

Artists of Nutley | Nutley Yesterday · Today - 1961

Artists of Nutley

MRS. JOHN AUGUSTINE SMITH

IN the 1880's, Henry Cuyler Bunner, editor of Puck, moved to the locality now known as Nutley, became one of its most ardent advocates, and is quoted as having written to his friend, Mark Twain:

“There isn't much that is prettier than this end of New Jersey. It is all upland, tumbling into shallow valleys and bright sunny reaches along the Passaic River, and hillsides white as snow with the daisies, and everywhere trees, in little clumps or in long lines by the roadside.... You come. I'll drive you around on Sunday and show you some views that will do your heart good. I'll row you up the Passaic. I'll give you a chance to play tennis.... Don't be afraid. You can't play worse tennis than I do.... The mosquitoes are very small this summer - few over an inch long....”

There, in the lines of Bunner's letter, we get a glimpse of the setting, the society, and the disposition that constituted Nutley's original artists' and writers' colony, one that entertained Mark Twain along with a host of other distinguished visitors.

Many of the members of the early colony had migrated here from the art colonies of Paris, London, and New York. Yet to define the community, further, as “Bohemian” or as “a Latin Quarter” is to use terms too ambiguous for future readers of a historical record such as this. To do justice to the gifted and gracious society that resided here, let us make clear that Nutley's early colony was neither arty nor bizarre; it was a cultivated family community.

Eccentrics, there were, however; judging from the records, improvisation ran high in the days of the artist pioneers. It is said that eight men actually pioneered the colony. Four were in the literary field: Henry Bunner; Frank Stockton (*Rudder Grange*; *Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine*; *The Lady, or the Tiger?*); Ripley Hitchcock; and Colonel Henry Goslee Prout, who, following a brilliant military career in Egypt, settled down to a quiet life here as editor-in-chief of *The Railroad Gazette*.

The four pioneer artists are recorded to have been Frank Fowler, Albert Sterner, Arthur Roeber, and Edward Loyal Field. All four, like so many of the painters to follow them here, had studied in Paris prior to coming to the colony, and had sought a quiet spot accessible to New York to continue their work. They found that Nutley's peaceful countryside provided the perfect place to paint, and that the community provided not only the perfect diversions, but also the encouragement of many cultivated laymen who lived here.

One of these men was Henry W. Goodrich, Nutley's greatly admired “Judge,”

whose son, Lloyd, shared his father's intense interest in art. Born in Nutley in 1897, Lloyd was brought up with the younger generation of artists here, including his good friend, Reginald Marsh. He studied art at the Art Students League of New York and at the National Academy of design. From 1925 to 1930, he was associate editor of The Arts magazine with a year abroad as European editor. He has been associated with the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York since its foundation in 1930; since 1958, he has been its director. Along the way, Mr. Goodrich has lectured and written extensively on American art, including definitive biographies of Winslow Homer, Albert P. Ryder, and Thomas Eakins. A Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the recipient of many honors and awards, Mr. Goodrich last year received the Art in America annual award "for outstanding achievement in furthering interest in American art." Mr. and Mrs. Goodrich have lived in New York for many years. Of all the artists and writers to have "graduated" from Nutley's colony, Lloyd Goodrich has contributed more to American art, generally, than any other. It is a matter of the greatest pride to our residents that he has carried on the tradition of one of Nutley's finest families of the colony days.

The Goodrich family lived at 187 Nutley Avenue in a splendid, rambling house designed by Nutley's architect, the Swedish nobleman, Baron Von Strom, who called himself plain "William Strom"; this house is still occupied by Lloyd's brother and the latter's wife - Mr. and Mrs. William Goodrich. Colonel Prout lived just around the corner from the Goodrich's in another handsome house designed by Strom at 18 Stockton Place, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Happe, Jr. Henry Bunner first lived on Highfield Lane in a house he named "The Bunnery," and later settled in his huge "House of Spare Bedrooms" at the corner of Whitford and Nutley Avenues. Ripley Hitchcock also lived on Highfield Lane right across from "The Bunnery."

