

Behind the Paintings at St. Matthews

By Cory Ritterbusch

For the past three generations, Shullsburg citizens have been told that the remarkable fourteen Stations of the Cross at St. Matthews Church were painted by “an impoverished artist.” One who was paid in exchange for food and lodging. A fun story which incites wonder. However, like many local legends, it is not true but rather a whimsical vehicle to promote appreciation. Luckily, truth is often stranger than fiction and perhaps the real story around the paintings at St. Matthews provokes more amazement than the repeated falsity. In the *History of St. Matthews Church* written by Raymond Jamieson for the Parish Centennial in 1935, it states:

“In the fall of 1898, the stations were painted by a talented but impoverished artist who boarded with the rector. In addition to room and board, he received for his work the munificent sum of \$670 which has been donated by various organization and individuals of the parish. These stations, life-size oil paintings, aside from their religious significance, are beautiful and valuable works of art. Masterfully executed, faithful as to detail they depict in a vivid and profoundly moving way the agonizing march to cavalry and crucifixion of our Lord.”

Albeit well-articulated by Jamieson, it is not true and one would have wished that someone would have examined Station #13 more closely. The legend continued when printed in the more accessible and popular, *The Sesquicentennial History of Shullsburg Wisconsin*, forty years later in 1977. Jameison’s inaccurate history was cited, in verbatim, thus cementing the legend of the “impoverished artist” story. Locals would add that he was “starving” and “worked for food.” Station of the Cross number 13 clearly depicts the artists name and date as, “J. Vittur 1898.” Furthermore, Vittur cleverly painted himself, as a painter, in station number one. Joseph Vittur (1853 – 1910),

was an Austrian born artist who was at the peak of his output in 1898 working for Catholic parishes throughout the Midwest from Ohio to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and providing the highest quality of work in the field. Most notably in Ohio and Chicago. His known surviving works closely resemble the beautiful pieces gracing the walls at St. Matthews. The ghostly white Jesus figure, like at St. Matthews, is also used in his other works. According to Fr. David Hoying, archivist of the Congregation Pretiosissimi Sanguinis, in Cincinnati says, “he was one of the most recognized “copyist artists” of his era.” Thus using material from previous works whether in whole or in part or combination. He was also called “The Rembrandt of America.” The 670 dollars that was paid to Vittur for the Stations of the Cross in 1898 would be around 20,000 dollars today. This does not seem to be a sum commanded by someone who is “impoverished” or reduced to poverty even if the sum was “munificent.” Vittur owned a comfortable home on Chicago’s Northwest Side.

So where does the “impoverished artist” story come from?

The only other paintings at St. Matthews grace both upper sides of the Sanctuary. Both identical in size, mural-like and large. The left piece, an image depicting an angel and a dove like bird shining down on an illuminating Mary like woman. The right piece, depicting Jesus on the cross.

Referring back to Jamieson’s 1935 *History of St. Matthews* he noted that in 1893 the interior of the church was “entirely decorated for the first time” with a dedication mass held on September 21st to honor the completion. Mrs. Catherine Lee was able to confirm the date to Jamieson personally at the time as it was the day her Son Hugh was born. Today, Hugh’s grave

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in Evergreen Cemetery confirms this. In one of the few surviving pictures from the interior of the Church from the Fr. Kinsella era we see two very crude paintings gracing the sanctuary. Appearing more rustic than they do today. Similar images but obviously altered. The left scene more altered than the right. Jameison continues noting that “The interior of the church was beautifully decorated again in 1914 by Jacob C. Schmitz and associated artists from Milwaukee.” The Schmitz team was one of many crack crews that made a living decorating churches with the highest skill available during the era.

Ernest Hüpeden, was a German artist who arrived in Southwest Wisconsin around 1890. As a traveling artist, he was well known for working in exchange for lodging and meals. He was a painter of murals, landscapes and portraits. Little is known of Hüpeden but he was known to have worked in neighboring Grant, Richland, Sauk and Crawford counties before arriving in Valton, where he completed his magnum opus, *The Enchanted Forest*, between 1899 and 1901. As late as 1910 he was still a known starving artist traveling by hitching trains and living in Viroqua. Dying in 1911 he was buried in a pauper’s grave. His legend grew over time due to his profound work, *The Enchanted Forest*. A tourist attraction in Valton today. In 1893 he would have been in his travelling peak and the probability of this including Shullsburg is very possible.

Pictures from post-1914 St. Matthews show these two paintings as more professional than that of the previous image with Father Kinsella pre-1908. Could Hüpeden been the “impoverished artist” who did the two upper sanctuary paintings in 1893, not in 1898, and later re-done by Jacob Schmitz crew in 1914?

The pre-1908 image of the interior resembles a folksiness style very similar to Hüpeden’s work. Likely they became too bucolic for the church after the more refined Vittur paintings were completed and the new stunning altar was added. The exquisite stained glass windows in 1907 and after the prominent steeple was built in 1909. Hüpeden’s work likely would have looked too rustic by the time the Schmitz crew arrived from Milwaukee in 1914. Schmitz and his crew would certainly have had the talent to enhance and tastefully

raise the standard set by Vittur 16 years earlier. The two upper sanctuary works today are simply enhanced versions of Hüpeden originals.

