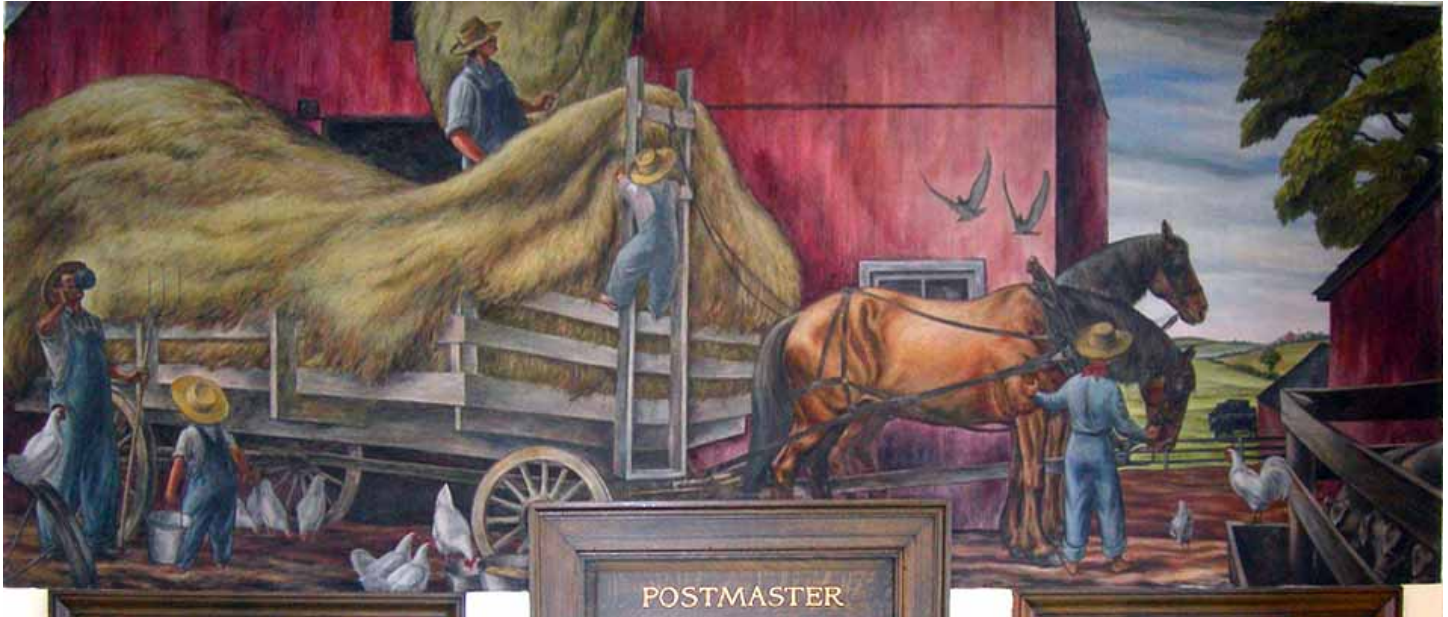


THE LANCASTER AREA ART CLUB

There are three paintings hanging in the upstairs hallway of the Cunningham Museum. These paintings are both romantic and impressionistic reflecting a modern sensibility along with a romantic sense of the past. They are the work of Lela Borah Smith, and she is where the story of the Lancaster Art Club begins. Even though it was called the Lancaster Art Club (later changed to the Lancaster Area Art Club) its members came from many other communities. The story of the club's origin is one of hard times and serendipity. We need to look back to the late years of the Great Depression. The government had instituted a broad range of programs to give jobs and hope to the country, and art played a part in that effort. The Lancaster Post Office, built in 1937, was one of many constructed during the depression with its modern somewhat art deco lines. Inside the lobby you will see a painting done in 1940 by Tom Rost, who now is known as a Wisconsin artist and illustrator, called "Farm Yard."



He began his career in the CCC camps where he drew and painted images of work done by the crew. His talent was made manifest and he was hired by the WPA (Works Progress Administration) to do public art paintings. Later in life he did cartoons for The Milwaukee Journal and covers for Field and Stream and other outdoor magazines. Before he completed his painting an art club was formed in Lancaster. It isn't known if any of the members of the Lancaster Art Club came to watch Rost work, but it is hard to imagine that curiosity.

Lela Borah Smith, one of the founders wrote: *"Amateur painting by a group of twelve housewives began in Grant County in 1939, the same year that the University Rural Art program was taking shape. We had not heard about the rural art program in 1940 when the first State show was held, but two of us had the courage to enter our first original paintings in the second State show in 1941. We came and saw our pictures on the gallery walls, and that day we took Rural Art back to Lancaster--and Grant County and Southwest Wisconsin."*



It started like this: Lela's sister had been hired to teach a WPA class on sewing. Things were going well for her until she was told by her supervisor that she could not teach only sewing, but had to add something else. She discussed it with Lela, who was a milliner, and together they decided to add art as a second class, even though neither had any



A Method of Painting in Oil



by Lela Smith — Wisconsin Rural Artist

ent long hours studying painting techniques, and then taught what she
ting was of one of her cats, Toby on a bright red pillow. When the
ted to stay together, and so the Lancaster Art Club was born. She had at
ndness for them showed in the paintings she produced. You can see a
emorial Library in Lancaster. Lela became a regular exhibitor at art
mual rural Art Exhibit with an oil painting called “Straw Boss.” She
Salon prize for an oil painting titled “Between Beats.” As time passed
as one of the best of Wisconsin’s rural artists. Some of her
of the Museum of Wisconsin Art. John Steuart Curry, the great artist of
n with her work.

