



Jim Schmidt of Solon has researched the location of the scene painted by Grant Wood in his 1939 "New Road." Schmidt has compared the painting (upper left) to aerial photos from the 1930s, and held discussions with area residents. His conclusion is that the area pictured is the intersection of Mehaffey Bridge and Cottage Reserve Roads. "New Road," by Grant Wood, 1939. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger; Photograph copyright National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Finding Grant Wood's "New Road"

By Janet Brown
Special to the Economist

SOLON— Grant Wood, in the summer of 1939, painted a gentle landscape near Solon, "New Road." Because a simple mile marker saying "SOLON 5 MI." appears prominently in the right foreground of the painting, many area residents wonder where the scene is located, or if such a place actually exists.

Not only does it exist, but during the summer that Wood painted the "oil sketch," lifetime Solon resident Joe Turkal lived in the white farmhouse with a windmill, shown in the left foreground of the painting.

"It's difficult to see the connection today," explained Jim Schmidt of Solon. "Look at the picture and it looks vaguely familiar, but a lot of the landmarks are gone, the houses are gone, most of the trees are gone." Nonetheless, Schmidt has documented the exact location of Wood's painting.

"We have these 1930s photographs that match the painting of 1939," Schmidt says, referring to the Iowa State Map

Service's recently-added collection of aerial survey photos taken during the 1930s.

The aerial photos and Schmidt's then/now sleuthing and comparisons are on the Solon Public Library website; <http://soli.inav.net/~solonlib>.

"The challenge," according to Schmidt, "was confirming whether the features seen in 'New Road' actually existed in one setting, or whether the painting is a composite of many features in many settings. These photos show all the features in the painting as they existed in the thirties," Schmidt explains. "It appears to be all in one place, I can actually document and find the pine tree, the houses, the barn, where the sun was. It was a correct representation of the area."

The location—five miles west of Solon—is the view looking north from the top of a hill on what is now Mehaffey Bridge Road, overlooking the causeway at Lake Macbride. Wood painted the scene from a viewpoint near today's intersection of Mehaffey Bridge Road and 200th Street.

Because of the expansion of Lake Macbride in the mid-1950s, portions of Wood's panorama are now submerged under the south arm of the lake. For instance, in 1939, the bridge which Wood painted in "New Road" crossed Jordan Creek. Today, that section of Jordan Creek is part of Lake Macbride as it passes under Mehaffey Bridge Road at the causeway.

The new road of 1939 led to the newly-completed Lake Macbride Park. The main entrance to the park at that time was via that new road, which stretches to the left of the painting, from the crossroads, toward the west. Today, that road is named Cottage Reserve Road. In order to reach the new beach, visitors followed that road toward the Cottage Reserve area, but rather than entering the Reserve, the road passed by a Moose Lodge on the lake, then continued on over a stone

bridge which crossed the new lake, to the beach. Today, that bridge is covered by the raised lake; and, of course, access to the Macbride State Park beach is from the opposite, or northwest, side of the lake.

From details in the painting, Schmidt discovered clues about the scene. Among those clues were the shadows, the color of the sky and the presence and shape of the small cloud. From these details, he determined that the sketch was painted late in the day, and that the northerly direction of the painting matches the site. At the library website, Schmidt explains how the painting's "distant, lonely cloud which resembles a fair weather cumulus" provides the final clue in determining direction.

The sky in "New Road" helped Schmidt determine the time of day, as it "transitions from blue on the left to magenta on the right". Wood painted the sky with fine brush strokes of pink, red and violet over a blue background. For Turkal, who lived in the painting that summer, the blue sky suggests happy days on the farm of his grandparents, Joe and Anna Turkal. As a 10-year-old boy in the summer of 1939, Turkal well remembers the Solon mile marker, the scurry of CCC trucks, and the big fish he caught in Jordan Creek. He laughed and said that his grandfather used oversized wire cutters to break through the new barbed wire fence (visible in the painting), and gain access to the fish in Jordan Creek. His grandfather was upset to lose his orchard (as seen on the 1930s aerial photograph) to the new road. "Grandpa had an apple orchard and Grandma had a small peach orchard," Turkal said.

