

Lyman Partridge White, “the Father of Brainerd”-oil painting...

Lost and found...twice!

Questions: What is it that is made as an important record of an important person in a town's history, then gets lost for two decades, then gets discovered, AND what if this all happens AGAIN but this time 86 years later?

Such is the strange story of a huge life-size oil painting of Lyman Partridge White, commonly known even more than a century ago as “Brainerd's First Citizen” and the “Father of Brainerd”. L.P. White came to Brainerd by stage at the age of 60 from Whiting, Vermont late in the summer of 1870 even before it was named Brainerd, then known only as “The Crossing” for lack of a better name, signifying the intended location of the crossing of the Mississippi river by the Northern Pacific Railroad, a bridge being completed in March of 1871. His father, for whom his hometown was named, was a soldier in the battle of Bunker Hill in the Revolutionary War. L.P. White was sent as an agent for the NP's Lake Superior and Puget Sound Company to make arrangements for platting a townsite here. With him, he brought his wife Jennie Knight, who was “the first white woman to enter Brainerd”. White built the 4th building in Brainerd, which was also the first frame private residence. This ambitious pioneer is to thank for being instrumental in the procurement of the “Central Park of Brainerd”, more commonly known as Gregory Square, or now Gregory Park. He also arranged for the donation of land for St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and in fact, built his house on the diagonal corner from it, a location at the time a long ways away from the rest of the fledgling town's buildings. Mr. White's accomplishments and contributions to Brainerd are a matter of record and would make an interesting story taking dozens of pages, but what about this oil painting?

In 2008 Marilyn Anderson of the Crow Wing County Historical Society (CWCHS) was going through some items that needed repairing at the museum in the way of carpentry work, most being large and odd-sized frames in disrepair. The inventory of items to go to the shop led us to the attic. My brother who was the intended carpenter was on hand to evaluate and assess the degree of work to be done. While poring through a crowded but neatly stacked row of huge frames I stumbled upon an oil painting devoid of a frame, just being loosely stretched on a dilapidated canvas. Since I have seen this familiar image many times before on any number of written and photographic histories of Brainerd, I was sure it was Lyman right there in front of me. Apparently, I let out a scream, and had to catch my breath! None of us could figure out why this painting was there, especially out of its frame and so vulnerable. We carefully sandwiched it back in between some other items, and continued our tour. Nearly done, we happened upon a HUGE, very ornate frame with stamped engravings, but missing its picture. Well, you guessed it, digging Lyman back out again and marrying the two pieces together it was apparent that the two fit like a glove and had “come back home”. The tour ended and the list was complete, but the budget had to leave Lyman in the attic for now.

A year later, in 2009, we revisited the not yet started repair project, and decided to do some chair repair and a half dozen frame refurbishes, but the sheer size of the oil painting was too costly to budget for full restoration, so we agreed to at least bring it to a professional framer to see if it could be re-stretched or backed and set back in its frame so it could once again be displayed in the museum there. In the meantime, I did some more research on L.P. White in the museum's research library and ran across an article dated June 23, 1922. It was done in preparation of that year's celebration of Brainerd's 50th anniversary. Eerily, the article is a near copy of the scenario related above, just 86 years later! It describes L.P. White's accomplishments but begs to speak of the real reason for the article. It seems that the White family gave the painting to the city some time after he died in 1902, and it was hung in the Council chamber of the then-new building, but “disappeared several years ago”. The writer of the article, the City Engineer, and the janitor found the missing portrait in the “dingy attic, among a lot of rubbish--discarded, abandoned. So soon we are forgotten”. It described a painting in good condition except for a previously repaired tear in the canvas, in need of repair once again. This tear is still there, the first repair attempt clearly visible, tape on the reverse side. There is a bit of paint missing in spots and the edges of the canvas that is tacked for stretching is in too poor of a condition to re-stretch without a new canvas relining. The colors however are strong but somewhat dark, and the artist and the date of 1886 are clearly visible in the corner. L.P. was a real estate agent, and in his hand one can see an abstract of title. He is seated in a very dignified pose, typical of the day. It should be noted that there were photos taken of the museum years ago when it was next door in the basement of the courthouse, and we see that the portrait was indeed there in its frame on display. So at least Lyman did spend some time on display “between attics”.

Back at the frame shop the technicians were apparently so taken with the beauty and history of the piece that they suggested it deserves more than a temporary rigid backing, especially since this is the SECOND time it's been "found". At 123 years old it could use some TLC! A proper restoration will, of course, be much more expensive, and the first step would be to send it to an accredited preservationist for evaluation and an estimate. Professional restoration would include new linen relining of the canvas with rabbit-skin glue. They will then "clean" the painting by removing the old varnish, which should lighten it and bring back some of its vibrancy, touching up areas where paint is missing, and re-varnishing. The entire canvas is then re-stretched onto new stretcher bars, and crated to be shipped back to Brainerd, where the painting will be fit into its original frame. This incredible frame is a sight to behold in itself, and some restoration work is being done on it as well.

It is now once again THIS writer's opinion that this should be the course taken. Here we have a local hidden treasure, a physical connection to our past, and the only tribute to this important city father. There is still much mystery connected with this painting, such as who commissioned it and why. And why was it relegated to the attic; perhaps because of the big rip at its base? Below is the 1922 writer's opinion, so you can decide for yourself what the future should be for the Father of Brainerd.

