



June 30, 1996---

Maureen Munson liked to paint in the daylight.

Since 1971, the afternoon sun has peeked through the windows of the Old Town Ale House, wondering if anyone is home.

Munson was there to answer. With her brush.

No stranger to hard knocks, the painter was an Ale House fixture when the tavern moved to North Avenue and Wieland Street a quarter-century ago. The sun offered a warmth that eluded her at night.

Munson was a well-known North Side artist in the early '70s. Her day job was in free-lance commercial work, but the night was a wild streak of jazz, booze, smoke and all that other jazz. Munson, then in her mid-30s, was a fan of the jazz group Ears. She would watch their sets at the old Orphans nightclub on Lincoln Avenue and sketch the musicians as they played.

But Munson's defining work is a golden mural depicting portraits of nearly 70 folks who hung around the Ale House between 1972 and 1974. That's how long it took Munson to paint the mural, which still stands on the east wall of the bar. Her mural is a soulful blip on a cultural monitor, revealing the tough heartbeat of a Chicago tavern.

The western sun has taken its toll on her work. Like tubes on an old radio, some faces are fading out. Ironically, Munson's face - the only portrait she did not paint - remains bold and beautiful.

Munson grew up in the Austin neighborhood, where her parents ran a grocery store. She was frail and of medium height. Munson's brunet hair framed her face in a soft way. She didn't talk much, in part because of a slight speech impediment.

Her whereabouts are unknown. The folks in the mural say she has tumbled into the shadows, and it's likely that she's living with relatives. One thing is clear: She never comes around the Ale House anymore.

Munson used to come around the Ale House a lot, so much that she had a free ride on beer and whiskey. "We traveled in tandem in the bars," said improvisation teacher John Starrs, 63, who dated Munson from 1968 to '71 and appears in the center of the mural. "And when all else failed, she sketched somebody for a drink. We were voted the craziest couple on Lincoln Avenue. But I don't know who did the voting."

In the spring of 1972, Munson brought her acrylics into the Ale House. She had an idea to paint the faces of the colorful parade of street hustlers, broken writers and busted bards directly on the barren wall.

"The Ale House was as close a social scene as I've ever been in," said actor-writer-director Del Close, 62, who was painted at the apex of the mural, next to Munson. "I was pleased they accepted me around their hearts. A whole life was centered there. People had affairs with each other. They'd rescue each other. They were hard-bitten urban characters, the kind (Nelson) Algren and (David) Mamet would write about. Except they were also real people and friends."

Former Chicago bartender Herb O'Brien is on the mural.

He admitted, "You had to be pretty far off the wall to be on it." Chicago piano player Bob Freitag looked at his portrait, partially eclipsed by a jukebox that plays lonely songs like "Sweet Kentucky Ham" by Rosemary Clooney. "There's a lot of tragedy on that wall, said Freitag, who at age 67, has escaped most of the blue notes. Like moths on flypaper, these gypsy souls were pinned down for a place in time.

Chicago journalist Jim Tuohy was one of the first to go up on the wall. He

thinks Munson was inspired by courtroom sketches from the Chicago Conspiracy Trial in 1969. "It occurred to me that Maureen could make some money if she just went to the courtroom and drew people," said Tuohy, who covered the trial and remembered artists selling sketches to attorneys and friends of defendants. "She told me she had never done any portrait work. But she started practicing, and the more she did it, the more she liked it."

Tuohy, now 58, offered to take her to a trial, but Munson always declined. Then, on St. Patrick's Day, 1972, Tuohy was drinking at the old O'Rourke's on North Avenue, down the street from the Ale House.

"I was feeling fine by noon," Tuohy recalled over a beer in front of his portrait. "It opened at 7 a.m. on St. Patrick's Day. Maureen comes in and says she wants me to come to the Ale House with her. Why in the world would I want to leave O'Rourke's? She said she had an idea. She wanted to paint people's pictures on the wall. I sat down and she started."

The result was a jury of your worst fears.

Ale House bartender Arthur Klug said, "It sure wasn't formal. You're having a drink and she says, 'You want to be on the wall? I'm ready to paint now.' I did it that way, other people did it that way. Other times she would say what time she would be here and people would meet her.

"But she always had to paint in the day."

Munson asked her subjects to sit near the tavern's front door so she could use natural light from the window.

The light gave greater depth to the vivid skin colors of her portraits. Munson painted only the faces of those she wanted to paint. It was forbidden for anyone to request inclusion on the wall. Close, who was not close with Munson, said, "She didn't put people on the wall because she liked them. I think she thought they belonged there."

