

Between 1900 and 1950, the population of Wilton, Connecticut nearly tripled. In the two centuries since its founding in 1802, the community only had about 1,500 to 2,000 residents at any given time. By the middle of the 20th century, 4,500 people lived within its boundaries. By 1960, the population would nearly double again to just over 8,000. The increase in population was no accident, as rapid changes throughout the town, state, and country affected Wiltonians' daily lives in unprecedented ways.

Artist and author E. Boyd Smith experienced this transformation first hand. Moving to Wilton with his wife Mary in 1906, Smith called the town home for the next 37 years until his death in 1943. During that time, Smith reached the height of his career as a writer and illustrator of children's books. The books he created while living in Wilton captured the world around him, often by literally copying Wilton scenes and locations in the illustrations, but also documenting a lifestyle that was quickly fading into the past.

This exhibition explores the changing nature of the town of Wilton between 1900 and 1950 and E. Boyd Smith's attempts to explain the daily life and shared stories of the very people facing those changes. As you move through the exhibit, think about how those changes have affected the town today, and how the questions those early 20th century residents confronted are similar to many that Wiltonians face today.



Early Life and Influences

Elmer Boyd Smith's path to a career in children's books in Wilton was not a direct one. Smith was born in St. John, New Brunswick, Canada, in 1860, but spent his childhood in Boston, Massachusetts, where his father worked as a ship builder. As a young man, he decided to pursue a career in the arts and made his way overseas to France. Now in his early twenties, he studied at the Académie Julian in Paris, working under the celebrated French painters Gustave Boulanger and Jules Joseph Lefebvre. Both Boulanger and Lefebvre took inspiration from the tradition of earlier European masters of the Renaissance with their collection of work including a large number of portraits and recreations of scenes from Classical Rome and Greece.

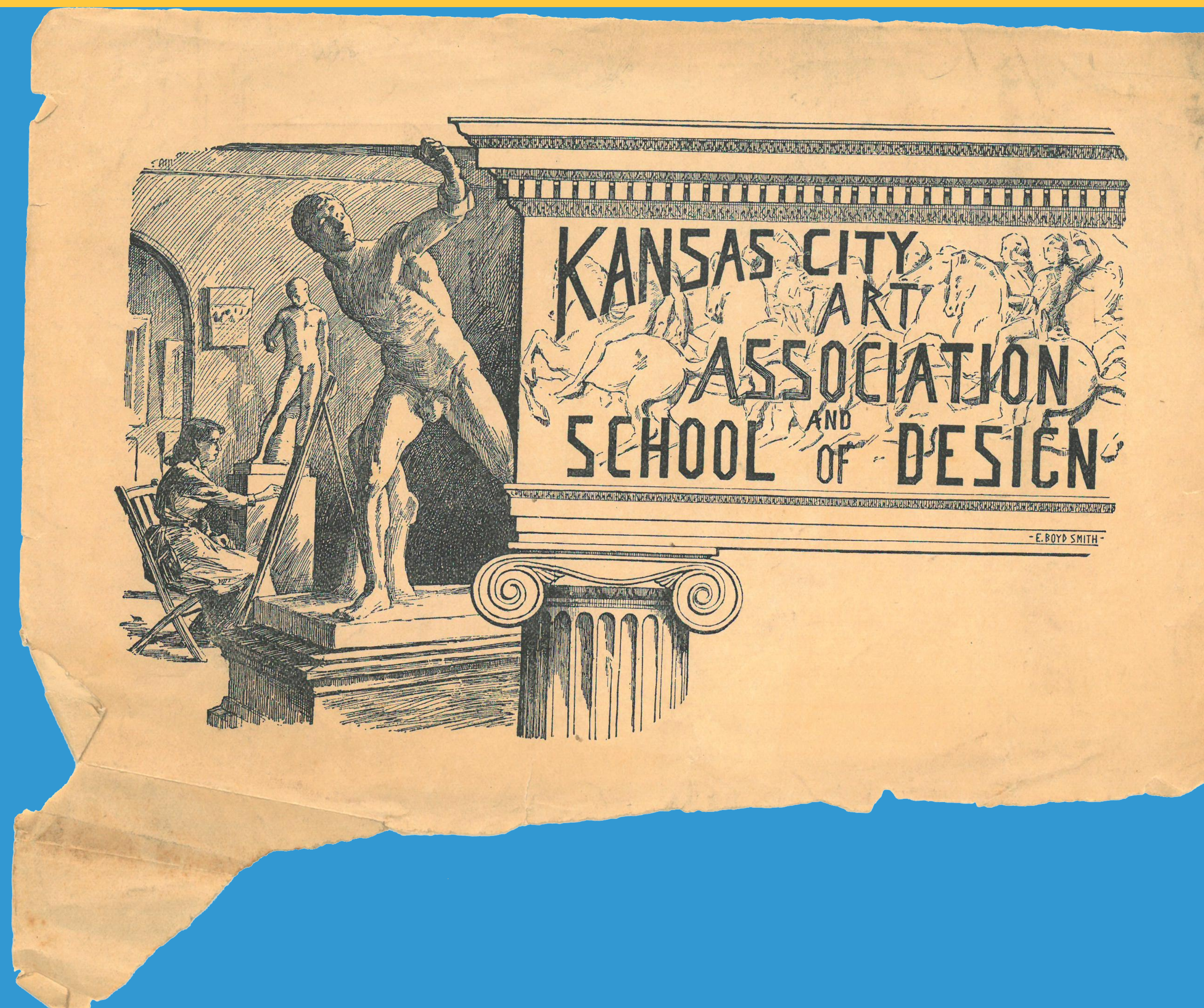
Smith soon after returned to the United States to continue a career in the fine arts. He made his way westward and by 1889 became the head of the Kansas City Art Association and School of Design, now the Kansas City Art Institute. His time in America was short-lived and soon returned to France. It was there he met his future wife Mary McDowell, a fellow artist and designer for Tiffany and Co. They married in 1893. While in France, Smith published his first illustrated book in 1896, "My Village", showing daily life in the French town of Valombre.

