

# Scenic Artist Oral History Project:

A heritage explored and recovered

by Karen L. Maness and Richard M. Isackes

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—Wilbur Ferrell

In a world where the practice of Scenic Art is undergoing dynamic change, the Scenic Artists must act, by virtue of personal style and sensibility, as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Irrespective of the advances in technology, it is the living artist in direct contact with the image that ensures the humanity of the practice and its products. In the words of Edvard Munch, "The camera will never compete with the brush and palette until such time as photography can be taken to Heaven and Hell." To understand our future it is essential that we remember and understand our past, and an important part of this history is the legacy of training, wherein the master artists of each generation teach those who follow them. By honoring this legacy we will ensure both the spirit and standards of the craft.

This summer marked the sixth visit by Karen Maness to Los Angeles, where much of this history has been revealed in interviews with Scenic Artists for the Art Directors Guild's Scenic Artist Oral History project. The following artists have been interviewed to date: Wilbur Ferrell, Chris Koon, Pat DeGreve, Denis Olsen, Michael Denering, Ron Strang, Ed Strang, John Moffitt, Gary Coakley, Chris Coakley, Joe Francuz, Bill Anderson, Don MacDonald, Don Hanson, John Stewart, Gary Thomas, Jim Katranis, Marion Dies, Bridget Duffy, Marian Westall, Andy MacPhee, Pietro Palladini, Eddie Martinez, Terry Peterson and Francine West.

Through research, family documents, stories and interviews, co-authors Karen Maness and Richard Isackes are documenting the contributions and influence of Hollywood's most accomplished Scenic Artists, including George Gibson, Ben Carré, F. Wayne Hill, Harry Tepker, Clem Hall, Bill McConnell, Verne Strang, Ben Tipton, Art Rider, Leo Atkinson, Bob Oberbeck, Jim Dobson, Duncan Alanson Spencer, John H. Coakley, Bill Jekel, Clark Provins, Michael Provins, Jerry Gebr, Gordon Butcher, Benjamin Resella, Warren Ferrell, Hans Burkhardt, Bob Woolfe, Marvin DeChellis, Les Grimes and Eric Obregon.

**Wilbur Ferrell (on right) and Clark Provins (left) painting a backing for BONANZA (from the Wilbur Ferrell Collection)**





This page, top: Benjamin Resella (on right) and Bob Oberbeck (left) laying out the drawing for an ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER backing. (from the Benjamin Resella Family Collection) Right: From left, Warren Ferrell, Jimmy Finger, Bob Oberbeck, Jake Henshaw and Gordon Butcher working at Warner Bros. Studio; Clem Hall is painting in the background. (from the Strang Family Collection) Opposite page: F. Wayne Hill (on left) and Duncan Allanson Spencer (right) painting the Grand Canyon mural for Disneyland's steam train ride in 1954. (from the Bill Anderson Collection)

The education of these artists was varied. Most of the earliest Hollywood Scenic Artists came from theater and many trained in the great scene painting studios of New York, Europe and England. Some in the next generation had the opportunity to work alongside the master painters of the Golden Age, such as those who were trained in the MGM scene painting shop under George Gibson's strict supervision, where end-of-day critiques

and plein-air painting trips on the weekends were required. Gordon Butcher remembers, "Do you want to learn how to draw trees? Go out and draw trees. Want to learn how to paint trees? Go out and paint trees. Hell no, you could not get that out of a god dang book." Others learned their techniques by restoring and replicating backdrops painted by prior generations or by apprenticing with elder Scenic Artists in other



studios. Whatever the path, the young artist in this system started at the bottom washing buckets and only by slow observation and hard work acquired the necessary technical skill to become a journeyman artist. Scenic Artist Gary Coakley, co-founder and past president of J.C. Backings observed, "I have graduates from art schools and other very good artists who come here and say, 'I can do that.' I try to explain to them that, 'Yes eventually you probably could, but it's going to take you a good seven years before you can do it on your own.' And they don't believe me."

The purpose of this article is to share with the reader some of the interviews given by elder statesmen of the industry where, in their own words, they reflect upon what influenced their careers.

