

Notes for Painted Forest Tour Guides

1897: Meeting hall erected by members of Modern Woodmen of America

Camp #6190

MWA was fraternal order with secret rites and ceremonies similar to the Masons.

Purpose: To provide life insurance for members. Much of ritual work was intended to educate members and potential members as to importance of insurance.

1898-99: Building still new. Ernest Hupeden, folk artist (born 1858) came into Valton. Emigrated from Germany, arrived in US in 1878.

Little known of his life next 20 years until arrival in Wisconsin in 1890's. He walked roads, stopping at rural homes. Offered to paint in exchange for place to stay, food, and alcohol. He was alcohol dependent.

Painted rural scenes, family homes, murals on interior walls. Decorated serving plates, a sea chest, and whisky bottles. Tradition says he would decorate an empty bottle in exchange for a full one, or empty one and decorate it.

Became a well-known figure in this southwest area. So his offer to decorate the new MWA meeting hall was probably met with ready acceptance.

He worked in the hall for approximately 18 months.

Stage Curtain

Completed painting stage curtain December 1899 (signature lower right corner)

Scene depicts defeat of Spanish fleet, Manila Bay, May 1898, Spanish-American War, just the year before.

His murals covered the walls floor to ceiling including window frames and shades. Only one shade remains. Restored and put on artist stretcher like an oil painting.

Purpose of murals: Provide atmosphere or background for camp's rituals, especially initiation ceremony.

Murals depict initiation ceremony symbolically to avoid revealing fraternal secrets, as hall was sometimes open for community activities.

Initiate Riding Goat

As part of the ceremony initiate rode a goat, but not a live one. See goat at back of room. Initiate was blindfolded and given a bumpy ride around the hall.

Death Figure and Background Painting

One part of the initiation ceremony concerned the inevitability of death and need for life insurance to protect family.

Member dressed in this costume or one similar emerged from closet. In eerie tone, spoke the words posted at the edge of stage.

Hupeden painted background for this: skull and bones, dying tree, and owl, eerie death symbol.

Woodland Scene

By 1899 lumbering had passed its peak here but some pines still stood. Hills also part of this landscape.

Two Initiation Scenes: Life before and After Joining

First Scene:

Ceremony containing a section intended to frighten.

Impressed upon the initiate advisability of joining a fraternal organization for protection against life's dangers and hardships.

Included frightening tricks. One simulated death by fire. Hupeden painted a scene showing one man being burned at the stake, one being dragged to the fire, and another stabbed and bleeding. All the bandits are masked and anonymous, adding to the terror. Guards at the valley entrances prevent rescue or escape.

The guards wear Prussian helmets, perhaps a sly dig at German militarism, which Hupeden said "pervaded the German schools from kindergarten through university."

Second Scene:

Initiate grimacing in fright, hair standing on end, effects of previous scene. Led to camp fire by a member. Bones of those who did not join and therefore did not survive life's dangers lie under trees.

Members gathered around camp fire and kettle, symbols of MWA in peace, safety, and brotherhood.

Members were not lumberjacks, as Masons are not stone cutters. Miners and sailors were not insurable by MWA because their occupations were too dangerous.

Symbolic axes of wood or aluminum were used by drill teams.

Marched in parades or at conventions.

Uniforms on mannequins were worn by teams of various camps.

Figure in gray robe: head consul or sage, symbol of wisdom.

Rear Wall

Sage appears again, holding hand of initiate, comforting him. Initiate worn out by previous experiences, legs bowed, shoulders drooping. Sage points to Germanic castle. (banners: "Peace, Light, Safety"; "Valton Camp 6190"). Symbolize peace and safety of membership in MWA.

Figures walking behind said to be recognizable likenesses of some of the members.

Home Scene

Peaceful home scene of family insured under MWA.

From steel-plate engraved logo on insurance policy (one on display on stage)

Modification by Hupeden: Added a babe in arms, born to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Gibeaut in 1895. Charles Gibeaut, chief consul, wanted baby named Royal Forest. Mrs. Gibeaut questioned name, but Charles couldn't explain because was secret password (describe hole, flap, sentry) Christened Royal Forest Gibeaut, called Roy.

Valton Panel

Artist's depiction of Valton of the future.

Thriving town at turn of century, population 100.

Two general stores, livery stable, two blacksmiths, hardware store, creamery, grist mill, barrel stave factory and small millinery.

Hupeden predicted city, main street stretching for blocks.

Included two enterprises Valton never had: saloon with bartender on sidewalk (Woodland Township has always been dry) and a bank.

He cut away wall to show interior.

Two purposes:

1. Show widow cashing \$2000 MWA life insurance policy;
2. Back drop for camp treasurer (called "banker"). Ritual floor plan shows that he stood at this point

Note wine bottles and glasses in window of Louis Lee's general store.

Names on windows above bank were actual residents of Valton. Horton was Township Clerk; Hupeden with a few brushstrokes promoted him to City Clerk.

Woodland Scene

Shade shows Valton smithy, Collins and Good

Woods growing back after lumbering, birches

Note profusion and variety of flowers, favorite subject of Hupeden.

Woods continue over window, around corner, over doorway, to camp charter. Hupeden worked charter into scene by painting marble shrine around it.

Additional Hall History

After camp was dissolved in 1920's, owned by several descendents of Charles Gibeaut.

Served as community hall, roller skating, dances, wedding receptions, township hall, Grange meetings, 4H exhibits, Valton school plays and graduations.

Purchased in 1960's by Ronald and Delores Nash. They presented musical variety shows ("Do's"), by local talent. Passed hat to defray maintenance cost. First restoration of hall during this time, by Nashes.

1980: Deterioration severe; sale to Kohler Foundation, Inc. Restoration cost: \$75,000. Details of restoration: Erected temporary interior bracing to protect plaster murals. Jacked up entire building. Tore out and replaced foundation; lowered back down. New cedar shake roof. Team of professional restoration artists cleaned and repaired murals. Stage curtain was taken to Chicago for special restoration. It is now permanently mounted on artist stretcher. Doesn't roll up. Given to Sauk County with the stipulation that it be shown to the public, and that the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley furnish custodial care and guided tours. The Painted Forest was gifted to Edgewood College, Madison, Wisconsin in 2004.

History of Stage Mural

Hupeden was hired by August Kriegel around 1908 to paint this mural on the wall of the office of the Kickapoo Hardwood Lumber Co., later American Hardwood Lumber Co. in LaFarge. Donated by Harold and Ruth Dyar of LaCrosse. Harold's father Bert Dyar bought the lumber yard from August Kriegel and converted the office into his family residence.

The mural is painted on tongue-and-groove boards, which were taken down one by one, numbered on the back, and stored for several years.

The railroad tunnel, near LaFarge, is no longer in existence.

The large cutout was for a chimney.

The single gray board to the right of the windows contains half of the artist's signature. Unfortunately, at some point a doorway was cut here, losing the other half. Another doorway interrupted the train in the original mural, where we have taken the opportunity to place the wall cabinet.

Opening Painted Forest

1. Turn lights on in main hall.
2. Raise shades.
3. You may turn on ceiling fans. There is air conditioning now if you keep the front door closed.
4. Put out "open" sign.
5. Ask visitors to sign guestbook.
6. Offer visitors brochures.

Close:

7. Remove "open" sign.
8. Lower shades.
9. Turn off lights.
10. Empty donation box.
11. Turn off ceiling fans and air conditioning.
12. Lock door. Sometimes it helps to push in.

Thank you!