



Memories  
from  
the early years

## **Lakehead Visual Arts Club: Fifty Years of Art History**

The Lakehead Visual Arts Club, according to our records, originated in the Fort William and Port Arthur Art Clubs, which were formed in 1951. Long before that date, however, a group of talented painters met at the YMCA and in private homes in Port Arthur and Fort William.

Finally, in 1960, thanks to the Dept. of Recreation for the city of Port Arthur, new facilities were found in the basement of the Balsam Street School. Mrs. Jill Campling was the president in 1960, with Mrs. Clare Dougall serving as past president and Helen Knights as treasurer. In 1964 the artists decided to amalgamate and form *The Society of Fine Arts*. At that time, they moved to their new home at Lakehead College and held an open house to exhibit paintings, ceramics and sculpture. In 1969, *Lakehead Visual Arts Club* was chosen as a more appropriate name for the club and the name was officially adopted in 1970. The city allowed the club to use the old CPR freight office at the marina as a gallery. With the help of the city, LVA has continued to operate the gallery ever since.

From 1958 to 1972, Ethel McLennan taught art classes at the Balsam Street School and Florence Quackenbush instructed art classes in the city of Fort William. Some of the other instructors during the early years included: Ann Scollie, Tillie Harasynchuk, Ruby Owen, Helen Strickland, Olive Widnall, Marjorie Bryan and Georgie Campbell. In 1961, Susan Ross offered instruction in portraiture. Other opportunities for art education included workshops by the Dept. of Education at the Quetico Conference & Training Centre from 1959 to 1972, and a summer school at the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University in 1967.

Lakehead Visual Arts continued to flourish over the last quarter of the 20th century, due in part to the leadership of Gladys Postans who served as president for 25 years, from 1976 to 2001. In partnership with the city of Thunder Bay, and supported by a dedicated executive and membership, she has worked hard to maintain a vibrant art presence in Marina Park.

The location of the LVA summer gallery at the Marina is ideal as a tourist attraction. As the Marina Park has developed and become more attractive to both tourists and the citizens of Thunder Bay, more people visit the gallery every year. LVA members who volunteer over the summer months put forth a special effort to accommodate tourists with information about city attractions as well as to inform them about local art.

Today the club continues to be managed by a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer and chairpersons responsible for public relations, telephoning, and hanging exhibitions. Our objective is to encourage and stimulate interest, awareness and understanding of art in members of the community and to provide an opportunity for artists to exhibit and market their art.

LVA welcomes professionals, amateurs and beginners, active artists and supporters of the arts as members of the club.

*Research by Elizabeth Cramb and Phyllis Callaghan*

## Recollections by Susan Ross: April 2003

As I remember, quite hazily, I must admit, a group of us went to the Fort William YMCA where we hired models to draw and paint. This was before we had the official name of Lakehead Visual Arts, and before the building at Marina Park was acquired. We also visited the Lakehead Psychiatric Hospital to try to help patients with their artwork, and, which was more important to me, to draw and paint the patients themselves. Most were willing models and seemed to enjoy it.

When the group became larger, and now the L.V.A., we put on many juried art exhibitions when we imported outside jurors. I, not being the managerial type, was on the hanging committee, which sometimes was quite dicey as a few prima donnas were particular as to where their work was hung.

In the late 50's or early 60's I was asked by Yvonne McCrae, the wife of the MPP for Fort William, if I could do anything for a friend of hers from Manitoulin Island who was in the city with a station wagon full of drawings and paintings which she had planned to show in Sault Ste. Marie. Somehow the plans fell through, so I contacted whoever was in charge of L.V.A. at the time to see if we could do anything. We did, and she had her show at the Marina Park building. This was none other than Daphne Odjig who has since become a world famous painter of Indian art.

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April 30th. 1972

Mrs. Roy Evans  
282 Wolesley Street  
Thunder Bay (P), Ontario

Dear Mrs. Evans:

Looking back over what records I have of the Fort William Art Club is like a lifetime passing in review. There are so many bits and pieces, so many names and faces, so many dates and places.

The actual founding date of the club seems lost in antiquity - those with whom I have been in contact differ in their thinking, but it would seem that it was in September, 1951. The first president was Mrs. Ruby Owen, but I have no written record of the other officers at that time. Succeeding Mrs. Owen in 1952 was Mrs. L. E. Hinds, sister of Mrs. C. E. Chapple, with the writer as Vice-President. The writer following Mrs. Hinds and continued as president through the years 1953 - 1957.

