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*Detail from Alison Stilwell's 1942 Chinese-style mural in Stilwell Hall.*

**Inside: Hidden Treasures of Stilwell Hall**

# HIDDEN TREASURES OF STILWELL HALL

by

Jeanne T. Myers

## Part I: Where Have They Gone?

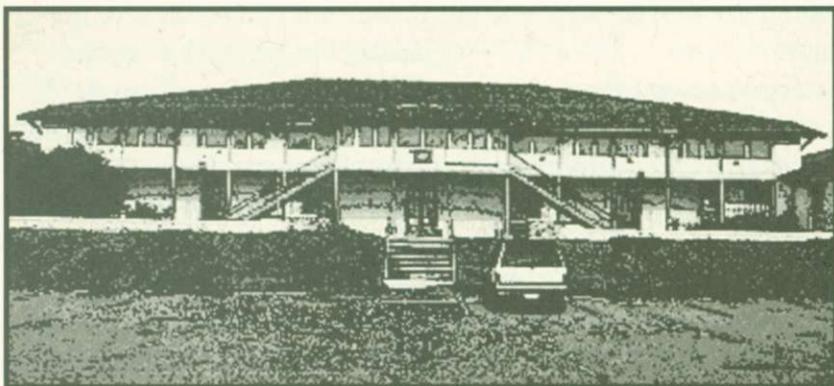
“The Fort Ord Soldiers’ Club” had its grand opening on September 2, 1943. It was the grandest military club in the country, with artworks created by many known and unknown artists working with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) through the Federal Art Project (FAP). The grand ballroom accommodated big events, smaller rooms provided quiet space for reading or writing letters to the folks back home. The large Tap Room contained “the longest bar in the west” where the troops could wet their whistles with five-cent beer after a hard day of rigorous training. This is a brief history of its beginning.

When General Joseph Stilwell was assigned to Fort Ord in October of 1940, he made it a priority that the enlisted men have their own place to relax and forget the pressures of the day. Despite his command duties, he took time to work with a planning team to design a grand recreation area for his troops. His original plan consisted of a large complex of playing fields, tennis courts, a swimming pool, a chapel, and club houses for both non-commissioned officers and enlisted men. The Enlisted Men’s Club was the first (and only) part of the plan to receive approval. The design was inspired by Colton Hall in Monterey, with twin stairways ascending to an open porch. Echoes of the architectural past are revealed in the adobe facing and walls surrounding the front terrace.

Ground breaking took place in February, 1941, and construction was on-again-off-again as WPA funding and man-power diminished and the economy improved. Private construction workers were hired to finish the building, which increased the cost. As a result, some of the plans were changed; artworks that were not underway were canceled, and construction of the barbecue court and seaside patio were never begun. The excavation for the swimming pool became the sunken parking lot in front of the club. In

1966, the building was renamed "Stilwell Hall" in honor of the late General Stilwell.

As the WPA construction crew erected the building, the decoration was in the hands of the Bay Area FAP artists. Weavers from the Federal Craft Project (FCP) dyed the fabric and made all the draperies for the building. FCP cabinetmakers built furniture



*Stilwell Hall, formerly called The Fort Ord Soldiers' Club.*

designed by FAP artists. Many of the artworks and furnishings were already completed by early 1942 and were held in storage awaiting installation in the unfinished building.

The finished building contained an estimated \$50,000 to \$60,000 (in 1941 dollars) worth of artwork, including the murals, easel paintings, mosaics, glazed tile, wood and wrought iron light fixtures, a fountain, carved woodwork and stone-work, wrought iron fireplace accessories, draperies, and furniture. It was the largest assignment ever given to a WPA art project.

What has become of all that splendor? The building has been stripped of all decorations not bolted down. The draperies have long since disintegrated, and the upholstered furniture is not likely to have survived in its original fabric. During the several redecorations, furniture and artworks were removed and possibly sold at auction through the Property Disposal Office. There are no records at the Property Disposal Office prior to 1976 of items from Stilwell Hall turned in for disposal.

