

## Century's Early Years Saw Cape End Art Association

By Ross Moffett

This is the first of a series of articles written by Ross Moffett, now one of the older and widely known year round Provincetown artists—this initial chapter deals with the very early Cape End scene—others in the series will appear in subsequent issues of The Advocate.

"On the evening of August 22, 1914, the Provincetown Art Association was organized in the Nauticus Club Room." Thus in the neat hand of Nina S. Williams, Provincetown school teacher, is recorded the birth of Provincetown's first art organization, which in the following year would give this town its first general art exhibit.

Before continuing with what transpired at this first Art Association meeting, it may be instructive to recall something of Provincetown and of its art and artists as they were on this evening of 44 years ago. There are still a few artists here who remember the great trees—elms, poplars and willows—that then lined most of Commercial Street; and of which only a relatively few remain. Kendall Lane, Atlantic Avenue, Nickerson Street, and other now bare side streets were green leafy archways, as may be seen in the photographs of John R. Smith. Horse drawn accommodations, with their jangling bells, still plied Commercial Street, although open air busses were starting to appear. For heavy work there were high one horse carts and jiggers, the latter being wagons with low underslung beds. Fish and fish processing, activities which gave character to the town but which are now largely relegated to the ends of two wharves,

were in evidence everywhere along the waterfront.

### Simple Living

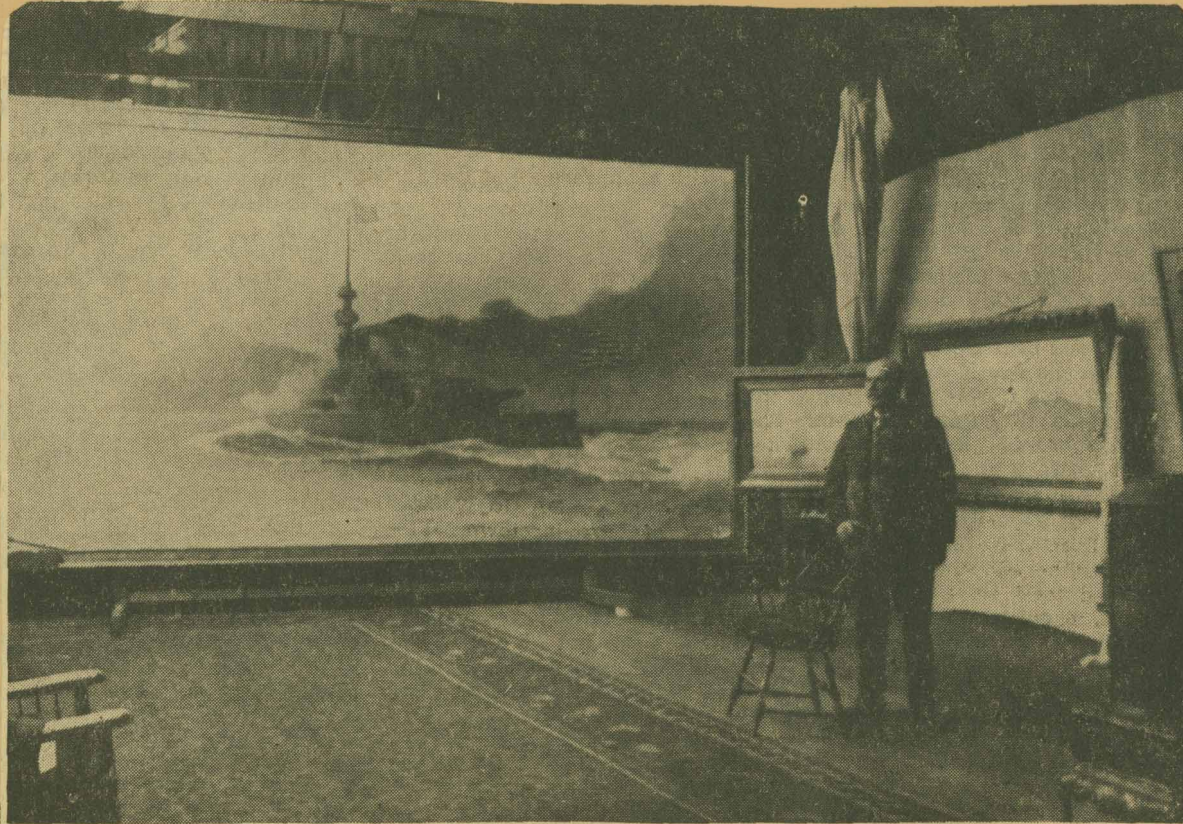
For twenty or twenty-five cents a hungry artist might eat at either of two prominent restaurants, the Surfside Cafe, in the building recently vacated by the A&P store, or R. A. Jennings' Dining Room, in the structure now occupied by the Portuguese Bakery. There were no bars or nightclubs. For relaxation one might go to the Star Theatre, now a bowling alley, or to the Pilgrim on the shore side of the street. Featured might be Theda Bara, Pearl White, or perhaps William S. Hart. George

Washington Ready and Walter Smith, the last two authentic town criers, were still practicing, each voicing, as was understandable, a professional jealousy of the other. If life was less exciting than at present, it was, at least up to August 1914, viewed with a confidence and optimism that are now hard to assume.

