

Stained glass offers a window on WPA art

Depression-era art virtually unnoticed

By MARY GOTTSCHALK

Sometimes a great treasure goes unrecognized, even when it's in plain sight.

Such is the case of the stained-glass window by Edgar Dorsey Taylor on the stairway landing between the first and second floors of Historic Hoover School.

The window is a lasting legacy of a California artist and the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, the agency created to provide employment for artists during the Great Depression.

Yet, aside from a small news story in 1939 in the *San Jose Mercury Herald* when the window was installed, it has been all but forgotten. Thousands of students have passed by the window in its 65 years as a silent sentinel as the building evolved from Herbert Hoover Junior High School to Hoover Middle School and now to Historic Hoover School. The one original building is now part classrooms and part community center.

Yet, few seem to have given the window much more than a passing glance.

"For years I've known that window was there, but I didn't take it seriously," says Ed Hodges, a local historian and a retired science and math teacher from Hoover.

Earlier this year, Hodges decided it was time to take the window seriously. He recalled another instructor, Bernie Gold, mentioning that he had heard the window was a WPA piece when he first started teaching at Hoover in the early 1960s.

Taking that clue, Hodges started searching through the scrapbooks kept for each school year, narrowing the search to the Great Depression years. In the 1938-39 scrapbook he found the photo and news clipping.

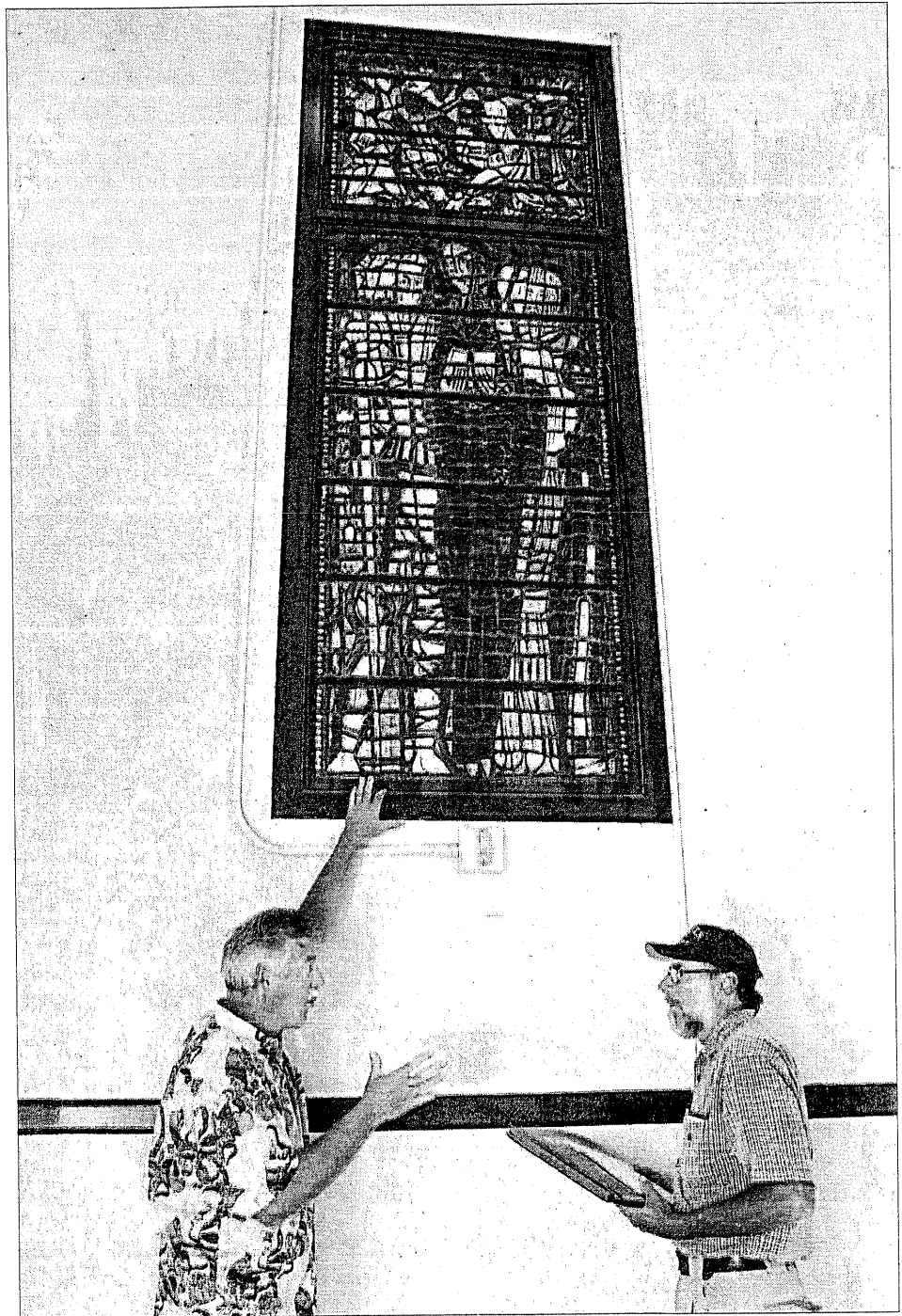
Although that article provided no title for the piece, it did report, "More than 1,200 pieces of glass were leaded into the window, which depicts a medieval scene, the presentation of a manuscript to a king and queen."

