

# NORTHSHORE

MAGAZINE ONLINE



## Piece By Piece

By Laurie Grano

**O**ften a thing becomes so meshed in the fabric of everyday life it seems to disappear. Such was the case at a Wilmette school, where for decades some important Depression-era art hung virtually unnoticed.

The two murals at Harper Elementary School have graced the auditorium's walls, facing each other across the compact room of red theater seats, for every play and choral production and parent orientation program since 1973, when they were moved from another local elementary school scheduled for demolition.

But over time, the murals faded from Harper's collective consciousness: The pictures had become part of the school's regular background scenery, like lockers and drinking fountains.

The murals by Chicago artist Gustaf Oscar Dalstrom depict life in Wilmette, a town that was still fairly rural back in the 1930s when the farming- and gardening-themed murals were done.

The paintings were commissioned through the Federal Art Project, one of the nation's first federally sponsored art programs and a significant piece of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the largest agency created under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal emergency-relief package designed to put millions of unemployed Americans back to work. Dalstrom was one of several hundred artists hired by the WPA's Illinois branch to make art meant for easy, free enjoyment in the state's public schools, libraries, park fieldhouses, hospitals, courthouses and post offices, with the highest concentration of commissions in densely populated Chicago.

Over ensuing decades, the WPA-era art — easel paintings, murals, sculptures, dioramas and posters teaching what was usually an art, history or science lesson — was largely taken for granted, many to the point of destruction. A small surge of interest in the early 1970s blossomed in the 1990s, when a renewed appreciation for the educational art form took firm hold. Since 1996, the Chicago Mural Preservation Project has painstakingly preserved more than 400 murals found in the city's public schools, which collectively house the country's largest collection of WPA and pre-WPA murals.

A mural-preservation movement is also underway on Chicago's North Shore. Several murals here have been restored, including those at Lake Forest's Gorton Community Center, Highland Park High School and Wilmette's post office. Several more are candidates for restoration. Gov. Rod Blagojevich's office has awarded, following a three-year delay, a \$100,000 grant to save the gravely deteriorating murals at Oakton Elementary School, one of Evanston's oldest school buildings.

At Harper School, Dalstrom's pair of charming storybook scenes came to exist in a state of benign neglect. Layers of dust dulled and dirtied the already muted coloring, and their initial rescue and a later stymied restoration attempt left cuts and bruises. Then in 2004 came a new principal, Susan Kick, who spurred the conservation of one mural and is following the lead of her district's educational fund-raising foundation to lobby community support in restoring the second.

The Swedish-born Dalstrom was working as the first supervisor of the mural unit of the Illinois Art Project (the state's WPA offshoot), overseeing the projects of two dozen painters who worked under him in the IAP's showcase program, when he accepted a two-mural commission for Laurel Elementary School in Wilmette.

Dalstrom was already an award-winning painter with an impressive résumé. He studied at The Art Institute of Chicago under George Bellows and Randall Davey and had his work shown in many Art Institute exhibits. His long career (he died in 1971 at age 78) included a lengthy run as president of the Chicago Society of Artists, and he held a staff position at the Field Museum in Chicago, where he painted display backgrounds. His work has been exhibited around the world and is in the collection at the Museum of Modern Art.



Conservation work by Helen Conklin has already begun on a series of murals purchased by the Garriques family of Lake Forest.



Swedish-born artist Gustaf Oscar Dalstrom's "Gardening," which has been housed at Harper Elementary School in Wilmette since 1973, is one of the artist's WPA-commissioned murals undergoing restoration.

Dalstrom's job in the 1930s IAP was delegating mural requests that came in from officials at schools, park districts, libraries or other public buildings, says Heather Becker, artist, historian, lecturer and author of *Art for the People: The Rediscovery and Preservation of Progressive- and WPA-Era Murals in the Chicago Public Schools, 1904-1943*.

Becker is chief executive officer of The Chicago Conservation Center, the country's largest private art-conservation facility and the firm that has restored most of the Chicago Public Schools' WPA murals, as well as those at Gorton Community Center, Highland Park High School, the Wilmette post office and many others. The center's project to restore all 58 WPA and pre-WPA murals in Chicago's park fieldhouses is underway.

Becker says the state's WPA mural process for schools generally went like this: School officials would have an idea for a mural and then either pick an artist or have one assigned them after meeting with the IAP's mural supervisor. The assigned artist would meet with the school's principal or art department director and then develop sketches for final approval. The mural messages almost always were educational and tame, "scenes that related to a school's students," Becker says. "Sometimes the art was more controversial, but these were all young emerging artists who were so thrilled to be working with the WPA during a period that was so severe they were eager to please."

The largest murals could take up to a year to complete. But according to Mary Lackritz Gray's *A Guide to Chicago's Murals*, Dalstrom indicated that artists considered it such an honor to do murals that they worked conscientiously and did not need constant supervision.

Dalstrom completed "Gardening," the first of the two sizeable Harper murals — each oil on canvas and measuring about 26 feet long by 9 feet high — in 1936. He wrapped up the second painting, "Farming," in 1938, the year the murals were installed in Laurel School classrooms.

The naïvely styled murals are bucolic countryside scenes done with soft colors befitting a grammar school setting. "Gardening" shows local folk communing together while they hoe and harvest. A white farmhouse peeks above a hill in the near distance and birds trail overhead. A girl tips a watering can over a thriving central flowerbed; other children read companionably beneath a flowering tree.

