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Article Summary: Twelve Nebraska post offices have Depression-era murals, providing a valuable and visible legacy of the New Deal, and, providing Nebraska with a good selection of murals and a firsthand experience with the fine arts. This is their story.

Cataloging Information:

Locations and Names of Murals:

Albion: *Winter in Nebraska*, 1939, Jenne Magafan
Auburn: *Threshing*, 1938, Ethel Magafan
Crawford: *The Crossing*, 1940, G. Glenn Newell
Geneva: *Building a Sod House*, 1941, Edward Chavez
Hebron: *Stampeding Buffaloes Stopping the Train*, 1939, Eldora Lorenzini
Minden: *1848 Fort Kearny, Protectorate on the Overland Trail 1871*, 1939, William E L Bunn
Ogallala: *Long Horns*, 1938, Frank Mechau
O'Neill: *Baling Hay in Holt County in Early Days*, 1938, Eugene Trentham
Pawnee City: *The Auction*, 1942, Kenneth Evett
Red Cloud: *Loading Cattle*, 1941, Archie Musick
Red Cloud: *Moving Westward*, 1941, Archie Musick
Red Cloud: *Stockade Builders*, 1941, Archie Musick
Schuyler: *Wild Horses by Moonlight*, 1940, Philip von Saltza
Valentine: *End of the Line*, 1939, Kady B Faulkner

DEPRESSION LEGACY: NEBRASKA'S POST OFFICE ART

By Elizabeth Anderson

Valentine in Cherry County is the home of a mural entitled *End of the Line*, painted in 1939 by Nebraska resident Kady B. Faulkner. This fine example of post office art depicts a frontier railroad depot with pioneer wagons near a steam locomotive; at the extreme right with a small group of travelers, a young woman holds a baby.

Faulkner, professor in the University of Nebraska Art Department, worked on the mural in her third-floor studio in Morrill Hall. She asked one of her students, Elizabeth Anderson, author of this article, to serve as a model for the young woman with the baby.

Painted in the late 1930s under the auspices of the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (later renamed Section of Fine Arts), the mural was installed in the newly constructed WPA post office building in Valentine. When the Valentine post office was moved to another new building in the 1980s, *End of the Line* was left on the wall of the building taken over by another government agency, Educational Service Unit 17.

Twelve Nebraska towns — Albion, Auburn, Crawford, Geneva, Hebron, Minden, Ogallala, O'Neill, Pawnee City, Red Cloud, Schuyler, and Valentine — currently have public buildings with murals dating from the 1930s. At that time Washington first became patron of the arts for small towns across the United States.

Elizabeth Callaway Anderson, a retired technical illustrator, received her BFA from the University of Nebraska in 1940 and is now earning a master's degree in creative writing.

The circumstances which led to the federal government's new role in the cultural life of the nation were unprecedented. The effects of the stock market crash of 1929 were overwhelming: Prices and wages fell, mortgages were foreclosed, factories shut down, banks closed their doors, and farmers were ruined by falling prices for grain and livestock. From 1929 to 1932 individual income in Nebraska declined forty-eight percent; in 1932 the per capita personal income in the state was \$277.¹

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, inaugurated in 1933, brought with him legislative proposals, readily passed into law by an anxious Congress, that would change the relationship of government to its citizens. For the first time Washington concerned itself with such questions as housing, regulation of the stock market, rights of labor unions to exist — and art for the small-town citizen.

New Deal experiments in government support of the arts combined two different concepts: patronage and work relief. Paternalism was the accepted code of such wealthy, educated families as the Roosevelts of New York state. President Roosevelt proposed extending this practice beyond its traditional limits to improve cultural life in isolated towns without museums and art galleries. "A more abundant life" meant to him more than meeting physical needs.² Edward Bruce, who later became the head of the U.S. Treasury subdivision responsible for post office art, shared this belief.

