

THE PAINTED FOREST * M.W.A. CAMP # 6190

The Modern Woodmen of America lodge hall, Valton Camp #6190 was completed in 1899. The M.W.A. was one of the many fraternal societies that flourished throughout the United States at the turn of the century. However, unlike most orders, the M.W.A. offered life insurance benefits to its members. This coincided with the beginnings of formalized insurance in America. Initiates into the M.W.A. were guaranteed both brotherhood and economic security for their families in the event of a member's death. As early as 1895, an M.W.A. picnic in Madison attracted 30,000 policy holders.

The building was constructed with locally milled lumber, conforming to the prescribed structure (60' - 33' - 24') and in keeping with the architectural style familiar to Wisconsin. Lodge halls and other public buildings utilizing stage areas often adorned the curtains with commercial advertising and decorative paintings; and as Camp # 6190 neared completion an itinerant painter walked into Valton. Ernst Hüpeden was a German immigrant who worked throughout southern Wisconsin, often exchanging his work for lodging and meals. Though educated in German universities, he was a self taught, or folk painter. In the spring of 1898, he was commissioned to decorate the stage curtain in exchange for boarding him in the local hotel.

When finished, he had not only embellished the curtain, but graphically illustrated the tumultuous sea battle off the coast of Manila -- when The U.S.S. Olympia destroyed The Spanish Navy in the Spanish American War -- a battle that cost the lives of many M.W.A. patriots. The work impressed the charter members to such an extent that they further commissioned Hüpeden to continue painting and adorn their walls with scenes depicting the M.W.A.'s initiation rites, fraternal activities and shared ideals. In November of 1899 the work was finished. Hüpeden had literally covered every square inch of wall space including the arched ceilings, window frames, wainscoting and even curtains with a panoramic mural, vividly portraying the numerous functions and activities of the order. There were frightening scenes which symbolized death, and contrastingly peaceful scenes of home life and fraternal fellowship. In one place the artist painted a futuristic portrait of Valton, as he imagined it to be 100 years later, and in another scene a widow receives her beneficiary check for \$2,000 from the M.W.A. bank.

Camp # 6190 prospered for nearly twenty years -- providing Valton with fraternal insurance protection and numerous entertainments. The lodge hall became a community gathering place -- and graduations, spelling bees, rollerscating parties, dances and plays freely utilized the large, open floor space

and stage. However, after WW I, America began to change, and the backbone of communal rural life was soon broken. Automobiles offered extended travel, and people were no longer dependent on their ~~business~~ immediate surroundings. The Depression followed and one business after another closed in the face of urban competition and rural poverty. The migration to the cities had begun.

Finally, the lodge was put up for sale, and purchased by William Gibeault, who lived nearby. The hall remained a community building and was at one time even used as a Town Hall. In the mid 1960's, Ronald and Dolores Nash purchased the property and took the necessary steps to check its deterioration. They named it The Painted Forest, maintained it as a community building for summer musical programs, and are very much responsible for its present preservation.

In 1980, Kohler Foundation, Inc. of Kohler, Wisconsin bought the property from the Nash family. Under the supervision of Don Howlett, the restoration work was begun. The M.W.A.'s home office in Rock Island, Illinois donated a collection of ritual artifacts, and in September of 1982 the building was given to Sauk County -- with the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley acting as custodians.

The building and mural inside give a simple, direct picture of turn-of-the-century Wisconsin, fraternal activities and the integral role of the artist. Ernst Hüpeden walked out of Valton in 1899, leaving a glimpse of the past that can be found nowhere in written or oral history.

In September of 1982, Kohler Foundation, Inc. presented to Sauk county the deed to The Painted Forest Property. With The Historical Society of The Upper Baraboo Valley acting as custodians, The Painted Forest will be open to the public on a regular basis.

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