

# Wall-to-Wall America

POST OFFICE MURALS IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Karal Ann Marling



University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis — London

For Helen, Tim, Gary, M. Sue, Anedith, Erika, and Sue.

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Fourth printing, 2000

#### Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Marling, Karal Ann.

Wall to wall America

Bibliography: p. Includes index.

ISBN 0-8166-3673-7 AACR2

1. Mural painting and decoration, American. 2. Mural painting and decoration—20th century—United States. 3. United States in art. 4. Postal service—United States—Buildings.

I. Title.

ND 2608.M3

751.7'3'0973

82-2622

Published by the University of Minnesota Press

111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290

Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520

<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

## Murals as Murals Should Be From Maryland to Idaho

Mural America was bound for glory in any vehicle that could be coaxed into motion. The spiritual itch for moving on to a better life and a better future was justification enough for Jackson, Missouri, and home-loving communities like Jackson to relish murals salted with locomotives and family Fords careening toward parts unknown. Thomas Hart Benton's *Power* panel in the New School for Social Research stages a tortoise-and-hare race between an ordinary coal-burning engine and a propeller-driven, futuristic supertrain suspiciously akin to a 1932 Raymond Loewy design for the Pennsylvania Railroad.<sup>1</sup> That hypothetical dirigible on tracks never glided off the drawing board, but its moderne pizzazz was optimally suited to Benton's purpose: he was, in spite of personal skepticism about the outcome, starting America's headlong race out of hard times toward an ideal, technological tomorrow.

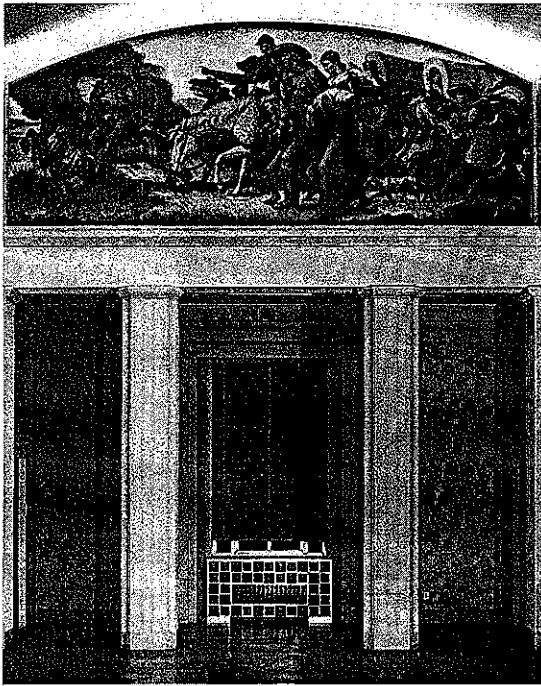
The contrast between dreamers' flights of the spirit and the awful realities of enforced migration during the Great Depression was underscored with bitter irony in Dorothea Lange's photograph of two vagrant children *Heading Toward Los Angeles, California* on foot in 1937. They trudge on, eyes glued to the dusty highway, oblivious to a Southern Pacific billboard showing a Pullman seat whizzing along effortlessly, like a modern magic carpet. "Next time," the roadside message suggests, "try the train—relax!"<sup>2</sup> Nomadic boys and girls, propelled into restless motion by "the quest for jobs, the lure of adventure, escape from broken, unhappy or poverty-stricken



Dorothea Lange, *On U. S. 66 Near Weatherford, Western Oklahoma*, 1939. The Oakland Museum, Dorothea Lange Collection.

homes" were the decade's shame.<sup>3</sup> And hard on their heels came whole families of Okies, joining the Joads to chase hope down Highway 66, "the mother road, the road of flight . . . the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors."<sup>4</sup> On any given day in the '30s, two million refugees were roaming the country, riding the rods, hitching rides, looking for work, looking for something lost back there where the exodus began. "The Depression," observed *Fortune* icily, "along with its misery produced social curiosities, not the least of which was the wandering population it spilled out on the roads. Means of locomotion vary but the objective is always the same—somewhere else."<sup>5</sup>

Lange found a family of four walking toward somewhere else *On U. S. 66 near Weatherford, Western Oklahoma* in 1938.<sup>6</sup> She planted her camera in front of them, stalling them in midflight on an axis that angles perpendicular to the highway, against the westward rush of the road. At the right, the mother clasps her baby and looks anxiously toward her husband. At the center, their tiny daughter stands isolated between her parents, peering timidly at the camera and the route ahead. At the left, the father stares down at the ground in an attitude of mortified defeat. Because the family has been checked in a motion that if continued, would bring them into the viewer's space, their plight becomes a moving part of the viewer's experience. Their



John Stuart Curry, *Movement of the Population Westward*, Department of Justice Building, Washington, D.C. 1937. National Archives.

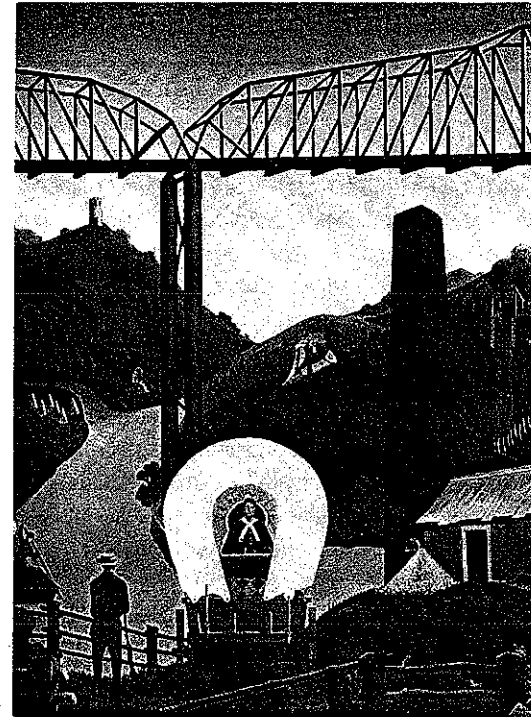
stasis is the onlooker's frustration, too. Because father, mother, and child are bound together in a unified spatial plane, yet markedly separated from one another, the integrity of the family unit is caught in a moment of maximum stress. The child stands alone while her mother looks for guidance to a father who has run out of ideas and hope. To stop is to lose sight of tomorrow; the image is pathetic because it is fixed forever in motionless despair.

The lonesome whistle that called this Okie family to come away, go somewhere else, and start afresh echoed through a Mural America obsessed with the migrations of the frontier era. It called migrants on the road to California and awakened painted settlers of historic yesterday, calling them to join in today's task of moving on and building a bright new tomorrow. John Stuart Curry's *Movement of the Population Westward* on the fifth floor of the Justice Building is the Depression's classical paean to American restlessness and hope: "[We] see," caroled the Section press release, "families of pioneers with their covered wagons and cattle facing the hardships of the trail and the dangers of the unknown."<sup>7</sup> There is, in fact, only one family marching westward across Curry's lunette—the heroic American fam-



Eugene Higgins, intermediate sketch for USPO, Shawano, Wisconsin. 1939. National Archives.

ily of all time and of 1937. Father takes the lead. With his young son clinging to his side, he squints into the setting sun, looking confidently beyond the prairie and his time in history. Mother solemnly cradles her baby and bows her head, a lithe pioneer madonna in homespun. Their steady gait, measured off in human terms by three left legs striding forward in sinuous unison, sets a processional cadence. The



Bertrand Adams, *Early Settlers of Dubuque*, USPO, Dubuque, Iowa. 1937. National Archives.

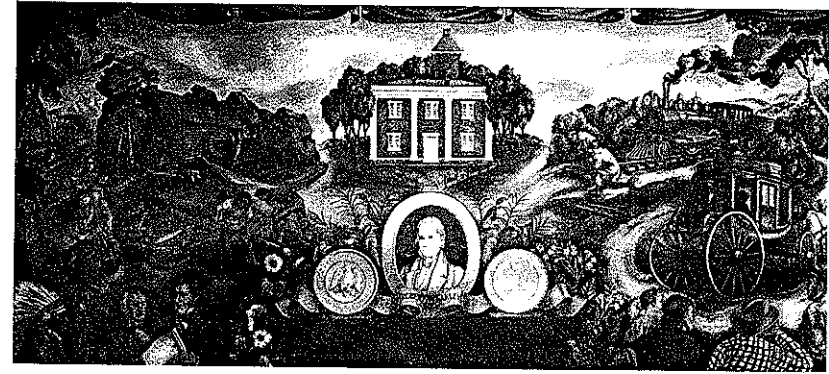


Louise Ronnebeck, *The Fertile Land Remembers*, USPO, Worland, Wyoming. 1938. National Archives.

mass of rearing horses, covered wagons, and ox teams presses on behind them and at their pace. The energy and determination of the family control and guide the inexorable movement of a nation bound for somewhere else.

Curry starts the great historical trek of the '30s at a slow walk. The tempo picks up in the Shawano, Wisconsin, post office, as woodsmen watch *Early Settlers* streaming past in a lumbering wagon train.<sup>8</sup> At Dubuque, Iowa, the prairie schooner heads straight out of history into 1937 through the girders of a modern trestle.<sup>9</sup> And in Worland, Wyoming, the Conestoga and the pioneer family also face the onlooker and seem to rumble out of the past into the post-office lobby: "The covered wagon drawn by oxen presses through galloping Indians and bison, figures of a vanishing culture whose forms have become shadowy and disappear into the past under the white man's determination to open up new lands. The landscape at either side depicts the irrigated fields and oil wells of the present" with fleets of 1938-model tank trucks rumbling along at a modern, breakneck speed.<sup>10</sup> In Wisconsin, the pioneer migration is a stately metaphor. In Iowa and Wyoming, the rumble of the wagons becomes a pointed simile. The pioneers' trek is drawn into an urgent dialectic with the hard travelin' present, and America's ceaseless movement picks up still greater speed in Tennessee and Mississippi and Minnesota, as the historical saga rolls on into the epoch of the iron horse and the side-wheeler.

Section murals in post offices in the sticks and in the marble halls of Washington insist that movement is a generative force in American life, that speed means progress, that journeys have always ended in



Minetta Good, *Retrospection*, USPO, Dresden, Tennessee. 1938. National Archives.

dreams come true. Consider Dresden, Tennessee, in 1938. Minetta Good called her mural *Retrospection*; the town and the ladies of the Dresden Garden Club prized the picture of life in antebellum days "for its exquisite beauty, the splendid workmanship, and for [what] it means to us."<sup>11</sup> The Garden Club and the other modern day citizens of Weakley County who stand with the viewer in the foreground of the mural looking back into times past find Dresden's rise contingent solely upon rapid comings and goings. First, pioneers clear a trail. Next, a stagecoach pushes off down a corduroy road. Finally, a train chugs into Dresden barely a foot behind the workers still laying the track to 1938.<sup>12</sup> Or consider Amory, Mississippi, in 1939. A horsedrawn carriage bogs down in a muddy thoroughfare, the fitting companion of the town pigs and the local drunk, while *Amory in 1889* roars to prominence on the mainline of the Memphis and Birmingham Railroad. *Amory in 1889* is a railroad town and a boomtown. New businesses sport spanking new signboards. A gaggle of ladies casting disdainful glances at the bemired sot from the heights of a new board sidewalk stand in the center of John McCrady's mural principally to show off their brand-new store-bought finery, shipped from Memphis or Birmingham.<sup>13</sup> The locomotive courses toward 1939, trailing clouds of local prosperity.

Or consider Grand Rapids, Minnesota, in 1940. In the center of James Watrous's mural, the ladies and the lumberjacks of Grand Rapids dance for joy when the "Andy Johnson" noses up to the dock. The tall facade of a new hotel peers over the river and the settlers cavort to whistles on the Mississippi that play the sweet melody of progress, of "the growth of the town during the lumbering

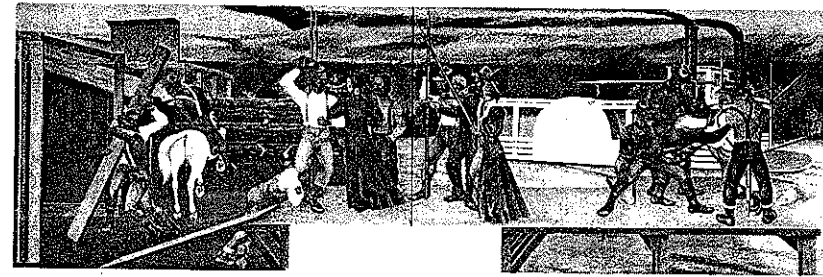


John McCrady, cartoon. *Amory in 1889* for USPO, Amory, Mississippi. 1939. National Archives.

and river trade period” still vivid in the memories of “local potentates” who took issue with the paddle rigging of a steamboat headed for 1940.<sup>14</sup>

And so the pictorial nineteenth century strode, galloped, chugged, and wheezed into the 1930s, ever moving, questing, building. Towns have always boomed when wagons creak, when trains scream, when packet boats steam down mighty rivers. The faster the pace, the brighter the promise—the nearer tomorrow. The mural saga of transportation across America was an object lesson to the '30s. The westering spirit of the pioneers made sense of a Depression generation “spilled out on the roads” in despair, trudging slowly toward California and the last frontier. America had passed this way before, in hope and confidence, walking through John Steuart Curry’s Justice Department mural. In that time and in the eternal present of Mural America, homeless wanderers found their dreams. Pare Lorentz filmed the Okies on the road in 1936, hiding from the dust in their broken-down cars. But his Dust Bowl documentary spoke to stay-at-home Americans when it bid the nation to keep faith with *The Plow that Broke the Plains*.<sup>15</sup> The swift machines that transformed the land when grandfather settled Amory and Grand Rapids made eminent sense to a nation intent upon leaving the Depression behind and reaching the future in the family jalopy, a Raymond Loewy rocket train, or, if need be, on an International Harvester haybaler. Machines built America, and the offspring of the pioneers had only to gaze beyond the moment to see a technological frontier still beckoning him or her toward tomorrow.

The didactic message of the murals was obliquely put. But a surfeit of old-timey costumes and vintage engines kept one from won-



James Watrous, *Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi*, USPO, Grand Rapids, Minnesota. 1940. National Archives.

dering if the nation had always zipped about with the frenetic energy of a Busby Berkeley chorus line in a Warner Brothers musical, pioneer legs pumping like syncopated pistons.<sup>16</sup> On occasion, however, the meaning of the electric current of motion joining the frontier past with the frontier of the future was stated with the purity of a prayer, the mystical clarity of a parable. The post-office mural in Goose Creek, Texas, makes such a statement. Pioneering pictures in New Deal post offices are readily ignored by virtue of the meticulous historical touches that give them the forlorn air of old civics textbooks left in an attic. Barse Miller’s Goose Creek mural is impossible to ignore. His *Texas* is so blatant an invocation of the wishful myth-making embedded beneath the pioneer trappings of Shawano and



Barse Miller, *Texas*, USPO, Goose Creek, Texas. 1938. National Archives.

Dresden that it takes an act of will to stand in the lobby without profound embarrassment. The hopes of the '30s are too close to the surface of this wall. The urgency is, quite literally, naked. The *deus ex machina* is indeed a machine that did not accomplish the miracles so earnestly anticipated by the children of the Depression.

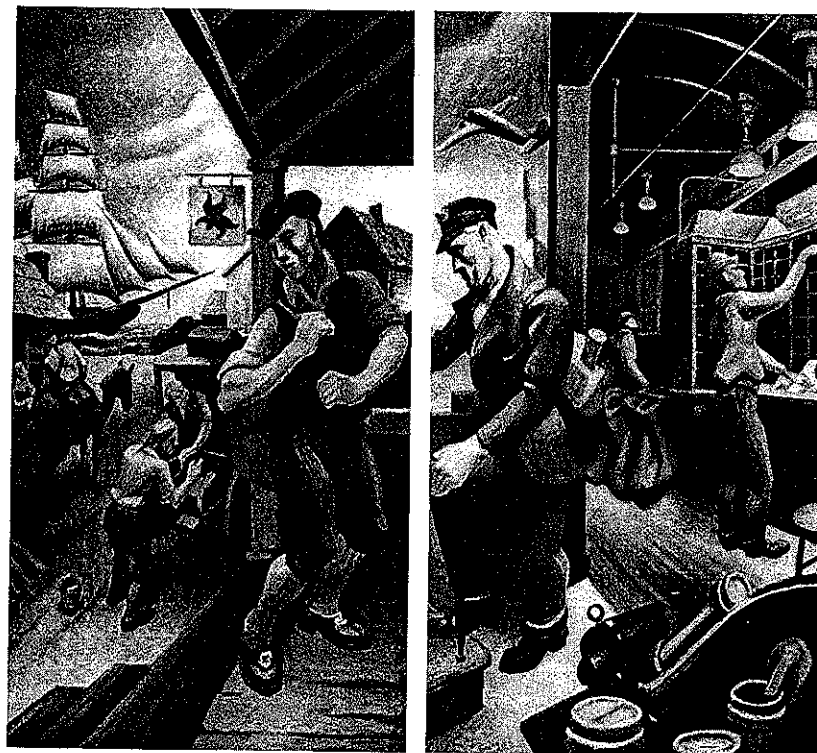
Texas is a giant, muscular deity who thrusts his nude torso from the partition above the postmaster's door and prepares to fire a tiny airplane—an updated lightning bolt—into the crowd lined up at the parcel post window:

Along the baseline of the mural are a covered wagon drawn by mule team and an early type of locomotive. Rising above is a winged figure which represents the spirit of the Texas pioneers. One hand holds an airplane, symbol of modern progress. The other hand reaches toward a star, as if to remind the present Texans of those qualities of vision and determination which have shaped the destiny of their State.<sup>17</sup>

Why not call him "America," reaching out of the Depression to grasp the distant star of destiny in 1938?