"The roads were all mud then," Turkal remembered, "except where the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) built the road to the lake. That was just all yellow clay." Gravel was applied only on the roads leading to the lake. Turkal described the deep road cut of the new roadway—which Wood accentuated with fine crosshatching brush strokes. A neighbor to the south drove a horse-drawn wagon into Solon every couple months, Turkal recalled: "You could hear him coming, hear the tugs jingling a mile away, but the road was so deep that from the front porch, you could only see the wagon driver

QUESTIONS on "New Road"—can you help?

The Solon Public Library wants to know more about "New Road". Please let the library know if you can help, or if you have questions about the painting.

- Who were Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger, who owned the painting before they presented it in 1982 to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.?

- Do any photographs exist which show this scene in 1939, as Grant Wood painted it?

- Do you know any relevant stories or information about the painting or the location in 1939?

- How many paintings in the National Gallery of Art, besides "New Road," display the name of a community or city?

- Some think that seeing a white horse brings good luck...did Grant Wood consider that when he included a white horse at the White (farm) riding stable?

- Do you have any details of Grant Wood's visits to this area, particularly of his stays in the Cottage Reserve home of the Stoddard family?

- Did the gravel used on the new road come from rock crushed at the Lake Macbride construction site?

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NEW ROAD

Continued on page 19

Ely News by Lenna See

Bud and Doris Lingel recently returned from an Army reunion in Lake Jackson, Texas. There were seventeen veterans and sixteen spouses in attendance. They toured the Sea Center and the Telephone Museum. Several of the couples showed photos of hurricane damage to their homes and properties. A couple of days were spent in Branson, Missouri seeing shows and observing Veterans week festivities on the way home.

Tim and Jackie Trpkosh entertained with the annual Thanksgiving Day dinner of the Trpkosh families and other activities during the weekend. Special guest on Thanksgiving Day was Rachel Trpkosh of Cedar Rapids. Also attending were Linda and Phil Thomas and families from Illinois and Missouri, Robert and Charlotte Trpkosh and families from Texas, Sue Sherry and Don Gerber of California, Sally and Larry Clark and family from Wisconsin and Illinois, Mary Robbins and families from Indiana and Michigan, Tyson Trpkosh of Waukon, Jon Trpkosh of Minnesota, Craig and Christine Trpkosh and Joe and several friends. A Christmas gift exchange was held following the dinner.

Thanksgiving Day dinner guests of Larry and Joyce Petersen in Cedar Rapids were Terry, Dawn, Nicole, and Toni

Petersen, and Tina Petersen, all of Cedar Rapids, and Rachel Hodina.

Thanksgiving Day dinner guests of Daniel, Kimberly, and Jesse Novak were Henrietta Klouda of Cedar Rapids, Danny and Nancy Schmuecker, Mitchell and Jalen of Luzerne, Emma Novak, Billy and Irene Novak, Danny Novak, and Mike and Rose Dunham.

Tara Higgins and friend of Iowa City and Ozella Hoffman of Cedar Rapids were dinner guests on Thanksgiving Day of LaVeda Higgins and friend.

Post-Thanksgiving Day dinner guests on Friday of Richard and Trula Ahrendsen of Olin were Gary and Hanna Grant of Center Junction, Ronna, Rachel, and Jenna Beitz of Hopkinton, Marvin and Verna Livermore, Lenna See, and Julie Livermore, Kali, Cheyenne, and Sierra.

Roberta Angell of Solon, Robert Rowell and Mark and Tammy Rowell, Matthew, Catherine, and Taylor of Cedar Rapids, Chris Petrik of Center Point, and Mervin and Bonnie Morris of Marion were dinner guests on Thanksgiving Day of Bill and Sherry Rowell in Cedar Rapids.

Verlee Andrie was a dinner guest on Thanksgiving Day of her brother and sister-in-law, John and Lorraine Trimble in Marion.

