

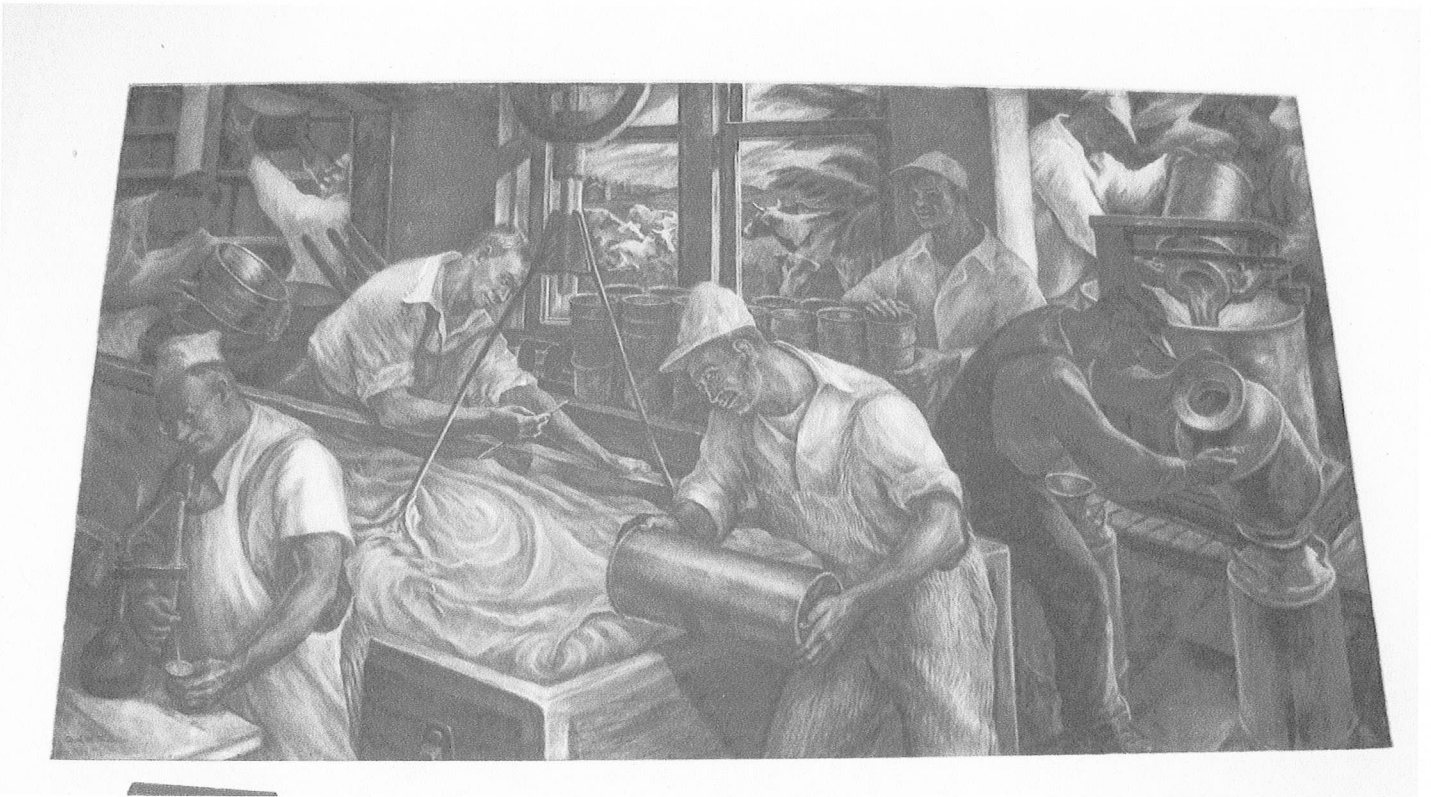
Fate of mural in Plymouth post office raised

The Sheboygan Press – October 6, 1999

Last week's announcement that the city's 60 year-old downtown post office may close its doors not only sent shudders through the business community but also through those who appreciate its historical aspects.

US Postal Service representatives called the facility at Main and Stafford streets "overcrowded and non-functional" and said because the current facility has no room to expand, it will be necessary to build on a new site, or to find an existing building that would suit the needs of the Postal Service.

