

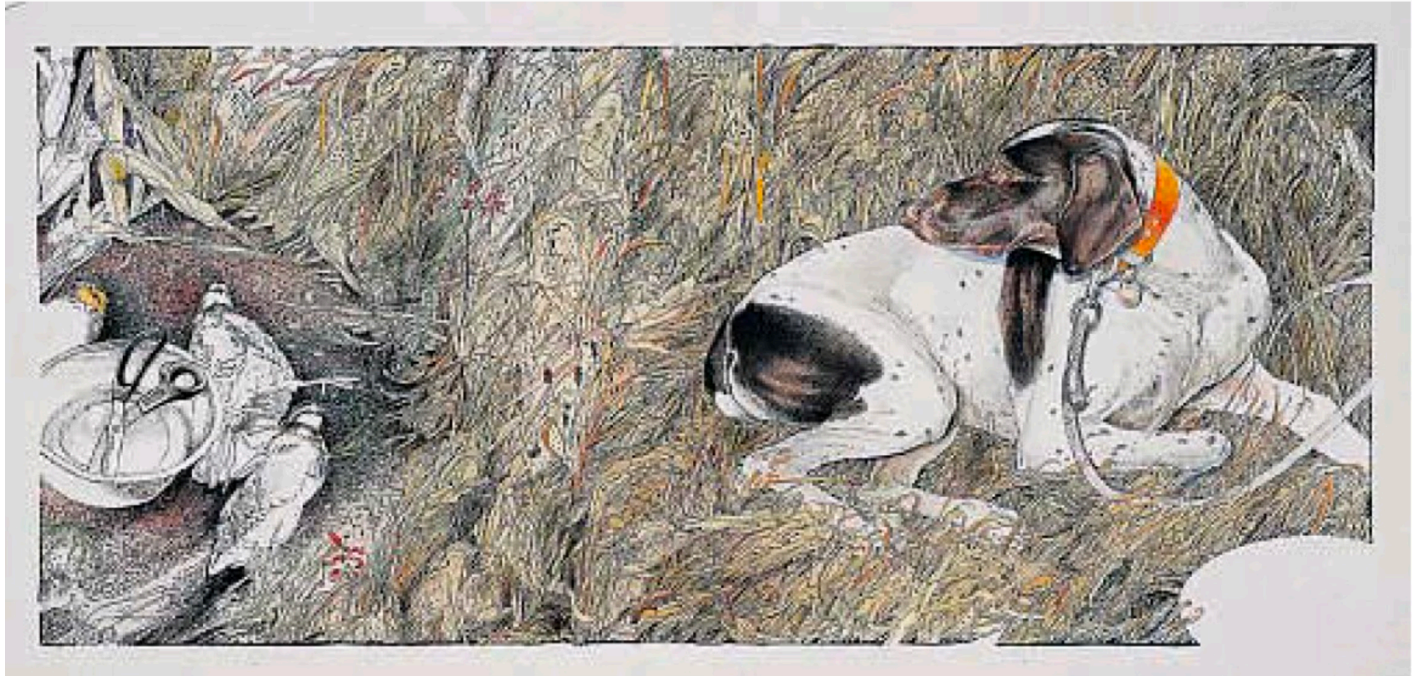
The Dallas Morning News

Illustrator caught love for outdoors

Arts

29 May 2016 | BYRON HARRIS Special Contributor Longtime WFAA-TV journalist

Byron Harris first met Jack Unruh 16 years ago.



Willie Mae, featuring one of Jack Unruh’s favorite bird dogs, is an illustration for his book, *Fish and Other Stories as My Pen Remembers Them—A Journal* by Jack Unruh, which is coming this fall from Herring Press.

In the mind of the angler, a fish even after it’s caught just keeps on getting bigger. Such is the stuff of yarns. But how does an artist convey in one illustration a fisherman’s tendency to exaggerate?

Jack Unruh knew how. He could crystallize a subject by emphasizing one attribute over another. Big fish? Yeah, his drawing said, let’s make it a whale. That selection of detail would take up residence in your mind’s eye. It would haunt. So the next time you saw a piece of Jack’s, it would

waltz right into your art brain and shake hands with the last one you’d seen.