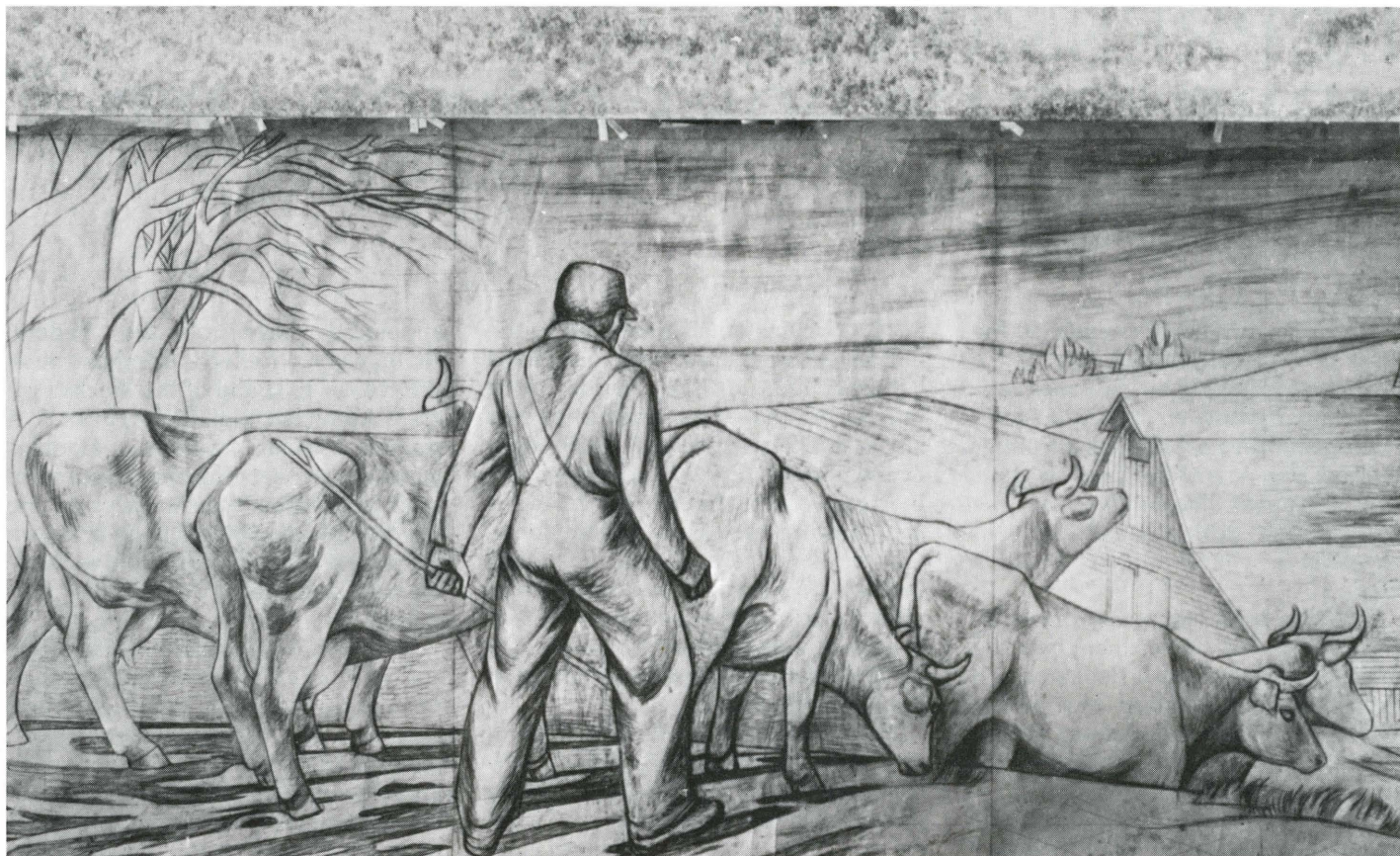
The second element in the experiment was embodied in Harry Hopkins,

appointed head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) in 1933 and of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935. A trained social worker, Hopkins believed strongly in the concept of work relief rather than in direct aid. He felt that by providing dollars in return for skilled white-collar labor, workers' dignity and skills would be preserved.³

To the problem of melding patronage and work relief can be added another: presenting the artist to the skeptical citizens of Main Street. Local townspeople were asked to accept an unfamiliar form of art under pressure of the federal government. The artists were required to travel long distances to previously unknown communities. Adapting to each other's prejudices and customs took effort—but for artists this chance of employment was vitally important. Earlier in the century various economic and aesthetic trends had cut them off from traditional markets for their work; by the 1920s the majority of American painters were so badly off economically that the Depression hardly reduced their meager incomes.

As the Depression deepened, various municipal, state, and private relief plans developed — but only a few artists benefitted. To seek federal help, George Biddle stepped forward as spokesman for the artistic community. Biddle himself was from a socially prominent family and had studied painting in Europe. As an established painter, he was acceptable to other working artists.

