INDIANS CEDE THE LAND
by George Melville Smith

HISTORY OF THE ARTIST AND THE MURAL

"Indians Cede the Land," by George Melville Smith, a 6' x 20' mural created for the Park Ridge Post Office through the Depression era Treasury Relief Art Project, is a rare treasure from the city's heritage. The government hired the best artists it could find to provide murals for federal buildings across the country. Believed to be an imagined scene rather than a specific single treaty signing, Smith's work shows elements from the wilderness and Native American environment, as well as the arriving wave of American pioneers who would re-shape the landscape to their own purpose.

Between 1934 and 1943, approximately 1,100 murals and sculptures were commissioned by the U.S. Treasury Department under the Treasury Relief Art Project and then the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration Program to decorate federal buildings across the United States. These projects were distinct from the Federal Arts Project that was administered under the WPA in that the artists did not necessarily have to be in financial need. Instead, the Treasury Section held regional and national mural competitions in order to commission "high art" -- the best artists available.[1]

George Melville Smith was one of a handful of artists who were awarded multiple mural contracts through the Treasury Section. He was selected from the designs he submitted to produce murals for post offices in Crown Point, IN, (1938), Elmhurst, IL, (1938), and Park Ridge, (1940). Smith was paid approximately $2,000 for each mural.[2]

Smith was born in Chicago on May 12, 1879, to Owen Smith and Agnes Nesbit. At 14, he studied as an architect's apprentice. At

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1 *Proposal: Conservation Services for the Park Ridge, IL Post Office Mural* (Chicago: Parma Conservation, 1-14-2009), 2.

2 Mary Emma Thompson, Ph.D., Post Office Art Program. (Park Ridge Historical Society and Park Ridge Mural Restoration Committee), 21 August 2011.

17 he attended the Art Institute of Chicago's evening school and worked during the day as a commercial artist to help support his parents. [3] His only known Chicago address was 672 North Rush Street in 1922. [4] He then studied in Paris under Andre Lhote from 1925-26 and painted in France, Spain, England and Italy. He drew sketches across New England. He was a winner of the Chicago and Vicinity Show held at the Art Institute in 1932 and also displayed there in 1933, 1937 as well as at the Federal Art Project exhibit that the Institute hosted in 1938. He displayed his work at the General Exhibit Building at the Century of Progress in 1933. Smith became the supervisor of the applied arts project for the WPA in 1936 and created a mural for Chicago's Schubert Elementary School in 1938. He was a member of the Arts Club, the Chicago No-Jury Society of Artists. He participated in the Forty-Eight States Competition in 1939. [5] He became the fifth president of the Chicago Society of Artists.[6] He died in Fayette, Kentucky, on October 4, 1952.

All of Smith's murals portray local historical events in American history that he created from his imagination. He was encouraged to visit the locale and research its inhabitants.[7]

The 6' x 20' Park Ridge mural entitled "Indians Cede the Land" was installed in the former unadorned Park Ridge Post Office at 164 South Prospect Avenue, on June 20, 1940, when the building was just three years old. The mural depicts U.S. soldiers and pioneer explorers meeting Native American leaders in the wilderness. To the left, behind the soldiers, are two rivers. To the right, behind the Native Americans, are brightly lit forest trees.

In 1970 the Post Office building was sold to the Park Ridge-Niles School District #64 to serve as the District's headquarters and is

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[3] John C. Carlisle, *A Simple and Vital Design: The Story of the Indiana Post Office Murals* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1995), 28-29.

[4] Peter Hastings Falk, *The Annual Exhibition Record of the Art Institute of Chicago 1888-1950.* (Madison, T: Sound View Press, 1990), 836.

[5] Louise Dunn Yochim, *Role and Impact: The Chicago Society of Artists.* Section III / 273, (Chicago: CSA, 1979), n. p.

[6] "Jon Balke, President of the Chicago Society of Artists," Telephone Interview, August 2010.

