Whitehall's Other Artist

By Tom Eitniear

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Many in the greater White Lake area are familiar with the name of Fred Norman, the painter of early scenes from the Whitehall/Montague area of Western Michigan. A number of his paintings focused upon the logging/lumbering history of the White Lake area and have generated interest from collectors of such artwork.

Fred moved to Whitehall shortly after the end of the civil war and remained a citizen of that town until his death in 1928. During that time, he not only created his artwork but was involved in many aspects of city life such as the local fire department, a photography business, worked as a carriage/house painter, refinished and reupholstered furniture, was the town clerk for over 2 decades, and collected Indian artifacts.

Fred was no longer the only artist in town when Wayland Beecher Nicholson established himself in Whitehall. Wayland was born on January 20, 1854, in Vandalia, Michigan and it was here that he spent the first decade of his life whereupon his family moved to Decatur, Michigan in 1864. Wayland met Lillie Estelle Parkhurst, and they became husband and wife on December 13, 1876. Shortly thereafter they made their home in Augusta, Michigan where Wayland engaged in the hardware business.

Wayland and Lillie moved to Whitehall, Michigan in 1883, and Wayland continued to engage in business with a furniture store in Montague, Michigan as well as Whitehall. Not content with furniture sales, Wayland engaged in numerous personal and business activities. He established a hearse and undertaking business, was a member of the Whitehall volunteer fire department, and was a member of the White Lake Businessmen's Association serving on its executive committee.

Wayland partnered with Reverend Thomas Hubbard of White River township, (grandfather of his wife Lillie) in the breeding of fine horse stock, and also engaged in horse transactions with James W. Parkhurst (father of his wife Lillie) who was the owner of the River Bend Stock Farm in Kalamazoo County, Michigan.

Perhaps one of the most interesting activities that Wayland engaged in was the production of crayon sketches of horses. Crayon sketches are best described as drawings made by implements that use clay, chalk, graphite or charcoal. He utilized his artistic skill and became well known at the time, traveling abroad in state and out of state to create sketches of noted horses which were then turned into plates for use by various sporting papers, or framed and enjoyed by the owner.

This skill certainly helped to support his family. A trip to Indiana in March 1888 to complete some sketches to be used by different sporting publications resulted in additional orders amounting to approximately $700, which would be roughly equivalent to $3400 in 2025 currency.

Wayland arrived in Whitehall towards the end of the lumber era where the inexhaustible supply of white pine had been exhausted. Plenty of hardwood trees existed in the greater White River watershed and Wayland saw an opportunity. He was actively selling hardwood furniture produced in other cities and was confident that the furniture could be produced in Whitehall.

