

HISTORY TALK

FROM THE UPPER FLORIDA KEYS

Issue 13 HARRY SONNTAG EDITION Winter, 2002-03



- TABLE OF CONTENTS -

- Harry Sonntag, Key Largo Hermit - P. 227
- 1821 - The Log of HMS Kingfisher - Page 241
- British Navy at the Florida Keys - Page 242
- 1781 - Red Wrecker, Good Wrecker - Page 243
- 1798 - Luis Pardo's Suggested Settlements - P.243
- 1833 - Lighting Colonial Cove - Page 265
- 1838 - Second Seminole War - Page 244
- 1862 - Hurricanes - Page 245
- 1741 - More of Don Rodrigo de Torres - Page 242
- 1733 - Fleet of Salvage Ships - Page 266

- 1864 - Key West Rebels and Indian Key - P. 249
- 1865 - Miss. Newspaper Clippings - Page 258
- 1880 - The Eviction of Indian Key - Page 251

HARRY J. SONNTAG

THE HERMIT ARTIST OF

KEY LARGO

By Chuck Faulkner

Around 1980 Harry Sonntag moved up to the Florida Keys. He was born in New York City.

October 17th 1901. Henry was awarded an art or a painting stipend. At the age of 16 he attended the Free Art Institute, showing great talent and receiving excellent grades. He then moved on to the Art Students League where he studied from 1907 to 1908 and then again from 1922 to 1923 with George Bridgman, Louis Moore and Charles C. Chapman. Some time in the mid 1900's Henry left the main campus of his New York studio to a drearying farm.

Henry hit the road, wandering the United States and with painting, it was the love of his life! He traveled to the northeast, Vermont and New Hampshire and then headed out west to Arizona and California. The place where in the State of Washington was of particular interest to him. There he spent several months, possibly also to be close to family members. On the road again, he ended up in Devils Lake, Wisconsin, an area known for its lovely rolling hills. He spent a few years there painting again.

With little money and no one for it, Henry hit the road again heading his way down, south to Florida. Something, he knows not what, led him to the Florida Keys. He decided to settle in the Upper Keys and found a spot in Rock Harbor. He built a shack out of driftwood scraps and seagrass, which suited him just fine. This would be his new home and studio. It was located there not just north of the Mustang Marina. Henry started a garden, where he grew tomatoes and other vegetables. Being close to the water gave him good access to fish and other foods.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This publication is produced quarterly by the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, incorporated in the State of Florida on July 7, 1976. COPYRIGHT © 2001. A society newsletter is also mailed to members. Subscriptions are automatic with any membership listed below.

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Henry's Rock Harbor driftwood home.

from the sea, Harry was not.

The Keys were a new adventure for Seeming. He found not only the natural habitat to be fascinating, but also the brilliant murals and murals with colors never before imagined. He went right to work, skidding with colors he had never known. The destination took over and Harry never looked back, painting day in and day out.

Evenings brought plenty of occupations and hugs. He realized by keeping an open fire going he could cover his body with smoke and this would act as a natural repellent.

Seeming had his eye on an old abandoned key-impending shack, which stood up on US 1, and thought "a gallery?" Around 1951 he found out who owned the building and approached him. The owner said that he could use the building at no charge. Harry got busy. He made a large sign for the top of the building that read KAY LARSON ART GALLERY. He also made a large OPEN sign that he hung on the door. Harry was so focused He stayed busy painting to fill the gallery. The owner never was here.

His works were gallery, sitting between \$55 and \$65. In today's market that would be equivalent to \$500 to \$600. His prices weren't negotiable! If you didn't like his prices he would tell you to get out and leave the place." Sales were less because of his prices, but Harry didn't mind, he had plenty of food and fire now.

Harry Seeming was living his dream, doing what he loved best with no pressures from society. He kept a clear mind so he could focus on creating his beautiful works of art. "To me," Harry said, "this is Utopia."

He sold a few paintings here and there. Winter visitors would come to the gallery to visit and take photos of him engaged in his work in the old ramshackle building. Once back home they would have the film developed and send the photos back to him.

Among the other visitors were art students from the University of Miami. Lyda and Jim Hadley, a young couple attending the University, befriended Harry. They were fascinated with him and soon became friends. Lyda was taking an English course and Jim was taking photography. Lyda started writing a story about Harry called "Portrait Of An Artist." It would be completed in about 6-months time, Jim snapped away taking numerous photos of Seeming

in his gallery and around his little shanty home. It is believed that Lyda and Jim did some work for the Miami Daily News.

That's when the story broke, July 8, 1951 "Harry E. Seeming Lives For Art Alone" One of the photos that Jim had taken was with the article, showing Harry outside the gallery with a painting on an easel. The article gave his background and described his gallery. They quoted Seeming saying, "Art is the universal language, and my desire is to bring beauty to the multitude, so people may realize how lovely is this world." The KAY LARSON ART GALLERY was on the map!

Lyda and Jim continued to visit on the weekends. Lyda was still writing stories for her story, she was writing it for a creative writing course due in Dec. Jim was still shooting photos. In Dec. Lyda finished her story and submitted it for grading, it was a hell ringer. She got a 10 out of a possible 18. The story does a great job of depicting his life in the Keys.

