

[http://visitmt.com/history/Montana\\_the\\_Magazine\\_of\\_Western\\_History/fall2003/madeinmontana.htm](http://visitmt.com/history/Montana_the_Magazine_of_Western_History/fall2003/madeinmontana.htm)



## Made in Montana

### Montana's Post Office Murals

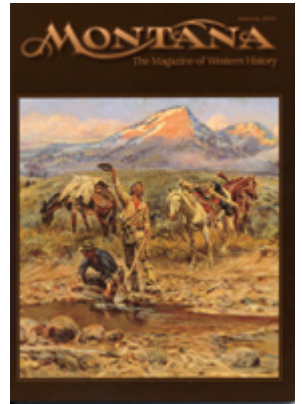
by Elizabeth Mentzer



From *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, Volume 53 Number 3(Autumn 2003), 44-53; this article is presented courtesy of the [Montana Historical Society](#). All rights reserved, © 2003

As part of a national program to create public art for the enjoyment of all Americans, the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts commissioned murals for six new post offices in Montana between 1937 and 1942, allocating 1 percent of the building's cost for each painting.<sup>1</sup> At heart, this program reflected President Franklin Roosevelt's desire to give Americans "a more abundant life" as well as his support for programs designed to put people to work.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1980s Great Falls artist Leo Beaulaurier, reflecting on the mural he painted for the Billings post office, recalled: "It was a real boon to us because it was a hard time for the arts. People could barely afford necessities, much less paintings."<sup>3</sup>

Artists secured mural commissions in two ways. In some instances, they anonymously submitted drawn-to-scale entries to a local jury. When the jury had made its decision, the entries were sent to Section officials who awarded the commission. A more streamlined method allowed officials to appoint an artist. If a submission did not win the local competition but found favor in Washington, D.C., the artist was invited to paint a mural for another location. Elizabeth Lochrie, Verona Burkhard, and Forrest Hill won commissions to paint murals for Dillon, Deer Lodge, and Glasgow through the jury process. Officials commissioned J. K. Ralston, Henry Meloy, and Leo Beaulaurier to create the Sidney, Hamilton, and Billings murals.<sup>4</sup> Artists received about twenty dollars per square foot with payment in three installments: the first when the contract was signed, the second when the project was half completed, and the balance upon installation.<sup>5</sup>



In keeping with the nature of the post office as a town center and a place where residents frequently stopped for business or pleasure, the Section of Fine Arts limited the subjects depicted in the murals. Program director Edward Bruce wanted safe American subjects. He did not want social protest, "ladies in cheesecloth," or "abstractionist tripe" adorning post office walls. Echoing this preference, his colleague Edward Rowan wrote to selection committee member George Yphantis that Treasury officials "have found that artists studying local history . . . often unearth material of universal interest and importance."<sup>6</sup>

The program to provide murals for Montana's post offices began at the behest of Jerry O'Connell, the state's sole congressman. In spring 1937 O'Connell contacted Secretary of the Treasury Inslee Hopper and Section official Edward Rowan about a competition for a mural for the new Dillon post office. He apparently felt that the state had been unfairly excluded from the national project; no Montana post office had a mural and no Montana artist had received a commission. O'Connell pointed out that Montana had at least five nationally known artists and that the community would be pleased to have the work done by a Montana man. Indeed, O'Connell had a specific man in mind: Tom Moore. In deference to the congressman, Rowan and program head Edward Bruce agreed to award a commission for a Montana mural and to limit the contest "to those artists resident of or attached to Montana."<sup>7</sup>



Fifteen Montana and twelve out-of-state artists submitted designs. The jury, chaired by Olga Ross Hannon, director of the art department at Montana State College in Bozeman, met in Dillon on September 10, agreed on their first three choices, and mailed them to Washington.<sup>8</sup> Though he had again written to Rowan that he hoped Moore's entry "will permit the work going to him," O'Connell graciously accepted defeat when Rowan advised Elizabeth Lochrie that she would be given a contract. Tom Moore's entry won, followed by Irwin Shope's third.<sup>9</sup>