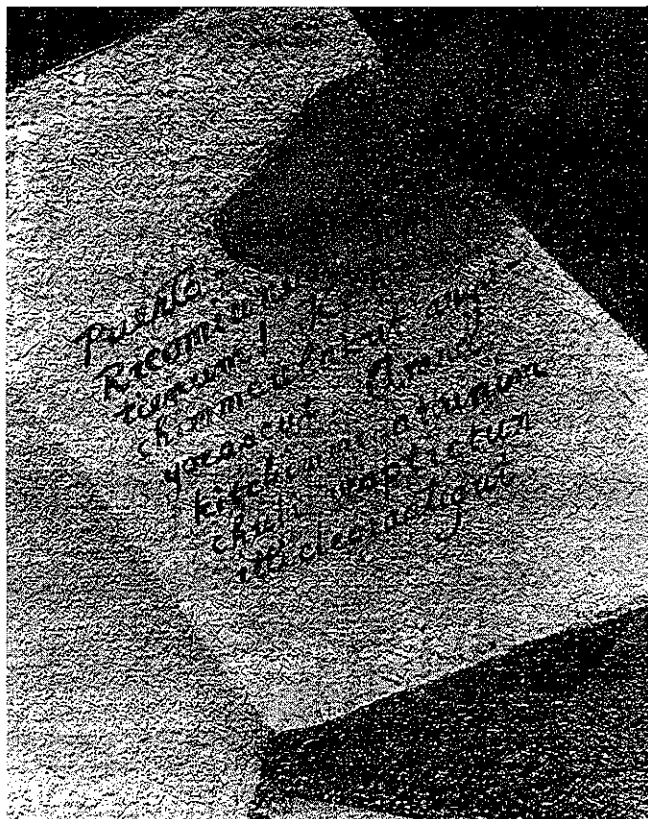
The zest for moving on aboard a winged stagecoach bound for distant stars was also expressed in a format tailored to the post-office construction boom of the '30s and the Section mural program for post offices. Indeed, few topics were more assiduously plumbed during the opening years of the mural campaign than the transportation history of the U. S. postal service. The National Competition of 1935 sent artists scurrying to Seymour Dunbar's 1915 *History of Travel in America* for prototypes, and with good reason. The majority of the winning designs for the Post Office Building on Federal Triangle involved fascinating and dramatic ways of moving the mail. *Pony Express*, *Stage Coach Attacked by Bandits*, and *Covered Wagon Attacked by Indians* were replicated ad nauseum in towns where "Local History, Past or Present, Local Industry, Pursuits or Landscape" lacked the theatrical chutzpah of turning wheels.<sup>18</sup> The picture album of Section accomplishments edited by Bruce and Watson in 1936—Volume One of a projected series on *Art in Federal Buildings*—included fleets of stagecoaches and wagons, lifted bodily from the postal competition. Stagecoach murals cropped up all over the map, from Stockton, California, to Catasauqua, Pennsylvania, from Raton, New Mexico, to Bridgeport, Connecticut.<sup>19</sup>

Among the muralists given postal commissions in 1935 without competing, Benton—who declined to sign a contract in the end—showed the greatest restraint in the matter of vehicular technology.<sup>20</sup>



Thomas Hart Benton, color sketch for Post Office Department Building, Washington, D.C. 1935. National Archives.

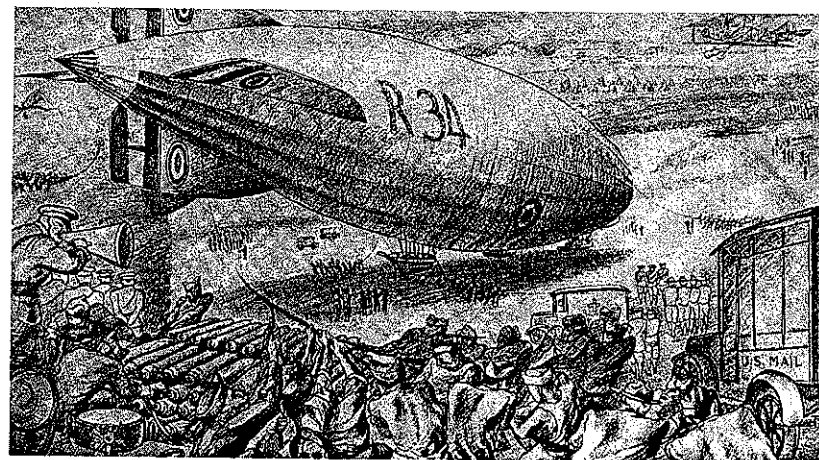
As his New School murals amply demonstrate, Benton loved nothing more than a charging engine, but his color sketch treating contemporary postal activities confines a limited amount of action to the staid interior of a railway mail car, while the colonial post is personified by a mail rider carrying his pouch up the front steps of a wayside inn. In both panels, Dunbar material appears in small doses—the prow of a clipper ship, the rear gate of a stagecoach, a distant view of an air-mail plane soaring over a skyscraper. The airplanes in Rockwell Kent's treatment of recent expansion of postal service to the territories are curiously incidental to the flight of the first letter sent by Eskimos in one panel and opened by Puerto Ricans in the other. And modern transportation had tangential bearing on the message that winged between them. According to Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, "gibberish" syllables inscribed on the sheet of stationery



Rockwell Kent, detail (destroyed) from *Delivery of Mail in the Tropics*, Post Office Department Building, Washington, D.C. 1937. National Archives.

were actually words of an obscure Kuskokwin dialect and were a call to arms: "To the people of Puerto Rico, our friends! Go ahead. Let us change chiefs. That alone can make us equal and free."<sup>21</sup>

The resulting controversy, adroitly stage managed by Kent, was a transcontinental affair. Puerto Rico decided that the islanders had been portrayed "as a bunch of African bushmen," Alaska realized that the Eskimos looked "like a bunch of rebels," and a newspaper editorial from Bridgeport, Connecticut, branded both pictures "subversive."<sup>22</sup> Bridgeport could afford to be smug: its own post office had just been decorated with the saga of mail delivery from the stagecoach era to the airplane age, and whatever Robert Lambdin's politics, the task of illustrating each and every piece of mechanical gear in postal history and getting every fact straight left him little

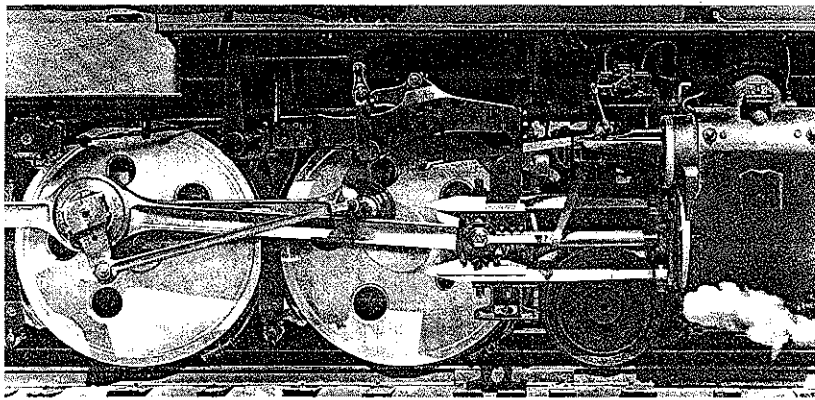


Peppino Mangravite, study for *English Dirigible R34 Delivering Mail to the United States at Hempstead Field, 1919*, USPO, Hempstead, New York. 1936. National Archives.

scope for covert rabble-rousing. The Kent case was the Section's own Rivera incident, confirming that agency's predisposition to mistrust painters with causes on their minds and to scrutinize the smallest detail of axle and propeller. But the episode did not impugn the glamorous reputation of the air-mail plane Kent crammed into the background of *Delivery of Mail in the Tropics*, nor did it dampen muralists' zeal for idolizing the latest methods of speeding innocent missives between farflung points.

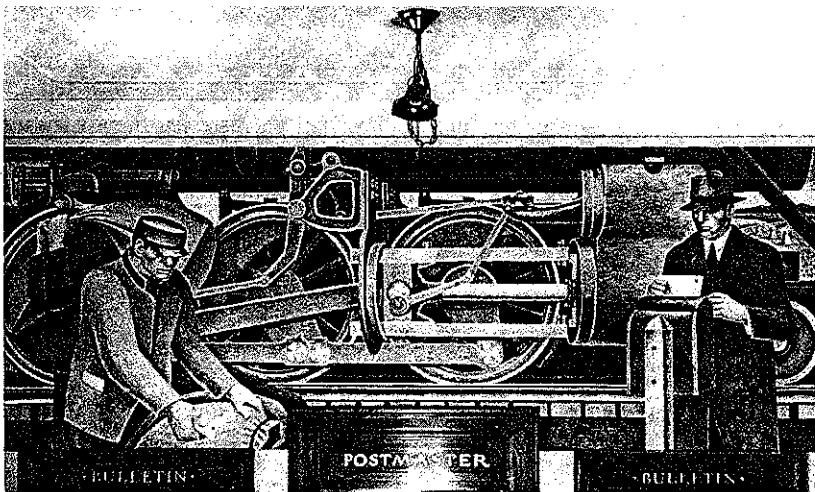
Peppino Mangravite pushed Buck Rogers modernism to its tragic limits in his mural for the post office in Hempstead, Long Island. Mangravite was a runner-up in the National Competition, but tossed his outdated copy of Dunbar aside in planning *English Dirigible R34 Delivering Mail to the United States at Hempstead Field, 1919*.<sup>23</sup> The mural was hung in 1937. In May of that year, as the nation listened on the radio, the airship Hindenburg crashed at Lakehurst, New Jersey, shattering the last illusions of visionaries who believed that the zeppelin was the bellwether of the space age and that the future would shortly waft to a halt at the mooring mast expectantly perched atop the Empire State Building.<sup>24</sup> The risk of immortalizing streamlined anachronisms was still worth running, however, for aerodynamic shapes epitomized modernity, efficiency, and progress. Scientifically graphed by Lloyd C. Douglas hero-scientists in lab coats, they conjured up modern exploits more daring and much more pressing than the stale legends of the pony express.

*Rolling Power*, an easel painting produced by Charles Sheeler in

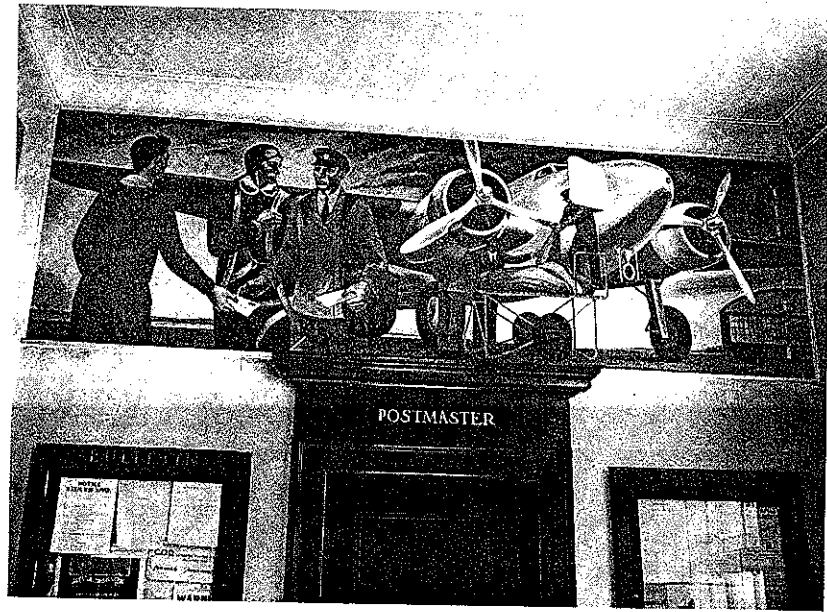


Charles Sheeler, *Rolling Power*. 1939. Smith College Museum of Art, Northhampton, Massachusetts. (Photo: David Stansbury)

1939, on assignment for *Fortune*, is a hypnotic closeup of the gleaming drivers and pistons of a Hudson class 4-6-4 locomotive, designed for the New York Central Railroad by Henry Dreyfuss, architect of the futuristic "Democracy" at the New York World's Fair.<sup>25</sup> The image is sterile and spare. The canvas is a vacuum, pumped clean of all potential save imminent acceleration, the *raison d'être* of the machine. Sheeler probes the bare crankrods of the locomotive with the



Dan Rhodes, *Communication by Mail*, USPO, Marion, Iowa. 1939. National Archives.



Dan Rhodes, *Air Mail*, USPO, Piggott, Arkansas. 1941. National Archives.

intensity of a Roman augur inspecting the entrails of a talismanic bird of flight. He isolates the happy omen that tells *Fortune's* business audience that the end of the Depression is near; the acceleration of the economy is at hand; and decisive, well-oiled action will carry the day.

Far from the altars of commerce, wreathed in the sweet attar of Sheeler's prophecy, the same portent of tomorrow reappeared in 1939 in the quiet Marion, Iowa, post office. *Communication by Mail* bridges the compositional interval between a letter box and a postal worker on a station platform with the polished undercarriage of the locomotive that hurtles the mail from country to city. Thief or sincere flatterer, artist Dan Rhodes built his mural around Sheeler's homage to *Rolling Power*. Then he turned up the throttle and lifted the flaps under his own power in 1941, with the *Air Mail* mural in Piggott, Arkansas. "I feel the Air Mail is of unusual significance to the smaller and more isolated communit[ies]," Rhodes explained, "linking them as it does with more distant centers." His image of flight had an almost purely symbolic significance for Piggott in any case. Rhodes's aircraft bore a striking resemblance to the new DC-3, the first airliner to turn a profit on passenger service without depen-

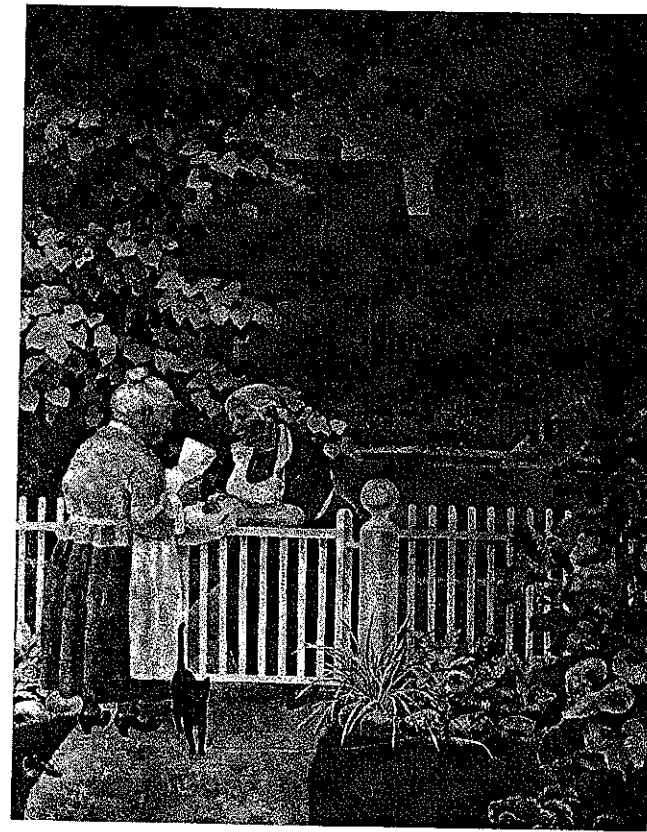


dence on federal mail contracts; the DC-3 rarely touched down in the northernmost corner of Arkansas. But Rhodes had other reasons for studying teardrop nacelles and propellers in Piggott: "I have tried to convey a sense of stream-lined power which is behind the mail service."<sup>26</sup> Streamlined power was justification enough for painting a futuristic phoenix arisen from the ashes of the Depression.

