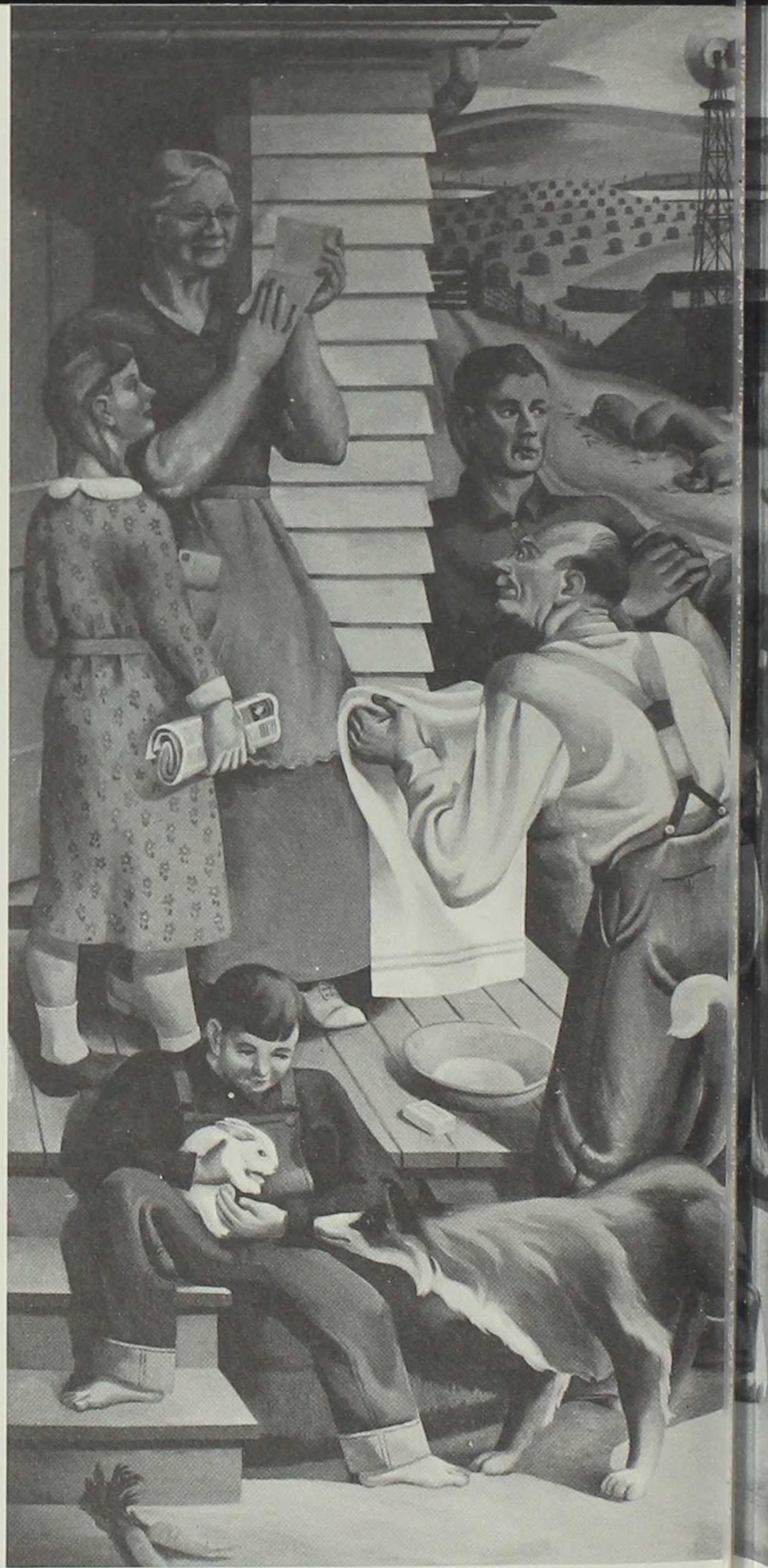


The New Deal Murals in Iowa

by Gregg R. Narber
and Lea Rosson DeLong

Most of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's programs for recovery from the Great Depression aimed to relieve material want in the United States, but some New Deal agencies sought to enrich the quality of American life in ways that were not purely economic. Between 1934 and 1942 a number of public programs involved the federal government in buying works of art and employing painters, sculptors, and other artists. The best-known arts program was part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), though several others operated during the Roosevelt years as well: the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the Treasury Relief Art Project (TRAP), and the various Treasury Section programs.