It was not only Lela who found success as a rural artist. Many
other members over the years have been awarded various prizes at art
shows. You can look at the meticulously kept scrapbooks at the
Cunningham Museum which show our local county artists and photos
of their paintings. These witness a quantity and quality of work that is
probably second to none in Wisconsin’s rural counties. Early
members of the club were: Nettie Ruegger (Lela’s sister), Helen
Haskins, L.J. Haskins, Henry Bryhan, Hattie Schwartz, Andrew Jerret,
J.D. Glynn, Grace Pendleton, Modesta Macke, Anna Staver, Sue

Johnson, Laura Johnson, Gertrude Richardson, Laura Zenz, and Katherine (Mrs. George B.) Clementson. The
Clementson’s provided a room as a studio for the club. Initially, club meetings were held each Thursday in a dressing
room under the stage of the Grantland Theater. Later meetings were held on Mondays at the Clementson home, and years
later in the Senior Center. In 1958 Marion McCormick took up oil painting, and helped to start a class with Arthur Colt, a
protégé of George Bellows (an acclaimed American Realist painter) as instructor. These meetings were held in a room at
the Electric Company. As the years passed others joined the club, and added to the prize totals.



Member Anita Schaefer of Potosi displays her paintings

Most of the club’s artists painted or drew local scenes. McCormick’s first painting was called “Ramshaw’s Alley”,
a place familiar to anyone who lives in Lancaster. A primary function of the club was to learn from each other.
Members

←LEFT: The work of The Lancaster Art Club members was not expensive in 1941.

Bret Ford		1941	34.45	42.00
Jul	Alberta Schmeidler	Jan	Roggenbach	73
	Duck Crayon picture		2 small designs	
	Bernice Clawson		Alma Godfrey	
	1 pr. cat.		Print Cat picture	\$1.00
me	Jess Peterson		Roggenbach	
	1 pr. cat.		1 design	.40
	Roy M. Cox		1 design	.25
	Touch up picture	Feb	Nell Rosaki	
	Mrs. Loren		Painting in pr. frame	.50
	Paint 13x20 in	Mar	Almira Proemic	
ug.	Roggenbach		1 plaque	10/.25
	1 painting		1 pr. peasant	.25
Sept	Mrs. Farrington	May	Anna Versperman	
	Mend & paint plaque		1 pr. watercolor	.50
			1 flower picture	25/.25

works of art that they were working on. What could be techniques for excellence were shared.

In December of 1945 the club helped to sponsor an exhibit of the University of Wisconsin's permanent collection of work by rural Artists. The paintings were shown in a store window at first and then moved to the Grantland club rooms where Prof. James Schwalbach, an artist with the Dept. of Rural Sociology at U.W. Madison made a presentation. Professor Schwalbach was the founder of the Wisconsin Regional Artists Association.

In February 1946 the club took a giant step. On February 16th of that year, the first annual Rural Art Show sponsored by the club was held. Fifty framed paintings were shown. Prof. Schwalbach and Robert Grilley of the U.W. department of art education reviewed and commented on the works exhibited. This was the first

of at least fifty annual Rural Art Shows which the club sponsored. Members and others showed their work. Sgt. Larry Clementson showed his painting, started in the south pacific theater of war months earlier. In 1947 the county home agents, and superintendents of Grant, Iowa, and Lafayette Counties worked together to help the Lela Smith and Jessie Ziegler of the Lancaster Art Club launch its second annual show. In 1948 Anna Staver and Lela Smith worked with the three counties and the U.W. Extension to mount the exhibits for the rural Art Fair.



First Club Rural Art Show, February 16, 1946. Left to Right: Mrs. Lester Haskins, Mrs. Jessie Ziegler, and Miss Helen Davis (Grant County Home Agent)

By 1960, others had become active in the club and were winning prizes for their work. These included: Lowell Cook, and Phyllis Baumgartner of Lancaster, Modesta Macke and Anita Schaefer of Potosi, and Florence Chance of Platteville.

The Club suffered a great blow on May 2, 1971 when Lela Smith, Grace Pendleton, and Modesta Macke were killed in an auto accident 6 miles north of Lancaster. They were on their way to a meeting in Spring Green of the Wisconsin Rural Artists Association. The day before her death she wrote a letter to a friend, which she didn't have time to mail, part of which said *"I might die tomorrow and I'd really like to have someone know what makes me tick....According to the Bible our lives are predestined, and I firmly believe that mine was. God gave me a talent and parents with understanding*

and encouragement.”



Lela Smith at home, late 1960's



Gertrude Richardson and Katherine Clementson in the 1940's

Over the years new members have joined, painted and passed away. The names of its members are too many to list. The club kept a record of members and photos of their works starting in the early 1990's. That material is kept at the museum now, because in January 2012 the club held its last meeting and voted to disband after 72 years of community enrichment.. Carmella Eddy and Helen Croft announced the decision. We at the Lancaster Historical Society will keep this amazing club's record for future members of the community to see. The reason for disbanding was given as "lack of members." Carmella Eddy explained that "with parents working full-time and part-time jobs and children involved in structured programs has made time a scarce commodity." What a shame that we no longer have the time to enjoy the meditation and creativity that art provides. Lela Smith once said *"When I tire of writing and painting I play solitaire on the board across my lap, or recline my chair and just snooze or daydream. Lazy – maybe – but I like it here."* Sometimes it is from daydreams that great creations arise.



"Fuchsias" by Helen Croft

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