A man of many hats

John W. Tinsman

By rights John W. Tinsman should be one of the best remembered men in Adair County. Within the 57 years since his death in 1924, however, his identity has become relatively obscure. Tinsman, a unique and interesting man, was a businessman, politician, artist and humorist.

Mrs. Helen Rieger became interested in him and his artistic works while employed as curator for the Violette Museum at Northeast Missouri State University in Kirksville. "I found him very interesting because when I thought of him I thought of not one man but several because of the various things he was interested in," Mrs. Rieger commented.

Tinsman, the son of Martin and Susan (Coppas) Tinsman, was born July 31, 1842, in Harmony, Butler County, Penn. Thirteen years later he moved to Adair County with his mother and four other children (J. A., Mary A., Fannie and Sarah). In 1860, young Tinsman graduated from a log school house on the banks of the Chariton River. The following year, at the outbreak of the Civil War, he enlisted in Company H, Seventh Missouri Cavalry, and participated in campaigns throughout Mississippi, Kansas, Arkansas and Texas. According to Mrs. Rieger, "Mr. Tinsman was either a first or second lieutenant in the Federal Army." At the termination of his initial commitment he re-enlisted and became a chief bugler in the Union Army.

Following his discharge from the Army, Tinsman returned to Kirksville and in November 1865 married Miss Dora Pannabaker, daughter of one of the most prominent families in Adair County at that time. The Tinsmans were parents of two sons and two daughters: Fred, Cliff, Flossie and Ida. Tragedy struck the Tinsman household in 1887 with the death of his wife, Dora, and later his 22-year-old daughter Ida.

The Businessman

Tinsman's business career began at the close of the Civil War when he returned to Kirksville and began the manufacturing of woolen goods with his father-in-law. After five years in this venture, he found it less than profitable. He quit the woolen business and became the owner of a saw and grist mill which he operated until 1875. That same year the great flood destroyed the mill and many of his personal possessions.

After losing his life-long savings he turned to other interests and once again began a new occupation. Tinsman had always been a talented artist as a youngster, and at this point in his life he used that talent to establish yet another new business. He opened an Art Studio and Photographic Gallery over McGovern's Store (now the Odd Fellows Lodge) on the west side of the square in Kirksville. Here he painted more than 3,000 scenic backgrounds that were sold to photographers all over the United States.

In 1895 Tinsman became General Manager for the Chicago Portrait Company and managed five western states including Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, California and Utah. As Mrs. Rieger recalls, "They made enlargements of photographs. The enlargements were life-size and they looked more like charcoal drawings than enlargements of photographs. There were a number of people in Kirksville that had them and if you got two enlargements, you got a premium and several of the premiums I have seen." After four years with this company he accumulated a small fortune and retired from this business.

Tinsman's last accountable business venture was in 1900 when he and one of his sons became interested in the Illinois Sewing Machine Company at Rockford, Ill. His involvement with that company lasted until 1904.

Story by J. S. Srnka
The Politician

John W. Tinsman was a strong Republican who cast his first presidential vote for Abraham Lincoln while in the Union Army in Little Rock, Ark. In 1892 Tinsman was elected mayor of Kirksville and was so successful that at the end of his term he was re-elected to that office.

1ST ELECTION RESULTS 1892

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2ND ELECTION RESULTS 1893

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Tinsman was able to accomplish a great deal during his short administration. He was responsible for a new water system, macadamized streets (a surface packed with a layer of small broken stone on an earthen road bed), new sidewalks and numerous other public improvements. Tinsman, a popular politician, was elected State Representative and was a member of the Missouri 45th General Assembly which met in 1909-1910.

The Artist

Another interest of John W. Tinsman was, of course, his painting. A niece of Tinsman wrote in a letter, “Mother said that when he was a small boy he used to paint pictures with kool (I don’t know how to spell it, but something he found among the rocks around the rivers), anyway, he was always painting during any spare time he had.”

Examples of his art are scattered throughout northeast Missouri; Tinsman was an accomplished painter. Dr. George A. Still, a prominent Kirkville doctor and art collector, said in 1919, “Few people know that in our own midst is an artist whose works have hung in the Paris Salon, one of whose sunsets was reproduced and sold to the extent of twenty thousand dollars by a color lithographer company.”

In an interview, Dr. P. O. Selby, Dean Emeritus of NMSU and Adair County Historian, said Tinsman studied at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Louis and at the Chicago Art Institute. It was while he was employed by the Chicago Portrait Company that he studied painting at the Chicago Art Institute.

According to an article published in the “American Art News,” Volume 3, Number 5, March 11, 1905, “John W. Tinsman, formerly a business man of Chicago, has now given up business definitely, proposes to devote himself to art, and has gone to Paris for study. He has already made some effective studies of the coast of California, his sunset scenes being especially good.” He spent the following year studying painting in Paris and at the art capitals of Italy.

