

Genesis and Harbinger

Steven Leech

The era of the late 1930s, nurtured by the various Roosevelt New Deal programs like the Artists', Writers', Theatre and Music Projects under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), brought together cultural workers much as had the counter-culture of the late 1960s. The Wilmington, Delaware vicinity was no exception in both cases. Artists like Edward Loper and William D. White were products of that late 1930s cultural phenomenon, and there were others.

Those various cultural projects were a socializing factor that constituted a kind of movement in the arts. Locally, my father, Steven J. Leech, Sr., was part of the local scene because he participated in the Delaware Federal Writers' Project (FWP), and there was a certain amount of cross-fertilization among participants. Among those with whom my father interacted and became friends, whether directly involved with the projects or closely associated with them, were William D. White, Edward Grant, Bayard Berndt, and Norman Browning whose father, Guy K. Browning, was an administrator with the Writers' Project. Another participant in the Writers' Project was Kenneth Horner, who was later instrumental in founding *The Wilmington Suburban News*, a weekly newspaper founded in 1939 to serve the suburbs directly surrounding the city of Wilmington. It is my understanding that my father worked for *The Wilmington Suburban News* for a time setting type. While there may have been others, the above became my father's lasting friends for many years after the Projects ended with the onset of World War II.

Because my father also had an interest in the visual arts, he became associated with what is now The Delaware Art Museum, which had been a relatively new facility at its current location on Kentmere Parkway. It was there that he took art classes (**pictured below, next page**) and met my mother, Marjorie Gasser, who had also been taking art classes and may have worked as a model.



Sometime in late 1940 or early 1941 my parents began their relationship. Around the same time my father wrote and submitted the below short article to the local FWP on October 22, 1940:

DELAWARE STATE PORTRAIT COMMISSION

Steven J. Leech, Sr.

The Delaware State Portrait Commission, created by an act of the General Assembly on March 26, 1913, is a body whose function is to obtain for various State Buildings in Dover portraits of famous Delawareans. The portraits are

obtained without cost to the State through public-minded citizens whose generosity has placed upon the walls of the State Buildings portraits of Signers of the Declaration of Independence from Delaware, United States Senators, Congressmen, Judges of the Courts, Cabinet Officers, Naval and Army Officers from Delaware who have gained fame, and Colonial and United States officials. Most of the painting are in oil, although several are pastels and some are crayons.

Artists represented include C. W. Schreyler, Thomas Sully, Ethel Penniwell Brown Leach, J. Paul Brown, S. J. Ferris J. D. Chalfant, Paul Hallwig, Chereton Y. Pyle, Augustus G. Heaton, Laussat R. Rogers, and several others.

Other works acquired by the Commission include three Historical Paintings obtained by special acts of the General Assembly and placed on the walls of the State Capitol. The paintings are entitled: "The Troops Leaving the Dover Green," "The Crusader," depicting a World War scene, and "The First Day of Peace," representing the surrender of Lee's Army in 1865. These paintings are by Stanley M. Arthurs, a native Delawarean and a student of Howard Pyle.

The Commission itself is composed of three members, the Governor, acting ex-officio, and two members who hold office during the pleasure of the Governor. Members of the first Commission named by the General Assembly were Charles R. Miller, Governor of that time, Dr. George W. Marshall of Milford, and Chauncey P. Holcomb of New Castle. Henry C. Conrad at one time was a member of the Commission.

Members of the present Commission are: Governor Richard C. McMullen, Christopher Ward, Wilmington, and Mrs. Mabel L. Ridgely of Dover. The members serve without compensation.

An annual appropriation of five hundred dollars is made to the Commission to be used for the general purpose entailed in carrying out its purpose.



The Second World War broke out for the United States in the following December 1941. War clouds had been looming throughout the previous two years both in Europe and Asia. However, life went on in Wilmington and in the rest of the country, which included the Arts Projects. After the attack by the Japanese Imperial Navy on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, much of the energy and resources expended for the Arts got absorbed by the mounting war effort.

Not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor, my mother and father, who were still only friends, decided to take a trip to New York City for the Easter weekend. Easter in 1942 fell on April 5th. The Easter Parade on 5th Avenue was a big event, and one of the Russian ballet companies was in town. My mother and father stayed overnight at The New Yorker Hotel at 481 8th Avenue. At the time The New Yorker had an illustrious permanent resident. His name was Nicola Tesla. It was there that I was conceived.

When my parents arrived home from New York City, my father had found he'd been drafted. By April 16th he reported to Camp Dix, now Fort Dix, in New Jersey. A very short time later he was ordered to Fort McClellan in Alabama.



The following is a very recently discovered letter my father wrote to his father, George Leech, and his sister, my Aunt Madaliene from Fort McClellan on May 6, 1942:

Wednesday, May 6, 1942

Dear Dad and Madeline:

I have heard from most everyone but you. I know you have a lot to do, but I think you could take a few minutes to drop me a few line. Its bad enough here without hearing even one word from home. Even if it were only a sentence or two saying everything was O.K. The only word I've had that you're still kicking was in a letter from Ellis, which I got this morning, saying he saw Dad in town one day. Has he, Ellis, been up to see Madeline. In his letter he said he was going to get the mortgage as soon as he could. And if he possible can I know he will.

If you still have the ingredients you, Madeline, might make some gingerbread or something similar

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to that and send it on down to this joint. The food here ~~was~~^{was} not so good up until today when they did come through with something fairly good.

But it still lacks plenty. There is something else you could send me if you can afford it—

Tobin's Irish Mixture tobacco. I also can't get Virginia Round down here; but I know you can afford them so I ~~would~~ want ask you to send them.

I have gotten one break while being here. The ~~first~~ ~~sargeant~~ asked me to make some charts for him, which I did. One afternoon when I worked on them the boys were taken on a four mile march and they wore a heavy pack, weight about 30 lbs., and of course their rifles, that you take everywhere. When they marched into the company street with

their rears chagging on the ground. There was I standing as fresh as a daisy. I certainly ~~felt~~ felt like a heel. But the day will certainly come when my own rear will not only be dragging but plowing a furrow in the rich earth of Alabama.

It's not so bad here though. The work, some of it, is very hard, but I'm getting used to it. Incidentally we get up a fine o'clock; but even that isn't so bad.

Don't forget to send me my mail, if any. There should be something there for me.

Well I think I'll say goodnight - and for crap sake drop me a few lines.

Steven

Little did my father know that my mother was on a train heading to Fort McClellan to tell him the news that I was on the way. To make a long story short, my parents were married on the 4th of July 1942, while he was on a short leave, at the Grace Methodist Church in Wilmington. They'd tied the knot there because it was the only place they could find a minister on a holiday. Shortly after, my father was shipped overseas, first to Australia, then to New Guinea, and ultimately to the invasion of the Philippines at Leyte Gulf in October 1944.

I was born on January 11, 1943, just four day after Nicola Tesla died at The New Yorker Hotel.



Some claim that Nicola Tesla, along with Einstein and John Von Neumann embodied new, and still secret, technologies that led to the feasibility of nuclear warfare and space travel, and contributed to shape the nature of the post war era. In a growing Cold War era, there was no longer any significant arts funding. Literary art got pushed back to the margins, to be created within small

circles of associations. That William D. White was forced to live in poverty in a hovel without electricity is, perhaps, indicative of the stagnate state of the arts in the decades following the end of World War II. Others, like my father and mother, faced tough times that sapped any notion of artistic endeavors. Until the late 1960s, and the heyday of the counter-culture, the 1950s embodied merely the genesis of a renewal of the arts we now experience. *Dreamstreets* has played its small part.



— Steven J. Leech, Sr