

Martha Watson Sauer's Key West Story

Miss Martha Fitzhugh Morris Watson arrived in Key West from Newtown, Pennsylvania with her mother in 1936. In a 1985 interview with Nan Klingener, part of an oral history series for the Miami Herald, Martha recounts: "We came to Miami and didn't care for it at all. That made us very eager to come to Key West. It took three buses and two ferries at that time to get here. We got into Key West and it looked deserted. The shutters were almost all closed. Everything was very forbidding. The houses were dry, there was no paint on them. It was kind of off-putting. We found out later there was no paint because everybody was too poor to keep their houses painted. The shutters were shut because in the daytime it was cooler that way. They opened them at night." She goes on to say: "They didn't see many people who were not Key Westers. I'd go into a shop and they'd say, 'You're a stranger, aren't you?' Because if you're not a Conch, you're a stranger. But people invited me to their houses, and I met other people my age. It was really very nice."

As the story goes, Martha, a young lady of 24, suffered from asthma, and her doctor had prescribed spending the winter in a southern climate such as Cuba. On the journey, she and her mother stopped in a Miami travel agency intending to continue on to Cuba, when they noticed a painting of a beautiful tropical scene. Upon discovering it was a painting of Key West, they changed their plans and instead decided to venture down the Keys. As it happened the painting they had noticed was done by WPA artist Avery Johnson. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) came out of the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) passed by Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930's to help America get back to work and prosperity in the wake of the Great Depression and hard economic times. Avery was one of several artists led by F. Townsend Morgan nationally known artist and etcher who had been dispatched to Key West for the very purpose of encouraging tourism to the island by portraying its tropical beauty in their artwork. Clearly the theory was -- and continues to be -- successful to this day.

Once Martha arrived in Key West it wasn't long before her artistic talents became known to the WPA group and she was soon asked to create block prints that were used in the design of tourist brochures for locales such as the Key West Municipal Aquarium, developed by the WPA as one of Key West's first official tourist attractions. She also created block prints for the Ernest Hemingway House, the Peggy Mills Garden, now The Gardens Hotel, and the West Martello Tower, home of the Key West Garden Club. She was also invited to teach at the WPA's "Key West Community Art Center" established at 301 Front Street, in the same building where the Key West Art Center operates today.

Along with fellow artist Jeanne Taylor, Martha taught watercolor and weaving classes for the next couple of years until ultimately the WPA program came to an end and most of the WPA-employed artists migrated back up north. Martha and the other artists remaining in Key West scattered their separate ways, occasionally coming together for art shows but not forming any sort of permanent association. As World War II approached, the 301 Front Street location was appropriated for use as the local headquarters for the American Red Cross. It was about this time that Martha met the man who would become her husband, Robert Sauer, an attorney from Chicago who had been stationed with the Coast Guard in Key West. They spent the rest of their lives happily married in Key West and also traveling extensively.

By the late 1950's a group of artists including Jeanne Taylor -- Martha's colleague from WPA days -- began an endeavor to reclaim the 301 Front Street location as a gallery and artists' studio space. After difficult negotiations with the City and much hard work by dedicated artists with the help of civic-minded businessmen, the building which had fallen into disrepair and been condemned was rehabilitated and opened in 1961 as today's Key West Art Center incorporated as a non-profit community arts organization. Martha joined the Art Center as an active member. F. Townsend Morgan offered many of his works for sale as well. Martha had numerous successful shows and receptions right up through the 1980s... all the while traveling, painting and learning. She is remembered by fellow Art Center members for her lovely ways, as a wonderful friend, and as a uniquely talented and devoted artist.