The story also identified the window as Taylor's design and described it as "built by the Oakland branch of the Federal Art Project and was under construction for a year."

Hodges' sleuthing led him to the www.wpamurals.com website, a labor of love originated and maintained by Nancy Lorraine of Evanston, Ill.

A former social worker and now a videographer, Lorraine first encountered WPA murals while doing a video on Oakton School in Evanston in 1998. The school has a wealth of WPA art, including a carved-stone sundial, three carved-pine bas-reliefs depicting animals, a diorama on railroads and a series of murals in the school's auditorium depicting the legend of Charlemagne.

Her interest piqued, Lorraine started reading about the WPA and then search-



Photograph by Erin Day

A Piece of History: Local stained-glass artist and former Hoover Middle School student Keith Bramer (left) discusses the condition of the school's stained-glass window with former Hoover science teacher Ed Hodges, who is investigating the history of the WPA-era piece by artist Edgar Taylor.

ing out WPA art, particularly in post offices. As she and her husband, John Flannery, have traveled, she's taken time to document WPA art.

In 2000, Lorraine registered the domain name www.wpamurals.com, built a website and started posting WPA art images and information as she's found it.

"It's just exploded," Lorraine says of

interest in her site. "There is such an interest in this, the government should do something. I'm not a professional, this is not my livelihood, I don't make money, it's a deficit."

Yet, Lorraine is quick to admit, "I love it, I absolutely love it."

She's often able to guide people to spe-

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cific art they thought had been destroyed, and corporations often contact her in search of art with a specific theme. She's also communicated with a few WPA artists, as well as their spouses and children.

Lorance says, "The WPA art symbolizes a time when people were faced with huge, crushing economic problems and real threats to their survival. It's a time when people grew together as a group. A lot of the WPA art was done because people insisted on being artists.

"It symbolizes what's best in America: people working together in a time of need without pure monetary reward. Most artists didn't make that much: 50 cents to \$2 a day."

Lorance likes to share the story of when WPA funding was cut, Iowa artist Grant Wood was told to let some of his artists go.

"As a group they decided to take less money and keep everyone in the group," she says.

"They believed strongly in their art and they believed strongly in the artists. It's reflected in the heart of the work they produced. It's strong and an absolute symbol of a country pulling itself together and continuing forward."

After Hodges contacted Lorance, she contacted the daughter of one of the WPA artists who worked on the window.