[7] Carlisle, id.

now known as the Raymond Hendee Service Center. As District #64 was taking over the building, the mural was to be discarded to make way for renovation. Learning of its plight, Paul Carlson, a longstanding history teacher at Maine East High School, who was a founding member of the Park Ridge Historical Society, endeavored to rescue it. With the help of two students, Tom Musolf, Class of 1970, who now lives in Arlington Heights, and Debbie Milling, Class of 1971, the rescue was undertaken. The mural was first sprayed with $25 worth of varnish to set the surface and then pried from the wall while using scaffolding supplied by the school district. [8]

Upon his death on August 19, 2008, Mr. Carlson's family as well as family friend and colleague, Otto Kohler, were prompted to return the mural back to Park Ridge. On September 20, 2008, 38 years to the day that the mural was rescued, the group delivered the mural to the Park Ridge Public Library where it was hoped that it would be put on permanent display pending restoration.[9]

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[8] "Carlson Rescues Old Mural," *Park Ridge Advocate*, 21 Sept.1970, 12.

[9] Anne Lunde, "Mural, 78, Carries Its Own Art Legacy in City," *Park Ridge Herald-Advocate*, 25 Sept. 2008

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THE TREATY OF ST. LOUIS OF 1816 AND THE INDIAN BOUNDARY LINES

Although the artist George Melville Smith painted local historical events from his imagination, he may well have been thinking of the ceding of Native American lands for what later became the City of Chicago and its contiguous suburbs, most especially Park Ridge.

The Great Treaty of Greenville of 1795 relinquished many sites along important rivers across the Midwest to the United States government to allow it to legally operate forts. This treaty included in Article III a 6 mile square (3 miles x 2 miles) piece of land at the mouth of the Chicago River at Lake Michigan. This area became Fort Dearborn, built upon the site of a former fort by Captain John Whistler in 1803 and named for President Thomas Jefferson's then Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn. The treaty also included a 12 mile square (4 miles by 3 miles) at the mouth of the Illinois River emptying into the Mississippi. The treaty called for the Native Americans to allow settlers safe passage across the portage through their lands between these two strategic points.[1]

The Treaty of St. Louis of 1816 created the Indian Boundary Lines of Chicago-land that are still important roads today. This cessation of land allowed the establishment of the cities, villages and towns of our area, particularly Park Ridge through the Treaty of Prairie du Chien of 1829 and the Blackhawk War of 1832.

After the U.S. government bought the land as far west as the Mississippi River from Emperor Napoleon of France in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, it still had to work out treaties with the Native American tribes who recognized neither the American or French claims to their territory.

The Treaty of St. Louis of 1816 (referred to in government documents as the Treaty with the Sauk, 1816) was conducted at

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[1] *The Treaty of Greenville As It Appears in the Laws of the United States*. (Philadelphia: Richard Folwell, Printer, 1796). Web. <http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/greenville/text.html>.

Portage des Sioux, Missouri, located immediately north of St. Louis, on August 24, 1816. The Treaty was signed for the United States by Ninian Edwards, August Chouteau and William Clark, the brother of George Rogers Clark of Chicago. On the Native American side the document was signed by representatives of the Council of Three Fires (the united tribes of Ottawa, Ojibwa and Potawatomi). One of the signers for the Potawatomi was Chief Che-che-pinqua— "Blinking Eye"--also named Alexander Robinson." He had been appointed Chief by the U.S. Government because he could speak all of the languages and could negotiate.[2]

The Treaty was proclaimed on December 30, 1816. Under the United States' tradition of English law, settlers could not be granted the land until a signed document was exchanged with the Native Americans including some type of compensation given in return. Therefore, in exchange, the tribes were to be paid $1,000 in merchandise annually to be delivered over 12 years. [3] The U.S. later reduced the amount by half and converted it from cash to goods in kind.