When Tinsman returned from Europe, he built a studio near Youngstown on a high bluff overlooking the Chariton River; he affectionately called it “Idylwild.”

Mrs. George L. Scriven knew Tinsman when she was a schoolgirl in Youngstown. As she recalls her impressions of Idylwild, “There was a huge stone fireplace; it was one big room and resembled a cabin. There was one room, and it was just covered with pictures.”
Seascapes such as the one above were among Tinsman’s most popular subjects. He was also noted for his sunsets and scenes painted while he studied art in Paris. Dr. George A. Still commented in 1919 that few people in the area realized such a renowned artist lived in their midst.

Tinsman was a generous man and had a good rapport with children. According to Mrs. Scriven, “On the last day of school Mr. Tinsman invited the school children to Idylwild for a picnic. I lived on the other side of the river in a village. That day the river was up and I didn’t get to go. He had promised all the girls would get a painting. Later that summer my parents and I went to Idylwild and he gave me a painting. It turned out that I was the only girl to receive a painting.”

Tinsman was known for his landscapes of the Chariton hills; however, he also painted about nine portraits. One of his more interesting portraits was one that he did for the Knights of Pythias. It was a portrait of Pythagoras, who was the ruling spirit of the Knights. Mrs. Rieger remembers, “The portrait was to be of his brother, as well as Pythagoras. I thought that there couldn’t have been a man as ugly as that. One time I happened to stumble on a picture of his brother, who didn’t have a beard, but the eyes, the nose and the facial structure of the portrait are exactly that of his brother.”

In 1919 Dr. Still hosted an art exhibit and sale in his home (presently the Srnka house). This function was held for the benefit of the Adair County Soldiers Memorial Fund to erect a monument in the Argonne Woods. Dr. Still “handpicked” a collection of paintings for the occasion. Two pictures by Tinsman were included, “The Isle of Capri” and “Street Scene in Venice.” Dr. Still had this to say about Tinsman’s work: “Mr. Tinsman’s sale paintings are many times more valuable than the price asked. They are real paintings by a real artist.”

In 1924, one year before his death, Tinsman gave his entire collection of approximately 171 paintings to the Violette-Robinson Historical Collection. According to Mrs. Rieger, “He donated it with a clause. If it was not exhibited it should be returned to his heirs.” The Jan. 30, 1924, issue of “The Teachers College Index” states, “The collection consists of seventy-four landscapes, mostly scenes near “Idylwild,” Tinsman’s Studio in the Chariton hills; fifty-four sea views; fifteen European scenes, mostly of Venice and the Bay of Naples; nine portraits and a portrait of Mr. Tinsman painted by Earl Musick, a former Teachers College Student, now an art student in Chicago; five cartoons; and thirteen
miscellaneous paintings.” In 1965 one of his heirs discovered the paintings were not being exhibited and asked that they be returned to him. The university did return what was left of the collection. Some of Tinsman’s paintings not included in the above collection are still privately owned.

The Humorist

The book, “The Youngstown Council,” written by Tinsman and copyrighted in 1921, is a good example of Tinsman’s sense of humor. Dr. Selby recalled that “Mr. Tinsman often referred to himself as the Mayor of Youngstown.” The fictitious events about which Tinsman wrote may provide some insight into the small-town politics of Youngstown and the trials and tribulations of its “sister city,” Kirksville. Here are two passages from that book:

“How The Glue Factory Plan Fell Through” — The Town Council met last night in the blacksmith shop to consider a factory proposition from a feller in Kansas City, the town hall having been previously rented by the nightwatch for a dance. After the Council was called to order by the mayor, the feller from Kansas City made the following statement:

“I have just as good a little glue factory as ever curled smoke out of a chimney in Kansas City, but I am hampered for want of space. What I want is to git out where I can have plenty of room and good air. All I ask is for the town to donate a site and subscribe ninety-five dollars to put up a suitable shed to commence operations. After which I will give work to a right smart chance of folks in your community. I am ready to move just as soon as the site is deeded and the money subscribed.

“I might just add that Kirksville is trying hard to secure this factory.”

After the feller set down, the Mayor hit the box with the hammer and said, Well, boys, what are you going to do. The councillor from the ward next the river got up and made a concise statement, to-wit, as follows: He enlarged on our great advantages with the river right at our doors. He said it’s surely high time the people of Youngstown reached out after some of the good things that were offered and clinched the argument by saying he would head the subscription list with five dollars, after which he set down and the Mayor hit the box with the hammer.

