

More Rikers Island Missing Mural Mystery!



HALLOWEEN 2019: Given this dateline, the emergence of yet additional and no less baffling Rikers Island missing mural mystery seems quite appropriate timing.

Indeed, the current case could be called the Visitation of the Ghost of the Missing Mural Past.

In 2005, also during the Halloween month, retired Deputy Warden James Larkin presented this website with a package of memorabilia from his 20-year DOC career that he had concluded in 1984.

Among the items was a 5x8-inch b&w print of the HDM mess hall, showing the mural and empty tables.

Larkin never saw the mural himself. It had been long gone by the time he was assigned to HDM in 1974. Later in the '70s, he was given the b&w print of the mess hall mural by a retiring veteran C.O.

Apparently, as Larkin best could determine after making inquiries, some warden or deputy warden decided on removing the WPA artwork in the early 1960s.

Above: The 20x70-foot WPA mural, "Man's Daily Bread" -- painted by major American artist Harold Lehman in 1936-38 -- is the focus of this section scanned from an 8x10 sepia photo of student visitors eating in the inmate mess hall of Rikers Island House of Detention for Men (HDM) April 7, 1961. Note scaffold, left.

HDM was originally the NYC Penitentiary and later designated the James A. Thomas Center, but is no longer used.

The scene was captured by Correction Officer/ DOC photographer Cecil Ramsey who, more than a decade later, gave the photo to a fellow officer, James Larkin.

The latter, now a retired Deputy Warden, sent it recently to the *CorrectionHistory.Org* webmaster to post on this website and to facilitate its inclusion in archives- museum space at the planned new training Academy.



The above enlargement of the far left side of the 1961 sepia 8x10 photo of the WPA mural in HDM mess hall clearly shows a mobile scaffold. But what was its purpose: to facilitate restoration or removal?

On a separate matter: No faces visible in the 1961 original photo were obscured. In an abundance of consideration for possible privacy concerns of persons in the scene 60 years ago, whether or not inmates, the webmaster partially obscured faces of persons in tieless open-collar shirts (that is, not in C.O. uniform nor dressed like a teacher).

This website's 2005 story about the 5x8 b&w print of the mess hall mural noted:

“Apparently the original wall surface was tile not suitable for a mural. Wooden panels had been anchored to it in order receive the canvas upon which the mural was created.

“To remove the mural, the canvas-covered wooden panels may have been taken down as intact units.

“Could they have been stored somewhere and forgotten? An intriguing question . . .

“One day in 1975, Harold Lehman returned to Rikers. He wanted to know how his mural had fared after approximately four decades.

He was interested in seeing its state of preservation and whether it needed any restoration.

“Only then did he learn that it had been pulled down about a dozen years or so earlier.”

The recent (October 2019) introduction of the 1961 sepia 8x10 photo adds more mystery to the already baffling enigma of the missing HDM mess hall mural.

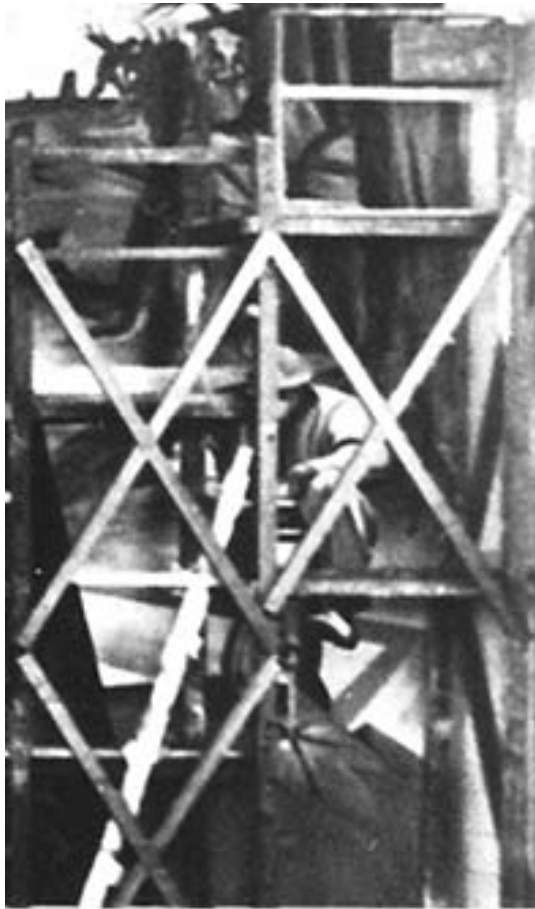
That's because close examination reveals the presence of a movable scaffold in front of the mural on its far left side.

