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POSTERity: Hunt for Depression-era National Park Posters Leads to Berkeley

By Glen Martin

It all started 43 years ago. Doug Leen was working as a seasonal ranger at Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, and his supervisor told him to clean out a complex of outbuildings south of Jenny Lake. Leen began hauling junk out of a barn when he saw it hanging from a nail: an old cardboard government poster featuring the park's rugged peaks.

Most other people, Leen acknowledges, would have chucked an old poster on the burn pile. But in 1972, it wasn't an *old* poster: It was obvious to Leen that it had been made sometime in the late 1930s or 40s. That made it, at that point, more aging kitsch than hoary and highly valuable antique.

"There was something about it, though," Leen said. "It had a kind of hand-made look to it, and it was a really strong image. I was intrigued by it, so I asked my supervisor if I could keep it, and he said yes."

The poster accompanied Leen when he left the park to continue his education and eventually pursue a dentistry career. But he didn't

just tack his find up on the wall next to other posters that were then in vogue—the photo of a kitten dangling from its paws with the caption, “Hang In There, Baby,” or the expressionistic daisy with the legend, “War Is Not Healthy for Children and Other Living Things.” The longer he had the Grand Teton poster, the longer he looked at it, the more he was smitten.

“There was a story behind it,” Leen said, “and I wanted to know what it was.”



So he researched his find, and found that it was one of a series of 14 posters commissioned by the Depression-era Works Progress Administration from 1938 to 1941 to promote the nation’s national parks. All the posters were produced by unemployed artists hired by the WPA, and all were created in a facility on the UC Berkeley campus known as the Western Museums Laboratories. No more than a hundred posters were printed—mostly by silk-screening—for each park.

“Neither the WPA nor the National Park Service considered them fine art,” said Tracy Baetz, a curator with the U.S. Department of the Interior Museum in Washington, DC. “They were given to the parks, and staffers hung them up in their gift shops and

headquarters, or gave them away. But the images were both beautiful and distinctive—they had that WPA feel and style that is now widely recognized and prized.”

That realization ultimately led to a concerted effort to track down the lost original park posters, craft reproductions, and even design new posters reflective of the WPA style. Most of the collection is on display for the first time at **POSTERity**, the current exhibit at the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Museum in Washington, DC.

Originally, Berkeley was chosen as the production facility for the posters for a simple reason: The university had available space.

“The NPS had rent-free rooms available at Hilgard Hall, and the first posters were made there,” said Baetz. “Later, the labs were moved to the former Federal Land Bank building on Fulton Street on the western edge of the campus. And the staff didn’t just make posters. They had an art department, darkrooms, offices and woodworking and metalworking shops. The WML was a full-service operation with a solid reputation for outfitting the needs of the national parks in the western region. Employees made trail signs, planned exhibitions, built models, drew topological maps, prepared lettering, hand-tinted photographs, created intricate dioramas and much more. At any given time, approximately 100 members of the WML’s workforce were provided at no cost to the National Park Service through the WPA.”

Some of the WPA’s art projects—especially murals—are widely known, as are the artists who produced them. But the artists who produced the National Parks posters have largely faded into the same oblivion as their creations.

“We do think we’ve identified one of them, though,” said Baetz,

who shared information about his backstory. “His name was Chester Don Powell—he usually went by C. Don Powell. We have some photos of him working on drawings at the lab, which appear to be connected to the first few posters produced. It seems the posters were collaborative efforts, with multiple artists working on each one.”

According to the 1940 census rolls, Powell live about a mile-and-a-half from campus with his wife and three kids in apartment that cost \$12 a month. He reported a 1939 income of slightly more than a thousand dollars.

“We interviewed his oldest son, and he said his dad was employed as an artist at the university and he remembers accompanying him to work,” Baetz said. “The family came out to California from the Midwest during the Depression. (Powell) had a small freelance shop where he produced anything that came his way—signage, packaging, anything that could help pay the bills. He also worked on a road crew. Then he heard the WPA was looking for artists to work at the Western Museum Labs, and he was hired.”

The poster project was shut down in 1941 as war loomed, and Powell got a job at the Kaiser shipyards in Vallejo. “He took a crash course in marine drafting, and worked at design testing,” Baetz said. “Basically, he was working on schematics that gauged the likely performance of the various ship designs.”



Artist Don Powell at work in Berkeley's Western Museums Lab

All that, of course, was unknown to Leen. The former ranger’s personal investigations intensified after participating in a

commemorative celebration at Grand Teton National Park in the 1990s. Since the image of his poster was in the public domain, he printed up a few hundred copies for distribution at the event.

“That kindled a lot of interest, not just in that poster, but also in the series,” said Leen. “I really began looking around in earnest.”

Leen discovered that the National Park Service archives at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia, had black and white negatives of 13 of the original 14 posters. He printed up his own posters from the images, guessing at the colors. Later, as word of his work began bouncing around the collectible grapevine and the nascent internet, originals started popping up.

“It was interesting to compare them to Doug’s prints,” Baetz said. “Some of them nailed the colors—he just intuitively got it. Others were way off. “

Over time, copies of 12 of the original 14 posters have been found. Only the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota remain missing.

“Some are in private collections, some are in the Library of Congress, and some are held by the individual parks,” said Baetz. “They’ve turned up in the kookiest places. One was found in a plant press (used for preparing wildflower specimens) in New Mexico. One discovery involved a real Antiques Roadshow kind of moment. A framed original was found, and when it was removed from the frame, there were two additional posters sandwiched behind it.”



So far, 43 original copies have been found, five of which are in Leen's private collection. While he was investigating and collecting, Leen continued printing exact reproductions of the originals, and also, in collaboration with individual parks, more than 25 original designs "in the style" of the WPA artists.

Leen quickly found out that the art and collectible worlds are Darwinian, avaricious, metaphorically red of tooth and claw—however you want to describe the sectors' high rate of forgeries and rip-offs.

"I've seen the unauthorized use of my designs on everything from coffee mugs to underwear," said Leen. "I haven't really pursued any aggressive legal actions, though. The thought of getting involved in lawsuits makes me ill. And anyway, at a certain point, I'm going to donate everything (poster-related) to the National Park Service. From the beginning, my real goal was sharing these images with the world."

Now anyone who can make the trip to the nation's capital can see (almost) everything associated with the posters in one place. POSTERity, the exhibition curated by Baetz, features six of the original WPA posters, reproductions of the originals, 25 new designs created by Leen and collaborating artist Brian Maebius, and explanatory displays of both the WPA project and the long investigation that ultimately exhumed the images.

“It’s gratifying,” Leen said. “But we’re still trying to find the Great Smoky Mountains and Wind Cave originals. I know they’re out there. We just have to keep looking.”

The 14 original designs created at the Western Museum in Berkeley between 1938 and 1941 depicted these national parks:

Grand Teton

Grand Canyon

Zion

Yellowstone (2 designs: Old Faithful and Yellowstone Falls)

Great Smoky Mountains

Glacier

Yosemite

Wind Cave

Mount Rainier

Petrified Forest

Fort Marion (now known as Castillo de San Marcos)

Lassen

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