Although there was a painting group in existence long before FWAC, it was not organized as a club, and consisted of a number of talented women, who met, I believe, from time to time in the Y.M.C.A. As far as I know, these women were Georgie Moss Campbell ( a prolific painter of

local scenes, and teacher, both privately, and in the local schools.), Mrs. Olive Widnall, Mrs. Florence Quackenbush, Mrs. L.E. Hinds, Mrs. C.E. Chapple, and some others whose names escape me. These women held annual exhibitions of their work in the Y, and were really the forerunners of local art interest. The time would be during the forties, I believe.

It was during this time that the writer joined the fall art classes, sponsored by the Fort William Board of Education, and under the guidance of Mrs. Art Widnall. The nucleus for the FWAC came out of these classes. The names of some of the early members are: Mrs. Bea McCallum, Mrs. Tilly Harasymchuk, Mrs. Helen Strickland, Mrs. Ruby Owen, (in whose home on Brown Street most of our early meetings were held.), Mrs. Vera Stephens, Miss Marjorie Bryan, Mrs. Charlotte Tripp, Mrs. Florence Quackenbush, Mrs. Agnes Limon, Mrs. Olive Widnall (who encouraged us all the way, and who was also a president of the club at a later date), Mrs. Rose Stewartson, Mrs. Ann Scollie, Mrs. Agnes Pateman, Mrs. Corinne Lovelady, and Mrs. Margaret Duncan. There were others, of course, and I have probably overlooked some, but all were most active in getting things on the road. Our annual fee, as I remember, was two dollars per member.

Some of these people became teachers in their own right, to name a few - Mrs. Ann Scollie, Mrs. Strickland, Mrs. Harasymchuk, and Mrs. Owen. Those who taught prior to this were: Mrs. Widnall, Mrs. Quackenbush, Miss Marjorie Bryan. Georgie Campbell, although interested in art furtherance, did not become a member of our group.

Formation of the club was given impetus by the Board of Education, Community Programs Branch, through the efforts of director, Mr. Bud (H.E.) Thomas. Earlier in the year he approached Mrs. Widnall, asking her to ascertain if her group would be interested in sponsoring a summer course under the guidance of one of the professional teachers from the Ontario School of Art. The enthusiastic response brought in Mr. Gordon Couling, who so fell in love with this area and its possibilities that he came again in 1952. His enthusiasm did much to further painting in this region. Not only were students of our own group involved, but people came from all parts of Northwestern Ontario.

Nothing was more natural than a desire to get in closer touch with one another, and so the club got its beginning. And it snowballed. From the small nucleus in 1951, to a membership of forty-nine at the close of 1962. They were active years indeed. We painted everywhere, and at every opportunity. The first large outing that I can remember, was at Stanley, where we painted up and down the Kam River, and met for an enjoyable meal served in the dining room of the Stanley Hotel.

I recall an exciting outing at Chippewa Park one brilliant Sunday in February, where we waded through the snow from where we were able to park our cars, to the park lodge. Mr. Art Widnall, who was director of Parks and Recreation for the City of Fort William for many years, had his men provide heat within the lodge, although it was not sufficient to enable us to remove our coats. However, this did not deter us a bit. A horse and sleigh, loaded with logs was provided for subject matter, and we painted looking out through the sunlit windows. It was great fun and I cannot remember anyone coming down with pneumonia.

We painted out on the old Harstone Road, at Perry's Boat Yard, Boulevard Lake Park, Amethyst, Birch Beach, Silver Islet, and so many other places. All were enjoyable outings, and so well attended.

About this time we became interested in showing the public some of the work we were doing, and I believe credit should be given to Mr. Mike Donovan (who died recently, I believe in Newfoundland), who was Librarian at the Brodie Street branch of the Public Library. Mr. Donovan gave us no end of encouragement, and our displays were well attended, as our guest book would attest. Not everybody signed in, of course, but figures vary at from two to three hundred. At one showing we had a delegation of painters and their families from Red Rock, some twelve painters. They were encouraged to form the Red Rock Art Club, and became quite an active group. The school children were encouraged to view the paintings and were brought to the library by classes during the afternoons.

A lot of hard work was involved, but enthusiasm seemed lacking until 1957, when a re-organizational meeting was held and things started to move. Mr. Jack Haggerty, a forestry professor from what was the forerunner of the Lakehead University, was elected president. His secretary was Mrs. Helen Strickland, who also edited our first regional bulletin.

