

Painter explores innocence of childhood

By MATTHEW SITLER

One woman's vibrant recollections of life during Muskoka's simpler, earlier days will be unveiled at an upcoming painting exhibition held at the Chapel Gallery in Bracebridge.

From October 18 until November 15, the art show "Winnie – One Woman's Legacy" will offer a glimpse into the formative years of artist Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler's life in the small village of Vankoughnet.

"I didn't really have a choice but to do this show," she explained, "because this show is really about who I am. It's done from feeling that I'm very privileged to have grown up in a small rural community where family and community were very much tied together. The strength of your family is very often solidified by the strength of the community that you grew up in."

Boyes-Sitler said 12 of the main oil paintings in her show depict life in Vankoughnet during the 1950s, while she was growing up.

"Scenes such as the local general store, participating in a small schoolroom, and going to the fall fair which was held in Bracebridge," she said. "And scenes from square dances at the Orange Hall in Vankoughnet and at church."

These paintings are a departure in style for Boyes-Sitler, who has mainly focused on doing neo-realistic landscapes, florals and idyllic country settings throughout her long career.

She says the "Winnie" paintings (named after her idealized self as child who appears somewhere within each painting) are deliberately rendered in a childlike and folksy manner. "If you think of a child viewing a scene from a 10-year-old's perspective, this is more what the Winnie paintings appear as," she said.

Boyes-Sitler has spent two years preparing for the Chapel Gallery show.

"It's been in the back of my mind for some time, as I've also written a series of 12 stories which I intend to publish within the next year," she said. "The



AT THE BRACEBRIDGE FALL FAIR. Vankoughnet artist Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler poses with her oil painting rendition of what it was like at the Bracebridge fall fair during the 1950s. Scenes such as these will be showcased at Boyes-Sitler's upcoming art show "Winnie – One Woman's Legacy" at the Chapel Gallery in Bracebridge between October 18 and November 15.

Photo by Matthew Sitler

paintings came out of the stories, because they depict a lot of the ideas and concepts that I have written about. The paintings stand on their own though, because each one tells its own story in its own way."

Boyes-Sitler hopes the paintings will accompany the stories in book form.

Large and heartfelt, the "Winnie" paintings utilize mainly primary colours to emphasize the innocence of youth.

"Hopefully, this in itself adds a vibrancy to the paintings," she said. "I hope that people of all ages

will identify with them. I can see them being of interest to small children and adults alike. Because anyone who's had any connection with growing up in a small community can relate very strongly to these images."

A member of Muskoka Arts and Crafts since she moved back to Vankoughnet from Scarborough in 1991, the artist's relocation to her childhood village set her afire with creative inspiration. A founder of the Vankoughnet Village Painters — a group that holds annual exhibitions — she has also had an extensive biography of her artistic life prepared by art consultant Robert Britnell.

Both the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto have accepted the biography. Her name will also appear in the upcoming issue of the National Gallery's publication "Artists in Canada."

Besides operating her store Cherishables, as she has done for the past 20 years, she continues to teach art in Vankoughnet to 30 students from within the village and throughout Muskoka.

"I think the Winnie stories are a real passion for me because they force me to go within myself and struggle with some of the issues I dealt with as a small child, but maybe never really dealt with," she said. "It's about coming to realize the very huge impact that people like my grandmother actually had on my years of development. If one person stands out in the stories particularly, it's my grandmother, Lottie Boyes, and her wisdom."

Her childhood, Boyes-Sitler said, "was a time when people living within communities were so supportive of one another. You were cared for not only by your immediate family but also by the community at large because people reached out very strongly to one another."

The artist will be reading one of the stories at her art show's opening, which will be held on October 18 between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m.

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