**An Introduction by Andrew Sabori**

In 2003, my wife and I visited Ellis Island to see if I could find any information about my ancestors. While walking through the many rooms of displays, my wife discovered a small photo of what looked like a mural. The location, Aliens Hall, was mentioned in a caption below the photo. The employees manning the information booth knew nothing about it.

When we got home, I inquired about the photo by calling the Administration Office at Ellis Island. The only information they could give me was that the mural was painted during the WPA program ( the Works Project Administration) in the 1930’s and that in the early 1950’s, at which time Ellis Island was closed, a storm tore off the roof and a major part of the mural was destroyed. They had no additional photos or other information about the mural. At this point, I decided to try and reproduce the original mural but as a smaller version.

My wife and I did Internet searches for information concerning the mural which lead us to Princeton University. With a trip to Princeton, we discovered a book on WPA projects written by Dr. Greta Berman, a professor of art at the prestigious Juilliard School in New York City. We contacted Dr. Berman, visited her at Juilliard and obtained more information about the mural but still there were no pictures. We had learned that the title was “The Role of the Immigrant in the Industrial Development of America” by Edward Laning, cira 1935. Dr. Berman knew Edward Laning and his wife. She contacted Mrs. Laning who was very excited that someone would bring back the mural that her husband created and for which he received very little recognition. The general public was not allowed in the area of Ellis Island where the mural was hanging so only the immigrants could view it. We also learned that Laning, while working with the WPA program, was paid only $25 a week for his work on the mural.

The next steps in our research were with the Smithsonian and eventually the Library of Congress. We explained to them how our journey began and that we planned to reproduce the panels, on a much smaller scale. A week after talking with several people at the Library of Congress we received a call that the researchers had located photos of the mural and they would send us copies. The Smithsonian asked us to contact them when we completed the mural because they were interested in displaying the work for a limited time.

Once I received the black and white photos from the Library of Congress I immediately wanted to see what colors Mr. Laning had used on the mural. If I was going to duplicate it, I would need that information for my work to be accurate. By this time we had located the few remaining original sections of the mural which hung in the Federal Courthouse in Brooklyn, N.Y. We contacted the judge’s law clerk and, after submitting a written request to see the mural, the judge gave Dr. Berman, my wife and me permission to visit the courtroom (ironically the chamber is where immigrants are sworn in as US citizens). The sections of the mural were in the back of a very large and poorly lit room. The murals were hanging over doors that were 9 feet tall, and with the massive size of the sections, they were in a place where very few people would even notice them. In fact, our attempt to take pictures was not very successful because the lightening was so poor. After our trip to the federal courthouse we visited the main New York City Library where we found three very large paintings of Laning’s which were also painted during the WPA project. After seeing his artwork I understood his color palette and had the information I need to reproduce the mural from Ellis Island.

With all of our research I was equipped with the needed information to approach administrators at Ellis Island and ask if they were interested in the reproduction of the mural panels. I believed I had found the perfect place to display the finished work. On the first floor of Ellis Island there was a large open space which we felt was an ideal location to temporarily display the reproduction canvases that I planned to paint. If that didn’t work out my second choice would be the Alien Hall. Three months after our original discovery of the photo of the mural we were back to Ellis Island for a meeting. We presented everything we had collected along with our proposal to reproduce the mural and show the work at Ellis Island. The administrators told us that they did not plan to open the Alien Hall to the public. It was being used for storage. At that time they indicated they would show my rendition of the mural for a short period of time at Ellis Island but wanted the panels to be on a smaller scale than I had planned. I felt the smaller scale would not do justice to Laning’s work. In addition, they proposed hanging the mural in the dormitories which were divided up into small rooms which would not do justice to Laning’s work through my reproduction. At that time, I decided to put the project on the backburner and shortly afterwards we moved to the Vegas area.

In June of 2008, my wife and I came up with the idea of painting the mural and using it as an educational tool for local students. We felt that not only did the mural have artistic value but extreme historical value especially regarding the WPA project which had paid the artist to do the original artwork and it is something many people are not aware existed. Further, the mural was especially important considering the current economic conditions (the market crash of 2008) to show people things weren’t as bad as they were in the early 1930's with the Great Depression. We also wanted to create a booklet that could be used in schools. The booklet would show a picture of the mural and explain who originally created it. An additional fold out version of my reproduction could also be attached.

**Logistics = Sizes**

The mural is divided into 19 sections of canvas in order to facilitate its transport. The largest piece will be approximately 60" long by 30” to 50" high (total project about 90 feet long). A great effort was made to keep it as close to the style of Laning's original. Some of the sections are smaller (they originally went over windows and doors). It does not have to be hung on a continuous wall and some of the smaller panels can be omitted if necessary. Art students from Pahrump Valley High School and the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, in Nevada, assisted with the background while they learned about Ellis Island. Later I added the final touches to the artwork giving it depth and presence.

**Listing of locations where mural has been displayed:**

Mural and portraits of famous immigrants displayed at The Tulsa Historical Society April 5 – September 27, 2007

Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, Las Vegas, NV Dec.12, 2008 – Jan. 23, 2009.

The Nevada Historical Society, Reno, NV Feb. 6 - Apr. 5, 2009.

The Northeastern Nevada Museum, Elko NV Apr 23 - June 3, 2009.

West Jordan Historical Society UT June 6 - July 20, 2009

Union Station Museum, Ogden, UT Aug 7 – 31, 2009.

White Pines Historical Museum Fallon, NV Feb – Mar 2010

Heritage Museum, Sparks, NV Apr – May 2010

Savannah River Visitors Center GA Nov. 2010- Feb. 2011

The Aiken Center for the Arts GA Mar-Apr 2011

National Archives in Atlanta GA July 20 – Feb 4, 2013

Macon Museum of Arts & Sciences, Macon GA Jan 5 – Mar 25

On July 20, 2012 the National Archives in Atlanta, Georgia opened an exhibit called, “Coming to America.” The opening ceremony included the swearing in of 130 immigrants as US Citizens. I was asked to be a part of the ceremony by displaying the mural as the centerpiece of their exhibit which also included an additional 22 portraits of immigrants I painted who became famous after arriving in America. Their immigration documents were also on display.

After the project finishes its US tour, I would like to see it permanently located where the public, especially students, Ellis Island immigrants and their descendants can see our country’s historical diversity. It would facilitate peoples’ understanding of Edward Laning’s struggle during the depression and the importance of the WPA program under the Roosevelt administration.

When I have given local presentations on the mural, I have encouraged the museum and/or groups displaying it to make an effort to invite Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and schools from the surrounding areas. One of the key points of my presentation is that this mural is a reproduction of a destroyed mural that was never seen by the general public because Ellis Island immigrants were quarantined for a period of time before being granted entry to the United States.

In each location where we have displayed the mural, the public has related to one or more elements in the panels. Viewers in Ely and Elko, which are mining communities in Nevada, related to the miners. In Utah, the public enjoyed the covered wagon, planting the crops and the building of the railroad because of Brigham Young. We hope in the future other communities can relate to the people, events and times, as painted in the mural. During these exhibits we have collected, and continue to collect, stories from immigrants and their relatives about their experiences coming to America.