Under the Christmas trees of the '30s, kids were playing with electric replicas of rolling stock fresh from the carshops. Marx Toys offered both "the latest-type Commodore Vanderbilt" passenger train in service on the New York Central and the Union Pacific's articulated City of Salina streamliner. The same "flying streamliners" could also be had in windup models, at a saving of \$2.70; the Lionel version of the Commodore Vanderbilt was stoked by no less an eminence than Mickey Mouse. For fifty-nine cents the mail-order houses would deliver a "13 Piece Municipal Airport Set," a cardboard terminal plus "a famous Tootsie Toy transcontinental tri-motor plane, a TWA cabin plane, and a Chrysler automobile of unbreakable metal, averaging 5 inches, 4 passengers and 5 dummy tools." Old-fashioned parents had a harder and harder time finding lead cowboys and Indians. Nowadays, Junior was torn between yearnings for a "Stage Coach Dan" playsuit with six-shooter, lasso, and fringe, and the "Genuine Buck Rogers Six-Piece Outfit," including a "toy rocket pistol (harmless)."<sup>27</sup>

By 1936, Parchesi and picture books were playtime anachronisms. The little boys in cowboy suits who scooted along Main Street on their streamlined tricycles were reenacting a matinee serial that was playing with monotonous regularity on the walls of America's post offices. In the aftermath of the National Competition, the pictorial saga of danger, action, adventure, and futurism in the postal service was becoming a cliché, a fable best left to varooming kiddies with cap pistols. By 1936, iconographic instructions for Section competitions were squandering turgid paragraphs in the cause of sparking a new approach to the Mail theme:

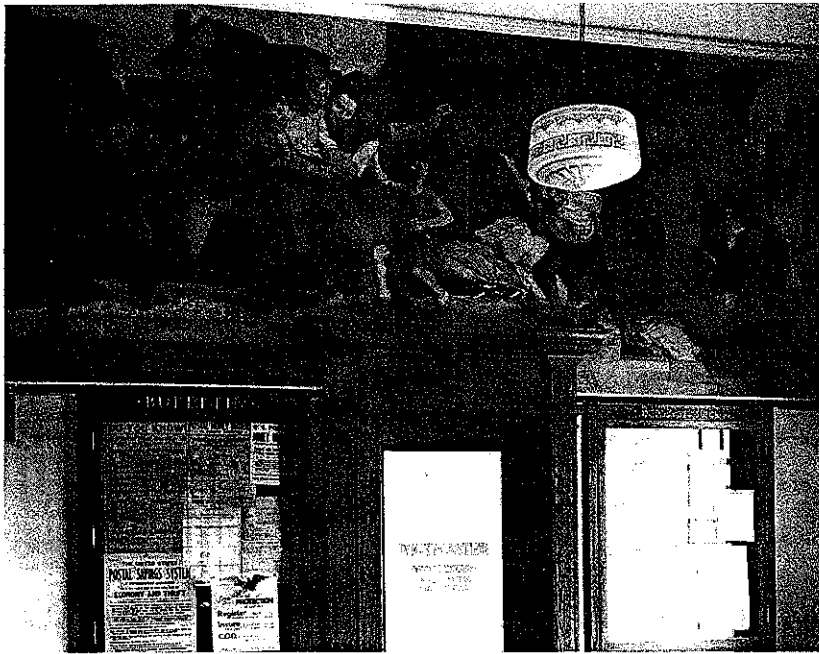
... the Committee feels it important that the artist realize that the central idea of the Postal Service is communication, by which experiences, ideas and goods are shared throughout the civilized world. This element of communication the Committee believes need not be represented by the more obvious symbols of airplanes, trains, packet ships, etc., but might take on great dramatic and human significance. The Post Office, moreover, is the one concrete link between every community of individuals and the Federal Government, and in addition to mail



Frances Foy, *The Letter*, USPO, East Alton, Illinois. 1936. National Archives.

service, through such departments as postal savings, money orders, etc., functions importantly in the human structure of the community. As distinguished and vital a conception along such lines is desired.<sup>28</sup>

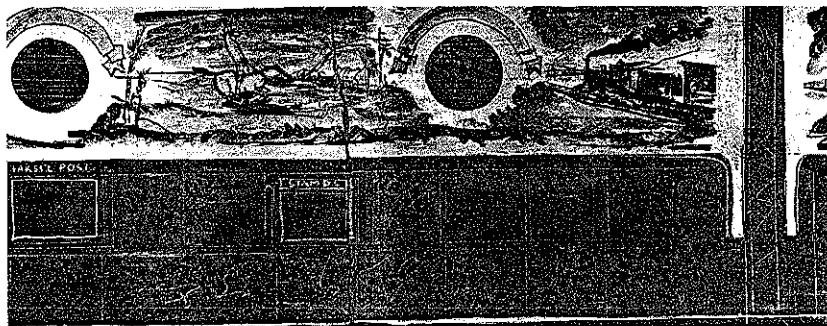
For all its pains, the Arlington, New Jersey, committee that was so deeply concerned with the "dramatic and human significance" of the post got a landscape and a cityscape without discernible postal significance. And some artists did try to find that drama, only to be rewarded with boring or bathetic results. In 1936 Frances Foy aimed at human significance in her East Alton, Illinois, mural. The postman has just turned the corner. Over a picket fence, two chubby old biddies and a cat are dissecting the contents of *The Letter*. So little is happening, however, that Foy had yards of space to spare and filled



Alan Tompkins, *The Arrival of the Mail*, USPO, Martinsville, Indiana. 1937. National Archives.

up most of the mural with floral arrangements. A speeding mail train would have helped matters no end. *The Arrival of the Mail*, painted the following year for the Martinsville, Indiana, post office is full of people and emotional brouhaha:

The mural depicts a scene on the porch of a Post Office in a typical small American town. The central figure has received a letter of good news and his family



Nicolai Cikovsky, preliminary study for USPO, Towson, Maryland. 1939. National Archives.

### *Murals As Murals Should Be*

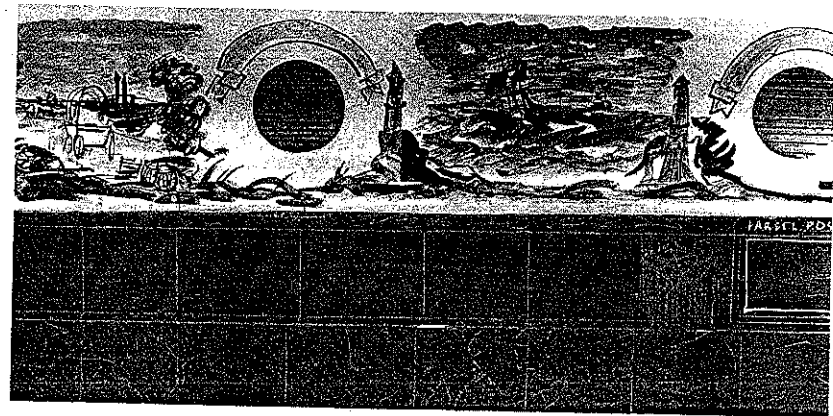
and friends join in the surge of good feeling. The woman descending the steps at the right has received tragic news. The two figures at the extreme left have not yet learned the nature of the news contained in their letter. Their mood of anticipation serves as an introduction to the extremes of joy and grief in the other groups.<sup>29</sup>

The extremes of emotion depicted are enough to make a boxholder think twice about picking up his bills. A third-class postcard is a ticket to bedlam in Martinsville, and artist Alan Tompkins seems to have surpassed his own mild desire "to convey a sense of the genuineness of friendly interest in others in American community life as well as the idea of the importance of the mail in the daily drama of our existence."<sup>30</sup> Pictures of the DC-3 had the virtue of being easier on the nerves than Tompkins's stricken widows!

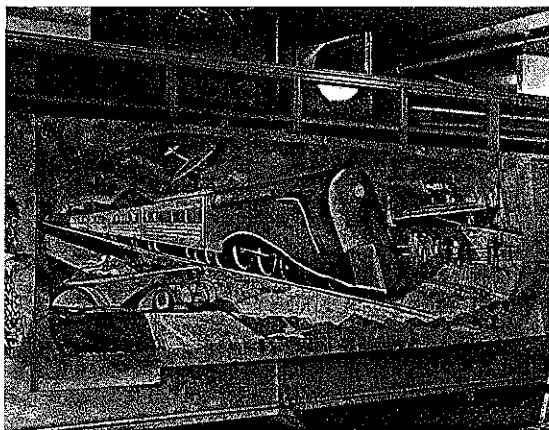
The postmaster of Towson, Maryland, still thought streamliners and the like perfectly delightful in 1939 when he presented his iconographic schema to artist Nicolai Cikovsky with the perky confidence of a man unaware that he has just reinvented the wheel:

I would suggest that the painting depict the Pony Express, Stage Coach, Early Railroad Train and Steam Boat, as a background for a Streamliner Train and modern Clipper Ship, to be the focal points in the work. In addition to the methods of transportation I have recommended, I would suggest that consideration be given to including an Indian Runner and Smoke Signals, the entire theme being directly related to the evolution of communication.<sup>31</sup>

Groans emanated from the upper reaches of the Treasury, of course. There was "no special objection to the subject matter as such, but



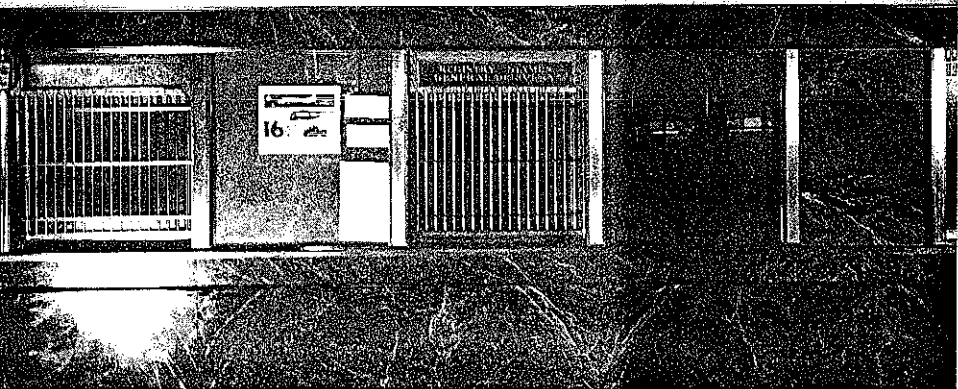
Nicolai Cikovsky, preliminary study for USPO, Towson, Maryland. 1939. National Archives.



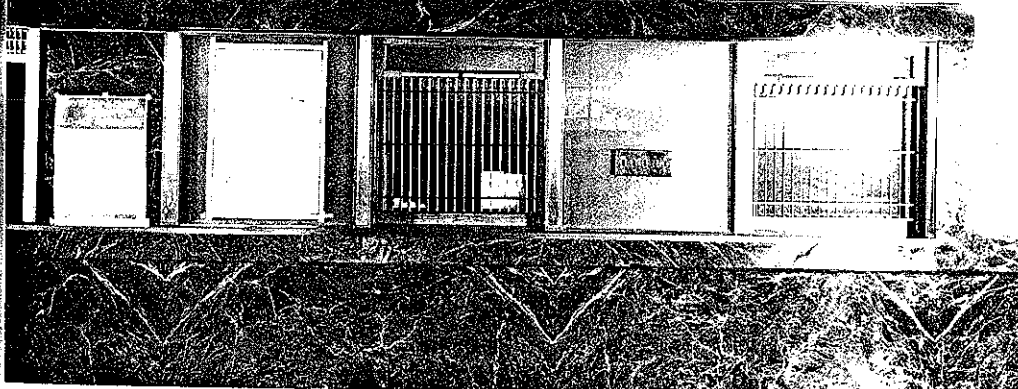
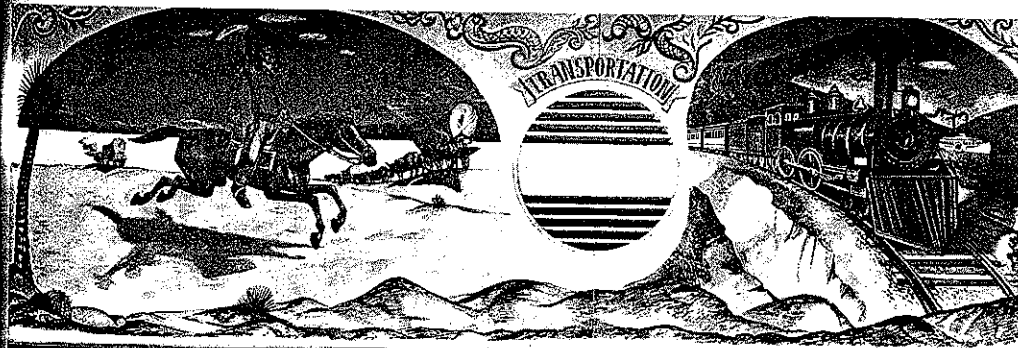
Nicolai Cikovsky, full-scale detail rendering for USPO, Towson, Maryland, 1939. National Archives.

*Murals As Murals Should Be*

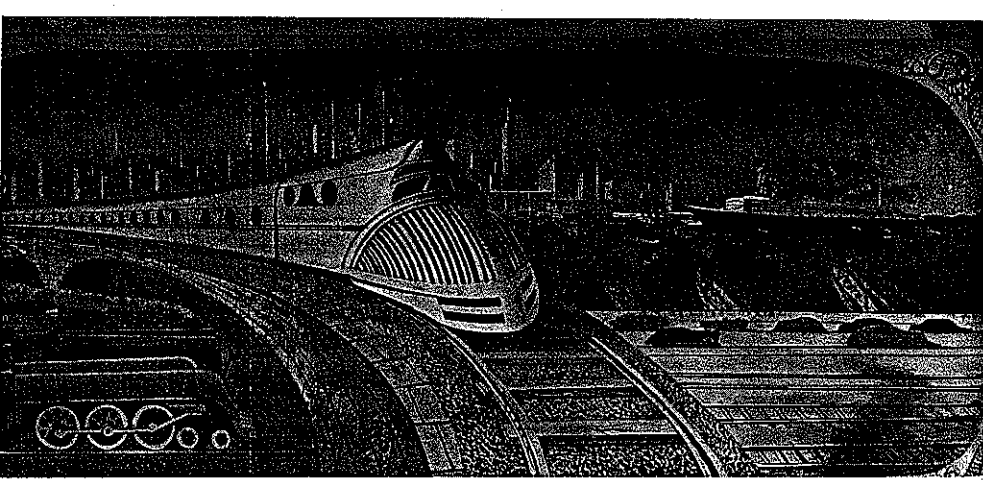
it has been used again and again—Evolution in the method of handling the mails. A little research on the artist's part would undoubtedly produce subjects of real historical interest.<sup>32</sup> Redundant contemplation of a stock theme was not required of the artist, however, and work proceeded with startling alacrity. The postmaster mailed his bright idea to Cikovsky in January, the five keyhole vignettes entitled *Milestones in American Transportation* were glued into place above the service windows on Saturday, June 24th, and by Thursday morning, June 29th, newspapers from Towson to Baltimore were screaming for their removal.<sup>33</sup> Postal officials in Towson were not sure just why the press was in full cry. Sure, they had heard mutterings about "the execution of the work and also the theme," but the



Nicolai Cikovsky, detail, *Milestones in American Transportation*, USPO, Towson, Maryland, 1939. National Archives.



Nicolai Cikovsky, detail, *Milestones in American Transportation*, USPO, Towson, Maryland, 1939. National Archives.



Nicolai Cikovsky, detail, *Milestones in American Transportation*, USPO, Towson, Maryland. 1939. National Archives.

custodian of the building could not bring himself to believe that the splendid topic chosen could be at fault and wondered if the trouble might not lie elsewhere. "The photographic sketches submitted with your letter of February 6th," he reminded Washington, "did not indicate that there would be any legend on the scrolls over the ventilators and in the finished work the inscription 'Milestones in Transportation' [sic] appear[s]." <sup>34</sup>

True enough, the scrolls had been blank in Cikovsky's exceedingly sketchy sketches and the new lettering which stretched some forty-eight feet across the lobby was regarded as an eyesore. The Towson *Jeffersonian* devoted a lead article, an editorial, and the picture page to Cikovsky's "JOKE" on the 30th, as if determined to enumerate every hideous facet of the ensemble. The banner-like scrolls ranked high on the list. According to the headline of the news report on the front page, "One Citizen Says Interior Now Looks Like Cheap Movie Theatre Lobby." Below, another unnamed protester agreed "that much better art work can be seen on roadside billboards." A third "said all that was needed was sawdust on the floor and a pink lemonade stand in the corner to give the interior of the building a circus side-show atmosphere." <sup>35</sup> In the editorial—"AWFUL!"—title scrolls and the subject matter of Cikovsky's "disgrace" were lumped together in infamy:

Its title is "Milestones in American Transportation" and, in five painful panels, is supposed to carry the beholder through a pictorial presentation of the progress made in transportation from pioneer days to the present time. Of course, as to subject matter, the New Towson Post Office "Mural" is better suited to a railway station or a bus terminal, and who knows, it may have been painted origin-

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ally for such a place, although its first four panels suggest that it may have been copied from one of Buffalo Bill's old side show banners. <sup>36</sup>

The photo caption delivered the coup de grace: "These might be posters advertising 'The Covered Wagon', Movie Thriller, or 'The Union-Pacific', but are not—they are 'murals' painted by Nicolai Cikovsky." <sup>37</sup> In an odd way, those were the kindest words the *Jeffersonian* ever printed about *Milestones in American Transportation*, and the casual analogy between the mural and two very popular movies was, intentionally or not, more insightful than glib. Both films were self-conscious epics of American history and hymns to American progress. Both described progress by means of vehicular movement across the landscape. And both, like Cikovsky's mural, were very, very long. The topic Cikovsky painted had been a popular one in movies of the '20s and retained enormous appeal throughout most of the '30s. The content and the flashy format of the Towson post-office cycle in fact invited comparison with the genre of Hollywood historicism upon which its critics fastened in disgust.