"Farming" is a springtime agricultural scene of farm animals including horses, cows, a pig, sheep and various barnyard fowl. A red barn sits off in the distance and, deeper in the hills, a village rises. A stream cuts through a pasture that sprouts trillium and other native wildflowers; the children in this image are huddled near a blooming shrub.

"There is a whimsical quality about them," notes Peter Schoenmann, head conservator of painting and murals for Parma Conservation, the Chicago firm handling the Harper mural restorations. (Chicago Conservation Center, author Becker's firm, also bid on the Harper project.)

"The Harper murals are very innocent, with a simplicity and serenity that bodes well for children's enjoyment," Schoenmann says. "The scenes are idyllic, and cooperation, at least in 'Gardening,' is definitely a theme."

During his tenure with the New Deal art program, Dalstrom painted other North Shore murals; he is

the artist of murals at the former Green Bay Road Elementary School in Highland Park, now North Shore School District 112's administrative building. He also crafted murals in other parts of Illinois and in other Midwest states. He is considered one of the top WPA-era muralists and — as with all WPA artists — his work is a vital link to our past.

"This was a period of turmoil, change and societal reform, and these artists were students of a given community at a certain time," Becker says. "The murals are of great local importance. It's extremely rare to find records like this of our local history in an art form that we can still appreciate and enjoy."



Dalstrom's mural "Farming" was completed in 1938, the same year a series of murals was installed in Laurel School classrooms.

Laurel Elementary School, the Wilmette Public Schools District 39 building originally housing the Dalstrom pieces, was demolished in the early 1970s. A successful rescue effort saved the murals, and in 1973 they were moved to the Harper School auditorium.

The years passed. Then came Susan Kick, who arrived as principal at Harper in 2004.

"The murals were kind of just here," she says. Later in the school year, as Kick assessed her building, she concluded the auditorium — dating to when the school was built in the 1940s — could stand improvement. As she began closely studying the murals for the first time, she began compiling a mental inventory of possible improvements and necessary changes.

"They struck me as being dull," says Kick. "This is an elementary school — its paintings should be bright and cheerful. In one of the murals you could even see the cuts and tears from when it had been moved."

"I could see they were not in good condition and should be restored," Kick continues. "I had no idea about their history." Later, as she sifted through boxes of stored office files, clues to the murals' past came to light. Further investigation filled in the gaps and sparked in Kick a mission to restore the historically valuable paintings.

"These murals are a piece of Illinois history, let alone a piece of Wilmette and District 39 history," she says.

Kick applied for a grant administered by the District 39 Educational Foundation, which she hoped would pay for a total revamp of the auditorium, from seats to sound system — an expensive proposal that included restoring the centerpiece murals.

The grant program, known as the Gripp Grant, is named after longtime District 39 teacher and Educational Foundation founding trustee Phyllis Gripp.

A fund-raising committee reviews grant applications biannually for innovative projects usually within the district, which includes part of Glenview, and recommends approval to the Educational Foundation, which has final say. District staff members and residents may apply.

The cost of restoring Harper's auditorium was more than the program could afford, says former Educational Foundation trustee and former grant committee chairwoman Holly Berman. "However, the idea to restore the murals was intriguing," Berman says. "The more research I did on the murals, the more excited I became."

The grant committee supported the idea of restoring the murals. The Educational Foundation, fortified with Kick's and Berman's research, was likewise taken with the project. A grant in the amount of about \$12,000 — about half the estimated \$23,000 to restore both murals — was approved last year to restore one of the murals. Fund-raising for the additional \$11,000 or so needed to restore the second mural is under way. "This project was different from almost anything we'd done in the past," Berman says. "But we knew that anyone else undertaking the restoration was very unlikely — few people even knew the murals existed."

It took a team of three Parma conservators, including Schoenmann, more than a week this spring to clean away years of dirt, mend tears and repair paint and varnish on "Gardening." The mural was in fair condition with no serious structural problems such as peeling paint, notes Schoenmann. "We used a very light touch," he says. "We simply wanted to get to the truth of the painting."

The difference in the two murals — with one "before" and one "after" — is evident. The colors in "Gardening" are now clearer and brighter and there are no signs of abrasions. (Conservators noticed slight yet curious differences in brushstroke styles between the two murals, leading them to speculate that Dalstrom may have had an assistant, perhaps his wife, the painter Frances Foy, who was known to have worked on IAP assignments near those of her husband's. Whether Dalstrom, as supervisor of the mural unit, arranged the close-proximity jobs can only be presumed.)

The benefits of having the murals restored are more than just tangible; the paintings' preservation is a morale booster. "Harper has always been a school of great pride," Kick says. "There are many families in the area with adult members who went to school here and now their children or grandchildren go to school here. This is a group of people who pull together and work for one common goal.

"They are also highly appreciative of art and finer things, and having these murals makes people even prouder," she continues. And on a more basic level "is the importance of what the murals can teach the children who — like almost everyone else here — before really didn't take notice of them."

Last school year, the restoration process was observed and explained as part of Harper's art class. The murals' lessons will hopefully be integrated into the school's regular art program and may someday be taught to a wider student audience, district officials say. "Those paintings are a piece of the school," Kick says. "When our students leave Harper, they will take the memory of the murals with them." Y

Donations to restore the second Harper Elementary School mural can be sent by check, with "Harper Mural" noted on the memo line to: District 39 Educational Foundation, c/o 1012 Cherokee Road, Wilmette, IL 60091.

**Photos courtesy of the Chicago Conservation Center**