Unruh, who died May 16 in Dallas at the age of 80, rendered subjects as diverse as George Soros, Lyle Lovett and Muddy Waters. Over the last decade, though, his style became known across the state as the visual embodiment of “The Texanist” in Texas Monthly. The humorous monthly column answers readers’ questions, say, about whether to send one’s dog to a taxidermist after it meets its maker, in an especially Texas way.

Unruh’s drawings, which accompanied the column, transform twang, weird and outrageous into pen and ink.

His ideas took shape in his studio above his garage in East Dallas. His office was just like him: unpretentious with humorous artifacts that projected a profound sense of self. He’d been inducted into the New York Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame a decade ago. He once illustrated a book by Nobel winner Pablo Neruda. You’d never know that from talking to him.

He possessed an artist's vocabulary, but he never trotted it out. "Rembrandt," he'd say, if the subject of a conversation somehow came to Rembrandt. The room would turn to Jack-the-artist for a pronouncement. "That guy could draw," he'd say with a smile.

Jack's work began with hard thinking. He'd spend hours deciding what an illustration was trying to convey before putting pen to paper. His friends knew he was a man who'd been blessed to find a way to get paid for what he loved doing. And he could mix business and pleasure.

He kept a pellet gun in the corner of the studio. Every once in a while, he'd open his second floor window to plink the one of the dozens of squirrels that wandered by on the branches outside. "They don't expect it from this angle," he'd chuckle.

At heart he was an outdoorsman. He drew for *Field & Stream* for years. The details he emphasized in outdoor scenes extract nuances others might not readily sense. An eagle's eye. A trout's vivid spawning colors. A purple-shaded moose dimly visible in the fading light of day. He took a notebook with him, sketching and writing while in the field.

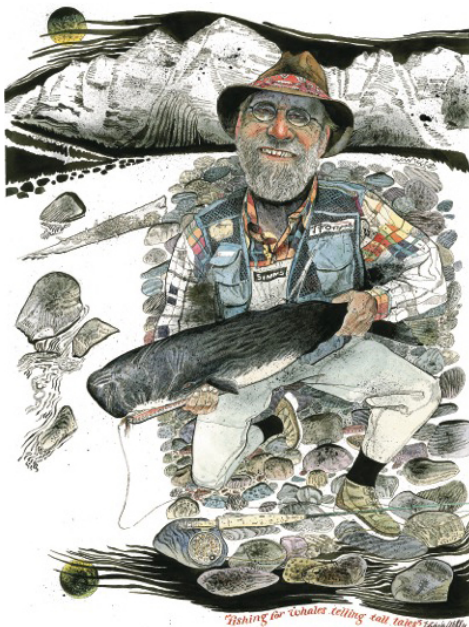
He was passionate about hunting quail in West Texas and his home state of Kansas. "It wasn't about the birds," says his longtime hunting and fishing companion Schuyler Marshall of Dallas. "It was about the dogs. He loved their enthusiasm, watching them grow, and honing their skills in tracking birds." His German shorthairs Babe and Willie Mae live in a kennel at the back of his garage. Unruh drew many portraits of dogs, one so moving that a fan seeing one illustration said, "Can I marry your art, please?"

"Jack was not a churchgoing man," Marshall says. "But he saw God in nature, and he'd see beauty everywhere. If we saw a vivid sunset, Jack would say, 'God, you did good today.'"

His dearest fly-fishing partner was his wife, Judy Whalen. They would trek annually over the Rocky Mountain West seeking brown, rainbow and cutthroat trout. All fish were released when caught. "Flyfishing was a kind of ritual for him," she says. "Exercising an ancient skill in a natural way."

He often bragged about the fish she caught. "Judy caught a 23-inch," he'd say.

And, as in the drawing, the trout seemed to get bigger every time he talked about it.



Fishing for Whales Telling Tall Tales is a self-portrait that appeared in *Aspen Sojourner* magazine.



Winston Churchill, FDR and the Boys (Blair and Bush) appeared in *Reader's Digest*.

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