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The Mural in the Squirrel Hill Post Office, Part 2

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Alan Thompson had a sense of humor. When he painted the Squirrel Hill post office mural in 1942, he didn't show scenes glorifying the nation's industrial workers or bucolic farm scenes meant to take people's minds off the hard times of the Great Depression. Instead, he created a lively narrative showing Squirrel Hill from its early American beginnings to the World War II era.

The previous article dealt mostly with the right side of the mural, which portrays Squirrel Hill in the late 1700s. This article deals with the left side, which shows the community in the 1940s. It is obvious that Thompson came to Squirrel Hill to look around. He must have observed the bustling streets, looked at local landmarks, and heard stories of its early days. He had a sharp eye for detail. He painted a mural bursting with lively characters. The figure who anchors the left side is a Jewish man who stands deep in thought while the activities of daily life swirl around him. While the gossiping ladies, greengrocer, soldier and newsboy would have been common sights anywhere in Pittsburgh in 1942, the Jewish man indelibly places the mural in Squirrel Hill. The lighter area around the man's head emphasizes his importance but also sets him apart from the others.

Thompson's use of light and color keeps the eye moving around the mural, which looks fresh and sparkling due to a painstaking restoration by art conservator Christine Daulton several years ago. Local architectural landmarks dot the background, such as a fluted bank column and Adeles' façade. High on the hill sits Taylor Allderdice High School, perhaps the most imposing structure in Squirrel Hill. And what scene from 1942 would be complete without a trolley?

Alan Thompson was born in England in 1908. He attended Carnegie Institute of Technology and Pittsburgh Art Institute and was a member of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. He was both an illustrator and an artist and was well known for his paintings of the Pittsburgh area. One reviewer wrote, "When looking at Alan Thompson's paintings, one feels they have left Norman Rockwell's clean, middle class neighborhoods and have crossed the tracks into a world that is a bit more cold and bleak." That bleakness is not as apparent in the Squirrel Hill mural, but there is an edgy quality to it. In spite of the crowded scene, the individuals stand alone or interact only with one other person.

Thompson's Squirrel Hill mural is one of about 1,150 murals and bas-relief sculptures created between 1933 and 1943 in a New Deal program that provided work for artists during the Great Depression. Artists were asked to work with a local committee to decide what subject would be portrayed and were encouraged to create scenes that were uplifting and patriotic. The bas-relief in the Turtle Creek post office, for example, is a peaceful scene of William Penn making a treaty with the Native Americans. By contrast, when looking at the mural in

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the Squirrel Hill post office, one wonders what the local committee thought of it. It's earthy rather than uplifting, with sly bits of humor, such as a dog eyeing a fire hydrant.

Looking again at the mural as a whole, it is easy to see where Thompson got his ideas for the contemporary scene on the left, but where did he get his ideas for the early American scene on the right? It turns out that stories of those times were still being told, and Squirrel Hill history has been written about in various sources, but that's a topic for another column. Very few original sites remain from that era in the Squirrel Hill area—one of which is Turner Graveyard at 3424 Beechwood Boulevard. If you're interested in seeing it, the graveyard is open anytime.