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The Man Who is Making Tremonton the Mural Capital of Northern Utah

By Tim Gurrister



Photos by Kera Williams

For this Tremonton boy, the city is his canvas.

Jason Nessen's paintings are showing up on the sides of this community's buildings at an increasing pace, assisted by city officials who line up the easements with property owners for his work.

It's tourism, but it's also art — street murals, typically historical, depicting slices of legacy from the area.

A Space Shuttle launch and Olympians with Tremonton ties are coming, as well as the famous "champagne photo" from the driving of the Golden Spike in 1869 just southwest of here that finished the country's first transcontinental railroad.

Nessen is finishing his seventh street mural since 2003, some a block wide, five in the heart of the downtown in this city of 8,000, one on the north side, and

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Jason Nessen works on a sports mural at 100 W. 600 North in Tremonton.



one in Garland, population 2,000, the city next door.

Why the abutting cities insist on being two towns is complicated. But that's another story. Their Main streets actually cross at one point, Tremonton's running east-west, Garland's north-south.

The self-trained Nessen, with some assistance from Bear River High School, has plenty to look forward to, with city officials currently planning possibly 10 more murals for him to apply to otherwise blank walls.

Nessen says he is inspired somewhat by a mystery muralist, "some hippie who came through town" as the story goes, in the 1970s. "It's a great story. He supposedly used his hair to make his paintbrush bristles."

The phantom is credited with painting landscape murals on buildings around Tremonton and other locales, as well as nearby Cache County and likely points north.

Nessen, 47, said he was a youngster when he first heard about the wandering freelancer whose landscapes can still be made out in several downtown Tremonton locations and elsewhere.

The phantom hippie probably painted about 20 murals in Box Elder and Cache counties, as the story goes. "They're on sheds and barns from here to Cache Valley," Nessen said.

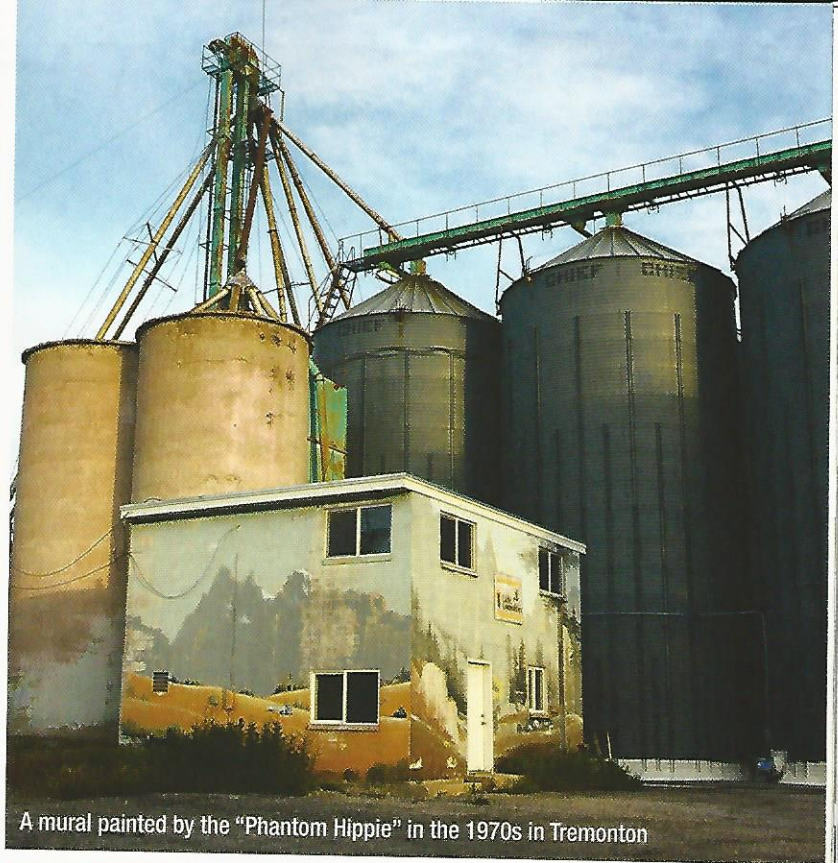
"As a kid, I remember seeing him paint. I was maybe 10 years old and was already into drawing. But I don't recall what he looked like except that he was human."

Three of the mystery muralist's works will be listed along with Nessen's in a coming brochure for the city's planned historical walking tour.

Nessen is putting the finishing touches on a mural de-



A mural at 140 W. Main in Tremonton painted by Jason Nessen.



A mural painted by the "Phantom Hippie" in the 1970s in Tremonton

picting players on Tremonton's championship high school girl's softball team at the city's North Park. The young ladies repeated as state 3A girls champs five times from 2008 to 2012.

Next will be a Space Shuttle launch, already sited for 13 N. 200 East, followed by the Golden Spike rendering.

"It should be a fun summer watching more murals come to life," said Shawn Warnke, Tremonton city manager, who's been busy the past year or more securing grants for Nessen's work.