**Mike Denering remembers his days with J.C. Backings at the Fox Studio where they also rented the scenic backings. When the backings were returned, they often needed repair and touching up.**

"There were thousands of backings that went back to King Kong. They would put these things up and you would work on them and you had to understand what originally was done. You had to tie it in so you wouldn't make it look like it was tied in. It had to be fixed without showing. So you had to deconstruct how the process was [done]. For someone to have that opportunity to see each backing...it really taught you more than you could possibly imagine."

**Ron Strang talks about some of the artists who trained him.**

One of the best in the business was Duncan Spencer, who went by the name of D. Allanson Spencer. He came from MGM, and was working at Warner's for a while—he showed me a lot of things. He worked very effortlessly. What he did was magnificent and it came with such ease that I was really influenced [by him]. He taught me lots of tricks. Made things go easier, faster and better. He taught me how to paint bricks in buildings with a big brush; everybody else was doing it with little tiny brushes, the effect was actually better with the bigger brush, and faster.



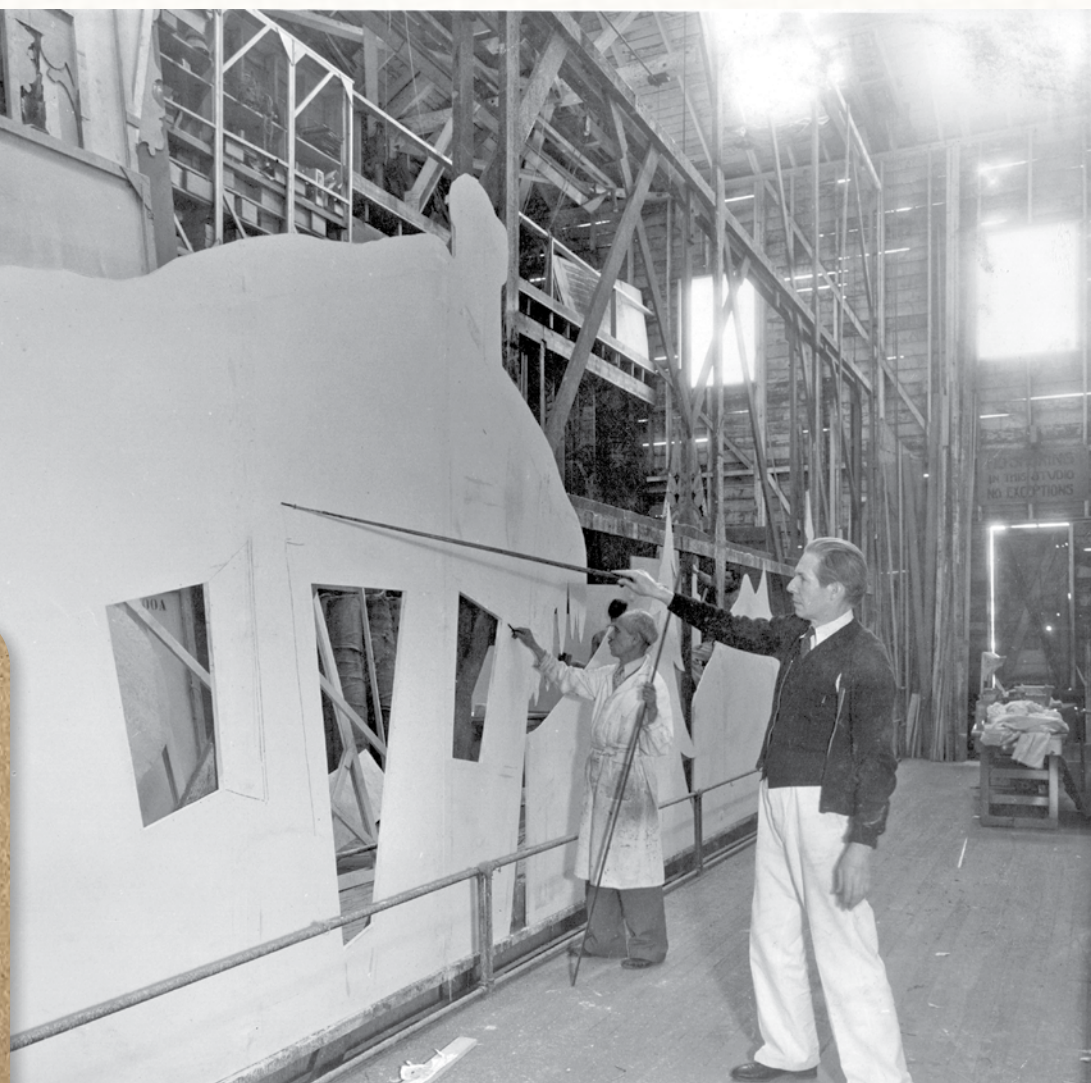
Then Clark Provins was at MGM. He had a tremendous knowledge of the scenic business. The whole business: the perspective, the painting techniques; Clark was one of the best. He told me that there was a guy, by the name of Ben Carré, at MGM, a little French guy that came from France pretty early in the game, you know what you're really missing is good drawing. He knew all the theory of doing perspective mechanically and mathematically, and they concentrated on getting really good, accurate drawing that you would get in nature, and then transferred to the set on the soundstage. Clark thought that Carré's contributions were exceptional.

