

Billy Beal holds his newest possession: The 1937 Harrisburg street scene painting by the artist Pennycent. (Photograph by Brian DeNeal)

Painting by Pennycent Returns

Billy Beal Has Piece of Harrisburg History Preserved in Paint

Brian DeNeal

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Billy Beal's Christmas gift to himself arrived a little later than expected on December 28, but he believes his painting was worth every bit of the wait.

The painting was entitled "WPA Street Scene" on the Internet auction site E-Bay. The artist was Pennycent and the date on the painting is June 20, 1937. The painting depicts a scene of downtown Harrisburg looking north across Poplar Street to Cherry Street from what is now Cherry Street Bar and Grill. In the distance, looms Harrisburg City Hall.

On the left side of the painting is the former Jake's Blue Ribbon Tavern with a sign on the window advertising hot fish for 10 cents. On the other side, across Cherry Street, is Turner's Furniture Store.

There are a few people on the street and a couple of pickup trucks parked on Cherry Street.

In the middle of the painting are two men walking, apparently engaged in a conversation. One is painted brown, the other is in blue, possibly a police officer in uniform.

A friend of Beal's found the painting on the auction site and immediately thought of him.

"Ginger Hayes called me one day and she said, 'you've got to get down here,'" Beal said.

Hayes had placed a bid on the painting being sold by a man in Greenport, New York, but the price became more than she was willing to pay.

Beal had the high bid when the auction closed, but the price was too low to satisfy the seller. Beal is hesitant to say how much he finally paid for the painting, but he believes it was worth the cost.

How the painting got to New York likely will never be known.

"(The seller) bought it at an art show in Long Island eight or nine years ago. Somebody may have had it when they moved to New York, Lord only knows," Beal said.

The painting is important to Beal for a few reasons.

"The reason I'm proud of this is, one, it's a Harrisburg street scene, not a particular house or anything, and another is I spent so many years in this building," Beal said.

He worked in the City Hall as a janitor for 22 years and is largely responsible for the display of old photographs of the city's past in the hallways.

The City Hall as depicted in the painting is exactly the same as it is today.

Beal has also had a long interest in the artist Pennycent, also known as Penny Cent and Penrod Centurion. He accepted mail addressed to Friederick Wilhelm Schmidt at the Herod Post Office.

Pennycent lived in Harrisburg for a few years and was an instructor at the College in the Hills near Karber's Ridge in Hardin County in 1934 and 1935. The College in the Hills operated as a kind of commune and school of mainly liberal arts until the building burned in 1938.

Beal looked in a 1941 Harrisburg City Directory and found a "Cent, Penny," renting at 103 No. McKinley St. at the Dorris residence.

Pennycent was educated in Switzerland and at the University of Berlin and received money from a Guggenheim Fellowship for his abstract art, Beal said.

Pennycent was well liked by many. He would regularly pay admission for boys to swim in the pool.

He had some peculiarities. Beal has learned about the man from people who knew him, such as Rollie Moore.

Pennycent was a vegetarian, Beal has learned, likely an odd trait for people of our county in the 1930s.

"He wore a T-shirt and shorts in zero weather riding a racer bike," Beal said.

Moore worked at Wimberly grocery in 1937 where Pennycent frequently shopped, Beal said.

Beal has copies of correspondence from Pennycent to the Harrisburg Chamber of Commerce regarding starting up a Workers Progress Association art center in Harrisburg. That project never came to fruition.

Pennycent spoke with a foreign accent, leading some to believe he was a communist and a German spy.

After the College in the Hills burned—or was burned, as many believe—Pennycent moved out of the area to New York City, Beal said.

What he did when in New York, no one seems to know for sure and it is not known when he died. It is possible he could even still be alive, though he would be close to 100 years old.

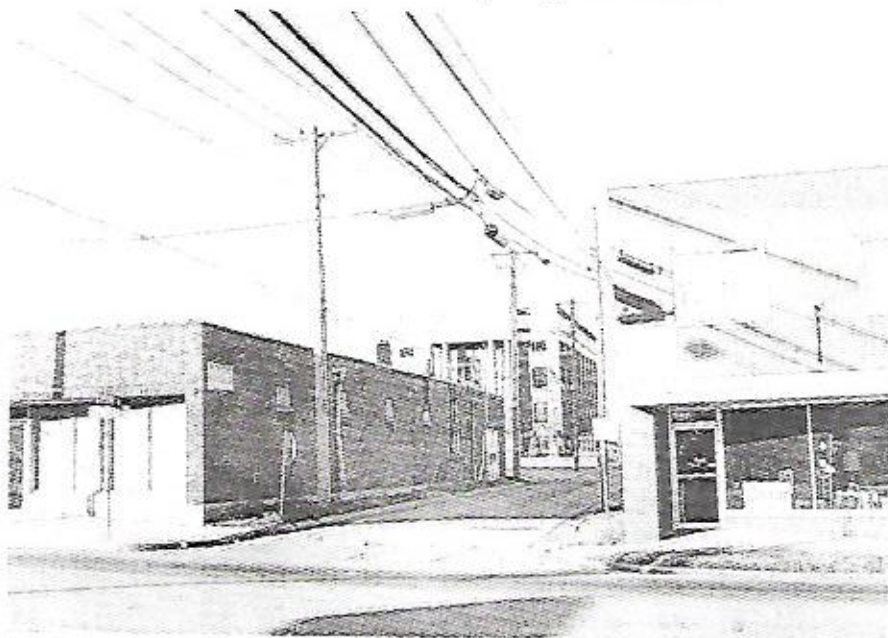
The Harrisburg street scene is Beal's only Pennycent original, but he has photographs of three other paintings: St. Joseph's Catholic Church of Elizabethtown, the "Hamp Farm" off of Karbers Ridge Road and "Rodney Johnson's old homestead" in Pope County.

The historian in Beal was pleased as he examined the framing of the painting.

Pennycent made his own frames and he used as backing for the painting a piece of a cardboard box from Harrisburg's former Gidcumb Furniture Store.

On the backing "cumb" and "arrisburg" are visible.

In the issue of February 2001, Springhouse ran a lengthy article about the College in the Hills, written by the late Fred Armstead. Photographs of Pennycent were part of that article.



The scene across Poplar Street to Cherry Street and Harrisburg City Hall is much unchanged since 1937. (Photograph of Brian DeNeal.)