

THE CONSERVATION OF THE OMENHAUSER CIVIL WAR SKETCHBOOK

Presented by J. Franklin Mowery

This presentation deals with an extraordinary product of the American Civil War, a watercolor sketch book produced by a confederate prisoner while interned in the Federal Civil War Prison at Point Lookout, Maryland. Point Lookout Prisoner of War camp was the largest Northern prison and held as many as 20,000 men at one time on less than 23 acres. This is the largest of four known surviving such sketchbooks, 62 pages in all, depicting scenes of the prison camp and what daily life was like. These sketchbooks are most likely to have been the hand of one individual, John Jacob Omenhauser. This particular book is missing, or never had, any preliminary pages. However, one of the other copies has a title page with the inscription



(Illus. 1)

"True Sketches and Sayings of Rebel Characters in the Point Lookout Prison Maryland by John J. Omenhauser (prisoner of war) 1865. The paintings in all of the different sketchbooks are very similar, even duplicates of stock scenes, but in this copy there are numerous unique vignettes including one which offers another clue to the artist's identity. In this scene, (Illus. 1) a black Yankee soldier complains of

being cheated out of change by a Confederate who had sold him tobacco. Three other rebels stand around chatting. One of them remarks, "John ought to be here, to draw this in his book."

John Omenhauser, a native of Austria, was a 30 year old resident of Richmond, Virginia when he enlisted as a private in Company A, 46th Virginia Infantry, on April 21, 1861. Except for a brief period when he was on parole after being captured by the yankees at Roanoke Island in 1862, Omenhauser served with this unit until his second capture near Petersburg, Virginia on June 15, 1864. Prisoner parole and exchange were rare during this period of the war and Omenhauser was held prisoner for nearly a year at Point Lookout. The only record of his internment is a letter sent to him from his fiance "Annie" that arrived two days after his release from prison and thus ended up in the dead files in the U.S. National Archives. In the letter Annie acknowledged a portrait photograph that Omenhauser had sent her from prison. There were several photographers at Point Lookout who took portraits of Yankees or confederates who could afford to pay. The fact that Omenhauser could afford to pay indicates he probably had outside sources of support during his imprisonment, as did many prisoners. Thus he might have been able to acquire brushes, ink, pigment and stationery. No doubt the pictures he made could have been sold or bartered. After the war Omenhauser married Annie and had two daughters; he supported his family in Richmond as a candy maker. One scene in the sketchbook depicts a resourceful prisoner who scraped together the material to make molasses candy (could this have been a self-portrait?). He died in 1877 of cancer, and was

buried in Shochoe cemetery in Richmond.

The provenance of this particular sketchbook which turned up in the gallery of a Massachusetts art dealer is rather murky. It is said to have originally belonged to an unidentified North Carolina drummer boy who, after his release from Point Lookout, gave or sold it to a bishop in Richmond. The bishop moved to Boston and the sketchbook came out of the estate of a deceased decendent of his.

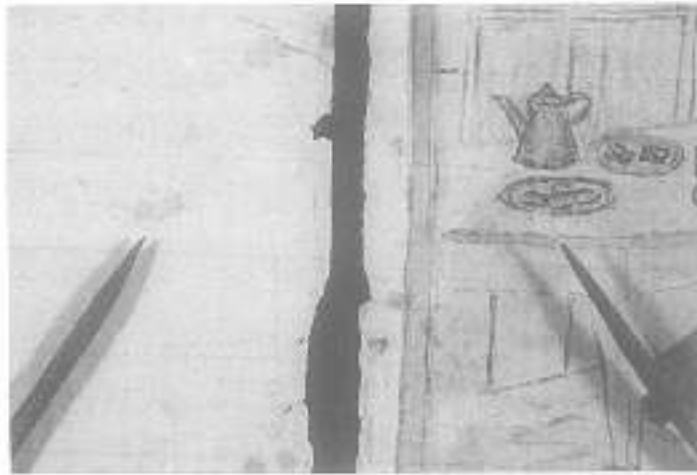
This book was created in a stationer's notebook which would have been commercially available at that time although perhaps during the war it may have been a bit more difficult to obtain. It was bound in 1/4 dark blue sheepskin leather with red and brown paste paper sides. The sides have been worn away, revealing the straw binders' board underneath, and are only visible by looking under the pastedowns inside. The back board had been broken and patched with a strip of linen on the outside. Also, a strip of the ruled paper from the textblock and another piece of linen was used to mend the inside of the board. On the front pastedown someone made pencil notations of names, letters and a sketch of a bird. The textblock had become detached from the covers and was later reattached by very crude sewing directly through the leather of the spine.