Mary and Elmer returned to the United States, this time for good, purchasing a house on Old Highway in Wilton in 1907.



Gustave Boulanger, 1856

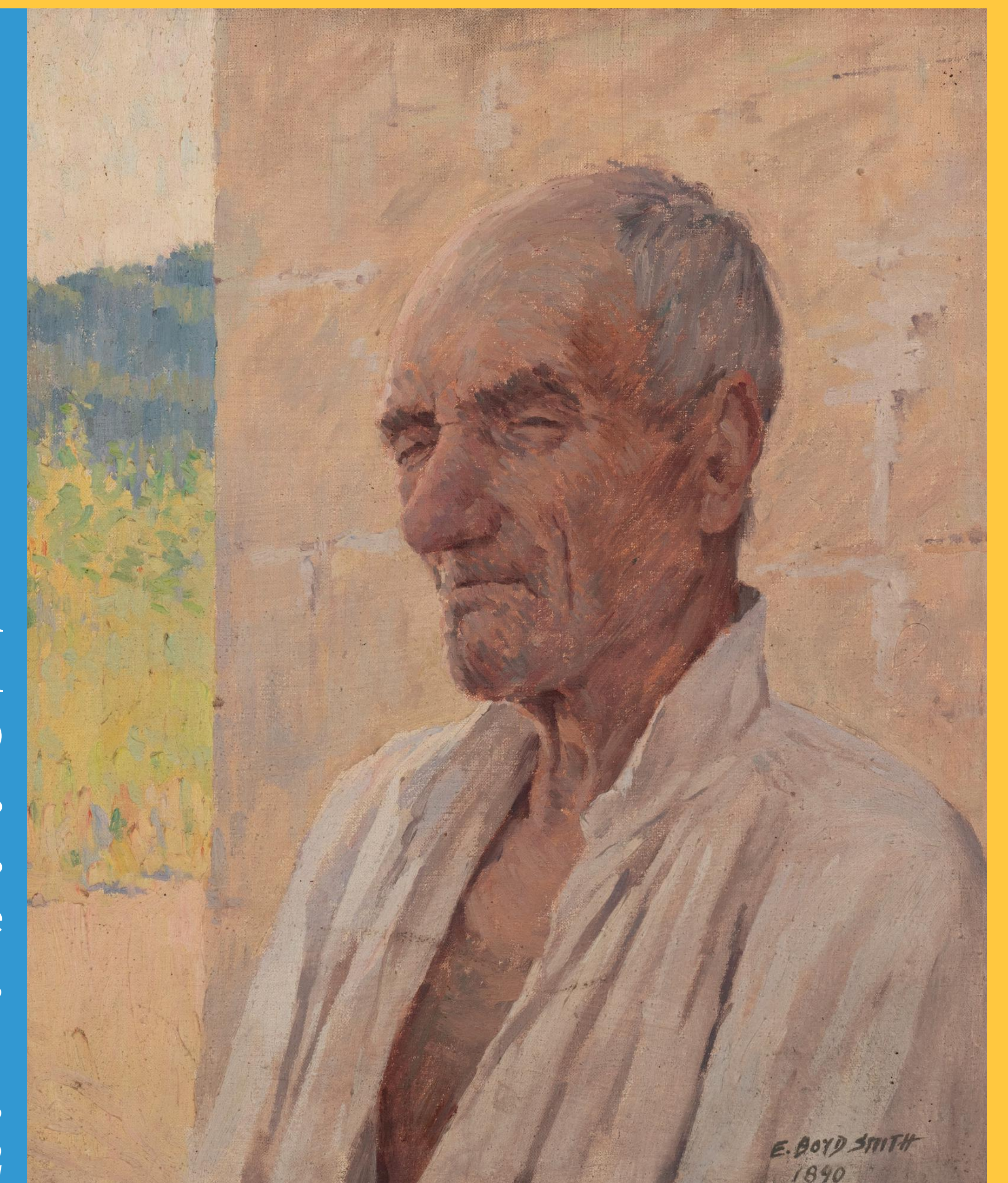
Boulanger was an award-winning painter who taught Smith during his early years as an artist. After his death in 1888, Smith wrote "Being one of his pupils, I became quite well acquainted with him, and regarded him with an esteem never since shaken...His kindness and generosity made him loved by all who knew him, and the soundness and thoroughness of his teachings have molded the life and career of many a young artist".



