

*THE ALPINE SUN SPOT SHOPPER – February 6, 2014*  
*Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society*

**JUSTIN GRUELLE'S EARLY BIRDS MURAL**

Justin Gruelle was an artist whose work encompassed many areas--and, he lived in Alpine. His works included watercolors and oils, landscapes and portraits, cartoons, magazine covers, covers for sheet music, children's books, and huge murals--many commissioned under the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s. Justin and his family moved to Alpine in 1955 and purchased a home and studio on Lilac Lane where he lived until his death in 1978. Many of his later works depicted Alpine scenes and appeared on the family's annual Christmas cards.

One of his most famous works was the Early Birds Mural, a seven-foot-by-eighteen-foot oil on canvas. This wonderful piece has quite an interesting history and, thanks to the efforts of Justin's nephew, Bill Smart, now belongs to the Indiana Historical Society. At the time of Justin's death the whereabouts of this masterpiece was unknown and it was his dying wish that it be located so that it could be enjoyed by future generations. Bill Smart devoted many years to his search and, in 2002, located the mural and eventually was able to bring it home to Justin's birthplace, Indiana.

Bill Smart will travel from his home in Florida to speak at the February meeting of the Alpine Historical Society. He has many memories of Alpine's famous artist that he will share for those in attendance. Examples of Justin Gruelle's works will also be on display and truly depict the diversity of his talent.

The Early Birds of Aviation, Inc., was an organization of aeronautical pioneers who flew solo before December 17, 1916--the thirteenth anniversary of the Wright Brothers' flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. In 1940, aviation pioneer Clarence A. deGiers commissioned his friend Justin Gruelle to paint four murals for the Long Island City, New York, headquarters of the Liquidometer Corporation. Liquidometer Corporation, founded by deGiers after World War I, marketed patents for measuring fuel in aircraft. One of these murals was The Early Birds which contains the portraits of many aviation pioneers as well as their aircraft. Justin was very concerned with detail and historical accuracy and spent many hours ensuring the murals were factual. Sadly, it is unknown what happened to the other three murals.

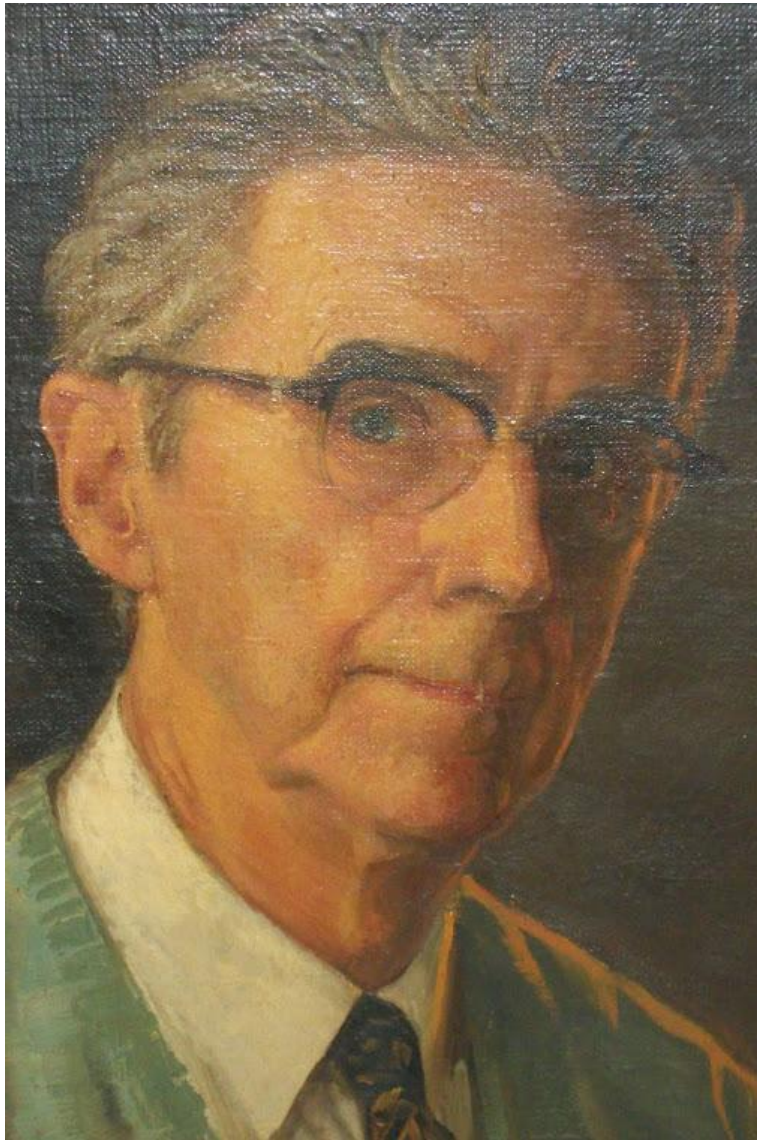
In 1955, deGiers presented the Early Birds mural to the western headquarters of the Institute of the Aeronautical Sciences in Los Angeles. He invited Justin to go to Los Angeles to supervise its installation and to paint a new panel to fill in an area on the mural that had been damaged because it was wrapped around a doorway in its original location. The IAS headquarters later moved to San Diego and the mural moved with it.

In 1969, deGiers gave the mural to the Smithsonian Institution for installation in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The Early Birds of Aviation, Inc., held a reunion there in October 1970 and the mural was displayed in the North Hall, just beyond the left wing of the Spirit of St. Louis, the most prominent location in the museum. It was removed from display when the new Air and Space Museum was being built and, because of its size, was not displayed in the new museum. That's when Justin lost track of his masterpiece.

If you'd like to learn more about the end of this story and much, much more about Alpine's famous artist, plan to attend the meeting on February 16, 2014. It will be held at the Alpine Woman's Club, 2156 Alpine Boulevard, from 1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m. A catered lunch will be provided, the cost is \$8 for adults and \$5 for children and students. All are encouraged to attend; however, reservations are required by February 12, 2014. Please call Carol Morrison at 619-445-2544 or e-mail [info@alpinehistory.org](mailto:info@alpinehistory.org) to make your reservation.

*Source: Bruce Johnson, Indiana Historical Society (<http://earlyaviators.com/emural.htm>)*

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Justin Gruelle - A Self-Portrait