Completed in May 1938 Lochrie's mural, *News from the State*, depicted a varied group gathered by a communal "post office" in Fryburg, northwest of Dillon, which Lochrie had visited with Dillon postmaster Harry Andrus who designed the mural. Situated on the stage route between Butte and Dillon, this locale provided a logical setting for a mailbox that symbolized the importance of the mail to early residents and stressed how the postal service facilitated the sharing of ideas and goods. These themes nicely tied Lochrie's painting to the competition guidelines and allowed her to incorporate key elements of local history in the mural. Of the six murals in Montana, hers was the only design to address the theme of mail. Section members "considered [it] quite unusual and interesting."<sup>10</sup>

A letter from Postmaster Andrus gave Section administrators solid feedback about the



mural. "[T]he colors blend in perfectly with colors of our lobby and has at same time given true picture of our country," he wrote. "I am sure the artist and department have made many friends in the community through this exciting work. Thanks for a gift appreciated by all." Lochrie, too, expressed her appreciation for the commission. "This work . . . has done more for my courage and moral [sic] than anything that ever happened to me; I never worked harder nor so happily."<sup>11</sup>

When Washington officials began planning for a mural for the new Deer Lodge post office, however, the process of creating public art did not proceed as smoothly. Enthusiastic about the prospect of Lochrie, a native of Deer Lodge, receiving the mural commission, several local organizations sent resolutions to the secretary of the treasury and Representative O'Connell to nominate her. These requests likely placed O'Connell in an awkward position. He had again hoped Tom Moore would earn the commission.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately neither Tom Moore nor Elizabeth Lochrie won the coveted commission. Choosing Lochrie to paint a second mural would have raised protest from other artists, and no one wanted to risk discrediting the mural project. Moreover, competition entries were supposed to be judged anonymously. Edward Rowan sidestepped the issue by informing Representative O'Connell and the Deer Lodge clubs that mural funds were "not available at this time." In early January 1938, however, Rowan notified Deer Lodge Rotary Club president H. W. Howell that money had been authorized. Rowan set about organizing the competition at once, naming George Yphantis, chairman of the fine arts department at Montana State University in Missoula, as head of the selection committee. Unlike the Dillon competition, the Deer Lodge contest was open to all American artists resident of or affiliated with Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Seeking to quell controversy, Yphantis requested that competitors' names not be publicly disclosed.<sup>13</sup>

Local history and landscape figured prominently in Verona Burkhard's James and Granville Stuart Prospecting in Deer Lodge Valley-1858, which featured the Stuart brothers in the foreground with a large mountain behind them. Many viewers assumed it was Mount Powell, a well-known landmark. Indeed, Burkhard's depiction raised some discussion: had she really painted Mount Powell? As Burkhard wrote to Rowan: "[A] number of people [have] taken it for granted that my design is an incorrect portrait of a mountain dominating the scenery around Deer Lodge. . . . [I]t was not what I intended. My idea was to build around an old 1860 sketch of part of Deer Lodge Valley." She had added the Stuarts and a dash of imagination to make "a pleasing composition."<sup>14</sup>



At Rowan's invitation, Mrs. Charles Wenrich, a former Deer Lodge resident and the wife of the deputy to the first assistant postmaster general, viewed the mural designs and determined that the mountain was not Mount Powell. Upon hearing her declaration, Rowan hastened to advise Burkhard that "The mountain should in every way be authentic." The artist agreed: "I realize the local citizens are justified in wanting a literal interpretation of a favorite mountain. I can sympathize with them." Burkhard also understood that if she wanted other government commissions, she would have to please the

Deer Lodge audience. Although she thought the artistic merit of the mural suffered, she made the change.<sup>15</sup>

