

Walter Seis: He was ours for 10 years

By Karen Zach, Around the County

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A fascination with the water be it Sugar Creek, the Wabash or one of the two rivers in Paducah, Kentucky, he lived the good life, almost always in his homemade houseboats with his beloved family. Such was the story of one of Crawfordsville's well-loved artists, Walter Seis.

Born the fourth day of October in 1847, in Middletown (Butler County) Ohio, to Walter Ruggles Sies, who was a physician and his wife, Julia, Walter had at least two sisters, Amanda and Julia (named for their mother). Some of his early life was spent in Wheeling, Virginia, which is where perhaps he got his love of the water to represent on a canvas. Our artist, Walter was a junior, his father mainly going by their middle name while our painter chose to go by Walter. The Sies family came from Connecticut into Virginia, Ohio and Walter on to Indiana and beyond!

Actually, Walter Sies loved to travel and as you know, truly craved the water scenes for his paintings. Although I couldn't find the actual picture, one of his paintings, evidently of an old man fishing on a creek bank, prompted one of James Whitcomb Riley's best poems, "An Old Timer." I laughed when I read the typically bouncy, sometimes forced but ever-popular JWR's rhyme.

Walter seemed to have quite a civic duty, often volunteering to aide in some way and even though he was quite late to have been in the military at the Civil War time, just at the end when he turned of age, he joined and was in the service for three years, mustering out of the 18th Infantry on October 9th in 1868 at Russell, Wyoming. He had enlisted in Indianapolis exactly three years earlier. I can just see him making sketches out there and likely did as he sold some Western Americana pieces later on, a Mexican coffee plantation painting having much renown. He also made at least one trip back out that way for more art fodder.

Upon his return from the Army, where he was described as being 5'6", having hazel eyes, brown hair and light complexion, he came to our area and began his career. In Boone County, he met and married (October 16th, 1872) Carrie Milhouse, daughter of Thomas and Mary Kugler Milhouse, Thomas being in several businesses, including boot and shoes and wool buying/selling. The newlyweds moved to Crawfordsville and lived here until a couple of months after the 1880 census when they went on to Terre Haute, always staying near water to place his houseboats where the family lived.

While in our fair city, he was a popular artist and had at least two places where he had his studio set-up. One of those was the original Lane-Willson law office on Pike Street. He was able to rent it cheaply as it had been condemned and was to be torn down, although there was quite a fight in the courts (ironic huh) about who owned the property. Thus, with the ruckus he was able to rent the building for his studio for as long as he needed it. Many were excited that he was able to do so to save the place for awhile longer as it dated back to one of the earliest buildings in the city. Although not large, it made quite a nice little place and was frequented by the good folks of the city, partly because some of them remembered the old "court days" when people would come in to "settle" and hang-out at the place interviewing the many lawyers who were there to serve who might represent them in court later that day. This was also the place where much of the prelim work was done getting ready to nominate Lincoln for president at the Republican Convention.

A few articles were found of Walter's "self" and his business offerings. One newspaper write-up said of his character that if he met a poor fellow he'd give up his last dollar as if he "had a million more beside it." According to this item, he had no false pride, was always in a good mood and was willing to do anything artistic to please, be it a painting, sign, photograph, buggy varnishing, portrait, landscape, you name it! Although paints were his favored media he also worked with brush, pencil and was one of the first photographers in both Crawfordsville and Terre Haute, having perhaps our first panoramic possibilities for groups.

One of the first items he painted after his marriage was a backdrop scenery for the Ladoga Opera House that lasted for two decades before being replaced by Will Richmond and Jim McCoy. Many pictures of Rock River (Sugar Creek) scenery was said to have made Walter some big bucks with art critics everywhere. Same to be said of his paintings of the Wabash River at Terre Haute. In his early days, a favorite place to sketch and paint was the Shades, even making trips back to do the same well after he moved away from the area.

Once in Terre Haute, the family lived on the water while Walter had a studio on 3rd street. Although not a businessman in a certain sense (he was quite well known to give away his pictures a few minutes after finishing one or selling them for practically nothing when there were art critics standing in line to buy one at a more than favorable price) in other ways he was quite astute. Farsseeing in his ideas of advertisement, he would make a large painting and then many smaller sketches of it to be sold for \$1. When he sold the allotted number for \$1 totalling what he felt the large painting was worth, he'd have a drawing from those sold and the winner walked away with the beautiful large painting for the \$1. This was always done in a public place like Hulman's (yep the Hulman family known all over west central Indiana) Grocery or the local post office. He'd walk away with the chunk of money from the small paintings and the large one made someone quite happy. Several articles noted that he was a real expert in wood engraving and no one was his equal.

From Terre Haute it was on to Paducah, Kentucky, where sadly his wife passed away. At that point, their three children (Walter Augustus, Pearl and Fred Ruggles) had pretty much grown at this point and him and the oldest who went by Gus worked hard to build their new boat (third as I know) the Gypsy Queen, named for the first boat he built, The Gypsy. In between those two the family lived on The Arab. The GQ was made from yellow pine, a good, hard and clean wood for the building. He and Gus built it and gave up everything for the sake "of our beautiful boat," he wrote back to the Crawfordsville papers. Sure you can surmise that boats were also a subject of his art work. Gus was quite an artist in his own right and after marrying (Ella Burton), he had a lucrative sign-making business, but he was always working and studying in medicine with a mad life-time desire to become a physician like his grandfather, but with six children to raise, it wasn't extremely feasible. In later years, Walter ended-back up in Ohio passing away June 28th in 1925 in Cincinnati.

Just last month, Walter hit the news again after all these years with his rendition of Fort Harrison displayed at the new Vigo County Historical Museum. It is a 6' x 8' painting that Allen Shotwell for the Tribune-Star says makes you feel like you're in the old fort's scene. It goes along with an 1890 Weekly Argus article that noted, "He is a man of undoubted talent, whose genius for art is exceptionally great!" More than sure all his travels, his love for the water, sketches and many people he met had a lot to do with his career. For me, sure glad he lived in Crawfordsville and made his mark here, albeit for only about ten years! Rest In Peace, dear man!

