLER**  
Painters and Decorators      DILLER, NEB.

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*Advertisement from The Diller Record, October 11, 1912. . . (Below) The Andrew H. Colman House, Diller. The front parlor, dining room, and library exhibit fine examples of interior decorative work by Hansen and Willer. Much of it is well preserved.*





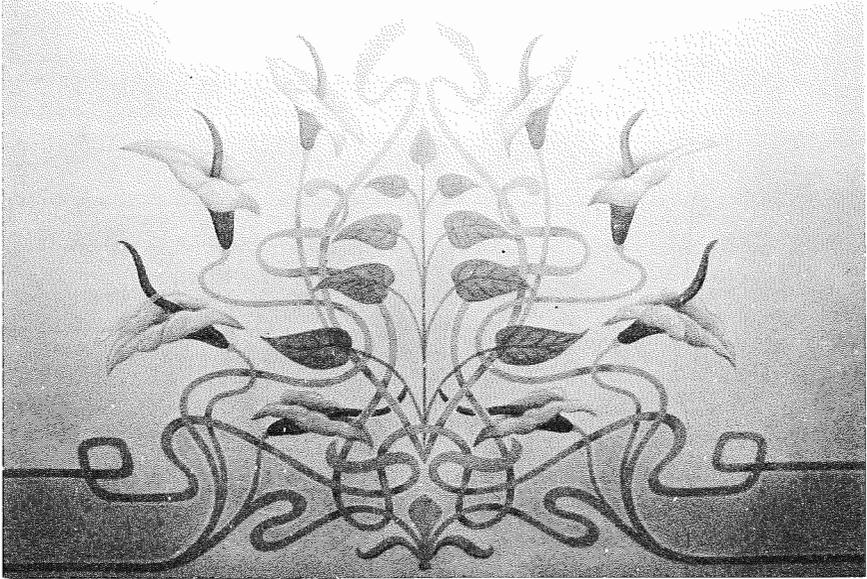
*The dining room ceiling is highlighted by a grained design above a chandelier. It gives the appearance of parquetry and is executed in contrasting wood tones. . .  
(Below) Dining room interior with door leading into library.*



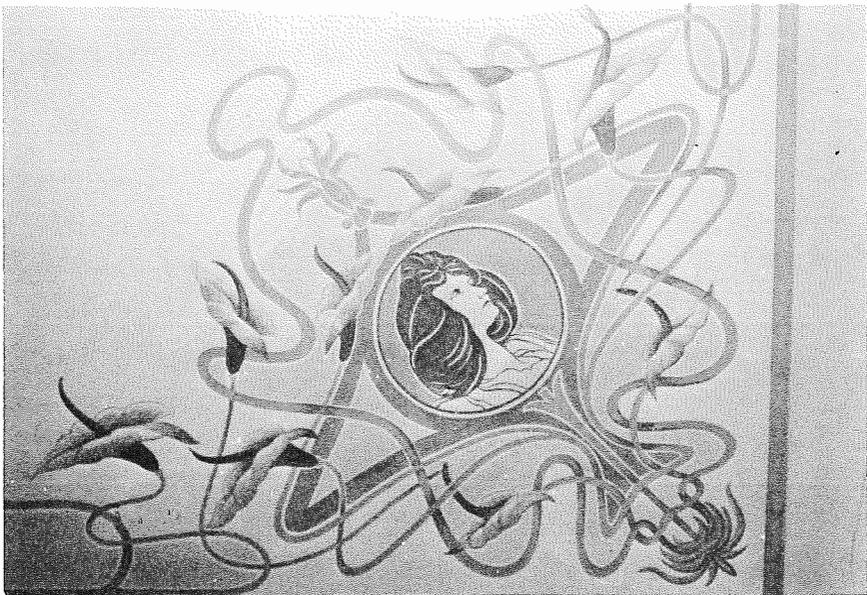


*Dining room walls in the Colman House feature still-life scenes above the plate rail with stenciled foliage designs and motifs of carrots and leafage. The entire work is done in peach, green, and shades of brown.*





*Library ceiling decorations depict typical Art Nouveau motifs of ribbons, lilies, foliage and geometric shapes (above) and women with long flowing hair (below), each symbolizing one of the four seasons. The designs are joined by ribbons and a solid border circling the ceiling.*



1915 the two artists took up permanent residence in Beatrice. While living here James Willer (probably assisted by Hansen) is credited with decorating numerous residences and community and civil buildings: the Gilbert Theater (non-extant), the D.D. Loock House (extant), the Joe Goldberg House (extant, decorations covered) and the Dr. H.M. Hepperlen, Sr. House (non-extant), all in Beatrice. Work was also done on the Richardson County Courthouse (extant) in Falls City and the Zion Lutheran Church (extant) in rural Gage County. By 1921 Willer was advertising in the Beatrice newspapers<sup>21</sup> and by 1924 had established "James F. Willer and Company, High Grade Interior Decorating, Painting and Paper Hanging."<sup>22</sup>

