

Artists recall bringing Vankleek Hill's historical murals to life

LOUISE SPROULE
louise@thereview.ca

VANKLEEK HILL – If you live in Vankleek Hill, or have visited the town, you have most likely seen the historical murals painted on the sides of three heritage buildings. The murals are a popular backdrop for visitors taking photos of themselves and their group.

Just last week, a portion of one of the murals came down during the demolition of an unstable rear storage area on one of the historic buildings and that loss is being felt. The appeal of the murals, aside from being pieces of art, was that they portrayed people from the town's history. Beyond that, the murals depicted people who were part of the town during the 1990s, when the murals were actually being painted. It was inevitable that over time, the community would feel a sense of ownership – a shared past and present was made real – in a way – in the historical murals. These murals came about thanks to three people who were relative newcomers to the area.

The Historical Mural Group was formed in 1990 and consisted of three members: Phil Arber and artists Elisabeth Skelly and Odile Têtu.

Skelly still lives in the area and recalls that the murals were completely an initiative of Arber.

"He showed up at our home one day and said, 'This is what you have to do next.' He had seen murals in other communities and thought we should have some in Vankleek Hill," recalls Skelly. "He really wanted to promote the town," said Skelly, of the late Phil Arber.

And so, the three began to make plans.

Let's take a look back at the history of the murals which are such a part of Vankleek Hill's history.

Historical Mural #1

The first historical mural was painted during the summer of 1990, and is about half of the lengthy painting that is on the west side of the apartment building with a commercial storefront – Jade Garden. (Back then, Hocquard Insurance was located in that storefront.)

The artists came up with a sketch of the first mural and the idea was to sell numbered, limited edition prints to pay the artists for their time. Sico donated the paint for the job, Skelly recalls. And Alie Rentals of Hawkesbury furnished the scaffolding, she recalls.

But the idea of a historical mural was new to local people. Sales of the 1,000 mural prints, even at \$10 each, were slow. Yet: people began to stop by to see the growing work of art in progress.

"Jean Higginson used to come by and film our progress. She was so enthusiastic ... of course, in just one day, it didn't seem like a lot had changed to us," Skelly jokes.

Earl Quan was a well-known character to Vankleek Hill residents as he spent a lot of time driving around town – especially at night, to keep an eye on things. Quan was concerned that someone would come along and spoil the artists' work during the night, so he took it upon himself to safeguard it from vandalism.

Léo Séguin was someone else that would stop by regularly, as was local inventor Bill Haines.

For Skelly, part of the magic of the mural was her partner's ability to paint a person into the mural–live. "People would just be standing there and she would paint them into the mural -- especially the people who would stop by on a regular basis," Skelly recalls. That kind of spontaneity stands out for Skelly, who explains that she worked on the buildings and other parts of the mural, but that Têtu had a fine touch when it came to portraits.

"If you work at a portrait too much, you could ruin it—but she always knew when it was right. She took great joy from adding people we knew," Skelly remembers.

Têtu, who now lives in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, says she remembers the enthusiasm of the people stopping by,

in particular: Jean Higginson.

She recalls that they worked with about 20 different colours of paint, pouring small amounts of each into small styrofoam cups so that the paint would not dry quickly. Six cups would fit into a fruit basket, which they took with them as they climbed up on the scaffolding to work.

"Phil was there with us a lot of the time. It was him moving the scaffolding and all the platforms every time we needed to be in a new position to work," she recalled. "He did so much work -- we needed to move that scaffolding or the platforms a lot."

Têtu recalls her father, who worked at Parks Canada at the time, connected them with a historian and a warehouse filled with reproduction items which were used as replicas for historic sites across Canada.

"These were like historical artefacts, but they were reproductions. We went through the entire warehouse with a historian, who showed us what would have been found in a general store in this part of Canada for that time period. We took a lot of pictures – every single thing in the general store scene is authentic to that time," Têtu affirmed.

A few years after the completion of that first mural, painted on marine-quality plywood, a second mural was considered.

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Historical Mural #2:

Mercier Carriage Maker:

Top: Bertha Hayes; Margaret Nixon; Katherine Cuning.
Bottom: Adam Harden; Joel Harden; Lady (the horse); Russell Mercier; Logan (the dog); Ian Oswald; Auguste Mercier; Mathias Mercier.

White Palace:

Top: Clara Timbers; Georges Martel and his son, Germain; Sophie Bigus; Andrea Harden; the Reverend Canon William Port Garrett.

