

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK EVALUATION: MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM

PREPARED FOR SOUTH DAKOTA HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

Prepared by



May 2015

National Historic Landmark Evaluation: Mobridge Auditorium

Prepared for:
State of South Dakota
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South Dakota State Historical Society – State Historic Preservation Office
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May 2015

Table of Contents

TABLE OF FIGURES	II
1.0 INTRODUCTION	1
2.0 PROPERTY DATA.....	2
3.0 SUMMARY DESCRIPTION.....	2
4.0 HISTORICAL SUMMARY	6
4.1 OSCAR HOWE (1915-1983).....	6
5.0 SIGNIFICANCE	9
5.1 MOBRIDGE MURALS IN CONTEXT	9
5.2 HOWE AND THE MOBRIDGE MURALS.....	11
5.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF OSCAR HOWE	14
6.0 INTEGRITY	17
6.1 AUDITORIUM BUILDING.....	17
6.2 MURALS	17
6.3 COMPARATIVE RESOURCES	18
7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS	20
7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION.....	21
8.0 REFERENCES	22
APPENDIX A: MURAL PANEL DETAILS	A-1

Table of Figures

FIGURE 1. MOBRIDGE, SOUTH DAKOTA AERIAL VIEW AND MAIN STREET AND MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, FACING NORTHEAST	2
FIGURE 2. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, FACING EAST AND SOUTHEAST	3
FIGURE 3. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, WEST FAÇADE DOOR AND CORNICE DETAILS	3
FIGURE 4. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, FACING SOUTHWEST AND NORTHWEST	4
FIGURE 5. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM VESTIBULE AND DOORS LEADING TO AUDITORIUM	4
FIGURE 6. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM INTERIOR, FACING SOUTHWEST TO BALCONY AND EAST TO STAGE FROM BALCONY	5
FIGURE 7. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, BASEMENT AND WEST OFFICE	5
FIGURE 8. MOBRIDGE AUDITORIUM, SOUTH WALL MURALS AND NORTH WALL MURALS	6
FIGURE 9. OSCAR HOWE IN HIS STUDIO, 1960S	8
FIGURE 10. CARNEGIE LIBRARY DOME MURAL BY OSCAR HOWE, MITCHELL, SOUTH DAKOTA (1940)	12
FIGURE 11. SOUTH WALL MURALS, “CEREMONIES OF THE SIOUX,” OSCAR HOWE	14
FIGURE 12. NORTH WALL MURALS, “HISTORY ALONG THE MISSOURI,” OSCAR HOWE	14
FIGURE 13. EXAMPLE OF OSCAR HOWE’S WORK FROM C. 1954, DANCE OF THE HEYOKA, PHILBROOK MUSEUM OF ART, TULSA, OKLAHOMA	16

1.0 Introduction

In September 2014, Stark Preservation Planning LLC (Stark) conducted an evaluation for National Historic Landmark (NHL) designation eligibility for the Mobridge Auditorium (now the Sherr-Howe Arena) in Mobridge, Walworth County, South Dakota. The study was completed on behalf of the South Dakota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), which seeks to expand the state's NHL collection to better reflect South Dakota's role in national historical themes and to preserve places of great significance. The property was selected by the SHPO for its potential to represent national history. Three other South Dakota sites were also evaluated as part of this project and submitted under separate cover: Fort Sisseton in Marshall County, the Spearfish Hatchery in Lawrence County, and the Prairie Homestead in Jackson County.

The investigation entailed initial contact with the property owner representatives to inform them of the study, to provide information on the NHL program, and to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study. Preliminary research was conducted at the South Dakota State Historical Society and field investigation took place in September 2014. Other resources available from the Mobridge Auditorium and City archives informed the history of the property. Additional research into comparative properties and historical contexts were completed as needed. The National Park Service's bulletin *How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations* was used to provide guidance on how properties may become eligible for NHL designation. The NHL program uses six criteria to assess the national significance of a property.

1. Properties that are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to, and are identified with, or that outstandingly represent, the broad national patterns of United States history and from which an understanding and appreciation of those patterns may be gained.
2. Properties that are associated importantly with the lives of persons nationally significant in the history of the United States.
3. Properties that represent some great idea or ideal of the American people.
4. Properties that embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type specimen exceptionally valuable for a study of a period, style, or method of construction, or that represent a significant, distinctive and exceptional entity whose components may lack individual distinction.
5. Properties that are composed of integral parts of the environment not sufficiently significant by reason of historical association or artistic merit to warrant individual recognition but collectively compose an entity of exceptional historical or artistic significance, or outstandingly commemorate or illustrate a way of life or culture.
6. Properties that have yielded or may be likely to yield information of major scientific importance by revealing new cultures, or by shedding light upon periods of occupation over large areas of the United States. Such sites are those which have yielded, or which may reasonably be expected to yield, data affecting theories, concepts and ideas to a major degree.

In addition to establishing national significance, a NHL-eligible property must also retain a “high degree of integrity” as expressed by the seven aspects of historical integrity: location, setting, design, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

The findings and recommendation of the Mobridge Auditorium evaluation of NHL eligibility are presented in this report. In addition, property information was entered into the SHPO historic sites survey database.

2.0 Property Data

Location:	212 Main Street, Mobridge, Walworth County
Owner:	City of Mobridge
Contact Information:	Christine Goldsmith, City Administrator City of Mobridge 114 First Ave E Mobridge, SD 57601 605-845-3555
Ownership Category:	Public
NRHP Status:	Listed (1986)
Property Type:	Building

3.0 Summary Description

The Mobridge Auditorium is located on the east side of Main Street on the city’s principal commercial corridor. The wide street is lined with one- and two-story commercial blocks fronting the sidewalk, typically constructed of brick. The two-story auditorium also fronts directly on the sidewalk. Abutting the auditorium to the south is a one-story commercial block. An open parcel, now a park, adjoins the auditorium to the north; to the rear is a paved parking lot (Figure 1).

