

Special to the Post-Tribune:

Gary's History on the Auction Block

By Kendall Svengalis

A tragedy is being played out in Gary, as items of great historical value are about to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Peggy Hinckley, Emergency Manager of the Gary Public Schools, with the aid of school department attorney, Tracy Coleman, have unilaterally authorized an auction of 78 pieces of art from the now closed Wirt-Emerson School for the Visual and Performing Arts.

When Peggy Hinckley took over as Emergency Manager, we were led to believe that closed school buildings, like Wirt-Emerson, would be secured from the vandalism and theft that have plagued other closed Gary school buildings over the past forty years. Those hopes have been dashed. In less than two months after its closure, an auction was hastily arranged to dispose of art pieces and items of great historical value from Wirt-Emerson. Who needs vandals when we have school officials eager to jettison Gary's history by conscious design?



**Bust of William A. Wirt, 1874
-1938, Gary's pioneering
school superintendent, by
Emory Seidel**

Granted, most of the items being auctioned in this instance are not historically significant, being mostly student or faculty works. But five items, including a bronze bust of William A. Wirt, Gary's pioneering school superintendent, are also on the auction block. The other items of historical importance include a bronze plaque to Wirt's memory, a William A. Wirt High School Code of Ethics, and two dedicatory plaques for the building, and its East Wing, dated 1939. Bidding on the Wirt bust has drawn the greatest interest.

Although this is classified as a Wirt-Emerson auction, the items in questions are all Wirt High School items. The Emerson art collection was placed in storage in 2008 and before the Emerson School for the Visual and Performing Arts combined with Wirt High School in 2009.

The auction is being conducted by Kraft Auction Services of Valparaiso ("You Name It, We Sell It"), wedged between auctions for farm implements, real estate, and poultry. Only, in this case, it's the residents and former residents of Gary, including school alumni, who will have their history plucked.

Lack of notification

The auction has aroused the ire of both current and former residents of Gary who fume at the insensitivity of the Emergency Manager for authorizing this auction, or at least for a lack of selectivity in choosing what items to put up for auction. The timing is also suspect, as well as the failure to notify people who should have been informed, including local historians, interested citizens, or Steve McShane, co-director of the Calumet Regional Archives, who has spent his career striving to save the region's history from oblivion. Perhaps, that was the intent: to conclude the auction before any knowledgeable persons could mount an objection, or suggest an appropriate place for items of great historical interest.

The auction will net but a miniscule fraction of the \$98 million cumulative debt incurred by the Gary Community School Corporation (GCSC). Yet, we are being told that "everything is on the table." However, there are plenty of items that can be sold to reduce that debt, including closed school buildings, furniture, computers, etc. But Gary's history should not be sacrificed due to mismanagement by successive school administrations, or the complicity of past school boards.

Many of us were pained to see the closure of the Wirt-Emerson School for the Performing Arts, but supported the Emergency Manager's decision to close it because Gary simply cannot support more than one high school. After all, Gary once had a public school enrollment of 48,000 in the mid-1950s, a figure that has fallen to 4,400 today, of which less than 1,000 are high school students. Declining enrollment, underutilized buildings, and financial realities made such a decision inevitable. But Wirt-Emerson's closure and the GCSC's debt are no excuse for scattering Gary's history to the four winds, never to be recovered.

Local Historian Steps in to Save Gary History

Stepping into the breach is a retired IUNW historian who is bidding to rescue at least one of these historic pieces, the William A. Wirt bust, with the intent of donating it to the Calumet Regional Archives or the Gary Public Library. Yet, how ironic is it that the GCSC should auction off an important piece of Gary history so a civic-minded individual can buy it to donate it back to the same city? A number of concerned Gary school alumni are now contributing to his effort so he doesn't have to bear the financial burden alone. We hope other bidders will withdraw.

Common sense would have dictated that these five items be donated to the Calumet Regional Archives first, before proceeding with this auction. Under that scenario, nobody would have objected.

Mayor Wilson-Freeman Temporarily Halts Auction

Fortunately, at the last minute, Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson stepped in and halted the auction because it failed to comply with state statute, after she was informed by heroic First District Councilwoman, Rebecca Wyatt, herself an attorney. Apparently, Ms. Hinckley and her attorney failed to read, or abide by, the statute (IC 6-1.1-20.3-8.5), which clearly provides that the "manager shall provide written notice to the mayor of the city of Gary at least thirty (30) days before selling assets under this subdivision," and further provides that "the emergency manager must confer with the mayor regarding those concerns or objections." The auction's end date has now been moved back to Thursday, September 6. We have every hope that the mayor will follow through and insist that those items of historical value be pulled before the auction concludes.



