

Original Hall of Fame Highwaymen Artists'

LPMS Staff Writers

Early in the fifties Bean Backus began teaching young black students art in what was then called his "old studio." The classes were held on Saturdays during the school year, and Bean charged his students fifty cents a lesson. In addition to the blacks, he also had other students who were frequently recommended to him by Zanobia Jefferson, an art instructor at Lincoln Park Academy.

In the mid-fifties Zanobia Jefferson arranged with Backus to recommend to him students of her art classes who she felt showed some artistic abilities, and who would benefit from his instruction. Apparently the one who had signs of the most talent was a young teenage black student named Alfred Hair.

Hair had very little money or sources for it and so his sister (Lena), who did house work for Backus, agreed help and part of her pay would go toward his tuition, as said by sister Gladys Hair Bennett. When Backus realized the promise of Hair he told the sister that she need not use part of her pay for the tuition fee because of Hair's outstanding work and his attitude toward art. Mrs. Bennett states, "Alfred borrowed money from me for gas to sell his paintings. He always paid it back". Over the years Zanobia Jefferson sent a number of students to Backus. Hair was aware of the money Backus received from of his artwork, and of his living style, which has been described as Bohemian, and decided to make a career of art.

He began to paint more or less reproductions of the work Backus had done or was doing. Hair loaded his car with a bunch of his completed art work, and following the lead of Harold Newton, he peddled the paintings. He stopped at galleries and professional offices and offered the paintings starting at about \$25- \$35 a copy. If necessary he would take thirty dollars for each but if you would take more than one he would lower the unit price. He or his agents sold five for a hundred and twenty five dollars to a gallery on Singer Island; he discovered a ready market for his work and soon had difficulty keeping up with the demand.

Hair then hit upon the idea of hiring a salesman to sell the paintings while he stayed home and produced more. One of his first salesmen was Al Black, a young acquaintance who was fascinated by the project Hair had developed, and Black was a super salesman. He recruited helpers, and he set up an open-air studio in back of his parent's house in Fort Pierce. He bought his home and arranged an assembly line type operation with some of his students making frames, and others would prime the upson board which he used; others became expert in doing clouds, others still water and waves. When business expanded he hired additional salesmen and rented a building on Avenue D. Hair also added a studio to his home to do the work in, and on a bet, he and his helpers painted twenty five paintings in a twenty-four hour period.

Thus began the legend of those now popularly known as the Highwaymen. Harold Newton and Robert Butler started the legend in a different time and place. Hair turned into a very profitable venture, for some of the aspiring artists.

The Highwaymen, also referred to as the Florida Highwaymen, are a group of twenty-six named and listed landscape artists who have been called "The Last Great American Art Movement of

the 20th century” as cited from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Mary Ann Carroll is listed as the only female among the group inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame. This group of self-taught and self-mentoring African American artists was able to define themselves against the many odds, racial and cultural barriers of the time in which they painted, and created a body of work of over 200,000 paintings. For over 50 years, The Highwaymen, a loose association of African American artists from Fort Pierce, Florida, who began painting in the early 1950s and into 1960s, created large numbers of relatively inexpensive landscape paintings, which were created using construction materials rather than traditional art supplies. As no galleries would accept their works, they sold them in towns and cities and along roadsides throughout Florida often still wet, out of the trunks of their cars. Their success and longevity is remarkable considering they began their career in the racially unsettled and violent racial times of the '50s in Florida, and the social conditions of the Jim Crow South, the stirrings of civil rights movement in Florida was only just beginning.

In 1970 one of the original members of the group, Alfred Hair, who was also considered to be the main catalyst and soul of the group was killed. Subsequently some of the group's creative energy and direction was lost, the remaining members created fewer paintings and productivity waned. However, they were rediscovered in the mid-1990s by Jim Fitch, a Florida Art Historian, and Jeff Klinkenberg of the St. Petersburg Times wrote the several newspaper articles about the Florida Highwaymen in August 1995. Since then they have become celebrated for their idyllic landscapes of natural settings of the Floridian landscape.

The Florida Highwaymen were inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame in 2004. Their renown has grown internationally during the 2000s and they have become part of Florida culture and history. The remaining artists in the original group (eight are deceased) continue to paint to this day, more than 50 years since they first started to paint, even though most artists are now in their 70s and some nearing their 80s. Over time their style has evolved into more carefully created works and away from the original "fast painting" techniques that enabled them to produce large quantities of paintings in their early years. Analogies compare the Hudson River School of the mid-19th century and Group of Seven (artists) from Canada in the early 20th century to The Florida Highwaymen Artists. In their respective time these groups, mentored and created works collaboratively. Painting in plain style, these groups of artists created expansive landscapes, of untouched and pristine lands, creating scenes of timelessness and raw natural beauty. In many ways the Florida Highwaymen's story is even more compelling and romantic than the other groups, as The Highwaymen had no backing or support and were much more resourceful and creative in both production and sales of their works.

Credits to Gary Monroe, “The Highwaymen, Florida’s African American Landscape Painters” and Florida Highwaymen, Legendary Landscapes by Bob Beatty.

Series continues in February with a profile of Alfred Hair, Sr.