

SAVAGE COLLECTION

The Hawaiiana Ware collection, which features scenes from Eugene Savage's murals, is no longer available in stores but can be ordered through the Homer Laughlin China Company (800.452.4462). Savage's works can also be seen at www.hawaiian-art.net and www.aloha-cruz.com.



Tiki-chotchke

SAVAGE ART, TIKI CULTURE

by DAVE HOEKSTRA

The dusty country town of Covington, Indiana, has never been associated with tiny bubbles, big luaus or grass skirts swaying in the moonlight. Around these parts, a “tropical breeze” is something you might order at the North Side Pub on the town square. But Covington (pop. 2,600) is the birthplace of painter-sculptor Eugene Savage.

His life was a passage to adventure. Savage, who died in 1978 at the age of eighty-five, is enjoying a rebirth through tiki and Hawaiiana culture. Savage's 1930s air-brush illustrations were used for menu cover art in the dining rooms of the now-defunct Matson Lines Cruise Ships. Original Savage cruise line menus fetch between \$75 and \$200 on eBay. His mural-like menus employ vivid colors, whimsical faces and flowing lines that move to a high tide.

The Matson's luxury liner was the S.S. *Lurine*, which departed every two weeks from San Francisco to Honolulu via Los Angeles from the late 1940s to the late 1950s. Mothers and daughters took hula lessons on board. Shipboard guests included Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart and Amelia Earhart. When guests adjourned to the dining room, they ordered from menus that featured Savage's illustrations.

I own the Matson Lines ship menu from the evening of Wednesday, February 6, 1957. The menu is titled “Hawaii's Decisive Hour,” where Savage depicted cheerful natives and pristine doves along the balcony of Iolani Palace in Honolulu circa the early 1850s. During this period, the King of Hawaii sought a treaty with the United States providing for the admission of the islands as a state. (The treaty was never ratified.) Guests on board in February of 1957 were served Hawaiian opakapaka, broiled French lamb chops, Hawaiian poi cocktail and steamed Carolina rice, among other delights. I wish I had been there. Since I wasn't on board, I did the next best thing.

I drove to Covington to explore Savage's roots.

Covington, located about ten miles east of Danville, Illinois, is along the banks of the Wabash River, which might begin to explain Savage's affinity for water. Maybe. (Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben-Hur*, is also from Covington.)

Two of Savage's most resplendent murals appear at the entrance of the Fountain County courthouse in Covington. The panels were painted in the mid-1930s

by Savage in his New York studio and shipped to his hometown. The north wall mural is *The Disbursement of Tax Dollars*, an irreverent look at the way the government manages affairs. Savage painted his favorite Covington teacher Olive Coffeen into the mural. She is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for holding the longest teaching tenure at sixty-nine years.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the mural, Savage painted a naked woman, stripped of all earthly goods and held in bondage. The south wall mural is *The Receiver of Taxes*, which features a battered farmer with a pitchfork, a man brought down by so much debt that he is upside down and the tentacled greed of an octopus spilling loose change in the public till.

The Savage murals are painted on canvas. They are just two of several murals in the courthouse, all of which are painted on plaster. In 1937 Savage directed Covington-area artists to paint murals that would complement his work. The murals cover over 2,500 square feet of wall in the courthouse building, accented by Tennessee pink marble. No other courthouse in America has a greater percentage of public murals. The courthouse murals were done in conjunction with the Public Works Administration—not the WPA (Works Progress Administration.) Savage also painted a mural at the Elks National Memorial, 2750 North Lakeview in Chicago, and the Stewart Center at Purdue University.

Nancy J. Wagner was coordinator of a 1999 courthouse mural restoration project conducted by the Indianapolis Museum of Art. She is Covington's foremost Savage expert. Quite appropriately, she is also an interior designer. “Well, they call me ‘Mrs. Courthouse Murals,’” Wagner quips during a courthouse tour. “I did grant writing and helped with the restoration. When the conservators from Indianapolis came here, they literally took Q-tips with cleaner to his murals. They were getting blackened. It cost us about \$25,000 apiece to have them cleaned.”

Savage was born on March 29, 1883, in Covington,

and reared in a brick home at the corner of Sixth and Crockett. His father Hardy was a successful businessman, and his mother Ann Weldon Savage was a musician who conducted the local choir. In an autobiographical sketch dated April 1, 1925, from New York City, Savage wrote, "The masses of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart probably provided that in the plastic arts I should become a fundamentalist." Hardy died in 1886, and in 1899 the family moved to Washington, D.C., where Savage attended Gonzaga College, a preparatory school for Georgetown University. He also studied at the Corcoran Art School in Washington, D.C., but when Ann Weldon Savage died in 1990, Savage, his two brothers and sister returned to Covington.

