

Palouse Watercolor Socius

ALFRED DUNN, 1909 TO 2002

BY
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It all began with a watercolor instructor at the University of Idaho. Alfred Dunn, Idaho's preeminent watercolor artist, inspired the founding of the Palouse Watercolor Socius as well as its continuation. Alf received his B.A. from the University in 1936. As a poor student he financed his education painting signs on windows and walls. After he graduated he moved to Seattle where he worked for an ad agency for five years. The experience greatly influenced his painting: "As a commercial artist you have to work fast. Watercolor is a quick sketch medium. You have to know what you're going to say and say it in a hurry. You're after something that can happen in a fleeting moment and you want to put it down as quickly as you can." He taught those skills to his students when he returned to the University in 1941, with classes in commercial art and watercolor until his retirement in 1974.

His students remember him as an inspiring, enthusiastic, and gifted teacher. One of them, Linda Wallace, remarked: "We can never forget the generous way Alf gave us the love for the watercolor medium. He opened his home to us more than once, sharing his latest works and discussing art with us, not as a teacher but as one artist to another artist."



Alf Dunn in his studio, 1999



Alf's retirement in 1974 sparked the decision of a few students to form a watercolor group. Linda remembers how it began. Learning of his retirement, "we were to say the least, all disappointed. He was a generous and inspiring instructor and we wanted more help! We wanted to continue to paint!" A small group of women including Linda, Penny David, Kay Montgomery, Rene Helbling, Jo Thompson, and Dorothy Shelton met at Penny's home. "With hot mugs of coffee and munching cookies we discussed what we wanted the club to become. Our excitement was palpable. We put out ideas and must 'haves.' This was the day we decided to form the Palouse Watercolor Socius. We decided we wanted to paint on location and to meet in each other's homes once a month to critique paintings and to share watercolor information. We haggled over the name of our group finally, deciding on Palouse Watercolor Socius. Penny said, 'she liked this name socius,' (a Latin word for companions) and that would make people remember us." They made Alf an honorary member which pleased him very much. Their passion for watercolor and commitment to the art continues to inspire and influence PWS.

Linda Wallace at the Latah County Fair, 2013

At first the members used only transparent watercolors. Later they experimented with other water media, as Linda explained, "stretch our creativity. It gives us pleasure to be able to share our diversity in techniques and subject matter with the public." After gathering in each other's homes for a time, they moved the monthly meetings to the United Church in Moscow where PWS still meets each month on the first Wednesday.

My admiration for Alf Dunn and introduction to the Palouse Watercolor Socius began when I was Director of the Latah County Historical Society. Having an interest in watercolor, I joined a group of students who met weekly at Linda's house. Like Alf Dunn, Linda was an excellent and inspiring teacher who shared his enthusiasm with us. It occurred to me after learning about his reputation and qualities as an artist, that Alf's life story would be an excellent topic for a project at the Historical Society. I started with an oral history interview, continued with an exhibit, and then wrote an article for our journal, *Latah Legacy*. I met many artists at our 1999 reception to honor him. The Daily News joined the tribute with its own article.

Kay Montgomery, a PWS founder



Jan Vogtman



It was almost ten years later in 2008 that I joined the Socius. On a sunny day during Pullman's Lentil Festival in Reaney Park, I found a watercolor exhibit of PWS artists. Jan Vogtman greeted me and answered my many questions about the paintings and the group. Over one hour of my browsing and talking with her, Jan convinced me that it was time for me to join the group and begin painting again. Now that our two daughters were in college I had no more excuses that I didn't have time to paint. It was a slow process, beginning by relearning the techniques that Linda had taught me. Determined to bring a painting to my first meeting, I produced a somewhat clumsy one of our cat on a bench. On my way to the United Church, I began to feel much trepidation in meeting artists more experienced and skilled than I, and particularly in taking my painting to have them critique. To my relief, what I met was a welcoming group of artists who gave my painting a gentle review, pointing out its successful parts. I drove home with my head buzzing, repeating to myself, "They liked my painting!" And in the spirit of Alf Dunn, they welcomed me as a fellow artist.

For 45 years, PWS and its members have become an important component in the artistic culture of the region. A current emphasis is outreach to the public to encourage the practice and knowledge of watercolor. This has been done through workshops, demonstrations at schools, libraries, and other sites and events. Members have participated in competitions such as the plein air paint out sponsored by the Moscow Arts Department last summer. Another commitment of its artists has been to support other organizations with donations of paintings for fundraising events. These have included Friends of the Clearwater, the Phoenix Conservancy, Prichard Art Gallery, the Artisans at the Dahmen Barn, and the 1912 Center. Others include Gritman Hospital, Latah County Historical Society, Artisans at the Dahmen Barn, Palouse Cares, Habitat for Humanity, Sojourner's Alliance, and Moscow Day School. In February Jan Vogtman and Cheryl Root donated proceeds from their February 13 show of animal paintings to the World Wildlife Fund. The coming year includes a show and sale at the Moscow Co-op in April, participating in Moscow and Pullman's annual art walks, the Center for Arts and History in Lewiston, and our annual show at Artisans at the Dahmen Barn. In April, the Moscow Co-op will host a show of small painting as a fundraiser for PWS. A new venue is a changing art exhibit in the Moscow Chamber of Commerce's Conference room.

Bobbi Kelly with two young students



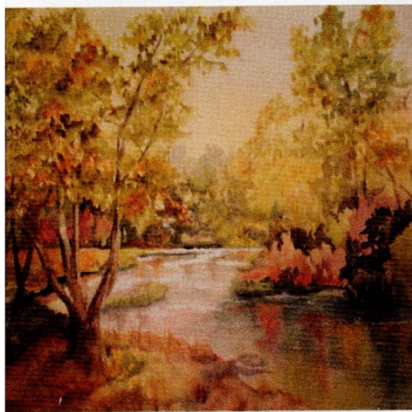


Left: Gabriella Ball explains her use of acrylic paints

My experience in joining PWS was not unusual. Bobbi Kelly remembers how she was invited by two members to join after she moved to Moscow. "From the very first meeting I attended, I felt at home with this welcoming group of like-minded artists whose goals are to share information and ideas for mutual benefit. PWS members are among my closest friends now, and I look forward to art activities and social activities with them." Peggy Conrad joined PWS in 2004 to become a better painter. "What I have found in the group, then and now, is help in reaching these goals and, also, a support system of good people who are willing to help other members achieve their goals."

Right: John Kirkland demonstrates a watercolor technique to PWS members Joyce Tamura and Ernie Weiss

During this year and years to come, PWS artists will still meet, share ideas and skills, critique and share paintings, enjoy the company of each other, and continue to contribute to the cultural richness of the region. In short, they will continue to follow the principles handed down from Alf Dunn, just as the first members did in 1974.



Gabriella Ball, Boise River



Kay Montgomery, Latah County Larches



Jan Vogtman