Then the Councilman from the ward next the stock pens arose in a quiet and dignified manner and said:

“I am dimetrically opposed to a glue factory. We have one of the best towns in Adair county. Our people are seeking for refinement and culture rather than wealth. They like the smell of
Above, this angle of Idylwild shows the steep bluff upon which it was built (photo courtesy of Mrs. George Scriven). Right, Tinsman in Colorado in front of scenery not unlike the kind he painted for studios.

growing corn, new-made hay and clover blossoms, then why in Sam Hill should we contaminate the town with the smell of glue. If Kirksville wanted the factory let them have it—they are in the habit of snapping up everything that comes along regardless of smell or quality. Anyway the smell of glue would be no worse than the smell of drug stores, besides the factory could utilize the many empty bottles found in the alleys and stairways to bottle up liquid glue thereby starting a permanent industry for Kirkville."

At this juncture his honor hit the box hard calling the members to order, saying, we can't tolerate any inst尼utions against our sister city, the Athens of North Missouri, the seat of learning and the town of churches. So the member from the ward near the stock pens set down.

The jeller from Kansas City seemed displeased with the turn things had taken and proceeded to light his pipe with a clouded brow. After a short pause the member from the ward near Young's barn got up and said he was greatly surprised that a member of the council should get up and throw cold water on our first great enterprise on account of the smell, when said member's residence joined the stock pens of the I. & St. L. R. R. and further said I fully acquiesced with the stand taken by the member of the ward next the river.

At this point the Mayor motioned the nightwatch with whom he held a whispered conference. It afterwards developed that his honor did not quite understand what acquiesced meant, but as soon as he did he hit the box with the hammer and said, all right, we will proceed with the business.

The member who acquiesced then set down. At this juncture of the proceedings the gasoline engine in the adjoining building commenced to grind feed whereupon the member from the ward near the deepo moved that the Factory proposition be laid over till the next regular meeting. The motion carried Sina Di after which the Mayor hit the box with the hammer and declared the Council adjourned. City Clerk.

Here is another passage from "The Youngstown Council:"

Visiting Tinsman's Studio — Last Tuesday was set by the Mayor and Council of Youngstown to visit Tinsman's Studio. The artist having given them a cordial invitation, saying never mind silk hats and tuxedo coats as the affair will be informal and be sure to bring along the City Clerk to write up the trip. So promptly at ten a.m. the Mayor and Council went up the steep Bluff and landed in front of the Studio. The Mayor was out of breath saying what in Sam Hill ever made you build way up here on this sand stone cliff. Well answered the artist one thing was to be out of the way of the backwater, after Kirksville builds their big power dam, but come in and make youselves at home said the artist.

After a few moments for a refreshment and passing of Virginia Cheroots the crowd began to size up the works of art produced by the artist while in Rome last winter. The mayor remarked, ain't some of your pictures rather red. Yes, said the artist those are Sun Sets. The Scene was red when I painted them late in the evening. Finally his honor fetched up in front of a painting and said what do you call this. That said Tinsman is the Ruins of the Roman Aqueduct built under the reign of Claudius. What do they use it for said the Mayor? The artist explained that about eighteen hundred years ago when Rome was at its best, the prohibitionists commenced to get in their work and caused all of the Breasuries to be moved out about forty miles into the mountains. The Aqueduct was built to run the beer back to Rome as they had no rail roads those days and they couldn't have found teams enough in all the country to have hauled it in. Well said his honor, I'll be Gosh Dinged. But said the artist it turned out bad for Rome in the long run for under the reign of Nero the City imagined they had to drink all the Beer that was run through and over that Aqueduct. Just as it is today. Some towns that have gone dry imagine they must drink all the whiskey and beer that is shipped in just because it's bottled up...

The member from near the stock pens here remarked consulting his watch. If I am not at home for meals, my wife creates discord and the Mayor said well boys, we had better go too and remarked Tinsman we have had a good time and I would like to spend a whole day with you. Come over and attend the council meeting sometime. His honor was heard to remark later on to look at that man Tinsman when you meet him you wouldn't think he knew anything. But from the way he paints and what he knows about the Roman Aqueduct he sure has been going some. City Clerk.

John W. Tinsman was indeed a unique and interesting man.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

American Art News, Vol. 3 No. 5, March II, 1904; Kirkville Weekly Graphic, 1872 and 1873; Owen, C. O. and Co., 1895, Portrait and Biographical Record of Northern Missouri; Mrs. Helen Rieger, interview winter 1980; Mrs. George L. Scriven, interview spring 1981; Dr. D. O. Selby, interview spring 1981; State Teachers College Index, June 30, 1919; Dr. George Still, Art Exhibit Pamphlet, 1919; John W. Tinsman, The Youngstown Council; Violette, History of Adair County, 1911 (Page 2 photo of Tinsman from this source).

See next page for Youngstown cartoons by Tinsman.