In 1901 Savage found work as a commercial artist in Chicago. At night he attended the Art Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. While in Chicago, the busy artist found time to marry physician Matilda Freitag. They had one daughter, Dorothy Ann, and two grandchildren. At one point, Wagner was corresponding with Dorothy Ann, but recent letters have been returned. In 1912 Savage was awarded the Prix de Rome, a three-year fellowship to study at the American Academy in Rome. In 1915 he received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the academy.

Savage realized his artistic voice in Rome, absorbing historic figures that he adapted for the classic style needed for traditional mural painting. For Matson, Savage produced four-foot-by-eight-foot murals that went into the basement of company headquarters at 215 Market Street in San Francisco. The murals were never used in the building, the Matson-owned Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, or on ships. (When World War II broke out, Matson ships were requisitioned as U.S. transport ships.) The Savage murals finally debuted as six menu covers on the maiden voyage of the refurbished "White Ship" *Lurline* in 1948. In 1951 Savage's menu designs were included in a display of American lithographs at the Smithsonian Institution.

Savage was appointed William Leffingwell Professor of Painting at Yale University, where he served on the faculty from 1923-1958. He became Professor Emeritus in 1968. Savage also was appointed as a member of the commission of Fine Arts for Painting by President Herbert Hoover and was reappointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. But Savage's menus had become so popular that Matson produced a line of six prints for purchase. Mauna Kea Galleries in Kamuela, Hawaii (www.maunakeagalleries.com/menu-all.html), reports that over a quarter of a million sets of Savage menus were printed as blanks or as actual menus.

Chicago artist David "Duke" Carter is one of the Midwest's leading authorities on tiki/Hawaiiana culture. He is the author of *Tiki Quest: Collecting the Exotic Past* (www.pegboardchicago.com), and discovered Savage through cruise-ship menus. He also discovered a rare Savage print called *Festival of the Sea* hanging on a wall at the Chef Shangri-La Restaurant, Des Plaines Avenue and 26th Street in North Riverside. The print depicts a traditional Hawaiian "Hukilau" fishing party. A resident of the Covington area sold the print to Chef owner Paul Fong.

"There's a crossover between the tiki crowd and the Hawaiiana crowd," Carter explains. "The Hawaiiana crowd is a little more lofty. They're into authentic stuff, and think the tiki stuff is too campy. They're collecting fine art and design. Tiki people like that, but they also embrace fake Hawaiian. Tiki collectors know a great deal of all South Pacific cultures and traditions. But Savage is big with Hawaiiana collectors, mostly for those menus." In 1999, The Homer Laughlin China Co. produced a series of Hawaiiana Ware featuring scenes from Savage's murals. His *Festival of the Sea* was featured as a themed place setting of dinner plate, salad plate, bowl, cup and saucer.

So far, Covington hasn't been overrun with a wave of tiki and Hawaiiana enthusiasts. "I didn't know about the menus," Wagner says. "But I know that lots of things are cyclical. Everything that is old is new again, so the fact he's getting popular again doesn't surprise me."

"There's a crossover between the tiki crowd and the Hawaiiana crowd. The Hawaiiana crowd is a little more lofty. They're into authentic stuff, and think the tiki stuff is too campy. They're collecting fine art and design. Tiki people like that, but they also embrace fake Hawaiian."

— DAVID "DUKE" CARTER



GO NOSE-TO-NOSE

with all 31 bears in our outdoor art exhibit. You'll have as much fun hunting for your favorite designs as soaking up the sun on our sandy beaches (rated among the top 10 in the U.S. by Parents Magazine!)

MAY 26 - OCTOBER 22, 2006



**For a free guide, visit:
St. Joseph Today Welcome Center**

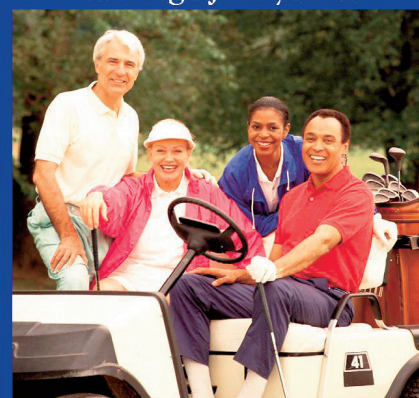
120 State Street
St. Joseph, MI 49085
(269) 985-1111
Email: info@sjtoday.org
www.beachbears.org

What are you doing this weekend?

Playing around with a mop and bucket, cleaning house?
Or playing a round or two with your golf partners?

Call in our foursome.

Then go join yours.



Summer's too short to spend it cleaning.

So call in The Maids! Our 4-person teams are bonded, insured, uniformed, highly trained, and fully supplied with state-of-the-art products and equipment.

We hold ourselves to the highest standards of quality and consistency, and pay attention to the details that others miss. We'll give you the healthiest, most thorough cleaning that you've ever experienced.

Then we'll come back and do it again. We follow all 22 steps of our Healthy Touch® Deep Cleaning System every time and we guarantee your satisfaction..

The Maids Home Services

(219) 791-0887 or (877) 720-0887

www.maids.com