The Dr. H.M. Hepperlen, Sr. House, a three-story colonial mansion constructed in 1910 near Chautauqua Park in Beatrice, was one of the most noted structures on which Willer worked, and one of the few for which photographic records exist.<sup>23</sup> Dr. Hepperlen later pronounced Willer a "master as an interior decorator and fresco artist."<sup>24</sup> The house was torn down in 1973.<sup>25</sup>

In the 1930s the Willer family moved to Omaha, where Willer decorated the Creighton University administration building and military theater as well as numerous other structures. In 1941 he and his wife moved to Sacramento, California, where he died in 1944 at the age of 58.<sup>26</sup> His work in interior decoration was carried on in the Omaha area by his own son Robert and son-in-law Harold Borland, who married Willer's daughter, Elizabeth.<sup>27</sup> No additional information is now available on Charles Hansen.

In Nebraska Hansen and Willer's Art Nouveau work is a significant example of the style used in interior decoration. The Diller Opera House and the Andrew H. Colman House exhibit the flamboyancy of the style through the techniques of stenciling and painting and remain as excellent products of the talents of the two artists. Research thus far credits Hansen and Willer as the only artists who performed interior decorative work in this style in the state. Their lives demonstrate the successful endeavors of immigrant artists settling on the Nebraska plains, and their work remains as an important part of the cultural heritage of the state.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Carol Cook Geu, "James Frederick Willer: An Immigrant Artist" (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1982), 1; Gertrude Willer, letter to Geu, February 26, 1982, xerox in appendix.

<sup>2</sup>*Fairbury Journal*, April 2, 1909, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>*The Diller Record*, October 22, 1909, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), 106.

<sup>5</sup>Petition for Naturalization, filed March 7, 1923, Gage County District Court, Beatrice, Nebraska (hereafter cited as Petition for Naturalization). Gertrude Willer, letter to Carol Cook Geu, February 26, 1982, xerox in Geu, "James Frederick Willer," appendix. *The Diller Record*, July 7, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup>Petition for Naturalization.

<sup>7</sup>*The Diller Record*, July 5, 1912, p. 1; March 3, 1911, p. 1; September 8, 1911, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup>The work was done by Survey Architect David Murphy and Architectural Historian Joni Gillerson, author of this article, who did additional research in early newspapers, county histories, city directories, census records, file information from the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey, and through personal contacts. Others instrumental in the completion of this paper: Jim Wilson, South Dakota Historic Preservation Center; Todd Brauch, president of the Diller Historical Society; and Carol Cook Geu, a University of Nebraska graduate who donated a copy of her thesis, "James Frederick Willer, An Immigrant Artist," to the Historic Preservation Office in March 1982.

<sup>9</sup>The Andrew H. Colman House was listed on the National Register on June 25, 1982; the Diller Opera House is pending acceptance.

<sup>10</sup>Kate Johns and Robert J. Cangelosi, Jr., "New Orleans Architectural Styles: Art Nouveau," *Preservation Press* (June 1981): 6.

<sup>11</sup>Harold H. Alexander, *Design Criteria for Decisions* (New York 1926), 6.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Clem Labine, "Stencilling Secrets," *Old House Journal* (June 1983): 108.

<sup>14</sup>Geu, "James Frederick Willer," 3.

<sup>15</sup>Sherrill Whiton, *Interior Design and Decoration* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1974), 521.

<sup>16</sup>Duane Fike, "The Table Rock Opera House, 1893-1900: A Small-Town Community Center," *Nebraska History* 58 (Summer 1977), 149-50. Douglas O. Street, "Band's Opera House, The Cultural Hub of Crete, 1877-1900," *Nebraska History* 60 (Spring 1979), 58.

<sup>17</sup>*Fairbury Journal*, February 23, 1912, p. 1. *The Diller Record*, February 23, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>*Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, October 30, 1955, p. 2A.

<sup>19</sup>*The Diller Record*, July 5, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Geu, "James Frederick Willer," 30.

<sup>21</sup>*Beatrice Sun*, June 21, 1921, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup>Geu, "James Frederick Willer," 54.

<sup>23</sup>*Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, October 11, 1970, p. 7B. *Lincoln Star*, March 16, 1973, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup>Dr. H.M. Hepperlen, letter of recommendation February 6, 1933. P.B. Weaver, chairman of the Richardson County Board of Commissioners, similarly recommended Willer as a "first class painter and decorator" after the artist's work on the Falls City courthouse. P.B. Weaver, letter of recommendation, May 12, 1924. Xeroxes in Geu, "James Frederick Willer," appendix.

<sup>25</sup>*Lincoln Star*, March 16, 1973, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>Geu, "James Frederick Willer," 47.

<sup>27</sup>Undated newspaper clipping in Geu, "James Frederick Willer," 58.