

Preserving a Piece of History



Community saves artwork depicting agriculture.

by *Billie Shelton*

It's not often that sale barn walls double as works of art. But that's just the way it was in Manning, Iowa, where an unusual piece of artwork was so outstanding that a group of local folks couldn't bear to lose it when the sale barn faced demolition.

The owner and some local citizens put their heads together to figure out a way to save the expansive mural that was painted on the walls of the former Manning Sale Barn by a local artist in 1973. Thanks to their hard work and vision, the mural is now safely preserved in the Audubon County Historical Museum in Audubon. Generations to come will be able to look at the painting in its new location and see a way of life that was the heart of this rural county for many years.

"Nothing is going anywhere now. It's ours," says Arch Andersen, volunteer treasurer of the historical society.

Worth saving

One of the reasons these organizers were so determined to save the painting is that it shows the cattle industry in southwestern Iowa in a way that's steadily disappearing.

"In those days," Andersen says with a gesture toward the painting, "every farmer had 25 to 200 head of cattle on the place. You still see lots of cattle around,

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but now the farmers are contract feeding for large packing plants.”

That’s why the sale barns are disappearing from many small towns, he says.

It wasn’t like that when veterinarian Robert Dappen opened the 450-seat Manning Sale Barn in 1972. Cattle were strong in the area, markets were good, and the sale barn was a busy place. To fill the expanse of wall that surrounded the sale ring, Dappen commissioned local artist Cam Ross to paint a mural depicting the beef industry.

Ross, a native of Audubon County, operated a sign business. He and his crew painted anything from lettering on truck doors and store windows to advertising signs on grain silos. He painted many signs for the Ralston Purina Co. and for the Archer Mills Co.

To do the sale barn project, Ross worked steadily from a scaffold for three months as the colorful, elaborate images took shape 20 feet (ft.) up on the walls of the sale ring. While he drew on crop and livestock scenes garnered from growing up in the area, Ross also used magazine advertisements as his models for part of the mural.

Ross earned \$10,000 for his work of art, which added a unique bit of character to the popular sale barn. Even so, the business closed just a few years later. In 1977, another veterinarian, Rexanne Struve, reopened it as a veterinary practice. When she moved her practice to a new building in 2000, the sale barn was slated for demolition.

Community action

Concerned citizens, as well as the local historical society, swung into action after Struve agreed to donate the mural to the Audubon County Historical Society. Determined to save the painting from the wrecker’s ball, volunteers struggled to find the best way to accomplish that. It was a project made especially daunting because the painting wasn’t simply attached to the walls; it *was* the walls.

Eventually, a local contractor decided that it would work to go in behind the walls and saw off the nails. “Once we got a plan, it all came together real well,” remarks Andersen, an acquaintance of Ross, who passed away in 1998 at the age of 77.

Getting the walls down was just the first hurdle. They also had to be transported 20 miles to Audubon. After welding special racks onto flatbed trailers so the panels

would stay upright, they were lifted by crane, stood on edge and protected by packing material. At 15 ft. tall, the art couldn’t be hauled on the highway, so an alternate route was devised.

“It took lots of organization from lots of volunteers,” Andersen says, “and in spite of that we still spent \$8,000 to \$9,000 on the move.” Donations covered some of that cost. According to Andersen, it took about a month to remove the mural and relocate it, once the organizers figured out how it could be done. The mural, which had survived a fire and slight water damage in its first home, arrived at its new location unscathed.

On exhibit

Now the mural’s 111-ft. length stretches along two walls of a building at the Nathaniel Hamlin Museum and Park in Audubon. The building also houses antique farm equipment, implements and some local artifacts.

What’s the reaction when visitors first view the mural?

“They always remark about how huge it is,” says Lynn Cody, tourism coordinator for Audubon County. “People are amazed at how detailed it is.”

Cody also is proud of the artwork because it was done by a local artist who appreciated the beauty and simplicity of Audubon County.

Ross’s talent won him recognition far from home, too. Shortly before starting work on the sale barn mural, Ross was hired by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. (MGM) which was filming the movie *Cold Turkey* in Greenfield, Iowa. The producers were so impressed by the set painting Ross did for them that they offered him a position in Hollywood. Ross declined, however, preferring the farm country of Audubon County.

The mural is staying in Audubon County, too, in the large museum building that seems to be the perfect home for it. “I bet if the historical society quit, the mural would stay right here anyway,” Cody muses.

Cam Ross would probably like that.

