Individuals in Community
+ By David Rhodes

People living in modern urban areas often assume that rural and small town communities—especially in earlier times—had little tolerance for individuality and that conformity reigned with a heavy hand. And while this may have been true in some cases, it fails to acknowledge the need those communities had for information sharing and providing their own entertainment. Rural areas did not demand conformity nearly as much as civility. Local gathering places served as social health centers, counteracting loneliness and isolation. Diverse talents were encouraged, and storytellers, comedians, musicians, public speakers, dancers, puppeteers, dramatists, weavers, quilt makers, craft makers, wood-carvers, poets, writers, and artists often flourished within these relatively out-of-the-way populations. When community events were held, people turned out and enthusiastically supported each other. Churches held community potlucks, concerts, and sing-alongs. Sports teams competed with teams from neighboring towns. General stores and other places of business daily witnessed the spontaneous formation of social groups. Clubs and organizations of all kinds provided important outlets, and often made their buildings available for other community events.

One such building was the hall encasing “The Painted Forest.” It currently sits on a little rise of ground at the edge of Valton, Wisconsin, an unincorporated rural village of several dozen homes, two churches, one graveyard, and a shrinking population, located in the middle of Wisconsin’s Driftless region, about an hour’s drive from the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi rivers. Inside its open hall, a treasure trove of painted scenes and wildly conceived images cover the walls and ceiling, depicting real and imagined activities of the building’s once-upon-a-time owners, an organization called the Modern Woodmen of America. Dark pines grow up the walls and stretch into the ceiling. Figures in blue and white uniforms march with symbolic axes, perform an initiation, fell trees, sit around a bonfire, and build a log home. Also depicted are characters in symbolic costume, a distant castle, and a scene of future (and, sadly, unrealized) prosperity for the little town.

The mural was designed and completed by Ernest Hüpeden, an itinerant artist who wandered into the area in 1898—at about the time the Woodmen’s new lodge was being completed. A German immigrant, Hüpeden was apparently hired to adorn the hall with scenes and iconography in keeping with the fraternal order’s activities and purpose, including the sale of life insurance to members (an innovation at a time when actuarial science and risk management were unfamiliar concepts).

Little is known about Hüpeden. He entered the U.S. in 1878 and was likely in his mid-forties when he arrived in Valton. Apparently an alcoholic, Hüpeden worked on the mural for most of two years. Afterwards, he remained in the general area for a decade, wandering from bed to bed. In exchange for lodging, meals, clothing, and whiskey, he painted colorful images and scenes on bottles, plates, boards, tar paper, trunks, mattress ticking, plastered surfaces, and canvas. As later recalled by a local farmer, he was “a friendly
man who mostly lived out of a paper sack.” On December 8, 1911, Hüpeden was found frozen to death and subsequently buried in a pauper’s field in Richland Center.

The preservation of The Painted Forest is credited to the Kohler Foundation’s restoration efforts in the early 1980s. Yet there were others—local people who assisted in preserving and maintaining the building, and in many ways their exemplary contributions evoked the same participatory nature of the early rural community as much as the dreamlike scenes painted inside.

During the 1960s, the Woodmen decided they could no longer maintain their lodge in Valton and sold it to Ronald and Delores Nash, a couple from deeply rooted local families. Delores and her husband owned and operated a dairy farm in a nearby valley and were active community members. Ron, an immensely likeable, strong, and energetic man, and an avid hunter, served several terms as township supervisor. Their faith was important to them, and on the silo east of their barn, large, painted letters proclaimed: God Is Our Landlord.

Dark-haired and frequently wearing a cautious yet generous smile, Delores Nash was a widely respected pianist—one of those uniquely gifted players who could confidently enter a song, make friends with the melody, and throw open all its windows and doors. She could ripple and pounce on a row of ivory keys with such inspired enthusiasm that her talented hands were constantly sought after. For decades, it was commonplace in Valton (and other towns in the surrounding area) to find an upright piano at the focal point of some celebration, funeral, or commemoration with Delores Nash seated behind it, nodding and rocking back and forth, her feet pumping the pedals, a full-throated crowd singing with her. (She could also coax eerie, trembling notes out of a crosscut saw by bending the blade while drawing a musical bow across it.)

Delores christened her newly acquired building “The Painted Forest” after the Hüpeden mural inside, and the appellation stuck like a sand burr to a longhaired dog. She also wrote a song about Ernest Hüpeden, “Traveling Man,” and, upon request, would perform it.

When the deed to the building changed hands, there was speculation that perhaps Delores had purchased the property to keep it beyond the grasp of other people who wished to convert it into Valton’s first tavern. And while this may (or not) have been true, of greater consequence was her wish to preserve the artwork in the building and to utilize the stage area and hall for musical programs, local school plays, weddings, talent shows, recitations, and roller-skating. So for a number of years the community nature of the building continued, albeit with different activities taking place inside.

Talents finding expression in rural communities reveal something of the individual as well as the community.

Years later, when the Kohler Foundation undertook the building’s restoration, many abilities were needed,
including the skills of a local carpenter named Verne Thompson, who was called in to address foundational problems caused by frost heaving. A cautious, reticent man, Verne was originally from Chicago, where he had worked as a cabinetmaker before moving into southwestern Wisconsin with his wife, Joan, and their growing children. After the family settled into the century-old farmhouse near the former site of Valton’s largest sawmill, Verne began looking for jobs as a carpenter and was soon remodeling homes, building porches, installing cabinets, and leveling floors throughout the Sauk, Richland, and Vernon counties. He also liked to play horseshoes, and when someone needed an all-purpose carpenter, they could sometimes find Verne smoking the miniature bent-stem briar that he kept in his pants pocket, pitching in horseshoe tournaments.

