



Photo by Lee Manchester. Mural by Arto Monaco reproduced by permission of Kevin Douglas. All rights reserved.

Arto Monaco's 1940 mural, which covers the upper portion of an entire wall of the now-vacant Village Inn tavern in Au Sable Forks, was painted the summer Monaco "ran away" from his job as a set artist for a Hollywood studio.

Arto Monaco's first mural survives in the Forks

By LEE MANCHESTER, News Staff Writer

AU SABLE FORKS — Arto Monaco's death in November, less than a week after his 90th birthday, aroused myriad memories among the many who loved him.

Monaco's Adirondack fame is mostly derived from the theme parks he designed here in the late 1940s and 1950s. He designed Santa's Workshop, a Christmas-oriented children's theme park in Wilmington, in 1949. He went on to design Storytown (now part of Great Escape), Gaslight Village, Holiday Harbor and Old McDonald's Farm, just to name a few other theme parks.

The creation most closely associated with Monaco himself — the remains of the fantasy castle at the old Land of Makebelieve amusement park, situated behind Monaco's home in Upper Jay — will be restored this summer in time for its 50th anniversary.

But the oldest surviving Arto Monaco mural may not be so lucky.

Arto painted the 7½-by-17½-foot mural in 1940. It depicts a Canadian hunting party conducted by Village Inn proprietor Jack Feulner. The condition of the mural is very poor. Restoration

might well cost a small fortune. And even if the mural could be repaired, it couldn't be moved — it is a part of the interior wall upon which it was painted.

That may be why Kevin Douglas, the current owner of the vacant Village Inn building, just off the Main Street bridge in Au Sable Forks, invited the Lake Placid News to come photograph the Monaco mural on Nov. 28, the day before Arto's funeral.

"That mural has always been a conversation piece," Douglas said. "People at the tavern would try to count the characters in it — but they would always miss the guy sticking his head out of the outhouse."

The Village Inn occupied the ground floor of the Kemp Block building. Built in 1905, the Kemp Block was one of only three South Main Street buildings that survived the catastrophic fire of 1925 in Au Sable Forks. Douglas's family acquired the building in 1952, half a dozen years after Douglas's grandfather Art had gone into business with Feulner.

Paul Savage bought the business after Art Douglas died in 1972, leasing

the space from the Douglas family. The Village Inn closed in 1982, about a year before Kevin Douglas bought the building from his family.

Douglas has resisted offers to purchase the building from potential buyers who made it known that they planned to destroy the mural — but who knows what the future will bring. If Monaco's mural is to be preserved at all, it will probably be in photographs.

THE VILLAGE Inn mural was painted when Arto Monaco was three years out of college. With help from mentor Rockwell Kent, the famous illustrator, Arto had entered the prestigious Pratt Institute art school in New York City, graduating in 1937.

Working for several film studios in Hollywood as a set artist and cartoonist after graduation, Monaco had grown restless one night in 1940. Hopping into his car, he had driven into the desert — and he'd just kept going until he reached Upper Jay. It was during that visit that Monaco painted the Village Inn mural.

Arto painted a second mural during that trip home, that one at the North End



Brick Cowles

Tavern in Plattsburgh. Upon the suggestion of someone who had seen the Forks mural, Arto painted his North End mural on canvas so that, if necessary, it could be removed from the wall. The characters on that mural were drawn from the nearby Army Air Corps base.

For years, no one knew what had happened to the North End mural. Then one day in the early 1960s, Louis Meconi of Au Sable Forks was filling his car's gas tank at Giroux's service station, across the street from the vacant North End Tavern. Remembering Monaco's mural, Meconi asked if anybody knew anything about it.

Meconi recently told his daughter, Sue Pulitzer, that the filling station manager, a man named Larry (his last name has been forgotten), also owned the old tavern building. After talking for a while with Larry, Meconi asked if he could take the canvas down to show the artist, who lived in Upper Jay. Larry said he could.

"When Louis got down here," recalls Monaco's assistant, niece Linda Denton, "he walked in with this big roll

of canvas, threw it down on the floor and said to Arto, 'Guess what I've got here?'" Louis unrolled it, and Arto took photographs of the canvas before Louis rolled it up and took it back to Plattsburgh."

Nobody has seen the North End mural since that day, four decades ago.

At last report Denton had not yet located Monaco's photos of the North End Tavern mural, though the artist's snapshot collection was extensive, to say the least.

SEVERAL factors have prevented the News from publishing, until now, the photos taken of the Village Inn mural last November.

One was the condition of the mural itself, which created all kinds of photographic problems. For a variety of reasons — the kind of paint used, the environmental conditions in the tavern and in Au Sable Forks, neglect — the original paints had cracked so badly that portions of the mural were hardly recognizable.

In addition to the cracking, years and years of tobacco smoke had covered the mural with a brown film, muting the bright colors typical of an Arto Monaco painting. An attempt to wash the nicotine film off the mural had further damaged the upper central portion of the painting.

The last "restoration" attempt did the most damage, however, according to Douglas, making the mural almost unphotographable: The entire painting was covered with a layer of shellac.

Not only has the shellac itself begun to yellow and crack, compounding the earlier problems it was meant to fix, but the shiny surface of the shellac reflects light so completely that the mural can no longer be photographed in anything but very muted light. The painting cannot be lit by a flash apparatus when it is shot; even daylight coming through the storefront window has to be masked, or nothing but a blur will register.

