AN UNLIKELY CANVAS

By Jim Noles

MUCH MORE THAN DISTANCE separates the small southern Alabama town of Luverne and the skyscraping skyline of New York City. Gotham's five boroughs, for example, boast the corporate headquarters of Citigroup, Philip Morris, and Merrill Lynch. The county seat of Crenshaw County, on the other hand, proudly claims to be home to Sister Schubert's Homemade Rolls and "the World's Largest Peanut Boil." In New York the mighty Hudson and East Rivers pour into one of the world's finest harbors, while in Luverne, the languid Patsaliga barely floats a canoe. And Luverne's twenty-five hundred residents could easily fit in just one of Manhattan's towering office buildings.

Nevertheless, the mighty Big Apple and modest Alabama town share at least one tie: a larger-than-life mural hanging in Luverne's old brick post office. But what could this painting of two farmers, their faithful mule, and a wagonful of cotton share with New York City? The answer, like that post office's roots, lies in the Great Depression.

The Great Depression arrived in Luverne and found a town whose residents needed only two-digit telephone numbers to call one another. Mule-drawn wagons made the rounds on dirt streets to deliver ice to waiting housewives. And the town's sole police car, usually parked outside the local drug store, doubled as the police station for Luverne's solitary lawman.

But as the Great Depression wore on, Luverne's bucolic veneer frayed. Two and a half decades of battles with the insidious boll weevil coupled with a creeping agricultural recession were already weighing heavily on the county's cotton farmers when distant Wall Street crashed. In the words of one observer, the Great Depression hit Alabama "at a bad time when things were already awful." Still, though his regency was threatened and his subjects went barefoot, Cotton remained king—at least for the time—in Crenshaw County.

Crenshaw County's besieged cotton farmers were not the only ones hammered by the Depression. Americans in every field of endeavor, including artists and sculptors, felt its heavy hand. But some of the lucky ones found themselves the beneficiaries of New Deal programs intended to lighten that burden. One of these beneficiaries was the Treasury Section of Fine Arts, or more simply "the Section."

At the time, the U.S. Treasury Department was responsible for the construction of federal buildings such as courthouses and post offices. In turn, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts commissioned some of the leading artists of the day to create art for the new buildings. In the case of a post office, an artist could expect to make around $750, less expenses, to decorate the roughly twelve-by-five-foot

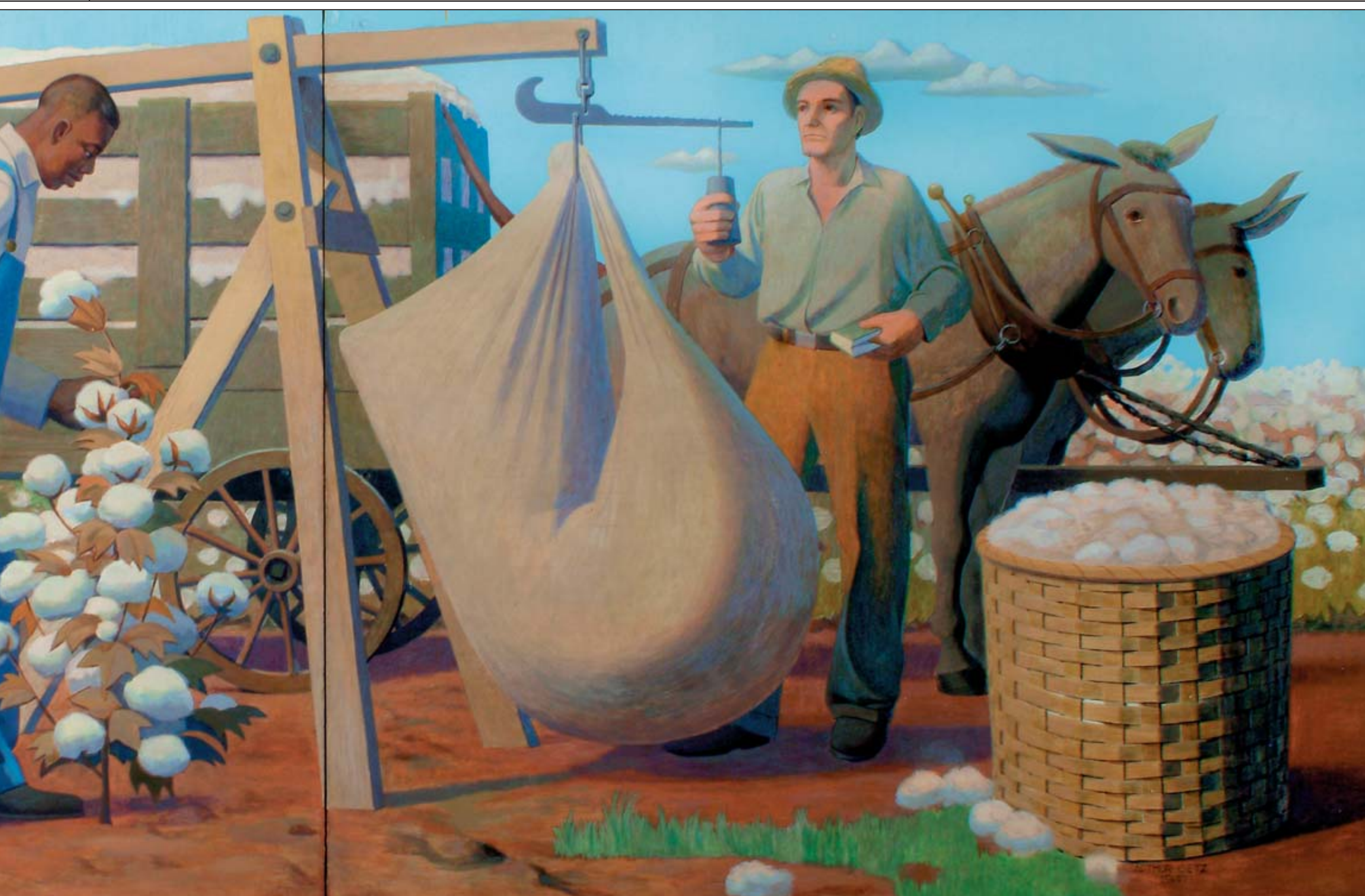
space above the postmaster's office door. In the depths of the Depression, this was good money indeed. Dozens of artists, including a young fellow named Arthur Getz, vied for the Section's commissions.

