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Art in parks revival to get financial boost with matching funds

By Charles Sheehan

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It took 10 arduous months, but the dark and ominous skies above Joliet and Marquette have been cleared away to reveal a pale and gentle blue.

Beatrice Braidwood's Progressive Era "Joliet and Marquette," which depicts Louis Joliet and Jacques Marquette, early explorers of the Mississippi River, is among the first murals to be restored as part of a larger mission to save dozens of works from artists such as Tom Lea and John Warner Norton that are scattered throughout the city in Chicago Park District fieldhouses.

Braidwood's mural, like 17 others in the Sherman Park fieldhouse, was thick with soot and varnish. Worse off are the murals that have split with cleaving plaster underneath. Others were subject to vandalism.

The Park District is expected to approve \$188,000 in matching funds Wednesday for a restoration project that will require thousands of hours of labor and cotton swabs to remove decades of decay and repair damages.

There are 58 murals in 11 Park District fieldhouses. The Chicago Conservation Center, which has nearly finished a similar but more extensive restoration of murals in the city's public schools, has raised corporate and private funds to match the city's contribution.

While the themes of the murals are of early American history, art historians say the works capture a period of high anxiety in the early 20th Century, as millions of European immigrants flooded cities to take jobs created by a new phenomenon called mass production.

The anxiety was felt both by the newcomers, crammed into crowded tenements, and those who watched the immigrants with suspicion.

Every work was intended to instill the belief that all it would take to live the American dream was some hard work, an adventuresome spirit and, perhaps above all, "constructive recreation," according to one mural.

At the time, park fieldhouses had become one-stop shopping for everything from immunization to education for thousands of immigrants eager to assimilate.

Lea, Norton and others were part of Art Institute of Chicago's mural arts program, founded in

1907.

Communities in the city funded the first works, but later murals were funded by the Works Progress Administration, a federal relief measure put into place during the Depression.

Some of them bordered on propaganda, but they mark an important era in American art history, said Mary Lackritz Gray, author of "A Guide to Chicago Murals."

The later works were influenced by the great Mexican muralists Jose Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros, said Heather Becker, chief executive officer at the Chicago Conservation Center

"In the beginning, the murals were a look at aspects of American society and what set us apart," she said. "But they came to be a reflection upon minority issues, labor issues, industrial development and how industrialization was changing everything. It was a look at the positive and the negative, and up to this point, there really hadn't been a debate."

The work required to restore the murals is extensive.

The center's head conservators, Margaret Nowosielska and Dorotea Bobek, spent most of the last year on the murals at Sherman Park, 1301 W. 52nd St., which housed some of the most severely damaged artworks.

They will be unveiled during a ceremony later this month, Becker said.

The works had largely been neglected for lack of funds until private corporations, such as LaSalle Bank, and private donors helped the Park District foot the bill.

The restoration project will likely be completed in 2007.