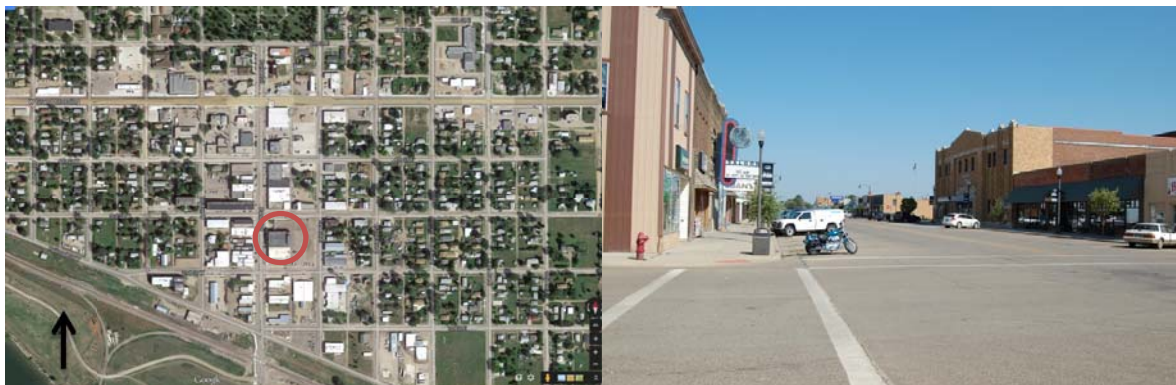


Figure 1. Mobridge, South Dakota Aerial View and Main Street and Mobridge Auditorium, Facing Northeast

The rectangular plan building stands two stories in height on a concrete foundation. Constructed with a steel frame, the outer walls are sheathed in brick veneer. The secondary walls are clad in a red-brown common brick, while a mottled yellow-brown brick is used on the façade and returning faces. The symmetrical façade is divided into five bays, and displays Art Deco design details. The bays are separated by brick pilasters with bricks set with protruding corners to appear as fluting. The wide center bay contains the main entry. Secondary entrances were originally designed for the two outer bays (the entrance to the north bay has been modified into a window). The intermediary sections, bays two and four, originally contained a pair of casement windows (the northern of these bays has been modified for a doorway). A band of paired casement windows are placed at the second story level – one in the outer bay, two in the intermediary bays, and three in the center bay. Ornamentation is made of concrete, and includes a band above the second-story windows with a repeating geometric design, as well as coping on the parapet wall, bases of the pilasters, and the base of the wall. The center bay is emphasized by a gabled parapet and projects slightly from the façade. The main entry contains three sets of double-leaf replacement glass and aluminum frame doors topped by transoms. A wide concrete trim surrounds the opening using fluting, stepped detailing, and a geometric flower pattern. A flat awning supported by chains and trimmed with aluminum strips covers the entryway (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Mobridge Auditorium, Facing East and Southeast



Figure 3. Mobridge Auditorium, West Façade Door and Cornice Details

The side elevations are windowless. On the rear elevation, the stage's central fly space visibly projects from the roof. Pedestrian doors are placed at the north and south ends, each with a nearby window opening. A large opening with wood paneled doors at the center provides access to the backstage. Modified window openings to the basement are at the ground level (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Mobridge Auditorium, Facing Southwest and Northwest

The main floor of the interior contains a large vestibule with a tray ceiling and cove light. The walls have yellow brick wainscot and stucco, and the floors are covered with modern ceramic tile. Off of each side of the vestibule are public meeting rooms or office spaces. Access to the basement level is provided by symmetrically placed stairwells from the vestibule. A set of interior golden oak doors with transoms lead to the principal space, the auditorium (Figure 5). The auditorium space is two stories in height. Bleachers are located on the west side, above the vestibule and offices, and the stage is situated to the east. The lower walls are covered with glazed yellow brick, and the floor is maple. The ceiling appears to be covered with a spray-on acoustic material and has recessed can lighting. Two basketball backboards are attached to the ceiling and can descend for use. The proscenium stage is set within a simple stepped frame, at the center of which is the letter "M." The raised stage has a wood floor and curtains flanked by exit doors. Plastered pilasters, painted with geometric designs, separate the side walls into five panels. Within the upper portion of each of these panels are murals painted by Oscar Howe.



Figure 5. Mobridge Auditorium Vestibule and Doors Leading to Auditorium

The bleachers at the west end, accessed by two internal stairwells, are constructed of concrete with wooden benches. The balcony balustrade is painted with a geometric design and topped with a three-line pipe rail. A projection room is at the center. Additional moveable bleachers can be expanded into the space below the balcony (Figure 6).

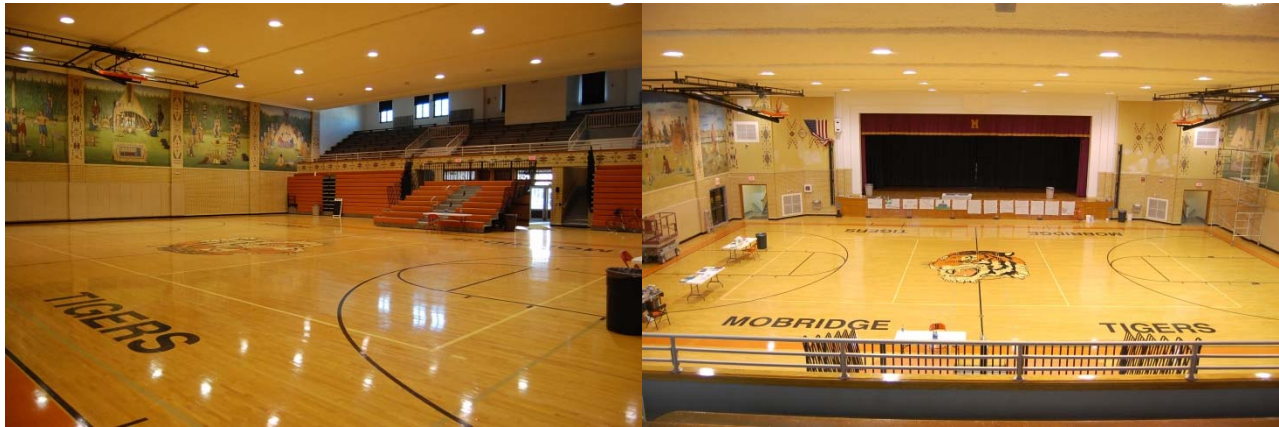


Figure 6. Mobridge Auditorium Interior, Facing Southwest to Balcony and East to Stage from Balcony

Backstage dressing rooms and restrooms are provided on either side of the stage, as are additional stairwells into the basement. The basement has polished concrete floors, poured concrete walls and steel support posts. The original restrooms and snack bar appear to be intact. A newer room was formed from the basement by the addition of concrete block walls (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Mobridge Auditorium, Basement and West Office

The 10 decorative murals of the auditorium are the principal features of significance for this property. They were painted by artist Oscar Howe in 1941-42, shortly after the auditorium was completed. The grouping of murals is divided into two sections and themes. “Ceremonies of the Sioux” theme is on the south wall, and “History Along the Missouri [River]” theme is on the north. The Ceremonies collection includes the murals titled from east to west, “Calf Woman and the Mystic Pipe,” “The Sun Dance,” “Hunka Ado-Wampi,” “Victory Dance,” and “Social Dance.” The “History Along the Missouri [River]” murals are titled from west to east, “Sakakawea and Lewis and Clark,” “Treaty Making,” “Christian

Service,” “Fool Soldier Rescue,” and “Retreat” (Figure 8). See Appendix for detailed images of the mural panels.