According to accounts of the Treaty compiled by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1904, by signing the document, the tribes ceded title to land that had previously been informally ceded to the United States by the Sauk (Sac) and Fox tribes on November 3, 1804:

"the said chiefs and warriors, for themselves and the tribes they represent, agree to relinquish, and herby do relinquish to the United States, all their right, claim, and title, to all the land contained in the before-mentioned cession of the Sacs and Foxes . . ."[4]

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[2] Charles J. Kappler, "Treaty with the Sauk, 1816. May 13, 1816. | 7 Stat., 141. | Proclamation, Dec. 30, 1816." *INDIAN AFFAIRS: LAWS AND TREATIES. Vol. II Treaties, (*Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1904)), 126-28. Oklahoma State University. Web. <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/kappler127.

[3] James A. Clifton, The Prairie People: Continuity and Change in Potawatomi Indian Culture, 1665-1965. *An Expanded Edition.* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1998), pp. 222-23.

[4] Kappler, *op cit.*

The thin strip of land protruding from Lake Michigan that was included in the Treaty belonged to the Potawatomi but the tribe had only learned of this earlier cessation the year before during the Treaty of Detroit at Spring Wells, Michigan, in 1815. Their land was already in the process of being surveyed and was intended by the U.S. Government to provide land grant rewards for volunteers in the War of 1812.

The second purpose that the Government had for the land was to make it possible for the New Americans to build a canal and to construct a military road to aid the canal building, from Lake Michigan to the Illinois River. [5] The importance of a transportation route from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico with all its economic ramifications was noted. The Illinois and Michigan Canal was conceived, constructed and finally completed in1848. Its modern day off spring is known as the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal constructed in 1900.

During the remainder of 1815 and early 1816, the Potawatomi waged a struggle to destroy the surveyor's tools to slow and/or stop the surveying. When they were unsuccessful they realized they would lose their land regardless of their efforts. They decided they must cede their land themselves in order to be one of the recipients of the annuity the U.S. would provide, rather than allow the Fox and Sauk to benefit. The Potawatomi united with the Ottawa and Ojibwa to sign the Treaty of St. Louis. It was the first time the Potawatomi gave up their own land surrounding their villages. According to Albert Scharf, a mapmaker who drew a map of the significant Potawatomi villages at that time, Park Ridge was the third most important Potawatomi village in Illinois following Bowmanville and Forest Glen in Chicago. [6]

The Treaty of 1816 was also the first time that the U.S. Government dealt with certain groups or "bands" of a tribe to

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[5] Florence L. Hagemann and Mark Dolnick, *A History of American Indians of the Chicago Metropolitan Region and the Western Great Lakes*. (Hometown, IL: Floating Feather of History Research Enterprises, 2004), 16.

[6] R. David Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 218.

represent the entire tribe across North America, leading to what Native Americans today believe led to the disintegration of the tribes.[7]

In the Treaty of St. Louis of 1816 the Potawatomi ceded, among other territory, a strip of land 20 miles' wide that connects Chicago and Lake Michigan to the Kankakee, Fox and Illinois Rivers leading to the Mississippi River and ultimately to the Gulf of Mexico. The streets along the northern Indian Boundary Line, like most Native Indian trails, run at a diagonal that is counter to the Chicago street grid, including Rogers Avenue on the far north side of Chicago, in Rogers Park, and Forest Preserve Drive on the far northwest side, west to the Des Plaines River.