On the wall near the door to Postmaster Loyd Irwin's office is a beautifully painted mural – a piece of plymouth's history and an important part of Americana. Painted in 1941, a year after the building's construction, it joined hundreds of others scattered throughout large cities and small rural towns. According to historical information, one percent of the buildings cost was reserved for mural decoration.



The mural at the US Post Office in Plymouth.

Post office murals springing up in the mid-1930s and 1940s were called the "people's art" – designed to inspire and encourage a nation overwhelmed by the problems of the Great Depression.

During that time, a federal program succeeded in putting needy artists to work, while offering a vision of hope to communities struggling with acute economic and social hardships.

Julie Sebranek of the Plymouth Advancement Association and Nancy Smith of the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce are concerned about the prospects of an abandoned federal building in the city, and about saving the historically significant mural. Smith said one of the goals of the chamber is to maintain the historical aspects of the city and to work toward preservation. "The city has no control over the federal government, but the old post office is part of our tradition," Sebranek said. "It's an old building with features that demand preservation. That is a very important mural and a legacy to our cheese-making industry."

Post offices throughout the US were decorated with these unusual murals featuring scenes of local interest, history, folklore, and industry. The Plymouth mural, painted by Charles Thwaites of Milwaukee embodies Plymouth as the "cheese center of the world." It tells the story of an old-time, rural cheese factory of the region. Through the window of the room is a view of a farm and Holstein cattle.

Thwaites, born in 1904, who also painted murals at the Chilton, Wisconsin and Greenville, Michigan Post offices, went on to become a well-known Midwestern artist. His works have been shown at Rockefeller Center and throughout the nation.

"If the building is razed, we would have lost a very valuable piece of architecture in our community," Smith said. "The building and the mural are important to our city's history."

Irwin said in other situations of relocation, murals have been cut from the walls and placed in museums. To relocate, the Postal Service estimates need for a building site of 2.5 acres, an area that is unavailable in Plymouth's downtown district.

No firm decision yet, postal service says *October 17, 1999*

US Postal Service real estate specialist Gail Stollenwerk says there is no firm decision to move the Plymouth post office out of downtown. But, she said problems with the present location are forcing the Postal Service to consider a new location. Stollenwerk says a new post office would include additional space, an enclosed garage and loading docks allowing trucks to load and unload in a sheltered area. "It would be much better for the employees, but the main point is we are not going to move the post office without cooperation. We aren't going to be heavy-handed, because we don't operate that way."

The Postal Service has taken the first step in the process by its announcement that it is seeking a new site and plans a public meeting to gather comments on the plan. "They won't move the post office out of downtown without input. That's the whole purpose of having the meetings," Stollenwerk said. "There is no definite decision at this point; after the meeting, they go from there."

When considering relocation, there is always the issue of historic preservation, she said. "We work with everybody. We always have to notify the State Historical Society, and they usually take special interest. The historic mural in the current post office would be protected by preservation laws," Stollenwerk said. "If the facility closes, the mural would be moved into the new post office, or possibly another federal building. They can't just move out and leave it there."

Local History Assignment – Plymouth Post Office

This assignment will focus on four historical thinking skills – Periodization, Comparison, Contextualization, and Causation.

Step 1 – Read the Newspaper article: *Fate of mural in Plymouth post office raised.*

Step 2 - Analyze the murals in front of the high school auditorium. Taking photos of them with your phone may help you answer the questions.

Step 3 – Write brief answers to the following questions...

Step 4 – Be ready to discuss/justify your answers in class.

1 – (Periodization) Which time period of US History would the post office mural fall into?

2 - (Periodization) Which time period of US History would the H.S. murals fall into?

3 – (Comparison) Which murals more accurately depict daily life in the time period shown?
Why?

4– (Comparison) The post office mural is described in the news story as the “people’s art.”
Could the H.S. murals also be described that way?

5 - (Contextualization) Why was the post office mural created? Did it serve a purpose?

6 - (Contextualization) Why were the H.S. murals created? What national/world events were happening at the time?

7 - (Causation) What national and global events caused the difference in the way of life depicted in the two sets of murals?

8 – Which historical thinking skill not used above could be used to analyze the two sets of murals?