

Irwin Caplan

by Lee Micklin

Sixty-five years ago a talented 17 year-old Garfield High School student took his art teacher up on the suggestion that he paint a mural around the room, a large rectangular space with long walls, about the size of two classrooms. While other students worked on their assignments, this student perched on a ladder above the blackboards painting a circus - trapeze artists, lions and lion tamers, a bearded lady, stallions and elephants... Decades later the circus is still in town, but for how much longer? As Garfield is slated for renovation in 2003, the fate of the murals is uncertain.

Last month (June 2003) the King County Landmarks Commission heard testimony of the historic significance of the 1937 murals painted by Irwin Caplan in his senior year at Garfield High. Testimony was part of a larger process, to consider Garfield High School for Landmark Preservation status.

Garfield's \$60.9 million renovation project will begin in June 2003 and be completed in the Fall of 2009. Historic preservation regulations will set limitations on design and construction. The site-based design team, made up of Garfield staff, students and community members, will advocate for an environment conducive to 21st century learning. Currently, halls are dangerously crowded and classrooms are tiny, with little more than room for students and desks. Some recommend gutting the interior of the building and leaving only the historic facades.

Irwin Caplan's murals are in two third floor classrooms. In addition to the four walls of circus murals, one wall in a neighboring classroom holds a mural of Paul Bunyan and his Blue Ox. Recently, Caplan, 84, made a visit to Garfield to view the murals: "I was very surprised; I didn't think they would stay in as good condition and have as much impact as they actually have. One story I remember from painting them was using a "flit" gun. We didn't have air-brush in those days and there was a lot of area to be covered. A flit gun is used to spray insecticide but I dumped the insecticide out and used it to spray color. It had a pump action and a little bucket that hung suspended along the tube. I painted during art periods, spraying away, and the kids in the class, when they sneezed, they would sneeze in color."

It was not just Garfield High teachers who recognized Irwin "Cap" Caplan's artistry with pen and brush. Cap served in the United States Armed Forces during World War II. He began in the Tank Force and advanced to the Army Intelligence art department. A simple comment made by an editorial artist from the Signal Corps sent Cap to New York after his military service. Watching Caplan casually draw a cartoon, the man leaned over and said "You know you can sell that stuff." Cap took his suggestion and sold it to *Colliers*, one of the premier magazines of the era. In New York Caplan distinguished himself as one of the most successful cartoonists in the country. Besides *Colliers*, he was a frequent contributor to *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *Parade*, *Liberty*, *Esquire*. He had two nationally syndicated cartoons, "Famous Last Words" and "48 States of Mind." He has received the National Cartoonist Society award twice.

Caplan returned to Seattle and married Madeline Tobin in 1949. They raised a family of three children (and now five grandchildren) and he established himself as a commercial illustrator. In addition, Caplan taught Graphic Design at the University of Washington and at Seattle Central Community College.

Caplan's signature "thick and thin" style of illustration was recognizable throughout the Northwest in his illustrations for such accounts as the Pacific Northwest Bell Telephone, Bardahl, and the Mutual Life Insurance Company. Other projects included the 1962 Seattle World's Fair Alaska Pavillion, Art Director for Spokane's Expo '74, and illustrator for the Seattle World's Fair poster sponsored by the Frederick & Nelson Department Store. In addition, Caplan's fine art paintings have been shown nationally at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and The National Gallery in Washington, D.C. They are in the permanent collections of many museums, including the Seattle Art Museum and the Henry Gallery.

Irwin Caplan's murals, besides delighting generations of students at Garfield High School for over 65 years, meet the criteria for King County Landmark status. Possessing an unarguable integrity of design and workmanship, they are clearly "associated with the life of a person significant in national, state, or local history."