



Preserving Memories and Conserving Paintings

—The Gardner Canvases—

by Greg Olson

Abigail Gardner Sharp spent her entire adult life searching for an adequate means through which to express, for friends and strangers alike, the horrible memories she carried in her mind—memories based on her experience as the 13-year-old captive of a band of Wahpekute Indians. In 1885, 28 years after her captivity, Sharp published her widely successful *History of the Spirit Lake Massacre*, in which she recounted her memories in the melodramatic language of the popular dime novels of the day. Like these Wild West adventure stories, early editions of Sharp's written memoir included graphic illustrations of some of the story's gory highlights.

Engraved by the book's publisher, Mills and Company of Des Moines—most certainly under Sharp's close supervision—a series of etchings depicted such tragic events as the killing of Sharp's family and the burning of the cabin of her neighbors, the Mattocks.

In the decades before photographic reproductions became technically and financially feasible, publishers of newspapers and books alike relied on the talent and imagination of artists and engravers to visually enhance the often-sensational stories they presented to their audiences. Journals such as *Harper's Weekly* and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* effectively used etchings to bring the battles of the Civil War, the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson, and other news stories of the day into the homes of America's growing middle class.

By the early 1890s the brisk sales of Sharp's book

allowed her to purchase her childhood home on the shore of Lake Okoboji and create a museum. Most striking among the curios arranged inside the small cabin were the five large paintings that served as illustrations for the tours she gave to visitors who paid to see the site. According to Mike Koppert, site manager at the Gardner Cabin, four of the five paintings appear to have been painted by Abbie Gardner Sharp, from memory. Rendered in vivid colors, these paintings are enlarged versions of the same grisly scenes depicted in her book that represented her personal recollections of the events she witnessed during and after the massacre.

The artistic expression of personal memory is a phenomenon that is centuries old. Ancient drawings scratched on cave walls and winter counts painted by American Indians on animal hide are recordings of events as recalled by their creators. The genre of memory painting was popular throughout the 19th century, and works of this nature continue to be produced today, often by older people who have little or no formal art training and whose working years are behind them. For some painters, the act of setting down their memories on canvas allows them to look nostalgically at their past. Others see painting as a means to document vanishing lifestyles, occupations, and folkways.

Created some 30 years after the fact, Abigail



Gardner Sharp's paintings of the "Spirit Lake Massacre" do not document an event in history so much as they bear witness to the suffering of a young girl. The images of crimson bloodstains on white snow and angry orange flames engulfing a cabin express Sharp's decades-long struggle with anger, grief, and loss. Like her book, these paintings are her attempt to help others comprehend the losses she survived and the difficulties she endured.

At the same time, these images were important to the success of Sharp's cabin museum. They added credence to her story and helped legitimize her status as a victim. In much the same way as sensational video images of death and destruction help boost television news ratings today, Sharp's paintings also brought paying customers to her museum door. These lurid images offered the curious public a voyeuristic peek at a famously tragic incident and satisfied their desire to vicariously experience tragedy. While Abigail Gardner Sharp claimed that her paintings, like her museum, told the true story of the "Spirit Lake Massacre," they should be viewed as subjective interpretations that have been shaped by decades of memory and by Sharp's need to satisfy the expectations of her audience.

The five paintings, which hung in the Gardner Cabin for decades, deteriorated over time. Dirt and grime accumulated on the surface, and the canvases themselves buckled and bulged. In the early 1990s, the Questers of Iowa, which encourages the study of antiques and fosters preservation and restoration of historical landmarks, funded conservation treatment of the five paintings as a statewide project, with Siouan Chapter #36 and Spirit Lake Chapter #865 making special contributions. Thanks to the Questers' generous support, the conservation and stabilizing treatments were completed; the canvases are cleaned and properly lined, their bulges and draws eliminated. The paintings now hang in the Gardner Cabin Interpretive Center. ❖

Above: The paintings after conservation treatment. From left:

- Abbie is taken hostage and led away from her family's cabin
- "Burning Mattock's Cabin"
- "Sad Fate Of Mrs. Thatcher. Crossing The Big Sioux"
- Negotiations for her surrender. "Council, Jim River, S.D."
- My Last Night With The Yanktons"
- Yankton "war cap" given to Abbie

BOTH PAGES: SHS (DES MOINES)



Before conservation treatments, the framing no longer supported the canvases. Below: Joan Gorman and an assistant from Upper Midwest Conservation Associates move one of the paintings. Conservation was funded by Questers of Iowa.





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