Treasure Section officials stressed art, not welfare, and were quite happy to award commissions to "proven" artists who were comfortably fixed; artists did not have to demonstrate need for their proposals to be considered by agency judges. However, the depression had put all but a few artists out of work, so that most of the men and women who received commissions could have passed a means test had it been required. Still, even the Treasury Relief Art Project, whose very name belied a welfare component in its mission, and the PWAP, which required a demonstration of need, claimed a higher purpose than merely keeping artists working and eating. PWAP Director Edward Bruce admonished his regional chairmen in 1933 that "this is not relief work and the



word relief should be eliminated by you in all reference to the project and in any discussion with the artists employed. We want to put competent artists to work who are out of work. . . . sentiment or need should not be a prime factor in selection of artists."



Richard Haines' "Iowa Farming" portrays a perfectly ordered rural setting—an idyllic family farm with all generations present, every sort of farm animal, and bountiful fresh vegetables. (SHSI)

The principal legacy of the New Deal arts programs in Iowa is the murals decorating the interiors of public buildings in towns throughout the state. About fifty federally funded murals were completed in Iowa in the decade before World War II; most are products of the Treasury Section programs, which enjoyed a

guarantee of one percent of the cost of each new federal building erected in this period, to be spent exclusively on works of art. Thus, a federal post office whose design included an interior mural offered an opportunity worth \$500 to \$1,000 or more to the artist whose proposal was selected in competition.

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The murals themselves exhibit a variety of themes—historical, educational, social, and agricultural—conveyed in the distinctive style of the artists involved. Some were group projects, while others expressed the vision of a single artist. A few inspired great local controversy, as in the case of the TRAP murals painted in the courtroom of the Federal District Courthouse in Cedar Rapids. Several others remain important as representations of the emergent midwestern regionalism of the 1930s, exemplified by the Iowa State University Library murals supervised by Iowa PWAP head Grant Wood. Whatever their particular histories, all contributed to a unique experiment that supported artists and made art available on a wide scale to the public. The illustrations on the following pages reveal the diversity and power of Iowa's New Deal murals and suggest some of the preoccupations of the state's citizens during the troubled years of the Great Depression. □

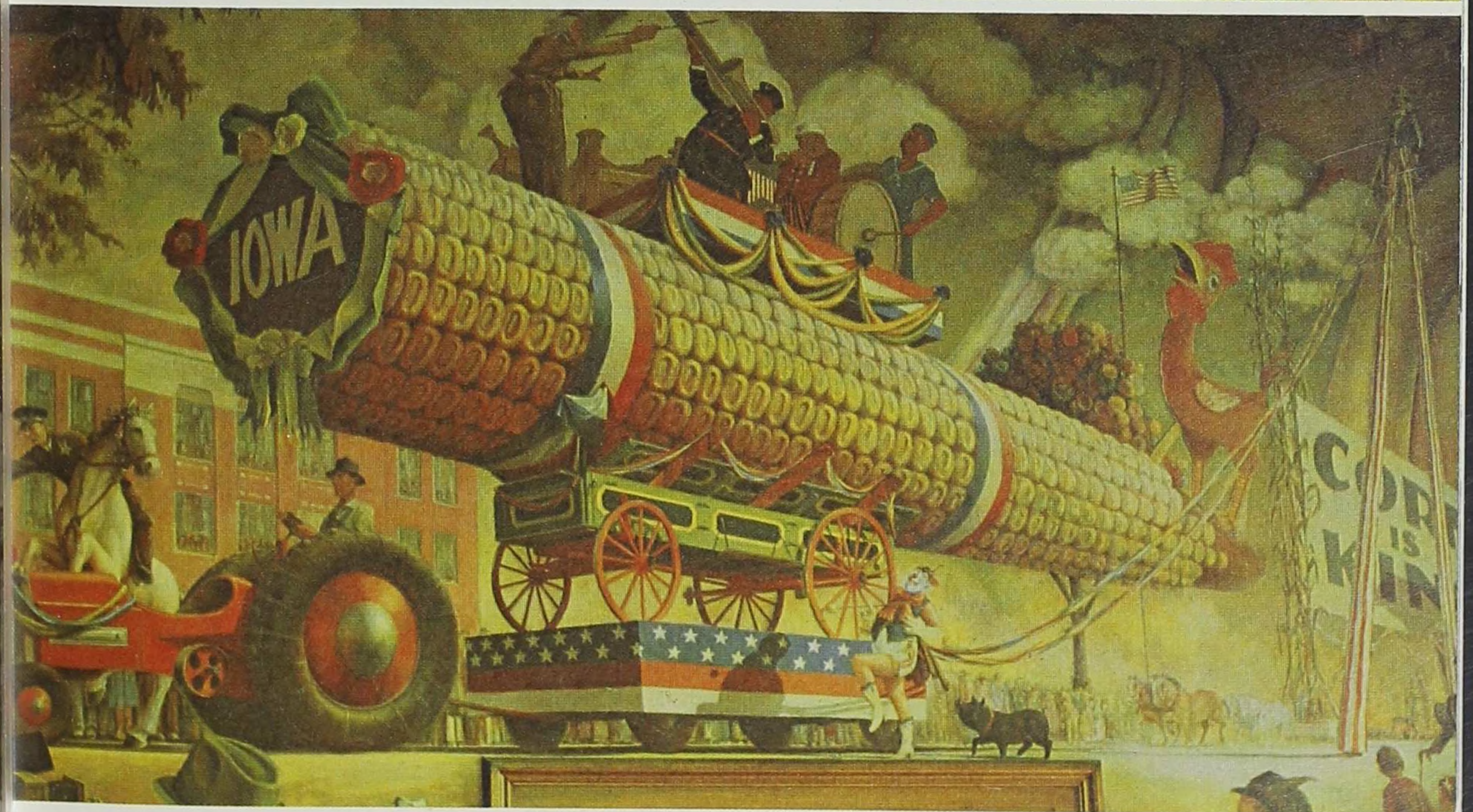
Marion Gilmore's "Band Concert" (right) depicts summertime activity in Corning at a time when concerts played a vital role in the cultural life of Iowa communities. Corning residents joked that "Homer's got his shirttail out!" when they first viewed conductor Homer Snodgrass, pictured in the center of the mural. Actually, Homer's shirttail is in; he is wearing a suitcoat. Painted for \$740, the band concert mural was financed by the Treasury Fine Arts Section.

