

Portraying Anytown, U. S. A.

## An Ohio Boy With Unblurred Eyes



By STEVAN DOHANOS



I OWE A LOT to my Ohio boyhood. When I was a kid in Lorain County I began collecting with a passion impressions and images of the face of America. It wasn't with the idea of being an artist: that had never occurred to me then.

I was a first generation American—and, even as a small boy,—trying desperately to be part of the little Ohio town of Lorain, which to me *was* America. My father came from a remote Hungarian village to seek his fortune in the New World. Chance brought him to Lorain; when he landed in New York he heard they needed men to work in the Ohio steel mills. That's how I happened to be born in Ohio—instead of in a little place in Hungary with the funny sounding name of Bacska.

I grew up in the rigid traditions of Hungarian family customs on one hand—and surrounded by America on the

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STEVAN DOHANOS, a native of Lorain, is outstanding as artist and illustrator. His work in its wholesomeness and sincerity expresses the finest qualities in American life. He received an Ohioana Career Medal in 1952. The next year and again in 1957 he contributed the art work for the cover of the OHIOANA ENGAGEMENT CALENDAR YEAR BOOK, and this year his contribution adorns the cover of this issue of our magazine.

other. I was glad for the culture and customs my people had brought with them from Europe—but I wanted to be an American . . . fast! I did the things American kids all over the land do. I played marbles in the spring, and made stilts, and played baseball. Once in a while I went to movies on Saturday afternoons. I saved my money for small pleasures like candy bars. I worked in grocery stores and peddled papers on street corners.

### A Brash Decision

When I was seventeen, and an office boy in a steel mill, I began to draw in earnest. It was then I hit on art as a career. This was a brash decision. I'd had no formal training—in fact, I'd never even seen an artist. A hit-and-miss period followed—a job-to-job process of finding my way, of learning my craft. Painting the living canvas of America remained a bright, faraway daydream.

One small achievement on top of another—like stacked saucers in a French café—brought me in an unspectacular way to Cleveland. I had my sights on being an interpreter in pictures of the America I knew.

It has been said that “. . . most American artists have a primordial urge to go to New York, just as salmon fight their way up the Columbia River.” I was no

different. As soon as I could make the grade, I left Cleveland and went to New York.

A few years of trial and error in the Big City led me to a milestone in my life: my first *Saturday Evening Post* assignment in 1937. I'll never forget the excitement of landing in this showcase of American illustration for the first time—of being a running mate of men like Norman Rockwell and Harold Von Schmidt! The *Post* kept me busy from then on—and kept a critical eye on my work. I kept drawing on my stockpile of boyhood memories of small Ohio towns—the subject I knew best. From them it was easy to distill the qualities of Anytown, U. S. A., that everyone could recognize.

#### Interviewed by an Editor

After a respectable number of Dohanos covers the *Post* decided to introduce me editorially to its readers, and an editor was sent to interview me in New York. We met for lunch and talked through cocktails and dinner—a marathon performance during which the tablecloth became gray with my pencilled diagrams, and (as the editor remarked)

the waiters grew beards. He took voluminous notes while I rambled on about my recollections and ideas on practically everything: art, esthetics, my boyhood in Ohio, and my fascination with everyday objects. After seven hours, we parted and he gathered up his notes and hurried to catch a train.

Next day he phoned that there had been a minor catastrophe—he had left his notes on the train, and would have to do the piece from memory. Summing up his most vivid recollections of our conversation, he began with a three-word description of me as the title of the piece: "Boy From Ohio." I was, he reported, "an Ohio boy with the unblurred eyes of a kid from the hinterlands."

No tribute could have pleased me more.

That's still about where I stand today. I've been away from Ohio for a long time now, yet my memories of growing up there are the basis of my stock-in-trade. The eyes of "the kid from the hinterlands" have taken a slight beating—I've passed from bi-focals to tri-focals—but I'm still trying hard to live up to my favorite citation, "an Ohio boy—with unblurred eyes . . ."