

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 28, 2009

Norman Rockwell (1894–1978): For all but our youngest readers, the name of Norman Rockwell should be familiar, as a very popular artist and illustrator of the 20th century. Perhaps most famous for his cover illustrations for the *Saturday Evening Post*, he captured the personal and human experiences, with a touch of humor, that touched the hearts of his many admirers.

The Curtis Publishing Company of Philadelphia published numerous successful magazines, but the *Post*, coming out weekly on Saturday night, was by far the most popular and long-standing. Beginning well over 100 years ago, it sold for 5 cents for most of its long life. Norman Rockwell began doing cover illustrations for the *Post* in 1916, and he did over 300 covers during the next 50 years. One was of a little girl whose doll was sick and the kindly country doctor who was listening to the doll's heart through his stethoscope. Another was of a young boy intent on running away, enjoying an ice cream soda while sitting on a stool next to a friendly policeman at a local soda fountain.

At Christmastime in the last winter of World War II, Rockwell produced one of my favorite illustrations. The date on the *Post* was December 31, 1944. The Battle of the Bulge, the Nazis' last push to the west, had just occurred. On Rockwell's cover, a small country church high on a hill probably in Vermont had its lights from within shining brightly through its windows across the snow-covered countryside. Obviously, the time was either Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve, and the worshipers inside had arrived by all kinds of vehicles that were parked around the church. One was a Model T Ford touring, and one was an early pick-up truck, both with blankets covering their radiators, protection from the bitter New England night. "Permanent" anti-freeze was practically unknown and very expensive. In addition, there was a horse-drawn sleigh and a larger sedan of the late 1930s. All the cars were equipped with chains. It was obvious that those inside were praying for the war to end and for their loved ones in faraway places to come home. No captions were needed on Rockwell paintings.

An unusual group of my friends known as the "Game Groupe" was visiting Williamsburg on one of our more elaborate trips in March 1968. On Sunday morning, we splurged and had breakfast at the Williamsburg Inn (some in the group claim that I served as cloakroom attendant). As we were seated at a large round table, I glanced to the side and about two tables away were seated Norman Rockwell and his wife. It was not necessary to whisper, "Is that Norman Rockwell?" He resembled *exactly* the pictures of him with which we were familiar. We did not have nerve enough to introduce ourselves; in our old age, it would be nice to say we had met him.

Rockwell was born in New York, but he lived most of his life in New England, specifically in Arlington, Vermont, and in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, where he died. There is a small Rockwell Museum in an old school in Arlington, but the main one, a spacious art museum built in the early 1990s, is on the outskirts of Stockbridge. It's well worth a visit.