Mt. Ayr native Orr Fisher painted "Corn Parade" (below right) for the local post office in 1941. This humorous fantasy takes place in a realistic setting—Fisher's courthouse is an accurate representation of the building in Mt. Ayr. But note the beerbellied clown with the Dallas Cowboy cheerleader legs, Popeye on the drums, the horse that stands on one leg, and the floats that out-do even the Rose Bowl pageant—all this with Shirley Temple looking on! This PWAP mural cost \$750.

Except where noted, all photographs in this article are reproduced courtesy of Gregg R. Narber and Lea Rosson DeLong. The authors recently completed a survey of New Deal murals in Iowa and this spring will present public lectures on the Iowa murals in communities throughout the state, under the auspices of the Iowa Humanities Board, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

An annotated version of this article is on file at the State Historical Society in Iowa City. The authors wish particularly to

acknowledge the assistance of the Des Moines Register and Tribune Company, the Sioux City Public Museum, Mrs. Patty Elwood, Mrs. Donella Jackson, and the postmasters of Cresco, Audubon, Rockwell City, Forest City, Pella, and Sigourney. The suggestions, encouragement, and guidance in preparation of this article and the lecture from which it came of Dr. Dorothy Schwieder, Thomas F. Worthen, Dr. Dwight Saunders, Karel Yasko, Dr. Walter C. Clark, Jr., Dr. Walter R. Houf, and Dr. Malcolm J. Rohrbough are also greatly appreciated.