Logo designed by E. Boyd Smith for the Kansas City Art Association and School of Design c. 1890., now the Kansas City Art Institute. Image courtesy of the Kansas City Art Institute, Jannes Library, Archives.

Elmer Boyd Smith
Portrait of an Old Man
1890

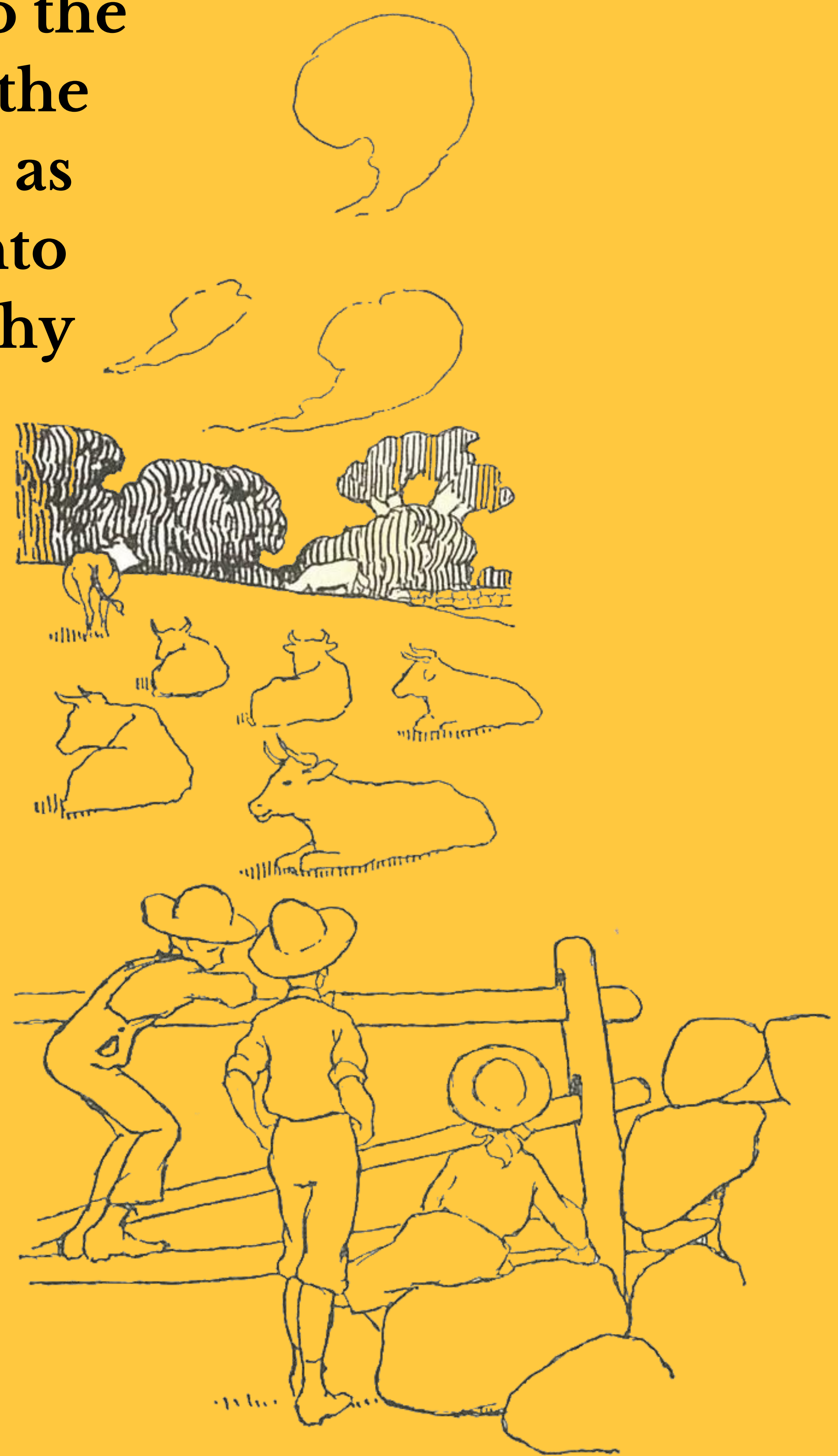
Oil on canvas
18 x 14 13/16 inches
Collection of the
Farnsworth Art Museum,
Rockland, Maine
Museum Purchase,
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Rural Roots

