

THE OLD HUNDRED (Psalm C.) AT ST. JAMES

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Introduction: Inside the St. James United Church of Christ, a picturesque white church adorning a hill overlooking a tranquil countryside in Fishing Creek Township, there is a beautiful mural, Old Hundred, gracing one of the walls with the text from a hymn, *All People That on Earth Do Dwell*. The verses are based on Psalm 100, but the hymn is attributed to William Kethe, a Scottish clergyman who lived in the 1500s, and who wrote *Fourscore and Seven Psalms of David*. Louis Bourgeois, a French hymnist, is credited with composing the music.

The following two newspaper articles provide fascinating accounts about an English itinerant painter, "Gypsy" Smith, who created the mural in 1905. The Old Hundred survives today although not in its original form. It has been recreated by Dorothy Wilson, an artist who is a member of the Society. The first article, "*Did Scotland Yard Detective Paint Church Mural?*," appeared in *Country Impressions* on July 8, 1971, and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher. The second article written by Susan Brook, "*Mural, Mural, on the Wall,*" was published in the *Press Enterprise* on February 21, 1997, and appears here with permission of the publisher. The Society is very appreciative of the two newspapers for permitting these articles to be used in this *Newsletter*. Following these two accounts is an addendum concerning the identity of "Gypsy" Smith.

DID SCOTLAND YARD DETECTIVE PAINT CHURCH MURAL?

There is no legend, no mystery, no question that the Old Hundred mural graces the vestibule of the St. James United Church of Christ, near Bendertown. Circumstantial evidence according to those who recall the actual painting of the mural and the story surrounding the painter, points to the fact that it was done by a Scotland Yard detective seeking a wanted man in the United States.

Clayton Beishline, who was a boy of about 7 years when the 'painting was done, told us the story as he recollected it. His father, Nathan, a Bible class teacher, a member of the ruling consistory of the then Reformed denomination, was caretaker of the church at the time.

Reminiscing Mr. Beishline recalled, "It was a beautiful spring morning in 1905 when my father and I were closing up the church one Sunday following the services. As we came out and closed the entrance doors we were greeted by a strange sight. Trudging up the hill on the road from Zaners was a man and a youth dressed in Scottish attire including kilts and sandals. The man had a Vandyke goatee and mustache and carried a Scottish bag over his shoulder."

According to Mr. Beishline the stranger hailed he and his father and requested to see the inside of the church. He expressed a deep appreciation of the beautiful setting for the church and cemetery and of the rolling contour of the area.

The group entered the church and immediately the stranger was taken by the beauty of the interior of the sanctuary. Expressing a deep feeling of devotion at the worship setting he requested that he be allowed to paint a religious mural back of the pulpit area.

Mr. Beishline declined to give approval without the consent of the others of the church ruling body and, of course, he was concerned about the cost, but did not mention it. He asked questions trying to lead to identity of the pair but got nowhere.

Finally he invited the lad and the stranger to his farm house for dinner. On the way to the Beishline's home the stranger changed his offer to that of painting the Twenty-third Psalm on the wall of the vestibule of the church. His argument was it would be seen readily by all who entered the church and help them to achieve a prayerful attitude for worship. His, clinching argument, "After all, if the people don't like it they could easily paint it out."

It was no until during dinner that it was made clear the man was offering to do the painting at no cost to the church membership. He was so impressed by the area and the simple beauty and apparent loving care of the house of worship that had inclined him to do something to enhance its worth.

At last Mr. Beishline agreed to the vestibule painting and with his wife's help it was decided to use the text of the One Hundredth Psalm. After the meal the little group returned to the church, built a makeshift scaffold and to Mr. Beishline's amazement the Scotsman opened his bag and produced the necessary paints and brushes to carry out his project.

What the painter actually used were the first four verses from the hymn, *All People That on Earth Do Dwell*, which is derived from *Psalm 100*.

All people that on earth do dwell,

Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.

Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;

Come ye before Him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;

Without our aid He did us make;

We are His folk, He doth us feed,

And for His sheep He doth us take.
O enter then His gates with praise;
Approach with joy His courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless His Name always,
For it is seemly so to do.
For why? the Lord our God is good;
His mercy is forever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.

Mr. Clayton Beishline says, "I can still recall his quick, yet unhurried strokes as he finished the painting in about three hours time."

Three small color scenes embellish the work. The lettering was done in block, Old English letters, of Scottish traditional form. "The youth," recalled Mr. Beishline, "sat at the foot of the scaffold on the steps of the church and read from the Bible throughout the time his older companion was painting the beloved song of assurance and praise."

At intervals, the artist would take a moment or two from his work to relax his fingers and arms. Each time Mr. Beishline made a try at learning the pair's identification but not until the job was completed did he learn anything at all about them.

When the painting was complete and the pair was gathering up possessions and preparing to go back down the road whence they had come, the man said the boy was 12 years old and identified himself as "Gypsy" Smith. He said the boy was his son and there was no need for further explanation or identification.

With a last look across the hills, he and the boy hiked off down the road never to be seen again.

The painting, needless to say, was a surprise to the church membership but it was a much appreciated and revered part of the sanctuary.

