

Making a Tile Mural for Calumet Township by artist Barbara Flanagin

Paul Lehto, Supervisor of Calumet Township, had for some time wanted to preserve the history of Red Jacket Shaft, Calumet & Hecla Mining Company's only vertical shaft. This along with Superior Engine House and Quincy Mine Shaft and Engine Hoist House were the greatest mining marvels of the Copper Country and the world in their time.

Only one small building remains on the site where the palatial surface structures of Red Jacket Shaft once stood. So in 2014 the KNHP Advisory Commission awarded Calumet Township a grant to create interpretive signs for the Red Jacket Shaft site. Jeremiah Mason, archivist with KNHP, was working with Paul on the project. As they wanted to involve members of the community as well, I was contacted to do an artistic representation that would show how Red Jacket Shaft connected, at a depth of about a mile, with Calumet Shaft no. 3, one of the incline shafts that followed the copper lode underneath Calumet. Jeremiah made a simple sketch of the buildings he felt were emblematic of Calumet, to go as a skyline, above ground.

When the colored pencil drawing was finally completed in the late fall of 2014, to my surprise, our township supervisor expressed an interest in using the image for a mural on the walls of the township meeting room. This revealed a new dimension hitherto unknown to me, that in addition to his knowledge of local history and hockey, he was a patron of the arts!

When I moved to Laurium in 2006 I hoped to pursue my interest in art, which had not been easy to do in earlier phases of my life. Many doors miraculously opened to me in art and here was another one, however I had never done anything on that scale before.

That next month I visited the Calumet Art Center during the First Friday open house. I had wanted to get back into ceramics, in which I had only limited experience, and spoke to Ed Gray, Director of the Center, about making tiles and possibly using them for a mural. A tile mural mounted on backing boards also would have the advantage of being moved, if needed, in the future. Ed was enthusiastic and embraced it as the sort of community project they liked to do. His support for the project was invaluable.

On February 24th I made my first practice tile of one of the buildings in the image, No. 2 Warehouse. Ed showed me the tools and what they could do in terms of texture and carving. We talked about what the best size would be for the individual tiles, and finally decided that it would be comprised of 108 six inch tiles. Cost of clay, glazes and firing were considered in order to make a proposal for the township. With the practice tiles as examples, the proposal was accepted at the February 2015 township meeting.

The image had to be enlarged from the original 16 X 20" colored pencil drawing to the 3 X 9' size of the mural. This was done through a grid laid over an enlargement of the design and cast onto a full sized paper with the help of a projector at the library (Thank you Patty). Details were then worked out square by square.

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Clay proved to be a good medium to express the texture of the old buildings against the natural beauty of the area. But carving came easier than the glazing, as the colors can appear very different before they are fired. The first three weeks were devoted to doing practice tiles, which helped a lot to begin to learn some of the properties of clay.

In addition to the carving and the glazing, the tiles had to be rolled out from 25# lumps of clay, as the studio doesn't use factory made tiles. This is done using a slab machine, which was my first lesson, and though Ed could do it effortlessly, it was not something I caught on to right away.

Determining shrinkage of the clay was another matter that proved to be not so straight forward and even after careful measuring, there was variation in the final size after two firings. This made calculations for how 108 main tiles and 52 border tiles fit together difficult.

Moisture content of clay determines when it is ready to be carved and when it can be fired. Too much moisture and the clay sticks to the tools making it hard to use. When it is too dry it is no longer pliable and certain types of carving can't be done. At times we wanted to hurry the project along and some mistakes were inevitably made, but clay has its own time, dependent on humidity in the air and other things.

To do a project of this scale, one obviously has to have the right work space and resources, as well as the right atmosphere and environment for work. We are fortunate to have that in a small town like Calumet. Many of my needs for the project were anticipated well before I could have thought of them and that kept the project rolling along.

One of my favorite memories of the project was the unloading of a ton and a half of clay from a semi truck in April. That was the quantity that had to be ordered for this project and the other needs of the art center. Everyone helped and the 50# boxes were passed from hands to hands down the steps, inside.

It was a pleasure to spend time with the many eclectic people, artists and others, young and old, who frequent the Calumet Art Center. It was also nice to hear stories from visitors who when watching the progress of the mural recollected stories of family members who had spent time in the mines or gotten married in one of the churches.

One draws from many experiences in life and my mother probably cultivated my early interest in art by providing me with plenty of my father's discarded papers from the office on which to draw. She also took my children and me to many interesting special exhibits at the Art Institute of Chicago, which often provided windows into past eras of time and taught me that one can learn about history through art. Learning to work hard on the details of a design came from the many good instructors in botanical art at the Morton Arboretum. Working nine to five in an office for many years helped to give me the discipline to follow through to produce results.

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I appreciate everyone who helped directly or indirectly, from loading and unloading the kiln, to cleaning the clay dust off floors and just about every surface, to friends who must have been tired of having me talk about the project and provided encouragement.

The tiles were glued and grouted to three separate backing boards at the art center the second week of August. On August 17th a Calumet Township crew transported the three sections to the Calumet Township meeting room, set the mural on a specially made base and attached it to the wall, an operation that went smoothly. Thus finished a nearly six month project, one that will hopefully be enjoyed for many years.