The textblock was made of a white wove paper with blue ruled lines folded into sections and sewn onto two recessed cords. The paper quality was still quite good registering a surface pH of 6.2-6.5. The paper was not particularly brittle although many of the folds of the sections had broken and remained glued to the leather

of the spine, leaving many of the pages now unattached as single sheets. The original sewing was completely broken down although there were remnants of the thread in the center of several sections. Halfway through the volume were four pages of pencilled text written on the reverse of several of the drawings. This unsigned text is an unfinished, rambling essay on Southern patriotism.

Because of staining and the pattern of the turn-ins on one of these pages it appears to have originally been the back flyleaf. The book overall was severely stained, the pages were soiled and in tattered condition. There were numerous tears throughout and some pages had large areas of loss. Most of the stains were of a yellow orange slightly translucent color characteristic of oily substances such as grease or fat; the placement on the pages fell where handling would have occurred and likely were the result of dirty fingers turning pages.

TECHNIQUE/MEDIUM: The watercolor drawings are on the recto side of every page and have been rendered in a limited but apparently a good quality palette. The scenes were often done first in pencil and then colored in. Over some colored areas the artist applied a glazing to enrich the depth of some of the colors. This glazing was crazed in areas where it was applied thicker, but generally it was in good condition. Conditions in a prison during the Civil War could not have been conducive to neat artistic creativity. It appears as if Ohmenhauser was rushed or simply failed to wait sufficiently long enough to allow some of the painting to dry thoroughly.



(Illus. 2, paint and paper which had transferred to opposite page)
As a result some pigment offset onto the opposing page and in other cases paper has stuck to the surface of the drawings. The white pigment that Ohmenhauser used was white lead (14 & 34) (basic lead carbonate) that had darkened from exposure to pollutants to an orangeish yellow in some areas and to a brownish black color in others. Flesh tones darkened, as well, as a result of having had white lead as a component of the color mixture.



(Illus. 3, Illustration discolored due to lead Sulfide)

The TREATMENT:The conservation of this volume was to be very conservative in its approach. There is significant telltale history in the various stains of the textblock paper. The artist certainly wasn't able to wash his hands every time he worked on the book and many of the stains look like oxidized

grease which could be indicative of the conditions under which this book was created. One can imagine Ohmenhauser, carrying this book around with him, stopping to paint a scene, eating something, then continuing without washing his hands thus leaving the oils that later oxidized staining the paper. Prior to any treatment the book was collated, photographed and paginated in pencil. It then was disassembled and drycleaned with crumbled Stadtler Mars eraser. This was simply to remove minor surface dirt; it did little to visibly change the appearance of the pages.

I was preparing to mend the sections when it became obvious that there was something wrong in the order of the pages. Observing the patterns of staining and the offsetting of pigment on the verso of many pages that didn't correspond with opposing pages led me to the discovery that the book was completely out of its original order. That is when the detective work began and the importance of the minute stains and tiny flecks of pigment came to light allowing me to uncover a nearly complete revision of the order of the book. For instance when the book arrived in the lab page 2 originally had been page 48, page 3 originally had been 23, page 4 had been 50, 5-51, 6-24, 7-49, 8-2 and so on.

I reordered the first 30 pages in the same sequence as they had been when originally painted. After that there are pages missing that made the sequence a bit more difficult to ascertain. Some groups of paintings could be related to each other, but placement of those groups in the book was ultimately based on speculation.

But once the order had been established as best as possible,

Terry Wallis, a conservator for the Library of Congress helped continue with this project by undertaking the mending of the book. The folds were guarded, tears mended, and small corner losses were filled with various Japanese papers and Zin Shofu wheat starch paste. We chose not to tone the infills or to infill the largest losses, mainly because they didn't pose a potential threat to the handling of the book and aesthetically a large infill could have diminished the historical evidence of what this book physically had been through.

