

Sara's Summer

By Jenna King

Sara dreamed about the paint set her parents promised her. For weeks she saved grocery bags, left over school papers and extra newsprint to paint on. Every day on her way home from school, Sara admired the paintings in the town art gallery. She imagined painting her first picture to show her classmates.

“Your artist is home!” Sara sang. She dropped her school pail on the floor and skipped to the kitchen table.

“Sara—um...your mother and I...uh...,” her father said and lowered his head.

“We’ll be moving into our store. We can’t pay the bank for both the house and the store anymore. I’m sorry honey, we can’t afford a paint set.” her mother said and hugged her.

Sara pushed away. Her stomach felt like an empty page. Her eyes flooded. “We can’t live in the store. It’s too small and it stinks like old fruits and vegetables.”

“It won’t be so bad,” her mother said. “The whole country is suffering. At least we still have a place to live.”

Sara stumbled outside and sank into her swing. She remembered the hardware store next to the art gallery had closed. Last week she had watched her best friend’s family move away to find work. She didn’t think it could happen to her family too.

The next morning, Sara trudged to their truck filled with household items. Her parents had sold all the extra furniture.

“It’ll be okay honey. We’ll make it through this.” Her father said. The next day he left to work in the fields.

“Why is he picking? He’s a buyer, not a migrant worker.” Sara said.

“Things are different now,” her mother said and waved as he drove away. “Your father can’t pay the growers to stock the store anymore. Our store is closing for a while. He’ll work in the fields until we can afford to stock our store again.”

Sara’s head throbbed. She closed her eyes and imagined painting. She stomped outside onto some fallen tree berries and noticed the berry juice stained her toes.

“Hmmm,” she muttered.

Sara raced back inside and grabbed her papers. She picked up a berry and dragged it across the paper. Bluish purple splashed before her eyes. She plucked a dandelion and squished it near the purple smear. Bright yellow glowed. Sara’s heart beat faster. She hurried to the wild grass by the fence and swooshed green on her paper. All day Sara collected her new treasures and arranged them on the table in the store.

“What’s this?” her mother asked.

“Watch,” Sara showed her mother the beautiful colors she made from nature.

“Well—looks like my artist is back,” her mother said and kissed her forehead.

Every spare moment Sara practiced her nature art. Her father brought spoiled fruits and vegetables from the picking fields for her to experiment with. Sara discovered cooked carrots made a light orange. Beets made pink and strawberries made red. Used coffee grounds made brown and charcoal pieces from the train station made black. Sara used sticks, leaves, feathers, and horsehair as paintbrushes.

In the summer, when the government supported Works Progress Administration came to town offering free art classes for children, Sara signed up. She learned many tips in her classes on becoming a better artist.

“Look Mother, a poster contest.” Sara announced after a painting class. “The winner gets a brand new paint set and art tablet! If I win, I can paint with REAL paint on REAL paper.”

A government supported Agricultural organization wanted a poster to remind Americans to not waste crops. Sara drew a sketch of her entry on newsprint with charcoal and used her nature collection to add color.

“How will I pay for the postage to mail it?” Sara asked.

“I’m selling an earring set to help pay this month’s bills. I’m sure I’ll have a few cents left over,” her mother said.

Sara camped by the radio until a winner was announced. “The first place winner in the Agricultural art poster contest is—Sara McCloud. Congratulations! Watch the mail for your prize.”

“I won! I won!” Sara squealed and danced around the store with her mother.

Two weeks later Sara ripped open the prize box. She held her paints in the air and spun around. She found a broken frame in the trash and painted it. Her father repaired it, placed her First Place certificate inside and hung it over her bed.

“I’m proud of you honey,” her father said.

Inspired by her new paints, Sara painted pictures for her neighbors. She painted them for the policemen, firemen and the mailman—everyone she met. Sara soon realized she missed her nature art. She pulled out her box of nature supplies. She used a combination of her new paints and nature materials to create a picture of their store as it had looked before the depression, when fruits and vegetables overflowed in the windows. She wrapped the picture in the comic’s section of an old newspaper and gave it to her father.

Her father proudly showed the picture to a wealthy field owner. He asked to buy the picture because it reminded him of happier times. With Sara's approval, her father sold her first piece of art for \$1.00.

"I worked a whole day picking in the fields to earn \$1.00," her father said. "You earned that painting one picture."

Sara painted all week and loaded her father's truck with pictures. Her father then sold them to farm owners and requests for Sara's art poured in. Buyers ordered paintings with a touch of her unique nature art worked into the scenery.

That fall, Sara and her father hung the 'Grand Opening' sign over their store. The extra income from Sara's paintings allowed her father to reopen the store after one summer.

"It's good to be back," her father said. "Sara, help me hang your pictures for sale above the fruits and vegetables. Your paintings will help us move into a new home in no time."

Author's Note:

Though Sara McCloud is a fictional character and her story is considered historical fiction, it is based on my studies of the government supported art projects during the Depression Era. The Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project kept artists employed and documented America's social and cultural history. Patriotic and Agricultural posters encouraged citizens to support the war and to not be wasteful of crops. Artist Maude Craig, also known as "the native artist," for painting pictures of joyful times during the depression's unhappiness and hardships inspired this story.