Even though he's been paid up to \$5,000 each for the murals, Nessen doesn't expect to quit his day job, as inventory supervisor at a granite countertop maker, Tremonton's Valley View Granite.

With a wife and six kids, Nessen is realistic about whether he'll ever be a full-time artist. "It's just a fantasy," he said, but nonetheless a goal to shoot for.

For now, he gets a kick out of working on such a large scale, with some of the murals 80 feet wide and more than 20 feet high.

"Working large has always been enjoyable for me and I like the challenge of taking an everyday photo and enlarging it to a massive wall mural or even an oversized canvas for hanging on a wall," he said. "When I go to art museums, the large-scale paintings always inspire me, so that's the direction I lean."

His favorite subjects are people and mountains. "Although I really don't mind any subject at all. If you know an artist that only paints barns, for example, I don't know if I'd call them an artist.

"The principles are the same for drawing a person's face,
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Finished Murals

The first six are in Tremonton, the seventh in Garland.

- Sports mural at North Park, 100 W. 600 North.
- The "Welcome Mural" with a vintage Tremonton scene of a Welcome sign stretched across main, at 25 E. Main. (This is painter Jason Nessen's personal favorite.)
- A vintage storefront along the length of a building by the city park and war memorial at 50 W. Main.
- A historical rodeo/county fair scene across from the Wells Fargo bank at 140 W. Main.
- Scenes for private interests at 60 N. 100 West and 100 N. 25 West.
- The old Garland sugar beet factory painted just across the street from the Garland city offices at 72 N. Main.

Upcoming Murals

In the works, to be commissioned by Tremonton city:

- Some famous area faces such as Tremonton Olympians Jay Silvester and Marlon Shirley, World War II "Candy Bomber" Gail Halvorsen (actually from neighboring Garland), and Tremonton truck driver Glenn Goss. Goss was fatally shot by a suspect in 1975 when he came to the aid of a Nevada highway patrolman struggling with a roadside arrest in Las Vegas.
- A Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge mural, site to be determined, and a second "Welcome Mural" from a 1950s photo of the city, sited for 145 W. Main St., to complement the first.
- Plus another to honor the fire department, planned for a wall next door to the volunteer force at 51 S. 100 West from a vintage photo, circa 1930.



A mural called "Welcome" at 11 E. Main, Tremonton, and a mural of an old sugar beet factory at 72 N. Main in Garland, both painted by Jason Nessen



a rock or even a barn. It's just a matter of learning to see. But I probably prefer people and mountains because I find it a thrill to get their personality or likeness in a painting.

"When folks recognize instantly who it is or what mountain range, that's enjoyable to me."

Calling himself something of a perfectionist, he says his murals can take months to complete. After getting off work, he tries to get to his painting as soon as possible so as not to lose the light. "Sometimes I'll stay after dark and use a headlamp or spotlight. I spend anywhere from 30 to 50 hours a week on the murals and have been known to paint up to 70 hours a week when I'm behind.

"So when you add my 40 or 50 hours at my day job, you see I'm not home much but to sleep and tell the kids to feed the chickens."

He'd prefer more family time "but we need the income and we all realize the huge blessing it is to have the work when we need it. So there's very little complaining. And Linda and the kids seem to enjoy people asking if it's their husband

or Dad that did a painting of so and so."

Art is just something he's always done, he said, "like a duck takes to water." First inspired by his mother, also an artist, he excelled at drawing and charcoal at Bear River High.

After graduation, upon returning from a church mission, he said his artistic process "had gone as far as it could with pencil and charcoal." Time to move into working in color, a step he found took several years to master. "It was brutal."

The transition complete, his work is now in view all over town.

Tremonton Mayor Roger Fridal would like to see his town become known as the mural capital of Northern Utah.

"I think we have more than any city our size or larger. I don't know of another city here that's even close, really." The street art will catch the eye of travelers, he said. "The murals will get their attention as they come through. We want them to look us over and decide 'I'm going to come back here as soon as I can.'"

In the past year, ATK, originally known as Thiokol, which built Space

Shuttle booster engines, has provided a \$1,200 grant for the mural work. More recently, Rocky Mountain Power's charitable foundation came forward with \$2,000 more. Before that came \$6,500 from the Box Elder Tourism Council.

The phantom would be proud. His work always featured mountains, streams and wildlife, often depicting the Grand Tetons, the famous mountains in the national park of the same name near Jackson, Wyoming, which Nessen said leads to speculation that more likely exist in that area and the phantom is from there.

One of the more well-known of his works is still visible on the side of the Gossner Cheese factory near Logan. That, Nessen said, leads to speculation he might have been a student at Utah State University's art school in Logan, which was prominent in the 1970s.

Ironically, Nessen painted over one of the minstrel muralist's works at a local insurance agency. Nessen is talking to people who may have known him, but hasn't come up with a name yet.

But the art lives on, a notion that brings a modest smile from Nessen. ▲