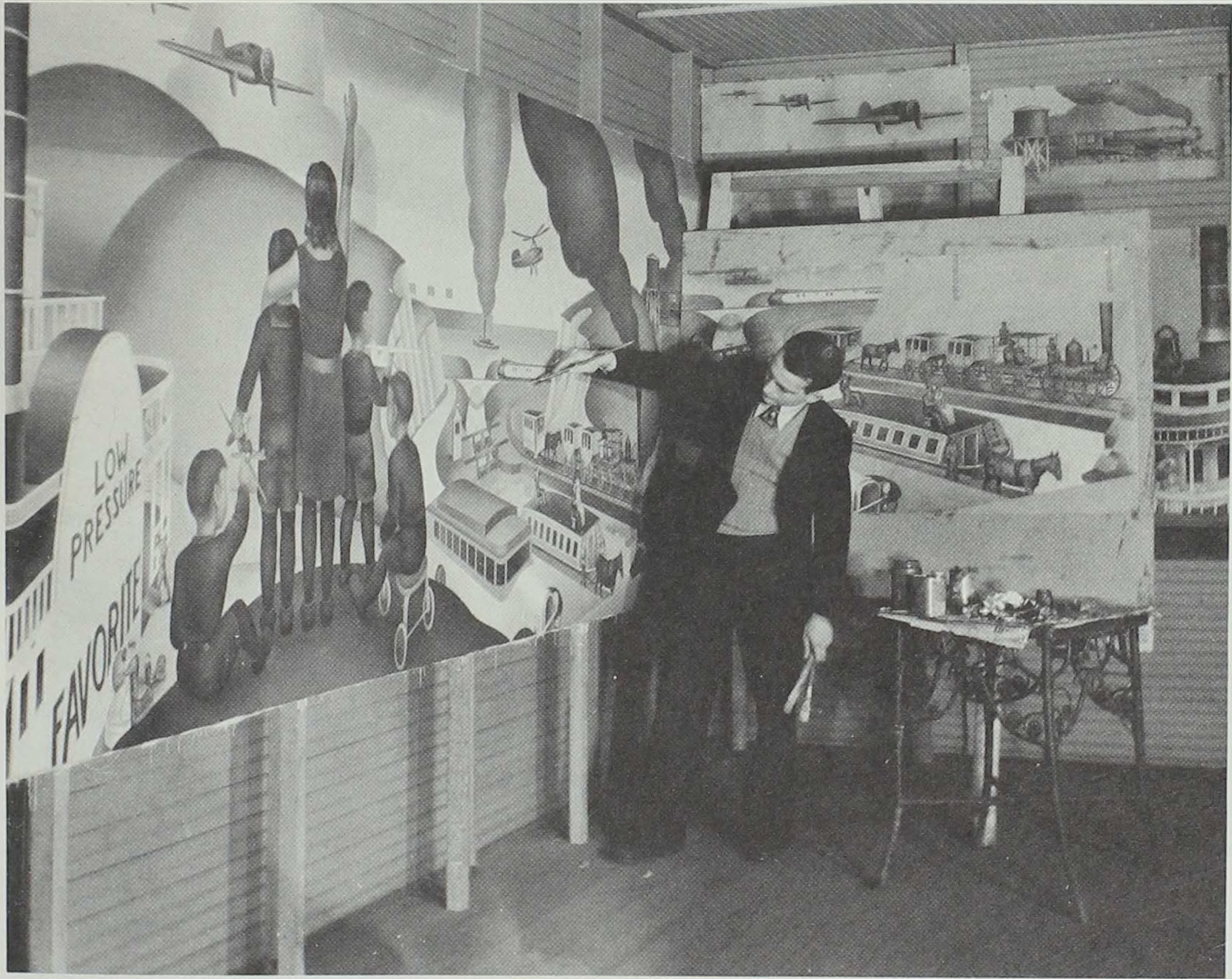
A sharp contrast to the playful character of the Mt. Ayr and Corning murals is this detail from "The Social History of Des Moines" (below), painted for the Children's Reading Room of the Des Moines Public Library by Harry D. Jones. The mural employed a crew of artists from September 1937 to its completion in December 1941. The mural is rife with sym-

bols and social content: its portrayal of westward expansion is stark and didactic, as is its depiction of the misery of economic depression and the bright future of social planning. The section pictured here symbolizes the Louisiana Purchase and compares the ultimate futility of military conquest with the modest but noble goals of the yeoman farmer.



The Treasury Section programs initiated many fine mural projects, including the others represented on these pages. Criss Glassell's "Rural Free Delivery" (above), completed for the Leon Post Office in 1938, exhibits the vivid style of the midwestern regionalists of the period.

John Bloom's "Cattle" (right) has a storybook quality. It was completed in August 1940 at a cost of \$670.



