

“St. Francis of Assisi in the spirit of poverty”



The St. Francis Mural by Harry Knickerbocker

Oral tradition at St. Paul’s has said the walls of the gym were painted with a mural. I had a query a couple of years ago about it from Harry Knickerbocker, a retired *Star News* photographer and artist no longer living here. It was his work. He was looking for the picture that had been taken of it, but I couldn’t help him. None of us here now had ever seen it – we had only heard vague stories about a mural.

With thanks to Covid-19 and the New Hanover County Library website making some usually unavailable online editions of the *Star News* accessible – we have the picture. It was published on the November 14, 1971, with a story about the Beggars Theatre.

Shortly after the arrival of the Rev. Robert Royall as rector in 1970, turbulent times of violent unrest in Wilmington with race riots and the arrest of the Wilmington Ten, a new theatre group emerged, led by Bob Davis and Royal and other members of St. Paul’s. They referred to themselves as “Beggars Players,” “a vagabond group...as poor as the proverbial church mouse.” They had only the “junky” “old basement-gymnasium” in the parish house and no money for lights or anything. They wanted to specialize in experimental theatre and original plays. Wilmington’s well-known Doug Swink was also one of the players.

That’s when Harry Knickerbocker started the mural. The newspaper described it as St. Francis of Assisi “in the spirit of poverty.” It was his “model of the monks’ vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, besides being known especially for his gentle love of animals and the gentler things of life.”

I’m looking for a better photograph. The NHC Public Library received lots of old *Star News* files back in the day, but don’t have the mural photograph. If anyone has pictures or more information, please get in touch.

Ellen C Weig, archivist@spechurch.com