

Bringing the Murals of Ely To Life

*A discussion of how
Ely, Nevada
has expanded its mural program
to include live productions
that bring the murals to life and
provide opportunities for special events.*



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Many communities have developed fine mural projects. Some of these tell the story of the community in historical representations and tributes to local residents who played an important part in the development of the area. People enjoy coming to the areas to see these visual depictions and learn about area history.

The Renaissance Society of Ely, Nevada decided to carry the idea of historical representation a step further with the concept of bringing its murals to life.

One of the Society's members was involved in the Festival of Masters held each summer in Laguna Beach, California. This festival uses live actors in full body paint to depict works of art. A huge back drop of the painting is constructed, complete in detail with spaces left for people. Then actors are costumed to become part of the masterpiece. The lights dim, the actors take their place on the canvas, the set is rolled out on to the stage, and when the lights come up, the masterpiece is presented with all the people in place. Following a discussion on this event, the Renaissance Society decided that our murals could be brought to life with a live production that featured the historic story in the mural.

Our first production was held in 2001 and featured the Cherry Creek Hot Springs mural. This mural features the mining camp of Cherry Creek, the hot springs the camp was built around, and a local couple who developed the springs into a resort which they operated for several years. A four act play was written that chronicled the development of the area, told some of the local folklore, and featured the story of the local couple. A cast was selected, rehearsals were held, and the production was the highlight of an evening of dinner and entertainment held as a fund raiser. The first mural had been brought to life.



Cast in front of the Cherry Creek Mural in 2001

In 2002, another mural, the Liberty Pit, was brought to life in a slightly different fashion. This mural depicts the large open pit copper mine and the men who worked there. Workers from five different ethnic groups had been recruited in the early 20th century from countries around the world. These people came to the area, worked in the mine for years and raised their families here. Three generations later, many of these families are still in the area. To bring this mural to life, we featured the oral histories of various families as told by descendants of the original workers. People were contacted with the idea and asked to prepare a 10-15 minute presentation of their family story. They brought photographs and family mementos. Dressed in native costume, these people told the story of their family and explained what life had been like for them. To add to the atmosphere of the presentations, the community choir performed folk songs from each of the countries. The choir had learned the songs in the native language and were accompanied with traditional instruments. Some of the people present had not heard these songs sung in the native language for decades. Needless to say, the presentation brought many memories to the audience along with a few tears.

The Ely Renaissance Society brought the Library Mural "In Tribute" to life in 3, 2003 with the stories of six people who lived in the area and contributed to the development of Nevada. The stories included Henry Comins, W. C. Gallagher, Mark Requa, William McGill, First Lady Pat Nixon, and Congresswoman Helen Delich Bentley, who portrayed herself in the production. John Lampros was Master of Ceremony for this production. In addition to the oral histories, period music was provided by Sherm Hawkins.

The living mural production this year will feature the Cattle Drive mural by Larry Bute. Glen Terry will portray Will James telling his story of ranching in the area. His story represents the many ranchers of the area who helped make ranching important in White Pine County. Sherm Hawkins will provide western music.

Since the first mural was brought to life, discussions have been held on various ways that different murals can be presented in a live format. We have outlined four types of living representations that may be used in bringing a mural to life.

Four Types of Presentations

1. **Play Productions** - a live presentation of one or more scenes detailing a story with a cast of actors.

Our presentation of the Cherry Creek mural featured a narrator who told the story of the mining camp. Information was obtained from journals kept by a jack-of-all-trades who worked throughout the area in the early 1900's. Other scenes in the play told of local events such as a town dance which was re-enacted and the story of the couple who operated the hot springs resort.

2. **Living History Presentations** - oral histories presented by descendants of local residents who were involved in the history of the area. Chautauqua players can also be used to portray characters.

Our presentation of the Liberty Pit mural featured five speakers who told their family history detailing what life was like in the early days of the mining town. Photographs, costumes, and folk songs added to the explanations.

3. **Concerts/Entertainment** - performances by individuals or groups featuring the music of the period.

One of our murals features the cattle drives and cowboys that played an important role in our history. A cowboy concert by a western singer would feature the songs of the cowboys.

Events such as parades, rodeos, and cowboy poetry readings could also be included.

4. **Festivals/Special Events** - traditional festivals done by the ethnic people showcase the customs, costumes, and food.

One of our murals depicts a Basque sheepherder and his flock of sheep. A Basque festival could feature dancers, roast lamb and Dutch oven cooking.

The Shoshone Fandango (celebration) features arts and crafts, Native dancers, traditional food, and games.



Native Shoshone dancers at a Fandango



Basque children perform traditional dances



Shoshone woman sculpture and live model, Delaine Spillsbury