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Arts, **Schools**, **Volunteers in the News**

Historical Society Rescues Mysterious Depression-Era Mural

Volunteers, donors join $50,000 effort to restore painting found during renovations at former Rochester High School.

By **Tiffany Dziurman Stozicki** | **Email the author** | October 27, 2010

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The mystery started when crews working on renovations at the former Rochester High School uncovered a mural under a thick coat of plaster. But now, the case is closed.

The pieces of a Depression-era mural found in what is now the **Rochester Community Schools** Administration Building are part of a large work completed in 1938 by Detroit artist Marvin Beerbohm, titled "Industrial Environment of Rochester High School."

The **Rochester-Avon Historical Society** has been leading the effort to restore and conserve the work, and now the painting soon will be on display again thanks to a group of historians, volunteers and donors.

Hidden gem revealed

The historical society estimates the project cost $50,000. The historical society, the Rochester Historical Commission and National City Bank (now PNC) all donated funds. E. Gilbert & Sons and Frank Rewold and Son donated removal and installation services. Rochester Community Schools donated warehouse space to house the mural during restoration.

The Works Progress Administration, part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives to put people to work during the Great Depression, commissioned the work. In June 1938, Beerbohm installed his mural above the main entrance of Rochester High School, near the central stairwell.

A June 17, 1938, *Rochester Clarion* article reported: "School authorities agree that artist Marvin Beerbohm has handled his subject in a masterly way and regard the mural as a distinct cultural addition to the school. Teachers and pupils unite in praising the work, and in the last few days many townspeople have made special trips of inspection on the strength of their children's recommendation."

An oil painting on canvas, the mural was affixed to plaster upon its installation. In 1961, during a school renovation project, work crews covered the mural with drywall. The painting remained hidden until another round of renovations uncovered it in the early 1990s.

"The construction crew pulled off wall board and found pieces of the mural on the back of the board," historical society president Rod Wilson said. "Those pieces were put away for safe keeping for nearly 20 years. However, two large pieces are now missing."

The rest of the mural remained on the wall.

Mystery solved

In 2007, at the urging of his wife, Susan, a Rochester High School graduate, Wilson asked the historical society to fund the mural's restoration. LaVere Webster a retired minister, historical society member and local painting conservationist, took on the project and began working with a team of volunteers to restore the work.

The mural had to be carefully cut from thick plaster with chainsaws and an impact tool. Then, three layers of plaster were removed one by one from the

back of the mural pieces. Finally, the mural could be put back together – much like a jigsaw puzzle. A large portion of the painting was still missing, leaving members of the historical society wondering what the rest of it looked like.

The answer came at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. A photograph of the mural was found in a collection of papers Beerbohm donated to the Smithsonian.

"We were flabbergasted," Wilson said. "We now knew what the rest of the mural looked like and had an actual black-and-white photograph of it."

The missing pieces were filled in using blown-up photocopies from the image. The photocopies were produced in sepia tone to maintain their distinction from the original painting.

Rochester's past in painting

Beerbohm's mural featured themes important to Rochester and the high school at the time.

On the mural's left side, Beerbohm painted images of the Ferry-Morse Seed Farm that once sprawled across hundreds of acres along Rochester Road (near Hamlin and Auburn roads). The mural's right side illustrated scenes from Parke-Davis Biological Farms, which housed horses, sheep, and cattle, and produced vaccines, anti-toxins and drugs such as Benadryl and Surital.

In the center of the mural is a portrait of Abram L. Craft, who was superintendent of Rochester Schools from 1898 until 1908 and later served as Oakland County School Commissioner.

Below Craft's image, Beerbohm painted students at work in the classroom. This section of the painting actually solved a vexing question for Wilson.

"At first we weren't sure who the artist was. Upon closer inspection, we discovered Beerbohm had written his name on the stenographer's paper in the typewriter," Wilson said.

The unveiling

Once restored, the 23-foot-by-57-inch painting will be installed on the balcony of the Harrison Room in the Administration Building. An unveiling and rededication ceremony is planned for Jan. 14. "To show our appreciation in helping to bring this mural back to the community, the event will be a ticketed fundraiser for **Rochester Community Schools**," Wilson said.

This is one in an occasional series of articles exploring Depression-era projects on display in public buildings in Rochester and Rochester Hills.

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