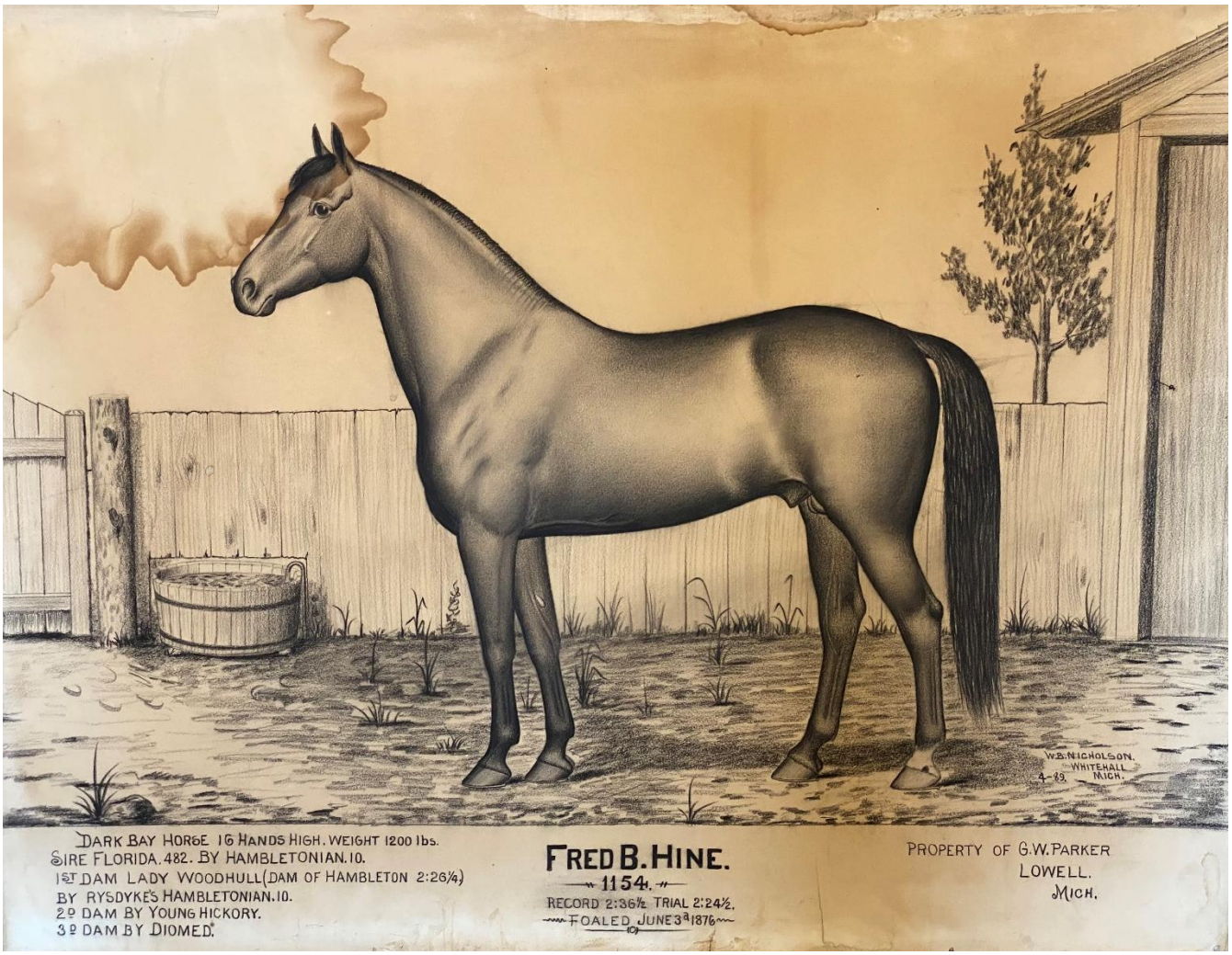

Figure 1. Crayon drawing by W. B. Nicholson compliments of Lowell Area Historical Museum, Lowell, Michigan. The only known original "Nicholson" in existence.

He engaged with local businessmen to obtain their commitment to purchase $100 of stock in a company that would manufacture articles for which a ready supply and demand could be obtained, for instance an article of furniture such as an upholstered rocking chair. A meeting was held on December 16, 1887, and the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company was created.

Initially the company produced the spring rocking chair but found that it was more advantageous to produce center tables of various designs. The center tables became the focus of the operation as more orders for the product were received.

The business began to grow and was doing well until Friday September 19, 1890, when the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company met its fate. A destructive conflagration swept through a portion of Whitehall, consuming numerous buildings, including the Cooperative Novelty Manufacturing Company.

Wayland continued his success in horse breeding and crayon lithographs after the fire but may have felt somewhat cursed as on March 26, 1891, his house nearly suffered the same fate as his company. The house fire did not do great damage, and there were no injuries, but there was considerable water damage to the furniture and the interior. The house was fully insured, which may have been an important factor in his decision to move his family to Holly, Michigan in 1892.

Wayland engaged in the hardware business when he moved to Holly. Demand for his horse drawings disappeared as photographic technology advanced. There were not many horse owners that would pay for his drawings when they could get an exact reproduction of their horse via a photograph.