Clark was a prince. He liked to share knowledge and he had a lot of knowledge.

**"John Coakley—and most people knew this if they worked around him—was a guy who could just step up to the palette with a Dutch brush and put one color in one side, and one color on the other, kind of mush it together a little bit, walk up to the drop and paint a picture."**



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Clark shared his knowledge of perspective, the camera work has different lenses, and I did not understand quite how that worked. He said, “If the picture is the same, it’s exactly the same because you are standing in exactly the same spot. He said the only difference is if you’ve got the long lens in, it’s going to crop it and you’re not going to see as much of the picture. You are just going to see the part that telephotos up, so the perspective is identical.” And I’ve never forgot that. Another trick that Clark taught me: sometimes when you paint a moon on a backdrop, he said, “If you take a key, like a front-door key, the kind that has a circle in it, and you hold it at arm’s length, the moon would fit in that hole. When you are taking a picture of a backing, and you know where a camera’s going to be, you know how big to make the moon.”

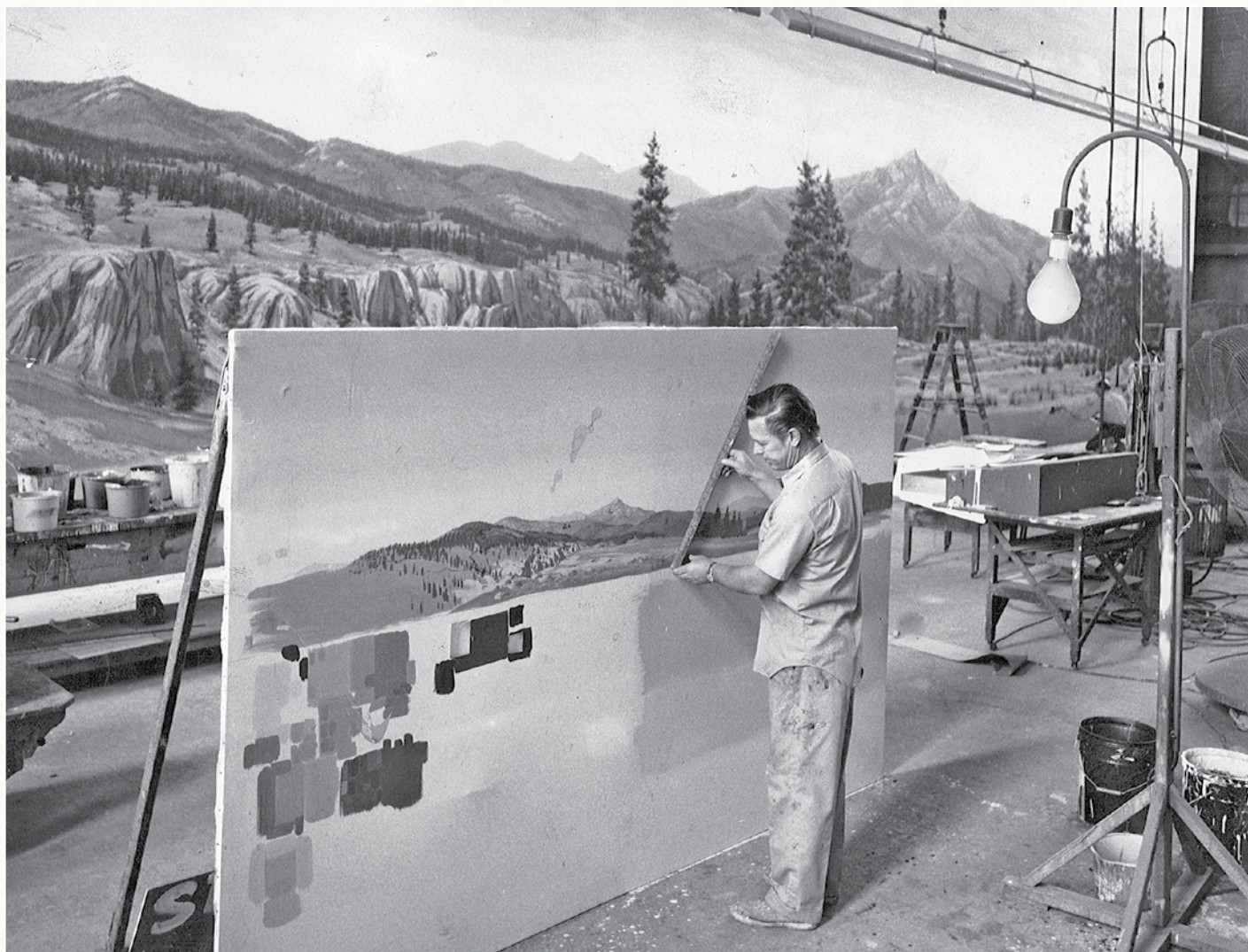
**In Wilbur Ferrell’s interview he remembers Bob Oberbeck and others.**

