



INDIANS CEDE THE LAND
by George Melville Smith

HISTORY OF THE ARTIST AND THE MURAL

“Indians Cede the Land,” by George Melville Smith, a 6’ x 20’ mural created for the Park Ridge Post Office through the Depression- era Treasury Relief Art Project, is a rare treasure from the City’s heritage. The government hired the best artists it could find to provide murals for federal buildings across the country. Believed to be an imagined scene rather than a specific single treaty signing, Smith’s work shows elements from the wilderness and Native American environment, as well as the arriving wave of American pioneers who would re-shape the landscape to their own purpose.

Between 1934 and 1943, approximately 1,100 murals and sculptures were commissioned by the U.S. Treasury Department under the Treasury Relief Art Project and, then, the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration Program, to decorate federal buildings across the United States. These projects were distinct from the Federal Arts Project that was administered under the WPA in that the artists did not necessarily have to be in financial need. Instead, the Treasury Section held regional and national

mural competitions in order to commission “high art” -- the best artists available.

George Melville Smith was one of a handful of artists who were awarded multiple mural contracts through the Treasury Section. He was selected from the designs he submitted to produce murals for post offices in Crown Point, Indiana, (1938), Elmhurst, Illinois, (1938), and Park Ridge (1940). Smith was paid approximately \$2,000 for each mural.

Smith was born in Chicago in 1879. He studied in Paris under André Lhote and at the Art Institute of Chicago. He was a winner of the Chicago and Vicinity Show held at the Art Institute in 1932 and also displayed there in 1933 and 1937 as well as at the Federal Art Project exhibit that the Institute hosted in 1938. He also displayed his work at the General Exhibit Building at the Century of Progress in 1933. Smith became the supervisor of the applied arts project for the WPA in 1936 and created a mural for Chicago’s Schubert Elementary School in 1938. He was a member of the Chicago Society of Artists and participated in the Forty-Eight States Competition in 1939.

All of Smith’s murals portray historical events in American history that he created from his imagination.

The 6’ x 20’ Park Ridge mural entitled “Indians Cede the Land” was installed in the former unadorned Park Ridge Post Office at 164 South Prospect Avenue on June 20, 1940, when the building was just three years old. The mural depicts U.S. soldiers and pioneer explorers meeting Native American leaders in the wilderness. To the left, behind the soldiers, are two rivers. To the right, behind the Native Americans, are brightly-lit forest trees.

In 1970 the Post Office building was sold to the Park Ridge-Niles School District 64 to serve as the District’s headquarters and is now known as the Raymond Hendee Service Center. As District 64 was taking over the building, the mural was to be discarded to make way for renovation. Learning of its plight, Paul Carlson, a long-standing history teacher at Maine East High School and a founding member of the Park Ridge Historical Society, endeavored to rescue it. With the help of two students, Tom Musolf, Class of 1970, who now lives in Arlington Heights, IL, and Debbie Milling, Class of 1971, the rescue was undertaken. The mural was first

sprayed with varnish to set the surface and then pried from the wall while using scaffolding supplied by the school district.

Upon his death on August 19, 2008, Mr. Carlson's family and family friend, Otto Kohler, another Maine East teacher, were prompted to return the mural back to Park Ridge. On September 20, 2008, 38 years to the day that the mural was rescued, the group delivered the mural to the Park Ridge Public Library where it will be put on permanent display following restoration.

Works Cited:

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