James Cruze made the film *The Covered Wagon* in 1923. In 1939 it was a relic of the silent era, ripe for plundering by Cecil B. DeMille, whose *Union Pacific* was a box-office bonanza of that year. Despite a close thematic parallel and some stolen scenes, the radical difference in sensibility between *Union Pacific* and *The Covered Wagon* defines a cultural watershed between the popular idea of wheeled progress in the '20s and the unique significance of locomotion in the '30s. Cruze's film exploits a documentary technique and a running time of ten reels to underscore the sluggish pace of national progress westward. The camera stands still and makes wagons creep across the frame, inch by painful inch, crossing the frontier at a crawl far slower than Curry's pioneer procession. DeMille's movie puts Barbara Stanwyck and Joel McCrea aboard a succession of trains that seem, over the course of 135 minutes, to have thundered down several thousand miles of main line. <sup>38</sup> The camera moves, the trains speed by, and the plot, a pastiche of climactic moments from every Western released to date, is an excuse for pure, repetitive action.

The epic of the '20s sets a goal: Cruze moves his wagon train resolutely toward Oregon, pausing to diagram every tedious step along the way. The epic of the '30s is a "spectacular," a supercharged, orgiastic marathon: DeMille's destination is absorbed into the frantic scramble to get going. The will to act is reason enough for flamboyant action. Movement feeds on itself and accelerates with the force

of the Hudson 4-6-4 in Sheeler's *Rolling Power*. Whereas *The Covered Wagon* plods toward a clearcut yesterday and an historic rendezvous with the west, *Union Pacific* hustles toward a vague place, the autochthonous tomorrow that was the spiritual home of the '30s. The trains are mechanical migrants in flight from reality, chasing hope down the tracks of time.

Calling *Milestones in American Transportation* a Hollywood poster could be considered a backhanded acknowledgement of the epic intentions of the mural and its contemporaneity. On the other hand, Cecil B. DeMille epics, always lauded for sheer entertainment value, were also notorious for a staunch disregard of fact. When the Baltimore *Evening Sun* entered the mural fray, Cikovsky's facts rapidly became the point at issue. Collating opinion from other Maryland papers, the *Sun* totaled the pictorial mistakes: "The pony express rider 'looks like a tough Apache', and he 'has his holster on backward.' In the third panel 'the oxen pulling the covered wagon aren't hitched to the wagon.'"<sup>39</sup> Half of Maryland had descended on the Towson post office to look for more errors. "The place has been overrun with curiosity seekers," the story continued, "and a check of visitors discloses the fact that nearly all of them pronounce the five panels as horrible."<sup>40</sup> An anonymous letter to Bruce pointed out that smoke rarely blows in opposite directions from a fixed location and marveled at the inability of an artist with "a gold edged diploma . . . to paint a decent child." Bruce's correspondent, who described himself as a "common Layman," hinted at hanky-panky: "When I saw your friend's, Mr. Cikovsky's, smearing on the Towson, Maryland post office I knew that some brush slingers will get a commission to paint a mural no matter what their work looks like. . . . Not everyone is blind to what is going on in this mural business."<sup>41</sup> The most sympathetic letter received by the editor of the *Jeffersonian* observed that the mural wouldn't look so bad "if the critic would stand near the post office door, or better still, outside the door."<sup>42</sup>

Demands for action rained down on the Section chiefs. Rip the blankety-blank thing off the wall! Don't pay the artist! Get somebody else to paint "local historical subjects" instead!<sup>43</sup> In August of 1939, the Section tried to end the shouting by sending Cikovsky back to Towson to rectify the worst of his mistakes.<sup>44</sup> "Today," the papers announced, "no capital 'I' carries a dot. Today there is no baby that doesn't look like a baby. . . . And now the artist has touched up the paint job a bit to make the smoke from the tugboats

blow in the right direction."<sup>45</sup> The cleanup effort was simply that—a stopgap. Had the public been so inclined, quibbles over peculiar aspects of the mural might have continued indefinitely. The Queen Mary, Cunard's eighty-thousand-ton waterborne marvel, made a straightforward statement about modern progress, once the tugboat smoke had been properly aligned.<sup>46</sup> But Cikovsky left a doomed dirigible hanging piteously over the Manhattan skyline, and his streamliner, streaking south out of Pennsylvania Station remained, to say the least, problematic. In the preliminary drawings, the engine was the Commodore Vanderbilt—or Marx Toys' rendition of same—pulling the Twentieth Century Limited west out of Grand Central Station by a most circuitous route. In the mural, the simplified engine is clearly a Lionel wind-up edition of a Union Pacific locomotive, far from the City of Salina, tearing through a Cecil B. DeMille fantasyland—not Maryland.

With the corrections made, discussion of the errors ceased, however, and the debate moved to a higher plane:

The mural has been altered as a result of criticism. It is, admittedly, an alteration that applies to details only. The more sweeping criticism, that the whole conception is as stale as an oyster that was opened day before yesterday, has had no effect on the Postoffice Department.<sup>47</sup>

Towson now wanted "a better mural," a conception that was not "trite," a picture reflective of the interests and tastes of the community:

Plainly, the artist had not followed the excellent suggestion made by the head of the Treasury Department's art projects, to wit, that it is a good thing for artists to visit the community for which their work is intended, learn something of its history, and generally "get the feel of the place." What he did was to ignore Towson and produce a jumbled assortment of ships and prairie schooners with the most conspicuous panel being devoted to a badly drawn pony express rider—a picture which might conceivably have been printed on the cover of one of the oldtime nickel paperback thrillers but which would hardly have made an acceptable poster for a third-rate Wild West show. . . . The chief objection to such an art job, as we see it, is this: that the artist deliberately foisted something upon a community which didn't understand it and didn't want it. He produced a fake "primitive"—don't imagine that he really *couldn't* draw any better than that—according to some theory of his own, without any consideration for the feelings of the community. That is not the way to interest people in art, or to win friends for Federal art projects.<sup>48</sup>

In September, the Towson *Jeffersonian* mounted a drive to have the "gaudy . . . poorly executed" cycle expunged and replaced by

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"murals done as murals should be, depicting local historical subjects." Congressman William P. Cole, Jr., had worked to get the appropriation for the building, so it was to Representative Cole that the local editor addressed this deathless verse, written under the nom de plume of Gum Shoe Harry:

Of all the murals under the sun  
Them Post Office ones are the worst ever done  
They hurt folks' eyes and they hurt their pride  
And everybody feels artist Cikovsky took the Government for a ride.<sup>49</sup>

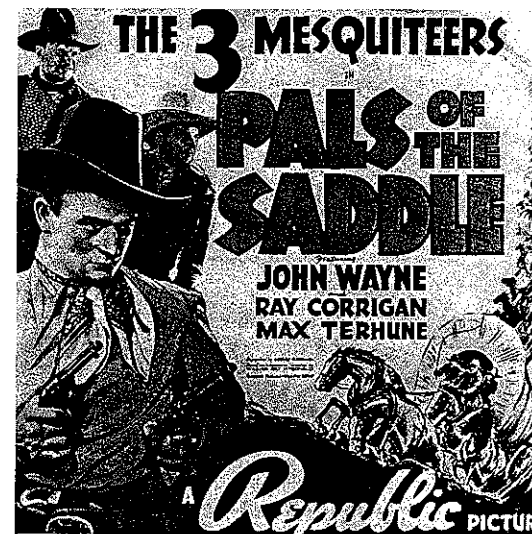
After a delay of several months, during which time he was sure that the Post Office Department or the Treasury would have to come to their senses, Cole tried to have *Milestones in American Transportation* discreetly carted away. He was tired of being "hammered, week after week, by a broadly read paper" and worried about the new post office in Catonsville, currently "free of any 'murals' or anything else to bring about criticism" but scheduled for Section ministrations.<sup>50</sup> The *Jeffersonian* had assumed the role of mural vigilante and was dropping broad hints about the 1940 elections. If Towson's "side-show banners" remained, Cole's days in office were numbered. The Towson case had also threatened to become an issue in the Radcliffe-Bruce battle for a Senate seat, for Bruce was hardly a popular name in Maryland in 1939.

Art, no less, was gumming up serious affairs of state, and Gum Shoe Harry's whimsical sallies had taken on a nasty edge:

Tomorrow the new post office at Catonsville will be dedicated and opened to the service of the public—and, next Saturday, who knows but what the interior walls of this handsome structure will be desecrated with some of Mr. Cikovsky's horrible murals. For what this means in vivid color, etc., see the interior of the new Towson post office. So far we have heard no plans for murals in the Catonsville building. But that signifies nothing. When the new Towson post office was dedicated there was no hint that Mr. Cikovsky's brilliantly doctored [sic] murals were soon to spoil its chaste interior walls. These "art offerings" were sprung on the unsuspecting Towson public and placed before anything could be done about it. . . .

The people of Catonsville can profit by Towson's experience. We suggest they guard their new post office carefully and if they see anybody wearing blue velvet trousers and a Windsor tie entering the building with a bucket of red paint in one hand and a covey of brushes in the other that they immediately call out the police and the fire department.<sup>51</sup>

Forewarned, the Section moved into Catonsville late in 1940 with a cautious tread and an accommodating smile and parlayed directly



Movie Poster, 1938.  
(Photo: Pat Osthus)

with the Catonsville Committee on Art, set up at a public meeting of concerned citizens prepared to guard their post office against bohemian intruders, as the *Jeffersonian* had counseled.<sup>52</sup> The Committee furthermore insisted upon "murals done as murals should be, depicting local historical subjects." And as for Towson, the town learned to live with *Milestones in American Transportation*: Washington could not be persuaded to whisk the murals away on a southbound streamliner.

The poetasters and poison pen pals of Towson offered lots of reasons for their hostility to *Milestones in American Transportation*. The murals were poorly executed. They had appeared without warning. Nobody had been consulted. Shady deals had been made. Folks would have preferred Maryland history. These were, by and large, objections reasoned out after the shock wave that hit Towson on a spring Saturday in 1939 had passed. From the beginning, the mural cycle grated on the nerves in ways people later struggled to put into logical phrases. Why? First reports spoke disparagingly of movie posters and wild-west shows. Cikovsky, it would appear, had trespassed over the faint line that separates art from popular art, a breach of decorum manifest in the broadside style of his work but more especially in his definition of a normally innocuous theme. The modern—the futuristic—end of his temporal spectrum was dispensed with in a single vignette. The remainder of the cycle, with the exception of the clipper ship, was cowboy and Indian stuff, for-

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eign to Maryland, which could have come straight from the silver screen. The great DeMille himself might have hesitated to show self-propelled wagon trains with Cikovsky's reckless brio, but that slapdash technique was an accepted convention of B-movie Western ads. Republic's poster for a 1938 John Wayne oater called *Pals of the Saddle* gave no intimations of a storyline that involved cowboys rounding up foreign spies for violation of the Neutrality Act; it featured instead a charging wagon train to which horses were apparently hitched by their reins and manes alone.<sup>53</sup>

As far as Towson was concerned, *Milestones in American Transportation* was a Hollywood horse opera fated to run forever at the post office. It was one thing to understand the conventions and connotations of popular culture, as the Regionalists tried to do, and to tap the wellsprings of people's concerns in a readable pictorial language related to the argot of the media. It was another thing altogether to scissor style and content directly out of the current matinee program at the Bijou and freeze it for generations to come on the walls of a public building. At the very least, the viewer was entitled to wonder whether Cikovsky spent the six months before he did just that worrying about why the Commodore Vanderbilt, the Queen Mary, and the covered wagon were popping up so frequently in the mass media, in formulary poses. Public art was not a license to patronize the public. The muralist who conceived his role in the public arena as a process of meditation between the residual elitism of Section standards for great art and the anything-goes free-for-all of the magazines and the movies was not obligated to pander. Towson sensed condescension in Cikovsky's attitude. Editors, politicians, and postal patrons in Maryland had no edge on a judge in Aiken, South Carolina, or a gin operator in Paris, Arkansas, when it came to saying what art in their part of the public domain ought to be like. Yet the charge that Cikovsky had painted a "fake 'primitive'"—that he could have drawn babies and holsters properly had he not been working "on a theory of his own"—constitutes a negative definition of public art. Public art was not an artist's amusing notion of giving folks a dose of their own schlocky species of art, popular art à la Cecil B. DeMille, especially when Western flicks had nothing whatsoever to do with Towson.

Gum Shoe Harry at his ill-tempered worst would not have argued against painting a wild-west epic with scrolls and legends in Nutley, New Jersey, a town which liked to recall *The Return of Annie Oak-*



Paul Chapman, *The Return of Annie Oakley*, USPO, Nutley, New Jersey. 1941. National Archives.

*ley*, making trick shots for the Mutoscope camera before a suspended bedsheet. Movie nonsense meant something to Fort Lee, New Jersey, where the film industry began, and the post-office mural showed *Early Moving Pictures* being made on open-air stages. It meant something to Burbank, California, where people worked for Warner Brothers and the post-office mural showed a Mexican dance scene being staged. Real six-guns and sagebrush meant something to Giddings, Texas, where the post-office mural showed *Cowboys Receiving the Mail*.<sup>54</sup> But Giddings, Texas, in 1939 was not much like Towson, Maryland.

In an epoch happily ignorant of structuralist interpretations of the Western, the theory that Maryland moviegoers examined pressing social problems in darkened loges while the Union Pacific built itself in two hours and fifteen minutes deserved the derision slathered on Cikovsky's vignettes.<sup>55</sup> Cecil B. DeMille's epic was entertainment, escape. Contrariwise, people did not go to the post office to be entertained by cowboy epics. If mailing a letter was a less perilous errand than Martinsville, Indiana, believed, it was nonetheless an official transaction with the U. S. Government. The post office was a prominent feature of the downtown scene and would be for years to come. The new building was the mark of the federal presence, a hard-won distinction acquired through the zealous efforts of "Bill" Cole, who may have been a slouch at getting things taken down but was a real whiz at getting them put up.

The Towson post office was a consequential, enduring monument,

adorned with a frivolous featurette. Too late, Towson opted for "local historical subjects," for "murals done as murals should be"—murals possessed, therefore, of qualities associated with local appreciation of the architecture that housed them: dignified sobriety and resistance to the passage of time. Quite apart from the gaudy Western movie flavor, the transportation theme chosen for the Towson post office was not equal to those demands. By 1939, the Section and the town judged the topic trite and stale. Themes, whether embodied in murals or movies, have imaginative half-lives of their own: the wider their imagistic spread across the media of cultural expression, the shallower their bite into the depths of culture. The historical onset and evolution of progress came to be addressed in the '30s through a hierarchical canon of moving vehicles. Wagons, steamboats, cars, and trains dominated DeMille's *Union Pacific*, John Ford's *Stagecoach*, Sheeler's *Rolling Power*, Edna Ferber's *Cimarron*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Roy Acuff's twangy recording of "The Wabash Cannonball," and scores of New Deal murals.<sup>56</sup> These symbols cloyed through repetition and lost definition. Through familiarity, the legions of trains and stagecoaches filled up that imaginative distance from the texture of daily experience that allows a book or a song or a mural to shock and delight. Turning wheels became ordinary and trite.

The meaning of the symbols dissolved apace. The extraordinary, at close range, becomes humdrum. In fact, the cumulative gathering of technological forces for one last scramble into a streamlined tomorrow showed signs of running out of gas in 1939 at the New York World's Fair. The Trylon and Perisphere epitomized futurism, but they were hollow structures antithetical to stability and poised, *sui generis*, on the brink of obsolescence. Tracing the path of mechanical progress that pointed out of the past toward an ideal future burdened muralists with artifactual symbols of that kind. Hence the change that painters strained to picture always threatened to loosen the imaginative hold of a modern locomotive with rust spots forming on the carapace or a millennial airship no longer in service, before the paint dried on the post-office walls. Cikovsky recited the gospel of progress by rote in the Towson post office, and his litany of wagon, steamboat, and streamliner exposed the waning potency of both facets of the formula. The technological past annoyed Towson. So did a tomorrowland where smoke blew the wrong way.