Was it positioned there for the purpose of planning and then carrying out the dismantling and

removal of the huge canvas, which over the decades had gained national recognition; at least beyond Rikers razor wire?

From the mural, the artist had reproduced detailed sections which were shown and hailed in such venues the American Art Today exhibit at the 1939-40 World Fair, the National Society of Mural Painters and the Whitney Museum.

The Smithsonian National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., the Wolfsonian Foundation in Miami Beach, and other major collections acquired Lehman-reproduced detailed sections from his *Man's Daily Bread*, such as The Driller in the images shown right. Indeed, the latter detail became a labor icon.



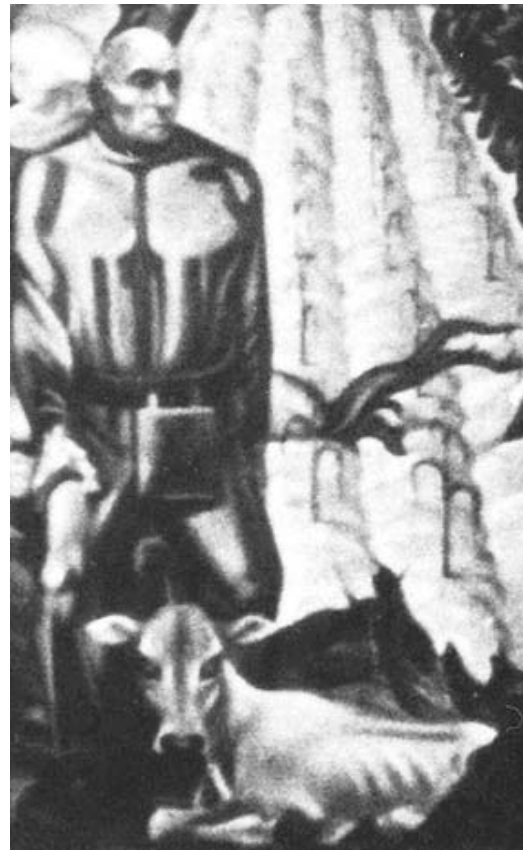
Above are enlargements of the far right sides of two Larkin-donated photos of HDM mess hall's mural painted by WPA artist Lehman. In the b&w one, a scaffold obstructs viewing the figure of a power drill operator. That detail is from the 5x8 b&w photo then Capt. Larkin was given in the 1970s by a retiring veteran C.O Charles J. Gulotta.

The above sepia right side detail from the 1961 8x10 photo given later in the 1970s to Larkin by its photo-taker, C.O. Cecil Ramsey, clearly shows The Driller. The full sepia 1961 version also includes a scaffold but one situated in front of the left side of the 20x70 foot canvas that had been mounted on wood panels affixed to the mess hall wall.

Comparing the scaffold image on this page with the one on the preceding page clearly reveals they are different both in design and materials. The webmaster believes the scaffold in the b&w photo may be used by the muralist in painting the original full length canvas or his subsequent section details. But the ultimate purposes of b&w and sepia photos scaffolds' constitute newly added mysteries surrounding the missing HDM WPA mural.



Scaffold on the left in the 1961 sepia 8x10 photo hides from view details visible in the much earlier b&w 5x8 photo.



On the top-of-page row 2 of those b&w photo detail sections show a man plowing behind 2 horses and a man seeding. Bottom row details depict co-workers, including a woman with a baby, and dustbowl famine. Ctrl-Click [here](#) for 15 detail sections from the b&w mural photo.