

COURTHOUSE MURAL'S JOURNEY TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH CENTER

In 1969, the Sheboygan County Courthouse was extensively renovated, a project estimated to cost nearly \$856,000, about \$5.5 million today. Beginning in the spring of 1968, the remodel was the first major project since the addition of the courthouse annex in 1958. Stubenrauch was the firm hired for the project, Fred Steinhaus was the architect of note.

Streamline Moderne in style, the exterior of the six-story structure is faced with Indiana limestone. Interior walls are faced with red Italian marble, and the floors are terrazzo.

Among other improvements in 1969 was a restructuring of the courtrooms. The two original courtrooms were each split in half to form four chambers. When built in 1933 each had 28-foot ceilings, nearly three stories high. Those lofty ceilings were also lowered to help with energy efficiency.

There was some objection to this downsizing, especially from Judge Ferdinand Schlichting. He felt the dignity and tradition of the courts would be diminished by a less-than-impressive courtroom.

One of the treasured old relics that had to go was a 12 by 18-foot mural that was attached to the wall behind Judge Schlichting's bench.

This mural had particular historical significance to the county and to the building. When the courthouse was built and artwork commissioned, Judges Edward Voigt and Ferdinand Schlichting discussed options. The County said it couldn't afford two murals, so only Judge Voigt's courtroom got one. But, in return, Judge Schlichting got his choice of subject matter, Indians and settlers.

The mural painted by a Professor G. Nordinger of Chicago in 1933, depicts a fur trader, Jacques Vieux, exchanging cloth, hardware and trinkets with an Indian chief. The scene was the trading post of William Farnsworth once located near the old Ashby Bridge near today's Esslingen Park. Nordinger once served as a portrait painter in the Court of Luxemburg and was a member of the Art Academy of Munich and the Ecole des Beaux Arts of Paris.

Sadly, Judge Edward Voigt died unexpectedly on August 26, 1934 at his cottage on Crystal Lake, never using his new courtroom. His body lay in state in the Sheboygan County Courthouse the week after its dedication.

When the remodel of 1969 was proposed, Schlichting was determined to save the mural. He consulted with art experts with poor results. Then, he was told that Alan Hanson, art supervisor with the Sheboygan public schools, could help him. Hanson told him it was certainly possible to remove the mural without hurting it. A Sheboygan firm, Strains Decorating Company, was hired to take it down.

“That painting is for the people of the area,” said Schlichting, “and as soon as a suitable place is found, it will be hung again.”

He always laughed about his single-mindedness when it came to the mural. One of his favorite sayings was, “You have to stick to your knitting when you think something is important. The folks at the county must have gotten sick of me and told me to just take it.”

Well, that was easier said than done. Hoping to find a public place for the mural he had come to cherish, Schlichting offered it to the Kohler Arts Center, Mead Public Library and the University of Wisconsin – Sheboygan. “But it really didn’t fit in any space they had.”

Much of what follows come from a previous article written by Dawn Belleau for the Research Center.

For several years, the rolled-up mural was stored in the Schlichting home. That’s when Charley Kurtinitis a friend of Schlichting and auctioneer and antique collector, said he would hang it at his auction warehouse (the old Turner Hall) in Plymouth.

For nearly 20 years after the whereabouts of the Sheboygan County Courthouse mural was a mystery. Judge Schlichting had taken to spending winters in Venice, Florida, and it was there after a phone call in 1987 from Jan Hildebrand, librarian-historian-writer at The Sheboygan Press, that the search for the missing mural commenced. He sent Hildebrand to Charley Kurtinitis, and of course, the mural.

Over the years, Kurtinitis entertained a number of offers to buy the mural, but he had promised Ferd (Schlichting) that he would take care of it until it found a home. The top four feet had been cut from the mural, the crowns of the majestic pines gone.

Shortened, but safe, the mural finally had a home – the place Janice had in mind from the beginning of her search—the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center in Sheboygan Falls. A volunteer researcher since 1983, Jan knew the library had an open wall ready for a bit of history.

Before the mural could be hung at the renovated 1837 Mill House which opened as the Research Center in 1986, Janice’s artist sister Barbara Wells Boedecker, then living in New Mexico, volunteered for the tedious cotton-swab restoration process, repairing the damage incurred in moving.

Even with its historic discrepancies, the painting is enjoyed and valued by the Research Center staff and visiting researchers. Thank goodness Judge Schlichting and Jan Hildebrand stuck to their knitting when it came to this bit of Sheboygan County history.