

Artist of the Month Harry Sonntag

Story by Rachel R. Peine

You won't see Harry Sonntag painting scenes of Key Largo, Rock Harbor and Tavernier these days. In fact, without a few "coincidences", you may never have been able to see his work at all. But his paintings are on display at the Key Largo Art Gallery today, thanks to some persistent detective work by Chuck Faulkner, who's been researching Sonntag's life and work since 1992.

Chuck is doing a presentation about Harry Sonntag's life and work on Monday, May 12 at 7:00 PM for the Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys, at the Key Largo Library in Tradewinds Plaza. This is definitely one event not to miss. Original paintings will be on display, along with a slide show and lecture about the collection.

Sonntag's striking watercolors create a visual history of Key Largo and Tavernier in the 1950s, including the local fishing industry of the time, the original Rusty's Tavernier Marina, and the Mandalay. In addition to the beauty of these scenes, Chuck's discovery of Sonntag's lost work seems guided by a mystical hand.

The trail started when Chuck and his friend Frank were buying and selling collectibles. Since they were always on the lookout for interesting items, they pulled over at a storage building where they saw a woman cleaning out her unit. They offered to buy a few things, and she gave them a few paintings. Then she said, "Here, take this bag, too." The bag turned out to have 170 paintings by Harry Sonntag; photographs of Harry, his home and garden; and newspaper

clippings from 1955. There's the first "coincidence". If Chuck had passed by 30 minutes later, it all would have been in the trash.

That bag had been sitting in the storage unit since 1960, when the owners returned from vacation in St. Thomas. They had stayed at a rooming house and found the paintings under their bed. The landlord wasn't interested in them, so the



Photo used with permission of Chuck Faulkner.

couple took the paintings back home to Central Florida.

Perhaps they planned to display them or sell them, but 32 years passed before the paintings came to light again. Once Chuck saw Harry's work, he was hooked. Starting with the newspaper clippings he started piecing together the life of the "hermit artist of Key Largo".

Sonntag arrived in Key Largo around 1950, after leaving Pratt Institute of Art in New York City and hitchhiking around the country. All he wanted to do was paint. He lived in a shack he put together a little north of the Mandalay, and he ate fish and whatever he could grow in his

garden. He painted and sold his paintings in an abandoned packing shed that he named the Key Largo Art Gallery, where Anthony's clothing store stands today. As he said to a visitor, "To me, this is Utopia. Here I am free - with no machines, no clocks - no pressure from society. I paint what I feel and live as I can." After the building burned down in 1955, Harry disappeared, and so did

friends. Lyda had saved a collection of photographs Jim took of Harry's home, studio, and garden, which she gave to Chuck. The photo of Harry in front of the gallery is one of Jim's.

Lyda also gave Chuck a typewritten story she wrote for an English class. It's a treasure as a portrait of Harry. The quotation above is from that story. Here's coincidence #2. Six weeks after meeting Chuck, Lyda died. If Chuck's exhibit had been six weeks later, this connection wouldn't have occurred. But some force wanted Harry Sonntag's paintings preserved. Lyda reinforced this thought in her story, saying, "He seemed to think there was a supernatural being caring for him and helping him to create beauty for posterity. His whole life was dedicated to that idea."

Against all odds, Harry Sonntag's work survived for posterity, and his paintings show the beauty of this area in a lost era. His paintings can be seen at the "new" Key Largo Art Gallery, in Plaza 103, across from John Pennekamp park. The Gallery is open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 AM to 5 PM. There's also a reception on the last Friday of the month from 6-8 PM. Phone - 451-0052.

Chuck's website, featuring Harry Sonntag is www.wetinc-art.com. You'll see Harry's paintings and also Jim Hadley's photographs. You can reach Chuck at 407-847-2315.

By the way, next time you're at the Pilot House, check out the display of Harry's work - inside, on the back wall behind the piano. You'll want to know more about the "hermit artist" whose paintings were saved by "chance".

The Ghost Ships in the Upper Keys

By Rich Peine

It was a slow Monday evening. I was sipping a brew at Gilbert's, listening to Linda Noyes sing. A pod of dolphins was playing just off the dock. A Keys picture if there ever was one. Linda (Coconut Telegraph's entertainer of the month for January) took a break, and we got to talking.