I learned more from Bob Oberbeck than from almost anybody that I could imagine. Even today, I still follow what he taught me. Things like reflected light,

bounce light off of the bottom, how you can—instead of painting something and making it look like a dollhouse—you bounce light off of the ground. You change color without really changing color, like glazing over things; those are things I had never thought of when I first started painting. You know to me a wall was a wall. He showed me how to wet edge to soften an edge, what should be the darkest, how shadows are, how deep a shadow should be, those kinds of things, all of that glazing and when things disappear, when texture disappears, and when it is unnecessary on a painting, and which colors disappear first. Yellow disappears first, you know, those kind of things, and how to put atmosphere into how you paint, keep bringing in the sky color into your color until you get your distance, and also playing color against color. [...] Actually, all my art classes and everything never got me as far as Scenic Art got me. Bill Jekel and Bob Oberbeck and Verne Strang and Clem Hall, especially Clem Hall, all of these people had to do with what I am today, which isn’t much, but at least they got me where I am. I can only say, all these people, God, there was a lot of talent.

**Above: Art Rider (on right) with unidentified Scenic Artist on left, drawing at Grosh Studios. (from the Bill Anderson Collection)**





**John Moffitt remembers Ron Strang and Clark Provins as his principal mentors.**

Ron [Strang] is primarily my mentor in Scenic Art. And the other guy I'd credit as my mentor was Clark Provins. I learned perspective from them. And I did have the opportunity to work with some of the Scenic Artists that worked with the really great painters from the heyday of Scenic Art: the '40s, '50s and '60s. They trained a generation of Scenic Artists. And in my opinion they were—and I don't mean to diminish anybody else's work—the last of the truly great Scenic Artists. And the people in my generation who came in, it was a different business. It was a mean, lean, tougher business.

**Chris Coakley reflects on Bob Oberbeck, Ben Resella and on his uncle John H. Coakley:**

Bob Oberbeck was kind of a layer technician, and liked to get vibration going by kind of going back and forth between complementary grounds. So although he had been brought up in the MGM way, he had developed kind of separately.

The one thing I learned from Benny [Ben Resella], 'Don't shoot me down before I'm flying.' [...] 'There's more than one way to skin a cat.' I think he would deliberately just charge off in a new direction just to see what he could do with it. And of course, he was skilled enough to pull it off every time.