The town that Smith discovered when he came to Wilton resembled the farming communities he had painted in France. Wilton did not have a very large population, totalling just 1,598 at the turn of the 20th century. Corn fields, apple orchards, and cow pastures covered the rolling hills of the Norwalk River valley. Many of the farms had not changed for 100 years, and many of the families that occupied them had lived there much longer than that. It was these scenes that inspired one of E. Boyd Smith's most famous works, "The Farm Book," first published in 1910.

The book tells the story of siblings Bob & Betty who visit their cousins on a farm in the country. The children discover all aspects of farm life during their stay, including planting, harvesting, milling, and bringing goods to the market. In the two decades that followed the book's release, Wilton's landscape shifted as family farms were sold off and divided into suburban plots. In the 1920's, many wealthy families - often from New York City - built summer homes in town to escape the oppressive city heat. Modern developments like refrigeration were making it easier for food to be grown further and further from population centers, and soon it was Wilton's proximity to the New York metropolitan area that made its land valuable, not the food that the land could produce.

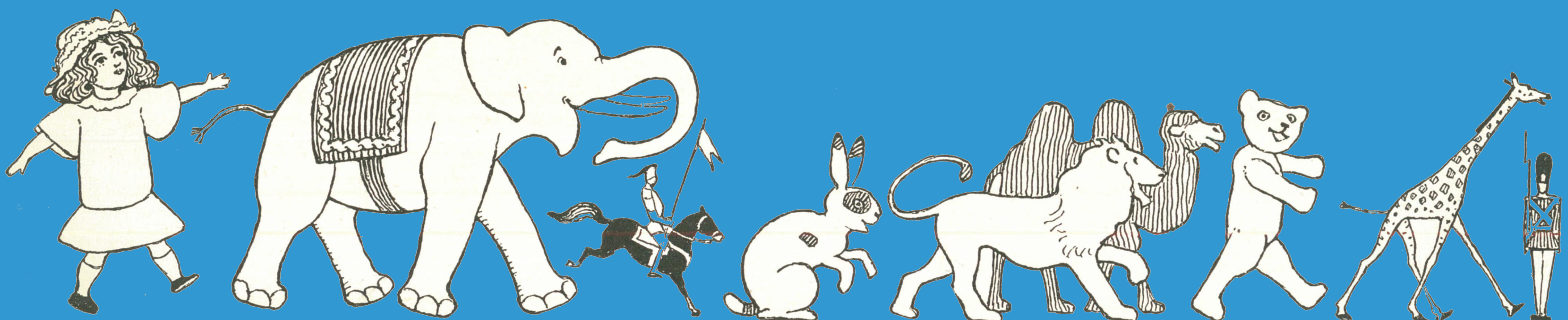


Leisure Time

In books written for children, having fun is a common theme! E. Boyd Smith and his fellow early 1900's Wiltonians found plenty of ways to come together for communal entertainment as well as moments of solo relaxation. Smith recognized these pursuits of happiness and weaved them into his tales.