By changing her depiction of Mount Powell, Burkhard gained the support of the town. "People of Deer Lodge surprised me by their great interest in the mural," Burkhard wrote to Rowan, adding, "Mr. Midtlyng, the Postmaster, said 'I could please all the citizens . . . if I showed Mt. Powell in good shape.'" Burkhard further catered



to local residents by changing the color of the tail of a deer depicted in the mural from white to black. Legend held that Indians called the valley "the lodge of the white-tailed deer," but hunters argued that there were no white-tailed deer in the Flat Creek Range. Again, the audience's wishes were paramount. For the artist, Burkhard commented, once the government knew your work, it was much easier to receive a commission.<sup>16</sup>

As successful as the mural program had been, in Great Falls it ran into difficulties. In 1939 the Section of Fine Arts sponsored an ambitious project, the Forty-Eight States Competition, a national competition to provide a post office mural for each state, with the designs selected by a Washington D.C. jury.<sup>17</sup> On October 26 the New York Times proudly announced the selection of seven New York artists, each of whom would be paid approximately \$725 and "get a helpful shove towards fame."<sup>18</sup> Mordi Gassner's design was selected for a Montana post office. In its December issue, Life Magazine featured small sketches of the designs. Slated for the new Great Falls post office, Gassner's design showed a comparison between old and new pioneers, and the problems of both, with people, animals, and covered wagons filling the canvas.<sup>19</sup>

Great Falls citizens took an immediate dislike to the proposed mural. Chamber of Commerce secretary A. J. Breitenstein summarized citizens' complaints when he wrote to Rowan that most residents did not understand the mural's message nor did this artist know anything about the town's history. And, he added, the painting looked nothing like those of Charlie Russell, the famous artist cowboy artist who had made Great Falls his home. Wasn't there some way that a new design or one painted by a Montana artist could be substituted? Breitenstein sent a copy of his letter to Senator James E. Murray, who contacted Rowan and asked to be kept apprised of events.<sup>20</sup>

Mordi Gassner was frustrated too. In a letter to Rowan, he explained that he wanted to start work on this project. Furthermore, he had understood that upon acceptance of his design he would be paid a third of the award. Instead he had not heard anything from Section officials about when he could begin work or expect to be paid. Such "victimization of the artist" was inexcusable.<sup>21</sup>

Rowan attempted to placate all parties. He penciled a note to a colleague: "Is there any job we could give Mordi Gassner instead of waiting for Great Falls, Mt? Note the complaint . . . which I think entirely justified." In his letter to the frustrated New Yorker, Rowan softened the rejection by suggesting that he would be invited to paint a mural in Sidney. Gassner, however, would have to submit a new design.<sup>22</sup>

In sharp contrast to Great Falls residents, Glaswegians showed genuine enthusiasm about a mural for the newly constructed Glasgow post office and federal court building. Indeed, most of the town turned out to examine the thirty-nine designs displayed in Paul Freidl's department store before the jury began the selection process. To some residents, though, it seemed that the community was devoting more effort to the project than the artists. Committee member Josef Sklower complained to Rowan that "None of the artists had visited or studied the local scene long or thoroughly enough to capture the local spirit." In fact, only Elizabeth Lochrie visited Glasgow. Perhaps for this reason committee members had difficulty reaching a decision, noting that "some drawings excelled in idea, others in color and drawing."<sup>23</sup>

Even when they had chosen a winner, the decision did not satisfy everyone. In a letter to Rowan, postmaster J. P. Sternhagen admitted that he preferred the group's second choice, Forrest Hill's submission. He added that he was writing only as an active committee member and that his position as postmaster should not have any bearing on the Section's decision. Not surprisingly, Washington concurred with Sternhagen. Always sensitive to postmasters' preferences, Rowan made sure they were involved with the proceedings and pleased with the outcome. Thus, the postmaster had a great deal of influence over the finished mural.<sup>24</sup>