It took Munson one or two hours to paint each face, often working from the rhythms of the jazz from the jukebox across the aisle. Munson didn't rush through her work. Former Ale House bartender Jerry Proskauer said, "She would tell some people that they weren't done. Not that she wasn't done." Munson never bothered to retouch any of the portraits, with the exception of the sometimes cantankerous Klug.

Klug, 71, said, "One night a guy took Maureen outside, and said, 'Destroy Arthur, mangle him! I never liked the son of a bitch.' So I had screws in my head and looked like Frankenstein's monster. But Maureen sobered up and changed me into an inhuman swine with a military monocle and a desire to kill the rest of the world."

That was rare. Typically, Munson liked men more than women.

"I did too, so I didn't care," said commercial artist/graphic designer Pat Bass, who was one of Munson's best friends. Bass had the distinction of adding Munson to the mural.

Munson asked four artists who hung out at the Ale House to come by on an appointed Saturday afternoon. They were mostly free spirits like Danny Morgan, a commercial artist who tattooed his forehead so he would never have to work in commercial art again. Munson wanted all of them to paint her. Bass was the only one who bothered to show up. "The wall was pretty much finished," Bass recalled while looking at the mural. "She sat on a high stool, and I stood on a ladder. I just got up there and painted her."

Bass, 66, last spoke to Munson in the late 1980s, when Munson's work was the subject of an exhibit at a small Near North Side gallery. Bass went to the exhibit and called Munson, asking her to attend the show. Munson refused to leave her house.

"She was definitely not a regular person," Bass said. "But for an artist, a very sensitive person. You have to remember that Maureen was a fashion illustrator before photographs took over. I can still see her big, fluid line drawings for Marshall Field ads. She had a magnificent gift for free line drawing. Maureen worked from line drawings of the people on the mural before she even thought about putting in the color."

Klug looked at Munson and Close staring out from the top of the mural. He said, "Del Close is a near genius, but there's no question Maureen was a genius. A very gifted woman, a very difficult woman. I'd like to know what happened to her. Of all the things she could do, that wall remains a monument to her work. She nailed everybody."

Bass's portrait is at the north end of the mural, the first one out the door. Bass has been married for 40 years. She has reared five children with her husband, Joe, a salesman. In the 1970s Bass used to stop by the Ale House for a couple

of beers after work on a Friday night. Joe would always pick her up. She could count on it.

Pat Bass retired at age 62 and is now taking writing classes at Northwestern night school and English and literature courses at Wright Junior College. She doesn't go to the Ale House anymore. But it wouldn't be hyperbole to suggest the Ale House changed her life.

"I didn't know it then, but we were sort of like a family," Bass said as a springtime sun warmed the wintery barroom. "One thing I remember vividly about that Ale House era is how people touched each other. They hugged, they put their arms around each other. To me, that was unusual. I never was a joiner. I gave up my Mormon religion when I was 23. I guess this took over.

"For the first time in my life, I felt close to people."



*HERE IS THE LINEUP OF THE MURAL FIGURES.  
BEST TO GO TO THE ALE HOUSE TO FIGURE IT OUT.....*

Maureen Munson worked from the inside out. Emotionally, her soul searched out her subjects. Technically, she began her mural at the center and worked outward.

Munson gained confidence as the mural evolved, which explains the greater detail of her fringe portraits.

With remembrances from Old Town Ale House bartender Arthur Klug and his ex-wife and Ale House owner Bea, here's a who's who of the mural and what has happened since the paint dried, a quarter-century ago:

1. Tony Burrell, former editor at Encyclopedia Britannica, is now recovering from a couple of strokes.

2, 3. John and Susan White, "They were here long enough to fall in love, produce a child and break up," Arthur says. "Nobody knows where she is now." John still comes around. Now and then.

4. Fred Gotham Jr. "One of the three suicides on the wall," he reports. No one is certain why Gotham had a parrot with him. Bea says, "I doubt if Maureen just threw it in. People did things (like wear live parrots) like that back then."

5, 6. "She's an English girl, he's a guy from Chicago," Arthur recalls. "They met, they married, they went to London and no one has seen them since. But they were here long enough to have their pictures on the wall."

7. Charlie Wilfong. "He was a guard at the Art Institute. He's dead," Arthur says succinctly.

8. Paul Tyner, free-lance journalist/novelist. "He was fairly successful at one time," Arthur says. "He submitted a script to Hollywood and they made a movie out of it. He took his wife and kids out there, got a place, had a pool and everything. He wrote a second script and it got shelved. He pulled out a gun and killed himself. Second suicide on the wall. In 1968, Tyner wrote a cop novel, "Shoot It."