An article by Emilia Hodel in *The San Francisco News* (July 5, 1941) is the single, most informative source of information about the artists involved. In it, she not only names the artists, but describes their commissions of the Soldiers' Club. Carleton Lehman, the FAP supervisor of all the artists working on the project, and Merlin Hardy both created large murals for the club. Merlin Hardy's beautiful mural for the Ladies Lounge featured a fashion show of Spanish-inspired costumes in a fiesta setting. Carleton Lehman filled the wall behind the bar with a nautical fantasy to delight the patrons. Alison Stilwell, already an established artist at the young age of twenty-one, also painted a mural as her personal contribution to her father's project. These three murals have recently been removed for stabilization and repair in preparation for installation in other locations. The Army's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) office is cooperating in the protection and relocation of these artworks as a detail of the closure of Fort Ord. The plans are to keep the repaired murals in the local area. New sites have been selected for two of the three. Perhaps a third, very long wall for the nautical fantasy will be available before repairs are completed.

Among other artworks were small animal sculptures by Sargent Johnson, door handles in the form of bronze dolphins and seahorses designed by Ajax Jackson, light fixtures and a fireplace by Michael von Meyer. Other artists and their works for the Club were described in Hodel's article, but are no longer located in the building, and no documents have been found pertaining to their removal or whether they were ever actually created. Watercolors by Dong Kingman, easel paintings by Merlin Hardy, Thomas Hayes, Milo Anderson, Eugene Ivanoff, and Stanley Long have disappeared. Sargent Johnson's small animal sculptures are gone. The fireplace designed by Michael von Meyer still remains in the building, as do other fireplaces and light fixtures whose designers are not yet identified. Many other artworks that were intended for the club were never begun. Beckford Young, known for his traditional Italian fresco technique, was to have painted four frescoes for the mezzanine, but there is no evidence of them now. Were they ever beyond the sketch stage?

There are still many questions about the Soldiers' Club artworks that remain unanswered, but the following chapters contain what has been learned so far.

## **Chapter II** **Merlin Hardy's Spanish Mural**

Merlin C. Hardy (1910-1984), a Bay Area painter, born in Oakland and trained at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco, had been working as a muralist for the WPA throughout the 1930's. He had assisted Lucien Labaudt on the Coit Tower murals in 1934, and painted murals for some of the luxury liners of the Matson Line cruise ships. He was commissioned by the Federal Art Project to paint a mural for the Ladies Lounge of the Fort Ord Soldiers' Club, and twelve easel paintings for the reading and writing rooms. The easel paintings have disappeared, but his elegant mural depicting life in California's Spanish era remained on the wall until its removal in March, 1997. At forty feet in length and over nine feet high, this is his largest known solo painting. Hardy is the only one of the Soldiers' Club muralists who clearly identified his work. He signed and dated it "May 4, 1942" on a scroll painted in the lower right foreground.

The choice of local history as the subject of WPA artwork was fairly common among artists chosen to decorate new buildings. Because of low budgets, most of the WPA's artists were regional residents; comparatively few had the national renown to be called up for projects far from their home territory. Hardy drew on the history of his own central California coast for his subject matter. His Spanish mural recreates an early nineteenth century fiesta scene with musicians, dancers, and conversation groups. However, he leaves the viewer somewhat puzzled by the apparent inactivity of the participants. The figures seem posed rather than enthusiastically participating in the celebration. The skirts do not swirl, nor is there a tie, a sash or a curl out of place. There is little variation in size and shape among the figures, with the sameness carried through even to the faces and the dark, unfocused eyes. All the

figures are as slender and sober-faced as fashion mannequins. A screen of trees provides a backdrop for the mannequins and allows glimpses of Spanish Colonial architecture and the desert beyond. There are also numerous lighting inconsistencies, which could indicate multiple lighting sources. Those and the red curtain on the far right all add to the stage-set appearance of this picture. What is really going on here?