Figure 8. Mobridge Auditorium, South Wall Murals and North Wall Murals

4.0 Historical Summary

The Mobridge Auditorium was constructed in 1936 as a project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Roland Wilcken, from Aberdeen, South Dakota, served as architect. Fred E. Peterson, also of Aberdeen, served as contractor. The building officially opened on May 6, 1937, and was completed for a cost of \$115,000. Oscar Howe was commissioned to complete the ten murals in the auditorium interior through the South Dakota Artists Project, a program of the WPA in 1941. Between April 18 and June 22, 1942, Howe painted the 10 murals. On June 5, he was inducted into the U.S. Army at Fort Snelling, and was granted a 12-day furlough to complete the murals before entering into active duty.¹ The auditorium continues to serve as the City of Mobridge’s principal event center. In 1991, it was named “Scherr-Howe Arena” after the native Mobridge twin brothers Jim and Bill Scherr, who won national wrestling championships and competed in the 1988 Olympics, and the artist, Oscar Howe. The building was listed in the National Register in 1986 for its associations with the WPA and for the Howe murals. In 2005, the City of Mobridge received a Save America’s Treasures grant to restore the murals. The project was completed in 2014 by artists Nicholas Ward and Amber Hansen under the direction of conservator Dr. Margaret Nowosielska.

4.1 OSCAR HOWE (1915-1983)

Oscar Howe was born on May 13, 1915 to George T. Howe and Ella Not Afraid of Bear in Joe Creek on the Crow Creek Indian Reservation of South Dakota. His grandparents and great-grandparents were leaders among the Yanktonai Sioux. Howe was sent to the Pierre Indian School at age seven, where he was subjected to severe punishment for speaking his native Sioux tongue, his only language at the time.

¹ “Mobridge Auditorium,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, on file at the National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

The strict conditions at the school were exacerbated by a stigmatizing skin condition and a nearly blinding eye disease, trachoma. When the school considered him “hopeless,” he returned home in 1925, where his physical ailments healed, and he learned more of the Sioux traditions through oral stories from his maternal grandmother, Shell Face. Howe returned the following year to the Pierre Indian School, from which he graduated in 1933. After working for a short time as a laborer with the Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps, he continued his education at the Santa Fe Indian School. There he developed his talent in art under the direction of Dorothy Dunn Kramer. Kramer’s studio, attended by other talented Native American emerging artists, gave Howe the important fundamentals of art within the context of his tribal tradition. Although the program emphasized the southwestern art traditions, Howe continued to be inspired by his Sioux roots.²

After graduating as salutatorian in 1938, he returned to his native South Dakota. Howe continued painting, and exhibited in galleries in Brooklyn, San Francisco, London and Paris. Without a regular stream of income, he was unable to afford to paint. One account of his life relays a story that he had received some 500 letters with requests for paintings, which were stored in cardboard boxes. Thinking the boxes were trash, his aunt burned the letters in a bout of house cleaning. Howe was devastated by the loss, according to the story.³

With few alternatives, Howe went to work teaching at his *alma mater* and the place where he experienced so much grief as a youth, the Pierre Indian School; he was paid in room and board. Through the South Dakota Artists Project, a program of the WPA, Howe achieved a break as a professional artist in 1940. The WPA sponsored Howe for a brief course in mural painting at the Fort Sill Indian School near Lawton, Oklahoma under the instruction of Swedish mural specialist Olaf “Ole” Nordmark.⁴ Through this program to employ artists, Howe was commissioned to paint the interior dome of the Carnegie Library in Mitchell, South Dakota. The design incorporated symbolic sun and rain clouds over hills. In the early 1940s, Howe illustrated three Sioux Indian books for young adult readers under the auspices of the South Dakota Writers’ Project and had a painting at New York’s Museum of Modern Art 1941 exhibit called “Indian Art of the United States.” Howe’s next WPA assignment was to complete 10 mural panels for the new auditorium in Mobridge. As this project concluded, he was inducted into the U.S. Army with combat battalions in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany.⁵

² George Agogino, “Oscar Howe: Sioux Artist,” *Plains Anthropologist: Journal of the Plains Anthropological Society*, 32:115 (1987); John A. Day and Margaret Quintal, “Oscar Howe, 1915-1983: Father of the New Native American Art,” *Southwest Art*, June 1984; Edward Keith Welch, “Distinctly Oscar Howe: Life, Art, Stories,” (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2011).

³ Elizabeth Thorpe, “Oscar Howe, Indian Artist,” *Bits and Pieces*, v. 2, no. 3, 1966, 17.

⁴ Sources vary on the sequence of Howe’s WPA experiences. Most sources site the Mitchell mural as his first commission, followed by his mural training in Oklahoma, and then by the Mobridge murals. Welch’s recent dissertation on Howe places the mural training first in the sequence, followed by the Mitchell and Mobridge commissions.

⁵ Heidi Howe, “Dakota,” *The American-German Review*, June-July 1961; Welch, “Distinctly Oscar Howe.”