Perhaps the promises of speed and power and machines had been

made once too often. Perhaps people who lived within sight of the technological marvels framed by Cikovsky's final vignette were immune to the rumble and the roar. *Life* magazine thought it odd that "the most heavily industrialized nation in the world" gave technology no place of honor in Mural America in 1939.<sup>57</sup> But all the painted stagecoaches and locomotives had roared straight down the spiritual cul-de-sac that petered out at the Towson post office. Towson yearned for the past, for local history. Local history meant staying put and staying home, turning a deaf ear to the nighttime whistle of the 4-6-4 as it zoomed off toward a paradisaical, machine-driven tomorrow. The roar of the dream machine was an evanescent echo on the wind. Home and history were as solid as the post-office wall. A great and troublesome paradox of Depression history surfaced upon that wall in Maryland: the track toward somewhere else always wound back toward home, like all the weekend excursion routes mapped out in the WPA Guide to the Old Line State.<sup>58</sup>

Industrial towns in the '30s did not contemplate murals with Ludism in their hearts. People were adamant, however, in their demand to see scenes consistent with local fact. Hence, in communities with an industrial focus, muzzy World's Fair futurism was as little appreciated as emblematic ladies in cheesecloth brandishing locomotives. Barse Miller won the 48 States Competition for Island Pond, Vermont, a lumbering center, but the father of the technological god of Goose Creek, Texas, did not venture to thrust naked fantasy upon the chilly factory and mill towns of the northeast corridor. His Apollo of Aviation hitched up his britches and picked up a saw. When industry was woven into the fabric of home, the work of the community and the manner in which it was accomplished in pictures were charged with the emotions accruing to home places. Where home and technology intersected, on the post-office wall, conflicting values often clashed: industrial progress with stability, movement with permanence, action with history. Among the various controversies kicked off by the 48 States contest of 1939, the Westerly, Rhode Island, and Kellogg, Idaho, mural disputes were unique because they revolved about the tension between home and industry. Kellogg chose to turn away from certain painful realities of the modern mining industry, into the make-believe serenity of the past. Westerly chose to unite industry with local history.

*Life* took no special notice of the Westerly sketch in discussing the "handful" of 48 States drawings with industrial topics. Paul Starrett





Barse Miller, 48 States sketch for USPO, Island Pond, Vermont. 1939. National Archives.

Sample pictured “a railroad engineer and his family crossing over the tracks at [a] station,” according to the caption.<sup>59</sup> In compositional terms, however, the importance of the engineer’s family is open to debate. The style is metallic and moderne and the sketch is controlled by a lateral thrust following the sharp plane of the railroad tracks. A caboose, box cars, and an updated steam locomotive wrapped in a streamlined shroud also describe a horizontal band across the design surface; a river retraces the tracks in the background. The family group elevated on the bridge is too generalized to sustain visual interest. The group is primarily a centering device for the energetic composition, a vertical pin which keeps the eye from passing over the mural completely in the compelling horizontal charge from right to left.

When the 48 States contest was announced, the Westerly post office was still in the preliminary drafting stages. Funds for a mural had not been authorized, and interested artists were advised to proceed by analogy with a wall in Norway, Maine, for which the competition brochure also featured no schematic drawing.<sup>60</sup> The Westerly situation was vague enough to justify a corresponding fuzziness on the part of artists vying for the job. Sample’s drawing, as Westerly realized from a cursory inspection of the *Life* reproduction, was not based on anything he could have seen there. The prize-winning design was another version of the tried-and-true fast-train-to-tomorrow theme, modified slightly to suggest that the engineer who gazes away from his wife and son, down the main line to somewhere else, occasionally comes home.

Westerly harbored no grudges against homebound engineers or the railroad industry, but two days after *Life* tipped Westerly off to Sam-



Paul Starrett Sample, 48 States sketch for USPO, Westerly, Rhode Island. 1939. National Archives.

ple’s plan, the *Providence Bulletin* began to ask why a Casey Jones picture had been chosen:

There’s a slogan put out by the Westerly Chamber of Commerce to the effect that the town is a “good place to live, work and play.” But to be consistent with future decorations in the town itself, the chamber will have to tack an addition on the slogan, pointing that it’s also a good place for railroad engineers and for a railroad underpass, overlooking the fact that there’s already a railroad underpass that does valiant service for late commuters. The inconsistency between the town itself and a segment of the future decorative plans comes to the citizens through the above picture, but not without leaving them slightly surprised. Artist Paul Starrett Sample’s sketch may be Westerly, they admit, but they unanimously agree it’s inclined to make a man mighty homesick—for Gary, Indiana.<sup>61</sup>

The newspaper printed a droll survey of local reactions. People agreed that if an artist were bent on showing an engineer crossing the tracks, then an overpass suited his or her purpose better than an underground tunnel. They felt better about the idea that the engineer might be a symbolic “representative” of the workers of Westerly after locating one “spare” engineer for the New Haven “by the name of Oscar M. Whitlock living at 16 Robinson Street.” So, the *Bulletin* admitted, “Sample’s casting is technically right,” but rather than changing the natural bed of the Pawcatuck River to conform with the engineer’s tracks, “they’ll vote to change the picture instead. It’s an easier contract and less conducive to wet feet.”<sup>62</sup>

The down-East humor of the poll, which went on to compare Westerly’s plight to that of Los Banos, California—currently stuck with a painted tribe of Arizona Indians—sparked a needless dispute. The

jury was at fault here, as in Los Banos. The Westerly competition had been won by a sketch Sample made for the Island Pond, Vermont, post office, a building also lost in the limbo of appropriations contingencies, but in October of 1939 the Section and the artist had agreed upon a total revision of the railroad concept. Sample was the artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire; as soon as the academic term ended in the spring, he expected to go to Westerly for a first-hand look.<sup>63</sup> Until *Life* broke the story, nobody thought to tell Westerly what was going on. Vermont's lumber dealers never knew that they had just missed getting the all-purpose, rolling-progress picture credited to Westerly in *Life's* December issue. Meanwhile, the Chamber of Commerce and the quarrymen of Westerly scratched their heads over the ubiquitous fast freight to the future and decided not to make the trip.

It was their contention that Washington was bound by repeated Section pledges to base even such outre forms of mural expression as might be suitable for an ultramodern building on a local version of modernity. An editorial in the Westerly *Sun* elicited agreement on that score from Rowan, who dusted off the same paragraph he had been using on inattentive muralists for several years:

The members of the Section feel as keenly as your readers that the murals which we are placing in Post Offices throughout the country carry the most meaning for the people when they deal with subject matter with which the people are familiar and [when] they reflect the local interests, aspirations and activities, past and present, of the public for whom the work is intended.<sup>64</sup>

The *Sun* credited the Citizens-Taxpayers Committee of Westerly with organizing opposition to the published sketch.<sup>65</sup> That group, formed six months before the Section itself was established, was not an ad hoc club for disgruntled art haters. When it held a mass meeting "to demand a revised mural which will reflect the life and history of the town," people turned out and voiced opinions sent to Washington four days after the *Life* picture spread containing the railroad drawing reached Rhode Island newsstands. The summary of Westerly's deliberations at the town meeting began with a bit of local history. The taxpayers' committee had spearheaded the drive to have a new post office built in Westerly and thus considered itself the offended party when the odd content of the Sample sketch was made public:

We have labored diligently in an effort to have this public building truly repre-

sentative of the town and so constructed as to be an honor, and a lasting memorial to this historical section of God's earth. When it was learned that an emblematic Mural was to be made part of the adornment for this modern building, the citizens . . . were greatly pleased.

The executive board of the Citizens-Taxpayers Association had been so excited by the prospect of obtaining "an emblematic Mural . . . for this modern building" that its members sent away for Section literature governing competition procedures. And having done their homework, they were prepared to insist 48 States regulations be followed to the letter in the Westerly mural, particularly "the first requirement . . . that it must be based on historical or industrial grounds, or both." This was, to be sure, a highly selective reading of a topic smorgasbord in which history and industry were buried away among a half-dozen other options and in no way paired. But according to that interpretation, the railroad picture in *Life* had "no bearing whatever upon the historical or industrial town in which it was to be placed." The Association's parting shot was inevitable:

Therefore a vigorous protest is hereby registered against the placing of such a misconception and ill-advised understanding of this historical town and its leadership in one of the oldest and most substantial industries, a native product, GRANITE.<sup>66</sup>

The Westerly Chamber of Commerce did not capitalize the word "granite" in its protest to Washington, although the subject was mentioned in an argument which, like that of the Citizens-Taxpayers Association, decried the proposed mural because it "in no way depicts our industries or our history." Perhaps granite was a moot point; Frank Sullivan, the president of the Chamber, did make his case on the letterhead of the Sullivan Granite Company:

There is no overhead bridge at the railroad station and never [has] been, and it seems to us a more appropriate subject could have been selected for this New England town where for over 100 years our citizens have found employment cutting and carving Westerly granite, and later making 4 color rotary presses for national magazines and textiles, and earned a livelihood in many of ther diversified industries.<sup>67</sup>

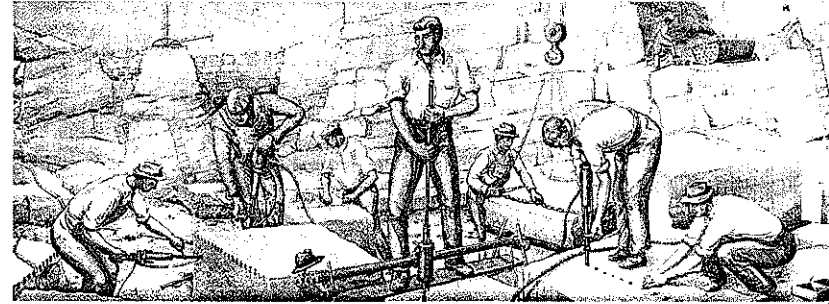
In the meantime, the Association had turned up and endorsed a mural sketch of which both groups heartily approved. Alexander G. Sawyer, a Westerly native, had submitted a granite quarry sketch in the 48 States contest.<sup>68</sup> Because he did not place in the judging, his drawing was returned and went on exhibit in December of 1939 at



Leo Rankin, 48 States sketch for USPO, Westerly, Rhode Island. 1939. National Archives.

the public library, as Westerly's homegrown alternative to the Paul Starrett Sample train for all seasons.<sup>69</sup>

Despite the exhibition at the library, local civic groups made no effort to inflict Sawyer on the Section by birthright. But his picture surely crystallized the iconographic self-portrait Westerly presented to Washington and helped laypeople visualize the conflation of history with industry emphasized in all the protest documents. Of the fourteen Rhode Island designs judged and rejected in the 48 States Competition, at least five dealt exclusively with the granite theme Westerly preferred.<sup>70</sup> On aesthetic grounds, the decision of the jury made some sense: most of the discarded drawings lack the technical sophistication of the Sample sketch, and none approaches its angular verve. What the surviving quarry designs have in common is concern with the human dimension of industry, and the tools and techniques men use to "earn a livelihood." Leo Rankin's design, for instance, contains fourteen sturdy figures who fill the foreground and spread across the quarry in a dense, frieze-like configuration, a mass of humanity as solid as a slab of Westerly granite. Taken together, the actions of the men constitute a picture guide to quarry work: mechanical drilling, power sanding, hand finishing, and hoisting are illustrated with schematic precision. A shiny bank of air compressors is balanced off by the muscular strength of a laborer struggling to raise a block by pulley. Modern industry is played off against the craft tradition and machine power against human might. This same analysis holds true for Paul Rudin's composition, concerned with the drilling and sawing operations that precede extraction of the stone and for Alfeo Verrechia's hoisting scene. *Activities at Rock Quarry, Westerly* by Bruce Mitchell puts those activities in a wholly historical context; the same processes are accomplished without



Paul Rudin, 48 States sketch for USPO, Westerly, Rhode Island. 1939. National Archives.

modern equipment, and the train that carries the granite away could have found a place among the nineteenth-century vignettes in the Towson post office.

The Westerly quarry sketches make enormous and insistent demands on the viewer's haptic sense. Every figure in every drawing holds, touches, grasps, grips, or seizes something: every drawing concentrates on *homo faber* so engaged. This worker's appeal to tactile manipulation of the hand quantifies stock academic symbolism. The outmoded goddess who clutches a wheat sheaf and the sci-fi godling who wields a modern airplane like a benevolent King Kong are pictorial stand-ins for the poorly arranged knots of figures who work in the Westerly designs. But making every fist work intensifies the value of working. All the grasping and seizing also specifies what the isolated symbol does not, namely, that work has actually been accomplished, not through the intervention of a heroine who holds the finished product or through the miraculous agency of the hero's technological attribute, but through the collective force of human beings whose manual competence and commitment to grasping the tools outweigh the power of the tools themselves and the value of what is produced. In that sense, the self-propelled streamliner in the Towson mural and the inherent dynamism of Sample's railroad composition lump those futuristic works together on the margins of an academic sensibility. Action hinges on externals. Machines act, and people, like Sample's engineer, look idly on. The train is, in effect, the Spirit of Goose Creek, Texas, in a metallic costume. Similarly, in Joe Jones's mechanized harvest scenes, the fruits of the soil are products of a technology to whose efficient operations people are ancillary. The Seneca, Kansas, reaper is, in effect, the goddess of the wheat sheaf.



Alfeo Verrecchia, 48 States sketch for USPO, Westerly, Rhode Island. 1939. National Archives.

In this one respect, the technological school of '30s mural painting has a common ground with the radical left and the social protest school. The look of the Depression years is often illustrated today by the canvases of the Soyer brothers, with their hordes of unimportant, idle people, waiting and watching in employment offices, relief bureaus, and railroad stations.<sup>71</sup> Moses Soyer meant his massed portraits to reveal the truth about the times: he warned fellow artists against "being misled by the chauvinism of the 'Paint America' slogan. Yes, paint America, but with your eyes open. Do not glorify Main Street. Paint it as it is—mean, dirty, avaricious."<sup>72</sup> Raphael Soyer's *Transients* of 1936 and Moses's *Employment Agency* of 1935 typify the dumb misery of Main Street through the inaction of the figures. More striking are their oversized hands, which have nothing to do and nothing to seize. Jobless people stranded in the Soyers' waiting rooms clench empty fists, dangle their heavy hands in their laps or between their knees, or touch themselves, stifling a yawn and patting a cheek as if the feel of their own flesh will solidify an existence of which they are no longer sure. The only movement is the twitch of the hands. They intertwine their fingers nervously as they wait—for the miracle train to somewhere else?—pitiable because they cannot act for themselves. The haptic itch has no outlet. Hands reach out, but the tools of deliverance elude the grasp of the waiters and watchers. Whatever they await will happen to them; people who watch and fidget are at the mercy of external forces their restless fingers cannot control.

Soyer called Main Street "avaricious." The Westerly sketches describe avidity, if not avarice, in the grasping action of scores of hands which forceably reverse the Soyers' brief for powerless inertia. The



Bruce Mitchell, 48 States sketch for USPO, Westerly, Rhode Island. 1939. National Archives.

quarrymen's hands hold the tools to build a future conceived in human terms and shaped by human action. And they hold on to their tools for dear life! The nature of the tools, although the Westerly competitors attended carefully to specialized equipment, contributes less to the meaning of the conceit than do the hands that use jackhammers and pneumatic drills. The old technology and the new are peripheral to the act of working, with any instruments available. Work is the primary content of the Westerly designs, and the constructive actions of the worker explain the perceptual connection between industry and history upon which the Chamber of Commerce and the Citizens-Taxpayers Association were fixated. For those groups, the granite industry was coextensive with the story of life in Westerly over a hundred-year span of time. In the world of the quarry sketches, techniques of the past and modern ones are interchangeable. The controlling constant is work itself and the concentrated dedication of the workmen who hew the stone. Life is earning a livelihood.

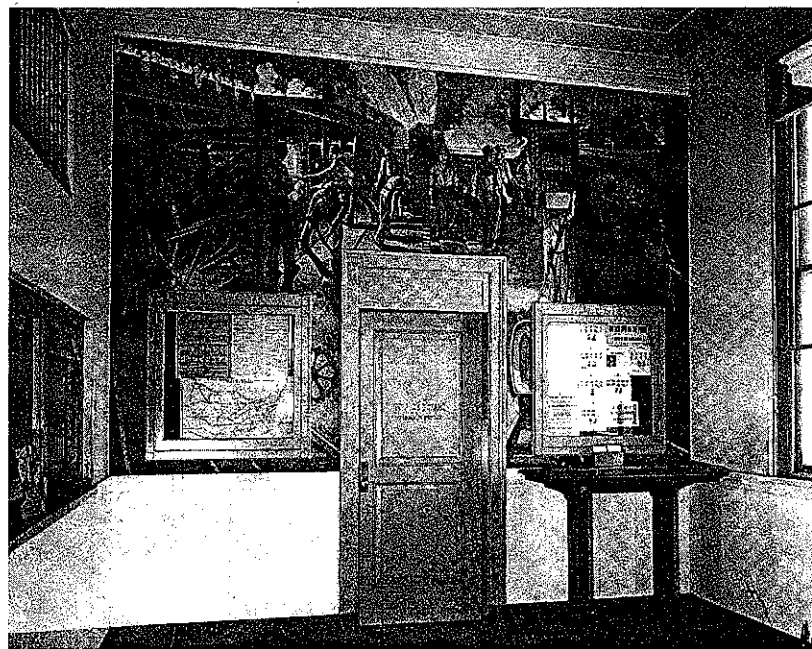
It is futile to probe the history of Westerly, asking whether work and work in the granite quarries preoccupied the place for a century with quite the preternatural fervor the workers pictured in 1939 bring to their jobs. This is purposeful history, rewritten in and for 1939—the "present history" of a decade-long construction slump, an economy sputtering fitfully through cycles of dim prospects and worse ones, unemployment pending even when granite lay in the quarries and hands ached to grasp the tools for working it. The specter of joblessness palpable in the stale air of the Soyers' waiting rooms was held at arm's length by painted arms that reach for tools and painted hands that pick them up. Those hands, for a century



Raphael Soyer, *Transients*. 1936. The James and Mari Michener Collection, The Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin.

now, had proven capable of earning a livelihood for Westerly by wresting building blocks from the Rhode Island hills. Whether they did so with laborious deliberation or modern efficiency scarcely mattered. Westerly worked.

