



Artists working at the Western Museum Laboratories facility on 45th and Horton in Emeryville, CA, April 1940

INTRODUCTION



Between 1935 and 1943, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project's poster division produced more than 35,000 poster designs, with a total production of about 2,000,000 posters.

Only 2,000 of these prints have survived; just one tenth of one percent. Assuming some of the surviving prints are duplicates, at the very minimum, 33,000 poster designs and 99.9 percent of the WPA poster art has been lost forever.

These posters were conceived during the Great Depression to motivate Americans to travel, read books, exercise, and stay healthy, in addition to thousands of other subjects. They were not for sale. Between 1938 and 1941, the National Park Service (NPS) commissioned a set of posters to promote travel to their parks. These were not just any posters, but were beautifully crafted by WPA artists and printed by hand in Berkeley, California, using the silk screen process. The onset of WWII derailed the project, however, and only fourteen parks received prints. Approximately one hundred copies of each design were produced for a total of about 1,400 prints. Today only forty prints have been located. The rarity of these prints prompted me to spend a good deal of my working life searching for the missing pieces of this national park poster set, acquiring them, and putting them back in the public domain before they disappeared for good.

It all began with a discovery in Grand Teton National Park where I worked as a seasonal ranger in the early 1970s. Each fall, the park held a clean-up day where everyone, from the superintendent on down, pitched in to clean up the park and haul junk to the park dump.

(above) Ranger Doug's CCC-built cabin at Beaver Creek where he lived while working as a seasonal ranger in Grand Teton National Park in the 1970s



The Beaver Creek Barn in Grand Teton National Park where the Jenny Lake poster was found

My supervisor and I were assigned the Beaver Creek Barn, a musty old building built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) thirty years earlier that was full of useless relics of the past, including a poster stuffed up on a support beam. I pulled down the poster, which was screen printed on heavy cardboard, and it greeted me with, “Meet the Ranger Naturalist at Jenny Lake Museum.” I was a Jenny Lake Ranger and, out of curiosity, I took it outside in the daylight, dusted it off, and realized this poster had a story to tell. My first thought was that there must be others. My next thought was that it wasn’t going to the park dump. Instead, it went back to my cabin at Jenny Lake and hung on my wall. And thus began my quest for the WPA poster art of our national parks.

Delving Into History

It was not an easy task. First, I had to figure out how expansive this national park poster set was, if it existed at all. After all, I had only one print in my hand. This search took me twenty years and yielded only thirteen black-and-white negatives. I made full-size prints from these negatives and then attempted to trace each gray layer of these photographs, which would become the future colors in the silk screen process. I hired help. Stencils—or screens—were made from these tracings, and finally we had to fit them together. Colors had to balance and the design had to make sense. Did the sky and lake share one screen? Which shadows fit where? This process—tracing and printing around one hundred screens—took about five years and was funded through sales of the reproductions.

I am not an historian, nor an artist per se. I am a retired dentist. I’ve always thought that dentists were artists—more specifically, a cross between surgeons and jewelers. I do understand good composition and color balance; I spent thirty-five years hand coloring porcelain crowns and rebuilding smiles. I became good at this, and it was one of the most enjoyable aspects of dentistry. Restoring these posters from old black-and-white photographs was another one of life’s rewards for me and involved similar skills.

After republishing the historical prints, two things happened. First, parks that didn’t commission posters in the 1930s wanted contemporary versions fitting this style. I was happy to oblige and got into the publishing business alongside my dentistry practice. Second, original prints began turning up, revealing their true colors for the first time. As of this printing, I’ve located twelve of the fourteen national park designs and a total of forty copies. Some were hidden away in Park Service file drawers, some in attics and garages. Two were purloined from the artist’s estate by someone impersonating me. These two rare survivors disappeared for nineteen years, but are now in the NPS History Collection (HFCA) Archives. You can read about that story in Chapter Two.

For the contemporary designs, I first followed the WPA artists’ methods, working by pen and brush, but this process was time-consuming and cumbersome. And frankly, I can’t draw a stick figure. I then hired artists with computers and powerful software, and the process began to unfold. One of the most difficult hurdles was marketing this idea to park bookstores with competitive prices that could still allow the silk screen process to flourish. Screen prints were expensive to produce, but I wanted to faithfully reproduce these as the WPA artists did. I was in the low end of the art market, not the high end of the poster market. I was also competing with modern-day, on-demand printers (and still am).

Today, I work closely with a computer graphic artist and screen printers whom you’ll meet at the end of this book. We have now produced about forty additional national park and monument screen printed posters, and this book presents each of them. This is the story of a personal journey that took me across America many times, visiting hundreds upon hundreds of junk stores and antique shops, and nearly two hundred national parks and monuments and their surrounding communities.

Finding this “lost art” became an obsession. Twelve of these fourteen prints are now back in the public domain. Two posters—Wind Cave and Great Smoky Mountains—have never been found; only crude photos survive. One print slipped through my fingers at auction—an only copy of Yosemite National Park—and sold to a private collector. It took ten years to find it, and another five years of communication with the owner, who graciously donated it to the NPS History Collection (HFCA) in July 2022 to join the other originals.

This book is divided into eight chapters. In Chapter 1, I present a brief history of the WPA, CCC, and the Western Museum Laboratories (WML), which not only printed the posters but also created most of the relief maps, dioramas, and museum exhibits in our western parks.

Chapter 2 takes you through the chronology of the printing of the fourteen original designs at the WML. Most of the artists, craftsmen, and craftswomen were not allowed to take artistic credit for their work and so remain anonymous. However, subtle clues, like initials scratched into the screens, emerged under the hand lens. With the advent of the internet, information from distant attics began to find me. Photos, and even original prints, began to surface—reverse discoveries that gave colors and life to the drab black-and-white negatives. Gradually I collected pieces of this puzzle, and am now able to assemble most of it fifty years after finding the Jenny Lake print in the Beaver Creek Barn.

Chapters 3 through 7 each contain eight designs in the approximate order in which I first published them. I delve into where the ideas came from, how the designs developed with input from the parks, how we overcame challenges, and how we reached the final designs. I share several iterations of our posters and some of the pitfalls we encountered. By the end of this section, you'll be able to make your own WPA poster.

In Chapter 8, I take you through the Department of the Interior (DOI) Museum's exhibition held in 2014–15. After the exhibition and during the NPS Centennial, I gathered up the exhibits, put them in the back seat of my car, and hit the road towing a 1948 Airstream. My travels took me more than 44,000 miles over 15 months, visiting nearly 200 NPS units and giving numerous presentations. In 2018, I was invited back to the Yates Auditorium at the DOI for one final presentation and donation ceremony.

In the acknowledgments, I introduce you to everyone who made this art happen. Poster art is more than an artist, but also the screen printers who craft each poster by hand. This time around, their names will not be lost to history.



The original poster found in the Beaver Creek barn