Biddle, influenced by the public



Winter in Nebraska, by Jenne Magafan, Albion, 1939. Several stages, including black and white and color sketches, were required before a muralist was permitted to begin work. Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration.

murals in Mexico City sponsored by Mexican President Alvaro Obregon, saw the mural as "a particularly important art form of the future."⁴ In May 1933 he proposed to his friend and former schoolmate, President Roosevelt, that young American artists be encouraged to produce murals on public buildings as monuments to the ideals of Roosevelt's social revolution.

With Roosevelt's encouragement, Biddle met with the assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury Department. This department acted as builder and custodian of all federal buildings and had the authority to commission artists to decorate them. His proposals were taken up by Edward Bruce, both an artist and a Treasury financial expert.

However, money for the Biddle-Bruce plan did not come from the reluctant Treasury but from the newly formed Works Progress Administration (WPA), which funded all art projects during the New Deal years. The Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (later the Section of Fine Arts) received its portion of WPA funding through the Treasury as the one percent of new building costs allotted for decoration. Thus post office murals were not (directly) WPA art.

The various steps in the formation, adaptation, and dissolution of the several art projects that functioned during the New Deal era are too complicated to describe here. However, the two theories of patronage and of work relief are clearly evident throughout

the evolution. The Treasury Section selected by competition artists to decorate public buildings; these artists were not required to prove "poverty." The Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP) received small grants from WPA to employ out-of-work artists in decorating federal buildings where budgets did not include the one percent set aside for sculpture and murals.

The Federal Project Number One (later known as Fed One) provided relief on a much larger scale to professional actors, musicians, writers, and artists. The Federal Art Project (FAP) took care of destitute artists through many facets of creative work including crafts and teaching.

Winning the commission to paint a

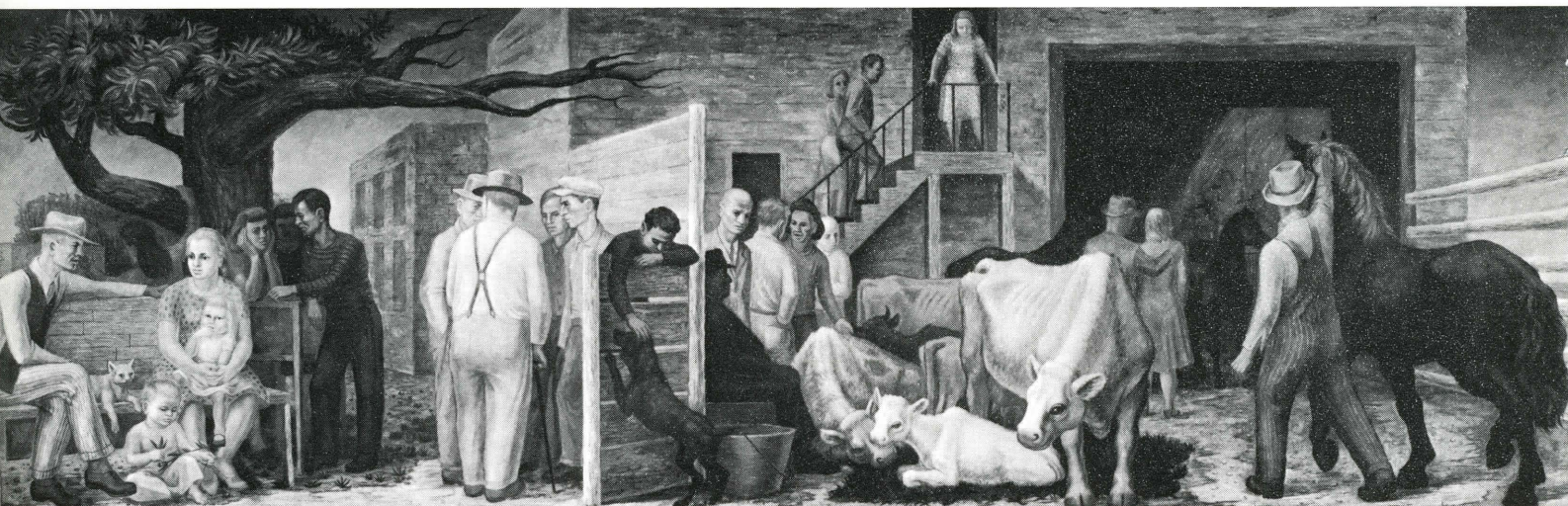


End of the Line, oil on plaster, by Kady Faulkner Valentine, 1939. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