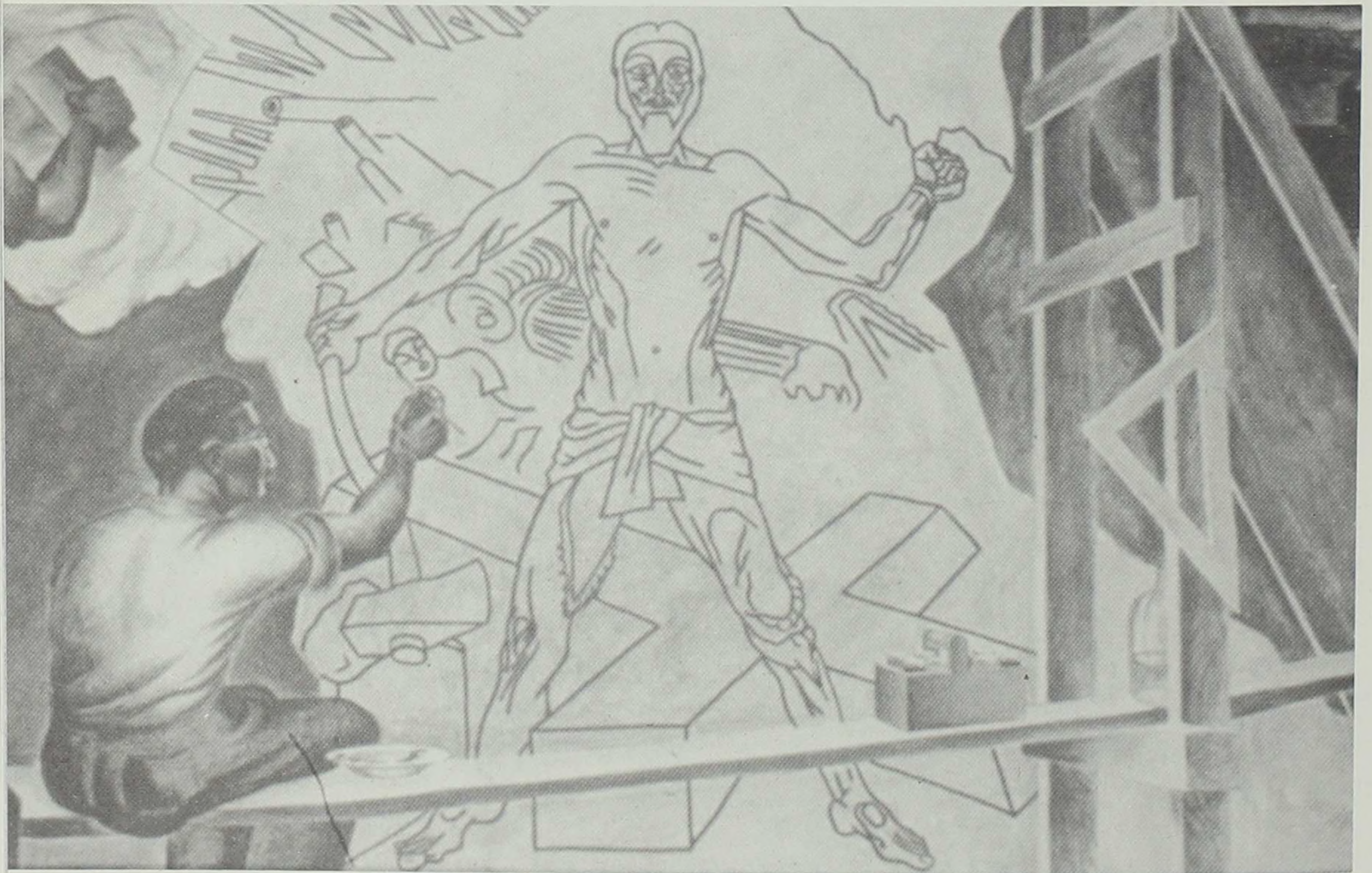
PWAP artist William Henning works on a mural for the Harrison School in Cedar Rapids, 1933 or 1934 (SHSI)