John [H. Coakley]—and most people knew this if they worked around him—was a guy who could just step up to the palette with a Dutch brush and put one color in one side, and one color on the other, kind of mush it together a little bit, walk up to the drop and paint a picture. So he had his own particular style and it became the style of J.C. Backings. And you could tell his work right away from the drops that came out of MGM. They were very exact, and not an extra bit of paint on them. John's [drops] would be more like watercolors: vibrant, and he didn't care about drips; they were part of it. If he had a lot of drips, he turned them into something. His sky would start with ultra-blue at the top. Then he'd throw a little magenta in that, and at the bottom he'd go red. It would look like an L.A. smog-looking [kind of] thing. And in the middle somewhere there would be a little turquoise. And he

**Above: Ron Strang, circa 1957-58, painting at Warner Bros. Studio. (from the Strang Family Collection)**





**Above: Wilbur Ferrell at work. (photograph by Klaus F.J. Bythiner, from the Wilbur Ferrell Collection)**

was in favor of exaggerating the separation of tones so that in the spatter you would get the blend, so that your eye, when you looked at it, would sparkle because your eye would do the blending, instead of doing close, manageable jumps in value. MGM was that way—close manageable steps in value. A lot of times they'd have twenty feet of sky and they'd only have two colors. John would have four or five colors in that sky, and it would jump out at you. [...] You could look at some of the earlier MGM drops and see the formal aspect to them. Some of them, you could even see the drawing through the paint. It was just very formal. You could never see that with one of John's paintings—there was nothing to go by. Just whatever came out of his brush was the

backing. Yeah. John's painting was just flamboyant compared to their stuff. So I'm imaging that he pretty much got edged out.

Among the "lucky last" to receive the benefit of the old system apprenticeship training were Joe Francuz, Don MacDonald, Mike Denering and Chris Coakley. Francuz writes,

Well, the master apprentice system is how I started. It's a great system. It's a great way to learn, and it's completely been destroyed. There's no more pot boys as far as I know. No, you can't get anybody to do that kind of work anymore. Everybody's a chief, so everybody does everything.

Scenic Artist Terry Peterson mentions that the last of the best Scenic Artists are now in or near their 60s. He concedes that others could have become great artists; however, the work that would have allowed them to be trained to a high level has simply fallen away, the knowledge has not been passed on. Ed Strang, owner of TRIO and former Scenic Supervisor for Warner Bros. is working to remedy this situation as he continues to train Scenic Artists to produce backings for the motion picture industry.

I look at all these artists, and I still look at their portfolios and I just wish I had work for them, because it's very difficult to make a living as an artist. I'm one of the fortunate

people that have been able to do it. So...it's good. It's fun. And I still enjoy it and I'm still very passionate about it, and all my people have to be passionate about it, or they're not going to work here. Because it is a dying art, but there's still plenty to be done...and we can do it.

J.C. Backings, owners of the largest collection of painted backings in Hollywood, continues to produce new painted backings for motion pictures. These drops are once again becoming recognized as one of the best tools at Production Designers' fingertips, offering unparalleled advantages when shooting in-camera for key shots.





**“A trick that Clark Provins taught me: When you paint a moon on a backdrop, if you take a key, like a front-door key, the kind that has a circle in it, and hold it at arm’s length, the moon would fit in that hole. When you are taking a picture of a backing, and you know where a camera’s going to be, you know how big to make the moon.”**

In a world where digital images and large-scale inkjet printers are competing for the same market as the traditional hand-painted backdrop, it is by no means certain that the classic Scenic Art of the past will continue as a source of employment for the young artist. However, two things are clearly true: the need for sensitive and technically proficient visual artists will never go away, and demand for these people will grow irrespective of the technical means by which work is produced. In the words of Ed Strang, “Scenic artists, they’re interesting people, they’re really intelligent people for the most part, and they’re very aware of their surroundings. And it’s fun to get inside their mind and figure out what they’re all about, and what motivates them and how to get the best out of the talent that they have.” **ADG**

**Above: Don Hanson at Warner Bros. Studio creating a scenic backdrop in the style of Albert Bierstadt’s 1868 painting of Lake Tahoe. (from the Williams Collection)**

**Karen L. Maness and co-author Richard M. Isackes have secured a publishing contract with Regan Arts LLC, A Phaidon Global Company, for the publication of HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE ART OF THE HOLLYWOOD BACKDROP. The book is projected for release in November 2015.**