

diversions



David Hansen/Daily Nebraskan

Reinhold Marxhausen's "Building of the Capitol" mosaic in the great hall of the State Capitol.

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Reinhold Marxhausen has a special fondness for the State Capitol.

In 1922 he was born in Minnesota and the State Capitol was completed in Nebraska. In 1965, he installed his last mural and the capitol was dedicated.

"Within my lifetime, I can finish a building that was started the day I was born," Marxhausen said.

An inventor and soon-to-be retired professor of art at Concordia College in Seward, Marxhausen designed two murals in the main hall -- "Building of the Capitol" and "Spirit of Nebraska."

He said he had read about the mural competition in the newspaper, but was unsure about competing internationally. At a reception at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Marxhausen recognized Fred Wells, chairman of the mural commission. Wells told him "not only are you qualified, but I recommend that you send in sketches."

"If it wouldn't have been for that confrontation and assurance, I wouldn't have done it," he said. "Fred Wells became a saint to me.

He was an instrument in my decision to compete."

The murals were the final additions needed to complete the capitol. When the exterior construction of the capitol was finished special slots for murals were left. Themes for the spaces were designated by Hartly Burr Alexander, thematic consultant during the construction of the capitol. Money dwindled away as the capitol was nearing completion, so the spaces remained empty until just before the state's centennial.

Marxhausen said that the capitol never had been dedicated because it never had been completed. The three spaces in the entry way and the three in the rotunda were filled, the only remaining were the six in the great hall.

An international competition was held. From an initial field of 60 entrants, the judges narrowed it down to 30, then six and finally three because that was all they could afford to commission at the time.

About the time Marxhausen was chosen to do "Spirit of Nebraska," he just had moved to Seward. He said he needed a studio to do the mural in and had one built in his

backyard to fit the dimensions of it -- 13 feet by 18 feet -- plus 5 feet on each side. He painted a white line, the size of the mural, on the floor and worked from there. When it was completed he built a ladder on the ceiling so he could get a bird's eye view of it.

Marxhausen said the committee wasn't too specific about what the spirit of Nebraska was, so he asked people. After responses like Big Red, he found the answer through his pastor. Stubborn determination.

"The land was covered with grass and pioneers settled instead of moving on," Marxhausen said. "Every other state in the country has the traditional kind of capitol, but Nebraska has a skyscraper. It's the determination of the state to do something different."

The mosaic -- made of glass from Italy, treated wood and fired-clay ceramic -- had a horizontal arrangement. Marxhausen said this depicted stability and conservative people. Among the details depicted, he included the landscape of the four seasons, an airplane for SAC Air Force Base, fossils and dinosaur bones, hands at work and reaching out spiritually, a seed

growing into a stalk of corn, a skyscraper pushing up as the capitol and a number "1" representing the unicameral form of government. Marxhausen summarized the mosaic as the "aspirations of the people, creativity and being more than they can be."

After the first three murals were installed, there was enough money to commission the remaining three spaces. Another competition was held and Marxhausen was one of the six competitors. He originally designed a piece for the "Planting of the Trees" mural but lost. He later was specifically commissioned to do "Building of the Capitol" because no one else would do it, he said.

In the "Building of the Capitol" mural, he explained how the capitol was a pay-as-you-build project. The architect built a ring around the old capitol, tore it down, then built the tower in the middle and added walkways, he said.

"They didn't miss a day of work," he mused.

The mosaic again was designed with glass, wood and ceramic. To the left is the old capitol building

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Seventh Wonder