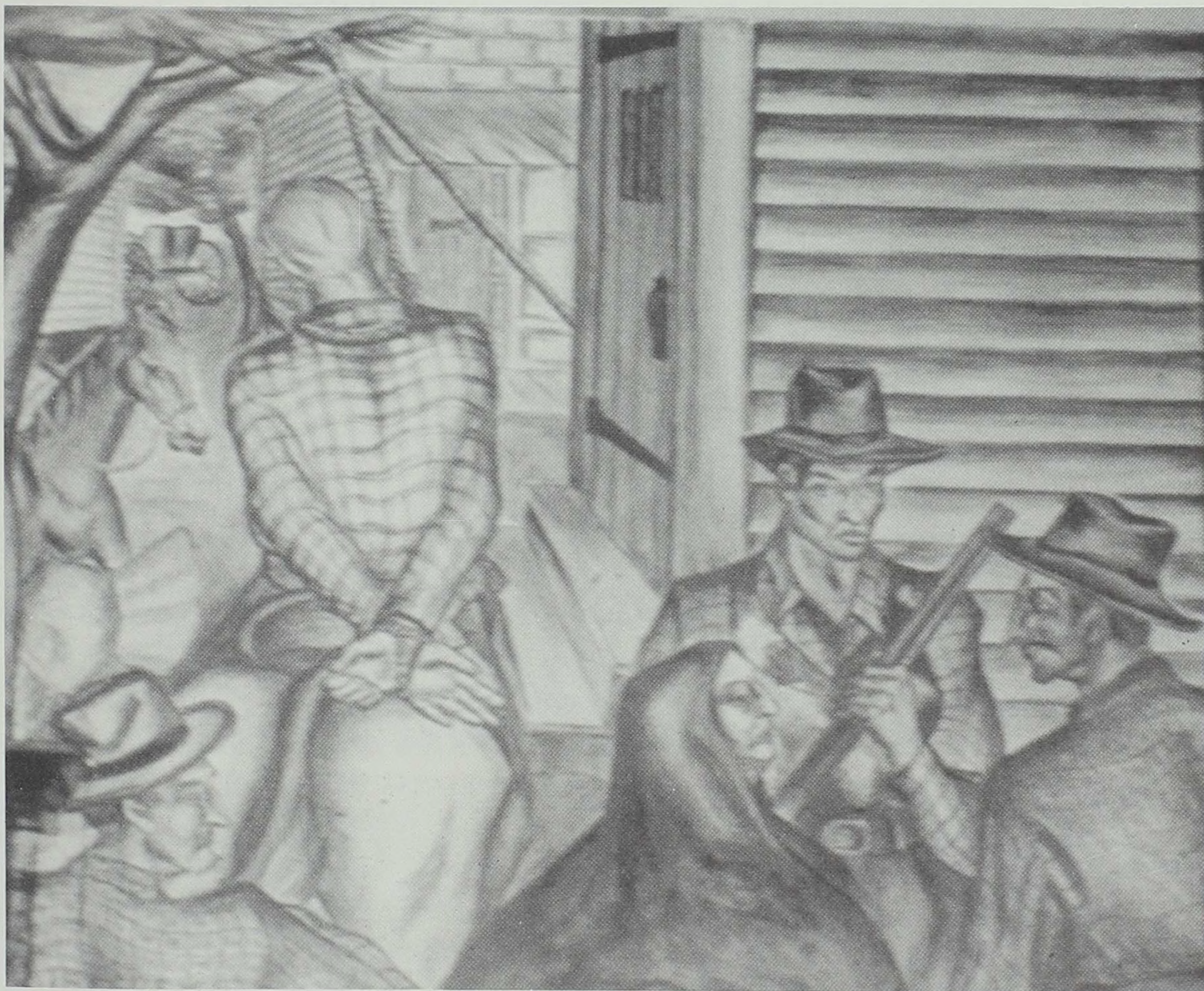


Perhaps the most controversial of the New Deal murals painted in Iowa was the group effort supervised by Francis Robert White in the courtroom at the Federal District Courthouse in Cedar Rapids. White's affiliation with allegedly left-wing causes explains much of the controversy surrounding his Cedar Rapids work. In the early Thirties, he had participated in a boycott staged at the Iowa State Fair; White and other members of the Iowa Cooperative Artists demanded rental fees rather than cash prizes from the judges. (A few years later, at the fair of 1937, White himself accepted one of the cash prizes.) Following the boycott, in 1935, White and fellow Cedar Rapidsians Arnold Pyle and Harry Jones formed Cooperative Mural Painters, the group soon afterward receiving a commission to do the courtroom mural.

The artists began by putting a frieze just below the ceiling of the room, using tempera rather than oil, the usual medium. For the murals themselves, they drew sketches on large sheets of paper; these were later transferred to the canvas, which had been coated with casein (consisting of lead, ammonia, milk, and lime). On top of this, the designs were painted in water colors that had been mixed with a goo made of water and egg yolk. The effect produced had the dynamic effect of oil paint but with unusually clear, bright colors.

Though a chart was made showing which of the four participating artists had done each section of the painting, supervisor Francis Robert White insisted that the mural had been done in a cooperative manner—"I do not feel that to speak of my murals and my assistants is correct. Each of us as individual artists [is]





responsible for the section of the mural as indicated . . . [but] there is a unity to the four walls which has resulted from group criticism and cooperation."

The criticism continued after the mural was completed in 1936 with funds from the Treasury Relief Art Project. Jurists were shocked by the mural's "Law and Culture" section (above), which portrayed a hanging next to the jury box. Intended to contrast lynch law with the modern judicial system, the painting's meaning was lost on many viewers, stunned as they were by the