While in Germany, Howe met his future bride, Adelhei “Heidi” Hampel. Their 1947 marriage in Chicago was made possible by the \$350 purchase prize money from Howe’s first prize in the second annual National Indian Painting Exhibition from the Philbrook Art Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a prestigious juried show of Native American painting. Inge Dawn Howe, the couple’s only child, was born in 1948. That year, Dakota Wesleyan University at Mitchell chose Howe to be its artist-in-residence. There he completed his undergraduate degree and began his career in teaching. He continued his education at the University of Oklahoma, where he received his MFA. The experience was instrumental in his development as an artist, allowing him the ability to synthesize his traditional native training at the Santa Fe Studio with the lessons of modernist painting. He returned again to his home state to the University of South Dakota, Vermillion as artist-in-residence and professor of art; he remained in that position through the rest of his life.⁶

As an artist, his style matured through the 1950s, and was firmly established by 1960 (Figure 9). From then on, Howe “produced a body of consistently virtuosic work which ranged between stylized abstractions and nonobjective interpretations, both equally focused upon his heritage.”⁷ Throughout his career, Howe drew upon his Sioux heritage and was inspired by the oral storytelling tradition. Although intensely aware of the unjust treatment of his people, his subject matter avoided explicit social protest, favoring instead the beauty of the Sioux culture and tradition. In his mature



Figure 9. Oscar Howe in his studio, 1960s

works, the images are increasingly abstracted, appearing to be inspired by Cubism. While fully aware of modern Cubism and its virtues, Howe contended that the source of his style was rooted in the tradition of the Plains Indians. Although abstracted, his paintings continued to tell stories of spiritual meaning. Day and Quintal conclude that “the beauty of Oscar Howe and his art was and will continue to be two-fold. First of all, he developed a highly expressive, personal art form which competes with the work of major artists from any era or heritage. Secondly, he joined the strengths of Native American art in its most compelling and complex forms with the mainstream of Anglo art, and set the stage for the New Indian Art which holds so much promise for the future.”⁸

During his lifetime, Howe was awarded honorary degrees from three institutions, received 15 gold medals and first place awards, was named South Dakota artist laureate, and was featured on Ralph Edwards’ “This Is Your Life” in 1960. From 1948 to 1971, he designed panels for the Corn Palace in Mitchell. Howe was stricken with Parkinson’s disease in his 60s, putting his painting career to an end. He died on October 7, 1983, at the age of 68.

⁶ Dan and Quintal, “Oscar Howe, 1915-1983;” Howe, “Dakota.”

⁷ Day and Quintal, “Oscar Howe, 1915-1983,” 55.

⁸ Ibid., 60.

5.0 Significance

While the Mobridge Auditorium's Art Deco design is well-executed and the building has associations with South Dakota's WPA, it is the 10 murals by Oscar Howe that elevate this property for consideration as a National Historic Landmark.

5.1 MOBRIDGE MURALS IN CONTEXT

The Mobridge Auditorium and its murals were completed under the auspices of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), one of the New Deal programs established by the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration to employ out-of-work Americans during the Great Depression. The WPA was the result of the Reorganization Act of 1939, and continued the work of the Works *Progress* Administration established in 1935. One of the important aspects of the WPA was its authorization to fund projects sponsored by both federal and non-federal agencies. Although the projects could be sponsored at the federal and state level, the vast majority of projects were planned and initiated by local units of government, such as counties, cities, townships, and villages. Eligible projects were to be useful in nature and should employ the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. Of the many New Deal programs, the WPA sponsored the broadest range of projects, from transportation infrastructure and conservation systems to schools, stadiums, auditoriums and city garages. The WPA also funded non-building activities, such as education, health and welfare programs and music, art, theater, writing and history projects.⁹

The WPA Federal Art Program was administered under Federal Project No. 1, and offered art decoration for completed public buildings such as schools, libraries, auditoriums and municipal buildings. The arts program, which also included music, theater and writers projects, began in August 1935 and operated through June 1943. It cost about \$35,000,000 and employed just over 5,000 people at its peak. Murals were among the most typical of the artistic expressions in public buildings, with a total of 2,566 murals executed nationwide. The products typically emphasized local or regional topics and styles, although subject matter was restricted to an American theme in a range of naturalistic, symbolic, legendary or historical representations.¹⁰

The WPA's mural program, its artists and American art of the mid-twentieth century was deeply influenced by the work of three Mexican muralists working in the 1920s and 1930s – Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros. The work of these muralists was supported through the Mexican government with the support of President Obregon. Their work captured Mexico's cultural and national identity, presenting it in an artful and public way. After learning about the Mexican artistic programs, George Biddle, the future head of the WPA, proposed to President Roosevelt a federally funded public program based on their model:

⁹ Anderson, Rolf, *Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933 to 1941*, National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form (on file at the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office, St. Paul), E48-E50.

¹⁰ Anderson, *Federal Relief in Minnesota*, E61.

The Mexican artists have produced the greatest national school of mural painting since the Italian Renaissance. Diego Rivera tells me that it was only possible because [Mexican President] Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumbers' wages in order to express on the walls of the government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution.

The younger artists of America are conscious as they have never been of the social revolution that our country and civilization are going through; and they would be eager to express these ideals in a permanent art form if they were given the government's cooperation.¹¹

At this urging, the Public Works of Art Project, a federally funded relief program for artists, began in 1934. Additional public art programs would form under the Treasury Section of Painting and Sculpture (1934-1943) and the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (1935-1943).¹²

Native American artists were included in the New Deal's art programs from the beginning. John Collier, commissioner of the New Deal's Indian Affairs, established a two-pronged goal for the program: 1) to preserve native cultural traditions, and 2) to achieve increased self-sufficiency among native peoples. The policies instituted under Collier's leadership promoted an upscale private market for native crafts, such as basketry, pottery and weaving that were produced using traditional methods. Collier, with the support of Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, also saw to it that native artists were included in the various arts projects of the WPA, including programs that provided murals in public buildings. The mural painters would become perhaps the best known of the Native American artists of the New Deal.¹³

Many of the Native American muralists, including Oscar Howe, were trained at the Santa Fe Indian School under Dorothy Dunn (later Dorothy Dunn Kramer). Dunn would have a tremendous influence on twentieth century native art during her brief tenure at the school from 1932 to 1937. Although her students came from 20 different tribes, her instruction for painting was inspired by Pueblo mural and pottery painting, Plains hide painting, and rock art. According to McLerran,

Dunn formulated a set of design principles for her art program, based on her studies of Southwest native arts and crafts, to which all students were expected to adhere. Her prescription for a recognizably Indian style of painting resulted in a distinctive look. Paintings in the Santa Fe style exhibited highly controlled brushwork that yielded flat areas of bright color, an even and pronounced contour line surrounding the forms, and a flat, non-perspectival rendering of space. Subjects deemed appropriate were animals

¹¹ As quoted in Jennifer McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art: Indian Arts and Federal Policy, 1933-1943* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 161.

