



NEBRASKA'S POST OFFICE MURALS

BORN *of the* DEPRESSION, FOSTERED *by the* NEW DEAL | By L. ROBERT PUSCHENDORF

Here is a sample of what you'll find in *Nebraska's Post Office Murals*. The book sells for \$29.95. Contact the Nebraska State Historical Society's Landmark Store at 1-800-833-6747, 402-471-3447.

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ALBION

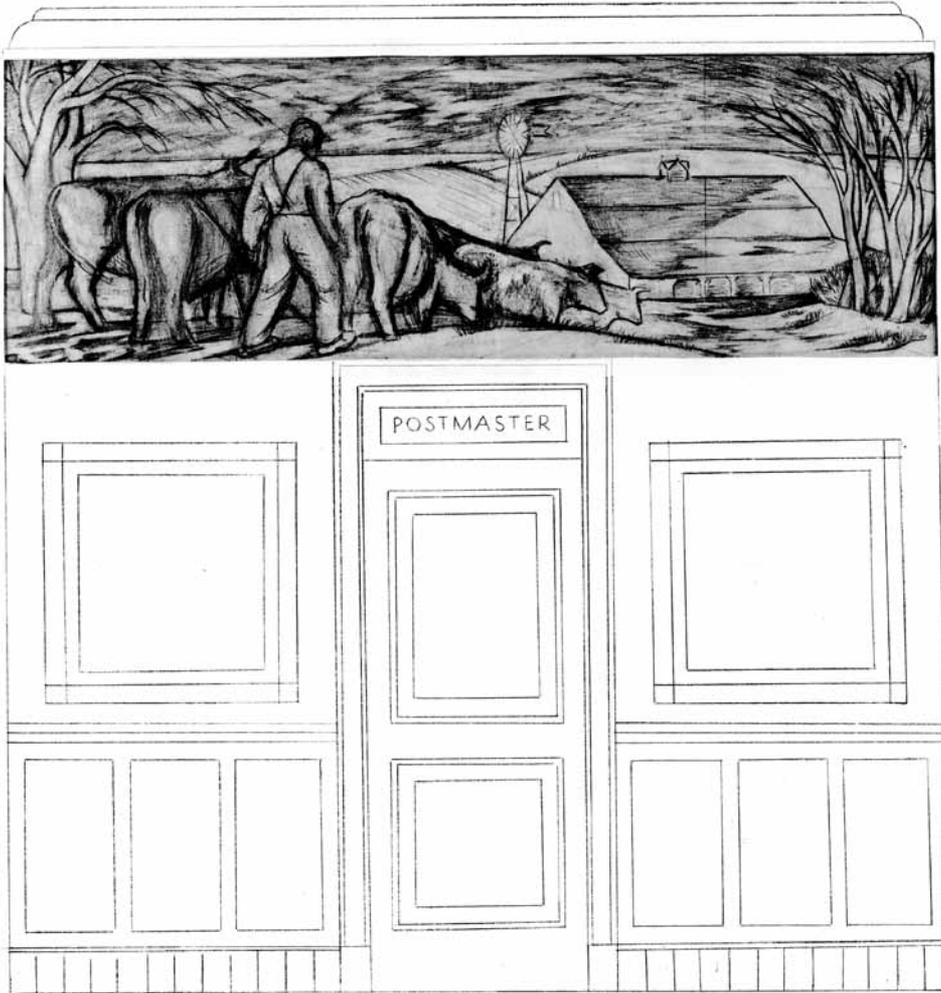
Jenne Magafan (1916–52) | *Winter in Nebraska*

1939, OIL ON CANVAS

Jenne Magafan selected a local agricultural theme, an excellent example of the American Scene. Dominated by hues of gray, the mural evokes a cold winter evening, reading from left to right, with the farmer placed in the foreground, herding his cows toward the barn in the immediate background. In the distance is a snow-covered landscape with contours of corn rows. Blustery clouds fill the sky, and the image is framed on both sides with barren trees. Magafan prepared a mixture of varnish crystals, turpentine, and beeswax to give it a matte finish.

The Section invited Magafan to submit designs for the Albion post office based on her previous work. After traveling to the area, she submitted two subjects, one of pioneers building a sod house and another of a Nebraska landscape in winter. The Section selected the winter scene, with Rowan writing that “this possesses an extremely handsome rhythm which was not lost on us.” But when Magafan submitted her two-inch-scale color sketch, Rowan, in a typical critique, raised the question of the left side of the barn, which “does not convincingly take its place in space. It seems to come up into the middle distance from the foreground . . . The general color, however, of the design and its various elements is most commendable.”⁴ After Magafan submitted a photograph of her full-sized





MURAL SKETCH FOR ALBION, NEB. P.O.
"WINTER IN NEBRASKA"

JENNE MAGAFAN
24 88 P.S.