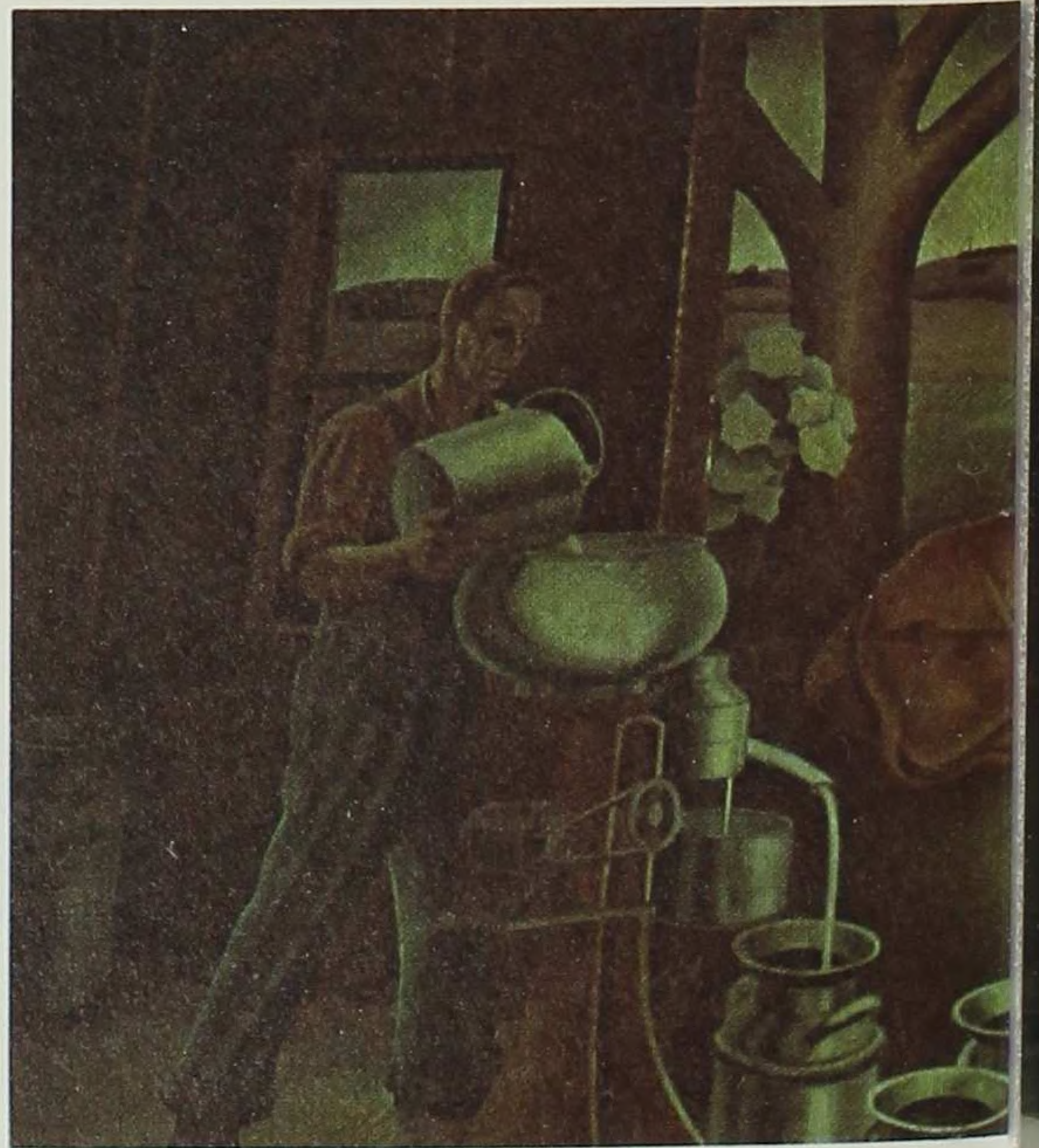
graphic depictions of good and evil. Other sections of the mural portrayed—with equally brutal candor—such themes as the opening of the Midwest, the impact of the machine age, and the rise of public health. The painting's references to campaigns against syphilis and to Christ's chopping up of the cross (opposite) fueled local controversy for some time, leading Judge Scott of Cedar Rapids to complain that he was "suffering from Mural turpitude." After years of objections, the court finally ordered the mural painted over; it is now totally lost.



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Installed in February 1938, William Henning's "Iowa Farm Life" (below) was one of several dozen Section murals completed in Iowa. Manchester postmaster Paul Kehoe suggested the subject; some years earlier the butter of a local creamery had won a prize in a New York City competition. Another Section mural finished in 1938 was Tom Savage's "The New Calf" (left), painted for the Jefferson Post Office. Savage's earlier painting titled "Butchering" had won an Iowa State Fair award; it was derisively known as "Bloodless Butchering" because the snow in the foreground of the painting showed no sign of the slaughter. "The New Calf" exhibits the same concern for the squeamish viewer. Though some made fun of Savage's inattention to these details, others gave his work high praise. Indeed, Eleanor Roosevelt chose "Butchering" to hang in the White House.