Post-Thanksgiving dinner guests on Saturday of Mike, Jackie, Cortney, and Tae Cleppe were Roger, Annie, Olivia, Hannah, Tyler, and Clayton Wolf of Cummings, Larry and Joyce Petersen, Terry, Dawn, Nicole, and Toni Petersen, and Tina Petersen, all of Cedar Rapids, Rachel Hodina, Ron and Tammy Cleppe, Steve Cleppe, and Mark Cleppe and friend, Theresa.

Don Musil spent several days over Thanksgiving visiting his daughter and family, Mary Musil and John McEwen, Ian, Eric, and Ellen in Helena, Montana.

Mark Furler of Gold Beach, Oregon spent several days visiting his parents, Mary Furler and Ralph Furler, and other relatives and friends in the area. Mark and Ralph drove to Black River, New York to visit Mark's son, 1st Lieutenant Garth Furler, at the Fort Drum Army Post, before he was sent to Afghanistan. They returned home Monday night.

Laurence and Mildred Mochal of Elberon and Richard and Trula Ahrendsen of Olin were Post-Thanksgiving Day dinner guests on Sunday of Lenna See.

Nancy Schmuecker of Luzerne, Judy Frank of Mt. Vernon Billy and Irene Novak, Rose Dunham, and Danny and Kin Novak enjoyed a potluck dinner with Emma Novak on Sunday. The occasion was to celebrate Emma's 96th birthday which was on Dec. 3.

New Road

(Continued from page 10)

from the chest up".

Visitors to the new lake, as well as weekend resident of the fishing cabins of the Cottage Reserve, could "re-horse," Turkal said, at the White family farm, to the north of his grandparents' home. The white horse and red bar at the crossroads in the painting depict the White farm. In 1939, the main road to Solon extended north—straight up the hill—beyond White's riding stable, then (right angle) turned eastward toward town.

Through the summer of 1939, Turkal's grandmother made cheese by hanging it in a bag from her clothesline, and twisting the bag every time she walked by, until the liquid was drained. The milk came from the family's two Guernsey cows, who regularly received ears of corn and hugs from Turkal's Swiss-born grandmother. She also sold kolaches and other baked goods to people staying in the Cottage Reserve, taking their orders on Sunday evening as they left the area for pick-up the following Friday.

Wood was a frequent visitor to the 1936-built art deco home of his friends the Stoddard family in the Cottage Reserve. He designed interior features for their home, including a generous round dining table, built-in shelving and even the living room colors—turquoise and coral. It was on those visits to the Cottage Reserve that Wood likely became acquainted with the scene of the painting, about a mile away. While the Iowa artist may have painted his "oil sketch" entirely on site, some art scholars noting the painting's level of finish believe that at least portions of "New Road" were painted in Wood's studio.

Also in 1939, Wood wrote a letter to his New York art dealers, labeling "New Road" a "sketch." In addition, on the back of the painting, he wrote that he reserved the option to expand upon the work at a later date. That did not happen; he died in February, 1942, just hours before his 50th birthday.

To solidly support his "New Road" canvas, Wood glued his double tabby-weave cotton canvas to the smooth side of a panel of Masonite. On other occasions, he painted directly on Masonite, a material developed in 1926. This painting measures 13 by 14 7/8 inches.

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., owns "New Road". It was given to them in 1982 by Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Strasburger, of White Plains, New York. Today it hangs as a main floor gallery, amid paintings by John Singer Sargent, Thomas Eakins and James Whistler. The painting was last in Iowa a decade ago, at the Davenport Museum of Art. It has been shown in Cedar Rapids in 1981 and during 1990 and 1991. "New Road" has been exhibited in galleries in Europe and America; and from 1987 to 1989, it hung in the Vice President's House.

Prints of "New Road", including framed prints, are sold at the Solon Public Library, by the Friends of the Library. Proceeds from print sales and from "New Road" note cards support the library. Mailing tubes are available for the print. The library is open on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 12 until 8 p.m.; on Tuesdays from 8 a.m. until 12 p.m. and on Saturdays from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m.

When Grant Wood created Solon's native sun painting giving us his perspective on an area of our neighborhood, it gave a revealing treasure to Solon and the world beyond.

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