Frank Stockton, who is credited with having been the first pioneer, lived at 203 Walnut Street, later the home of painter Harry Chase and now the home of Mr. and Mrs. David L. Miller. Edgar Loyal Field selected a site next door to the Stocktons, and built a studio at 189 Walnut Street. Frank Fowler, Albert Sterner, and Arthur Hoeber were the first artists to have studio homes in the very heart of the artists' and writers' colony, that lovely, shaded lane, The Enclosure, now nestled as serenely as ever on the banks of the Third River.

As more and more writers and artists joined the colony, these talented and articulate people dominated the community's social life. They were unquestionably Nutley's gayest and most glorious days, to date. They were the days of the Archery Club, the Field Club (sponsored by Mrs. Thomas Satterthwaite, grandmother of Mrs. Edgar Sergeant, who paints under the name of Tacie Sergeant), The Gun Club, and the Yountakah Country Club, one club giving way to the other as the center of social activity. These were the days of picnic rides up the Passaic, of informal musicales, of fireside readings by noted authors, and of amateur theatricals for which the scenery was

painted by well-known artists.

Yet, surprisingly little has been recorded of that idyllic era, and much of the information has come down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. Even today, the classic reference work is "the little green book" of seventy pages compiled by Mrs. Elizabeth Stow Brown in 1907. In 1951, *The Nutley Sun* published a pair of remarkably lively stories, said to be based on Mrs. Henry Goodrich's personal reminiscences. Far too rare are the genuine articles like the vivid *Story of the Murals* by Edgar Sergeant, authentic, first-hand accounts of the colony of which such writers and painters were a part.

Historical evidence of the early Nutley colony might have been relegated entirely to these isolated pieces had it not been for the decision of Miss Ann Troy to compile this book for the Nutley Historical Society, and had it not been the decision of the Nutley branch, American Association of University Women, to exhibit representative works of the colony artists in a special Heritage Display included in its Young People's Art Exhibit, May 26, 27, and 28, 1960, and thus to revive interest in that glorious era of art from which our town's special culture stems.

Mrs. Stanley C. Yorton, 1959-61 president of the Nutley branch, AAUW, appointed Mrs. William H. Happe, Jr., chairman of the entire exhibition. Mrs. Happe, aware that only one AAUW member - indeed, only one Nutley resident - was thoroughly qualified to direct the complex preparations for the Heritage Display, appointed Miss Ann Troy both director of the Heritage Display and chairman of an AAUW Research Group specifically organized to correlate material for this project. The group was composed of Mrs. Robert C. Bossert, Mrs. W. B. Clary, Mrs. Sherman L. Gerhard, Mrs. G. A. Rackell, Mrs. Theodore E. Rowland, and Mrs. Oscar Shapiro.

The AAUW made immediate plans to arrange the exhibition in three parts, so that Nutley's children, for whom the entire project was initiated, might have the opportunity to view almost a century of representative Nutley art in the combined exhibitions.

The largest exhibit, to be held in the Franklin School gymnasium, was the Young People's Exhibit of Fine and Industrial Arts. It was this idea, advanced by Mrs. John Peddieson and Mrs. Rollin G. Schaffer that had initiated the whole venture. The exhibit constituted representative work of all of Nutley's school children from nursery school through high school. Dr. Anson Barber, superintendent of schools, supported the idea immediately; together with Edward Lenihan, president of the Board of Education, he gave the exhibition cooperation throughout. The principals of the schools, notably William Gilligan, principal of Franklin School, and, therefore, host to the exhibition, also were enthusiastic. The art faculty of the respective schools entered the project immediately, working and planning through the school year for the May exhibit. Mrs. Happe appointed, as art faculty chairmen, George Shiffert and Helen Lewis to represent the fine arts department, and Joseph Mattiucci to

represent the industrial arts.

The second exhibition, the Heritage Display, to be held simultaneously in Franklin School, was to be a loan exhibition, the size of which would depend almost entirely on the cooperation of Nutley residents and certain museums for pictures by the colony artists. *The Nutley Sun*, working hand in hand with the AAUW in a program which it felt was of great benefit to the community, devoted a story to the exhibition in almost every issue throughout the preparatory period; it was partially because of the plea for pictures run in its *Nutley: Art Colony* columns that the public responded so magnanimously, lending the majority of the pictures that were exhibited in the Heritage Display.