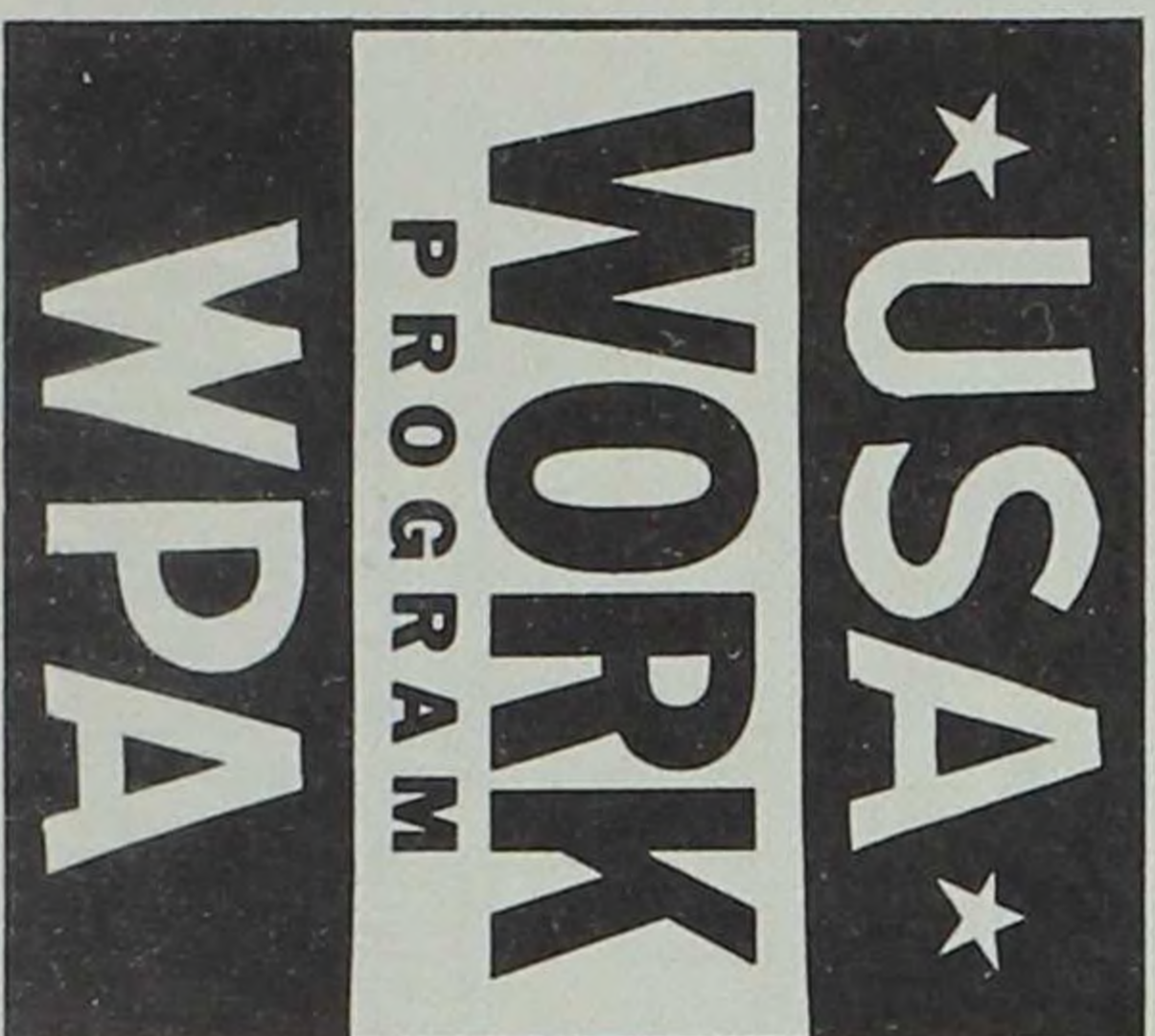




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William Sackett of Independence posed for Robert Tabor's "Postman in a Storm," completed in January 1938. A local artist, Tabor painted in a natural style; his postman is as realistic as a close-up snapshot.

Frontier schoolteacher Mary Wilkins is the focus of Herbert O. Myres' mural (below) at Sioux City's East High School, one of the first paintings funded by the Public Works of Art Project. Begun in late 1933, "Arrival of the First Teacher" took almost a year to paint;

money contributed by East High's graduating classes helped pay for the work when PWAP funding ended. The artist painted in bright colors, giving his historical characters a vivid realism. The event depicted here occurred in 1857, when the arrival of the steamboat Omaha, bringing Sioux City's first teacher, was a major community event, drawing to the pier local dignitaries, housewives, and other residents of the town and the surrounding country.

