



PHOTOS PROVIDED

Above, Michelle Mapstone completes restoration of lagoon, Friend of Nokomis; top left, is the Citche Manito Warns the Nations from Hiawatha mural; far left is the introductory text panel from the Hiawatha mural and at left is Rena Frankeberger.



Williamsport Women

BY MARY SIEMINSKI

# Rena Frankeberger Designer of the Curtin Hiawatha Murals

Rena Frankeberger was the supervisor of art in the Williamsport schools for at least 20 years — from about 1910 until 1930. She might have been forgotten in Williamsport if she had not worked along with students and teachers at Curtin Middle School to design and paint 46 murals depicting scenes from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem "The Song of Hiawatha." The murals were painted over the course of three years during the Depression, from 1932 to 1935.

As a result of a community-wide effort, the murals, which had been removed from the Curtin school cafeteria when the building was being renovated in 1985, have been restored. Michelle Mapstone, a recently retired Williamsport Area School District art teacher, did the painstaking work over seven summers.

James Dougherty, who was the principal at Curtin when the project began, is framing the works and re-hanging them in the first floor hallway at Curtin. The school department is planning a formal rededication and open house, to be held in the spring of 2014.

Not much is known about Rena Frankeberger except that she devoted much of her life to art and to teaching art and design. We do know from our research that she was exceptionally serious about her work and very persistent. Like many other female teachers of the time, she did not marry and she seems to have lived most of her life as a boarder in other people's homes.

Our research turned up three fascinating letters that

she wrote to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., requesting specific information about American Indians so that the paintings would be as authentic as possible. The Lycoming County Historical Society has copies of these letters and the response from the Smithsonian. The letters have been digitized and added to the Lycoming County Women's History Collection. ([www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc](http://www.lycoming.edu/orgs/lcwhc))

In September 1932, Frankeberger wrote to Smithsonian staff asking for two pieces of information — "the type of design and color used by the American Indians in their war paint" and "Was there such a thing as a Sacred Belt for Wampum — and if so, was there a special pattern for it?" Two weeks after sending the first letter, she wrote another letter, dissatisfied that she had not yet received a reply. She mentioned that she had received help from the Museum of Natural History in New York and she was eager to have the murals "as nearly historically correct as possible." In October, she wrote again, increasingly impatient. The last letter must have crossed in the mail with the response from M. W. Sterling, the chief of the Bureau of Ethnology.

I think that she must have been very disappointed in the long-awaited answers to her questions. An ethnologist at the Bureau, Stirling suggested that, for information on war paint, she consult several volumes on the American Indian that she could probably find in the State Library in Harrisburg.

As for the belt, he said, "It

would not be scientifically accurate to use a 'sacred' wampum belt before the advent of the white man."

To add insult to injury, Sterling was quite clear that "historically correct" and The Song of Hiawatha were mutually exclusive. "Longfellow's poem Hiawatha has made use of a mass of disparate and misinterpreted legendary material. There is no historical reason for bringing the name Hiawatha into this poem." Apparently his appraisal, with which other scholars agree, did not deter Rena from continuing toward her goal.

During her many years in Williamsport, Frankeberger was also very active in city art life and in professional pursuits.

She had her students design a city flag and booklets that were sent to soldiers overseas during World War I. She also had her students — including her male students — "sew." It was reported in the May 14, 1915, Williamsport Gazette and Bulletin that "Boys Object to Being Required to Do Sewing." Frankeberger had been called before the Williamsport school board to explain herself because "There has been much comment on this phase of the art work and not all of it pleasant." I thought she defended herself exceptionally well. First, she said that very few of the children had any objection. Second, she explained that in design work the "value can be obtained only when the design is worked out by the one making it."

And third, she pointed out that "the work was easy and required merely a cross stitch, and no hemstitching." No back-

ing down for Frankeberger; her only compromise was that in the future she would try to find designs that might appeal to boys.

Looking through school department reports for the years that she was the art supervisor, I found many reports in which she advocated for her department and spoke with pride about the work that she and her students had done. She conducted an annual Art Week, began an original plan for classroom decoration and contributed frequently to professional magazines. She would have been a teacher for Frances Tipton Hunter, the noted illustrator who graduated from Williamsport High School in 1914.

Frankeberger originally was from the small town of Lewisberry in York County. She was born in June 1872, the youngest of the seven children of Joseph and Rebecca Arthur Frankeberger. Before she came to Williamsport, she taught in Amsterdam, New York, and Atlantic City, N.J.

Frankeberger seems never to have stopped studying and learning. She earned a bachelor's degree in education from Bucknell in 1927, when she was 55. The Bucknell registrar's records indicate that she attended Bucknell for only two semesters and two summers, but she brought with her credits from the former Keystone State College, now Kutztown University, Pratt Institute, Columbia, the Art Students' League and the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. Two years after she earned her degree from Bucknell, she was granted a master's degree from

Columbia University Teachers College.

We know little of her personal life — I found only one very poor photograph. In the 1935 edition of American Women: The Official Who's Who among the Women of the Nation, she identifies herself as a Methodist and a Republican. In Boyd's Williamsport Directory for 1917, she is listed as a boarder at the Elmira Street home of Charles W. Sones; in 1920, she is living on West Fourth Street, in the Normandy Apartments. She died in 1946 at the age of 73 and is buried in the family plot in Lewisberry.

Frankeberger had retired when she was commissioned to create the murals. She worked from her home in Lewisberry. It was the Depression, and sometimes the school department had difficulty paying her because the local banks were closed; she was paid with cafeteria funds and the proceeds from plays.

The restored murals are remarkable. They are bold and colorful, with exacting detail on small things such as the beads on the belts. The border decorations are striking. These lovely paintings drew national attention when they were dedicated in 1935, and the repainted and repaired murals should attract even more attention at the rededication ceremonies in the spring.

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