¹² Susan Cianci Salvatore, *The Detroit Industry Mural, Detroit Institute of Arts* draft National Historic Landmark Nomination (on file at the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, Lansing).

¹³ McLerran, *A New Deal for Native Art*, 162.

and plants, Pueblo ceremonial dancing, Pueblo women engaged in traditional craftwork, and other scenes of everyday life.¹⁴

Believing that native artists had an innate sense of color and design, Dunn refrained from teaching European painting techniques such as light and shade, perspective, anatomy and use of models.

Evidence of Dunn's influence can be seen in the massive federal mural projects in the new Department of Interior building in Washington, D.C., completed under the supervision of Secretary Ickes. Indian arts and crafts were an important part of the building's decoration, intended to emphasize the department's purpose in protecting the nation's cultural and natural resources. Dunn was actively involved not just in the selection of the native artists, but also advised on subject matter, and recommended a consistent palette throughout all the murals. At least two of the six artists selected for this project studied under Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School.¹⁵

5.2 HOWE AND THE MOBRIDGE MURALS

The Mobridge murals were completed after receiving training in mural painting, but over 10 years before Howe would fulfill his formal education in art, and in particular an education outside the confines of traditional Indian artistry. While Howe's artistic contributions that melded traditional Sioux subject and style with Modern techniques are most evident in his post-1950s work, the Mobridge commission offered Howe the opportunity to first explore those possibilities. The commission, through the South Dakota Artists Project, also played a critical role in his life as an artist and in first gaining public notoriety.

The Mobridge mural commission was originally awarded to artist Bill Lackey of Faith, South Dakota. Lackey was an experienced muralist with examples of his work in the Yankton City Hall and Davison County Courthouse. When awarded the commission, he was working on two panels in the Pollock school auditorium. Lackey's planned subject was to show scenes from the life and death of Sitting Bull, depicted in three scenes on the auditorium's south wall. It is not clear whether Lackey withdrew from consideration or if the offer was withdrawn; it is possible that Lackey's call to service in World War II caused a reversal in the mural commission. Newspaper accounts simply report that he was "unable to complete them."¹⁶

South Dakota's WPA art project supervisor Andre Boratko turned to Howe to execute an expanded package of murals. Among the challenges of the site were the size and placement of the mural panels. Each wall measured approximately 100 feet long, and the murals would be 16 feet high. The bottom of the murals started at 10 feet off the ground, making the top of the painting 26 feet from the floor. According to Howe, about three or four people were asked to make the paintings before he was

¹⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁵ Ibid., 176.

¹⁶ "Mural That Depict Life of Chief Sitting Bull," *Mobridge Tribune*, January 1941, viewed on <http://oscarhowetour.wordpress.com/murals-1940s/>.

approached, “but each time they would go inside and look at the walls and they would be scared.”¹⁷ The completed paintings would be the largest of the WPA murals in South Dakota.

In November 1941, Boratko presented Howe’s models for the 10 panels planned for the south and north walls. The proposed models received full approval by the Mobridge City Council. Painting began on April 18, 1942 with assistance from brothers John and Tom Saul, Native American painters from Fort Thompson, who painted the decorative borders. Howe first completed the north wall, “History Along the Missouri” during the month of May. He was paid \$60 per month. As Howe was beginning work on the south wall, he was drafted into the Army. He arranged for a two-week furlough and enlisted the help of artists Ruth Swan, Paul Kean, and Paul Mountain to complete the series.¹⁸ The murals were completed two months later.

Howe’s previous mural commission for the Carnegie Library in Mitchell (1940) closely reflects the painting traditions in which he had most recently been taught in Santa Fe (Figure 10). Titled “Sun and Rain Clouds over the Hill,” the figures of the Mitchell project expressed a prayer for rain and represented the four cardinal directions.¹⁹ His fine brush work, abstracted figures, and strong outlines honor the traditional Dakota skin painting technique and reflect his Santa Fe training. Although the images there illustrate important symbols of native culture, their presence is more decorative, and lacks the powerful story-telling qualities of a larger mural completed just one year later. Howe’s style would be transformed in his execution of the Mobridge murals.



Figure 10. Carnegie Library Dome Mural by Oscar Howe, Mitchell, South Dakota (1940)

¹⁷ As quoted in Welch, “Distinctly Oscar Howe,” 79.

¹⁸ “Sioux Artists Begin Auditorium Murals,” April 23, 1942, *Mobridge Tribune*, viewed on <http://oscarhowetour.wordpress.com/murals-1940s/>; Welch, “Distinctly Oscar Howe,” 81.

¹⁹ Welch, “Distinctly Oscar Howe,” 71.

The subject matter for Howe's Mobridge murals illustrate two themes: the pre-European contact life of the Sioux as shown through traditional ceremonies, and the contact period of Europeans in the Missouri River valley, typically referred to as "History Along the Missouri." These themes, while superficially presenting a nearly anthropological representation of traditional native practices and the benign illustration of Euro-American and Sioux relations in the nineteenth century, have undercurrents of political activism. For example, the Sioux ceremonies and dances shown on the south wall were illegal to perform until 1978 when the American Indian Freedoms Act was passed. Their unbridled representation can be understood as a show of defiance. Lakota historian, flautist, Hoopdancer and friend to Oscar Howe, Kevin Locke, offers his interpretation of the "Ceremonies of the Sioux" murals:

The traditional practices were actively repressed, as was the language. The Federal edicts were still enforced outlawing any outward practice of ceremonies. It is really remarkable, really heroic that Howe was able to stand out in a public forum and depict all of these things (religious ceremonies) because all of these ceremonies were kept underground and people would only practice them in secret. The overall theme of the general society was that all of this was dead, all of it was destined for extinction; it had no place and was totally irrelevant to modern society.

To me what Oscar Howe was able to do was to look beyond the general feeling and to see the universal themes and then highlight these universal themes. All peoples have a gift to bring into the world; we all have something valid and valuable to contribute towards an emerging global civilization.²⁰

The themes Howe chose, notably different from Lackey's proposed Sitting Bull story, bear a resemblance to those used for the Navajo Council House in Window Rock, Arizona (National Historic Landmark). Commissioned in 1942 and completed in 1943 by artist Gerald Nailor, a year after the Mobridge murals, the Navajo cycle begins with the early life of the Navajo, including scenes of hunting, gathering, and agriculture, followed by an encounter with Catholic priests, white encroachment and treaty signing, forced removal from native lands followed by incarceration, the coming of the railroad, and continued conflict into the twentieth century (McLerran 2009:9-10). Nailor was another student of Dorothy Dunn's at the Santa Fe Indian School, attended during the same period that Howe was at the school, and almost certainly knew Howe. Further investigation may be necessary to determine if the Mobridge murals served to inform the themes and structure of the nationally significant Navajo Council murals.