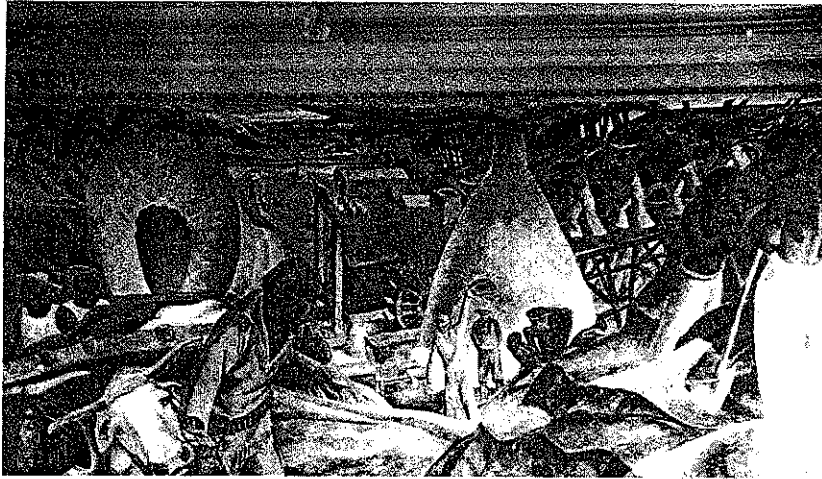
The Chamber of Commerce slogan called Westerly "a good place to live, work and play." In 1939, and in the 1839 of the imagination, Westerly lived and worked by prehensile energy. Or rather, the people of Westerly worked. In the logging camps, the steel mills, the factories, and the mines of Mural America, people threw themselves into their work with grateful abandon. In vast tracts of Mural America, nobody looked for work, waited for a job, or fled west on the roof of a boxcar. Nobody sat in the station with folded hands waiting to be whisked away to somewhere else, because everybody could pick up the tools and do the job at home. In Barse Miller's 48 States design for Island Pond, Vermont, his winged spirit of transportation and flight has settled down, donned a workshirt, and joined a crew of lumbermen who cannot spare a minute to make divine forays into



Frank Anderson, *Spirit of Steel*, USPO, Fairfield, Alabama. 1938. National Archives.

the wide world outside their camp. They are too busy sawing logs, and work comes first.<sup>73</sup> Nor is the *Spirit of Steel* in Fairfield, Alabama, a posturing putto bearing a garland of iron pigs to wreath the gears that spin about the postmaster's door. The spirit Frank Anderson ran to ground in the mills was human, collective, and sweaty. A dozen workmen raise their shovels to feed the converter, preparing for "charging the furnace and making the bottom" at U. S. Steel.<sup>74</sup> In Russellville, Alabama, workmen attired in the picturesque costumes of 1817 bring a comparable intensity and simpler tools to bear on running the first Bee Hive iron furnace built in Alabama.<sup>75</sup> Men always worked hard in the mills of Alabama.

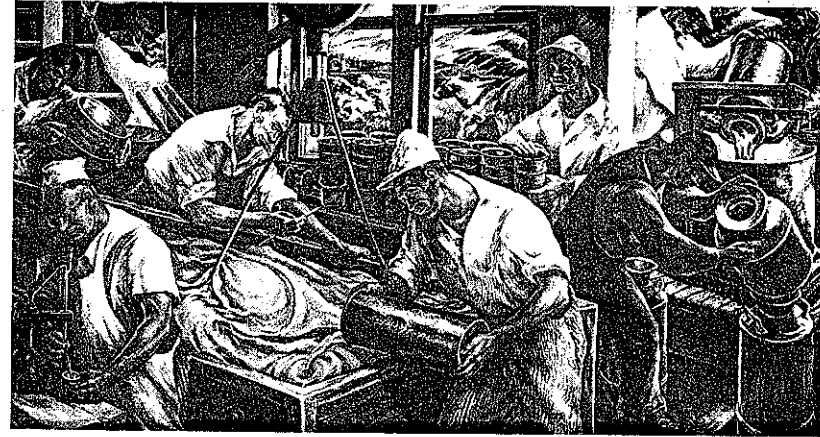
For Plymouth, Wisconsin, the self-styled "Cheese Center of the World," Charles Thwaites painted a cheddar factory. Workers in white tend the vat, stack the hoops, test the mix, and store the wheels as if their livelihoods depend on proving the town motto true in a single workday. Yet, as the Section noted with delight, "the faces of the workers in the cartoon all have such pleasant expressions. It is a very nice relief as so many workers depicted look so grim and sad about their tasks."<sup>76</sup> During the late spring of



Conrad Albrizio, *Shipment of the First Iron Produced in Russellville, USPO, Russellville, Alabama, 1938.* National Archives.

1937, while Anderson was making his preliminary sketches and strikes were raging in the plants of "Little Steel," Philip Murray's Steel Workers Organizing Committee was signing up the last of the U. S. Steel subsidiaries, without precipitating a bloodbath. The steelworkers in the Fairfield post office look a bit thoughtful, as if they were remembering their CIO pledge cards and mulling over the odds that the union could keep them working forty-hour weeks, with time-and-a-half for overtime and a 10% wage increase.<sup>77</sup> But "sad"? "Grim"? The working people of Mural America are too busy to worry about arranging their faces to please the Section, too energetic to pause for smiling daydreams, consumed by the will to work. And when the workers hop off the train and stream out of the grain elevator for *The "Lovers' Leap Bridge" Benefit Dance* in the Columbus Junction, Iowa, post office, why, they square dance with the same fierce gusto, the same absorbed expressions.<sup>78</sup>

A Midwestern artist who worked for the Section dismissed New Deal iconography as an affair of "wheels rampant and workmen couchant," Washington's official equivalent of windy academic folderol under a thin '30s veneer.<sup>79</sup> The heroic worker, weighed down by an emblematic cogwheel and bent to his labor with the herniated expression of a marble Hercules abandoned in a post office around the corner from the Augean stables should, by rights, look grim and sad, if that particular fellow ever lived and worked in Mural America. He didn't, of course. The workmen who stoke the blast furnaces in



Charles Thwaites, composition sketch for *Cheese Making, USPO, Plymouth, Wisconsin, 1941.* National Archives.

Fairfield surmount the machinery on display in the lower reaches of the mural literally and figuratively. They work, without a second to spare for posturing in "couchant" attitudes. They run the machines with no help from a mythical "Genius of Steel": they are themselves "The Spirit of Steel," en masse. Heaps of ore and a film of coal dust infernally lit by the glow of the converter hardly remind Fairfield steelworkers of the Augean stables. Besides, if a legendary hero strains in the murk, who might he be? The stoker? The miner? The crane operator? The foreman? Each man's effort matches that of



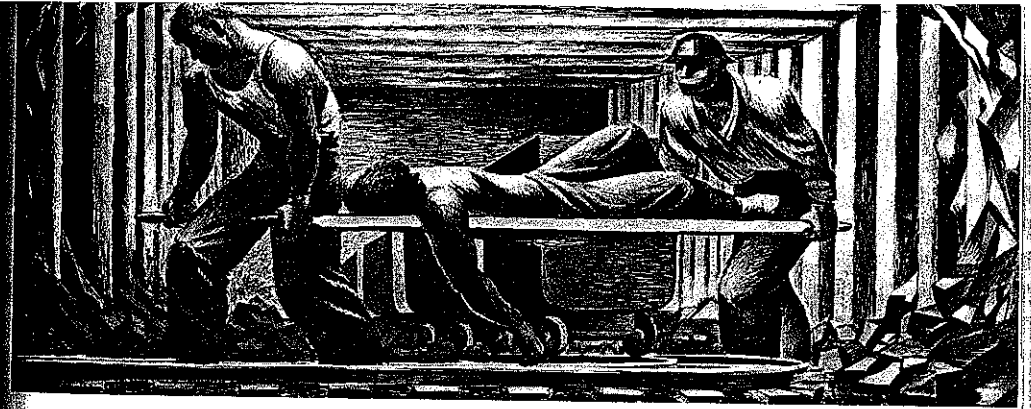
Sante Graziani, cartoon for *Lovers' Leap Bridge Benefit Dance, USPO, Columbus Junction, Iowa, 1942.* National Archives.

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his neighbor and each performs his ordinary job—a part of the larger enterprise—without a fuss. Heroes? It is the working people of Fairfield and Plymouth—and every person works—who might merit that title were they not too caught up in the workaday rhythm of the four-to-twelve shift to flex their biceps and clench their jaws like regulation heroes—say, big strong Clark Gable in a denim workshirt saving the oilfield in the last reel of MGM's *Boomtown*.<sup>80</sup>

Work demanded the will to work and a collective commitment to grasp the tools, feelings to which histrionic stoicism and heroic eyeball-rolling were emotionally superfluous. Work was the fiber of the past and the key to the future; it was the steady, business-as-usual heartbeat of Mural America. Grim or sad expressions, even pleasant ones, are hard to find there. The visages of the American workers are, at their emotional extreme, merely preoccupied; they hold their breath at the thrill of a job. Most of the time, they are sublimely contented and content to let their faces register the homely, humdrum routine of a welcome day's work, well and truly done. The only cause for sad looks among the workers of Westerly was the fact that they never got to drill and blast and hoist the granite blocks in the post-office lobby. Sample was too busy to watch them work, construction bids on the building were snarled in red tape, and the mural project evaporated in 1940, sadly enough.<sup>81</sup> But at the height of the controversy over whether the worker's actions or the robot whiz of the machine should represent Westerly, the Providence *Bulletin* stiffened local resolve to fight by relating the story of an industrial mural hounded out of a post office in Idaho because it was too sad to contemplate: "Kellogg, Idaho, turned thumbs down on its proposed painting of a pair of miners trundling an injured companion to the hospital or the morgue, the picture didn't say which. 'Too pessimistic,' said Kellogg."<sup>82</sup> "Ghastly," said the Boise *Statesman*.<sup>83</sup> "Local residents have objected to the pessimistic atmosphere of Fletcher Martin's mining scene," said *Life*, declining to dwell on the implications of a picture that, according to its own inventory of the contents of Mural America, ought never to have been painted at all. The most bitterly contested sketch of the chosen forty-eight was reviled because it cast aspersions on the saga of industry in "the most highly industrialized nation in the world."<sup>84</sup>

When the storm of protest first broke, Fletcher Martin told the Associated Press "if the townspeople objected to [the] subject," he was more than willing to scrap *Mine Rescue*.<sup>85</sup> It was Rowan who



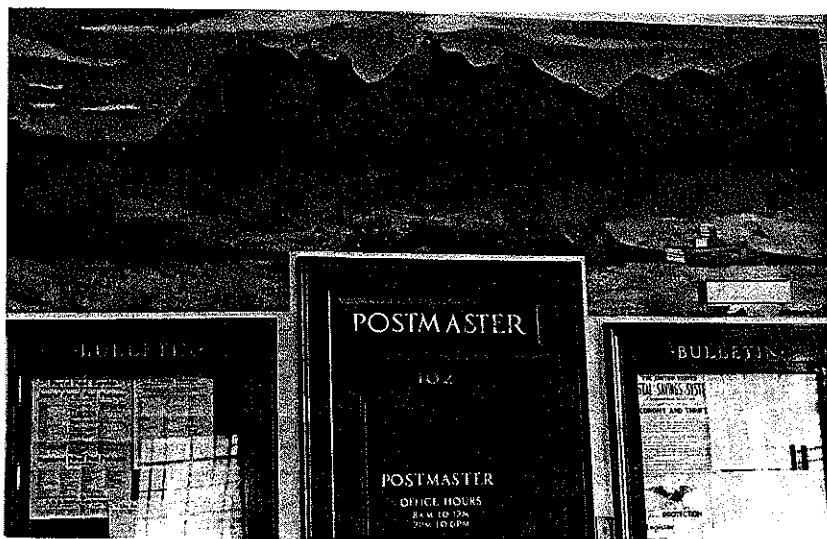
Fletcher Martin, 48 States sketch, *Mine Rescue*, for USPO, Kellogg, Idaho. 1939. The University of Maryland Art Gallery.

told him flatly, and by wire, "Do not undertake Redesign."<sup>86</sup> The Section was reluctant to discard the strongest piece of work to emerge from the 48 States talent hunt. Moreover, convinced of the aesthetic merits of the drawing, Rowan could not bring himself to examine local objections with the attentive respect they deserved, if for no other reason, because of the large number of people concerned enough to protest and the range of interest groups they represented. He hoped to keep *Mine Rescue*, and mollify a town that confused tragedy and trivia, with an additional mural on a slaphappy theme as yet undetermined:

... the members of the Section have the greatest respect for your mural and I personally regard it as spiritual in content as any pieta. I, nevertheless, am aware that the seriousness of the subject matter might be regarded as depressing or distasteful to some people, especially since they have to look at it day after day. For this reason I have been investigating to find if there is a second space in the lobby and the availability of the necessary funds to invite you to undertake a second mural in this building which would represent another side of the Nevada [sic] experience. May I ask you to await further instructions from me before undertaking the redesign.<sup>87</sup>

Rowan may well have wished Kellogg were in placid Nevada. The Yerington, Nevada, natives said nary a word, pro or con, when they got a look at their proposed mural, a truly depressing ranch-house scene Adolph Gottlieb painted for Safford, Arizona. Bruce liked *Homestead on the Plains* well enough to appropriate the sketch for his permanent collection.<sup>88</sup> The Section liked *Mine Rescue* even better, and for very different reasons it too shortly wound up in the Treasury vaults.

Distaste is too polite a term for the panicky distress that swept



Adolph Gottlieb, *Homestead on the Plains*, USPO, Yerington, Nevada. 1941. National Archives.

through Kellogg, and depression was the last emotion Depression America longed to commemorate for all time in a public mural. Impassioned protests came from the Idaho Art Association, the Kellogg Chamber of Commerce, the Wardner Industrial Union, the Bunker Hill & Sullivan Mining and Concentrating Company, the U. S. Senate, and hosts of unnamed sources quoted in the newspapers of the Coeur d'Alenes district. Letters from the labor force and the business community made much the same point: the picture was an assault on the lead industry. From the mines flowed the lifeblood of home, and not a drop was to be shed in the Kellogg post office. Mine accidents happened, but to associate industry and catastrophe meant giving work in Kellogg a permanent pall of tragedy. Work in the mines of Coeur d'Alenes in 1939 was not a tragedy; it was the miner's triumph, the kind of victory for the worker that John L. Lewis was wont to anticipate at the annual UMW convention. Kellogg had a big company union, however, eleven hundred strong, and "by unanimous vote the subject matter of the mural of Fletcher Martin . . . was condemned as unfit and entirely out of place to adorn the walls of the post office of this community." The union threatened an injunction, sundry "unfriendly acts," and, if all else failed, "serious trouble" that portended the use of pick-ax handles. "Surely," the miners pleaded, "out of the large number of paintings submitted for the Kellogg of-

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fice there could be something of an inspirational nature accepted, a picture that would be a pleasure to look at and gain some spiritual value therefrom. Not a depressing death or accident scene from which one turns with a shudder."<sup>89</sup>

Stanley Easton, the president of a local mining company, was a man of rare discernment whose tastes paralleled Rowan's, and he refrained from intimating that he would unleash a goon squad on Martin. Nevertheless, he too counseled a change:

The artistry of the design is good but the subject is weird and distinctively inappropriate. [T]here is so much colorful historical background to this community that many subjects would be far more appropriate and admirable. . . . I have not heard one single word of commendation. [I]n fact the community as a whole is greatly disappointed and I hope that steps will be taken to substitute a more cheerful, realistic and appropriate design.<sup>90</sup>

The president of the Idaho Art Association was altogether less keen on modern art:

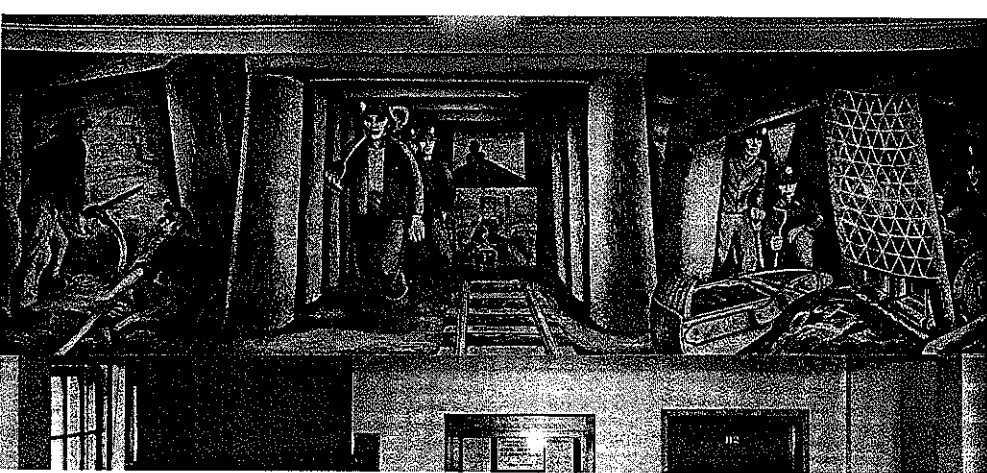
Kellogg is one of the most active mining centers in America and though every precaution for safety is employed in these modern mines fatal accidents do occur. To hang a picture depicting such an accident would prove a torture to the families of victims and would certainly be in poorest taste. I can see how such a sordid subject would come from the brush of some so-called modernistic or futuristic artists but I cannot imagine competent judges using such poor judgment.<sup>91</sup>

Kellogg merchants and white-collar professionals scoffed at reports that Martin thought he was "depicting American life" with this "modernistic" chamber-of-horrors view of a mineshaft. "Such a scene is not at all representative of our district and certainly is not typical of American life in this locality," countered one local businessman.<sup>92</sup> The Chamber of Commerce seconded the union's query. Why, oh, why had the judges picked "this monstrosity" when hundreds of "inspiring" sketches "worthy of a great mining area" must have been reviewed?