It seems almost as if Hardy chose to create a display of costume designs for the enjoyment of the ladies relaxing in the



*Detail of Merlin Hardy's fiesta mural, 1942.*

Soldiers' Club Ladies Lounge, a fashion show of gowns and uniforms from the artist's imagination. His exceptional talent as a designer is evident in this work. The costumes are beautiful and elegant in pastel tones, with full skirts embroidered in beautiful patterns, trimmed with braid and tassels. The men's bolero jackets are similarly embroidered, and the gold-trimmed red jackets of the military uniforms command attention.

The Spanish mural originally faced a mirror of nearly the same size on the opposite wall,

through which it pleasantly dominated the entire room. The Ladies Lounge of Stilwell Hall has since been renamed "The Spanish Room," and has served as a lounge with no gender designation. The room was falling apart when the mural was removed March 1997. Moisture condensation in the unheated, unused building was

soaking sections of insulation batting, causing them and the ceiling tiles to fall. Vinyl floor tiles were curling up and mildew was growing on the dripping walls, but the mural remained in remarkably good condition despite its surroundings. Only a few small areas of flaking pigment were noted, most of the paint was still smooth and sound, albeit somewhat grimy. A mysterious round indentation near the center of the mural was revealed, once the canvas was removed, to be a hole in the plaster wall. Something round and hard (just about the size of a human head) had impacted the wall about five and one-half feet above the floor, breaking the plaster back into the wall and leaving the canvas unsupported at that spot. Fortunately, the canvas was not broken, but it must have an interesting story to tell.

The mural has been repaired and cleaned in preparation for its reentry into society. A team of students and instructors from the new California State University at Monterey Bay campus (CSUMB), working with a conservator hired by the U.S. Army for this project, helped to overlay the mural with a tissue facing so that no fragments of pigment would be lost in the removal process. The canvas was then removed all in one piece, using thin metal spatulas to break through the adhesive. Cleaning and minor repairs have now been completed, and it has been mounted on portable supports so that it can be displayed again. In September 1999 it was installed in Pomeroy Hall on the CSUMB campus. Since the Spanish mural is part of Fort Ord's history, and Fort Ord has become part of the university's history, this seems to be an appropriate fellowship.

What became of Merlin Hardy after completing his commission for the Soldiers' Club? There is no evidence that he continued painting after the closing of the WPA, except, perhaps, as a private pursuit. Instead, the brief biographical information available indicates he concentrated on his talents as a designer. If you've purchased any of the specialty china or ceramics at Gumps, you may have purchased some of Hardy's creations. After WWII, Hardy worked at Gumps as a designer of overglaze painting on ceramics and fine china until his death in 1984 at his home in San Francisco, according to his obituary in the San Francisco Examiner

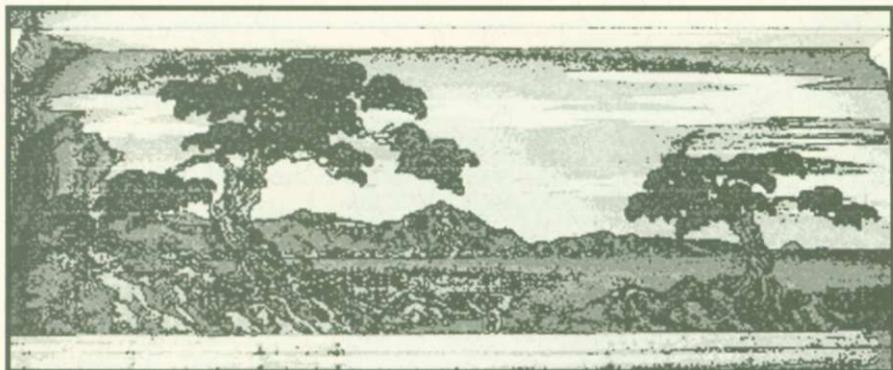
(Sunday 21 October 1984). However, several calls to Gumps have yielded a disappointing lack of information. They have no record of Hardy as an employee, so perhaps he was an independent artisan, selling his wares outright to the store. He believed it was the artist's primary duty to add beauty to the most utilitarian articles, and spent nearly forty years creating very special ceramic art ware.