It was in 1957 that the writer was approached by Mr. Wilfred Walker, manager of the Lakehead Exhibition, asking if it would be possible to organize a showing of area paintings at the annual exhibition. As a result of a meeting of the L.A.A.A, the writer was made chairman of this project, and the Area Clubs were approached. The response was spectacular to say the least, so much so that the showing became an annual event for several years.

Also at this time, arrangements were made for a traveling exhibit of the works of various clubs. The two hardworking people responsible for the success of this project were Mrs. Ethel McLennan, and Mrs. Ann Scollie.

Summer and winter courses continued to be very successful, and such highly-rated teachers as Gus Weisman, John Martin and Mrs. Dorothy De Bruno Austin came to Lakehead to conduct these courses. Weisman came for two seasons, and John Martin for three. Mrs. Austin conducted a portrait-painting school in January of 1957. It was a very bitter January, weather-wise, but the turnout was excellent, and we enjoyed Mrs. Austin as a teacher, mentor, and friend.

During this time we also enjoyed a showing of 150 Years of Canadian Painting through the courtesy of the National Gallery. This was held under the auspices of the Mayor and Members of the Fort William City Council and the Fort William Art Club. A Miss Norah McCullough, Western Representative of the Gallery was here for the showing (February 24th to March 4th, 1962).

Another exhibition was the showing of the etchings of Nicholas Hornyansky, one of the foremost painters of his kind, in October 1956. We had many other showings supplied by both the Arts Institute and Gallery, but I have no written records of these.

I could fill a book with my thoughts on the work done by so many dedicated people for art in this area. I have neglected to give credit to Mrs. Chapple who allowed us to use facilities at her home (The Firs, in Neebing), for so many years. To Mrs. Edith Slack, at whose home we held many meetings, who was a brilliant painter, a friend to all of us, a one-time president, and member of the painter's group prior to the formation of our club.

What are my thoughts on as Arts Complex? Some years ago we approached Mr. Rob McCormack to see if it would be possible to promote such a project, but it was felt that it was beyond our powers at that time. (1962) People who were contacted at the time were members of such groups as The Little Theatre movement, Ballet Group, Symphony Orchestra, Choirs, Camera Clubs, Literary Society, Writers' Club, Weavers, Folk Dancers, Philatelists, Craft Groups, Lapidary Group, and Chess Club. I have no doubt that there must be many other groups who would be interested in seeing the furtherance of such a project.

As to location, as I told you over the phone, I have always favoured a central location - it would do much to pull our city closer together. It struck me that the logical location would be in the vicinity of the Confederation College, University, and Avilla Center area, where there would be plenty of room for parking. With the opening of the Balmoral extension, travel time from any end of the city would be more or less equalized.

And that, I think, must be thirty. My shoulders start to ache when I bend over a typewriter for any lengthy period. If there is any more I can add, please contact me and I will try and dig further. Hope the foregoing will be helpful.

Yours sincerely,  
Harry Pym

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**Purpose and Functions of the Lakehead Society of Fine Arts  
Suggestions and Thoughts  
Ethel McLennan 1969**

**PURPOSE**

May I refer to the first Constitution of the Port Arthur Arts Club as I feel the "purpose" outlined for its existence was brief, to the point, and is still good but could be expanded. When the Constitution for the Port Arthur Arts Club was drawn up in the fall of 1952, the purpose for the forming of the Club was outlined briefly as follows:

"To associate interested individuals in the knowledge and appreciation of all forms of the graphic and plastic arts in this area with particular reference to the interpretation of this Thunder Bay Area"

We felt that that we were situated in such a beautiful and historical part of Canada that the Club should endeavor, as its first venture, to bring to the attention of the public, through twice yearly exhibitions of their work, the many beauties and interesting parts of this territory.

I would also like to refer to one of the nine rules under the heading of "Exhibits" in the above Constitution, which reads as follows:

#### ALL WORKS DISPLAYED WILL BE ORIGINAL

This is a very important and essential rule, which, I regret to state, is disregarded in some instances. One of the professional instructors we have had at the Lakehead said, (quote) Copying is a weakness. Everything has been planned and executed by someone else. It is not your work. You learn a lot of tricks about how to render things, which have nothing to do with painting. Painting is a means of expression of your experiences of life. It isn't a copy of someone else's. You must express your joy in life and not be concerned with small things or formulas. (End of quote) Those who copy are only robbing themselves and killing their creative abilities. They miss so much and will never experience the joy and satisfaction felt when receiving recognition for a painting of their very own composition from start to finish. You should feel an affinity between yourself and your subject; to become aware; to feel a spark of insight, to experience from inside out. We must be concerned with the relativity of all things of life, the close bond between music and all other forms of art. To quote again, " As music has volumes of sound, then softness, so should a painting have."