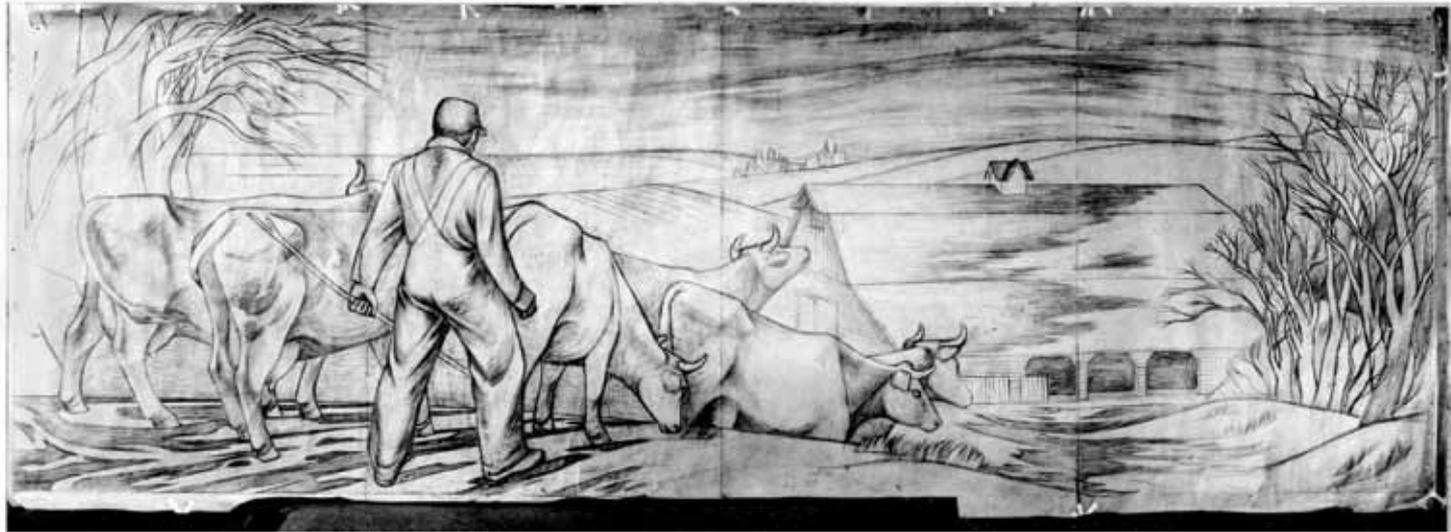
Jenne Magafan's sketch for the Albion mural.

cartoon, Rowan authorized her to proceed and released the second installment of the \$670 contract. However, he suggested that she “check the drawing of the hind quarters of the second cow to the left. The leg seems somewhat heavy in the middle.” After seeing a photograph of the completed work, Rowan praised it as “quite handsome in quality.”⁵

Accompanied by her twin sister Ethel and fellow student (and future husband) Edward Chavez, Magafan installed the mural during a “very swell trip” to Nebraska. She was pleased with the community’s response. “They were terribly interested and enthusiastic with the idea of having a mural in their town. There was also the feeling that it was a great privilege that Washington should choose to give them a mural.” But after a picture of her work was reproduced in the *Omaha World-Herald* it spurred an editorial attributed to “Cactus Ike,” an anonymous and folksy writer: “I figure this no doubt is a right nice bit of art . . . and she sure made it look right chilly with the sky full of dark, blusterin’ clouds and the wind blowin’ the tree branches around and the ground covered with snow . . . but the young lady evidently overlooked the fact that out here in Nebraska when it really gets cold the farmers keep on bein’ farmers by wearing more than a pair of suspenders over their shoulders.” According to the Albion postmaster, local residents shared Cactus Ike’s opinion.⁶ The Section, however, was so pleased with the mural that they asked Magafan if they could use her cartoon for an exhibition of mural studies at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.

JENNE AND ETHEL MAGAFAN were first exposed to art by an inspiring teacher, Miss Helen Perry, at Denver’s East High School. She was so impressed with their talent that she paid the twins’ tuition to study with Frank Mechau at his School of Modern Art in Denver. In 1936 Jenne and her sister followed Mechau to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center when he became an instructor there.⁷ The sisters assisted with his mural for the Colorado Springs post office, among others. Jenne also trained under Peppino Mangravite while at the center.

Magafan’s murals included a collaboration with Edward Chavez for the Glenwood Springs, Colorado, post office, a TRAP commission done under the supervision of Frank Mechau. For the Section, she painted post office murals in Anson, Texas, and Helper,



Full-sized cartoon of the Albion mural. Rowan suggested that Magafan “check the drawing of the hind quarters of the second cow to the left.”

Utah — the latter being awarded under the 48 States Competition. In all, the Magafan twins completed seven post office murals for the Section and collaborated on another mural for the Social Security Building in Washington, D.C. She settled in Woodstock, New York, where she shared her artistic endeavors with husband Edward Chavez. The twins traveled the Mediterranean in 1951–52 after Ethel Magafan and Edward Chavez received Fulbright scholarships to study overseas. Less than a week after their return, Jenne died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of thirty-six.

