

Delta Sources and Resources



The Misselhorn Art Gallery and G, M & O Depot Sparta, Illinois by Terry Waldron

The Misselhorn Art Gallery is located in the old G, M & O Depot in Sparta, Illinois. It houses over two thousand originals by Sparta native Roscoe Misselhorn, including sketches, painting, woodblocks, and pen and ink drawings. In addition, there are many examples of his graphic design work: logos, letterheads, posters, as well as many of his editorial cartoons produced during the 1930s.

The Depot

In 1875 the St. Louis to Cairo (narrow gauge) line was chartered linking Sparta, Illinois to the rest of the United States. A depot was built in Sparta in 1879 on the site of the

current station. Records from 1882 show that over 7,000 passengers traveled through Sparta by rail. Decades later the need for larger, more uniform rail lines meant the demise of the narrow gauge and the introduction of larger, more powerful locomotives.

The current depot, built in 1907 after a fire claimed the original structure, stands as the last remnant of the Cairo to St. Louis rail line. The new depot was built using the same floor plan as the original wood structure, but this time bricks from the city's kilns formed the thirteen inch walls. The largest area is the freight room, with its elevated platform. Also featured (and labeled as such) were the two segregated waiting rooms: men's and women's.

By the late 1950s, rail travel was rapidly being replaced by the bus and car. In 1958 the last passenger train dropped off its travelers in Sparta. In 1972 the Gulf, Mobile and Ohio merged with the Illinois Central and an era of

railroad history ended.

Used only for shipping and office space, the depot began to fall into disrepair. The windows were boarded up and by the late 1970s, only the west waiting room was used as an office for one employee. The depot closed for good on June 28, 1986, its future uncertain.

Established in 1988 the Misselhorn Art Foundation grew out of an effort to establish a scholarship for local art students. It quickly became a caretaker for the collected works of noted Midwestern artist Roscoe Misselhorn.

The Artist

Roscoe Misselhorn (1902–1997) began drawing in earnest in the third grade when, in his words, “my teacher, Mattie Baird had us draw pictures of chickens using little circles. She thought mine was the best and put it up on the blackboard.”

Roscoe grew up two blocks from the G, M & O depot, a place he always found fascinating. He could spend hours watching and absorbing life among the people and things coming and going at the station.

In high school he did art work for the yearbook and posters for special events. However, since at the time the only ‘art’ class was drafting, he dropped out of school during his junior year. Not to be discouraged he decided to pursue his dream of being accepted to the Art Institute in Chicago. Unfortunately, after a long train ride, he found he lacked one essential thing: a high school diploma.

In 1924 Roscoe married Ruth Tritt, a teacher who encouraged him to continue developing his talent. He finally succeeded in attending the St. Louis School for the Arts (now Washington University) for three years. Taking commercial art courses, he developed a real talent for designing logos, letterheads, and advertising pieces. He also found work as a cartoonist. During the 1930s his work was syndicated by the Meyer Bothe Company out of Chicago to over 3,000 newspapers across the country. He was paid \$5 a week for each edito-

rial cartoon. During that time he also painted store windows, signs and lettered hundreds of truck doors.

He did all that to earn money and yet always found time to sketch those things that interested him. He loved old barns, covered bridges, steam engines, and riverboats. While attending school in St. Louis he often wandered the back streets and drew what he saw. He captured life along Produce Row and the Mississippi riverfront, an area long since demolished to make way for the arch grounds.



In 1949 he published his first book *Sketching with Pencil*, soon followed by *A Portfolio of Sketches*, and *The Ozark Sketchbook*. Later collections focused on St. Louis, Missouri, Illinois and his large scale book of American Steam Trains. Over the years Roscoe produced thousands of original pieces. His artwork can be found nationwide. Roscoe passed away in the fall of 1997, leaving a legacy for generations to admire and enjoy.

The Movie

In the fall of 1966 Hollywood came to Sparta. Much of the Academy Award winning *In The Heat Of The Night* was filmed on loca-

tion in and around Sparta. With a script depicting racial tensions in a small southern town, star Sidney Poitier felt it would be a difficult shoot on location. So the filmmakers scouted for a “southern looking small town.” It also needed to be near a major airport, so film stock could be flown back and forth to Hollywood. Because the city water tower kept showing up in shots the name of the town was changed from Wells (in the John Ball novel) to Sparta, Mississippi.

The old GM&O Depot featured prominently in the film in three important scenes: in the confrontation in the waiting room between Warren Oates (deputy Sam Woods) and Sidney Poitier (Virgil Tibbs); trackside as Rod Steiger (Chief Gillespie) asks Virgil to stay and help him find the killer; and finally, the closing scene when Virgil boards the train to leave and he and the Chief part ways as equals.

The Depot has a large collection of movie memorabilia including a shooting script, autographs, lobby cards, and posters from around the world. Recent additions include photos of actor Scott Wilson, whose first film role was as Harvey Oberst in *In The Heat Of The Night* and most recently portrayed Hershel Green on AMC's *The Walking Dead*. Scott was in town in 2014 to film a commercial promoting the 175th Anniversary of the Sparta.

The Foundation

In 1989 the Misselhorn Art Foundation grew out of a desire to start an art scholarship for area students. But, one thing led to another, and the group and its goals were expanded. The Foundation's additional purpose became to catalog, protect and display the collected works of Roscoe Misselhorn, and to promote the arts in Randolph County and Southern Illinois. In time it grew to provide educational opportunities for the youth of our area through tours, special exhibits, sponsorships of art related activities, and scholarships.

The Gallery makes an effort to host at least two special exhibitions each year and has featured many area artists and photographers.

Standard hours are 1–5pm Saturday and Sunday. We also offer special tours to a variety of groups. Additional information can be found by emailing artsparta@yahoo.com. ▲▼▲