In an email now posted on the site, Mary Gill Smith writes that her father, Norval L. Gill, "tells me that the stained glass was done using the older method of painting the glass black and scratching it off to reveal the color and design, rather than painting the design directly onto the glass. Each section as it was worked on was about the size of a book. He recognized the piece immediately from the photo on this website."

WPA stained-glass windows are relatively rare, Lorance says, because it was such "a specialized skill. It was much more common to do murals, paintings or wood-carvings."

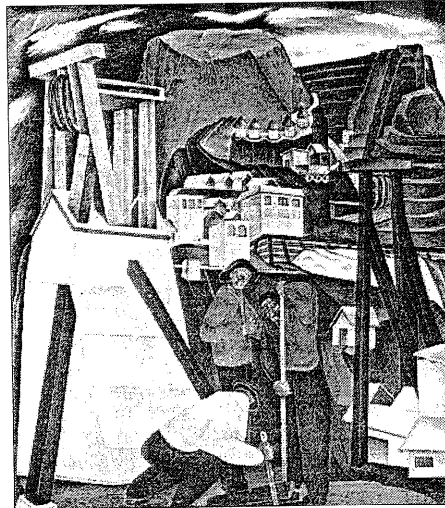
The artist behind the Hoover window was born in 1904 in Grass Valley, earning his bachelor and master of arts at the University of California, Berkeley. After graduating in 1932, Taylor traveled in Europe for a couple of years and then returned to Cal to teach. It was during this time he designed the window.

In the 1940s he moved to Austin to teach at the University of Texas, and in the early 1950s he moved back to California, teaching at the University of Southern California.

Today, Taylor, who died in 1978, is best remembered for his black-and-white woodcuts.

A 1940 limited-edition lithograph of Taylor's *The UVX, Jerome* depicting the United Verde Extension copper mine in Jerome, Ariz., now sells for \$800 to \$1,000 when it comes on the market, says Keith Sheridan, a New York-based dealer in fine art prints.

Sheridan isn't familiar with all of Taylor's work, but of *The UVX, Jerome*, he says, "This particular work is distinguished by its complex, precisionist composition and fine draftsmanship. Taylor's blend of cubist vernacular with his folk-art-like vision makes this work an important example of midcentury modernist Amer-



Wood Cut: This 1940 lithograph of 'The UVX,' Jerome copper mine in Arizona is another example of Edgar Dorsey Taylor's work.

bly two visits to the school by Lou Henry Hoover may have resulted in her encouraging her husband to use his influence for his namesake school. The Hoovers moved to a home they built on the Stanford University campus after he left the presidency in 1932.

Although the federal government paid for the window, the February 1939 graduating class sponsored it as their farewell gift to the school.

Harry Farrell, noted San Jose author who grew up near The Alameda, remembers the former first lady's visit when he was a student there.

"Mrs. Hoover came at the time of the June 1938 graduation," Farrell says. "She was an honored guest and I was an usher, so I saw her from a distance."

Farrell, who graduated from Hoover in 1939, has only a vague memory of the window.

"It was no big deal at the time," Farrell says of the window.

This summer, Hodges asked Keith Bramer, stained-glass artist and owner of Parrot Studios on Emory Street, to evaluate the condition of the window.

"It's a beautiful window," Bramer says. "I went to the ninth grade at Hoover and I remembered seeing it, but I didn't remember what it was like."

Bramer finds the window in "great condition, especially for its age. If it were mine, I'd leave it. It's in no danger of falling apart, it's in its original historic condition and it doesn't appear to have ever been worked on. It's in great shape."

In terms of value, Bramer says, "To some it would be a priceless piece. To have work done like that nowadays would cost upwards of \$500 a square foot, and there's a big difference between a historical piece and a nonhistorical piece.

"It would be worth a good deal of money, at least \$10,000."

Hodges is working on a plaque explaining the history of Taylor's window, which he hopes to place this fall. Some Hoover graduates are planning to return for the ceremony, and Lorance says she will make an effort to attend as well.

The WPA stained-glass window designed by Edgar Dorsey Taylor can be