

New discoveries from the SDHC art collections

Member Christa Wise's wonderful reflection on the legacy of Saugatuck painter and art educator, Cora Bliss Taylor was inspired by the recent preservation of the two murals first shared with you at the Holiday Party and the January-February Newsletter. Thanks to the generosity of members we were able to raise over \$2,000 to frame these artworks and share them with our community. We hope our collections inspire more memories like these and we encourage you to reach out to us with your own stories. -- Editor

I have summered in Saugatuck since I was six years old. One of the high points of my young life, when I was still counting my age in single digits, was making art with Cora Bliss Taylor. I loved the freedom of being able to take the ferry across the river for a nickel, and spending a couple of hours painting with her. My mom paid \$3.00 a week to send me to the "landscape" class on Wednesdays and the studio class on Saturday. I went for many years.



Cora Bliss Taylor

Mrs. Taylor was older than my mom and definitely more, I think we would say now, Bohemian. I remember when we signed up for classes and were invited to come inside her home. Every piece of furniture, every flat surface, was covered with colorful hand-painted paisley, and I was awe struck. It was not like the suburban homes I was used to! She dressed the part as well, routinely coming to class wearing a broad-rimmed straw hat embellished with sequin-covered felt fish, artsy flowing dresses, and always a big smile. As a retired art teacher, I now look back on her teaching with admiration; she was fearless. We loaded up our cupcake tins with tempera paint, grabbed brushes, and a drawing board with three pieces of paper secured with clothespins, and headed off to paint on-location every Wednesday. I cannot imagine sending twenty-odd little kids to sit on the dock of the Big Pavilion without fearing the loss of one or two of them in the river, but it was never a problem.

On Saturdays we painted in her backyard. On rainy days, we painted in the studio, a garage-like outbuilding. I remember the pitter-patter of the rain on the roof and coziness of the structure on those gray mornings.

In that time, my parents rented weekly apartments at Holiday Hill, and we had many returning families with young daughters. They discovered I was a built-in playmate, and I enjoyed my role as tour director revealing paths through the woods to the Oval, leading the climb to the rope swing on Mt. Baldhead, and cajoling their daughters to take art classes with Mrs. Taylor.

My favorite projects were the murals we painted every summer. The concept of a mural was new to me, but I quickly embraced the collaborative project with gusto. To my surprise and delight, the S-D History Center has found and restored them for display.



While it has been nearly 60 years since I worked on these pieces, I really enjoyed the memories they awakened. Mrs. Taylor allowed her "serious" students to work on them. When I saw the circus, I remembered painting the polka-dots on the fat lady's costume, but even better, I recognized the my contribution to the river side mural. My family bought "Holiday House and the Rancho Villas" (now Holiday Hill) in the early 50's. This mural, painted in the 1950s shows Holiday House.



Holiday House and early RADAR tower on Mt. Baldhead, late 1950s

The building was a two-story frame structure that I was told was the home of a lumberman in the 1800's. It had been converted into five apartments that were rented on a weekly basis during the summer with a big communal "Sundeck" overlooking the river. Unfortunately, the building burned in 1960.

When I first saw the work, it jogged my memory. I recognized the building that was ours and remembered advocating for its inclusion in the piece. The driveway up the hill was my first clue and while the memory of what the building looked like is fuzzy, I do recall painting it. About six to ten students worked on the murals, but this part was my effort. For a moment, I could not figure out what the "pinwheels"

in yellow, pink, and blue were until I remembered the patio tables with the same colored umbrellas on the Sundeck. They are a bit wonky, as I had not yet learned about "perspective." What a pleasure it was to reconnect with this artwork, and how amazing it is that it was saved.

There are many in this community who learned to love making art with Mrs. Taylor. She was the gateway to the art world for children of my generation, and I am in her debt. At the end of summer, Mrs. Taylor matted the three best paintings of each of her students and staged a clothesline art show in Cook Park. Mom saved these matted works of mine, but they all perished in the Holiday Hill fire. Getting to revisit the nascent artist that I was when painting this piece is why it is so special to me. I must admit, however, these paintings were far more magnificent in my memory. To my young self, these murals felt as huge and masterful as the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Mrs. Taylor was truly a seminal influence in my life and I suspect in the lives of many of the children of Saugatuck. I loved her and her classes, and I was always disappointed when the it was time to clean up and leave. As an artist and a retired teacher of art, I can only hope I have left a legacy as treasured as hers.

-- Christa Wise