The picture of two miners carrying a third miner, dead or injured, on a stretcher from a mine tunnel does not appeal to the minds of the people of this district as being symbolic of our leading industry or pleasant to look upon. In fact, we consider the picture a travesty on mining in general and emphatically protest its acceptance for our post office.<sup>93</sup>

The only statement favoring *Mine Rescue* was sent to Postmaster General James Farley, a political mastermind, by a lady who plainly appreciated partisan skullduggery when she saw it and knew how to counter pressure in kind. Farley's confidante was Mrs. Myrtle Fother-





Else Jemne, *Iron Ore Mines*, Ely, Minnesota, USPO, Ely, Minnesota. 1941.  
National Archives.

gill, of 204 Y Alley, and she claimed to represent the Ladies Auxiliary of Local No. 18 of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, heretofore silent on the subject of the mural. Mrs. Fothergill was not impressed with Martin's picture but chose to offer a weak defense to underline her resentment of the local kingfish who had plotted the spontaneous barrage of protests:

Mr. Easton, manager of the Bunker Hill, Sullivan mining and milling company spoke before the Chamber of Commerce [and] the Industrial union and opposed the hanging of the mural. Of course his speech did much toward swaying the sentiments of those hearing it; but we . . . feel this mural to be much more appropriate for this district than lots of others including the "Cataldo Mission" because after all mining is the industry in this locality.<sup>94</sup>

Her support for the picture is tentative and barely touches on the content of the image. *Mine Rescue* is preferable to a scene out of the fastness of history because "mining is the industry in this locality." Her opponents not only conceded but crowed about the importance of the mines to Kellogg. Mrs. Fothergill and the organized protesters parted company over the issue of what a mural ought to stand for and accomplish in the community. The bigwigs and their employees wanted a view "typical of America life" in a locality bound to the mines. It followed, then, that a portrayal of the typical run of life would be "admirable," "inspirational," and "realistic" and that it ought not to look too "modernistic or futuristic" insofar as "isms" generally meant weirdness. This mishmash of contradictory, half-baked aesthetic logic came down to one simple truth: Kellogg wanted normality. No accidents, no blood 'n' guts. No suggestions of

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catastrophe, extant or imminent. No harm to anybody. No nagging hints that their mine was a minefield, that the dominant local industry was or could be headed for some nebulous disaster, that working along in the American way in Kellogg in 1939 was fraught with peril! No Depression or depression! The sad and grim need not apply here! No metaphoric overtones or undercurrents of a negative type, please. Move along, Mr. Martin, or else contend with a shift's worth of sore miners! Oh—and no heroes either, while we're at it, fella!

Everyday pedestrian realism in the workplace did not mean the proletarian fury of Paul Muni playing Joe Radek, heroic miner, and threatening to blow the mine to kingdom come unless the bourgeois bosses mended their ways; Warner's *Black Fury* won John L. Lewis's ringing endorsement in 1935 but was not popular fare in the Coeur d'Alenes. Before his conversion to minimal class-consciousness, Miner Joe's basic philosophy was simple: "Work like a mule!"<sup>95</sup> And with considerably more dignity than mules have, the miners of Ely, Minnesota, worked happily in *Iron Ore Mines*, a mural begun in 1939 and closely modeled on Martin's controversial sketch. As in *Mine Rescue*, the low rectangle of the mine shaft is centered on the composition, the timber vaulting eddies back into the earth, the figures are bulky enough to establish the confined dimensions of the tunnel, and the lighting is restricted to jangling contrasts of shadow and electric beams. The figure types are also similar—wide in comparison to their stature, pneumatic, squeezed by the force of gravity. Else Jemne's drama is strictly stylistic, however. The clash of darkness and spotlight illumination and the painful compression of space form a setting for routine work and modern machinery. Steel nets, claw shovels, backhoes, compressors, jackhammers, and ore cars serve three groups of workers who grab the tools and perform their segmented tasks with unheroic absorption, wearing the bland expressions of Plymouth's pleasant cheesemakers. Their faces are visible, even in the dim mine shaft, to show that they are plain people and this is an ordinary workday. Martin uses chiaroscuro to make a different point. The face of the miner carrying the head of the stretcher in *Mine Rescue* is lost in the gloom of his sad, black thoughts. His opposite number is selectively lit, bringing the tense set of his jawline into relief: he is an angry man. Not a ray of light softens the inky penumbra around the upper body of their fallen comrade. Darkness separates the quick from the dead.

Else Jemne had traveled to Ely in 1939, just before the Kellogg

story hit the wires. The town was not unlike Kellogg and the other lead and silver centers of the Black Hills that snaked out of the Iron Range of northern Minnesota: "The only industry in the city is mining, bolstered by a summer resort business." The Ely people with whom she spoke—and she cast her net of contacts wide—were split in their preferences: some favored a mining theme, but an equal number wanted a view of the recreational "Wilderness" about the Range. Jemne painted the forest in 1939 so satisfactorily that local pressure on the Section brought her back to Ely in 1941 to revive the complementary mining panel. The people and the postmaster could not find words adequate to express their praise for *Iron Ore Mines*:

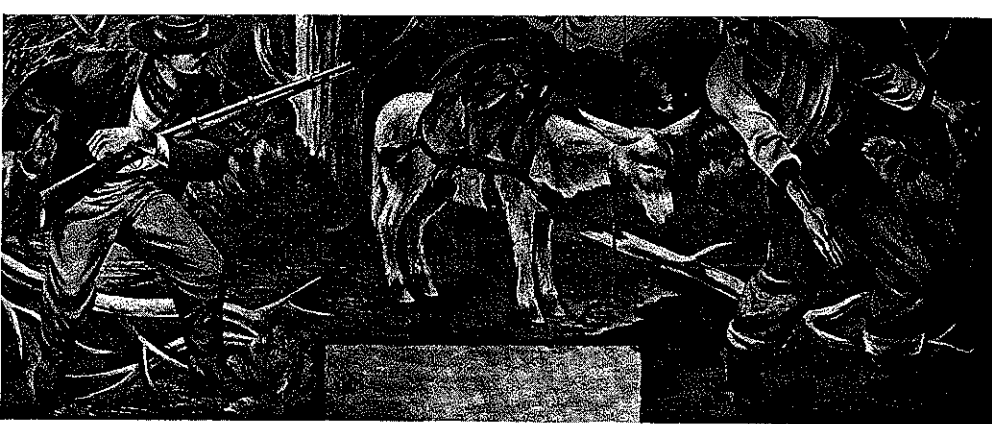
About eighty percent of our population are engaged in the mining industry. The miners, in the majority, are emigrants from Yugo-Slavia and Finland and their descendents. To have a painting that depicts their daily work is regarded as a flattering tribute to their activities and daily comments of satisfaction are heard in the lobby as groups of miners pause to survey the painting and discuss the story it tells. Also the merchants and townspeople indirectly supported by the mining industry, are loud in their praises of the beauty of the mural and the subject it so suitably portrays.<sup>96</sup>

There is no question that Fletcher Martin created the superior work of art. Rowan smote Martin's critics with proof positive of the aesthetic merits of *Mine Rescue* and told its lone defender that "it is comparable to some of the great religious paintings of the past, such as the picture[s] of the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross and the Deposition and its spiritual content seems as important to a number of people since it represents the sacrifice which a good citizen makes in faithfully carrying out his humble duties."<sup>97</sup> Jemne painted the better public mural, and the secret of her success was the story she told. The story made the mural "beautiful" in the eyes of Ely. The Kellogg sketch, of course, bristles with the narrative connotations Rowan cited, with high drama and barely suppressed emotion. At first blush, a story line is difficult to extract from the unremarkable, monotonous incidents Jemne presents: one guy drills, another runs his mechanical claw. Perhaps the story is too ordinary to notice unless the viewer worked the mines of the Range in the '30s, but the miners in the Ely post office read it with ease and pleasure. First of all, it is their story, a day in their working lives. The tale is remarkable, paradoxically, because nothing remarkable is happening. In a narrow sense, work is not interrupted by a Kellogg-style mine accident. In a more general sense, nothing threatens the fixed patterns

and rituals of making a living. External catastrophe—labor troubles, falling steel prices, slack demand, jobless transients forced out on the roads beyond Ely, the Depression itself—is sealed out of this airless mine where people work today and can work forever. And it is the people, the ordinary Joes who make this perfect world. They master the machines and their own destiny with quiet will and competence. Heroes need not apply!

Myrtle Fothergill and the Ladies Auxiliary of Local No. 18 approved of *Mine Rescue* because "after all mining is the industry in this locality" and accepted the sketch despite the heroic, even melodramatic content of the image. Or did Local No. 18 see the lead industry of Kellogg in Martin's terms, as an heroic contest between brave, brawny miners and the Mr. Eastons of a cruel and dangerous world? Was Myrtle Fothergill the only clear-eyed realist in a town full of self-deluded dreamers and capitalist lackeys with a vested interest in singing lullabies to edgy miners? *Mine Rescue* verges on social protest: singular, larger-than-life responses to catastrophic situations in industry are invited by the triune revelations of murder, suffering, and rage. Jemne's tableau is apparently conservative. The collective values exemplified in it threaten the status quo only insofar as the normality achieved is itself a subversive wish, antithetical to the way things are, appreciative of the way things could be and indeed once were when men picked up their tools and worked.

Towson, Westerly, and, in the end, Kellogg, Idaho, chose local history over emblems of sorrow and symbols of flight. If home and work and the plain people who worked in Kellogg faced tangible uncertainties in the present and elusive glories down the road of time, the past was a snug harbor of bedrock fact. Rowan's push to secure two murals for the Kellogg post office foundered on the reefs of budgetary stringency in the Public Buildings Service.<sup>98</sup> The protesters remained unpersuaded by arcane analogies to the crucifixion. The Section reluctantly set up a local advisory committee: Myrtle Fothergill never attended a meeting; and Mr. Easton, her nemesis from the Bunker Hill & Sullivan Mine, quickly took command.<sup>99</sup> *Discovery* was hung in the Kellogg post office in May of 1940: "The mural depicts Philip O'Rourke and Noah Kellogg, the two miners who, with their burro, are credited with the discovery of the B.H.&S. mine."<sup>100</sup> The battle of Kellogg was over. In the painted Idaho of 1885, everybody smiles; even the burro seems vaguely pleased. And so was Kellogg in 1940. According to the postmaster, "the Mural has created



Fletcher Martin, *Discovery*, USPO, Kellogg, Idaho, 1940. National Archives.

considerable interest among the patrons of this office and so far the public seems to be well pleased with both the design and the painting."<sup>101</sup> Fletcher Martin pointed his station wagon west, pleased to see the last of Kellogg, and in the ironic finale to the story, drove straight into "a beautiful accident on the highway in Nevada and completely demolished my [car]."<sup>102</sup> The story acquired a moral. Beware the siren's call of the open road and the rumble of the singing wheels! Stay home, America. Stay home.

## NOTES

1. C. Hamilton Ellis, *Railway Art* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1977), pp. 113-114. The Loewy design appears in Bush, *The Streamlined Decade*, pp. 58-59. The period's fascination with speed, futurism, and wildly impractical vehicular design is the topic of Tim Onosko, *Wasn't the Future Wonderful? A View of Trends and Technology from the 1930s* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), esp. pp. 156-163.

2. Reproduced in Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade, Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties*, p. 31. A similar photograph by Lange's husband, Paul Taylor, taken in the San Joaquin Valley, California, in 1938 shows migrant children and their families camping beneath another Southern Pacific billboard, suggesting that the passerby "Travel While You Sleep"; Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus, A Record of Human Erosion in the Thirties* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Oakland Museum, 1969), pp. 86-87. This collection of photographs of migrants was originally published in 1939; both photographers were with the FSA.

3. Newton D. Baker, "Homeless Wanderers Create a New Problem for America," *New York Times*, December 11, 1932, reprinted in David A. Shannon, ed., *The Great Depression* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), p. 56.

4. Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, p. 103.

5. "No One Has Starved," from *Fortune* (September, 1932) quoted in Don Congdon, ed., *The Thirties, A Time to Remember* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 103. Studs Terkel, *Hard Times, An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon

## Notes to pp. 133-138

Books, 1970), p. 29, titles his chapter on the nomads of the '30s from Woody Guthrie's lyrics to "Hard Travelin'."

6. Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, unpaginated plate following p. 144, from the 1939 edition of *An American Exodus*, discussed pp. 225-231.

7. "Descriptions of Completed Murals and Data on Artists," 135 (Box 203), folder containing captions supplied with press photographs of recently completed murals, most of those in the Federal Triangle. See flimsy sheets for the Department of Justice.

8. For discussion of Eugene Higgins's 1939 mural, originally titled *The First Settlers*, see Mecklenburg, *The Public as Patron, A History of the Treasury Department Mural Program*, p. 72.

9. The commission for the Dubuque, Iowa, post office and courthouse was awarded by means of a regional competition held in 1935, and the decorations were completed in 1937 by Bertrand Adams and William L. Bunn. Both murals had vehicular themes. Adams's *Early Settlers of Dubuque* shows a covered wagon and Bunn's work is entitled *Early Mississippi Steamboat*; see 130 (Box 215), *Bulletin*, #3 (May-June, 1935), p. 12 and #14 (July, 1937-January, 1938), p. 18. See also "Form Announcements of Competitions" for Dubuque, Iowa (July 15, 1935), 131 (Box 206) and *Treasury Department Art Projects, Painting and Sculpture for Federal Buildings*, catalogue of an exhibition held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., November 17-December 13, 1936, entries #1 and 44, 130 (Box 215).

10. "Descriptions of Completed Murals and Data on Artists," 135 (Box 203), hereafter cited as "Descriptions," for Louise Ronnebeck, Worland, Wyoming, post office (1938), *The Fertile Land Remembers*. Consistently, the fastest movement of the pre-rail era occurs in Oklahoma Section murals, a number of which deal with the predictably popular theme of the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889. Of special interest are post-office murals at Drumright (Frank Long, 1941), Sayre (Vance Kirkland, 1940), and Yukon (Dahlov Ipcar, 1941). See Nicholas A. Calcagno, *New Deal Murals in Oklahoma* (Miami, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Humanities Committee, 1976), pp. 7, 32-33, and 43.

11. The Dresden Garden Club (Mrs. J. E. Shannon, Pres.; Miss Ida Baxter, Sec'y; and Mrs. J. E. Jones) to Rowan, October 17, 1938, 124 (Box 132) [Folder: Artists' Letters].

12. "Descriptions," for Minetta Good, Dresden, Tennessee (1938). "David Crockett" appears in the pioneer group at the left of the composition. At the right are "a departing stage and the coming of an early train."

13. "Descriptions," for John McCrady, Amory, Mississippi (1939). Between the 2" scale sketch and the cartoon stage, McCrady reduced the number of gleaming signboards and fictionalized the names of the merchants. The Section, of course, frowned on the use of details that might be mistaken for ads, even when the firms in question were long defunct. But in both versions of the design, one sign remained posted on the depot at the right of the scene: "Amory Does Not Want Yellow Fever. Strangers Keep Out." One such stranger is met by an armed posse; one man shields his mouth with a handkerchief. Yellow fever epidemics were rampant in Mississippi throughout the late nineteenth century, but it is impossible to connect the sign with a specific outbreak in 1889. In this instance, the benefits of speedy transportation are mixed. I am grateful to Sue Birdwell Beckham, an Amory native and one of my graduate students, for her work on this mural.