Upon learning that he had been awarded the generous \$1,250 commission, Montana native Forrest Hill immediately bought his own 168" x 72" canvas for "an arm and a leg" to begin work on the 72" x 168" mural. Now, he was familiar with both its location and the competition guidelines. In an effort to please everyone, he included nearly all the suggested elements in Early Settlers and Residents and Modern Industries. The mural showed an outline of Montana with settlers, fur traders, an Indian, and surveyors arrayed around the outside and figures representing agriculture, trucking, the railroads, and industry filling the interior. Section officers observed that the painting's quality was undistinguished but felt the subject would be significant for post office patrons.<sup>25</sup>



Hill, like Burkhard and Gassner, experienced civic censorship over one of the mural's details. In the lower right-hand corner, he painted a gambler seated at a small table with a whiskey bottle and glass, but the suggestion that these vices were common in the life of Montanans led the selection committee to chasten that "too much prominence was given to the gambler." Hill recalled that the local branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union threatened that he would not be paid if he did not change his painting. Hill accordingly altered the painting, moving a woman dressed in white and carrying a Bible to the prominent position the gambler had once occupied. The gambler stepped into the woman's position and lost his identity; he is now just an anonymous man in the design.<sup>26</sup>

Section officials used the submissions for the Glasgow mural as the basis for appointing artists to create artwork for three other Montana post offices. However, in selecting an artist to paint the Sidney mural, the designs were not the sole basis for Section officials' decision. Letters from the wife and mother of one of the contestants, J. K. Ralston, stressed Ralston's knowledge of the area, his reputation as the next Charlie Russell, and his friendship with state officials. Apparently convinced, Rowan wrote to Ralston in October 1941 to inform him that he was "invited . . . to undertake the mural decoration of Sidney, Montana post office." Though this commission was to have been Mordi Gassner's, he again lost due to grass-roots activism. Twice defeated, Gassner turned his attention elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

General Sully at the Yellowstone-1864 drew on Ralston's knowledge of eastern Montana landscapes as well as the history he had studied at the state historical society. As Ralston explained: "Like a lot of others, I hated to see it [the Old West] go. Now [that] it is history . . . I've made it my life's work to try and make the Old West live again on canvas." His representation, though, left something to be desired. When Rowan



reviewed the painting's progress, he advised Ralston that a number of the pioneers looked "studio manufactured." Unfortunately, whether short on time or inclination, Ralston left them as they appeared in his initial vision.<sup>28</sup>

The second artist chosen from the Glasgow entries was Montana native Henry Meloy, who taught art at Columbia University in New York City. In mid-September 1941 Rowan wrote to inform Meloy that Section officials deeply admired his design and that they wanted him to design the Hamilton post office mural. Meloy's finished mural, Flathead War Party, shows the tribe preparing to attack the Blackfeet, with Mount Como, a Bitterroot Valley landmark, in the background. An accomplished artist, Meloy knew to focus on historical topics and local scenery.<sup>29</sup>



The last post office mural installed in Montana was Leo Beaulaurier's Trailing Cattle. Impressed by the sketch Beaulaurier submitted for the Glasgow competition, Rowan invited him to create a mural for the Billings post office in

October 1941. Beaulaurier's mural featured longhorns in the foreground, with the browns and whites of the animals contrasting with the blended blues of the river and sky. This design, like Ralston's, related a brief period in western history, one that gave the mural a sense of place and time and also played to easterners' sensibilities about the West. It was the subject that sold the Section on this particular design. Billings residents also embraced the mural. Postmaster Mearl L. Fagg wrote that people were "pleased with the theme of the picture in that it fits in with our country and records a history of actual scenes that many have seen in the past."<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the initial enthusiasm with which Montanans embraced the post office murals, they have largely faded from the public's consciousness in the intervening sixty years. For some people, the murals became a

mute reminder of hard times that no one wanted to repeat; for others, they seemed a quaint remnant of the distant past. In recent decades, as advances in communications eroded the importance of the local post office, fewer people visited to socialize or look at a mural. One Billings postal employee described it bluntly: "I saw the mural when I first started work here, but haven't paid attention since."<sup>31</sup>

Despite their waning popularity, the murals have been maintained in their original condition. In 1976 Verona Burkhard cleaned and varnished the Deer Lodge, Dillon, and Hamilton murals while visiting the state. The Billings and Sidney murals were cleaned and assessed in 1983. In Sidney the construction of a new post office and a new museum, the Mon-Dak Center, in the 1970s raised controversy over the question of whether the mural should be moved from its original location.<sup>32</sup>



Today, the Montana post office murals, all still hanging where they were originally installed, capture the spirit of Franklin Roosevelt's vast economic vision, one in which the arts and humanities went hand and hand with economic recovery.