Hardy's paintings were shown in galleries in Los Angeles and New York, as well as in the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. With such a wide-spread reputation, he must have been considered a promising talent at the time. It is very likely there are some of Merlin Hardy's oil paintings still in the Bay Area. He entered the San Francisco Art Association annual shows every year from 1935 to 1945, and even held a one-man show in the San Francisco Art Association (SFAA) gallery of the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1941. Alfred Frankenstein of the San Francisco Chronicle reviewed Hardy's show in the paper. "This artist's forte lies in the delicate sophistication that underlies his figures' paintings and his bright, carefully calculated and splendidly painted flower pictures." This may also describe the easel paintings that he created for the Soldiers' Club. If they were dispersed by auction through the Army's Property Disposal Office at Fort Ord, there may even be some in the Monterey area. Perhaps the publicity surrounding the return and reinstallation of Hardy's mural will bring some Hardy collectors to light.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Alison Stilwell's Monterey Mural, Vandalized!**

Alison Stilwell (1921-1991) was an accomplished painter before she was out of her teens. She specialized in Chinese style landscapes because she spent her childhood and received most of her art training in China where she lived with her family during her father's assignments. She was born in Peking (Beijing) on February 5, 1921 and began studying art at age fifteen with Prince P'u Ju, a Manchu courtier. The technique was learned upside down; the teacher sat on one side of the desk, and painted, she sat on the



*Alison Stilwell's 1942 Chinese-style mural in place in the "writing room" of Stilwell Hall before vandals damaged it in an attempted theft.*

other side and watched. Her innate talent enabled her to translate the movements mentally and perform them correctly. When Alison's artworks were exhibited in California Hall on the Berkeley campus, she was only nineteen years old, and the Stilwell family had just returned to live in Carmel while General Stilwell was assigned to Fort Ord in 1940.

Alison was barely twenty-one when the WPA/FAP offices in San Francisco closed. Dorothy Collins, one of the administrators from that office, was reassigned to oversee the completion of the Soldier's Club by a civilian construction company. Collins persuaded the general's daughter to paint something for the empty space above the fireplace in the Writing Room. No other artwork had been designated for that wall. It is the only major artwork in the building which was not created under the Federal Art Project since she was not employed by the WPA.

The young artist put her talents to work with oil paint on a large canvas approximately eight-by-fifteen feet. The result was a Monterey landscape painted in the Chinese style in bright colors. The mural features the wind-sculpted cypresses of Point Lobos, their twisted trunks framing the clear blue waters and complementing the rocky shoreline. Alison's canvas was mounted directly on the wall over the fireplace where it provided a serene focal point for the soldiers who used the quiet room. Some wrote letters back home, other read books from the floor-to-ceiling bookcases fitted

between the tall windows. Since General Joseph Stilwell, who had initiated the Soldier's Club project, had already returned to duty in China by the time the club was finished, Alison and her mother attended the 1943 Grand Opening celebration in his stead. Photos taken during the party show world maps on the wall opposite the fireplace. The center of the room was filled with couches and tables and chairs where soldiers could work in comfort and quiet.

Throughout the building's various transformations, the mural remained while the bookcases, the world maps, and the tables and chairs disappeared. During remodeling, the Writing Room was renamed the "Cypress Room" because of the commanding presence of the mural, which was still in very good condition until 1996. Early in that year, thieves entered the building and attempted to remove the mural by peeling it from the wall, pulling on the canvas rather than loosening the adhesive from behind. They then compounded the damage by rolling it up with the paint side in, causing the pigment to wrinkle up and flake off. The theft was interrupted and the thieves escaped, leaving the damaged artwork behind, trampling it in their hurry. The mural has suffered tremendous paint loss, but is now in protective custody with the Northern California Art conservators. The current plan, when funding becomes available, is to complete repairs and reinstall the mural in the restaurant of the Pomeroy Hall complex at CSUMB. When that will happen is an unanswered question.