Since our inception we have grown, perhaps slowly, but steadily. We have surmounted many problems, accomplishing much more than meets the eye both here and in the surrounding district. Through amalgamation of both Lakehead Clubs, that of Fort William and Port Arthur in 1963, we became the Lakehead Society of Fine Arts. We are going through an experimental period, making many new and, in some cases, quite beautiful discoveries; not all, however. Each serious artist learns and benefits from his own struggles and mistakes, and eventually finds his own style and interpretation. The finest art of all ages is still fine and we must or should respect it and study it or phases of it from time to time. However, we should also continue on to our present day possibilities, which are many. We must always keep an open mind, keep a high standard of learning and atmosphere, but we must also have a tolerant eye and ear for the opinions and work of the younger, modern painters. They have much to give.

#### FUNCTIONS

One of the main functions, if not the main function, is to carry out to the best of our ability, the terms of the purpose of the Society. This can be accomplished as follows:

1. By bringing in from time to time professional art instructors; arranging classes with local instruction; bringing in exhibits of outside work, especially the work of noted artists; holding local exhibits; having art appreciation evenings with movies or slides, followed by discussion; having lectures, guest speakers, followed by a social hour; holding

demonstrations, and so on. Suggestions from the members along this line should be encouraged.

2. The business portion of the monthly meeting should be conducted according to parliamentary procedure, be as brief and to the point as possible, the agenda having been prepared beforehand. Thus, no time is lost, interest is kept alive and a social hour or some form of entertainment can be enjoyed. We must develop a spirit of comradeship among us... "esprit de corps" or, in other words, "a sense of union and of common interests and responsibilities and developed among a group of persons associated together." Old members should mingle with the new members and see that everyone is at ease and glad to be there.
3. To help people, both young and old alike, there is no age among artists' to understand the term "awareness", a term which opens up a whole new concept of a fuller and more exciting and satisfying way of life. One does not have to look far to see beauty in this area, nor anywhere, really. As one instructor pointed out to us, "Even garbage can in winter has its artistic moments when strong light and deep shadows vie with each other on the undisturbed snow which often covers the round lid of the can." Notice this sometime! I feel it is so important to develop an appreciation of art in all its forms wherever we can, even though many may not become active members or members at all. To have the intelligent understanding and interest from those around us, in what we are trying to accomplish, is of the utmost value to the artist.
4. Painting is a language understood by all nationalities and ages. Therefore, we should keep our eyes open to discover people in every walk of life who have always wished to paint or take up one of the plastic arts and who now have time to do so, but are reticent about coming forward. There are also lonely people needing a diversion of some kind who will not only find an objective but will possibly make new friends with the same interests. There are the people who are sick because of loneliness or boredom, who might, through belonging to an art group, find incentive for living. Many of the people mentioned above may find and develop real talent and have something to give others. Culture enriches and is needed to fill out a well-rounded life.
5. I feel that young people who show unusual talent but cannot find ways or means to develop it should have encouragement and, if possible, financial assistance.
6. As stated before, we have achieved more than is realized during the past years. We owe grateful thanks to the dedicated members of our Society for their unfailing efforts. We are really very fortunate in having the use of the present Art Centre for the time being. We should remain there for the next few years or as long as possible, building up in the meantime a fund for a permanent home for the Arts when a suitable opportunity presents itself. However, we have a capable Chairman and Board of Directors who will advise us. The main lack is the absence of a permanent art gallery where we can view and study the paintings of noted artists as well as the work of other clubs, to keep well informed and



not go back to isolation. We have greatly appreciated and valued the use of the University for several of our exhibits.

Ethel McLennan  
October 16, 1969

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**Something About Our Club: by Kay McCullough**  
**Port Arthur Arts Club**  
**9th Annual Exhibit**  
**May 7th, 8th and 9th, 1960**

Our membership of 90 spans an estimated age group of from 25 to 75. It is comprised mostly of busy housewives, parents and grandparents, several businessmen and women, and a few teachers. Some of us are "old veterans" who have "painted for years" and who formed the backbone of the original club formed in 1951. Others of us joined later and, lacking long experience and training, progressed mainly on our own enthusiasm and now are sometimes referred to as the club's "prolific painters". Still others of us, newer members still, are in varying stages of discovering ourselves through art.

