

# WPA mural a slice of history

At first glance, the old Post Office on Golden's 12th Street is fairly nondescript. As with many Works Progress Administration buildings, the architecture is primarily functional, save for a dash of art deco flourish — in this case, a rectangular cupola atop the roof.



**ROB  
WITWER**

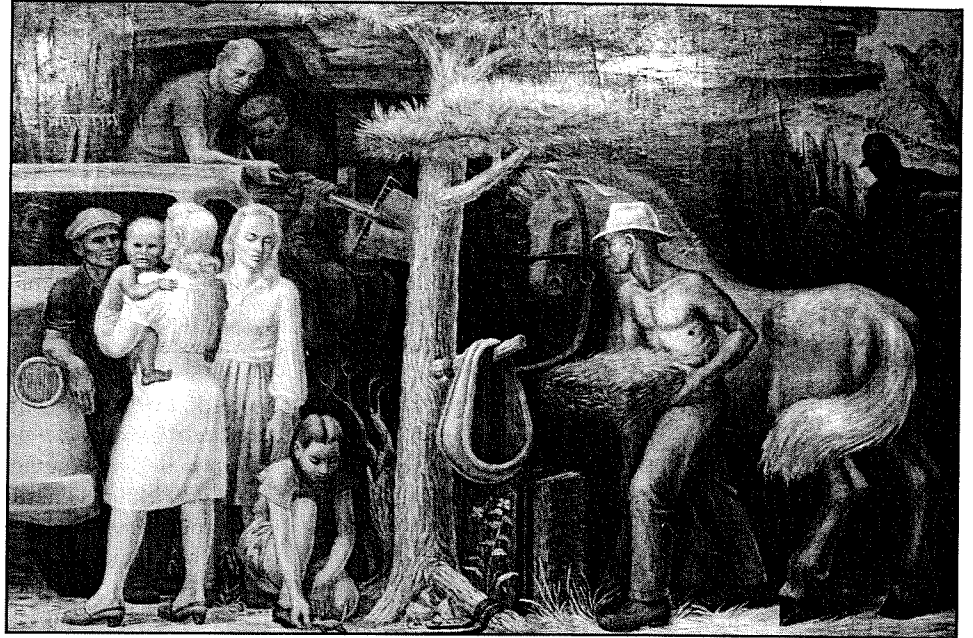
But it's what's inside that takes your breath away. As you enter through the front door, look up to your right and there you'll see it: a large, colorful mural overlooking the main lobby. It's a knockout.

The tempera and oil piece, "Building the New Road," depicts the building of a highway through the mountains beyond Golden. The accompanying text notes that the scene takes place just before lunchtime, as "some of the workmen are still busy and others have paused for a smoke or to talk to members of the family who have come to see the progress of this important project."

"Building the New Road" was painted in 1941 by a Colorado Springs man named Kenneth Evett. Although Evett would later gain international fame as an artist, he was young and unknown when chosen to paint the mural.

The Golden mural is one of thousands created for U.S. Post Offices during the Depression. In 1933, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiated the Public Works Arts Project. The purpose of the PWAP was twofold: to create jobs for artists and to provide artwork for communities. The Section on Fine Arts, which administered PWAP projects, selected Evett through an anonymous competition in the late 1930s.

Evett studied with Thomas Hart Benton, whose influence can be seen in the mural's



bold colors and naturalistic figures. Evett's representation of the construction project is at once everyday and heroic. An unfinished section of elevated highway looms triumphantly in a canyon of rock and dirt, surrounded by machines and men. There is also a gentleness here, as one worker chats with a woman holding a baby (the baby's face, I might add, is uncannily adult-like).

The heroic-industrial theme is common to WPA-era murals, but Evett's scene is nicely tempered with a few pastoral touches. At the bottom, a young girl stoops to feed a chipmunk beside a pink flower. The scene is about what one might expect from an artist who spent his first 23 summers in Estes Park, as Evett did.

After painting the mural, Evett's fame grew steadily. In 1954, he painted a series of murals in the Nebraska state capitol (my mom, who grew up in Lincoln, remembers that Evett's use of cubist elements caused quite a controversy at the time). Over the years, his paintings have

hung in the Whitney Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Corcoran Museum.

Evett, now 91, lives in Ithaca, N.Y. His career as a painter is over. Although he spent the last 60 years on the East Coast (30 of those teaching at Cornell University), Evett's roots are unmistakably Western. His wife, Betty, whom he met in Colorado Springs in 1936, puts it this way: he is still "a genuine Coloradoan."

That description — genuine — fits Evett's wonderful, and perhaps overlooked, tribute to the mountains west of Golden and those who made them accessible. Next time you're in downtown Golden, check out this one-of-a-kind piece of local artwork at 619 12th St. (just a block east of Washington). It's worth the time.

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*Rob Witwer grew up in Evergreen. He now lives in Genesee with his wife, Heather, and his two boys, Robby and Johnny. When not doing daddy things, Rob is a business lawyer.*