A native of Passaic, New Jersey, Getz had joined the merchant marine after high school. After a year at sea, he attended Pratt Institute, Brooklyn's prestigious school of fine and applied art, graduating with honors in 1934. But with New York firmly in the Depression's grip, Getz struggled to find work as an artist. For a time, he considered returning to sea. His mother, however, knew that her son's true calling lay elsewhere and, to foil such plans, she destroyed his merchant marine papers.

Stranded on land, Getz eventually opened an art studio in Manhattan on West 22nd Street. The studio was located in a loft over its landlord, a fast food entrepreneur named "Jimmie the Greek." Jimmie's food left much to be desired, but his tenants included an art supply shop that provided the gesso panels Getz used for painting. Another piece of good fortune came in the form of the studio's fireplace, which he and his friends used for heat during the cold winter months. For firewood, they scavenged wooden pallets from gutters fronting local warehouses.

In 1936 Getz succeeded in selling his first spot drawings to the *New Yorker*. His first *New Yorker* cover was printed for the magazine's July 23, 1938, issue. That same year, Getz garnered his first Section commission, a mural for the Lancaster, New York, post office. Three years later, in 1941, Getz received a second commission, this one for the post office in Bronson, Michigan. Meanwhile, he submitted another design for the post office in North Bergen, New Jersey, only to be met with rejection. In the wake of that rejection and in the teeth of a draft notice, Getz submitted a preliminary design for the post office in distant Luverne, Alabama.

In homage to King Cotton, Getz's proposed mural depicted two men harvesting cotton beside a mule-



Beginning in the late 1930s, the Treasury Section of Fine Arts selected artists to decorate post offices across the country. Though Arthur Getz's mural "Cotton Field" reflects the heritage and history of Luverne, it was painted on panels in Getz's New York studio and mailed to Alabama. (Photo by Lacy Robinson.)

***Above:** Though he would later enjoy success as a commercial illustrator and a fine artist, Getz struggled to make ends meet through the Great Depression. Here, Getz stands beside his self-portrait. (Courtesy Sarah Getz.)* ***Right:** No other artist contributed as many cover illustrations to the* New Yorker *as Arthur Getz—213 over a span of fifty years. (Courtesy the* New Yorker.*)*

drawn cart. Edward B. Rowan, the assistant chief of the Section, liked the idea—"rather appealing in its simplicity," he declared—and awarded Getz the Luverne contract on September 17, 1941. Still, he cautioned Getz of the challenge he seemed poised to undertake. "I wish to warn you," Rowan wrote, "that if you undertake a theme of cotton it will be necessary for you to acquaint yourself thoroughly with the appearance of the cotton plant as the individuals using this post office will be especially observant on this point."

Fortunately, Getz counted among his friends and fellow artists a young lady from Spartanburg, South Carolina. "Through research and the opinion of southern-born painters I know this design is authentic," he assured the Section. Working on two gesso panels with casein tempera as his medium, Getz finished his mural in March of 1942.

Within two weeks of completing the painting, which he christened, "Cotton Field," and sending it to Luverne for installation, Citizen Getz became Private Getz, United States Army. He soon obtained another type of commission—this one as a lieutenant in the field artillery.

Meanwhile, Luverne's postmaster carefully installed the two panels comprising "Cotton Field" in the lobby of his post office, a modest brick building standing in the shadow of the Luverne Baptist Church. Writing to Rowan, the postmaster declared, "We all are very much pleased with it and complimented very high[ly] by the public." Rowan dutifully passed his compliments on to Getz.

After the war Getz returned to New York, where he resumed painting and providing cover artwork for the *New Yorker*. By the time he provided his last cover to the *New Yorker* in 1988, over two hundred of his paintings had graced the front of the magazine. Other illustrations could be found adorning the pages of magazines ranging from *Readers Digest* and *Consumer Reports* to *Esquire* and the *New Republic*.

As the years passed, Getz moved to Connecticut and developed into far more than simply a magazine illustrator. With what he called his "fine art," he carved out a reputation as a talented painter. Today his paintings and drawings can be found from New York to Tel Aviv, in collections ranging from the Library of Congress to those of Ed Koch and John Updike—and even in the home of the world's largest peanut boil.

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