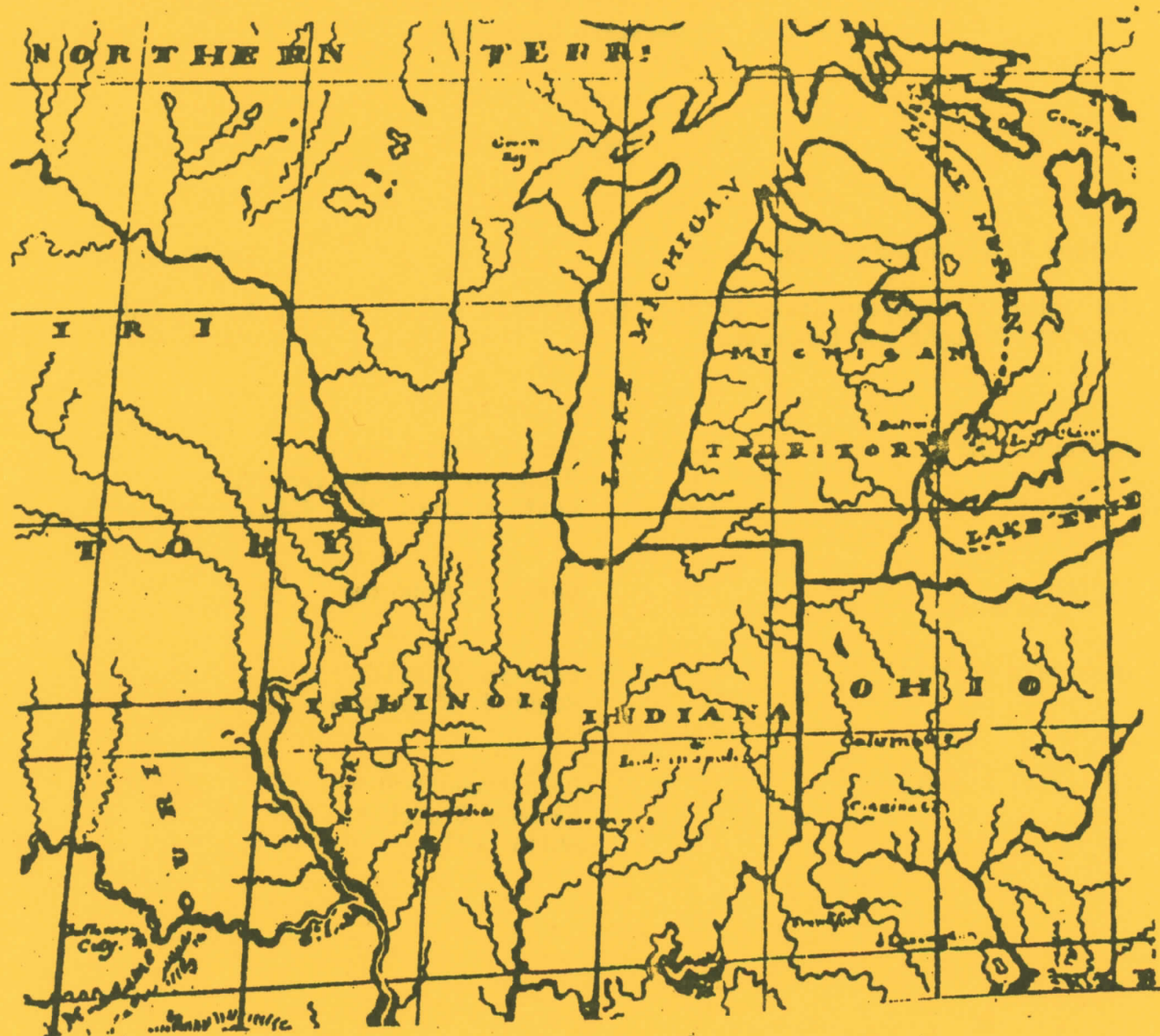


ΣML Newsletter



The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature

The Center for the Study of
Midwestern Literature and Culture

Founded 1971

VOLUME THIRTEEN
NUMBER ONE
SPRING, 1983

Society for the Study of
Midwestern Literature

Newsletter

Volume Thirteen Number One

Spring, 1983

Published at Michigan State University with the support of the Department of
American Thought and Language.

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Published in Spring, Summer, Fall

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Midwestern Literature
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Contents

Editor's Note	David D. Anderson	i
Murals by Gilbert Wilson		ii
A Voice from the Thirties (An Interview with Gilbert Wilson)	Philip L. Gerber	1

MURALS

by

Gilbert B. Wilson

1. Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, Terre Haute.
(Being restored).
2. Indiana State Lab School, Terre Haute,
(Destroyed by me).
3. Indiana State Lab School, Terre Haute, (Re-done).
4. Science Hall, ISU (Mural lost in renovation).
5. Mural in private home of Blumberg family, Terre Haute (?).
6. Conversion Hall mural at Lake Wawasee, Indiana (?).
7. Mural in private home of C. J. Root, Terre Haute (?).
8. Fresco in Sculpture School, New York City (painted over) (?).
"Drum Taps" of Walt Whitman.
9. Whitman mural redone in Community Theatre, Terre Haute.
10. Mural "Comedy" in Community Theatre, Terre Haute.
11. Mural portrait of teacher, Sarah Scott Jr. High, T. H.
12. Mural in private home of professor at Antioch College.
13. Mural at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.
14. Mural in Dance Studio of Georgia Gay, Columbus, Ohio
(Destroyed).
15. Two outdoor murals for private home of Rick Hardy,
Frankfort, Kentucky (?).
16. Mural panels for Moby-Dick in Frankfort Public Library,
(Never accepted).

Editor's Note

We're very pleased to begin, in this issue of the Newsletter, a series of interviews of Gilbert Wilson, distinguished Midwestern muralist and artist, now living in Louisville, Kentucky. Conducted by Philip Gerber of State University College at Brockport, New York, the interviews cover Gil's career as an artist, his wide acquaintanceship among artists and writers, including Sherwood Anderson, and the lot of the artist in America.

Gil is perhaps best known to members of the Society as the painter of the centennial portraits of both Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser.

David D. Anderson

A Voice From The Thirties
(An Interview with Gilbert Wilson)

Philip L. Gerber

Born in 1907 in Terre Haute, Indiana, birthplace of Socialist Eugene Debs and novelist Theodore Dreiser, Gilbert Wilson has spent a lifetime painting and attempting to define in writing the place of the artist in America. He took his professional training at the Chicago Art Institute and the Yale School of Art, emerging in the teeth of the Great Depression to find himself adrift in the economic chaos of the times. Influenced in style by the conventional muralist Eugene Savage and in tone by the radical Mexicans Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and Jose Clemente Orozco, he launched a series of murals of his own in Terre Haute and at Antioch College, some of which have managed to survive the vicissitudes of five decades. Along the way, Wilson cultivated valuable friendships with a variety of personalities in the arts, among them cartoonist Art Young, Painter Rockwell Kent, journalist William Allen White, and novelists Sherwood Anderson, Pearl Buck, and Theodore Dreiser. His work on a music-drama "The White Whale" brought him together with actor Walter Huston, whose son John was then instrumental in engaging Wilson for a national tour of the artist's Moby-Dick paintings in connection with Huston's filmed version of Melville's novel. Wilson now lives in Louisville, Kentucky, where he continues to paint and to set down a lifetime's observations in his book: What Makes the Artist Tick? A Study of Sex, Sublimation, and Creativity. The present interview, the first of six, was conducted in 1979 in the artist's studio in Frankfort, Kentucky. As it opens, Wilson speaks of his acquaintance with Art Young, political

cartoonist and author of On My Way and My Life and Times.

Wilson: Art Young, the cartoonist, was an early influence on me. I was in the library in my home town of Terre Haute one time, and I ran onto a book by Art Young. I thought that he must be as old as Charles Dickens. I ran into my old art teacher, and I spoke to him about this character, and he said, "Well, I'm sure that he's still alive." He knew of his cartoons and other work. I had read in Young's book called On My Way that he had known Eugene Debs. He had come to Terre Haute with Jack Reed just after Debs got out of prison--

Gerber: When would this be?

Wilson: This was right after the First World War, so it must have been around 1920 or so. Harding pardoned him, you know. Debs wouldn't accept anything but a full pardon. I guess you know about his going into prison over confronting the draft in the First World War, and the strikes--the Pullman Strike. Anyway, Art Young had met him and made drawings of him. Well, I was going to do this mural, what I called "A Mural Song of the Midwest," of Theodore Dreiser and Paul Dresser and Art Young. These are three people who were associated with my home town of Terre Haute and were figures known worldwide.

This is how I got to know Art Young. I went to New York and from there up into Danbury, Connecticut, and he lived in a little old rooming house there. He had a farm out on the edge of Bethel, Connecticut. He was in the midst of writing his final autobiography, finishing what he started in On My Way. It was called My Life and Times. He had a ghost writer

who was doing the historical background, and he was doing his personal-life part--they were both very closely interlocked. As I read his Times--well, Young's life was interesting, but his manuscript for Times was just pedestrian as the dickens. This writer was just one of the hack writers. So I began to discourage Art, all unwittingly--I didn't realize I was. I just said, "Art, this doesn't sound like you, and I don't like it. It doesn't fix with your other work." Well, he had a deadline coming up in about a month or two and so I got busy with the publisher and some other people and got him off of that deadline for another year at least. I was so fascinated with the old fellow, being there with his work and all, and hearing his philosophy--he was a Socialist, you know.

Gerber: What year was this?

Wilson: It was around 1938. And one day a bright young woman came to visit him. she was Marguerite Tjader Harris; she had this magazine called Direction. Well, I was running out of money, and I didn't want to live on Art Young. I had about fifty dollars a month, which I was getting from my father, and for about a year I was getting twenty-five dollars a week from George Braziller's Book Find Club. Braziller was helping young artists and writers at that time--a tax dodge, I presume, but it was very helpful, of course. So I started using Art Young's drawings to illustrate articles which I wrote about him. He made a drawing of me, and I made a drawing of him. This I pasted in here, in my copy of Direction, because they used another artist's painting there. This helped me stay on there in Danbury. The hell of it was, I had been doing my murals at Antioch, and now I'd run into this situation with Art Young and I didn't want to leave

there, and still I felt I had to go back to Antioch and finish my work there, so it became really a problem of staying for a while with him and then going out and working at Antioch and then coming back--carrying water on both shoulders, so to speak. I found out that Art Young knew Dreiser, and when I got to know Dreiser myself a couple of years later, around 1938 or 1939, I took Art over to Dreiser's home in New York City. We didn't find him in; he was away.

Gerber: Where was Dreiser living then?

Wilson: I believe it was on Tenth Street, East Tenth Street.

Gerber: Down in the Village, then?

Wilson: Yes, about a block off of Fifth Avenue. I got Art young drawing again. He had done a series called "Trees at Night," which I wrote an article about, and he had a whole lot of drawings for another book, Types of the Home Town, which was not published. Well, I consoled with him over the fact that he had another year to go on his autobiography, so he let me get his work together on Types of the Old Home Town and we brought that out. I found these friends of mine at Terre Haute, the Blumbergs, a wealthy family who were patrons of mine. I had them come to New York one time and they went up to Danbury and met Art Young. Of course, they loved his philosophy in spite of the fact that he was a Socialist. He was that kind of Socialist that is a very dear kind of person. They bought one of his paintings for five hundred dollars and another for two hundred dollars. This money was helpful to Art because he was being supported by the League for Mutual Aid, which was a very find and purposeful thing to help struggling

radicals to get along financially. They would use Art Young's plight to raise money and, of course, support him. I fell out with them because here I was, selling some of his drawings to friends of mine and turning the money over to Art. But they didn't understand. There again, I'm accused of being "commercial" with his work, and I couldn't defend myself, again. All I could show them was the checks.

Gerber: But Art Young didn't mind this, did he?

Wilson: No! He was all for this. In fact, there were times when he had a dental bill--had all of his teeth removed, both upper and lower, and had plates made. Well, he paid his dentist with drawings. Can you imagine that? Barter.

Gerber: Sure. They're doing it again! I read about it in the magazines.

Wilson: I've been doing it with my plumber. I gave him one of my Moby Dick drawings. He was an old sailor, and he loved this picture of the sea. It saved me forty dollars, for fixing my hot-water heater.

Gerber: And saved him from buying the painting and paying taxes.

Wilson: Yes. Well, that's how I got to know Art Young, and I was going to use him in this "Midwest Mural Song," because he was born in Monroe, Wisconsin, which is middlewest, too.

Gerber: What happened to Art Young since his early days? Wasn't he a big newspaper cartoonist?

Wilson: He worked for the Hearst Press for a number of years, and he admitted in

his autobiography that in the early years he was all for hanging the anarchists. That was when the anarchists' trial went on, you know, in Chicago, about 1886-87. I mean, he made a pamphlet-cover for that thing. Now he was getting the scales removed from his eyes by learning eventually that he had been on the wrong side of the oppressed, you might say. So he started working for The New Masses and The Liberator, magazines which had a very "left" influence. But he didn't get any money for his work. He was working for nothing. And when his property was sold--he sold his farm out in Connecticut, in Bethel--most of that money had to go his wife and his two sons, who were living in California at this time. I met one of the boys. I always felt sorry for any son of a famous man, because he's always compared to him, his father, usually unfavorably. I think Walter Huston and John Huston are the only father-and-son team that have really made a name for themselves separately. But Art Young's son--he tried writing poetry and tried drawing and various other things, but he was always compared with his father. He was drinking and really in a predicament.

Gerber: The son must have been a grown man himself by that time.

Wilson: He was, I'd say, close to my age at that time. I was in my late thirties, I believe, and he was around that. His brother, who lived with his mother out in California, was older yet. He palled around with some notables. He went to Swarthmore--or Dartmouth, I believe, not Swarthmore. He played football there and was really a nice guy and all, but he was always Art Young's son. Art Young had quite a reputation in his early days as a well-known

illustrator for The Saturday Evening Post and even for Time magazine in its early days. And he was doing a Sunday-Supplement picture every week. He influenced me a great deal, I'm sure, in my early years.

Gerber: How long were you around Art Young?

Wilson: I got to know him when he was around sixty-five, and I think he died when he was about seventy or so. I was with him at least five years, helping him every chance I had to get his drawings into some kind of shape. He had to move out of this place when he sold the property, so I made a lot of portfolios out of big heavy cardboard. We bought some good thick tape and fixed up his things. All of it fell into the hands of The League for Mutual Aid; they had the first right to all of his work. But he had fallen out with them politically in the meantime. It was one of those things back in the times during the Second World War when the political picture was making it very difficult to decide where you belonged. The interesting thing was that Art Young could be friends with all phases of the Left; I mean, they all claimed him, but he had no real identity with any of them--he was a philosophical Socialist, you might say. I think he had a viewpoint very much like Dreiser's. He really was for labor and for the working man and the struggling poor and all, but he had no what you might call sharp political identification. He looked like a Capitalist.

Gerber: I notice that this issue of Direction is all of Art Young.

Wilson: This came out after his death, 1944, this special Art Young issue. I forget just the date that he died. It was around Christmas time and he was out walking from one mailbox to the next. He had hundreds and hundreds of cards that he would print up and send out for Christmas. He didn't want to put

weight on the mailman, carrying all of those cards out of one mailbox, so he'd go two or three or four blocks and put a third of them here in one mailbox and a third of them there in another. Someone had given him a bottle of vodka. Now during his last years he swore off smoking and drinking. His doctor made him do it because he had high blood pressure. Whoever it was that gave him this vodka said, "Come on, Art, we got to celebrate, it's Christmas and New Year's." And so he took a drink of vodka and--. I was out here visiting my folks in Kentucky and a wire came saying that he had died.

Gerber: From the vodka?

Wilson: Well, from his walking and from his drinking, that little bit of vodka. You know that after you've stopped drinking for a year or more and then take a drink, it's like taking--I saw a man take a smoke once after he'd been away from it for about three years and he fainted; the inhalation of the smoke just overcame him. He had to sit down before he fell; he couldn't get up for quite a while for fear he'd really fall down and pass out. I started to speak about these paintings of Art Young's, and his watercolors, and his drawings. I'd gotten him drawing again, and he made one final drawing of Hitler and Mussolini and the Spaniard dictator, Franco. I would spend my time at the library getting him current-event pictures of these face in the news and he would make caricatures of them. So I was really instrumental in getting him back into drawing. He was being torn down by working on this book and by his worry about the deadline. I felt that his publishers were really cruel to him. They didn't like me around. I was always against them, you might say, against their interests and in defense of him.

Gerber: Did he finish the book?

Wilson: Yes. I have two copies. One he gave me, and another he gave to the Blumbergs. He made some little drawings on the fly of their copy. Even since they bought two of his paintings and two of his drawings, he was very liberal with giving them sketches of himself. In all the years that I knew him, that one little sketch of myself is all that I ever got from him.

Gerber: You said he looked like a Capitalist.

Wilson: He thought that he did. He was fat and jolly, with a nose something like a drunkard's. He'd lived, not a fast life, you might say, but he smoked almost incessantly. Cigars. And we always had a drink of gin when we went down to dinner at the house where he lived in Danbury. His doctor was telling him all the time, "Art, you just can't take coffee, you can't take cigarettes or tobacco, or any kind of liquor, because your heart won't take it." I went around with him in the Village. I was a sort of a "bodyguard," because all of his friends, old Radical friends, would invite him in and they'd want him to have a drink and they'd want him to do his imitation of a Southern Senator and recite the poetry of James Whitcomb Riley. He was constantly in demand, and performing all the time. They didn't realize the effect on him, but I could tell; when he began to get red in the face and shake, you could tell. We'd rehearse sometimes a full afternoon on his poetry. I'd handle the book and he'd recite long poems, like "Little Orphant Annie," and there was one called "The Back-house"--

Back of the house it stood

A half a mile or more--

Gerber: Good old country humor? I know several of those poems of James Whitcomb Riley.

Wilson: He would get so excited. I went with him on many celebrations. They were having anti-Fascist meetings in New York then, you know, and he was always a celebrant on the stage. I sat there with him many times. That's how I really got into the movement.

Gerber: That would have been during the Spanish War?

Wilson: Yes, all during that time. The time when the Fascist problem was coming here to America, and Sinclair Lewis published his book It Can't Happen Here. Art Young was a great soul. I feel that my friendship with him was just like it was with Dreiser. I had more close contact with Art than I had with Dreiser, and he had a tremendous influence on my thinking, my outlook, because I was pretty naive before that time.

Gerber: When did he change his viewpoint?

Wilson: It was gradual. He tells of this in his book, My Life and Times. As he said, in those early days he was all for making pictures. He had no special conscience or consciousness, and it was only through meeting people, I suppose. I know that he admired Thomas Nast, and Nast had a very social viewpoint. Nast did that famous drawing of Tammany Hall, you know, making all its inhabitants look like vultures. And the title was "Let Us Pray." P-R-E-Y! Art Young became a Socialist gradually, more and more a man dedicated to getting that view into his work. Typical of it was his picture of a group of children coming down an alley with a can of beer in their

hands, and they're going home from the bar, and the little girl says to the boy, "Gee Annie, look at the stars, thick as bedbugs." That kind of humor. And then another cartoon where this guy comes home from his work, you know, and he's just tired out, he's sitting there and his hands are just hanging down, and he's down, and his wife is at the stove and she says to him, "Yeah, you're tired. Here I am standing over a hot stove while you're working down in a nice cool sewer." That drawing was owned by Alexander Woollcott--no, he's got the one of "Gee Annie, look at the stars." I tried to set up a retrospect exhibition of Art Young's work, after he died, at the Museum of Modern Art. He really should have been displayed there. He had exhibitions now and then, but nothing that really went over his whole life's work.

Gerber: What was Art Young's impact on you?

Wilson: He influenced me insofar as I was taking such a grim view of things in my murals. You remember that first one I did, of the machinery and the powerful forces of steel? There's the scientist with six arms and he's holding back the forces of machinery; he's pointing to the opposite wall, he's got his arm around the youth, the younger generation, he's got another hand at the microscope, and he's got one hand clenched as a fist in the face of the monster machine. Well, I was going after my social-conscious mural-painting with grim determination, and Art said, "Look, this will kill you! You've got to laugh at the whole thing. There's nothing like humor to really beat down a serious problem, if you can just get people to laugh at it." So, in my next mural, which I did at Antioch, I tried to take some of that idea of his and apply it to what I

was doing. I'd had a run-in with the Daughters of the American Revolution when I was doing a mural up at Lake Wawasee, the hotel summer resort. I'd been given five years to do it in, take as long as I wanted, getting for it just my room and board, nothing else. I got the materials, of course. There I had shown a flag with a gold swastika in front of it. Nothing is supposed to be put on the American flag, you see. So there was a convention there at the hotel, the DAR, and they saw this painting going on and complained to the management. I was not there at the time. I used to go home for weekends. I knew this rich Terre Haute family across the lake, and whenever they went back and forth to their city home, I'd go home too, and then come back again with them. So I put the swastika behind the flag and had the wind blowing the flag against it so that you had the impression of a swastika; that's how I got around it. But I got into a dickens of a problem with the hotel people because their guests were being nasty about the decorations in the hotel. This was at Spink-Wawasee in upper Indiana, up near Culver Military Academy, near where South Bend and Notre Dame is, up in the lake country there.

There had been a summer showing of paintings--the Hoosier Salon. I'd been exhibiting in it ever since my last year in art school, taking a prize now and then, and so this summer exhibition had photographs of my murals. I didn't have anything to send to the exhibition but photographs. But the jury turned them down because they were not originals but copies of originals, so they ruled them out. This woman, one of the three sisters who owned the hotel--Spink-Wawasee--she saw this work of mine. She was an opera singer

who had never "made it"; she had aspirations to be a great singer, and so she appreciated my work, and she asked me to come to do the mural. She said, "Here's these walls in this new building of ours, and I want you to paint just what you wish on them." The other two sisters were against my being left so free, and they were worried about the stuff I was painting, because I had three starving people--a man, a woman, and a child--walking through a long avenue of food, just down a painted corridor, you know, these huge masses of food, and here they are walking down this corridor.

Another of the murals was called "Modern Crucifixion," and there was this worker just stark as could be and bare to the waist, just pants, and standing there like this, pulling a lever on one side and throwing a switch on the other. It's all in the form of a big metallic mechanical cross. The local priest in the neighborhood there, he didn't know whether this was sacrilegious or not. But I was being influenced then by Diego Rivera, all the time putting stuff in my murals which would cause controversy. I felt it was like taking the shock of the needle to inoculate you against a disease; if you don't get sick from it, it doesn't "take."

Gerber: This was before you knew Art Young?

Wilson: Yes. I was speaking about the fact that I had gotten into trouble with the DAR, and so the next time I painted a mural, which was at Antioch, I had two dowagers ass-over-head, falling down into a morass of collapsed machinery and a sort of ash pile. One of them was drinking tea, didn't even know she was falling. The other was crocheting little swastikas in-

to the flag, into the stars. So I was laughing, trying to make use of what Art Young had told me about humor. He'd say, "You're more like Daumier in your work; you're not really laughing, you're really insulting these people and making other people laugh at them." "But," he said, "It's not very funny what you're doing."

Gerber: Where was this mural with the six-armed scientist?

Wilson: Oh, that's the first one I did, in the local junior high school at Terre Haute. That was my first mural. I'd just come back from Mexico, where I saw the murals of Diego Rivera and Orozco.

Gerber: When did you go to Mexico?

Wilson: After my graduation from the Art Institute at Chicago, a friend of mine and I just took a trip down there on the train. I wanted to meet Rivera. I had a letter from him saying that, I'm doing these murals in Mexico City and if you want to come down and see them, I'll talk to you."

Gerber: Had you ever met him?

Wilson: No, I just corresponded. But he couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak Spanish, so he promised during that week of my being down there that if I would come to New York where he was going to paint a mural in Rockefeller Center, he would let me see what he was doing. So I go there, and he had left, just gotten in trouble there with his murals, painting the portrait of Lenin. So I learned that he was out in Detroit, the Ford Museum, or something. Again I missed him. I was just following around the country, I'd say, with never getting a chance to see him at

work. I was studying Spanish all the time, trying to--he said through his interpreter that if I could learn enough Spanish so that he could help me and I could help him with some of his learning, and so forth, that then I could work with him. He was very friendly and kind and considerate. I spent a whole day, I remember, in Mexico there just sitting on the floor of a public building waiting for him to come down from where he was painting. That guy just stayed up on the scaffold, ate his dinner up there and everything. He came down once during the whole day.

Gerber: Which building was he working at?

Wilson: He was working in the National Palace. He did a small chapel in Mexico, something like I wanted to do with local people here in Frankfort, Kentucky, recently. His was in the agricultural school, a marvelous thing, the ceilings and the side walls and everything painted. You're surrounded with this luscious color. It's a miniature Sistine Chapel.

Gerber: He had his lunch on the scaffold?

Wilson: He was dictating to some woman who was taking down something or other in Spanish. He would come down and, I suppose, go to the toilet. I used to wonder, what in the devil does that guy do when he stays up there so long? I got into the place through a note that he had given his assistant and I had to go early--it was about seven o'clock in the morning, it was still dark, wintertime down there. They had the rainy and the dry seasons, but I was in there about seven-thirty and I didn't get any breakfast. I didn't have any lunch, either. I just sat waiting, waiting, and waiting

until about three or four o'clock in the afternoon. Rivera's assistant had done the plastering for him and then he comes in and paints in frescos. So he came in about ten o'clock and painted till about three o'clock, and then he came down. I was still too timid to go up to him because he was talking to someone when he came down, so when he went back up again I saw the woman he was with pointing down at me. It was almost closing time, about five o'clock, before I got to see him. He motioned for me to come up. I climbed up this big long ladder and showed him the letter, which I had with me, the one in which he said that if I would come down--

Gerber: He was a big fellow, right?

Wilson: Rivera was fat--with "long legs like a frog," one of his wives said. He was part Indian, with dark skin, bulging eyes, black curly hair, and often put his likeness into his murals, sometimes as a Negro. He weighed about three hundred pounds. How in the world he could climb up and down those scaffolds and do his work I honestly don't know. He painted more square feet, I understand, than any painter that's ever lived.

Gerber: He did it by himself, didn't have assistants do it?

Wilson: Well, he had his plasterers. Orozco did his own plastering, but Rivera had people building his scaffolds, and he had two or three assistants. One fellow I got to know, who worked with him, spoke English, and he was very helpful in telling me, "Now, really, if you will learn Spanish, you can travel around with him." He was in the same position that I was, he was a young painter who was getting the experience; he could speak fluent Spanish.

Gerber: He was American?

Wilson: Yes. Sort of an Indian descent, I think, maybe some European background.

Gerber: So you think Rivera had an impact on your own work?

Wilson: Well, I started out in art school wanting to be an illustrator, like N. C. Wyeth. I had no social consciousness. I wanted to write stories and illustrate them. I had sent one story to Boy's Life and got three hundred dollars for it. It was an illustrated Indian story. I called it "Revenge: The Story of Two Daggers (A Shadow Play)." It is the story of two Indian boys, brothers, who are given identical daggers by their grandfather. The oldest takes his ordeal to become a brave--three days on a cliff without water or food, to commune with the Great Spirit. On the third night his tribe is attacked in the canyon below. To leave the cliff is to fail the ordeal, but he goes down swiftly--to find the enemy has wiped out the tribe and stolen his brother. The lone Indian becomes a wanderer in search of revenge. One day much later the lone Indian comes upon a hunting party of the enemy. He kills them one by one with his black-feathered arrows. Finally the last one takes refuge on a cliff top. The two fight to the death, and the lone Indian winds up with two daggers both identically alike. With nothing now to live for, he plunges both in his heart and falls dead. When he wakes up he finds the Great Spirit has sent him a message in his dream: revenge is wrong. I think it's a good story, acted out many times as a shadowplay.

Gerber: Tell me about your work with Eugene Savage.

Wilson: This was after my third year at the Art Institute. I got this job with Eugene Savage, the mural painter. Savage was a handsome man, about your

size (5' 10"), with a mustache. He had a white clutch of hairs in one eyebrow, which gave him a distinguished look. He could draw more skillfully than anyone I ever knew. He was born in a place called Corvington, Indiana. He had won the Prix de Rome. All of his assistants had taken the same prize, but me. If I ever won it, I'd turn it down.

So I met this man who was also from Indiana, and he was exhibiting in the Hoosier Salon, where I had a picture that year. I was really impressed with his design for his murals. He would make design-murals about one-fourth the size of his final painting. Say if it was to be twenty feet tall, he would make this design five feet tall. And the detail and all was so beautiful, and the marvelous drawing and draftsmanship and color. I was tremendously impressed. So I got to meet the man and he was doing a mural, or placing the canvases of his mural, in the American Legion Memorial in Chicago. So he invited me to help him. He had two Yale students with him who were helping him, and I was now in my last year at the Art Institute. He really, in a sense, sparked my interest in murals. So I helped him for about a week. He would paint these murals in Westchester County, New York, and bring them out here to Chicago, and paste them on the walls. So what we were doing was mounting these canvases. Some of the panels would curve at the top, so that meant scoring--cutting into--the panels and then putting those two parts together and repainting the thing so that you didn't see the cut.

I asked Savage if I could come and be an apprentice, and he said, "If you will come to Yale. I have to require the students who work for me to paint like I do, my style, in order to use their work. I hate to do this," he said, "because I don't like, myself, to change my style to fit someone

else, and I don't think you ought to, either. But if you're going to be an assistant of mine, you have to learn to paint enough like me so that I can use you." I agreed to the terms and went to work for him. I got to his studio up near Ossining, New York, where the prison was. But as soon as I got this job, I had to force myself to quit school and go get this job. I'd only been at school about three months, when they wrote my father and said, "Your son has left school, we don't have any record of where he is." I hadn't told my folks about this.

Gerber: You were at the Institute?

Wilson: It was at the Yale Institute, the art school. Getting the job with Savage, I just collapsed over the thing; there I was, at the top of what I wanted, and I just got so homesick to get home that I ran away. After getting the job, I just took off for the railroad station, hiking.

Gerber: How old were you?

Wilson: I guess I was about twenty-six or seven. I went up to my sister, who lived in New Jersey, and borrowed her car and drove back home. This was my oldest sister, who now lives in Cincinnati. And Savage, while I was working on these murals of his, made me do beaux arts projects. They are monthly studies for students. They give you a project--to do a mural in a home where the mural must interest the adults as well as the children. It's a problem thing. Another was a Shakespeare library. You're supposed to take three of Shakespeare's plays; your panels are twenty feet high and four or eight feet wide, and it's all Gothic architecture. I got one bronze medal, that's all I ever got out of the job.

But Savage introduced me to the work of the Mexican muralists. I used to go into New York with him every two weeks or so, drive with him, and when I didn't have anything else to do, he would say, "Go to the museum and see this and do that; there's some Mexican mural painters got some work over there. This was Siqueiros and Orozco and Rivera. I saw these and, Gad! I was overwhelmed by the powerfulness of Orozco's things. He would do a huge portrait of a man wrapped around with chains, chains, chains, all over, completely suppressed with heavy steel chains. Siqueiros did one called "The Echo of a Scream." It's a child's crying, and then this huge blow-up of the child's face, the mouth wide open, screaming. I saw art used as a social force in a way that I'd never seen before. The change from the beautiful classic style of Eugene Savage to this raw, wild quality that was in Orozco and Siqueiros, that decided me on going to Mexico after spending a year with Savage.

Gerber: Where were Savage's mural installed?

Wilson: The one that I worked with him on was in Chicago, out on Michigan Boulevard. Of all things, its an American Legion War Memorial. It's got the ceilings and all, three big panels. It is like the thing I was going to do here in Frankfort, if only they would agree to let me. I was impressed with his style and his technique and his drawing. In fact, my drawing still today is like his. That drawing of the whale over there, Ahab and the whaling boat knocked up in the air--that is the way Savage would draw. He never has light and dark, light coming from one side and dark on the other; his light is "hid in a bushel," it's all over the figures and the design. There are no shadows. I have to admit that I was influenced by Savage's style. I made

the remark one time that his paintings could be all cut up into little six-inch squares and each of those six-inch squares would be beautiful. You could put them on the wall and they would be marvelous pieces of design. But I never felt that his work in the Memorial at Chicago was sufficiently anti-war. It is just absolutely what you might call pusillanimous.

Gerber: Too tame?

Wilson: He has these two doughboys; they've got spades over their shoulders. They have just buried the dead, and they're holding them like this, as if they're saying, you know, "No more war for us." Beautiful uniforms--.

Gerber: A little too clear?

Wilson: Yes. Nothing at all dirty about his paintings. Savage's murals designs were always very busy, with lots of figures doing various things. He had a way of defining the human figure and depicting it with such detail when it was nude, it caused his students to say (behind his back): "Wherever you see one muscle--put two." But he had a way of romanticizing everything and making it "beautiful"--too beautiful for words, and yet impressive. I suppose one might describe Dante's hellish Inferno as "beautiful poetry," so perhaps the same might be said of Savage's style of painting. Or again, Georgia O'Keefe's paintings of dried bones. Going from Savage to Rivera and Orozco and Siqueiros was a shock. Siqueiros painted most of his stuff in prison, you know. He was in prison for almost fifteen years. He was very active in the Communist Party, and his paintings are extremely political and very powerful. He painted with enamels, so his things are as permanent as they can be. He painted in the jail.

Gerber: So that is where you picked up your social consciousness?

Wilson: I suppose so.

Gerber: And after that you met Art Young?

Wilson: Yes. It's hard to say how a thing evolves. The feeling are there, and the impressions, but they haven't coalesced, they haven't come into your consciousness. I think it very likely the fact that my father was a bank clerk all his life, had one job when he was young and kept at it--that influenced me to live a different life.