But all of us are amateurs who are constantly learning and all of us are "appreciators". As such, we feel that although the producing of something worthwhile is one of the goals at which we aim, failure to reach this goal is not necessarily failure at all but, indeed, success, IF, in the process of learning some of the "hows" along with the "whats" and the "whys", we have deepened our original capacity for appreciation and our enjoyment of just "doing".

Beginning this year, some of us who are professionally trained, have assisted in teaching the many interested newcomers to our ranks who have swelled our membership to more than double. Beginners' work often has a unique freshness. We think this is true of the work of our classes represented here today. During the last year we have also established classes in clay modeling and hope in future to gain enough outside interest in other graphic arts to expand into things like ceramics, wood carving, silk screen printing and allied crafts. We would welcome any suggestions.

Many of our members have availed themselves of the opportunity to attend winter and summer courses in art instruction, which are held at the Lakehead and, since its inception, at the Quetico Conference and Training Centre, Kawene, Ontario. To conduct these four to five day courses, the services of a qualified artist-instructor have been arranged for through the N.W.O.A.A. (Northwestern Ontario Art Association) of which our club is a member, also the Communities Programs Branch, Department of Education and the Quetico Centre. Well-attended bi-yearly courses, conducted over the past twelve years, have attracted people from all walks of life interested in art, including many members from the fourteen member clubs in the N.W.O.A.A. all the way from Red Rock to Atikokan.

Instructors such as Gus Weisman, John Martin, Gordon Cooling, Dennis Osborne, Dorothy Stevens, John Bechtell, William Roberts and Gottorn Otto have influenced in some way the thinking of many of the artists represented here today. If there is a lack of \*sameness" -- and we hope there is -- it is because we have found inspiration to varying degrees in each of these men and later, working on our own, have attempted to sift the best (or should I say the most personally-applicable) ideas of each through our own, in the hope of arriving at or, have done so, of strengthening and improving our own individual style.

Last week was a highlight in the history of our club when we spent three wonderful days hosting Professor George Swinton, artist, lecturer, writer and teacher from the School of Art, University of Manitoba. Mr. Swinton's comments and criticisms of what we are doing or trying to do were food for the soul-his ideas of how we may progress and grow, a source of inspiration for us all. He loved the Lakehead, though he termed "a crime and a disgrace" the lack of an Art Centre in two cities combining a population of 100,000. As a result of his visit, solutions to many of our problems have moved one step forward from the discussion stage. We are all looking forward eagerly to a return visit this summer.

Particularly indebted are we this year to Mr. Ray Whittenberg and the Civic Recreation Committee for invaluable help in launching our new program of "expansion through more active participation and through teaching others"; and in the procuring of suitable quarters for this purpose in the basement of Balsam Street School. With the cooperation of the Board of Education these facilities are meeting the immediate needs of our Thursday Night Workshop and our Tuesday Afternoon Portrait Painters.

From time to time we have been more than pleased to welcome visitors, other than just members, who have just "popped in' at the Balsam Basement just to see what goes on. Won't you feel free to do the same? Any Thursday night--you'll be entirely welcome!

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### **The CPR Freight Shed (LVA Marina Gallery)**

The CPR station and the freight shed were built in the first decade of the 20th century. Judging from old photos at the Thunder Bay Museum, the freight shed was probably constructed around 1905. It was an important building during the railroad era that began in 1875, when the sod was turned at Fort William for the transcontinental railway. The Canadian Pacific Railway line to Winnipeg was completed in 1882 and the full line coast to coast in 1885 (A Brief Chronological History of Railways in Thunder Bay, by Tory Tronrud). Anything related to shipping and receiving by the Canadian Pacific Railway at the Lakehead would have passed through this little building from the early 1900's until the 1960's. In 1976, the grand old CPR station was demolished as the great railway era came to an end. From 1969 until the present day, the CPR freight shed has served as a summer art gallery for the Lakehead Visual Arts Club, for workshops, and for group and solo exhibitions. LVA and the City of Thunder Bay have enjoyed a long history of working together to maintain an art presence in the Marina Park. The city has

allowed the artists to use the building, and in return, the artists have contributed to repairs and maintenance and have operated the gallery each summer from late June until Labour Day.