#### **Chapter IV: Carleton Lehman's Nautical Mural and More**

Joseph Allen, the head of the Federal Art Project (FAP) in 1941, appointed Carleton Lehman (1911-) to be supervisor of the FAP artists on the Soldier's Club project. Technically, supervisors are to be overseers, not participants, however, there is no production quota for artists as they each work at their own speed, so a supervisor does little more than encourage and note progress. Lehman felt he had too little work to do so he volunteered to paint a mural for the bar. In 1941 he painted a sailor's fantasy on a

ninety-foot canvas at the "pickle factory" (473 Jackson Square in San Francisco, FAP headquarters) that wrapped around three sides of the room he used as a studio. His mural features several clear literary references to Melville's *Moby Dick* and the Biblical story of Jonah, as well as an assortment of undersea creatures. He completed the canvas in one piece and rolled it for storage because the interior walls of the club were not completed. He called the mural *Moby Dick*, but left it unsigned and undated. When it was installed in the Soldiers' Clubby a paperhanger, the huge canvas was cut into six sections (over each of the five windows) and mounted directly onto the wall behind the bar. it stretched from corner to corner.



*Detail of Carleton Lehman's 1942 "Moby Dick" mural, far left panel, featuring Captain Ahab aboard the ship "Pequod."*

The scenes on each end are of whaling ships on the surface of the water; the four scenes between the five windows depict underwater activities. The first section on the left features the ship *Pequod* with a peg-legged Captain Ahab scanning the horizon, harpoon in hand. A second sailor looks in the other direction, over the first window toward the spouting whale in the second section. This is not the White Whale, but a black sperm whale with Jonah resting in its mouth. The three black fish in the whale's throat and the three white fish dancing nearby could be symbolic of the three days and nights Jonah spent in the belly of the "great fish." Be-

tween the second and third windows, a sailor plays a card game of "Spades" with a mermaid while four other mermaids stand around on their tail fins and kibitz. The mermaid on the far right leans on the top of the window. In the fourth scene, three dolphins frolic near a bright red anemone while a pelican skims across the top of the water. The fifth section contains the Great White Whale holding Captain Ahab's peg leg in his mouth. This scene shows a slight miscalculation by the artist in designing the mural to fit around the windows; *Moby Dick* should have fit perfectly between the windows, but is just a few inches too far to the left. As a result, the paperhangers who installed the mural had to perform a frontal lobotomy on the unfortunate whale to allow room for the window frame. In the last scene, two sailors aboard the ship *Hispaniola* search for whale spouts; one looks back toward the White Whale and a school of flying fish cruising at low altitude while the other, harpoon ready, looks forward off the bow. All of the scenes are linked by the flow of currents painted in blue and green tones throughout the long mural.

Besides the obvious references to Monterey's former success in the whaling industry (1854-1877), the mural also illus-



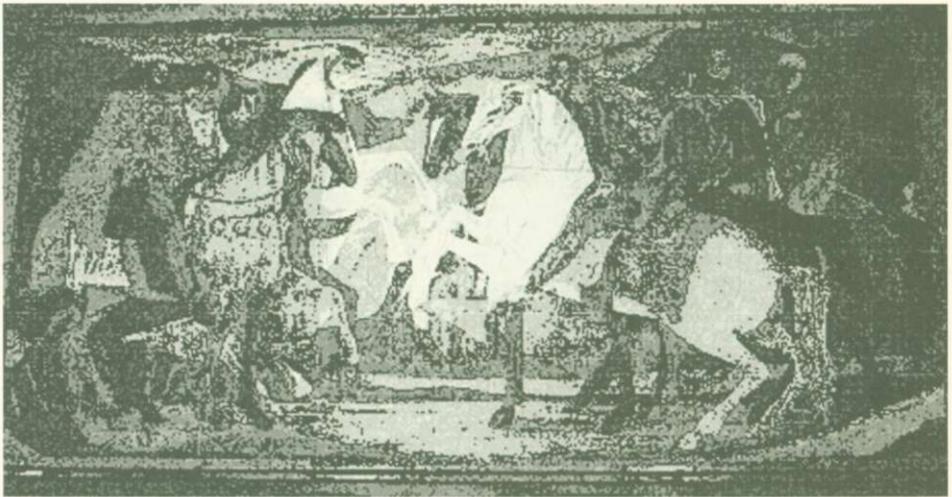
*Detail of center panel of Carelton Lehman's 1942 "Moby Dick" mural featuring a card game between a sailor and a mermaid.*

trates other varieties of sea life; the tiny fish swimming near an empty tin (in the dolphin panel) may refer to the successful anchovy industry. Lobsters, octopi, anemones, and leopard sharks, featured in the mural, also live in the waters off Monterey.