A few years ago, she was out sailing early in the morning with her boyfriend Dan and her daughter Samantha on Dan's 28 ft. Morgan. They were in the area of Tavernier Key. The sun had just about risen when they got stuck in the shallows. Repeated attempts to get the boat free were to no avail, so by the end of the day they decided to row ashore. It was dark by that time, and with Dan doing the rowing they headed back to the Tavernier Creek Marina.

As Linda looked back toward their stranded boat, she was startled to see two translucent sailboats about four miles away. They were very bright with an iridescent glow about them. Both were two masted and around 40 to 50 feet. Her daughter saw them, too, plus an additional ship. Dan peered into the darkness but didn't see anything and wrote it off.

Dan dropped Linda and Samantha off and rowed back to the boat, since he didn't want to leave it unattended overnight. As he headed out, he realized the women hadn't been hallucinating. One of the "Ghost

Ships" appeared ahead of him. He tried to catch up with it, but it always seemed to stay an equal distance from him - about 3 to 4 miles away.

The next day Linda started asking some of the local captains if anyone had ever seen these glowing ships. She was questioning her sanity. One of the captains said, "You're OK; I've seen them too." Another captain verified the sighting as well.

History records many wrecks off Conch Reef. Do we have the souls of drowned crewmen still trying to get their ships off the reef, or is this a natural phenomenon? Strange that a natural formation would look like a ship. I don't know, but if anyone out there can shed some light on this mystery, please contact me at the Coconut Telegraph. We want to hear your story.

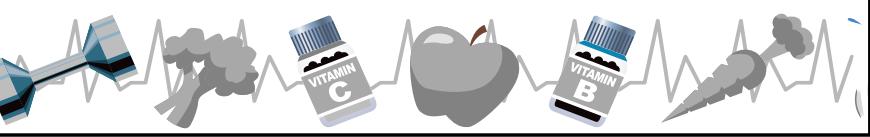
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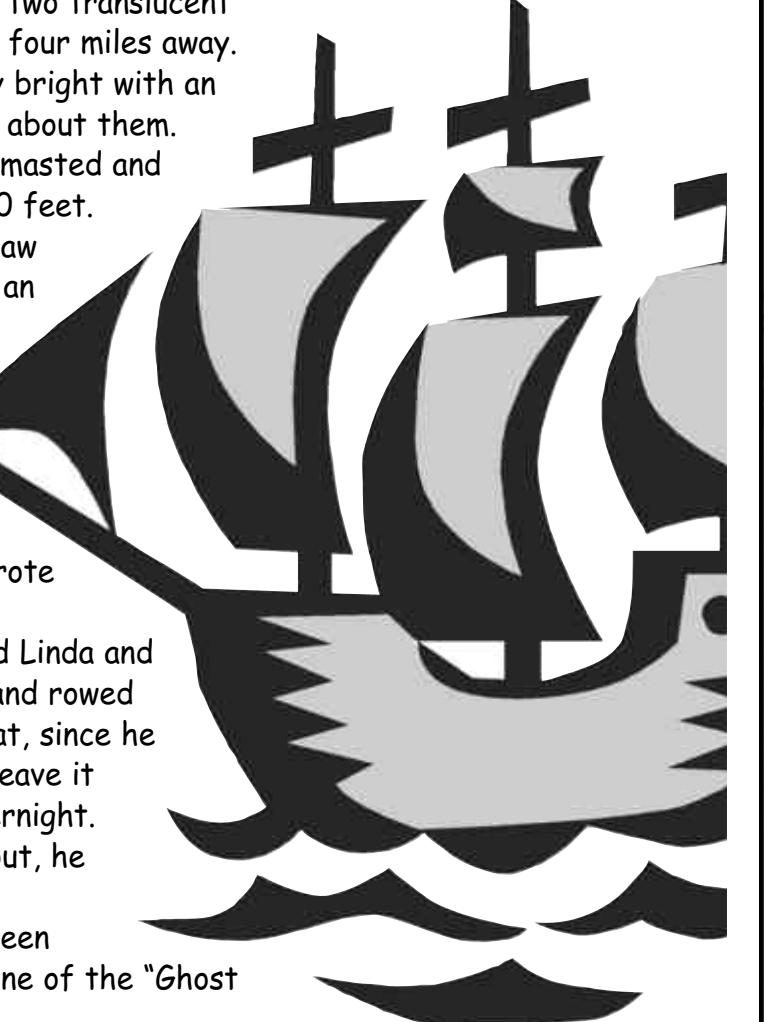
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