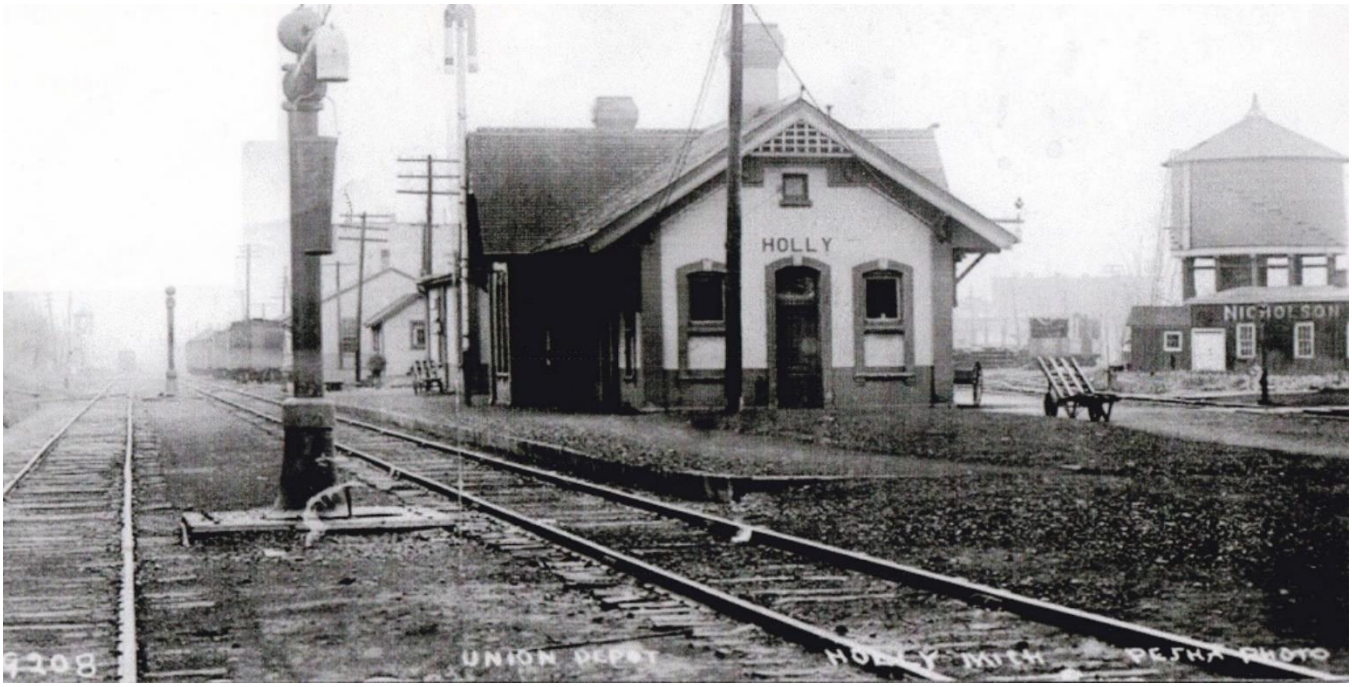

Figure 2. The Nicholson hardware was located close to the train station in Holly, Michigan

Wayland moved to Highland Park, Michigan circa 1905 where he engaged in metal work and eventually became an electrician. He and his wife had two boys [James (b. 1888) and Allen (b. 1892)] and they spent the remainder of their lives in Highland Park. Lillie passed away in 1933 at the age of 77, and Wayland passed away in 1943 at the age of 89. Both are buried at the Fairview cemetery in Brighton, Michigan.

Figure 3. Nicholson grave in Brighton, Michigan

Wayland Nicholson spent only a decade in Whitehall, Michigan but had a positive impact upon the area. His drawings exist in anonymity.