The truth behind the “starving artist” legend has been sitting on the canvas of Station Numbers 13 and 1 since 1898. The story was likely lost in translation up to 1935 and has remained stuck in time ever since. The true artist of “The Stations” was remarkable, but not starving, and has an interesting story himself. However, two other works may have likely been executed by one of Wisconsin’s most celebrated folk artists. This should further solidify the importance of St. Matthews as a treasure of painted art and one that was likely a stop in the interesting journey of Ernest Hüpeden.

— Cory J. Ritterbusch, 2020

About Ernest Hüpeden:

Self-taught artist Ernest Hüpeden worked throughout southern Wisconsin, often exchanging his paintings for lodging and meals. He painted murals, landscapes, and portraits. An itinerant artist he immigrant from Germany, sailed from Hamburg to New York City in 1889, after being imprisoned for eight years for a crime he maintained he didn’t commit. Hüpeden made his way from the eastern seaboard to Wisconsin, walking and painting, to subsist room and board. Eventually arriving in Valton, Wisconsin, he became known for his murals and his paintings on furniture and household items such as bottles and pie pans.

Hüpeden created his tour de force, a large-scale mural covering the walls and ceiling of a lodge belonging to the Modern Woodmen of America (MWA). He worked on the mural from 1899 to 1901. In Wisconsin, Hüpeden spent time in the towns of Baraboo, Cazenovia, Hillsboro, Hub City, Ironton, LaFarge, LaValle, Plattville, West Lima, and Yuba before arriving in Valton, where the Modern Woodmen of America (the town’s fraternal organization) were looking for a painter to decorate their newly built lodge.

Hüpeden died in Valton in 1911 but lives on in the community through *The Painted Forest* and the many paintings he did for residents and businesses. Today his work is celebrated through the efforts of the Kohler Foundation and the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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About Joseph Vittur:

Vittur was born in 1853 in the village of San Cassiano, in South Tyrol, in what is now northern Italy but then was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. “There was an artistic heritage in that area, a tradition of artisan work: painting, carving, sculpting.” Showing artistic talent, he was sent to Vienna (possibly the Vienna Academy of Arts) to study art.

Vittur met his wife, Franziska Sim, in Vienna. He began to paint for a living to earn additional money for his growing family, he agreed to act as a sales agent for a new type of bullet that a friend of his had invented. That drew unwanted attention from the French government, and Vittur decided to immigrate to the United States. His family followed later.

He was aboard the La Touraine when it departed for America in 1893. During the crossing he met Fr. Paulinus Trost, C.P.P.S. a priest and painter who had studied art in Munich. They became friends and Fr. Trost gave him a letter of introduction that helped him find work in Chicago at several churches including Notre Dame de Chicago where his painting of biblical scenes fills the 2000-square foot dome.

Vittur became one of the most recognized “copyist artists” of his era, according to Fr. David Hoying, C.P.P.S. the province’s archivist. “A copyist painter is one who does not compose his own paintings, but uses subjects from other artists, either in whole, in part, or in combination,” he said. “Fr. Trost was also a copyist painter, for the most part.”

Vittur was a man of many talents. He was an artist but also had a gift for language. Ladin, a Romance language not to be confused with Latin, was the language of his birth, but he could also speak Italian, French and German... “If he was painting in a French church, he spoke French. In a German church, he spoke German.” In 1904 Vittur left his wife and moved to Cleveland and apparently went “insane.” In 1908, he was called back to his wife in Chicago and admitted into a mental institution. He died at Elgin, IL in 1910.

About Raymond Jamieson:

Raymond Jamieson was born in Shullsburg in 1901, the grandson of Scots Irish immigrants who settled there in 1869. His father was a prosperous Shullsburg merchant, banker and political leader. Graduating the University of Wisconsin in 1922 with a degree in English, Ray moved to New York’s Greenwich Village, where he found work as an actor in one of the first talking films. He lived there eight years working as a writer and actor. With noted Swedish playwright Hans Alin, he translated seven plays from the Swedish, adapting them for stage and screen. In 1930 he left to pursue his work as a dramatist in Europe, but was called home to Shullsburg with the death of his father, retired president of the Wisconsin bankers’ association. Jamieson wrote a history of St. Matthew’s Church at its hundredth anniversary in 1935.

An amateur historian and ‘old house enthusiast’, Ray Jamieson had an active interest in historical preservation. In 1937 he carried out one of the first restorations of a Cornish house at Pendarvis in Mineral Point, which he used as a cottage. A decade later he restored an 1845 miner’s cottage on Church Street in Shullsburg, which he made his home.

In 1943, he entered into partnership with Lloyd Rooney to purchase the historic Berry Tavern 3 miles south of Shullsburg. He was working as a utility company bookkeeper with an office in the same building as Rooney, the former bank (now the Water Street Pub). When Rooney left to serve in Europe during and after the war, Jamieson assumed full responsibility for managing the Berry farm and other properties. Rooney never returned to Shullsburg.

After the war Jamieson helped launch the Southwest Wisconsin Scenic Association to promote historical tourism in the old legion region, serving as the organization’s vice president. Prominent citizen, community activist, linguist, literatus, historical preservationist and Badger Historical Society of Shullsburg founder. William Raymond Jamieson passed away in 1989.