9. Tom Kelly, newspaper writer who worked for the Brooklyn Eagle, the same newspaper that produced Walt Whitman. A heavy drinker, Kelly died in his 60s.

10. "Pretty Billy" Kraumann. "A very sweet, fine-looking boy," Arthur says. "I remember that his parents were deaf. He went to Italy to be in movies, where he met Gore Vidal."

11. John Phillips, involved on the fringe of Chicago politics.

12. Ruth Talaber, "Brilliant woman who was great with figures," Klug says. "She did everybody's income tax. Ruth died a natural death." Bea reminds Arthur, "A lot of these people were not that young."

13. Dietrich. "He lives in the Pacific Northwest. He's very good with his hands. He was going to carve some stuff for us one day but he never got around to doing it. I've never seen him since."

14, 15 Anna (left), unknown husband (right). "She was a huge woman, but completely female in every way," Arthur recalls. "They made a soft porn movie with a couple of Second City actors." A Victorian nude of Anna hangs above the Ale House bar. During a slow day at the Ale House, bartender Jeanette Proskauer married Anna and the man next to her on the mural. No one remembers his name.

16. George Fox, "He followed (customer) Linda "Lovely" to St. Marten's," Arthur says. "When she left, he was there. He got married to someone else and he's still there today."

17. Joffre Stewart, local poet/writer/activist. "Joffre is the only man I've ever met who has remained true to his convictions," Arthur says. "Joffre was an anarchist the day I met him 40 years ago. He's the same anarchist now that he was then."

18. Judy West, actress who had a bit role in the Jack Lemmon film "The Fortune Cookie." Arthur recalls her high school picture: "Golden hair, big blue eyes, at one time one of the prettiest women you saw. Then she turned into a junkie. Around 1988 she was sitting in a Uptown saloon when a man came in and robbed it. She kept yapping at him a mile a minute. He told her to shut up or he'd blow her head off. Well, she kept talking.

"And he blew her head off."

19. Jim Tuohy, Chicago newspaper man, writer, raconteur.

20. "Lucky," street hustler, has disappeared. Some say he was murdered. Best known for getting into a breathtaking 15-round bar fight (not at the Ale House ) with Jay Kovar, owner of O'Rourke's.

21. Sharon Horwich, Ale House day bartender

22. Jack Ripplingill, lived at the Paxton, the transient hotel around the corner

from the Ale House that burned down in 1993. Regulars called him "Paxton Jack," and when died a couple of years ago, his remains were sent to the Cook County Morgue. A morgue worker found an Ale House phone number. Jack had been befriended by Betty Perkovich, the mother of Ale House bartender Michael (see No. 62). She learned that Jack was going to be buried in a Potter's Field.

"A hospital worker named Neil Cooperider got together with Betty and they shipped his body 150 miles on a train back to his hometown of Sterling, Ill.," Arthur says. A day before the burial Betty got a phone call. "No one was around but the gravediggers," Arthur says. "Betty said, 'I'll be there.' Betty, Neil and the gravediggers made sure he was buried next to his mother, sister and brother. A lot of basic human dignity was involved."

23. Herschel, part-time therapist.

24. Stan Moore, photographer now living in Florida. He took the nude portrait of Anna (see No. 14), or better yet see it at the bar.

25. John Starrs, teacher, editor, poet. Munson's boyfriend.

26. Hank Oettinger, 84-year-old raconteur, drinking pal of actor George Wendt.

27. Michaela Tuohy, works in public relations for the Mayor's Office of Special Events. Ex-wife of newspaper man Jim Tuohy (see 19).