Stylistically, Howe's composition of the Mobridge murals dramatically breaks with the methods learned at the Santa Fe Indian School and the style he used just a year earlier in Mitchell. Here, he combines rich color, realistic shading, and perspective with a flat abstraction. In many instances, muralists are faced with a broad undivided wall space that poses challenges for separating different stories and time periods depicted within the mural scene. At Mobridge, the solution is provided by the auditorium's architectural design. On each wall, five panels are separated by pilasters. Howe's challenge was,

²⁰ Kevin Locke, interviewed by Christine Goldsmith, transcribed by Nicholas Ward, accessed at <http://howemuralrestoration.blogspot.com/2014/09/the-mobridge-murals.html>, on December 9, 2014.

therefore, not to separate different scenes, but to unify them. On the south side depicting the “Ceremonies of the Sioux,” a wall of leafy green vegetation (corn or a dense forest?) and a narrow band of faded blue sky provide a common backdrop for the five scenes. A lighter green grassy area unifies the foreground, where the activities of each scene take place. The collection of five panels and each individual scene is balanced with a pivotal character at its center. The center and outer bays each depict a teepee, the center one being larger, creating a formal symmetry. On the framing pilasters are traditional geometric patterns painted by the Saul brothers (Figure 11).



Figure 11. South Wall Murals, “Ceremonies of the Sioux,” Oscar Howe

For the north wall, whose theme is “History Along the Missouri,” the river, the bluffs beyond, and the broad sky provide the unifying backdrop among the five panels and also place the scenes clearly within Mobridge’s geographical setting. The foreground suggests a slightly more undulating topography where the various scenes take place. The center scene, “Christian Service” provides a pivot point with the figures arranged in a pyramid, mirroring the teepee form on the south side. The cycle concludes with the panel called “Retreat,” composed of a single male figure standing above the Missouri River. The figure stands opposite and faces the single woman found in the first panel on the south side, bringing the story full circle (Figure 12). See the appendix for mural panel details.



Figure 12. North Wall Murals, “History Along the Missouri,” Oscar Howe

5.3 CONTRIBUTIONS OF OSCAR HOWE

Although Howe himself bridled at being categorized as an “Indian” artist, his name consistently rises to the top among Native American painters of his time. His inspiration from his Dakota roots in various forms throughout his career make this categorization irresistible. More than most other ethnic groups, American Indian artists face a greater dilemma in their choice of expression of their cultural identity at the sacrifice of greater acceptance in contemporary American mainstream art. In his introduction to

Native American Painters of the Twentieth Century, Robert Henkes highlights Oscar Howe as an important example of creatively applying Native cultural values with modern styles:

... to separate one's art from one's heritage, religious beliefs, and historical customs is difficult, perhaps even illogical. A better goal might be to separate heritage from stereotype – to approach traditional subject matter in a new way. This approach has proved successful for such renowned Native American artists as Oscar Howe and George Morrison, who by using European styles to express ethnic values have reached far beyond the scope of the Native American experience.²¹

Howe's later work, for which he would become so well known, was remarkable for its melding of traditional native subject matter with modern abstract and Cubist styles. Howe steadfastly clung to his heritage, painting subject matters such as ceremonial rites and dances, while cloaked in an abstract Cubist style, expanding and deepening its meaning. Howe became a role model for future generations of artists to use heritage "as a stimulus rather than an obligation. His work served to remove restrictions from the stereotypes of traditional style under which Native American artists had labored for generations. The gates of freedom had been opened," wrote Henkes.²²

Although Howe always viewed his work as authentically Native – how could it be anything else? – the art world would not always recognize it as such. In the spring of 1958, Howe submitted his painting *Umine Wacipi* [War and Peace Dance] to the Philbrook Art Center's American Indian painting competition, the same competition that awarded him the grand prize in 1947, and that he both entered and judged multiple times in the late 1940s and 1950s. His submission was rejected from consideration of an award, the jurors declaring it a "fine painting – but not Indian." In other words, it did not conform to traditional standards for Indian art.²³ In response, Howe wrote a letter to the Philbrook Art Center's Curator of American Indian Art, Jeanne Snodgrass, asserting:

Whoever said that my paintings are not in the traditional Indian style has poor knowledge of Indian art indeed. There is much more to Indian art than pretty, stylized pictures. There is also power and strength and individualism (emotional and intellectual insight) in the old Indian paintings. Every bit in my paintings is a true studied fact of Indian paintings. Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, that is the most common way? We are to be herded like a bunch of sheep, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian always has been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him. Now, even in Art, 'You little child do what we think is best for you, nothing different.' Well, I am not going to stand for it. Indian art can compete with any Art in the world, but not as a suppressed Art. I see so much of the mismanagement and treatment of my people. It makes me cry

²¹ Robert Henkes, *Native American Painters of the Twentieth Century: the Works of 61 Artists* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1995), 1.

²² Henkes, *Native American Painters of the Twentieth Century*, 64.

²³ Welch, "Distinctly Oscar Howe," 121.

inside to look at these poor people. My father died there about three years ago in a little shack, my two brothers still living there in shacks, never enough to eat, never enough clothing, treated as second class citizens. This is one of the reasons I have tried to keep the fine ways and culture of my forefathers alive. But one could easily turn to become a social protest painter. I only hope the Art World will not be one more contributor to holding us in chains.²⁴

Howe's letter was a pivotal moment in American Indian art history, influencing the perception and acceptance of modern Indian art. In 1959, the Philbrook Art Center added an "experimental" category to allow for more innovative works, such as Howe's²⁵ (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Example of Oscar Howe's work from c. 1954, *Dance of the Heyoka*, Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma

The Mobridge murals represent his early work, a style as distinctive from his training at the Santa Fe Indian School as it is from his abstracted work of the 1950s and 1960s. While not fully realized by his later abstract period, the Mobridge murals offer the direction in which Howe's style would take. By leaving behind his formal art training and introducing European painting techniques, such as texture, realism, formalism and perspective, the Mobridge murals strongly suggest his willingness to fully integrate native subjects with contemporary and European style and technique. Although his style would take more abstracted forms in future years, the murals demonstrate that for Howe cultural integrity could be expressed in non-traditional styles.

