

Mural touched up at library

By Dennis Hines

A large piece of historical artwork at the DeKalb Public Library received some touch-up work recently.

Representatives from the Chicago Conservation Center visited the library to help clean a mural located in the main room of the facility. Margaret Nowosielska worked on the project from Oct. 23 to Oct. 26. She expected the project to take about two weeks to complete, but she received assistance from a co-worker to complete the project sooner.

“I’ve worked so many years on murals, so it wasn’t more difficult or much more difficult or much more unusual,” Nowosielska said. “The painting is in pretty good shape.”

Nowosielska said she has been cleaning murals for about 30 years. She said some projects take her about a year to complete, while others only take a few days.

“It depends on how big it is and how much it’s damaged,” she said.

Officials from the Chicago Conservation Center clean and repair murals for schools, banks, park districts and libraries. Nowosielska said her next project is to repair a mural at a school in Chicago.

“It’s a big project, so it will, at least, take until the end of the year,” she said.

Nowosielska said several DeKalb residents have watched her clean the mural throughout the week.

“They are very nice people,” Nowosielska said. “It’s a small town, which makes it much nicer.”



Dee Coover, director for the DeKalb Public Library, said the cost to have the mural cleaned was about \$10,000. She said Northern Illinois University students from Nancy Castle's grant writing class submitted a draft grant to the DeKalb County Community Foundation to inform them about the project.

Coover said the foundation awarded a \$5,000 grant to the library, and members of the Katz's Family Foundation awarded a matching grant of \$5,000 to help fund the project.

“As soon as we got the money in place, we hired the Chicago Conservation Center, and they're unbelievably well qualified,” Coover said. “They literally wrote the book on WPA (Work Projects Administration) murals, but they do many other types of work.”

Coover said many library patrons asked questions about the mural during the cleaning process.

“They have been thrilled, absolutely thrilled,” Coover said. “They are interested and wanting to know what's the WPA, how long has it (the mural) been here, has it always been here and how come they have never noticed it before. Margaret Nowosielska was worried about the smell of varnish, and nobody has complained.”

The mural was painted and commissioned to the library in 1934 by Gustav Dahlstrom.

“He was actually the head of the entire state of Illinois WPA program,” Coover said. “So he was a very famous painter back in 1934.”

The WPA was formed during the Great Depression. Coover said members of the organization painted murals for schools, libraries and post offices.

“This agency was formed to employ artists and writers to do projects for schools, post offices and, in this case, libraries, and many people travel around the United States to see WPA murals,” Coover said. “Santa Fe is famous for their murals. In many places, they have been painted over, torn down and replaced. So we're particularly lucky to have this one that's never been painted over and is in quite good condition.”