

# **McKinney woman seeks to preserve baptistery art history**

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McKINNEY—Many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Texas Baptists spent Sunday mornings gazing beyond the preacher in the pulpit to stare at a painted scene of the Jordan River in the church baptistery.

Before all those memories fade and all those images are lost, a McKinney woman wants to preserve that piece of history.

Joann Loughlin, a retired English teacher and member of First Baptist Church in McKinney, wants to photograph baptistery paintings and other gospel art in Texas Baptist churches, as well as write brief historical sketches about the artists who produced them and the congregations that commissioned their work.

## **Disappearing legacy**

Loughlin's family moved frequently when she was young, and she admired the Jordan River paintings she saw in the baptisteries of many of the churches they attended.

"Over the years, I noticed they seemed to disappear," she said.



John Alfred Fullerton, an artist known for his three-dimensional work, painted the Jordan River scene for the baptistery at Staples Baptist Church, southeast of San Marcos. (Photo / Joann Loughlin)

In some cases, rural churches that were home to baptistery paintings disbanded. In other instances, as churches grew, they built new sanctuaries or expanded and modernized their worship spaces—painting or plastering over chipped and fading paintings.

Loughlin recognized the paintings as reflections of the importance earlier generations of Texas Baptists placed on sharing their faith and bringing new believers into the fellowship of a congregation. She wanted to honor their commitment to evangelism and discipleship by preserving that legacy.

So, she contacted one of her former students, Naomi Taplin, associate director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection in Waco, to discuss the matter.

Taplin and others at the historical collection and archives recognized the value in her ideas about researching and preserving a slice of Texas Baptist history, and they encouraged her to present a written proposal.

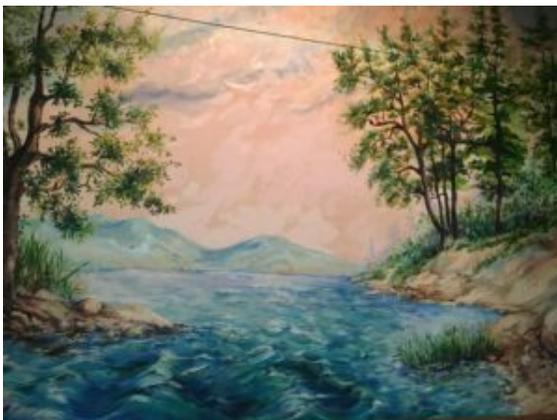
Loughlin proposed visiting churches around the state to photograph not only baptistery paintings, but also other examples of artwork in Texas Baptist congregations.

## **Work in progress**

She wants to research the artists who produced that work, learn what she can about how and why the churches commissioned the art, and then publish a book collecting those photographs and written historical sketches.

So far, she has discovered, photographed and researched a half-dozen churches with baptistery art—New Hope Community Church, formerly Dunn Memorial Baptist Church, near McKinney; Chestnut Community Church in McKinney; First Baptist Church and Austin Street Baptist Church in Yoakum, about 40 miles north of Victoria; and Prairie Lea Baptist Church and Staples Baptist Church, southeast of San Marcos.

She also has photographed and researched a painting and sculptures at First Baptist Church in Temple.



Joann Loughlin photographed the baptistery scene from New Hope Community Church, formerly Dunn

Memorial Baptist Church, near McKinney.

“Everyone at all the churches I have visited have been so gracious,” she said. “I’ve gained a real sense of how the kingdom was advancing in those churches.”

Through her research, she has learned the background behind the baptistery backdrops. Artists from throughout the United States traveled around the country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to paint commissioned works for congregations. One artist she learned about painted more than 500 pieces—baptistery scenes and murals—for churches throughout the nation.

“The artist would stay anywhere from two weeks to six weeks, and the church would feed him,” Loughlin said. “When he finished, the church would collect a freewill offering to express their appreciation.”

## **‘Not just decorative’**

Many of the churches were in rural areas, and most averaged about 100 in attendance, she said. No doubt, many congregations had other places where they could have invested their resources, but they chose to draw attention to the spot in their sanctuaries that represented lives Christ transformed, she observed.

“The people cared so much. They wanted to show in a tangible way how the Lord was working in their church,” she said. “It was not just decorative.”

Loughlin’s initial goal is to photograph and research art from 40 churches, but she hopes to surpass that number. In addition to baptistery paintings, she wants to expand her research to include other ways Texas Baptist congregations used original artwork to teach gospel lessons.

Her greatest challenge lies in locating Texas Baptist churches where baptistery paintings and other distinctive artwork remain. To provide information about congregations she might want to research, contact her at [slaterjot@gmail.com](mailto:slaterjot@gmail.com).