²⁴ As quoted in Welch, "Distinctly Oscar Howe," 121-122.

²⁵ Welch, "Distinctly Oscar Howe," 126.

6.0 Integrity

6.1 AUDITORIUM BUILDING

Several modifications have been made to the Mobridge Auditorium since its construction. On the façade, the original wood-framed doors have been re-fitted with modern, metal frame replacements, including the enclosure of the transoms on the side doors. The original 8-light casement windows were replaced with 4-light casements. A stylized metal sign over the front entrance bears its new name – “Scherr-Howe Arena” – a modern appellation dating to the 1990s.

A number of changes have occurred to the interior, including the removal of the original ticket booth and placement of modern ceramic tile on the lobby floor, remodeling of the offices adjacent to the lobby, the application of acoustic material to the auditorium ceiling, and the construction of concrete block wall partitions in the basement.

While these relatively minor alterations have occurred, the building retains strong integrity of location and setting on Mobridge’s Main Street, at the core of the town’s historic commercial area. Replacement of windows and doors have resulted in some loss of integrity of material and design, although the Art Deco detailing of the exterior façade is still clearly expressed. On its interior, the character-defining principal public spaces remain intact and largely unaltered.

6.2 MURALS

Since they were painted in 1942, the murals have experienced some loss of integrity. This includes structural issues such as wall cracks and general paint deterioration, as well as mounting electronic score boards to the walls, since removed. In 2014 the murals were restored, partially funded by a Save America’s Treasures grant through the National Park Service. Mural restoration artist, Nicholas Ward describes the damage and restoration work as follows:

There was significant structural damage to the north wall murals “History Along the Missouri” and minimal damage to the murals on the south wall “Ceremonies of the Sioux.” The difference dates back to a structure fire from the building adjoining the north wall and resulting heat/water damage caused by the fire and subsequent roof damage to the [Scherr-]Howe Arena. I believe this was in the late 50’s but I do not have specific dates.... One result of the damage was that the walls cracked. Another result was efflorescence, a process by which salt contained within the plaster escapes through the wall and resides on the surface. (This was initially the cause of much of the paints flaking or chipping away).

When we arrived to work on the project Dr. [Margaret] Nowosielska who was at the time working for the Conservation Center out of Chicago (she has recently resigned) was already in the process of cleaning the murals. I believe roughly one month was spent cleaning dirt and such off of the surface. This was done mostly with special sponges and water (fairly straight forward).

As project artists our job was mainly to assist in the cleaning, to inpaint or replace areas where paint was missing (had chipped off) and to replace or restore areas where overpainting by an artist other than Oscar Howe had taken place. In all of the north wall panels this included the entire sky. Under the direction of Dr. Nowosielska we worked to remove areas of the overpainting to identify underlying windows of the original colors. We did so and were able to map out the color structure for the sky areas. We also had the reference of photos from the USD archives to aid us in these efforts. For the remaining areas we followed a guideline set up by Dr. Nowosielska who is much more versed in best practices for restoration/conservation than we are.

Our approach to the remaining areas of the murals (below the horizon line) was to inpaint losses and to in some areas subdue effects caused by an overlaid varnish which had caused much yellowing and crackling to the surface of the most affected areas. Being sensitive to future efforts or advances that may develop in the ability to remove varnish we conducted our processes with paints that are easily removable by standard conservation processes. Our painting is very easily distinguishable in its chemical makeup from that of Oscar Howe's and may be entirely removed without any effect to Howe's original work.²⁶

Although there has been some deterioration of the murals, the restoration procedures appear to conform to professional paint restoration standards that maintain the highest degree of integrity possible.

6.3 COMPARATIVE RESOURCES

Although the Mobridge Auditorium is a fine local example of the Art Moderne style and a WPA funded project, its potential national significance accrues from the interior murals by Oscar Howe. The property compares favorably to other Howe mural installations and with other properties whose significance derives from the presence of artistic murals.

The Howe mural in the Mitchell, South Dakota Carnegie Library was his first mural of note, and immediately preceded the Mobridge murals.²⁷ Although executed with deeply meaningful traditional symbolism, the Mitchell mural in the library's dome appears more decorative than monumental in character. This is contrasted with the series of paintings in Mobridge, which illustrate multiple scenes and narrate an interpretive story of the Sioux traditions and presence in the Missouri River valley. Furthermore, the Mobridge murals, which are 16 feet tall and span 100 feet, are massive in their scale, and comprise the largest WPA mural installation in South Dakota.

²⁶ Nicholas Ward, email message to author, December 9, 2014.

²⁷ The Mitchell Carnegie Library, now known as the Oscar Howe Cultural Center, is listed in the National Register as a contributing property to the Mitchell Historic Commercial District. The mural is not mentioned in the description, and it does not constitute any portion of the significance of the district.

Notably, an important and prolific aspect of Howe's career was the design of the Corn Place in Mitchell from 1948 to 1971. His experience in Mobridge set the stage for telling important stories of local significance on a grand scale. Howe's work on the series of temporary installations, reset each year using South Dakota produce, led in part to his greater public awareness and designation as the state's Artist Laureate.

National Register listing or NHL designation of buildings whose significance derives solely or primarily from a permanent art installation, such as a mural, has precedent. The draft NHL designation of the Detroit Institute of Arts is attributable solely to the *Detroit Industry* fresco murals by Diego Rivera within the building. The property is significant under NHL Criterion 2 for its association with Diego Rivera and under Criterion 1 as Rivera's greatest work in the United States between the Depression and World War II. Although not solely based on its murals, the Navajo Nation Council Building in Window Rock, Arizona, erected in 1934-35, is designated as a NHL under Criterion 1 for its associations with the Native American heritage and the New Deal. Its period of significance expands to 1943, inclusive of the period when Gerald Naylor painted its murals, which are an integral part of the building's significance. Coit Tower in San Francisco, California, is listed in the National Register under Criterion C in the area of Art as an excellent example of Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) art and the American Scene art movement. These examples suggest that murals can bear the weight of National Register and NHL eligibility, when the building containing them is authentic, but of minor significance.