Winter in Nebraska, oil on canvas, by Jenne Magafan, Albion, 1939. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

Long Horns, oil on canvas, by Frank Mechau, Ogallala, 1938. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)





The Auction, by Kenneth Evett, Pawnee City, 1942. Part of this mural is reproduced on the front cover. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

mural for a particular post office was a long process, complicated but democratic. The anonymity of the artist was preserved while his or her design was filtered through various screening groups. Once the construction of a new post office was under way, the mural competition was announced. A local committee was formed to provide information on the history and activities of the community. Simultaneously a regional jury of persons knowledgeable and interested in art was assembled.

Both the local committee and the Treasury Section in Washington publicized the competition for the mural, open to artists nationwide. These artists were not "on relief" and were not required to prove need; the winner was chosen solely on the quality of the entered design.

The local jury would review the anonymous, numbered entries, drawn to the scale of one foot to three inches. Several of the better entries would be sent to the Section, where a top-level jury would again evaluate them. If the Section agreed with this jury's choice, the winner would be announced, with first-time use of the artist's name.

Each of 190 competitions was concerned with a specific building,⁵ but

approved designs that did not win a particular competition could be passed along to another contest. Nebraska post offices exhibit at least two examples of this spinoff process. Kady Faulkner failed to win the competition for the Dallas, Texas, mural and was later selected to "do the Valentine job."⁶ Phillip von Saltza entered *Wild Horses by Moonlight* in an Arizona post office competition; the Section assigned the unchanged design to Schuyler in eastern Nebraska. When local residents complained about tall cacti in the landscape, von Saltza superimposed cottonwood trees.

Whatever the preliminary procedure, an artist was assigned to a specific job and required to sign a contract; several stages of preparatory work were outlined, each stage to be approved by the Section. Both a black-and-white sketch and a color sketch in the one-inch-to-one-foot scale were included in the first stage. The second stage was a full-size (about thirteen-by-six-foot) cartoon drawing. Each step had to be accepted, altered as necessary, and the changes approved by the Section.⁷

The artist received one-third of his or her fee when the contract was signed; the second third with Section

approval of the cartoon; the final payment when the Section approved a photograph of the finished mural. Twenty dollars a square foot was regarded as an optimal fee for "quality" muralists — but the actual total of reserved funds available for a given site meant that most awards fell short of this amount. The average commission across the United States seems to have been about \$725. The fee was expected to cover all expenses for travel, research, materials, and the final labor of mounting the mural on the post office wall.⁸

As an artist worked through his assignment, from choice of subject to finished mural, pressure was exerted from various sources. Local groups might suggest a particular theme from area history or industry. Section personnel would counsel realism as opposed to abstraction; inoffensive versus questionable poses or modes of dress. Townspeople would express their opinions on the details of the mural design in person to the artist, through the columns of the town newspaper or by letter to Washington. Faulkner's Valentine mural was roundly criticized in the February 1939 *Valentine Republican*: If the background hills were "supposed to be" the

Post Office Art



Archie Musick painted three murals at Red Cloud, Moving Westward (left), Loading Cattle, and Stockade Builders. Stockade Builders occupies the space usually selected for such murals - the area above the door into the postmaster's office. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)



1848 Fort Kearney, Protectorate on the Overland Trail 1871, oil on canvas, by William E. L. Bunn, Minden, 1939. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

Threshing, oil on canvas, by Ethel Magafan, Auburn, 1938. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)





Loading Cattle (top), Stockade
 Builders (left), and Moving West-
 ward (right), all oil on canvas, by
 Archie Musick, Red Cloud, 1941. (Jef-
 frey Bebee Photos)



hills north of town, they had too few trees; the wagon cover was not properly attached; the train engine was of the wrong type. Some Geneva residents complained that muralist Edward Chavez's sod house builders are "Chicano, but no Mexicans ever lived here."⁹ However, postal workers at Schuyler speak fondly of their mural. Perhaps the inclusion of its design in the December 4, 1939, issue of *Life* made local acceptance easier; and the indefinite historical setting may have allowed fewer irritating details.