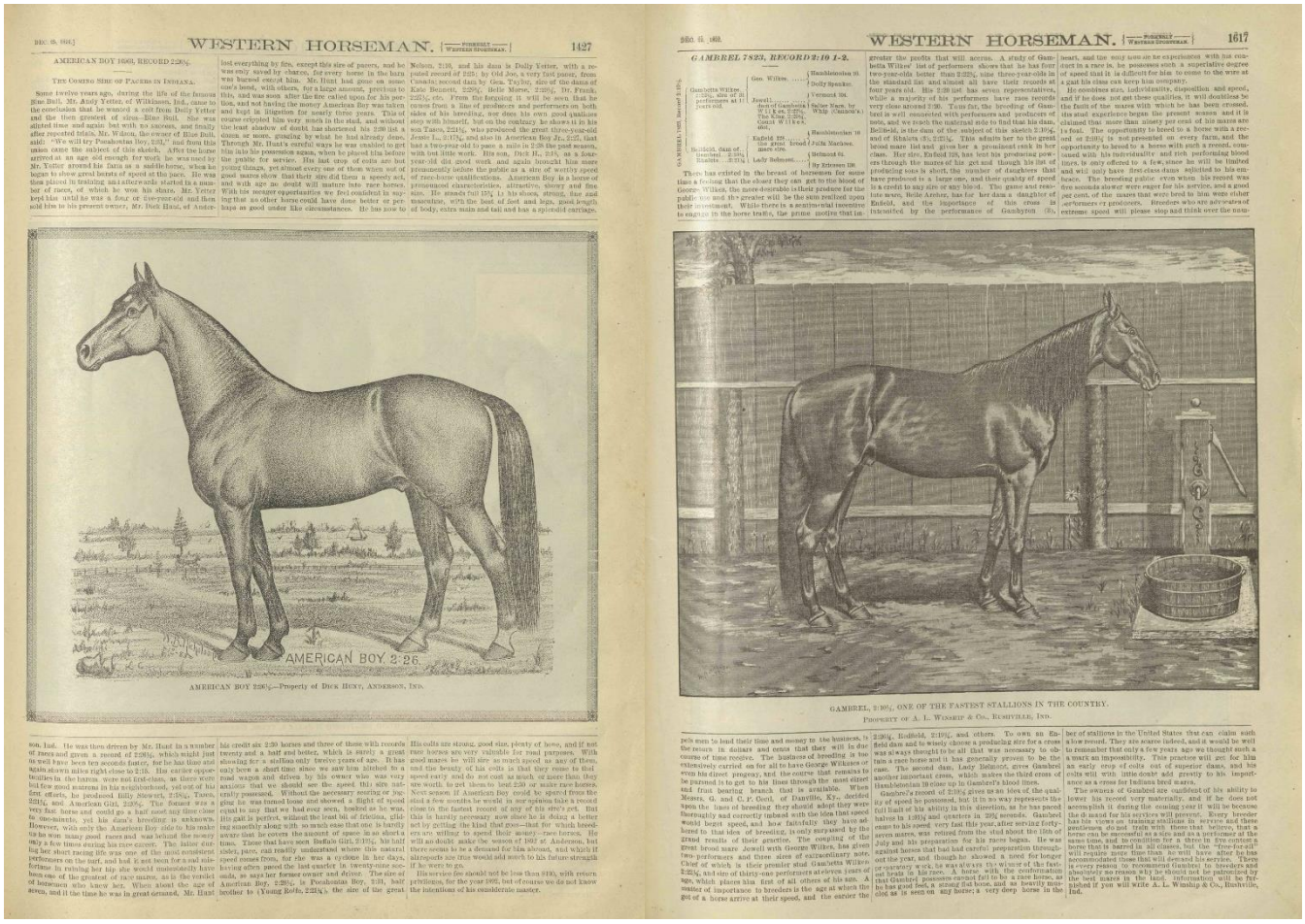

Figure 4. Nicholson drawings featured in the Western Horseman publication