14. James Watrous to Rowan, April 3, 1939, 133 (Box 52). According to undated clippings from the local newspaper, *Life in Grand Rapids and the Upper Mississippi* was not well received. The clippings carp mistakenly on the relief aspects of the work and call it a "WPA" project. Repeated mention is made of the fact that Watrous was not a Minnesotan and did the work in Madison, Wisconsin, where he resided. Whatever the real cause of the complaint, objections came to focus on the name of the boat. Locals insisted that the famous early steamer was called the "Andy Gibson." Since no correspondence remains in the Grand

Rapids file after the pro forma request that the artist check his facts, and since the boat is still called the "Andy Johnson" in the post-office mural, one must assume that the artist had some factual support for his decision and that the townspeople were indeed upset by a Wisconsin reliefer in their midst.

15. Bergman, *We're in the Money, Depression America and Its Films*, pp. 165-166. Lortentz's short documentary was financed by the government. For discussion of the utopian strain in the social planning of the '30s, see Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams, Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), esp. pp. 74-76.

16. Arthur Hove, ed., *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press for the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, 1980), pp. 20-21.

17. "Descriptions," for Barse Miller, Goose Creek, Texas (1938).

18. *Pony Express* (1937) in the North Corridor, 5th floor, of the Postal Building is by Frank Mechau. *Stage Coach Attacked by Bandits and Covered Wagon Attacked by Indians* by William C. Palmer are in the North Corridor on the 7th floor. See *Bulletin*, #14 (July, 1937-January, 1938), p. 16, 130 (Box 215).

19. Bruce and Watson, *Art in Federal Buildings*, unpaginated plates. See also: Moya del Pino, *Mail and Travel by Stage Coach* (1936), Stockton, California, *Bulletin*, #14 (July, 1937-January, 1938), pp. 12-13, 130 (Box 215).

F. Luis Mora, *The Arrival of the Stage* (1936), Catasauqua, Pennsylvania, *Bulletin*, #14, p. 24.

Joseph A. Fleck, *First Mail Crossing Raton Pass* (1937), Raton, New Mexico, *Treasury Department Art Projects* catalogue, entry #94, 130 (Box 215).

Robert L. Lambdin, *Stage Coach*, etc. (1936), Bridgeport, Connecticut, *Treasury Department Art Projects* catalogue, entry #163.

20. Thomas Hart Benton to Olin Dows, undated (received May 15, 1935), 133 (Box 124) does carefully inventory just such secondary details:

Here is the listed subject matter.

Postal Conveyance (Old)  
Foot Carrier  
Stage "  
Horse "  
Clipper Ship  
(New)  
Foot Carrier  
Postal Car  
Airplanes  
Pneumatic Tube.

Benton declined the contract in an undated letter to Rowan, posted from Jefferson City, where he was working on his important Missouri Capitol cycle (ca. late autumn, 1936). He reconsidered because "the subject matter of the Post Office was just a bore to me. I only undertook it because I wanted to be in on something which I believe has genuinely significant cultural prospects for the country."

21. The outlines of the Kent controversy are established in the Bruce Papers, 135 (Box 137) [Folder: Rockwell Kent], in an undated "Interview by Edward Bruce" and a typed extract from a report in *Time*, September 20, 1937. Resolution of the controversy is discussed in Watson's "Memorandum to the Director of Procurement," November 1, 1937. This document reports the results of a meeting between Rowan, Kent, and Watson at which the artist initially agreed to paint in a new message suggested by Rowan ("May you persevere and win that freedom and equality in which lies the promise of hap-

piness") but changed his mind when the Director of Procurement insisted on a motto ("To commemorate the far-flung front of the United States Postal Service"). The original message, with Kent's agreement, was obliterated by someone else and the native now holds a blank letter. It is clear that Kent had gone to enormous lengths to put one over on the Section and to be sure they found out. Bruce said, for example, that "it hardly seems necessary to send a Latin inscription to Alaska and get it translated by an illiterate Eskimo boy."

22. For discussion of the political ramifications of Kent's prank, see McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists*, pp. 63-64.

23. *Bulletin*, #7 (December, 1935), p. 9, 130 (Box 214) and David Shapiro, ed., *Art for the People—New Deal Murals on Long Island* (Hempstead, New York: The Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, 1978), p. 58 and plate, p. 15. James Brooks had won a competition for the Hempstead post office in 1935 but did not accept the commission. TRAP funded the Mangravite mural, although he was commissioned through regular Section channels, as a runner-up in the National Competition.

24. For consideration of streamlined imagery in what the author calls "WPA murals," see Martin Greif, *Depression Modern, The Thirties Style in America* (New York: Universe Books, 1975), p. 36, and diagram, p. 42.

25. Illustrated and discussed in Bush, *The Streamlined Decade*, pp. 78 and 80; see also "Power. A Portfolio by Charles Sheeler," *Fortune*, 22 (December, 1940), pp. 73-83.

26. Rhodes to Rowan, November 4, 1940, 133 (Box 2). See also Bush, *The Streamlined Decade*, p. 38.

27. *The Sears Roebuck Catalogues of the Thirties, Selected Pages from the Entire Decade*, unpaginated selections from the year 1936.

28. See announcement of the Arlington, New Jersey post office competition of 1936, 131 (Box 206) [Folder: Form Announcements of Competitions, A-H].

29. "Descriptions" for Alan Tompkins, Martinsville, Indiana (1937).

30. "Descriptions," Martinsville (1937).

31. Copy of a letter, Ernest Green, Postmaster and Custodian of the Building, to Nicolai Cikovsky, January 3, 1939, included in Rowan, Memo to Acting Supervising Architect, March 31, 1939, 133 (Box 44). Tompkins hit upon the same idea in his Wabasha, Minnesota, post office mural, *The Smoke Message* (1939).

32. Note from the desk of Louis Simon, dated March 21, 1939.

33. Custodian of the Building to Treasury Department, July 1, 1939.

34. Custodian to Treasury, July 1, 1939.

35. The Towson *Jeffersonian*, June 30, 1939, feature article, "Mural in New Towson Post Office Regarded as Joke, Crude Painting by Nicolai Cikovsky, a P.W.A. Artist, Stretches Across Entire Corridor Wall, Technique Very Poor. . . ."

36. *Jeffersonian*, June 30, 1939, editorial, "Awful!"

37. *Jeffersonian*, June 30, 1939, caption beneath five photos showing: *Pioneer Covered Wagon and Mississippi Steamboat, Coast Lighthouse and Clipper Ships, Pony Express, Railroad Train ca. 1860, and Modern Train, Queen Mary, Autos, Planes, Dirigibles.*

38. Kevin Brownlow, *The War the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 368 and Paul Trent, *Those Fabulous Movie Years: the 30s* (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishing/Vineyard Books, 1975), pp. 172-173. Western films of the '20s and '30s are treated in detail in my "Thomas Hart Benton's *Boomtown*: Regionalism Re-defined," *Prospects*, VI (1981), pp. 119-123.

39. Baltimore *Evening Sun*, June 30, 1939, quoting the Towson *Jeffersonian* and the *Union News*.

40. Folder of miscellaneous clippings, June, 1939, 133 (Box 44).

41. Anonymous letter to Edward Bruce, undated (ca. June-July, 1939), 133 (Box 44).

The smoke discussed is that in the final panel of the sequence, and the tugboats are not the only problematic example. A steam engine in the left foreground belches smoke toward the left also. The child in question is the Blob-like infant in the covered wagon.

42. Folder of miscellaneous clippings, letter to the editor of the *Jeffersonian* (ca. June-July 1939), 133 (Box 44).

43. Folder of miscellaneous clippings, 133 (Box 44). This report, which suggests that the government should have insisted on local history in the first place, mentions the local postmaster "who has a queer sense of humor and a queerer sense of fine art, [and] thinks the Cikovsky murals are masterpieces, but he is having a tough time convincing citizens that they rank with the work of the old masters."

44. Cikovsky to Rowan, August 24, 1939.

45. Two reports in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* and the *Sun*, August 29, 1939.

46. John Maxtone-Graham, *The Only Way to Cross* (New York: Collier Books, 1972), pp. 268-269.

47. *Baltimore Sun*, August 29, 1939.

48. *Baltimore Evening Sun*, August 29, 1939.

49. *Towson Jeffersonian*, September 29, 1939, editorial and open letter to William P. Cole, Jr.

50. Cole's undated letter (ca. February, 1940) is quoted in Smith W. Purdum, 4th Assistant Postmaster General, to W. E. Reynolds, Commissioner of Public Buildings, February 15, 1940.

51. *Towson Jeffersonian*, January 12, 1940.

52. The committee—composed of a minister, a high school teacher and another person whose profession is not cited—is discussed in John W. Loeber (interim Chair and attorney) to Lenore Thomas, December 5, 1939, 133 (Box 43). The committee rejected plans for exterior sculpture and requested an historical mural. Avery Johnson was appointed to depict *Incidents in the History of Catonsville* but his sketches came in for severe factual criticism from the committee in 1941. See Rev. Trumbull Spicknall to Hopper, January 18, 1940, and Letter of Appointment to Johnson, December 3, 1940. The committee critique, all four pages of it, is enclosed in Johnson to Rowan, August 12, 1941.

53. Alan G. Barbour, *The Thrill of It All* (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 110, and George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western From Silents to the Seventies*, revised ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 223.

54. These works are: Paul C. Chapman, 1941, Nutley, New Jersey, post office, *The Return of Annie Oakley*; Henry Schnakenberg, 1941, Fort Lee, New Jersey, post office, four-part cycle including *Early Moving Pictures* also called *Moving Pictures at Ft. Lee*; Barse Miller, 1940, Burbank, California, post office, *People of California* in two panels, one called *Motion Pictures*; and Otis Dozier, 1939, Giddings, Texas, post office, *Cowboys Receiving the Mail*. In fact, the cowboys were sketched by Dozier before he went to Giddings and found himself in the heart of chicken country. He proposed to draw that subject instead but was told by Rowan to retain the cowboys because the chicken "subject is too unpleasant to incorporate in a single decoration in the Post Office"; Rowan to Dozier, August 11, 1938, 133 (Box 105).

55. For a particularly obtuse specimen thereof, see Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society, A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1975).

56. Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh, eds., *The Stars of Country Music, Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), p. 125.

57. *Life*, "Mural America," p. 13.

58. Jen Yeh, *WPA—The Writers Project* (Hempstead, New York: David Filderman Gallery, Hofstra University, 1978), p. 2.

59. *Life*, "Mural America," p. 12.

60. *Bulletin* #19 (June, 1939), p. 24, 130 (Box 215).

61. *Providence Bulletin*, December 6, 1939.

62. *Providence Bulletin*, December 6, 1939.

63. Rowan to Sample, October 20, 1939, and November 10, 1939, 133 (Box 98).

64. Rowan to the Editor, the *Westerly Sun*, December 28, 1939, re editorial of December 7.

65. *Westerly Sun*, news article, December 7, 1939.

66. A. Fred Roberts, Sec'y, The Citizens-Taxpayers Association of Westerly (organized May 25, 1934), to Rowan, December 8, 1939.

67. Frank A. Sullivan, George B. Utter and Rogers E. Trainer, Westerly Chamber of Commerce, to Rowan, December 12, 1939, and December 15, 1939.

68. 124 (Box 134), "Forty Eight States Competition," p. 55.

69. *Westerly Sun*, December 7, 1939.

70. 124 (Box 134), "Forty Eight States Competition," lists the following entries: 342, 101, 1074, 1146, 367, 416, 1108, 555, 752, 1187, 403, 467, 177, and 1084.

71. See, e.g., Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, p. 103.

72. Quoted in Baigell, *The American Scene, American Painting of the 1930's*, p. 61.

73. The Island Pond sketch, illustrated in *Life*, "Mural America," p. 15 was never executed; see also *Bulletin*, #20 (November 1939), p. 17, 130 (Box 215).

74. Frank Anderson to Rowan, November 17, 1937, 133 (Box 1). In 1917-1919 Anderson had been a housing planner for U. S. Steel. Although the community liked the mural, Rowan refused to allow the cartoon to be reproduced in the *Birmingham News* and criticized the drawing mercilessly.

75. Originally, Conrad Albrizio planned to show a quarry but protests from Speaker of the House W. B. Bankhead and the Russellville Businessmen's Club led to a design change. Dr. J. M. Clark, Natchez Trace Association, to Bankhead, July 19, 1937, 133 (Box 2) argued that the quarries "we have with us now and possibly will always have. The old furnace is rapidly being lost to humanity, leaving no conception to future generations of its methods or operations." Hence the topic was changed to *Shipment of the First Iron Produced in Russellville*.

76. Maria Ealand to Charles Thwaites, August 16, 1941, 133 (Box 115).

77. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, p. 240.

78. The preliminary color sketch makes it clear that Graziani began with the idea that the dance was a momentary hiatus in the workday. Rowan, pleading special knowledge of Iowa on the basis of seven years spent there, mandated a number of changes: the train went and the harmonica player put his shirt back on. In the final version, the occasion has become a town festival or carnival with cake booths and a supper being laid, but the facial expressions remain unchanged. See Rowan to Sante Graziani, February 9, 1942, 133 (Box 29).

79. For a discussion of the heroic-worker motif in the '30s, see Marling, "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth," pp. 422-423.

80. Romano Tozzi, *Spencer Tracy* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1973), pp. 87-8. The film was released in 1940.

81. Rowan to Sample, October 24, 1940, 133 (Box 98). There are no further entries in the Westerly file.

82. *Providence Bulletin*, December 6, 1939.

83. *Boise Statesman*, November 9, 1939.

84. *Life*, "Mural America," p. 13.

85. Wire, Martin to Rowan, November 7, 1939, 133 (Box 19).

86. Wire, Rowan to Martin, November 8, 1939.

87. Rowan to Martin, November 9, 1939.

88. A complete copy of the Yerington file is in Bruce's own file, 124 (Box 133). See also Harriet (a Section sec'y) to Rowan, May 3, 1940, 124 (Box 139) requesting the Yerington sketch to hang with Bruce's other personal favorites: John Sharp sketch, Bloomfield, Indiana; William Bunn sketch, Hickman, Kentucky; Paul Faulkner sketch, Kewaunee, Wisconsin; and J. H. Fraser sketch, Little Rock, Arkansas.

89. J. P. O'Neill, recording sec'y, Wardner Industrial Union, to Public Buildings Administration, November 6, 1939, 133 (Box 19).

90. Stanley A. Easton, President, Bunker Hill & Sullivan Mining and Concentrating Company, to Federal Works Agency, November 9, 1939.

91. L. J. Bell, President, Idaho Art Association, to Bruce, October 28, 1939.

92. *Spokane Chronicle*, October 28, 1939.

93. R. L. Brainard, President, and W. A. Tuson, Sec'y, Kellogg Chamber of Commerce, to Federal Works Agency, November 6, 1939.

94. Mrs. Myrtle Fothergill, Local No. 18, Ladies Auxiliary, International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, to James Farley, November 14, 1939.

95. Bergman, *We're In the Money*, pp. 105-106.

96. Stuart Schaefer, Postmaster of Ely, Minnesota, to Rowan, January 30, 1941, 133 (Box 52). See also Jenne to Rowan, July 8, 1939.

97. Rowan to Fothergill, December 20, 1939, 133 (Box 19).

98. See Form Memorandum to the Commissioner of Public Buildings, December 13, 1939.

99. Rowan to Easton, December 20, 1939.

100. "Descriptions," 135 (Box 203) for Fletcher Martin, Kellogg, Idaho (1941).

101. Arthur T. Combs, Postmaster of Kellogg, to Section, May 26, 1941, 133 (Box 19).

102. Martin to Rowan, June 10, 1941.

## 4

### An Article of Faith From Minnesota to Arizona

Local history, according to the post-office walls of Mural America, was rife with happy accidents. Lady Luck smiled upon Messrs. Kellogg and O'Rourke and their burro. Within the year, another trio of fortune hunters was pointing, grinning, and dancing for joy in Lovelock, Nevada, where Ejnar Hansen's mural reenacted *The Uncovering of the Comstock Lode*. This time, the cast of characters consisted of "Old Frank"—a Mexican prospector—and the two Grash brothers, who have just stumbled on a deposit of "rich silver quartz in a canyon at the foot of Mount Davidson." Old Frank may be the stuff of silvery legend, but what happened next is the golden history of a \$300 million strike: "This find led to the discovery of what was the greatest deposit of precious metals ever found in the world and was the beginning of the mining industry in the state of Nevada."<sup>1</sup>

In 1940 Betty Carney reminisced with old-timers, rifled through bales of old newspapers, and did some prospecting of her own in the Chisholm, Minnesota, public library. She unearthed the story of a *Discovery of Ore* made by a fluke of fate: "John McCaskell discovers ore under a tree while prospecting for lumber in 1891. This is not the first discovery, but one that established the length of the Mesabi Range and the importance of the western part."<sup>2</sup> And there, on a rich vein of unalloyed chance, the substantial bulk of the new Chisholm post office now stood. On the wall inside, the bearded McCaskell ponders two handfuls of red ore he has scooped from the roots of a large tree toppled by lightning. At the right edge of the picture,