Even though the Treasury Section tried to direct the choice of theme, five regional patterns emerged.¹⁰ The content of the designs in general seemed to echo the mood and the reaction of a region toward the economic problems caused by the Depression. Murals in New England focused on scenes from the past: political and intellectual aspects of religion and anti-slavery activity and incidents from the American Revolution. This stable subculture generated little energy to counteract the dragging economy. In the South murals mirrored a stagnant economy based on labor intensive farming. People in extreme poverty, still conscious of their bitter defeat in the Civil War, did not want artistic treatment of that subject. Their region seemed to offer almost no hope or energy to provide economic solutions for the hard times.

The Mid-Atlantic states also chose mural themes from the American Revolution; in contrast to New England, they emphasized those events that paved the way for a new nation. Representations of industrial might indicated energy and ability to combat the Depression. The Midwest also was more dynamic than the South, with murals there picturing both contemporary and historic events in small-town life, farming and manufacturing, and in general depicting a subculture willing to attack current problems.

The huge area of the American West, separated from other regions by distance, climate, and indigenous culture,

had developed after the 1890s a popular rather than academic style. "Western art was already regional — local, authentic, colorful, and simplified."¹¹ Nebraska post office murals of the 1930s followed this trend. Nebraska straddles that geographical line that separates the country suitable for agriculture from the arid lands that continue west beyond the Rocky Mountains; the Nebraska post office murals divide along the same line. Auburn's mural shows threshing of grain; Pawnee City's, a farm auction; Geneva's, housebuilding on the prairie. Westward along the Kansas-Nebraska border, in "short grass country," the post office mural at Hebron depicts a huge buffalo herd moving across a railroad track tiny in perspective. There is no indication of farming or small-town life. Still farther west — at Ogallala and Red Cloud — two murals deal with the cattle drives north from Texas and Oklahoma to meet the rapidly expanding railroads after the Civil War. Red Cloud has additional panels treating displacement of the Indians by encroaching white settlers.

Most of the artists for the twelve Nebraska post office murals had studied under recognized, established painters and muralists.¹² Their work has recognizable mural qualities, though done in various styles. The ones that follow the aesthetic requirements for wall paintings (emphasis on a two-dimensional pattern close to the picture plane) seem to have been influenced by a particular group of painter-teachers — Thomas Hart Benton, Henry Varnum Poor, and Boardman Robinson — who taught many of the Nebraska muralists.

Kady Faulkner, the only resident Nebraskan of the twelve, had studied with Poor, Robinson, Hans Hoffman, and Adolf Dehn. After the 1930s she painted murals in several Nebraska churches and continued to teach at the University of Nebraska Department of Art until her retirement in 1950.

Archie Musick, who painted three murals at Red Cloud, *Loading Cattle*,

Stockade Builders, and *Moving Westward*, was a student of Thomas Hart Benton and of Boardman Robinson. His elongated forms in motion seem to echo Benton's restless style rather than Robinson's massive solid patterns. Musick, credited with other post office murals in Colorado and Missouri, taught in Colorado in later years.

Kenneth Evett studied with Henry Varnum Poor and George Biddle. Besides *The Auction* at Pawnee City, Evett painted two others in Colorado and Kansas. He taught at Cornell from 1948 to 1979, returning to Nebraska in 1954 to paint three murals in the rotunda of the State Capitol.

William Bunn was a student of Grant Wood. Perhaps Wood's influence and Bunn's own work as an industrial designer influenced his distinctive style. The various elements of *Fort Kearny Protectorate on the Overland Trail* at Minden are arranged like beads on an abacus. Bunn returned to industrial design after World War II and in 1948 was design manager for the Shaeffer Pen Company.

G. Glenn Newell and Eugene Trentham may have been easel painters who entered mural competition to survive the Depression. Newell, who studied at the National Academy of Design and at Columbia University, was seventy years of age when he painted *The Crossing* at Crawford. Eugene Trentham painted *Bailing Hay in Holt County in Early Days*, the O'Neill post office mural. Both he and Newell had won prizes in national exhibitions.

Swedish-born Phillip von Saltza's *Wild Horses by Moonlight* at Schuyler is executed in the manner of an easel painting: The two horses loom large in the center of the twelve-by-six-foot rectangle, and the unemphasized details of the desolate landscape recede into the distance. Von Saltza, a resident of Maine in the 1930s, painted other post office murals in Vermont and New Hampshire.