To the textblock a section of new handmade endpapers were added. It then was re sewn on two cords and placed in a dark blue calfskin 1/4 leather binding with decorated paper sides made similar in color and pattern to the original paste papers. The original cover was housed in a tray in a clamshell box under the finished new binding.

It wasn't until after the binding was complete that I realized I had forgotten to address one of the original requests of the owners, and that was to treat the darkened discolored white lead pigment. The white basic lead carbonate had become discolored when it had come in contact with the atmospheric pollutants sulfur dioxide and hydrogen sulfide over the years and had turned to a splotchy orange and gray/brownish black lead sulfide. I had told the owners that the discoloration could be reduced by a treatment with hydrogen peroxide which would convert the dark lead sulfide to a stable white lead sulfate. The conversion of darkened white lead to the white lead sulfate is a procedure which is well documented and which I have done on numerous occasions in the past.

Ever since my training in Vienna when I became violently nauseous from being exposed to ether in etherial peroxide solutions I have resorted to working with simple concentrations of hydrogen peroxide which had been stabilized with magnesium sulfate and sodium silicate when converting white lead. I experimented with several concentrations and found that dilute concentrations required repeated applications of the peroxide solution. Because of the very sensitive nature of the gum binder in the pigment I wanted to use just a single application, and therefore chose to use a 2% solution. Still the the gum binders softened sufficently that the page had to be allowed to dry for quite some time before even a sheet of hollytex could be laid over without sticking to the paint.

On several pages where treatment was needed there were ink lines or inscriptions over the white lead pigment. I tested tiny spots and found the ink to be unchanged by the peroxide. I was still careful not to intentionally apply the peroxide on the ink but invariably some did come in contact, although without noticable effect.

Several days later I noticed on one page an unusual spot in the middle of a balloon caption -- the ink was faded! I thought I must have inadvertantly dropped a drop of peroxide and it bleached the ink. The next day more areas appeared faded, and I then realized something was terribly wrong and that what must be happening was due to vapors being emitted from the peroxide. But what puzzeled me was that this hadn't begun until several days after the peroxide treatment. I immediatly fanned the book open in the fume hood and had the air flow briskly flowing across the

pages but the fading continued.



(Illus. 4, Areas with faded ink)

Strangely some ink remained unaffected and often the worst fading occurred on a page several pages from the nearest site where peroxide had been applied. I checked the ink inscriptions over painted areas that could have come directly in contact with the peroxide, but found no change. Several colleagues were helpful in checking references but no concrete explanations were obvious, for the delay, the uneven fading, or why several pages would be skipped over before affecting yet another page.

After about a week everything seemed to stabilize, or at least the fading didn't get worse. I had no other choice but to contact the owner and explain what had happened. There was some consolation (if you can call it that) in that under UV light the faded ink inscriptions fluoresced brightly. The only thing I felt could be done was to carefully write over what had faded. With their approval, and lacking any other options, that is what I did. So over a week's time, painstakingly working in a dark room with only the UV light and a spot pencil flashlight, I traced the faded text. I used a steel-nibbed pen and brown ink mixed with

watercolor matched to the original as best as possible. I had to add methyl cellulose to the ink to thicken and control the flow. Upon completion the results were reasonably satisfactory and the owners seemed pleased.



(Illus. 5, Faded ink)



(Illus. 6, After treatment)

I still can't satisfactorily explain why everything happened the way it did. One observation concerns the ink found over painted areas -- this was less affected by the vapors. Perhaps this was because the underlying pigmented areas had generous amounts of gum binder which became resolubilized and mixed with the ink, encapsulating it and thus protecting it from the oxidizing vapor. Why some pages were unaffected or jumped over, or why it took several days before it began to fade, I don't know.

Obviously I agonized over a treatment gone wrong and I am sure that many of you will consider this treatment to have been an inexcusable transgression of our code of ethics. But perhaps by this confession and detailing the experience others might be able to avoid or take precautions to prevent a similar problem from happening to them.