Lyda writes about the first time they met Harry. They were walking up the shore beachcombing for driftwood when they suddenly came upon his clearing. They studied the odd looking man, who was bent over a log near a makeshift cabin. His hair was gray and bushy. As an anthropologist being them from its perch, they then heard a friendly greeting. "My name is Harry Seeming," he said, extending his hand. He wore a khaki shirt open to the waist, which showed a brown, mosquito-bitten chest. The biggest word present to be was being loudly above his sandaled feet. His art supplies lay on the deckings of the cabin. "Here's one and one's a while." They stood him immediately. He said he had studied at the Art Students League and the Pratt Art Institute but was unable to create anything, saying they copy one another and are influenced by each other's techniques. She also had written about the gallery that was always around, Harry referred to it as his garden spot. "I guess that old shed is my friend," he laughed. "Don't think that 'My only friend'" He said, "People around here treat me as if I were a lion." He had found a beautiful couch chair and had taken it up to the woman who ran the grocery store on the highway because he had heard she wanted one. She was afraid to take it. She thought he wanted money for it. "Hell, I don't have to beg for anything! I found a piece of copper the other

My cat eventually fell off the old boat, and told it for enough to keep me in coffee for two weeks. People just don't treat me, I guess."

One October morning a hurricane was approaching the Keys. Lyda and Jim had heard the advisory and rushed down to persuade Harry to come back with them. Harry said, "This is my place here, with nature, and nature will take care of me. The printer is not going to Miami, why should I?" He was determined to stay and they were convinced that nothing they could say would change his mind. The storm began to threaten. With heavy hearts they returned to Miami. The next day when they were returning, they were fearful of what they might find. The road was covered with debris and it was late afternoon before they reached the Key. The grocery store by the highway was a pile of rubble. They left their car and started down the mangrove toward the dock. Through the forest they could see the pelicans sitting on a rock basking in the sun. They thought that all winged creatures left the path of an approaching storm. Was Harry right? Was this his Queen's Angel? Coming to the clearing there he was eating fish. His dock stood as erect as ever, with only minimal damage! "We figured you were probably dead," Lyda commented. "Oh no, the old gal and I got soaked but the sun has dried us out."

Seating painted numerous names of the Key Harbor, including a few of the Mandate, Marine, and also Treasure with a place called "Harry's," which is near the Treasure Chest Station. In May 1974 the Miami Daily News published another article and then another in October 1974.

In 1975 the Florida Keys began to develop. We believe Seating was feeling the pressure. We're speculating the owner of the property sold it and told him he had to leave.

In the Spring of 2002 Mary and Jerry Williams were doing research at the Historical Landmark when they came across a puzzling article from the Historical News dated May 28, 1955. It had "Famous Art Gallery Destroyed By Fire Struck."⁷ It stated that the Key Largo Art Gallery had burnt to the ground. Seating said he had left the building around 7 pm. Friday evening. The entire contents of the building had been destroyed which had included Seating's life collection of manuscripts, poems, and paintings of Keys scenes. There was no

documented writing in the building and the cause of the fire was undetermined.

Harry Seating had simply disappeared.

In 1960, a vacationing couple from Kissimmee, Florida found a bag of abandoned art work under a bed in a rooming house on the island of St. Thomas. The owner had no interest and told them they could have it. Not realizing when they had the couple brought it back to Central Florida and put it in storage for over 30 years. In 1991, the woman was cleaning out her storage unit.

This is where I came into the picture. A friend and I stopped in when we noticed the woman clearing out a storage unit. We purchased some items from her and then she suggested we take this bag of art work with us. She told us how she and her late husband had found the bag in St. Thomas. Upon opening the bag we found 162 paintings, we realized that we had a large part of this artist's life, including photos, newspaper articles, and other effects.

After doing some research we discovered that Harry J. Seating had died in St. Petersburg in 1951, the year before we had discovered his collection, adding only to the mystery of the life of the famous artist of Key Largo. We believe that this is Seating's life's work and it was never destroyed by fire in 1955.

In Jan. 1998 The Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys honored Harry Seating as their monthly program. The local paper The Reporter had done a nice press release. We had a great turnout of about 100 people. Among the attendees was Don Chason former owner of Mary and Star's Restaurant, the late George Eager of Citrus Compressor and the late Jack Hill of Key Largo Fisheries. They were teenagers when Harry was around in the 50's. Chason said that he was one of a handful and visited up around. Hill said he had given him some grouped items and that he told him he didn't want any more as they were too strong of a narrative. He also talked about the way Seating would stand over the open fire and use the smoke to keep the mosquitoes off. George added that he watched Harry burn to display his art before he took over the Key Lime picking shack up on US 1. Memorabilia artist Millard White critiqued the watercolor paintings. Passing them through to images, saying things like "look at this power" and "see this strong use of brilliant color."

In the Spring of 2005, I had asked a long time

found. Ed O'Neil is help-prepare the opening collection. He agreed, and approached the new city hall building in Kalamazoo, Mich. They agreed to let us display four pieces of art and a history board on the fourth floor. An article was then published about the display in the *Ultimate Detroit*. Soon after we were contacted when a local woman-connected city hall claiming to have known Harry Fleming in the 1900's, We corresponded in touch with Lydia "Mom" Bradley and soon met with her. We could not believe our eyes. Lydia had proof photos of photos that her late husband Jim had taken. There were some of the photos mentioned earlier in the story, of Harry around his gallery and home. Lydia was really enthralled about what I was doing with the collection. She then presented me with the proof photos, also an original watercolor painting of the Bay Large Art Gallery, which Fleming had given to her in the 1900's. If that wasn't enough, she pulled out the story she had written in 1902 and presented that to me. Lydia really liked Harry's work. A few days later it presented her with 9 pieces of his work, and was looking forward to talking to her more. She was in the process of going out of town for a few weeks and didn't have a lot of time to talk. I thought I would talk to her when she got back. But unfortunately this was not meant to be. Lydia "Mom" Bradley passed away just 4 weeks later.