The remaining Nebraska muralists (and perhaps Archie Musick) all



Workers, by Harry Krieger, Hastings, Nebraska. (NSHS-F293-120)

THE PUBLIC WORKS OF ART PROJECT IN NEBRASKA

The Depression era relief programs initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal sought to provide employment in jobs beneficial to society. In addition to funding the construction of parks, roads, and a host of other public works projects, federal relief provided employment for over 10,000 artists during the decade 1933-43. Along with the Treasury Department's Section of Painting and Sculpture (which produced the post office murals), there was the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) and the Federal Art Project of the Work Progress (later Work Projects) Administration (WPA/FAP). Unlike the Treasury Department's art project, which awarded work on a competitive basis without regard to need, the PWAP and FAP were relief programs.

The PWAP was established under the jurisdiction of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the government's first national work-relief effort, which funded temporary employment during the winter of 1933-34. During its short life from December 1933-June 1934, the PWAP nationally employed about 3,700 artists, who produced some 15,000 works of art.

In Nebraska the PWAP employed

thirty artists, who created 180 oil paintings, etchings, pen and ink drawings, and lithographs. The artists were selected on the basis of their qualifications and on their need for employment. Each was allowed to select the subject of his or her work as long as it had an American theme. Many of the art works produced by the Nebraska project illustrate the state's history, reflect the impact of the Depression on Nebraska life, or portray the future from a 1930s perspective. The project was supervised by noted Omaha architect Thomas R. Kimball and Wilda Chase Reeder, a Fremont artist and art teacher.

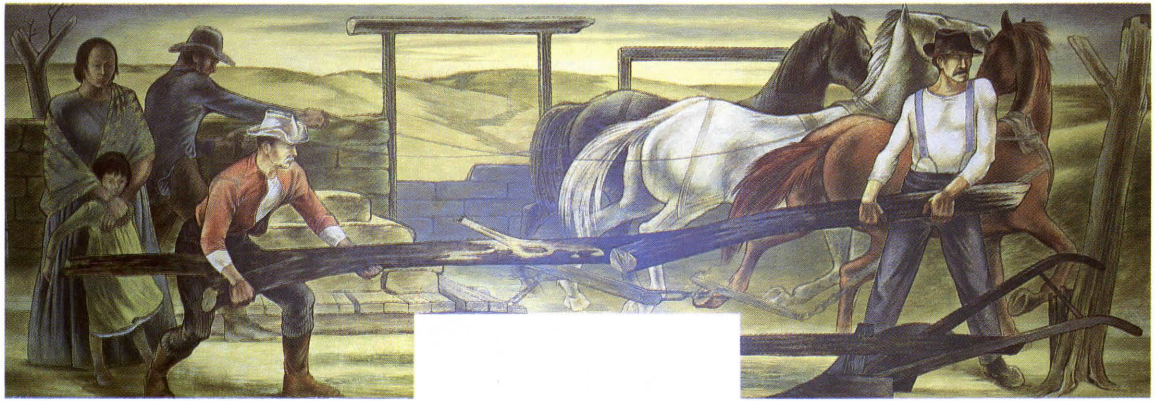
Artists were classified in two groups according to their qualifications and ability: The "A" group was paid \$180 per month while the "B" group received \$106. One Nebraska artist recalled that she was never paid, despite completing the art work and submitting the required oath of allegiance to the United States.

Once the CWA was terminated in 1934, the works of art (considered federal property) were transferred to the custody of the Nebraska Emergency Relief Administration and later to the Nebraska State Historical

Society. The Society has 153 works of art representing twenty-eight of the artists employed by the Nebraska PWAP. The following artists participated in the Nebraska project: R.E. Beard, Merville, IA; Gustav Berk, Robert J. Brinkema, Lyman Byxbe, Augustus Dunbier, Herschel G. Elarth, Louise Ennis, William C. Gilbert, Robert Gilder, Carl Gloe, Raymond Johnson, Elizabeth Olds, Ruth Ratliff, John T. Robertson, Ernest Roose, Louis Smetana, Edwin Truman, and J. Laurie Wallace, all of Omaha; Ellis Burman, Rose Cohen, Elizabeth Dolan, Morris Gordon, Sara S. Green, Lillian H. Ibser, and Gladys Lux, all of Lincoln; Frank Grattan, Stanton; Harry Krieger, Hastings; Albert Leindecker, Scotia; Ernest Stevens, Neligh; and H.O. Myre, Sioux City, IA.