Unfortunately, it also bears the scars of having had items fastened to it with both tape (the removal of which also removed some of the paint pigment) and nails or screws that punched holes in the canvas. Two large rectangular holes in the canvas are evidence of some major damage at some time. The mural was repaired by repainting the scene directly on the plaster wall behind the canvas. Unfortunately, the crumbly plaster could not be removed when the canvas was detached from the wall in February, 1997. In addition to the scars already mentioned, center sections of the mural were quite moldy, which caused considerable flaking off of the pigment. The mural was overlaid with tissue to hold the pigment flakes in place during removal from the wall.

Another large painting, or "portable mural," entitled *Generals On Horseback* was painted by Carleton Lehman in 1942 at General Stilwell's request. It features seven generals from California history. Lehman's original idea was to paint recognizable portraits of the generals, but General Stilwell preferred more generalized representational figures. In remembering it twenty years later Lehman recalled Vallejo and Fremont, but could not remember who the other five were. When the *San Francisco Chronicle* announced that this painting would be exhibited in the San Francisco Museum of Art before installation in the Soldiers' Club, the article mentioned Generals Fremont, Halleck and Rosanoff. Others might have been Generals Jose Castro, E. Hitchcock, Stephen Watts Kearny, or Bennett Riley. There are other generals who played a part in California's history, but only four have been positively identified with the figures in Lehman's painting. The fact that both U.S. and Mexican generals are represented may explain the confrontational appearance of the mounted soldiers in the painting. The rugged landscape in which the two groups face each other adds to the tension in the scene. The colors are mostly shades of brown enlivened by the red and blue of the uniforms.

*Generals on Horseback* was painted without assistants. Lehman said the most difficult part of the composition was to depict twenty-eight horse's legs while keeping the painting meaningful. He solved the problem by treating the legs as a Bach fugue, designing them in counterpoint. *Generals on Horseback* is painted in oil on canvas, and measure 6'5" high and 10'2" wide. His *Generals on Horseback* was mounted on stretchers and hung as a "portable mural." It remained the primary decoration in the lobby until its mysterious disappearance in May 1995, when one or more thieves removed the bolts fastening the frame to the wall and stripped the canvas from the massive stretchers made of two-by-fours. It has yet to be recovered. The thief must have had knowledge of the painting and the fact that it was not permanently mounted to the building. In 1987, the Soldiers' Club was inventoried and an emergency removal plan for the artifacts was devised by KRA Group Architects. At that time the estimated value of Lehman's *Generals on Horseback* was \$7,000 - \$10,000.



Carleton Lehman's 1942 "*Generals on Horseback.*" Stolen in 1995.

## CARLETON LEHMAN

Carleton (or Carlton) Lehman, born in Visalia, California in 1911, studied at the University of California at Berkeley with graduate work at Harvard. He served two years as a teaching assistant for the Art Department at UC, Berkeley, then took a position with the WPA running the Sacramento Art Center in 1939-1940. The next year he went to work in the Federal Art Project under Joseph Allen. He said most of the artworks for The Club were created there, at the FAP headquarters in San Francisco, and carried down to Fort Ord when completed. The artworks were stored in a Fort Ord warehouse awaiting the completion of the building.

The six sections of *Moby Dick* are again in storage, awaiting funding for their repair, and a new home in which to entertain the public once more. *Generals on Horseback* is still at large. Will it ever be returned for public display? Stolen artworks do turn up now and again. This one has been out of the public view for all but the patrons of the Soldiers' Club. Would anyone recognize it if it showed up in a gallery or private collection?

### *About the Author:*

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*Jeanne lives in Tucson, Arizona with her husband, an Air Force officer.*

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