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Bracebridge

Painting the past

Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler has turned her gaze inward for a series that celebrates the village life she knew as a child in Vankoughnet

By Matthew Sitler

Nostalgia takes intriguing turns when captured on canvas and print by Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler.

The Vankoughnet resident has numerous artistic accomplishments to her name. Most recently she earned a place in the National Gallery's publication *Artists in Canada*, after art consultant Robert Britnell submitted an extensive profile of her artistic achievements to the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

But she is more excited about a breakthrough of another kind, a series of oil paintings and short stories that harken back to her childhood in the 1950s.

"The 'Winnie' paintings are the most exciting things I've done in my painting career," she explains. "Largely, they refer to my family experience. For many years, this whole concept has been mulling in my mind. The paintings depict my life."

The scenes of public school and community gatherings capture a long-forgotten innocence, which comes leaping into view with a unique vibrancy. All the stories and paintings are told from the point of view of Winnie, an idealized version of the artist as a child. She can be seen hidden amidst the whimsical crowds that populate all of Boyes-Sitler's new paintings.

"Winnie is who I am," said Boyes-Sitler. "I allow people to see, through Winnie, my weaknesses and strengths."

Boyes-Sitler grew up in Vankoughnet, and returned there in 1991. She describes herself as "one of the lucky ones," someone who discovered her passion for painting early in life, and who has had an opportunity to develop her talent for many years.

This year will be the first opportunity however, for the public to discover what has fuelled her immense output throughout the years.



VANKOUGHNET ARTIST Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler with her oil painting "Little Flock." Inspired by her surroundings in Muskoka, the artist has most recently depicted scenes of rural life in the 1950s, adopting a naïve style for paintings like "Square Dance at the Old Orange Hall" (below). She will hold exhibitions of her work at the Chapel Gallery in Bracebridge and the Kathleen Gormley MacKay art gallery in Unionville later this year.

Photo by Matthew Sitler

As she writes in her statement of intent for an upcoming art show: "In an ever-changing world, the experience of the rural village is quickly becoming lost as larger populated areas encompass the surrounding villages. Many of the activities depicted in these paintings are part of the strong heritage of Muskoka and in particular, of rural Muskoka. A heritage which must not be forgotten."

A founding member of the the Vankoughnet Village Painters — a group that holds annual exhibitions — she has taught art in the village for 12 years and now has 30 students. Her store, Cherishables, which she operates from her home, will celebrate its 20th anniversary next summer.

While she has earned a solid place in the community, Boyes-Sitler's new paintings reveal for the first time, vivid, colourful scenes of her youth.

The four paintings she's created so far for the series include "The Old Schoolhouse", "The First of July Picnic", "The Square Dance at the Orange Hall", and "The School Christmas Concert at the Orange Hall."

By the time the series is complete, she hopes to have rendered 12 paintings in total.

Done in a folksy, colourful style, the Winnie paintings are inspired by and linked to a series of short stories. These tales, which Boyes-Sitler hopes to publish in book-form one day, recall the experiences that time cannot wash away. They tell of the peaceful and the serious sides of life, and many centre around a rural school.

"To attend a rural school is to experience life from the perspective of a small village," she said. "Some of the other stories touch on teasing in childhood, struggle, and sad times."

Boyes-Sitler has been involved in many juried shows, and has had four one-woman shows in Toronto and surrounding regions. This includes an exhibit held at the Kathleen Gormley MacKay Gallery in Unionville, Ontario last year. She will exhibit there once again this year, this time with a series of landscapes and florals, in March.

She will also exhibit her Winnie paintings at the Chapel Gallery next October between October 15 and November 18.

Matthew Sitler is a reporter with the Bracebridge Examiner, and the son of Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler.