

**ALPINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**NORWALK [CONNECTICUT] THANKS BILL SMART INTERVIEW**

**(Nephew of Justin Gruelle)**

**December 21, 2011**

*Tad Diesel:* Hello, I am Tad Diesel and, on behalf of the Norwalk [Connecticut] Arts Commission, it is my honor to welcome Bill Smart to the city of Norwalk. Bill has given the city a true treasure and that is his collection of art that was created by his uncle, Justin Gruelle. And, Bill, first of all, on behalf of all the citizens of Norwalk, thank you very much.

*Bill Smart:* Well, thank you, Tad, for letting me come up and sharing this great day. It's wonderful to be here. Thank you.

*Tad:* You may know that Justin Gruelle was among the artists of the WPA era of the 1930s who created in Norwalk city hall six of the treasured murals that are on display, but Bill has donated a collection of his personal collection of his uncle's art that now will accompany those murals. Bill, perhaps we could start by you just giving a sense of growing up with your uncle and your early life in Norwalk.

*Bill:* Well, Norwalk has always been the big city for me, coming from a farm in Indiana. I first came here in 1936 when these murals were put on the wall here. My uncle painted them and I celebrated my tenth birthday in Norwalk, so that was a lot of fun—75 years ago. So it is special to be here and see all these other paintings that I have collected through the years at home with his other things. So, thanks for making this happen.

*Tad:* It's a pleasure. Tell me about how your relationship with your uncle. Bill has donated over 20 paintings and a whole collection of other artistic memories from his uncle. How did it come to pass to get into your family?

*Bill:* Well, the whole story began back in a little town called Southport, Indiana which is now part of Indianapolis. My mother's sister married Justin Gruelle. They came out from the big city of Norwalk and my mother and our family stayed in Indiana. So we would visit back and forth and I always had this close feeling about Norwalk because I remember Calf Pasture Beach and Silvermine where they grew up so it's been wonderful through the years to have this back and forth relationship with Norwalk. Even though I never lived here, I used to spend holidays here, summer vacations and that sort of thing.

*Tad:* We're going to declare you an honorary citizen, at least for today. [Laughter] How would that be? I wonder if we could walk around a bit and you could maybe point out some of the art you have donated and provide some of your own memories.

*Bill:* I'd be happy to. These two are my cousin, John Paul Gruelle, who was a graduate of Norwalk High School in 1945. This is him at a younger age making a model airplane. That was used as a cover of a magazine. Justin was an illustrator, as you know.

*Tad:* Now, the winter scenes, these are some of my favorites. These are creations that, well, tell me how these came to pass.

*Bill:* Well, every year Justin and Mabel enjoyed making a silk screen greeting card and sending it out to all of their friends at the holiday time. This is a painting he did showing him shoveling snow on their house on U Lane, and they created a Christmas card out of it. This one is inside their home at 53 Yew Street and he had a fifteen foot ceiling for painting murals—the ones down here. Over the fireplace was this map, which is now in the Norwalk museum.

*Tad:* Why don't we begin with a picture of the artist himself?

*Bill:* There is Justin in his later years. I think he painted that at about the time he was leaving Norwalk and moving to California. He had a whole career out in California after he left Norwalk, but this was always his home for many years from the time they bought property in Silvermine, which is over here, right along the Silvermine River.

*Tad:* Let's take a special look at these two pictures, because I think they have a particular history for you.

*Bill:* Well, yes, this one was painted in 1946 and it is the Silvermine River and I had just come out of World War II and spent a couple of weeks with Aunt Mabel and Uncle Justin and we had a picnic and he painted that picture while I was sitting watching him. Later he gave it to me as a memory of that time and so it has always been very special. And the one here was out his studio window when we were snowbound. I was there one Christmas holiday and got snowbound with the family. So, a lot of these have personal meaning to me and I'm glad to see that they are here and part of the Norwalk community. This is a very special one here. This is my mother's sister, Aunt Mabel, and then John Paul and Jane and the house that they built up on Yew Lane, in 1924, I think. What's special about this is that he also did a book called *A Mother Goose Parade* and as part of the frontispiece he used the same illustration, but with Mother Goose standing alongside. You notice holding the Raggedy Ann doll here. That's always a special family portrait for me. This is John Paul when he was just a young boy with the long hair and then I'm standing in front of Jane here with the dog Mickey. And Jane, back then, you see she was doing sewing, you see the needle and thread and she was creating a costume of some sort for the dog. We just saw down at the Norwalk Museum some quilts that she had done, so she has been a seamstress all of her life.

*Tad:* That's an amazing family—when you think of the entire family of artists we've got Jane, the quilter, we've got Justin who created the murals here at city hall and the other murals in town, and Justin's brother Johnny, who was also an artist.

*Bill:* A cartoonist. Both Justin and Johnny were trained by their father, Richard B. Gruelle who is known as one of the Hoosier Group of Artists in Indiana. So he trained the two boys at home plus a sister by the name of Trudy, who we haven't talked about yet. She was an artist herself. So, anyway, all children grew up being trained by their father, but Johnny became a cartoonist and then did Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy and Justin went on to the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis and then to the New York Art Students League, so he was more of a well trained artist and you see the results of his training. Many people think that Justin was probably, of the three, the most well trained and the best artist. That's just my personal prejudice perhaps.

*Tad:* We allow you that prejudice. Let's move down the hall down this way.

*Bill:* In 1910, the Gruelle family came from Indiana and they bought this little house down on River Road right near the Buttery Saw Mill and before the bridge over to Wilton. They owned sixteen acres on both sides of the river and this little house was expanded and then, across the road, was what was called the Blanchard Furrier Mill and then that was their studio. And then Johnny and his wife came from Cleveland a year later and they actually moved into the old mill while they were building a house up around the other side of the Wilton Bridge. So that is an historic old photograph. This one is of Upstate New York and is a sketch, a watercolor sketch he did. It's special only because you look at it as a sketch, it is a fine painting by itself, but he went back to his studio and he created one about three times the size of that as a finished painting, which is now hanging in the museum at Pasadena, California.

*Tad:* It's great to see one of the interesting things about the collection is we are able to see Justin Gruelle's art from his very early days and how he's developed as an artist throughout the years. It really makes this collection round out well.

*Bill:* It's just a very exciting collection and to see it all here with his murals makes it very special.

*Tad:* Tell me about these two.

*Bill:* This small one is just a, I say just a, watercolor sketch and I think there's a larger painting somewhere. This is the view from 53 Yew Street walking down and looking on the Silvermine River. And Justin and Mabel used to picnic there near the old Loudon Dairy Farm which is now a golf course, I understand. So they bought this land from Mr. Loudon to build their house and their studio and some day we may find the larger painting to go with that. The one on top is the Mt. Desert Island near Bar Harbor, Maine. In the summer of 1939 he went there to do some work for Clara Fargo Thomas who was a New York City socialite muralist and she was the type that got all the contracts to make murals for the 1939 World's Fair. She would have her picture taken with a paint brush in hand and then Justin would come through as the ghost painter and complete all the murals. Now, that's not for the record, because..... [Laughter] Part of his pay was to have a month or so on the island and help her paint a mural for her home on Somes Sound

which is still there, by the way. In the summer of 1940 I went along on the trip that summer, I came to Norwalk and then went down there and spent a month on that island and I have some wonderful photographs (I don't have any paintings, this was my only painting) from there, and I'm glad it's here so I can come here and enjoy it.

*Tad:* These days, when all logos seem to be created by computers, this is a great example of hand art.

*Bill:* Well, it is interesting and he liked to identify his things, and you have in your collection, you now have several covers of sheet music and he, as an illustrator back in the 1930s, he designed several covers for sheet music and they wanted him to sign his name so he created this logo. I was just at the public library, the Norwalk Public Library, and I saw a similar logo that he did for his Aladdin and His Lamp Mural that you have there and it says "Justin Gruelle" [Pointing that the name was split—Justin on top, Gruelle on bottom], so I guess there's a whole story on the way he signed his name and did his logo. But this is the only one I have that came from one of the covers.

*Tad:* Well, Bill, there's a treasure of art on the walls and also this wonderful collection of eclectic, I guess, history. Tell us about this.

*Bill:* Well, it's obvious that Raggedy Ann is part of the Gruelle family heritage and history. Johnny Gruelle, Justin's older brother, created Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy, as most people know, in 1915, 1918 I believe the first dolls and the first books were created by Johnny Gruelle. He died in 1938 and the publishing company hired Justin, his younger brother, to illustrate several of these books, the *Raggedy Ann Picture Book* here and *Raggedy Ann and the Snow White Castle* and *Betsy Bonnet String*, but they asked him to sign his name "J. Gruelle" to confuse the public and make them think that Johnny Gruelle was still alive. So Justin, for many years, lived in the shadow of his older brother and, of course, his famous father back in Indiana. So it's really interesting that he's come of age finally in his later years to be in the Norwalk City Hall. These are from his early, he was hired right out of the New York Art Students League, to be a staff artist with Kelly Springfield Tire Company in New York. Their headquarters were in Akron, but they had their advertising department at 57<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, so he created these full page illustrations here. He did posters and they did a lot of trade advertising back then. And then later years he worked with Walt Disney. You see a couple of stills from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and he illustrated a lot of their posters for the RKO Productions in New York; he worked in the studios there. So, he was proud to be an illustrator, but he really enjoyed doing painting, that was his love. But, trying to support a family during the depression, he had to take jobs wherever he could get them. Sometimes they allowed him to sign his name. This one, the music was actually written by Johnny Gruelle and the cover was designed by Justin. So, that's an unusual piece there.

*Tad:* Well, Bill, this is just a wonderful history and, once again, I want to thank you once again on behalf of all of Norwalk. The history of Justin Gruelle's artistic contributions to our city is well established, but now we have really rounded it out thanks to you.

*Bill:* Well, it's my pleasure, and I'm glad that you appreciate it and enjoy it and I'm very happy to be here and celebrate in the unveiling of this exhibit. So, thank you very much.