ELIZABETH MENTZER earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Montana State University-Bozeman and taught in the history and English departments for a number of years. After nearly three decades in Montana, she and her husband now live in Iowa City, Iowa.

1. Ralph Purcell, *Government and Art: A Study of American Experience* (Washington, D.C., 1956), 66-70. Money for the murals was appropriated when buildings were 75 percent completed and construction costs had been met.
2. Richard D. McKinzie, *The New Deal for Artists* (Princeton, N.J., 1973), x. The Section of Painting and Sculpture was formed in 1934 under the aegis of Department of the Treasury. Its name was changed to the Section of Fine Arts in 1938, but artists and employees often referred to it simply as the Section. Edward Bruce managed the program from 1934 to 1943 with the help of Edward Rowan and Forbes Watson. *Ibid.*, 53.
3. Billings (Mont.) Gazette, April 10, 1983.
4. The Montana artists likely knew or knew of one another as part of a close-knit community of artists. Lochrie, Hill, Ralston, Meloy, and Beaulaurier were native Montanans, and Verona Burkhard was well acquainted with Ralston and Meloy. Elizabeth Lochrie's daughter believed that her mother knew all the other artists or at least knew about them. Betty Hoag McGlynn to author, November 17, 1987, letter in possession of the author.
5. McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 54.
6. *Ibid.*, 57; Edward Rowan to George Yphantis, n.d., Embellishment files, box 60, Public Building Service Montana (hereafter PBS Montana), entry 133, Record Group 121 (hereafter RG 121), Public Building Service, Treasury Relief Art Project, Central Office Correspondence, 1935--1939, National Archives, Washington D.C. (hereafter NA). Though government officials sometimes urged artists to check the scale or the position of a figure or passed along a community's critique of the mural in progress, none of the painters complained of undue interference in the actual creation of the mural. Deer Lodge artist Verona Burkhard wrote, "In every case I was free to choose my own subject. The government never indicated what I should paint or how." Elizabeth Lochrie expressed a similar sentiment to her daughter. Verona Burkhard to author, August 1988, letter in possession of the author; McGlynn to author, November 17, 1987.
7. Edward Rowan to Inslee Hopper, March 12, 1937, PBS Montana, NA; Edward Bruce to Representative Jerry O'Connell, April 8, April 18, 1937, *ibid.*; Representative Jerry O'Connell to Edward Bruce and Henry Morgenthau, Jr., March 11, 1937, *ibid.* O'Connell was apparently unaware that Lochrie had completed *Pioneers on the Oregon Trail* along the Snake River for the Burley, Idaho,



post office in 1937.

