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Murals' rebirth brings history to life

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March 22, 2007

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Once feared lost to crumbling walls and water damage, the Oakton School murals created by struggling artists during the Great Depression have undergone a painstaking restoration thanks to a decade-long community effort.

School officials invite the community to celebrate the unveiling of the Oakton mural restoration project at 6 p.m. Friday at the school, 436 Ridge Ave.

The 26 murals and panels depict "The Song of Roland," an early piece of French poetry that describes the Battle of Roncevaux Pass involving King Charlemagne and his courageous knight Roland in the eighth century.

Perhaps more importantly, the 1930s-era murals are, as Evanston-Skokie School District 65 Superintendent Hardy Murphy has put it, "a testimonial to the American spirit during the Depression."

Unknown artists across the nation went to work under the federally funded Works Progress Administration during the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

"This was a way to put artists to work and at the same time engage in some morale building in a country that was in the throes of some really destitute economic times," said Murphy, who was struck by the significance of the WPA art and "The Song of Roland" when he arrived in Evanston in 1999.

Restoration timeline

According to District 65, restorations started in 1997 with generous private donations from Cigna Insurance and other corporate donors. But the need for structural repairs to correct water damage delayed the restoration temporarily.

As the rate of deterioration accelerated in the late 1990s, conservation experts from the Chicago Conservation Center took tracings of the images to facilitate restoration should funds become available eventually.

For parents at Oakton School, the sight of crumbling walls in the school's main gathering place seemed to symbolically affirm any misperceptions about the school that lingered in the community.

"Events held in the school involving students and the community are tarnished by the deteriorating condition of the walls and the art held on them," wrote Mark Cleveland, in a 2001 letter appealing to local legislators. "Last month, a 20- by 30-square-foot plaster section of the south wall fell to the floor among children during a class in the room."

State Rep. Julie Hamos, D-18th, of Evanston succeeded in acquiring a \$100,000 grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. The funds, however, got held up in Springfield and weren't released until last May.

Murphy has spoken often of the inspiration he draws from "The Song of Roland" and the artists' portrayal of a great piece of literature and an epic battle.

"You cannot help but be moved by the chronicling of spectacular and historical events," said Murphy, who likens the poem to such great works of literature as *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*.

"The fact that those events have been reduced to writing and presented in paintings is very inspirational," Murphy said, noting that housing the murals in an elementary school is a "way to bring history to life through art."