



Missing murals puzzle some

One of the three murals that once graced the lobby of the old Tracy Post Office at 12th and Adam streets — now the Tracy Historical Museum — has long been missing.

I didn't think anybody outside of Tracy cared one way or another about the missing mural — until earlier this week. I received an e-mail from Dr. Jimmy S. Emerson, a veterinarian in Dalton, Ga., asking if the missing mural had been painted over when the city of Tracy took ownership of the building in 1968.

Apparently this had been reported in articles written about the whereabouts of artwork produced by Edith Hamlin, a San Francisco artist who specialized in murals during the 1930s and '40s. In 1938, as part of a federal Depression-era arts program, she produced the three canvas murals that were mounted on the wall over the postal clerk windows in the lobby of the Tracy Post Office building completed that year.

Those murals became familiar sights for Tracyites, many of whom made daily treks to the post office in those days. The murals showed three Tracy historical themes: the 1776 to 1848 exploration of this area by the three Spaniards on horseback, the overland crossing of pioneers and the arrival of the railroad in Tracy in 1878. The missing mural is the one that depicts the overland crossing of the pioneers — a family riding in and walking beside a wagon pulled by oxen.

The murals were still in place in 1968 when the city bought the old post office building in 1968 and when the Tracy District Recreation Commission took over the building.

Joe Wilson, who headed the recreation commission in those days, told me this week that a city painter was about to paint over the murals when he stopped the painter and pulled the canvas murals off the wall.

“I placed them in the walk-in safe originally used by the post office,” Joe told me. “I knew they had value.”

In the 1970s, Edith Hamlin and a friend stopped by the old post office building to inquire about the murals.

Joe showed her they were in safe keeping in the walk-in safe, and she seemed pleased.

Joe retired in 1988, and that was the last time he remembers seeing the three murals.

In 1993, when the West Side Pioneer Association opened its first museum in the old Boy Scout hut on Bessie Avenue, historical artifacts in the recreation building were moved there.

Betty Galli, who was active in that program, remembers that only two of the three murals were found.

Sometime before them, the third mural had gone missing.

“We couldn’t find the third mural,” she said. “We asked around, but nobody knew where it was.”

The two murals were displayed in the museum on Bessie. Then in 2003, when the old post office building was turned into the Tracy Historical Museum, the two framed murals were mounted on a wall in the museum’s main room.

The murals have value beyond their local historical importance because they are great examples of Depression-era mural art sponsored by the federal artists programs. Ellen Opie, indefatigable researcher for the West Side Pioneers, reports that Edith Hamlin, born in Oakland in 1902, was active among the muralists, including Mexico’s Diego Rivera, who produced murals all over the country. Her first commission was under the Works Project Administration Art Program in 1936 to create murals for Mission High School in San Francisco. The Tracy Post Office murals were painted under a contract with the Treasury Department. She was paid \$725.

“For the Tracy Post Office,” Opie said, “Hamlin painted three murals rather than one. She painted each mural on a 5-foot-by-9-foot canvas in her studio in San Francisco. She brought the canvases to Tracy and personally mounted them onto the walls of the Tracy Post Office on June 14, 1938. The canvases were glued directly to the wall. Each mural depicted a different aspect of the settlement of the Tracy area.”

Hamlin later painted murals for the Santa Fe Railway ticket office in Chicago, again using a western theme.

Apparently, if Dr. Emerson’s interest in the missing Tracy Post Office mural is any indication, there is continuing appreciation of Depression-era mural art in public places.

Tracyites can take a look at two prime examples of the art form by heading over to the Tracy Historical Museum on Sundays, Mondays and Wednesdays.

And who knows, maybe someday Edith Hamlin’s third mural will turn up.

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<http://www.tracypress.com/local/2005-12-17-missing.php>