8. For each competition, Rowan appointed an art expert as the committee chair, and the chair then chose a panel of qualified members. In Dillon, Branson Stevenson, Professor Harold G. Marriam [sic], A. R. Jacobs, Mrs. F. D. Willis, and Dr. W. H. Stephan served as jury members. McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 53; Dillon (Mont.) *Daily Messenger*, April 12, 1937.
9. Representative Jerry O'Connell to Edward Bruce, September 19, 1937, PBS Montana, NA; Edward Rowan to Elizabeth Lochrie, September 25, 1937, *ibid.* Rowan made a few suggestions to Lochrie about the position of figures and colors.
10. Edward Rowan to Olga Ross Hannon, July 9, 1937, PBS Montana, NA; Rowan to Lochrie, September 25, 1937.
11. Harry Andrus to Edward Rowan, May 16, 1938, PBS Montana, NA; Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, February 25, 1939, *ibid.*
12. Woman's Club of Deer Lodge to the Secretary of the Treasury and the Honorable Jerry O'Connell, October 30, 1937, PBS Montana, NA; Rotary Club President to United States Secretary of the Treasury, October 22, 1937, *ibid.*; Don Valiton to Edward Rowan, November 1, 1937, *ibid.*; Representative Jerry O'Connell to Edward Bruce, October 30, 1937, *ibid.*
13. Edward Rowan to Representative Jerry O'Connell, November 10, 1937, PBS Montana, NA; Edward Rowan to Don Valiton, November 18, 1937, *ibid.*; Edward Rowan to H. W. Howell, January 6, 1938, *ibid.*; "Competition for the Mural Decoration in the Deer Lodge, Montana, Post Office," *ibid.*; George Yphantis to Edward Rowan, October 26, 1938, *ibid.* Committee members included postmaster Robert Midtlyng, Theodore Jacobs from Missoula, Branson Stevenson from Great Falls, and Robert Barnett from Helena. Olga Ross Hannon volunteered to chair the jury, but Rowan had already named Yphantis. Edward Rowan to Olga Ross Hannon, January 6, 1938, *ibid.*; George Yphantis to Edward Rowan, January 15, 1938, *ibid.*
14. Verona Burkhard to Edward Rowan, March 31, 1939, PBS Montana, NA; Verona Burkhard, telephone interview by author, August 1988.
15. Edward Rowan to Verona Burkhard, March 13, 1939, PBS Montana, NA; Verona Burkhard to Edward Rowan, March 31, June 6, 1939, *ibid.*
16. Burkhard to Rowan, March 31, 1939; Burkhard interview. Emphasizing the importance of the matter, a local headline trumpeted: "'That's Mount Powell' was visitors' exclamation when seeing the mural." Undated newspaper clipping, Deer Lodge file, box 60, RG 121, NA.
17. Maurice Sterne, Henry Varnum Poor, Edgar Miller, and Olin Dows judged the 1,477 designs. McKinzie, *New Deal for Artists*, 56.
18. *New York Times*, October 26, 1939.
19. "Speaking of Pictures," *Life Magazine*, December 4, 1939, 12-15, quote on p. 13.
20. A. J. Breitenstein to Edward Rowan, December 14, 1939, PBS Montana, NA; Senator James E. Murray to Edward Rowan, January 16, 1940, *ibid.*
21. Mordi Gassner to Edward Rowan, September 25, 1940, PBS Montana, NA.
22. Edward Rowan to Maria Ealand, January 5, 1940, PBS Montana, NA; Edward Rowan to Mordi Gassner, October 2, 1940, *ibid.*
23. Elizabeth Lochrie to Edward Rowan, September 10, 1940, PBS Montana, NA; Josef Sklower to Edward Rowan, September 5, August 11, 1941, *ibid.* Committee members included Mr. and Mrs. Josef Sklower, Sam Gilluly, Paul Freidl, Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Friedland, Mr. and Mrs. J.P. Sternhagen, Nora Mumford, Ruth Bowling, Mrs. George Bonndeson, Agnes Rowell, art instructor James Long, and artists William Standing and Frank Lafaurnaise. The competition was open to all artists in Idaho, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming.
24. J. P. Sternhagen to Edward Rowan, August 14, 1941, PBS Montana, NA.
25. Forrest Hill, interview by author, Laurel, Mont., November 1987, notes in possession of the author; "Competition for the Mural Decoration of the Glasgow, Montana Post Office," History file, Glasgow

post office, Glasgow, Montana; Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz, *Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal* (Philadelphia, 1984), 217; Edward Rowan to Josef Sklower, August 26, 1941, PBS Montana, NA. Hill paid two hundred dollars for the canvas and forty dollars for the shipping. He had planned to use a cheaper cotton canvas, but Rowan told him that it was unlikely to be sturdy enough for public display of a mural. Hill interview.

