

Artist returns to see how scenes have changed

By STEVE RADDOCK

Back when Franklin Roosevelt occupied the White House and Joe Louis ruled the boxing ring, John Gelsavage—a young Detroit artist—traveled over many of Rochester's stone and dirt backroads looking for still life subjects.

In 1939, Maurice Collins' blacksmith shop in Goodison, caught Gelsavage's eye. A watercolor resulted. Last week, paved roads and a Toyota Corolla brought the painter back to the shop site, on which the Palm Creek Cider Mill now stands. The Collins operation went out of business in 1945.

Although Gelsavage sold most of the sketches and paintings he produced during that period, he decided not to market the blacksmith watercolor because it reminded him of a mill frequented during his childhood days in Pennsylvania.

A couple of months ago, however, Gelsavage gave the watercolor to Detroit Historical Society representatives who had come to pick up two other paintings. They, in turn, passed it on to the Rochester Historical Commission.

Unsure of the exact whereabouts of this blacksmith shop, the commission turned to the community for help. The watercolor was put on display in the Avon Township Public Library and burbs requesting information were printed in the local press.

AT THE INVITATION of the Rochester Eccentric, Gelsavage, now 70, visited Goodison and confirmed that the shop he painted once stood at the Palm Creek Cider Mill location. Walking around the building, he

reminded about the landscape being peppered with buggies and wagon wheels. Stacked crates of apples now stand where horses once walked to be shod.

According to Gelsavage, he often scouted the Rochester area for subjects because it was the nearest location with hills and winding roads. Coming from a hilly section of Pennsylvania, he said he felt at home here.

He had passed by the blacksmith shop three or four times prior to painting it in the summer of '39. It had either been too early or too late in the day for getting the right lighting conditions. He finally scheduled a trip to Goodison for the specific purpose of painting the shop.

The watercolor took him approximately one and a half hours to paint. He also did a couple of sketches of the shop showing horses being shod and buggies parked outside the building. These were sold.

The son and brother of miners, Gelsavage was born in Old Forge, Pa., in 1909. Mining subsequently took his family to Jerome, Pa. in 1912 and Earnest, Pa. in 1922.

It was as an eighth grader in Earnest that Gelsavage penned a poem about the misfortunes of miners for a class assignment. Entitled "16 Tons", the piece passed into obscurity until it turned up one day in Tennessee Ernie Ford's classic recording. The record identifies the lyrics as originating from an anonymous folk poem.

Gelsavage is still trying to figure out how the poem, which was stashed away in his teacher's attic, made it to Tin Pan Alley.

HE STARTED his involvement with art by taking lessons from a Washington, D.C. correspondence school when he was 14. A year later, he was accepted into Indiana State Teachers College despite the fact that he had not attended high school and was one year under the minimum age requirement for admission.

After completing three successful years at Indiana State, school administrators discovered the high school omission. He was told he couldn't get a college degree until he received a secondary diploma.

What he did, instead, was spend six months in the Pittsburgh Artists Institute. He then troiked out to New York City, joined the Art Students League and landed a job with the McGraw-Hill Publishing Co. as an editorial artist. He spent 1926-1930 in Fun City.

His father and brothers, in the meantime, had moved to Michigan in 1924—prompted largely by the coal strikes taking place at that time. They were lured by Detroit's burgeoning automotive industry, which offered cleaner work and more money.

IN 1930, GELSAVAGE also established roots in Detroit. He went to work for the old Detroit Times as an editorial illustrator, served a short

stint with the Detroit Daily Mirror doing the same thing, and then rejoined the Times.

In the throes of the Depression and

making only \$15 a week with a wife and children to support, he bowed out of the newspaper business in 1933. He opted, at that time, to become a full-time independent artist.

Launching his venture with some \$1,500 in savings, Gelsavage produced over 500 works between 1933 and 1937, including sketches, watercolors, oils and lithographs.



The last time Detroit artist John Gelsavage stood at Goodison's Orion-Collins intersection was in the early 1940s. When he returned there last week, he

saw a landscape that had been given a facelift by progress. (Staff photo by Mindy Saunders)

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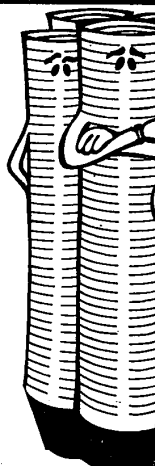
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