There were many rumors about the man and boy, all, of course, connecting them with Scotland. Their insistence at not giving any positive information about themselves led to

the growth of the, rumor the man may have been connected with Scotland Yard or some other foreign police force.

About ten years after the painting was done a postcard was received by the Beishlines which had been mailed in New York. It added fuel to the fire of those who guessed he was a detective for it said only, "We are sailing today for Scotland. Caught the man I was looking for and am taking him back." It was signed "Gypsy" Smith.

In 1935 during a redecoration of the interior of the church the paperhangers covered the painting up. For fifteen years it remained hidden and eventually almost forgotten by some of the church members.

In 1950 another redecoration project was undertaken. Clayton Beishline recalled the painting of the Hundredth Psalm [Old Hundred] and asked James Snyder, who was doing the redecoration to carefully remove the paper in the area where the painting was.

Mr. Snyder did his work so well and the Scotch painter's materials were so good that only a few small spots of black paint were removed in the process of taking the old paper from the wall.

Beishline employed Ralph Doty to touch up the damaged letters and today the painting is once again admired by the church members and guests. Only Nevin Yost in addition to Clayton Beishline still remembers the man and boy who carried out the project.

To those who would term the story a "legend" the two men reply, "No legend ever painted a picture."

MURAL, MURAL ON THE WALL

Stillwater artist works to bring back buried treasure

By Susan Brook Press Enterprise

STILLWATER - A contractor mistakenly buried a 92-year-old church mural under a coat of plaster last winter, but thanks to artist. Dorothy Wilson, the image is being resurrected.

Working from a tiny photo reproduction, Wilson has spent hours painstakingly transferring the mural's image to canvas. The mural, painted in 1905 by a Scottish traveler named Gypsy Smith, shows the illuminated text of Psalm 100.

The art work, painted at St. James United Church of Christ, had been a distinctive and treasured feature of the simple country structure which stands near Zaner's Bridge Road and Paperdale Road, near Bendertown.

"They were shocked. They went in one day and in the place of the mural there was this pure white wall. Everybody was really shocked," Wilson recalled.

Wilson, a congregation member, was among the disappointed people missing the brightly colored mural, which livened up the entry vestibule.

"Once the plastering disaster was over in the vestibule, they found somebody else to plaster the sanctuary," Wilson said.

The text of the "Old Hundred" was shown in black lettering with several small figurative and landscape paintings within the capital letters. Over the years, it had taken on its own mystique, thanks to the elusive nature of the original artist, who apparently did the work free of charge, out of his appreciation for the quiet country atmosphere.

In fact, the mural had been covered over once before, during a wallpapering effort in 1935. "For 15 years it was hidden under the wallpaper and people had just about forgotten about it, but one man remembered it," Wilson said.

When the church was being redecorated in 1950, Clayton Beishline, a boy when the painting was done, asked the wallpaperers to see if they could retrieve it. Beishline, who succeeded his father as the church's caretaker, remembered being at church when the mural was painted.

After long hours of picking off bits of paper, they found the image underneath was still in fairly good shape, according to earlier newspaper accounts.

But a layer of chicken wire and hard plaster covered it after the latest redecoration. Wilson's husband, Kenneth, contacted historic preservation experts, but none offered much hope for salvaging the mural.

After discussion at a church meeting, Wilson said she thought she could attempt to copy the image from photographs.

Ironically, the only picture church members had to go on was a tiny photo reproduction from the late Mary Hartman's Christmas postcard. The card had been saved by Ruth and Richard Wenner, who, like Wilson, live near the church.

"I'm really glad I could give them back something that's very special to the church. It won't be exactly the same, but it will be close and I also hope Gypsy Smith would approve," Wilson said.

For safety's sake and ease of painting, Wilson proposed to repaint the image in acrylic paint on plain canvas rather than on the wall itself. She felt it would then be less vulnerable in the future.

But in every other way, she tried to be as faithful to the original as possible - in size, in color and in spirit.

It was difficult at first to figure out what the tiny paintings were because they were at ceiling height and the angle of the three-inch photograph gave a skewed perspective, the artist said.

"The 'O' was hard. At first I thought it was a rock, but then after looking at it, I thought I could see the gables and roof of a building and I realized it was shaped like the church," she said. An angel's figure, arms outstretched, is entwined in the psalm's initial "T."

"Again it was so small, it was hard," she said.

Memories of the mural are also tricky, since it was over a Sunday School door in a spot where people saw it on first entering the building.

Wilson appreciates the freshness and energy of Smith's work, which oral history tells her was done in one afternoon.

"He really knew lettering. It was very spontaneous. There were two lines that were a little squeezed up against one another and I deliberated whether to redo it that way or make it like he intended it to be," she said. In the end, she decided to aim for the product Smith would have achieved, if he had more time to work on it.

ADDENDUM

Who was "Gypsy" Smith? From the information posted on the Christian Hall of Fame Web site, www.cantonbaptist.org/halloffame, there was an evangelist called Rodney "Gypsy" Smith. He was born in England in 1860 and died in 1947. He came to America thirty times to conduct numerous religious campaigns. Whether or not he was artist who painted the mural at St. James Church no one can answer for sure