7.0 Recommendations

Howe is widely acknowledged to be an important artist who successfully melded Native subject and style with contemporary American art, influencing and broadening the definition of contemporary American Indian art. Within his lifetime, his achievements were acknowledged by several honorary degrees and many awards, and he was named South Dakota's Artist Laureate. As an educator for most of his career, he served as an important influence on young artists. The Mobridge murals represent a pivotal period in Howe's career as he began to develop his unique style and voice within Native American arts. Although the subjects were personal to him, illustrating both the ceremonial subjects he learned from his grandparents and the anguished history and landscape of his Missouri River Valley upbringing, their meaning conveyed universal stories to be appreciated by Native and non-Native viewers.

Stark recommends that the Mobridge Auditorium meets criteria for NHL designation. Multiple areas of significance may apply.

- *Criterion 1: Association with events and broad patterns of history.* The New Deal offered new opportunities for Native American artists, which acknowledged their talents and the importance of Native American culture. It also provided an avenue to document the history and culture of Native Americans. Howe's murals depicting traditional and forbidden Sioux ceremonies offered greater depth of meaning to American culture and history, and inform us about traditional culture in ways previously inaccessible. The murals are an outstanding example of this aspect of the Native American New Deal arts programs, which helped to establish the career of an influential artist. The murals also may be important within the context of the Santa Fe Indian School and its instructor, Dorothy Dunn.
- *Criterion 2: Association with lives of important persons.* Oscar Howe's life and career has demonstrated national significance as an important artist who contributed to a critical change in perception of Native American art. The murals are among the most important representation of his work because of their scale, visibility and public accessibility.
- *Criterion 4: Distinguishing characteristics of a type, period or style.* The Mobridge murals are a Howe masterwork, and therefore eligible to meet this criteria as the work of a master and demonstrating the exceptional value of the mural series. Based on the inherent size of the mural paintings, and their accessibility to the public within the auditorium, the murals have high impact, thus increasing their significance.

The integrity of the property is largely intact. Despite minor losses to design and material, the building continues to stand as a good vessel for the important murals, reflective of its time and place. The murals themselves were recently restored using professional standards, bringing back many of the aspects of Howe's original design that had been lost to deterioration, inappropriate over-painting, and other intrusive alterations.

With further exploration into the context of the Mobridge murals and Oscar Howe, we believe this to be a strong candidate for NHL designation.

7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDITIONAL INVESTIGATION

While the Mobridge Auditorium appears to possess historical significance meeting NHL standards, further research may be necessary to better define the most appropriate criteria and the area(s) of significance. Suggestions for further investigation include:

- Confer with the National Park Service’s NHL staff to assess the strongest area(s) of significance for designation;
- Evaluate the potential for other sites related to Howe that would represent his life and accomplishments, such as his home and/or studio;
- Consult with art historians and Howe experts to further assess the role of the Mobridge murals in Howe’s career and place the murals within a larger historic context;
- Review primary and secondary source materials available at the University of South Dakota; and
- Determine if the “Ceremonies of the Sioux” murals played a role in documenting aspects of Native American culture that might have been lost otherwise, or brought new information to the general public about Native American culture in a direct and public way.

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Appendix A: Mural Panel Details

South Wall, Ceremonies of the Sioux (east to west)



Calf Woman and the Mystic Pipe, or White Buffalo Calf Woman



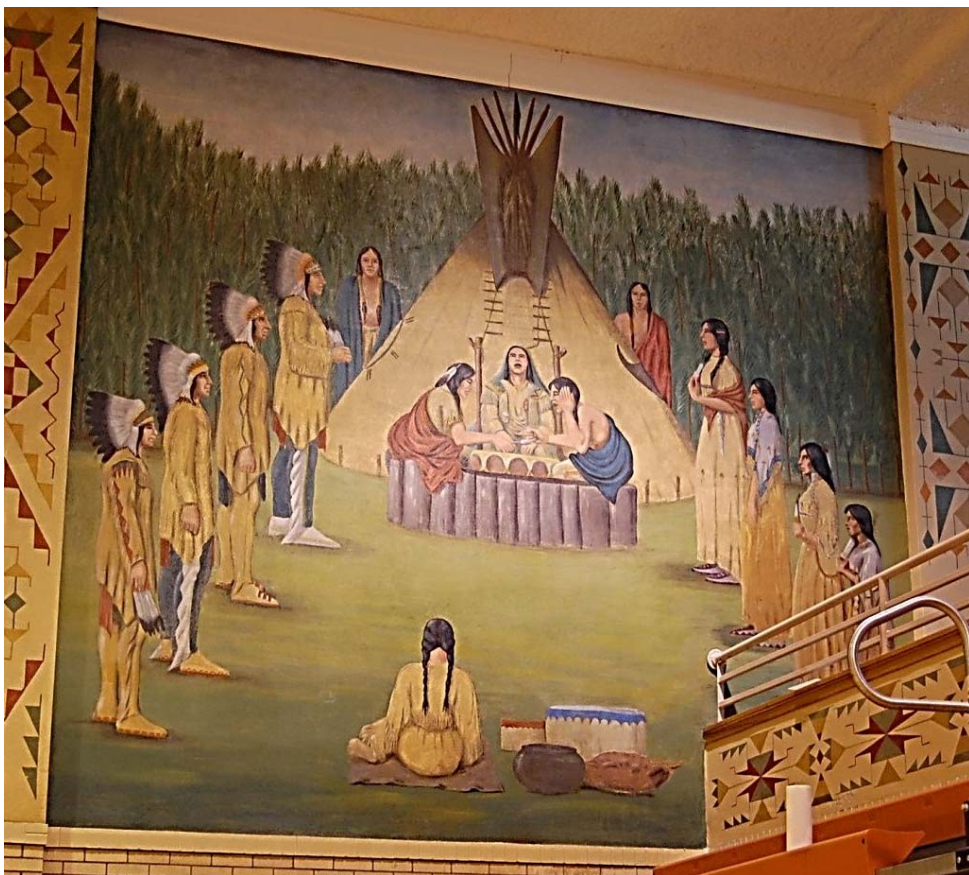
The Sun Dance



Hunka Ado-Wampi, or Courtship and Marriage



Victory Dance



Social Dance, or Hunkapi Ceremony

North Wall, History Along the Missouri River (west to east)



Sakakawea and Lewis and Clark



Treaty Making



Christian Service



Fool Soldier Rescue (before restoration)



Retreat (before restoration)