

ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Elmhurst Post Office Mural

In December 1935, the City of Elmhurst celebrated the dedication of its new post office building at 154 W. Park Avenue with a ceremony that included the attendance of the Lieutenant Governor of Illinois. However, the building was not quite complete. Shortly before its opening, a national competition was held under the auspices of the U.S. Treasury Department Section of Painting and Sculpture to commission an artist to furnish a mural for the post office interior.

The Section of Painting and Sculpture was a New Deal public arts program aimed at providing employment opportunities for American artists during the Great Depression. Unlike other public arts programs, like those under the umbrella of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Section of Painting and Sculpture awarded projects through competitions based on artistic merit and talent. The vast majority of these commissions were placed in post offices across the country.

George Melville Smith, an artist from Chicago, submitted two designs for the Elmhurst competition. Since the contest had no other submissions, one of his proposals was chosen for the new post office building. Smith happily accepted the appointment just a few days after the post office opened to the public in 1935. Smith was a trained artist who studied at the Art Institute of Chicago as well as schools in Europe, spending two years abroad honing his craft before returning to the Midwest in the 1930s. His mural for the Elmhurst post office, titled "There Was a Vision," depicts farmers working the land in the 19th century pioneer era.



"There Was A Vision" Mural at U.S. Post Office at 154 W. Park Avenue, 1937. Artist George Melville Smith is at right. M2011.1.24

Completed in September 1937, the new mural was hung and dedicated in the post office on October 15, 1937. He was paid \$630 for his work. George Melville Smith went on to win Section commissions for murals that were hung at post offices in Park Ridge and Crown Point, Indiana, as well as WPA commissions for murals at Schubert School in Chicago.

The mural hung in the lobby of the Elmhurst post office, untouched for decades, before the U.S. Postal Service scheduled the piece for restoration in 2003. On May 1, 2004, a ceremony was held by the City of Elmhurst and the U.S. Postal Service dedicating the mural as an historic marker.

By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, February 2021