

James Daugherty:

## Through the Artist's Eye

by Kathleen Salak Failla

*"A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature." Ralph Waldo Emerson. (From *Sound of Trumpets*, a selection of Emerson by James Daugherty; 1971, Viking Press, New York, N.Y.)*

James Daugherty helped shape the revolution of American abstract art in the early years of the 20th century. He painted innovative abstractions stressing color as the primary motif. By the time, he moved to Weston in 1923 with his Russian-born wife, Sonia, a writer, and his son, Charles, who was nine years old, Daugherty had already established himself in the art world as a pioneer in the new movement that stressed color rather than objects.

After moving here, he continued to paint. But his work took on a wider dimension, expanding to book illustrations and murals. He wrote and illustrated his first picture book for children, *Andy and the Lion*, in 1938. In 1940, he won the Newbery Medal for *Daniel Boone*.

His son, Charles, who lives in the pre-Revolutionary house his parents bought when they left Greenwich Village to become part of the famous Westport/Weston art colony, sat for an interview in his living room which is filled with his father's work. "As a mature artist myself, I have great admiration for my father as both an artist and a perceptive, compassionate human being," said Charles. He recalled his father as an inspiring, positive force, not only in his life, but in the lives of many he touched personally and through his work.

James Daugherty was as comfortable in front of an audience, as he was in front of his easel. He enjoyed public speaking, and expressed his views on art and literature with enthusiasm and good humor. At one point, he even ran for the state legislature. But only half-heartedly. Charles recalled how the family set out for a cross-country car trip just as his father's friends were placing the artist's name on the ballot as a Democratic candidate. "We stopped some place in Missouri, so he could call. Just to make sure he hadn't won," Charles laughed.

But, no where was there more inspiring than in his work. In addition to painting, he illustrated more than 100 children's books and created giant murals for public buildings. He loved words, particularly the works of the great writers, and the Daugherty's home today is a testimony to that. Walls are lined with shelves, containing not only the artist's books, but that of the literary masters, who influenced him.

In a handwritten autobiography, provided to the *Chronicle Quarterly* by his son, the artist writes of his childhood, noting that books were a source of adventure and comfort. Born in Asheville, N.C., in 1887, he lived first in the Midwest before the family moved to Washington, D.C., where he attended the Corcoran Art School.

His autobiography includes a collec-

tion of free associations through the eye of an artist looking back at his boyhood.

James Daugherty wrote: "Early recollections of an Indiana farm and the rigors of country winters and the little red school house and my dad's saw mill and his singing 'The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze' and other American song boy stuff - also his reading out loud to me Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales.'" All this on the banks of the Wabash."

When the Daughertys moved to Weston, it was to a wood frame house on a dirt road with no name. Much later it became known as Broad Street, located on the Westport/Weston line. The Daughertys could look across a meadow, now Crystal Lake to the manorial home of artist John Held, Jr. (see *Chronicle Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4; Fall 1993)



James Daugherty with son Charles in his studio in 1924.

Jazz Musicians, watercolor and pencil, 29 1/2" x 20" (Detail from painting). →



While Daugherty frequently traveled to New York to visit galleries and meet with publishers, his heart was in Weston. He took solace in the tranquility of country life. He started a hiking club, whose membership included other famous artists, like Ralph L. Boyer, a friend from early days on St. Mark's Place, in New York.

He was very happy here, his son recalled. "He and his artist friends used to go up to Valley Forge and Devil's Den and paint and picnic," he said. During the summer, they would head to Compo.

But, during those long cold, winter nights the artist took comfort in the memories of his boyhood. Sitting by the

tall, fieldstone fireplace, located at the center of the Daugherty home, the artist would spend hours reading to his son. "He read the complete *Ivanhoe* and the works of James Fenimore Cooper. That's how we passed the winter evenings," said Charles, looking out at a snowy landscape.

In the 1920s, the landscape looked quite different. "This corner of Connecticut was quite rural until 30 years ago or so," he said. For example, Crystal Lake, which today, is ringed by expensive homes, was not a lake at all, but a meadow, with a swamp that froze in winter. "We used to ice skate there," Charles said.

Whether it was summer or winter, Daugherty always found time to explore the countryside. But, he couldn't wait to get back to his easel. "His work was for the most part his recreation," said Charles. His two studios are in use today by Charles, a successful painter, and his wife, Lisa, an accomplished sculptor.

"His career was somewhat split - he was always a painter," Charles said. "But after he moved here in 1923, he got more and more into book illustration." When the Great Depression hit, Daugherty was recruited to paint murals, a number of which still survive. Before his death in February 1974, he was working hard as an abstract painter. His works are in the collections of The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of American Art, Yale University, and other major U.S. museums. His son carries on the tradition, not only as a painter, but in encouraging others. For several years, Charles and Lisa have been actively involved in the Weston Cultural Events Committee, which attempts to bring the works of local artists to the attention of their fellow Westonsites.