Smith's work noticed the rapidly changing landscape of leisure as modern mass media was introduced. His book "Fun in the Radio World" (1923) tours a number of places far and wide where radio broadcasts are being picked up and the effect they are having - even having pigs and goats express their annoyance with the noise. "In the Land of Make Believe" (1916), Smith tells a much simpler, timeless story of children pretending their toys have come to life.

Wilton's real life residents were finding their own ways of entertainment evolving. In the early 1920's, Orem's Dairy owner Charlie Orem founded a baseball team that played its home games in one of his cow pastures, helping to give the team its name: the Farmers. The Wilton Playshop was founded in 1937, with local actors and musicians coming together to produce popular shows and plays - a tradition that continues to today.



A Growing Town

E. Boyd and Mary Smith were not the only artists who came to Wilton during this time period. Due to its proximity to New York City, artists flocked to Wilton and other Fairfield County towns during the 1910's, 20's, and 30's to find quiet studio space with relatively easy access to the city's prosperous art scene.

Artists were not the only ones who found Wilton a desirable place in these decades. Many wealthy New York City professionals - doctors, lawyers, bankers, etc. - found the town to be the perfect escape during the sweltering heat of the summer months. As family farms were sold off and subdivided, these new families either purchased historic farmhouses and renovated them to fit modern tastes or simply constructed brand new homes with aid of popular architects like Nelson Breed and Frazier Peters.

Aiding these transplants was brand new travel infrastructure in the form of the railroad and paved roads. Many of Wilton's former dirt country roads were paved during the 1930's, allowing car travel and commuting to a level never before seen, especially with the construction of the Merritt Parkway in 1938. Smith's "The Railroad Book" (1913) shows the wide reach of these new transportation technologies, notably showing trains connecting New England communities with the rest of the vast nation.



School's In

Despite having no kids of their own, Mary and E. Boyd Smith had a keen interest in ensuring the education of the town's children. Smith's concerns extended beyond just his popular books aimed at young kids, but to all literature as well. He was an active member of the Wilton Library Association during the construction of Wilton Library's first permanent home in 1918.

One of the main developments in schooling during Smith's time in Wilton was the phasing out of the long running one-room schoolhouses located in the town's nine different districts. The schools were the result of a hyper-local approach to educational matters which left funding and decision-making in the hands of families from the respective neighborhoods the schools served. Often bunching together students from kindergarten to 8th grade and teachers with differing qualifications and backgrounds, the quality and consistency of a student's education varied greatly from year to year and district to district.

Smith was a leader among a group of Wilton residents which pushed for a more centralized approach to teaching, ultimately leading to the opening of Center School in 1930 and the consolidation of the individual districts into one town-wide organization by 1935.



Legends & Race

The conflicts of growth, preservation, and nostalgia on display in Smith's work extended beyond community development. Two of his books deal directly with the history of the United States and the stories behind the founding of the nation: "The Story of Our Country" (1920) and "The Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith" (1906). The books take two different avenues to explain American history to young children, with one briefly exploring notable events from the Vikings arriving on the continent through World War I, and the other telling the famous - if inaccurate - story of Pocahontas. In both cases, Smith acknowledges and laments the injustices and devastation brought on Indigenous communities by colonists while also considering the displacement of these peoples inevitable.

Other races are not treated with similar consideration. Throughout his illustrations, African Americans rarely appear as anything beyond cooks, servants, or background characters. Their depictions are dehumanizing, with features exaggerated in the style of "blackface" performers common to the period. Smith's work was not out of step with the rest of the community, with blackface minstrel shows a common form of entertainment in Wilton into the 1940's.

The efforts to bridge the gap between traditional and modern life apparent in Smith's books did not always extend to all areas, and instead helped perpetuate stereotypes and myths of old.