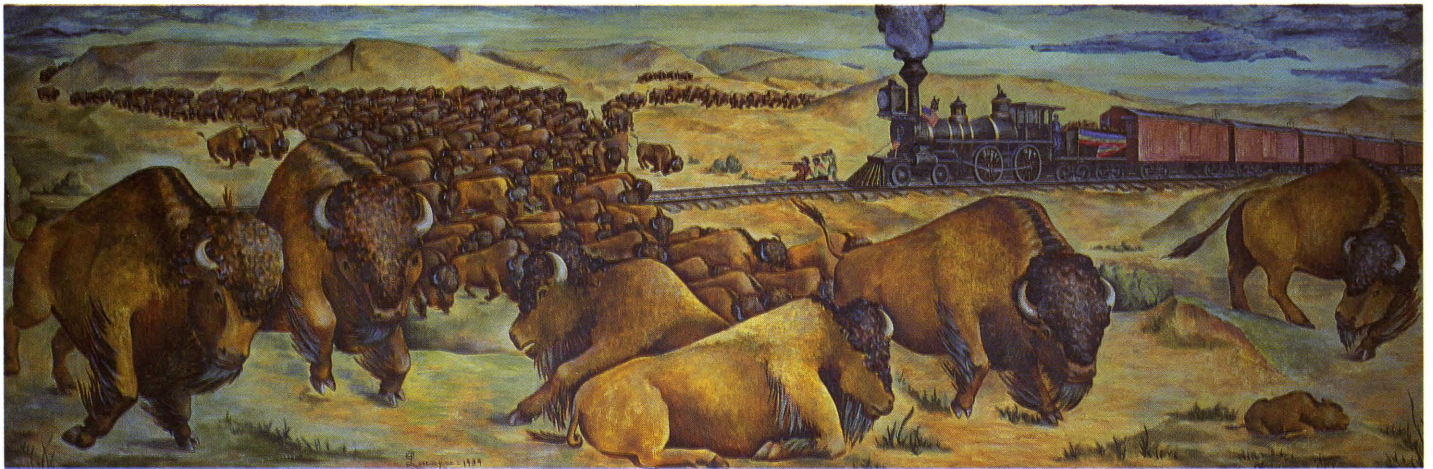
Paintings by Ernest Stevens and Gladys Lux have appeared on the cover of *Nebraska History*. Some of the PWAP artists, such as sculptor Ellis Burman, produced art for other federally-funded projects during the Depression. His Lincoln sculptures, "The Smoke Signal" (Pioneers' Park) and "Madonna at the Well" (Sunken Gardens), are two well-known examples.

- Editor



Building a Sod House, oil on canvas,
by Edward Chavez, Geneva, 1941.
(Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

Stampeding Buffalo Stopping Train,
oil on canvas, by Eldora Lorenzini,
Hebron, 1939. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)



Baling Hay in Holt County in Early
Days, oil on canvas, by Eugene
Trentham, O'Neill, 1938. (Jeffrey
Beebe Photo)



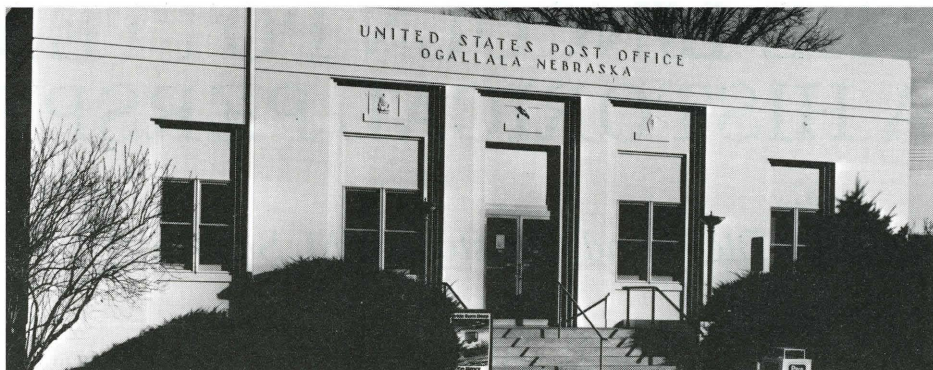
worked in the western tradition. Fostered by the distinguished artists who worked in Taos, New Mexico, and later by the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, a regional mural style developed. Perhaps the clear, dry air and the intense sunlight encouraged a way of seeing and painting with boldness of form and color and shallow arrangement of the compositional elements.¹³

Frank Mechau studied at the Denver Art School and the Art Institute of Chicago. He taught for several years at the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center, directed by Boardman Robinson. His murals are in Colorado, Texas, and in Washington, D.C. Mechau taught at Columbia University while working on *Long Horns* for the Ogallala post office. Later as artist-correspondent for *Life*, Mechau traveled some 20,000 miles during World War II.