26. Selection committee meeting minutes, September 3, 1941, PBS Montana, NA; Hill interview.
27. Mrs. J. K. Ralston to Edward Rowan, October 25, 1941, PBS Montana, NA; R. S. Nutt to Edward Rowan, October 28, 1941, *ibid.*; Mrs. J. K. Ralston to Senator James Murray, October 3, 1939, *ibid.*; Commissioner of Public Buildings to Senator Burton K. Wheeler, November 5, 1940, *ibid.*; Edward Rowan to J. K. Ralston, October 17, 1940, *ibid.* In 1942 Gassner painted *The Three Ages of Phoebe Goodell Judson* for the Lynden, Washington, post office. Five Gassner murals painted between 1929 and 1930 are part of the permanent collection of Brooklyn's Polytechnic University. Karal Ann Marling, *Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression* (Minneapolis, 1982), 201-4; John Seabrook, "A Mothballed Mural," *New Yorker*, October 22, 2001, 26.
28. J. K. Ralston to Edward Rowan, January 10, 1942, PBS Montana, NA; James K. Ralston, *The Voice of the Curlew: J. K. Ralston's Story of His Life as Told to John A. Popovich* (Billings, Mont., 1986), 254; Edward Rowan to J. K. Ralston, January 16, 1942, PBS Montana, NA.
29. Edward Rowan to Henry Meloy, September 16, 1941, PBS Montana, NA; Henry Meloy to Edward Rowan, May 23, 1942, *ibid.* Meloy's brother, Peter, assisted him in researching the theme.
30. Edward Rowan to Leo Beaulaurier, October 17, 1941, PBS Montana, NA; Mearl L. Fagg to Edward Rowan, April 28, 1942, *ibid.*
31. *Billings (Mont.) Gazette*, April 7, 1983.
32. *Billings (Mont.) Gazette*, April 7, 10, 1983; History file, Deer Lodge post office, Deer Lodge, Montana.

Six Montana communities benefited from President Franklin Roosevelt's desire to give Americans "a more abundant life" and to put people to work during tough times. As part of a national program, the Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts commissioned murals for six new Montana post offices between 1937 and 1942. Deer Lodge artist Elizabeth Lochrie, pictured at left with two unidentified assistants and postmaster Harry Andrus, won the competition for the Dillon post office mural with her proposal for *News from the States* (1938, oil on canvas, 44" x 143 1/2", pictured on the back cover in color).

Orr Studio, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

The mural program for Montana's post offices began with the 1937 request of Congressman Jerry O'Connell (left), the state's sole congressman, who felt Montana had been unfairly excluded from the national project. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Olga Ross Hannon, director of the art department of Montana State College in Bozeman, chaired the jury that judged the twenty-seven designs submitted for Montana's first mural competition. MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

The second mural commission went to Verona Burkhard, whose *James and Granville Stuart Prospecting in Deer Lodge Valley-1858* (1939, oil on canvas, 56 1/2" x 144") prominently featured local history and landscape features, including Mount Powell in the Flint Creek Range west of Deet Lodge.



Otho Hartley, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena  
Don Beatty, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Section officials invited Henry Meloy, a Montana native and Columbia University art professor, to design the Hamilton mural. His Flathead War Party shows the tribe preparing to attack the Blackfeet with Mount Como, a Bitterroot Valley landmark, in the background. Flathead War Party is pictured in color on the back cover (1942, oil on canvas, 77 1/2" x 168").

L. H. Jorud, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Great Falls artist Leo Beaulaurier (photographed in 1930) created a design for the Billings post office. His mural, Trailing Cattle (1942, oil on canvas, 43 1/2" x 161"), pleased Billings residents with a scene "that many have seen in the past."

MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

Don Beatty, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

The setting for Elizabeth Lochrie's News from the States (detailed above) was the Frying Pan Basin on the stage route between Dillon and Butte.

Don Beatty, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena

---

From *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 51 (Summer 2001), 70-73; this article is presented courtesy of the [Montana Historical Society](#). All rights reserved, © 2001.