Gary at Night by Alexis Jean Fournier, acquired by Emerson in 1930 for \$500

oil paintings for the school, with the support of Wirt and school principal, Everett A. Spaulding. As Wirt later indicated in a letter to the Gary Public Schools Art Association: "The money to buy these paintings comes largely from the profits in the school cafeterias. Most of the cafeterias make a profit of less than three-fourths of one cent on each meal served ... The surpluses from the lunches served, if any, are used to purchase pictures for the school whose food department has the surplus. No tax money any time has gone into these purchases."

The Emerson Class of 1920 donated 14 original oil paintings to the school. By 1931, a total of 38 paintings had been donated to the school at a cost of \$14,093.00. Two additional paintings were donated between 1933 and 1939; and three more between 1939 and 1948. A portrait of E.A. Spaulding was donated by the Class of 1949. Classes donated those paintings with the understanding that they would become a permanent addition to their school.

The Threat to the Gary Schools' Historic Art Collection

But this auction portends something far more ominous: a stated desire to auction off the collection of original oil paintings and other art works assembled by the Gary public schools over many years, originally with the blessing and encouragement of William A. Wirt himself. A 1948 published Gary school inventory listed 229 oil paintings, bronzes and other original art works, to which must be added dozens of paintings collected after that date, as well as dozens of prints, etchings, and other items of lesser value.

History of Art in the Gary Schools

The collection of original art began at Emerson, Gary's flagship K-12 school, which opened its doors in 1909. Following Emerson's first art exhibit in 1919, graduating classes began purchasing original



March Storms, Grand Canyon by Carl Hoerman, acquired by Emerson in 1930 for \$500

When the building on East 7th Avenue was closed in 2008, the Emerson collection was moved to the School Service Center. Efforts to examine, or inventory, the collection were repeatedly rebuffed by successive school administrations. The neglect of the art was exacerbated by frequent changes in administration and the subsequent loss of historical memory. Today, only 34 of the 44 original oil paintings at Emerson remain, as well as one gouache on paper reproduction. The portrait of Everett A. Spaulding, for example, who served as Emerson’s principal for 40 years, is among the 10 missing pieces. In 2015, those 35 pieces, along with 80 pieces from other closed Gary schools, were transferred to the Conservation Center in Chicago, to be catalogued, photographed, and stored until a permanent repository could be found.



Peace by Lucy Hartrath, acquired by Jefferson School prior to 1939, purchase price unknown

Many other Gary schools also collected original art. According to the 1948 published inventory, Froebel had 18 original oils, of which only one is accounted for. Horace Mann had 17 pieces, of which only 12 are accounted for. Lew Wallace had 17 items, of which only 9 are accounted for. Roosevelt High School had 47 items, including oil paintings and a collection of 10 Audubon prints. Only one found its way to the Conservation Center. Smaller numbers of original art works were collected by Ambridge (1), Beveridge (6), Edison (4), Franklin (9), Glen Park (8), Jefferson (7), Riley (1), Tolleston (10), and Wirt (7) schools. Only 19 of the 53 pieces from these schools are accounted for.

by art and home economics teachers with the aim of promoting art appreciation and instruction, and maintaining a permanent gallery in the Memorial Auditorium Art Salon. Only 3 of these are now at the Conservation Center. In fact, the bust of William A. Wirt, by noted Chicago sculptor Emory Seidel, now residing at Wirt High School, and now being auctioned, was almost certainly part of the Memorial Auditorium collection, as indicated by the 1948 inventory. Thus, of the total of 229 items listed in the 1948 inventory, only 115 have made their way to the Conservation Center, leaving a total of 114 unaccounted for.

Gary’s Memorial Auditorium also housed 38 art works, including oils, watercolors, casts and bronzes, apparently donated through the auspices of the Gary Public Schools Art Association. That Association was organized in 1925

Gross Mismanagement of the Gary Schools’ Art Collection

The longer a school’s collection remained in the “care” of the Gary Community School Corporation, the greater the likelihood that it would suffer loss or damage. Froebel, the first high school to close, in 1977 (by then a junior high), suffered the loss of almost all its collection. Roosevelt is a special case. Its collection appears to have been loaned, and never returned, a matter that calls for special investigation. This accounting does not include items acquired after 1948. The vast majority of the items now in Chicago were acquired by Gary schools prior to that date. In fact, the entire collection may have totaled more than 300 pieces at one time, including watercolors, prints, etchings, bronzes and casts, nearly 200 of which are now missing.