The third exhibition was to be an independent showing of the works of Nutley's contemporary artists, most of whom are now in residence here. It was arranged by the AAUW committee with Mrs. John Pikus, president of The Nutley Art Group, which had been organized in November, 1950, and incorporated and registered in Trenton, New Jersey. The Nutley Art Group agreed that an exhibition of the contemporary work would round out the century of art; they made plans for an independent exhibition to take place on May 28 and 29, for which the Nutley Historical Society contributed the ground floor of its museum.

Mayor Harry W. Chenoweth, whose advice had been sought from the first, offered the town's services for the exhibition, including protection of the art work, which meant constant surveillance, during the three-day Heritage Display, by the Nutley Police Department. This exhibition, alone, was found to require a \$10,000 insurance.

One of Mrs. Happe's first concerns, as chairman, was to assure Nutley's school children of the finest resident artists to judge their work. She was delighted when almost all of Nutley's leading contemporary artists accepted at once, and manifested great interest in the venture. The list of judges comprises a "Who's Who" of today's Nutley painters: Beda Zel Angle, Estelle Armstrong, Robert Bowden, James Carlin, Ann Cole, Catherine Craig, Vivian Noyes Pikus (Mrs. John Pikus, president, Nutley Art Group), Emma Gazan, Mr. and Mrs. Allen Hewitt, Lorelei Kriegsfeld, Michael Lenson, Mrs. John Meyer, Chester Mockridge, John Moore, Maritta Palmer, Gertrude and Santo Pezzutti, Gladys Pratt, Sheila Rogoff, John Schermerhorn, Marie Spinning, Maude Williams, and Mrs. Edwin Zeller. The names of other contemporary artists, unable to attend the judging, appeared in the Nutley Art Group catalogue of their exhibition.

Miss Troy, meantime, was already at work on preparations for the Heritage Display; these were involved and intricate. She worked painstakingly for months in order to gather and verify necessary information. The list of artists' homes, a condensation of some of the biographical material, and a catalogue of the Heritage Display, represent some of the research conducted by Miss Troy

and the AAUW Research Group. Any accounts of the colony appearing in this chapter also are based on material Miss Troy has assembled through the years, both privately and as a member of the Nutley Historical Society and of AAUW.

She started her Heritage Display research in the fall of 1959 in the artists' traditional stronghold, The Enclosure. Over the years, information regarding the artists who had settled there had become confused; this was the obvious starting point.

Miss Troy corroborated certain facts: it was Frank Fowler, returning from extensive study in Florence and Paris, who built the first artist's studio in The Enclosure, at No. 16, one that was to become, in time, the most famous studio in the area, for it was to be occupied, successively by Frederick Dana Marsh and his sons James and Reginald; by Guy Péne duBois; and, currently, by Nutley's noted contemporary artist and art critic, Michael Lenson, and his family. Through a series of interviews with residents of The Enclosure, she obtained further information, by which, combined with facts she already possessed or obtained by correspondence, Miss Troy was able to authenticate the location of The Enclosure artists' studios, and most of the main facts about their work.

Sterner's Enclosure studio was next door to Fowler's, and was later to be occupied by Charles W. Hawthorne. Arthur Hoeber lived diagonally across The Enclosure, next door to the Earl Stetson-Crawford house, which, in turn, was near the house Baron Von Strom built as his own residence.

Although Mr. and Mrs. Fowler were painters known for their portraits, Fowler also had a wide reputation as a fresco painter. During his stay in France, he had contributed his talents to a series of frescoes in the Luxembourg Palace, and was long to be remembered here in America for his ceiling frescoes in the ballroom of the old Waldorf-Astoria.

Sterner was born in London of American parents, and is reputed to have had one of the finest backgrounds in painting of all the Nutley artists who studied in Paris. He came from France to America in 1881 to continue his work, which included the fine portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Henry W. Goodrich, exhibited in the Heritage Display.

Arthur Hoeber had studied and exhibited in Paris before he came to Nutley via his post as art critic on the *New York Times*. His painting, *The Early Moon*, is one of three Nutley art treasures in public view in town today; it hangs above the fireplace in the Nutley Public Library. (The other two paintings are: Arthur J. Elder's panoramic view of Nutley, a watercolor, at the Nutley Historical Society; and Isaac Brewster's portrait of Miss Susan Lockhart at Washington School.)

