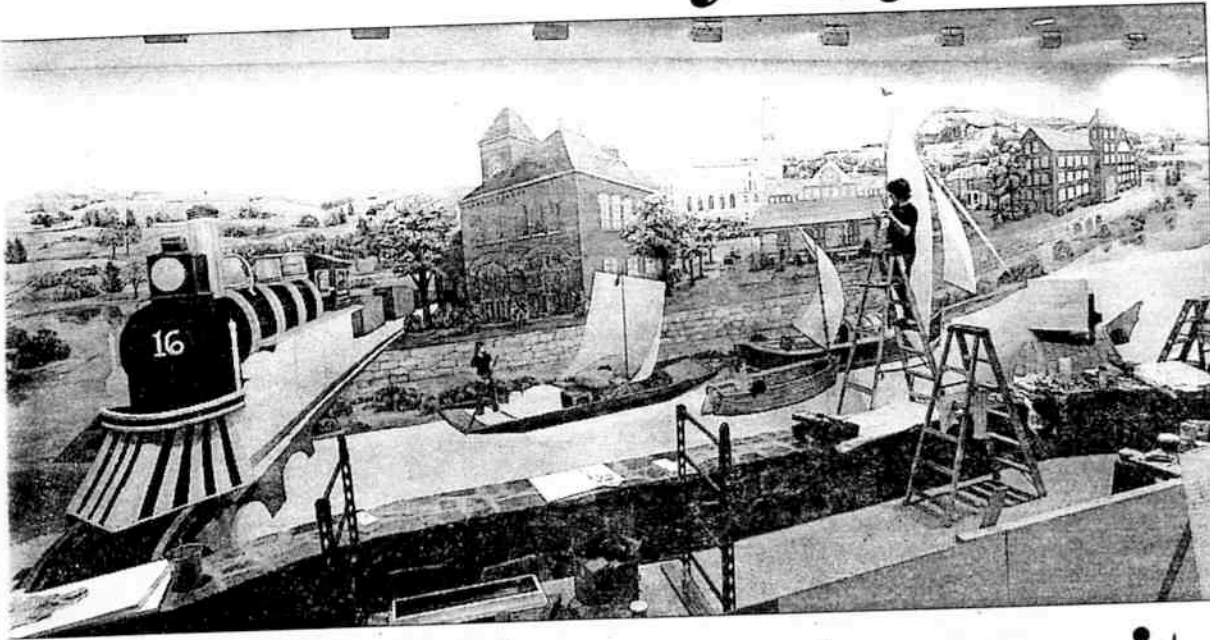


City Life



Standing high on a ladder, artist Mary Webster works on her mural outside of the Christmas Tree Shops in the Holyoke Mall. The mural depicts life in the Paper City in the early 1900's.

Staff photo by JOHN SUCHOCKI

Mural artist captures city's past

By KATHLEEN LITCHFIELD

Staff writer

Artist Mary Webster came to Holyoke about 10 weeks ago to learn the history of the Paper City.

Traveling from her hometown of Arlington, Webster said the closest she had ever come to Holyoke was to visit an old friend in Amherst. So when she arrived, she knew nothing of the Connecticut River and how it flows through the city's canals, lending life to Holyoke's businesses; how the turn-of-the-century railroad trains along the Hartford-Northampton line transported goods in and out of Holyoke along their tracks; or how the diverse ethnic makeup of the city and its neighborhoods has changed through the years.

But after visiting Paul Graves, of the Holyoke Public Library History Room, and Charlie Lotspeich, of the Heritage Park Visitors Center, Webster realized she had begun her educational journey into Holyoke's past.

Contracted by the Christmas Tree Shops, Webster was to adapt a design drawn up by Goodman Associates Architect Peter Schmid. The design depicted life in the Paper City in the early 1900's and Webster was to create a detailed mural of the city based on the design,

to adorn the Christmas Tree Shop's exterior walls inside the Holyoke Mall at Ingleside, she said.

Aside from extensively reading and researching in the library and at Heritage Park, Webster said she toured Holyoke, drove up and down its streets, talked to people around town and took lots of photographs to learn about the city.

She said she used her photographs for clarity a week later when she drew the detailed mural on paper, before she illustrated her drawing on the wall just outside the main entrance to the Christmas Tree Shops on the first floor of the mall.

"The hardest part was physically getting it onto the wall," Webster said, as she inspected her art work over a cup of coffee with a visitor recently.

The mural, spanning 65 feet across, is one of the largest projects Webster said she has ever undertaken. In order to draw the mural on the wall she said she divided her original paper drawing into grids, drew the grids to size on the wall with colored pencils and then transcribed her illustration, one square at a time.

"It took about a week," she said, adding that she and her assistants worked from midnight to 4.30 a.m. one morning.

"Then it was just refining and refining," she said. And she isn't exactly sure what details she will add before she's done.

"You have to sort of let it evolve. It gets a life of its own," she laughed, pointing out different sections of her work that she altered along the way.

The brightly colored and intricately detailed mural, painted mostly in acrylic and oil, features many aspects of Holyoke's history, beginning with an expanse of farmland where cows are seen peacefully grazing, "because the land originally was farmland before Holyoke was developed," Webster said.

Period sailboats glide over the Connecticut River (one carries Webster's deceased dog, "Ornery," who can be found painted in each of Webster's murals) while an old brick mill factory building is served by rushing water along one of Holyoke's canals.

In the description which stands on an easel and accompanies the mural, Webster wrote: "Water, which in art is often used to symbolize the flow of life, has been raised throughout the mural. It is the flow of the Connecticut River and the canals that powered the life of this city and generated its place in history."

A flat bottomed barge also

floats on the river, typical of those that would transport goods along the waterway, Webster said.

Also known for trans

goods in the early 1900's w railroads. A portrait of the American, a richly ornate

Please see Mall, Pa