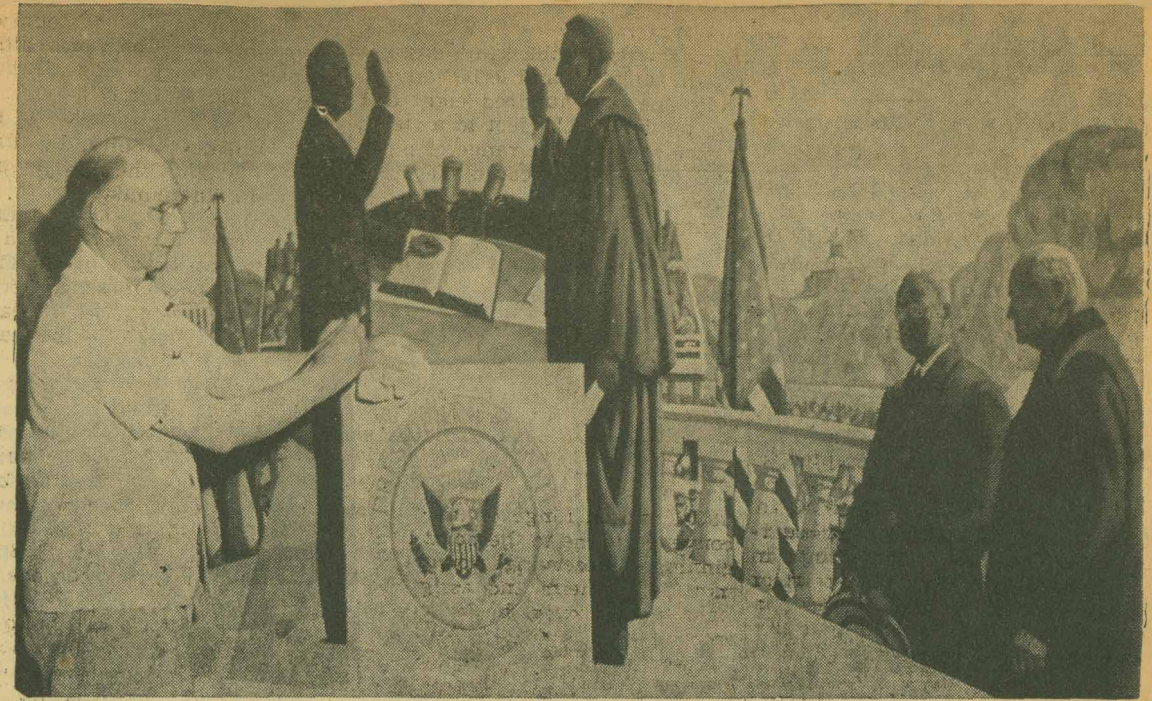
In 1914 most of the art activity of Provincetown was centered around the summer art schools of Charles W. Hawthorne and E. Ambrose Webster. Aside from this, two more artists were working in Provincetown at this time.

## Take Shape

There was William F. Halsall, a marine painter, whom some of us remember as a dignified old gentleman whose thoughts often took him back to his days in the Union Navy during the Civil War. He had painted in the old Shirt Factory building on Court Street a thirty foot canvass of the battleship Oregon steaming around the Horn in 1898, a picture that was still fresh in the minds of local people in 1914. Halsall, who did not like modern art, once said of a landscape by Oliver Chaffee, "It has neither the anatomy of color nor the grammar of drawing."



One of the very early artists was William F. Halsall, remembered as a dignified elderly gentleman, whose thoughts often took him back to his days in the Union Navy during the Civil War. He had painted in the old Shirt Factory building on Court Street a thirty-foot canvass of the battleship Oregon steaming around the Horn in 1898, a picture that was still fresh in the minds of local people in 1914.



The author, Mr. Moffett, is shown here at work on the murals which he was commissioned to paint for the Eisenhower Museum in Abilene, Kansas. The scene on which he is working depicts the administering of the oath of office during the inaugural ceremonies of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Mr. Moffett studied the Eisenhower background from the early days of the President.

This remark we bandied about, thinking it very funny and old-hatish.

### Colorful Character

The other artist was the colorful Arthur V. Diehl, an Englishman who painted and sold his pictures in the building now housing the Provincetown Art Shop. Diehl would paint a dune or beach scene in a few minutes, all the time keeping up an entertaining and impressive flow of conversation for the onlookers. On occasion he might claim descent from Napoleon, coupling with this story an involved explanation of legitimacy that was not easy to follow. Or again he might tell how, when a boy of sixteen, he was called upon in a pinch to conduct the Royal London Orchestra. With the right audience, that is when no other artists were present, he might launch into a philosophical discussion of art. At a certain point Rembrandt would be brought into the discussion, and at the end the listener would realize that Diehl was in no respect Rembrandt's inferior.

In the general art climate of the time, the impressionist style in some form or other was in universal favor. Gone were the days when one was questioned suspiciously as to his attitude towards impressionist paintings. By 1914 this style had been accepted by

officialdom and was being taught in most art schools. It had, in short, become the academic art form of the time. Even by 1914, however, there were in Provincetown some intimations of the art forms that were to follow impressionism.

### The Founders

At that initial Art Association meeting, on August 22, 1914, the following slate of officers was elected: President, William H. Young; vice-presidents, Charles W. Hawthorne, William F. Halsall, and E. Ambrose Webster; acting vice-president, Mrs. Eugene Watson; treasurer, Mrs. William H. Young; recording secretary, Nina S. Williams; corresponding secretary, Moses N. Gifford. An art committee was selected made up of Edwin W. Dickinson, Oscar H. Gieberich, Gerrit A. Beneker, Oliver N. Chaffee and Frank Desch. It is stated in the minutes that when Mr. Gifford gave one dollar to the treasurer he became the first dues paying member.

There was much work to be done before the new association would have direction and continuity. Meetings were held at least every month during the first two years. The officers elected at the initial meeting were for the most part reelected every year for the next five years. The exceptions to this were the office of corres-