Greenblatt Steps in to Save What Remains of the Collection

Interestingly, the transfer of the collection to the Conservation Center might never have happened were it not for the intervention of Jerry Greenblatt, an accountant, whose firm was charged with assisting the Gary schools to get their financial affairs in order. Greenblatt, who was doing an inventory of school property, found the art in substandard storage conditions and, as an art aficionado, resolved to do some-



Segovia, Spain by Charles Kilgore, acquired by Emerson in 1930 for \$800



Trail of the Wind by Frank V. Dudley acquired by Emerson in 1925 for \$300

thing about it. He convinced the superintendent and school board to pay for the transfer of 115 of the more significant pieces to the Chicago-based Conservation Center and for the cost of their inventory, storage and photographing. Another 60 pieces of lesser importance were left in Gary. The Distressed Unit Appeals Board (DUAB) is committed to paying storage fees for the foreseeable future until a permanent repository for the collection can be found.

The lack of proper accounting makes it difficult to ascertain how many works of art disappeared from the walls of their schools, or whether they disappeared after being placed in the custody of the GCSC. Rumors abound that items were appropriated by administrators, faculty, staff, or those with access to the storage facilities at the School Service Center. I can say with a high degree of certainty that the Emerson collection was intact when the original building was closed in 2008, including the 15 gouache on paper images of the Holy Grail Series by Edwin Abbey that were hung on the third floor hallway.

Only one of the Holy Grail Series (*The Vision*) made its way to Chicago. The others were allowed to deteriorate in the "care" of the GCSC. What we can say with certainty is that nearly 200 items in all are gone or damaged beyond repair.

Selling Off Gary's History to Pay a Mere Fraction of School Debt

This leads us to the question of whether the Emergency Manager will ignore the wishes of alumni and take the drastic step of sacrificing what's left of this historical legacy to pay for the financial mismanagement of past school administrations. The only appraisal of the collection was conducted years ago and suggested a possible value of \$350,000. But auctions are problematic and the ultimate yield may be far less. If the collection did yield \$350,000 (after deducting auction fees), this would constitute just 1/280th of the GCSC's cumulative debt of \$98 million. If it yielded \$500,000, it would constitute just 1/196th of the cumulative debt.

Restoration Costs Ignored

It's also worth noting that the Conservation Center estimated that it will cost \$330,000 to restore the 115 pieces now in its care to a saleable condition. Bidders at art auctions rarely buy "fixer-uppers," so the collection is unlikely to yield anywhere near what the Emergency Manager thinks it might had she done her homework.

Alumni Interest in the Collection

It also raises the question of the moral, if not legal, claim Gary school alumni have over a collection purchased with their lunch money and donations. Having interviewed nearly a hundred former Gary teachers and students since publication of *Gary, Indiana: A Centennial Celebration*, the question I have been most frequently asked is: "What have they done with our art collection?"

Brauer Art Museum Offers Best Home

Clearly, Gary has neither the facilities or expertise, nor the finances to manage this precious legacy. And, it has repeatedly proven itself incapable of managing it properly or ensuring its safety. If it is to remain in the region, the best venue for its care, preservation, restoration, and display is the Brauer Museum of Art at Valparaiso University. Just 22 miles from Gary, the Brauer has the



Lumberville by E. W. Redfield, acquired by Emerson in 1931 for \$2,600

climate-controlled storage space, as well as the attractive gallery space to mount exhibitions of the collection. Keeping the collection intact and in the region will allow Gary school alumni and area residents to once again appreciate this marvelous collection, long-hidden from public view. It will also serve as an impetus for fundraising for restoration efforts. Moreover, Gregg Hertzlieb, the Museum's director, has expressed to Gary school alumni his eagerness to accept, preserve and display the collection.

There are many more stakeholders in this issue than the Emergency Manager, DUAB, and present Gary school officials. Thousands of Gary alumni have a stake in seeing that this collection is preserved for posterity, and not used as fodder to pay off debts for which they bear no responsibility. After all, where would we be as a civilization if, every time a governmental entity experienced financial challenges, its first thought was to sell off its history?

After years of neglect by the GCSC, the Emergency Manager, working with the Distressed Unit Appeals Board, has a golden opportunity to do the right thing and move the art collection to a permanent home where it can be enjoyed and appreciated by future generations. It's just a matter of time before Gary's original high school buildings are just piles of rubble. Only the art collection will remain to remind us that the Gary schools were once a shining educational example to the nation. Let's hope they do the right thing.

A Gary native, historian Kendall Svengalis is president of Duneland Press and author of *Gary, Indiana: A Centennial Celebration* and the historical novel *The Great Emerson Art Heist*. Although he left Northwest Indiana many years ago, he never lost his love for Gary and the Calumet Region.