The fourth of the pioneer artists, Edward Loyal Field, was an etcher and painter who also came to Nutley from study in Paris; although he built the

studio house at 189 Walnut Street, he still continued to spend much of the time in France. Frederic Dorr Steele, the noted illustrator best remembered for his Sherlock Holmes drawings, eventually lived in the studio house. It is also recorded that Sterner, calling on his artist friends here, did some of his finest work in this studio.

Frederick Dana Marsh came to The Enclosure from study in France about 1900, and quickly won recognition as the first American painter of industrial scenes. His son, Reginald Marsh, became famous for his city scenes, mainly of New York. A year after his death in 1954, his paintings were given a memorial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Reginald's brother, James Marsh, has become an outstanding designer in wrought iron, and has a national reputation for the restorations and reproductions of early chandeliers in historic buildings throughout America. An exquisite example of his work, a pewter chandelier, was exhibited in the Heritage Display. He lives with his wife, Anne Steele Marsh, also a contemporary artist, and daughter of Frederic Dorr Steele, at the Marsh studio, Fiddler's Forge, in Pittstown, New Jersey. Mrs. Marsh is represented in the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, among others. In addition to their work, the Marshes are co-founders of the Hunterdon County Art Center in Clinton, New Jersey. Our resident artist-writer, Michael Lenson, art critic of the *Newark Sunday News*, wrote a moving tribute to the Marsh family in the February 1, 1959, edition of that newspaper, together with a personal note by Lloyd Goodrich. Lenson titled his piece, *A Talented Dynasty*, and went on to say "Three generations of the Marsh family have made art a dedicated way of life."

Guy Pene duBois was a later resident of The Enclosure, and one of the most brilliant of the Nutley painters. He had served as art critic for various New York newspapers before he settled here to paint. He had studied previously in Paris, and returned to France in 1924 for several years' stay before coming back to this country. His magnificent painting, *The Corridor*, on loan from the Newark Museum, was considered one of the most striking pictures exhibited in the Heritage Display.

Charles W. Hawthorne was one of the most distinguished of the Nutley painters, and is one of the most widely acclaimed today. Many artists studied under his direction at the Charles W. Hawthorne School of Painting at Provincetown, Massachusetts; among them were Tacie Sergeant and Estelle Armstrong. It was a great disappointment to Miss Troy and the AAUW committee that no Hawthorne painting could be obtained for the Heritage Display. With this exception, every one of The Enclosure artists was represented.

The work of Clinton Balmer and George Blake is described in Sergeant's *The Story of the Murals* which appears in this volume. Actually, both Balmer and Blake, like Tacie and Edgar Sergeant, belong to a later school of artists than that of the foregoing painters. For classification during preparations for the

Heritage Display, these later painters were designated as "the intermediate group." These were the young colony members who had the advantage of working with the early Nutley painters, yet the bulk of whose work pre-dates that of our strictly contemporary school in Nutley. Earl Stetson-Crawford belongs rightfully in this intermediate group, as do William Eville, Abram Molarsky, Irwin Smith, Estelle Armstrong, and her late husband, W. T. L. Armstrong, who was not only a painter but also a distinguished Nutley architect.

It is of interest, in the list of artists' homes, that the William Eville house at 210 Rutgers Place is still occupied by the artist's son and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Eville. It is also noteworthy that three of the artists of the intermediate school still live in Nutley. Estelle Armstrong continues to occupy the house she and her husband maintained at 603 Bloomfield Avenue during the artists' colony days. Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Sergeant still live at their lovely home at 160 Satterthwaite Avenue. Mr. Sergeant, one of the most civic-minded residents Nutley has ever known, is an increasingly frequent contributor to *The Nutley Sun*, writing pieces both serious and humorous for the benefit of the general public.