Added to all these challenges, the dimensions of the barroom in the former Village Inn make it impossible to shoot the entire mural with a single exposure. Of the 106 exposures taken last November, five separate vertical shots of portions of Monaco's mural had to be found that could be cleaned up well enough to print. Then the News had to experiment

with several different computer programs until it found one that could "stitch" those panels together into a single frame depicting the entire mural.

In addition to the photographic issues, the News also wanted to dig up as much of the story behind the mural as possible before running the pictures. That project was complicated somewhat by one of Arto Monaco's trademark artistic practices: Nearly every caricature appearing in the mural was taken from a real person, someone well-known in Au Sable Forks at the time the mural was painted.

The problem: The health of Bill Calhoun, Monaco's assistant muralist, prevented him from being interviewed. And of the dozen identifiable characters portrayed in the mural, only one still survived: Tim Snow Sr., of Au Sable Forks.



Tim Snow Sr.

TIM SNOW was just a few months older than Arto Monaco when the 27-year-old painter came in to begin work on a mural for the barroom at the Village Inn, where Snow worked.

"That Arto was a character when he was younger," Snow recalled. "He had an imagination. He could do whatever he wanted."

Another local man, Bill Calhoun, assisted Monaco with the Village Inn mural, as he did later in 1940 at the North End Tavern.

"He was a hell of a painter," Snow recalled of Calhoun, "but they painted different. That birch tree on the right,



Tim Snow Sr., 27 years old in 1940, hauls an armful of firewood.

that was Bill's, and you can tell the difference."

The mural depicts 13 human characters and another dozen humorous animal figures. The humans are sitting around in the out-of-doors, in camp settings or lazing away under trees. In the distance is Whiteface Mountain — but, according to Snow, the inspiration for the mural as a whole was a Canadian hunting trip taken by Village Inn proprietor Jack Feulner.

Feulner is shown taking it easy in a birch-bark canoe while an unnamed Indian guide paddles away. Seated behind Feulner is a big, live moose inspired by the bull the barkeep brought home from the Great White North. According to Douglas, that moose head hung for many years on the Village Inn's wall.

In the center foreground sit Speen McKenzie and Dan Manning Sr. on a log, both clad in business attire, both with trouser legs rolled up and feet immersed in a stream. McKenzie, a director at the local bank when the mural was painted, holds a fishing line; a small fish with a sailor's cap is sticking its head out of the water near the line.

Manning, district attorney for Essex County at the time and grandfather to Jay's current town attorney, smokes a pipe while he reads a law book, "Fish and Game Law, by Ima Nutt."

To this duo's left is Howard Kemp, dressed in hunting clothes but wearing a business hat, his left arm around the shoulders of the big bear seated next to him on a log.

"He was some kind of big shot with the Champlain Valley Bank down in Plattsburgh," Snow said. "He hunted some, but he always had the business hat on."

Behind Kemp, coming out of the wood shed in a camp, was the caricature of young Tim Snow Sr. himself, carrying an armful of firewood, his Village Inn apron tied around his waist.

"There's no story there," Snow said. "Arto told me he was going to get me in the picture, and he did — but he had to show me on the move, because that's the only way he saw me there."

The camp from which Snow was hauling firewood is little more than a shack with the name "Charlie's Cozy Nook" nailed above the door. In the doorway stands an unidentified French-Canadian character, known only as "Pete Le Foupe," dressed in a nightshirt.

Washing his face in a basin in front of the Nook is Monaco himself, attired only in bright red long johns.

On the lawn in front of the camp sits a trio of picnicking birds, dressed in human attire and reading the daily newspaper published at the time in Au Sable Forks, *The Adirondack Record*.

Around the shack's corner, Guy Watson has tapped a keg for himself with a straw.

"Guy Watson was a drinker," Snow said. "That's all that's about. He worked in the woods."

Standing on the far left of the mural, holding up a tree, is insurance agent Brick Cowles, dressed in hunting clothes.

Moving back to the center of the frame, seated by himself on the riverbank, facing into the glories of nature and away from the other locals is painter Rockwell Kent, daubing away at a canvas.

And at the far right, "snoozing" away beneath a tree (with one eye open!) is Charlie Marshall, co-proprietor with his brother Frank of the Bridge Theater. The Bridge, which stood behind the Kemp Block, was so called because of the walkway that connected it to the main bridge across the Au Sable River. The Bridge Theater burned to the ground in the 1940s or 1950s, according to Douglas.

Charlie is watching as a rabbit wearing a sweater emblazoned with the letter "H" picks his pocket. The rabbit is

Hollis "Screech" Merrifield, who worked at the Bridge.

"Charlie took care of him for years and years," Snow recalled.

In the lower right-hand corner is Monaco's "signature": a little cartoon bird clad in a checked sport coat and cap carrying a picket sign saying, "Designed and painted by Arto Monaco — Wm. Calhoun, Asst. — 1940."

Scattered throughout the mural are birds and animals, large and small. Most of the animals don't really play a part in telling the mural's story, Snow said; they are just there for fun, typical examples of Monaco's good humor.

It was that same sense of innocent fun and good humor that kept drawing people to Monaco throughout his career, right up to the end last November.

"When he painted that (the Village Inn mural), there wasn't that many people paid attention to it," Snow said. "It wasn't until later, when he was famous, that people gave it any notice, really."