In later years, Verne’s son-in-law Mike recalled a time when he had worked with Verne. While pounding nails into a house outside Hillsboro, someone from down the road stopped over to hire them for a job the following week. This happened again and again, and each new work site ended up farther and farther away from home. Eventually, thirty feet in the air, roofing a house in Ontario on the other side of Wildcat Mountain, Mike asked how far away they intended to go. Verne pulled his pipe out of his pocket, lit it, and replied, “Oh, before long we’ll start working our way back.”

Individual skills adapt to community needs in the same way that words find content in paragraphs.

After the restoration of The Painted Forest was completed in 1982, a local historical society volunteered to provide minor custodial services. Every Saturday from 1:00–3:00 p.m. (during warm months), one or more of the society’s members opened the hall to visitors. Other arrangements to view the mural could be scheduled by calling Lillian Johnson, president of the Historical Society of the Upper Baraboo Valley (SW Region), or her husband Gordon, the treasurer. Like Verne and Joan Thompson, the Johnsons were Chicago transplants, and after taking root they lived on the hill across from them. In fact, Verne had built the Johnson’s home before they moved into it, with Gordon helping in the role of assistant carpenter.

Before moving to Wisconsin, Lillian had been a librarian, and Gordon worked as a scientific consultant for a paint manufacturing company. Both were voraciously inquisitive, loved reading and music, and Gordon played violin. Together, they raised four girls before moving to Wisconsin. (In earlier years, Gordon had worked on the Manhattan Project, a federally funded research and development program that involved thousands of scientists and engineers, active from 1942–1946, and resulting in the world’s first nuclear weapons. He always downplayed his contribution to atomic bomb-making; the radiation experiments assigned to him, he explained, were being duplicated by scores of other scientists in the U.S and Great Britain. At the conclusion of the project, along with other participating scientists, Gordon signed a petition advising President Truman to demonstrate the lethal device on an uninhabited island near Japan before the weapon was actually dropped on a populated city, in hopes of convincing the emperor to unconditionally surrender and avoid civilian casualties.)
Lillian and Gordon were both fine-featured and quiet-spoken; Lillian with short brown hair and dark brown eyes; Gordon was fair, blond, and blue-eyed. Both were community-minded, and after living in the area a short time, they helped form a local food buying cooperative and took active roles in ordering, receiving, and distributing produce and commodities. Gordon, with a penchant (and fondness) for data keeping, served as treasurer, while Lillian made use of her gift for warmhearted communication and helped with ordering and settling differences over orders gone wrong.

Gordon and Lillian founded the historical society mentioned above and diligently worked to maintain an active membership. Speakers were invited to make presentations about early settlers, indigenous people, and Wisconsin's stand against slavery; quilt shows were organized, with plentiful snacks, coffee, and tea rounding out each meeting. Attendance remained sparse, however, and those interested enough to come were usually older and often encountered difficulties in getting to and from meetings. In winter months, only four or five members could be counted on to brave the snow.

After Lillian was diagnosed with cancer and her health began to decline, Gordon assumed the lion’s share of responsibly for The Painted Forest. To augment the visitor tours he conducted in the hall, he learned as much as he could about Hüpeden, located several of his works in the surrounding communities, interviewed older individuals about what they remembered from earlier times, and found Hüpeden’s gravesite in Richland Center. He also furnished The Painted Forest with memorabilia appropriate to a century-old Woodmen lodge, including Woodmen insurance literature, a ballot box with black and white voting balls, costumes, and a mechanical goat used in initiations.

Occasionally assisted by hospice volunteers, Gordon took care of Lillian in their home until her death in 1995. In the years immediately following, Gordon’s eyesight began to precipitously fail. After being forced to give up driving and depend upon neighbors and friends for transportation, he still managed to read printed material and music scores (in good light) by balancing a second pair of prescription glasses in front of another. His movements became more tentative. Many people advised that he move into a senior center, but Gordon refused, explaining that he and Lillian had planned to live out their lives in their house on the hill south of Valton, and he intended to carry through on that. Also, Gordon blanched at the prospect of disposing of his mountainous collection of personal belongings, which filled his two-story home, basement, and two-car garage. As one of his friends once remarked, “He just never threw anything away.” He had books (over ten thousand), magazines (twenty subscriptions, with some dating back to the 1920s), newspapers, household items, outdated scientific paraphernalia, old recording equipment, etc., with narrow footpaths winding through every room in his house.

Though he and Lillian had both been freethinking humanists, Gordon began attending the local Friends Church, where his violin playing was much appreciated. Every Saturday night, the organist would call with the
list of hymns for Sunday morning so he could practice them beforehand. He also enjoyed playing in nearby nursing homes.

Gordon continued to supervise The Painted Forest and open it by appointment until 2004, when the property came under the care of Edgewood College. His narrated tours lasted about forty-five minutes as he accompanied visitors slowly around the hall, stopping to point out noteworthy historical references and features in the mural—features that he could only dimly see himself. He often remarked: “For over a half-century these painted walls served as backdrop to other activities. People came here for meetings, initiations, parties, music programs, weddings, roller-skating, and school plays. Now, the mural itself is the attraction.”