When the AAUW invited these three artists to exhibit their paintings, all three chose to have their work hung in the Heritage Display as a tribute to their colony friends, though their work would have been equally at home in the contemporary exhibition presented by The Nutley Art Group. It must have been very gratifying to these artists that their paintings caused so much spontaneous comment at the exhibition. Miss Troy and Mrs. Robert Levinson, chairman of the Hostesses, reported that parents, visiting the exhibit with their children, would stop abruptly in front of the painting by Tacie and Edgar Sergeant, and exclaim with pleasure, then circle the room and return to admire it again. It is a fresh and beautiful painting of the Sergeant children at the shore, done jointly by Mr. and Mrs. Sergeant. Estelle Armstrong's *Chartres Cathedral* was one of two outstanding favorites with the children ; the other was Anne Steele Marsh's *The Black Cat*.

Mr. and Mrs. Marsh, who were invited to be guest artists at the AAUW exhibition, also chose to have their work exhibited in the Heritage Display, along with that of their respective families. Therefore, Frederick Dana Marsh, Reginald Marsh, and James Marsh all were represented in a group, while Anne Steele Marsh's painting hung side by side with a drawing by her father, Frederic Dorr Steele.

Mrs. Marsh had brought the Steele drawing with her to the exhibit, along with proofs of Steele's "Golf Book," a collection of caricatures from the old Field Club days. This memento excited great interest during the exhibition; it was the drawing, however, that had created the interest in advance of the exhibition, for it had to do with Sherlock Holmes, and thereby hung a Nutley mystery.

The AAUW committee verified, well in advance, that Steele had illustrated twenty-nine of the thirty-three Holmes stories written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle after 1903 - the pipe-smoking Holmes in the deerstalker cap that is known around the world today. Steele had based the drawings on the face and figure of the great actor, William Gillette, who played the title role in his own dramatization, "Sherlock Holmes," the play in which he made his "farewell revival" tour in 1929-30. Some, if not all, of the illustrations had been drawn in Steele's Walnut Street studio; naturally, Miss Troy and the committee were anxious to hang a selection of them in the Heritage Display.

Although Miss Troy was most successful in tracing the early artists' pictures, she could find no trace, whatever, of a Sherlock Holmes. Repeated pleas for information from residents through *The Nutley Sun* series brought plenty of replies about other pictures, but no replies whatever about the Holmes drawings. What had happened to the greatest of sleuths?

Anne Steele Marsh informed Miss Troy that the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., had the collection of Steele's Holmes drawings; she was sure, however, that some of the illustrations must be among her father's works, and she promised to make a search.

Two weeks before the exhibition, Mrs. Marsh, who had been searching industriously for some of the drawings, phoned Miss Troy to say that she could not find a single one. She had, however, found one of Steele's drawings of Gillette; that was the drawing that finally hung in the Heritage Display.

Two weeks before the exhibition, Mayor Chenoweth proclaimed May 26th through May 29th "Artists' Days" in Nutley. The Chamber of Commerce, which had given the committee complete cooperation throughout the preparations, publicly acknowledged the importance of the exhibition with a piece in *The Nutley Sun*. Nutley's merchants, town-wide, donated window space for the art work of Nutley High School students as a special promotion.

The most exciting news to reach the committee was that Lloyd Goodrich could accept definitely the AAUW invitation to appear as guest speaker on the opening evening of the exhibition.

Over 1,500 people attended. The opening evening was gala; the Heritage Display was crowded; Lloyd Goodrich's talk in the Franklin School auditorium charmed Nutley's residents. It was an easy flow of reminiscence, brought gradually up-to-date with references to Mr. Goodrich's work as director of the Whitney Museum. *The Nutley Sun*, in its detailed account of the event, headed its story "Community Spirit at Exhibit Impresses Many Noted Artists."

The social columns of the same edition of the *Sun* featured another story: "Artists Gather at Studio Party Following Exhibit." The party, presented in honor of Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd Goodrich and Mr. and Mrs. James Marsh, was held in the studio where Mrs. Marsh, as a child, had watched her father work during those years at 189 Walnut Street, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. John

Augustine Smith, by whom the party was given together with Mr. and Mrs. William H. Happe, Jr.

In the *Newark Sunday News* the following week, the paper's art critic, Nutley's Michael Lenson, wrote a gracious piece commending the exhibition. "This wonderful event," he wrote, "was designed as much to honor a proud heritage as to expand art as a way of life into the present and beyond. As such, it will be long remembered."

Tags

- [Mark Twain](#)
- [Bunner](#)
- [Stockton](#)
- [Marsh](#)
- [Fowler](#)
- [Art](#)