Edward Chavez studied with Mechau at Colorado Springs and with Arnold Blanch and Peppino Mangravite. He painted murals at Geneva, Nebraska (*Building a Sod House*) and in Colorado and Texas. In 1951 he received a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Italy and later taught at the Art Students' League at Colorado Springs and at Syracuse University.

Jenne Magafan and her sister Ethel were at Colorado Springs concurrently with Chavez and studied under Mechau, Robinson, and Mangravite. Jenne Magafan's mural, *Winter in Nebraska*, is in Albion, Nebraska; she painted others in Colorado, Texas, and Utah. She and her sister painted murals for the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. Ethel Magafan's *Threshing* at the Auburn post office was one of those readily received by an appreciative community.¹⁴ She went on to do post office murals in Oklahoma and Arkansas and for the U.S. Senate Chamber and the Recorder of Deeds Building in Washington, D.C.

Eldora Lorenzini studied with Bidle and Poor and at the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center with Boardman Robinson (but apparently before Mechau taught there). Certainly, her



The United States Post Office at Ogallala. (Jeffrey Bebee Photo)

Stampeding Buffalo Stopping Train at Hebron uses the same large forms as those used by the preceding four painters. Three huge buffalo form a solid pyramid in the foreground, stopping the movement of the running herd. The color of the buffalo hides is matched to the wood forming the doorway to the postmaster's office, making the mural a part of the endwall of the lobby. Lorenzini did other post office murals in Colorado and in Washington, D.C. and worked as a decorator, printmaker, and illustrator.

The Nebraska post office muralists were professionally trained by distinguished teachers. Caught in the hard times of the Depression in 1930, some were already established; others were just beginning. (The youngest, Ethel Magafan, was twenty-three when she painted the mural for Auburn.) Each muralist grasped the opportunity to earn money by doing what he did best — paint. Fewer than 1,000 of the 57,000 artists listed in the 1930 federal census were employed by the Section of Fine Art.

The twelve Nebraska post office murals are still extant. As federal property, most have been cleaned and retouched under a postal service contract. They are a valuable and visible legacy of the New Deal, providing Nebraska not only with a good selection of post office murals, but with a continuing firsthand experience with the fine arts.

NOTES

Photographic documentation was assisted by a federal grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and administered by the Nebraska State Historical Society's Historic Preservation Office. The photographs will become part of the permanent collection of the office's Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey, a statewide effort to document and record places of historical, architectural, and cultural importance.

¹Leonard Arrington, "New Deal in the West," *The Pacific Historical Reviews*, 38 (1969), 314.

²Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), x.

³Marguerite D. Bloxom, comp., *Pickaxe and Pencil: References for the Study of the WPA* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1982), 1.

⁴McKinzie, *New Deal*, 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, 54.

⁶Leonard Thiessen, "First All-Nebraska Mural for Valentine Post Office," *Sunday World-Herald*, February 26, 1939.

⁷Gerald E. Markowitz and Marlene Park, *Domestic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 121-23. See also Markowitz and Park's "Not By Bread Alone: Post Office Art of the New Deal," *Timeline* 6 (June-July 1989):2-15.

⁸Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 77.

⁹Author's interview of R.V. Jacobsen, postmaster, Geneva, Nebraska, 1988.

¹⁰Markowitz and Park in *Democratic Vistas*, 69-103, delineate those five regions and the specific reaction of each to the Depression.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 172.

¹²Jaques Cattell, ed., *Who's Who in American Art* (New York: R.R. Bowker Co., 1986). Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art* (Sound View Press, 1985). Sarah St. John and Margaret Furlong, eds., *The Art Index: A Cumulative List of Fine Arts Periodical and Museum Bulletins* (New York: M.W. Wilson Co., 1941, 1944, 1947).

¹³Markowitz and Park, *Democratic Vistas*, 172.

¹⁴Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America*, 207.