"The portrait should be taken care of for the credit of our city. We shall not attempt to explain how the portrait came to be in the attic; it is enough to know that it is there. We believe the good people of Brainerd will agree with us that this historical painting should be restored and given a prominent position in the city hall. Surely space could be found for it."



LEFT: Brainerd Dispatch photo, 1999



RIGHT: This is from an 1874 real estate publication



Lyman in the old courthouse museum basement.



2009: In the shop just to get it transportable!

Lyman P. White.

BRAINERD, Minn., Aug. 29.—Lyman P. White, the “Father of Brainerd,” and known to the Indians of Northern Minnesota as the “Big White Father,” died early to-day. He was born in Whiting, Vt., in 1811, and served several terms in the Legislature of that State.

The New York Times
1902

-Carl W. Faust, Dec. 21, 2009

NEWSFLASH, 8/19/2012:

It has just come to my attention that the long-awaited Lyman P. White oil painting restoration project has just gained funding and approval for its restoration! This has come in the form of a Minnesota Legacy Grant, and it will restore the oil painting to the tune of \$7000. This did not cover the frame restoration, and it was determined that a new frame could be purchased for less than full restoration of the old one. But, the CWCHS board decided that the old frame is so intricate, likely as old as the oil painting itself, and fitting with the theme that the two should NOT be separated. They have graciously approved funding for structural and cosmetic repair.

This should last many a decade, and is so fitting with what keepers of history do.

Lyman will now have a new home, which is available by a huge effort the Museum's staff has made to make more display space available. The “attic”, or third floor was only half used all these years, part for display, and part for storage, but moving out some un-displayed items to the fairgrounds, and lots of sorting and cleaning has made more display room. A temporary wall was removed, doubling the size of the room. This revealed a newly- exposed huge but gorgeous brick wall where Lyman will be prominently placed. He's still in an attic, now better named the “top floor” but will be “like new” at 126 years! It is the third and final floor on one's journey through the CWCHS Museum's wonderful tour through the county's history, through its logging days, then railroad era, and old and new resort era. This is all seen on a leisurely journey up easily-walked ramps, fully handicapped-accessible. Seeing Lyman will be like the pot at the end of the rainbow!

IMHO, when LPW finds his way back on that brick wall on the Museum's top floor, we need to have a huge ceremony, and unveiling, TV, and bring the mayor and Dispatch and have a photo shoot and champagne!!! Maybe a band. A fly-over!!! Fireworks..... Whoopie!

-CWF, 9/13/2012

Update, 9/1/2013:

Open House - "What's New at The Museum"

We're having an open house from 10-3 on Saturday, October 12th, 2013, where we will be **unveiling the restored portrait of Lyman P. White** (the "*Father of Brainerd*"), introducing the new "*Brainerd*" book authored by the Society, and highlighting other recent changes at the Museum.

For more information on Lyman P. White:

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=58319656>

The mystery of the Lyman P. White portrait, 1886

There are several questions surrounding the LP White painting. Here are some that are the most perplexing, but there are surely more!

-WHY was it painted? Was LP called the Father of Brainerd already in 1886, only 16 years after he arrived?

-Who commissioned it? Was it LP himself, or his wife, or the city of Brainerd?

-Why was it kept in an attic for so long?

-How did it get torn?

-Who is the artist, J. M. Jones? Was he a local artist, or one of those that traveled and did contract work?

Here is all I can find on this person's name, but no clue if it is the right one.

1888 BCD: Jones John, teamster, res 37 N 10th.

1903: No J. or J. M. Jones.

1920 BCD: Jones Jas M, carp, res 323 Vine st, (Minnie L)

Lyman P. White oil painting timeline:

1870: LPW arrives in Brainerd.

1886: 16 years later, the painting is completed. **But when was the painting done, and commissioned by whom, and WHY?**

1902: 39 years later, the White family gave the painting to the city some time after LP died in 1902.

1922/6/23: 20 years later, for Brainerd's 50th anniversary celebration, a newspaper article was done on the painting. "It was hung in the [City Hall's] Council chamber of the then new building, but disappeared several years ago. The writer of the article, the City Engineer, and the janitor found the missing portrait in the dingy attic, among a lot of rubbish--discarded, abandoned. So soon we are forgotten". The writer also quoted:

"The portrait should be taken care of for the credit of our city. We shall not attempt to explain how the portrait came to be in the attic; it is enough to know that it is there. We believe the good people of Brainerd will agree with us that this historical painting should be restored and given a prominent position in the city hall. Surely space could be found for it."

Remember, this talk of restoration was in 1922!

2008: 86 years later, the painting is found up in the county museum's attic, then its frame in another part of the room. At some point, however, it must have been found and brought to the county museum, which was then in the courthouse basement next door. Apparently, it was never displayed in this present museum building.

2009: The painting and frame is brought to a framer for evaluation, but later brought for a professional opinion, then stored in the Twin Cities waiting on funding for archival restoration.

2012, August: Funding was acquired for restoration of the painting alone.

2013/10/12: 127 years after the portrait was painted, you are now seeing history being made as this wonderful portrait is once again proudly displayed in a “**prominent position**”, for the public to enjoy!

-CWF, 10/12/2013