28. Jim Garrett, one of the first Ale House bartenders. Died of kidney disease.

29. Jim Stein, former part owner of Ale House, accountant at Ranalli's restaurants.

30. Lucy Grider, worked for telephone company. At one time owned 20 percent of the Old Town Ale House.

31. Del Close, Chicago comedian, actor, director, teacher, writer.

32. Maureen Munson, mural artist. The only portrait she didn't paint. (See No. 57.)

33. Arthur Klug, Ale House bartender, 1972-1988.

34. Jim Small, bartender, former 20 percent owner of the Ale House.



35. Odell, regular customer, died of lung cancer 15 years ago.
36. Len Oswald, male model, writer of pulp fiction and articles for men's magazines. No one from the Ale House has seen him in 20 years.
37. Russell Henderson, drummer.
38. Wayne from Wisconsin. "This expression . . ." Arthur says with an unforgiving wince, looking at Wayne's face. "That was it. The word simper comes up. He'd come up, hit on me and simper at me."
39. Dick Mabbitt, head music buyer for Sears, Roebuck, always wore a blue suit, moved to Casper, Calif., in the late 1970s and died there in 1986.
40. Bill "Tracy Lord" Berg, college basketball player, performer. He called himself Tracy Lord because he was a fan of the Katharine Hepburn character in "The Philadelphia Story." "He developed cancer, tuberculosis and then AIDS," Arthur says. "He went to St. Joseph's Hospital. One day he took the window out and threw himself out of the 14th floor. It was Christmas time. He landed by the hospital Christmas tree."
41. Pat Taluc, Ale House bartender for past 15 years, jazz fan, loves to turn on the movie channel during her shift.
42. Joe Russo, CPA, died of complications from AIDS.
43. Chuck "Urban Blight" Lynch. "At Christmas he would sit here and rant and rave and not allow money to pass over the bar because it was green and he hated Christmas," Arthur snarls. "He was absurd in every way. Somehow he lived to be 75 and he died of alcoholism and other diseases."
44. Mark Jacobs, son of the late labor leader/FDR pal Joe Jacobs. Mark died from a heart attack in the late 1980s.
45. Bill Porter, fantasy CIA agent. "I went to Door County once in my life," Arthur says. "And I saw Bill Porter. He had nailed himself to a cross and was walking down the road, saying that Jesus Christ was still alive. We threw him out of the Ale House because he was so crazy. We were outside and I was telling him he never was going to set foot in the Ale House again. He said, 'You don't understand. I do that stuff in the bar because I'm working undercover for the CIA and I'm getting very close to this inside information I

must have.' I told him to get lost and that was the last I saw of him."

46. Don Chisolm, painter, flew in from Florida for mural reunion portrait.

47, 48. Sally Warren (left), Georgia Hansen (right), retired Chicago schoolteachers who grew up together and drank together at the Ale House. They still talk regularly over the telephone.

49. Bob, " The Window Washer."

50. John, "The Garbage Man" Krzton, made necklaces from garbage. Died more than 15 years ago.

51. Buzz Norris, breadmaker. "Here's something I learned about the difference between men and women," Arthur says. "He used to grab me from behind. He had these phony breasts and they would ram into my back. Women's breasts actually flatten against you. They don't hurt at all. He died of AIDS. My hernia is killing me."

52. Chet Walton, hairdresser, known for doing Mayor Jane Byrne's hair.

53. Mimi Harris, wife of late photographer and labor activist Sydney.

54. Herb O'Brien, bartender at the old Gate of Horn music club, now lives in Minnesota. He almost ruined the mural because he started washing the wall with Fantastic detergent. "It's about six shades lighter than it should be," Bea says. "He claimed the Art Institute told him it would work. No one could stop him. He was about 6 feet tall and he just kept cleaning the mural."

55. Ron Lustig, former contractor, ran a Chicago coffee shop.

56. Jerry Proskauer, onetime Ale House bartender, brother of Ale House bartender Jeanette, currently an alcohol substance abuse counselor.

57. Pat Bass, artist who painted Maureen Munson's portrait.

58. Bob Freitag, piano player extraordinaire at Orso's.

59. Jeanette Proskauer, Ale House bartender, former mail-order minister.

60. Tom Erhart, Second City actor and original member, did voiceovers, including a signature deal with Schlitz Beer. One night over beers at the Ale

House he confessed to a local newspaper columnist that he despised Schlitz. The columnist wrote about Erhart's revelation and his voiceover career went flat. In March, Erhart died of complications from lung disease in March in his Hovland, Minn. home. He was 67.

61. Marty Blackburn, she married, divorced, and now she travels a lot.

62. Michael Perkovich, ex- Ale House bartender, English teacher at University of Illinois/Chicago, now pursuing Doctorate at the University of Illinois/Chicago.

63. David Hansen, free-lance cameraman, also works on "Creative Directory" reference guide. (Not related to Georgia, No. 48)

64. "The Unknown Drinker," the only unknown on the wall.

65. Glenn Francis, recently retired from Marshall Field's appliance department.

66. Thomas B. Small, Sr., father of Jim (see 34). Engineer for the Chicago Board of Education, was basking in retirement when painted on the mural.

67. Diane Voss, former stage manager of Second City

68. Tayna Boyd, ex-wife of Jim (see 34). She was pursuing her MBA in Sociology at University of Chicago. Today she is vice president for marketing at Hallmark (greeting cards) of Canada.