



[[San Juan Silver Stage](#) | July 2020 | Sally Johnson, Museum Coordinator, [Montrose County Historical Museum](#)]  
<https://silverstage.news/07-20-if-alleys-could-talk-a-story-in-murals>

What happens when you decide to take a short cut through the alleys in downtown Montrose? Doesn't matter if you're a newbie who just moved here or a longtime resident. Until you really look, you don't see the whimsical interpretations of what "could be" rather than just "what is" (or "was") along the alleyways.

Driving or walking the alleys behind the first two blocks of East Main, you will start noticing all the different doors, windows on the street level, and big metal doors on the old stone and brick buildings...but they don't quite look like they did when they were built over a century ago. In 1987, they had a facelift, thanks to a new art teacher. Debi Jacque moved to Montrose from Aspen for a new job teaching art in the elementary schools. She was looking for something to occupy her summer months ahead. Her boyfriend at the time, Slade Hubley, gave her the idea of painting a mural on the wall of the building on the southwest corner of Main Street and Townsend. There was an intense fire

that had destroyed the existing building, and it exposed a wonderful canvas for a mural. Debi, who had experience with painting murals in the past while living and teaching in Iowa, loved the idea.

Debi and Slade began to lay down the work for painting the mural. First, they went to the director of the Downtown Merchants Association, Dixie Aufderheide, with the idea, and she liked it. She even agreed to pay Debi \$500. However, Dixie and the merchants wanted more than just one wall: They wanted a series of murals painted on the backs of the buildings along the alley behind the post office. Debi said, "No problem, let's do it." Walt Burke of Park Avenue True Value Hardware donated the paint and the brushes. Then someone donated the scaffolding, and the project began to unfold.

Realizing this was a massive undertaking, Debi immediately decided to send out a request for student volunteers to help with the project.

Researching the architectural embellishments of the historical buildings, Debi decided that a significant portion of the murals should include windows, shutters, awnings, and balconies where none of these features existed. In designing the murals, she exercised some creative license, bringing a new version of "main street" to the alley.

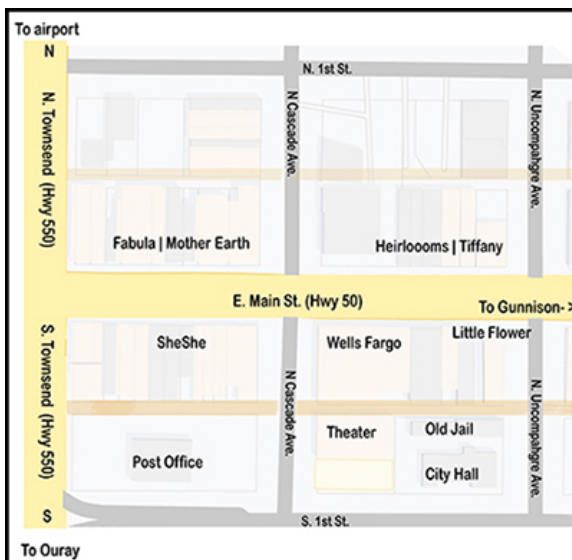
The community was slow to grasp the idea. Then a trickle of students came to lend a hand. Next came a moderate flow of kids, and finally, a handful of adults. The summer of 1987 was faced with a record heat wave, with the sun reflecting off those south-facing walls. Store owners were so anxious to watch the process of "paint drying" that soon they provided ice-cold drinks and snacks for the muralists. The artists would take a break around noon and return at 4 or 5 p.m. to avoid painting in the hottest part of the day. Many parents would drop off their kid for hours, encouraging their creative spirits in a positive and safe environment. (The parents also probably needed a much-needed break from all that energy.) Often, the adult volunteers would either pick up or take home the students, which sparked lifetime friendships and mentors.

When the Fourth of July parade came that year, the artists decorated an old International pickup as a float, and many piled into the back of the truck, joining the parade.

During the completion of the project, there was pride and ownership of the different murals. A special pin was created for the mural artists at the end of the summer. The project continued in 1988

when murals were painted in the alley on the north side of Main Street under the supervision of artist Cheri Isgreen. For a time, there was always that kid competition of which mural was the best. As you walk down the alleys today, you might see where a fresh coat of paint has partially erased one of the old murals. Stop for a closer look, and you might see the telephone pole that still has a vine climbing up it or just a peek of where some of the mural is still visible. Maybe someday we will see a new round of energy for painting the alley murals again. Until then, a stroll through the downtown Montrose alleyways is full of artistic surprises and a nostalgic reminder of where we were nearly half a century ago.

## Where to Find the Murals Today



The nostalgic murals decorating the backs of historic buildings continue for two blocks of East Main along the commercial district from Townsend to N. Uncompahgre Avenue. They are mostly found in the alleys behind the Post Office past Wells Fargo Bank on the south side and from the parking lot behind [Fabula](#) and [Mother Earth](#) to [Tiffany's, Etc.](#) on the north side.

On a sunny summer day, tour the alleys in your air-conditioned vehicle or get out and take a walk. The beauty of a downtown alley tour is that you can linger

when you like and make side trips if you choose. Stop and shop at one of the downtown stores housed in historic buildings, many with backdoor murals, like [Heirlooms](#), Tiffany's, Etc., Green Cupboard, [Little Flower](#), and in the next block, Fabula, Mother Earth, and SheShe Boutique.

Visit a downtown eating establishment for some refreshments or adult beverages. Maybe pick up a picnic lunch to enjoy in the shade of one of the town parks. If you worry about going inside a place of business, text or call. Downtown shops and restaurants can take your order by phone and carry it out to you curbside.