The Treaty describes this land as:

"thence, in a direct line, to a point ten miles north of the west end of the Portage, between Chicago creek, which empties into Lake Michigan, and the river Depleines, a fork of the Illinois; thence, in a direct line, to a point on Lake Michigan, ten miles northward of the mouth of Chicago creek; thence, along the lake, to a point ten miles southward of the mouth of the said Chicago creek . . ."[8]

Chief Alexander Robinson, one of the signers of the Treaty of St. Louis of 1816, was the son of an Ottawa mother and a Scottish father. He was born in Mackinac, Michigan. He first married Cynthia Sahsos whose present-day descendants include Verlyn "Buzz" Spreeman of Schiller Park. He then married a Native American / French woman named Cateche (Catharine) Chevalier and had seven more children . One of her present day descendants is Judith Wing, Robinson's great-granddaughter. Mrs. Wing created a genealogical chart of the family and Mr. Spreeman presents lectures about his collection of Native American artifacts as well as tours of the family's former homestead within the Indian Boundary Line.[9]

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7 *Id.*

8 Kappler, *op cit*.

9 "Verlyn Spreeman: Chief Che Che Pin Quay's Ancestor." Telephone interview. 15 July 2010.

For his assistance to Chicago settlers John Kinzie and Captain & Mrs. Heald and their families during the War of 1812, Robinson was granted a two square mile homestead from the Government inside the Boundary Line at the Treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1829. During the War of 1812 most Chicago Potawatomis favored the British, and on August 15, 1812, when federal troops abandoned Fort Dearborn at is what the current intersection of Michigan Avenue and Wacker Drive on the southside of the Chicago River, hostile Potawatomis led by Siggenauk and Mad Sturgeon attacked the garrison and entered Native American land at what is now 18th Street and Prairie Avenue. More than 50 Americans and about 15 Native Americans were killed. Robinson, a fur trader with Kinzie, harbored the settlers to Michigan and later relinquished them safely to the British.[10]

Robinson's homestead was situated at the Des Plaines River east from Cumberland Avenue and from Addison Street north to Higgins Road. He and his ancestors are buried there in the family plot north of Lawrence Avenue along East River Road in what is now the Indian Boundary Division of the Cook County Forest Preserve. Robinson died in 1872, one year after the Chicago Fire, but his descendants lived on the property until May 26, 1955, when their house mysteriously burned to the ground and its occupants, Robinson's granddaughter and great-grandson, were rescued by firemen. Soon after, the property was condemned by Cook County without presidential approval and taken over by the Cook County Forest Preserve Division. The family is currently attempting to get the land back.[11]

The old Native Indian Trail in this Forest Preserve Division begins at Madison Street, follows the Des Plaines River northward, through Thatcher Woods to North Avenue, to Grand Avenue (3 ½

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[10]" Judith A. Grove, Ed.D. "Indian 'Royal' Family Still Honored by Local Forest Preserve Monument," *Park Ridge Herald-Advocate 2004.*

[11] Mark Konkol, "Chief's Relatives Want Land Back," *Park Ridge Herald Advocate* 18 Feb. 2010.

miles), through the historic Robinson reservation, and to Touhy Avenue. The total length is about 10 ¾ miles where it connects with the Des Plaines Division trail.[12]

Some Native Americans today view Robinson as a traitor for his role in signing and ceding the land in the Treaty of St. Louis of 1816. Robinson explained that he was attempting only to do what was best for his people: to allow them to receive something tangible for their land and to avoid loss of life. Under the Treaty of St. Louis that Robinson signed, the tribes were to receive $1,000 per year for twelve years. After the treaty, that amount was later reduced to half, and then the cash was replaced with goods in kind.

The mural "Indians Cede the Land" by George Melville Smith suggests some of the geographic elements present in the Chicago area at the time the Native Americans signed treaties to give up their claims to the land. It is an area fed by two river corridors, the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers, with the wilderness of the original woodlands about to be replaced by settlement. The American Government negotiators are balanced by representatives of several different tribes.

While the issue of relocating the "noble savage" was a popular representation by the Government which enforced the Native Americans' withdrawal, modern audiences with wider and more enlightened political and historic perspectives today can also appreciate that they were given little choice in their removal. This mural reflects our historical actions as well as our changing social thought in regard to our Native American heritage.

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[12] *Points of Interest: Indian Boundary Division Picnic Areas and Trail Map*. (Cook County, IL, Forest Preserve, n.d).

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