Balcony:

Samme Putzel (as a child); Emile Mercier; Amelia Sproule.

Bottom (left of entrance): The artists, W. C. Fields, Auxilium Poirier; (waitress). Sadie Barton; Delbert Barton; Vivian Barton; Mitchell Dandy; Jodie Dandy.

Bottom (right of entrance): Marcel Villeneuve (waiter);

Abraham Poirier, André Boyer; Bertha Kerr; Alexandre Matte (P'tit Alex); Sister Rita; Sister Christina.

Bank of Ottawa:

Top: Napoleon Martel; Arthur Martel; Léopold Séguin; Gaston and Boris (the cats); the lovers.

Bottom: Harry Allen; Isaac Allen; Percy Allen; John M. Barton; Bill Haines; Léo Séguin; Hughie Allison; Duncan (the dog); Bryan Coleman.

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HISTORICAL MURAL #1: This is one of the limited-edition prints created as a fundraiser for the mural.

Wood Brothers Bakery:

Top: Ian Hepburn; Rick Cummings.
Bottom: O. J. Wood; Ambrose Pilon; Mrs. Wood.

Deguire Brothers Tinsmith:

The spy; Freda Pemberton Smith.

Bottom: Willy Mercier, Ron Dines, C. P. Butler; Phil Arber; Hermas Séguin.

E. Z. Labrosse:

Top: Howard Wiltzie and nephew; Basil (the cat); Joyce Vogan Lafavre.
Bottom: Édouard Séguin; Emile Méthot; E. Z. Labrosse; Guy Labrosse; Pauline Piché; Hazel Piché; Archie Hardy; Philomène Villeneuve; Duncan (the dog).

History, photos, memories part of murals

Historical Mural #2

This second mural became a seamless continuation of the first one— this time, the historical scene spanned the entire length of the building facade on Home Avenue, working doors and windows into the painting.

Again incorporating people and scenes from old photographs, people from 1992 were included in the mural. As they began to work, the group knew that a hydro pole right in the middle of the two murals had to go. After considerable effort, the pole was moved and Arber, who was always on the move buying and selling antiques, came up with vintage lamp standards, which were attached to the building to illuminate the murals at night.

Once more, 1000 limited-edition, numbered prints were for sale at \$10 each to help pay the artists.

But when funds were short during the mural process, Arber always picked up the tab, Skelly says.

Going To The Fair

A third mural project came about a few years later and this time, the image would be painted directly on brick on the north side of what was then the Méthot building on High Street (It is now owned by Jan Holland). Part of the main floor of the building housed the Méthot grocery store, familiar for its outside fruit and vegetable display.

Skelly—who is a watercolourist—recalls painting several scenes from the store, which had the hometown look of a store from another time, she recalls.

The concept of including people from the town’s history and showing them all on their way to the fair, even showing some livestock and a well-documented plane that landed at the fair one year, was an engaging one. If only the artists had painted the to-scale image after they knew it was going on a north wall.

“We had to reverse the image because we realized that if we did it the way it was, everyone wasn’t going to the fair they were going away from it,” Skelly laughed. These were the days before digital photography. A photograph was taken of the to-scale artists’ rendering and printed in reverse. The artists created limited-edition, numbered prints to finance that mural, too.

Skelly remembers being on the scaffolding and feeling the ground vibrate every time a truck went by. It was kind of scary, she recalls.

Community Patchwork

When Arber visited the artists and pitched the idea for a fourth mural, this time in the form of many images in a patchwork pattern, Skelly recalls that she and Têtu felt a bit self-conscious and thought that the torch should be passed to other local artists. But they

were soon caught up in researching pictures and scenes for this fourth project and chose many images from past editions of *The Review*, using Review photographs such as the one depicting the army trucks during the ice storm as they rounded the curve on High Street, scenes from the Vankleek Hill Fair, the May Show and even the Vankleek Hill quilting group.

This time, the artists created a to-scale version of the mural and calculated the cost of the project before dividing it proportionally among the images. In other words, each image came with a sponsorship price attached and sponsors would have their names printed in the corner of the image that they had sponsored.

The idea worked. Before long, every image had been purchased and the familiar Community Patchwork mural, with quilt squares painted along each side, was installed on the north side of the building on the southwest corner at the main intersection in town. There were no limited-edition prints this time.

As the paint on the murals has faded and bricks needed repair and plywood deteriorated, a volunteer group considered restoration of the murals. About two years ago, some funds were raised, including an \$8,000 donation from the remaining funds in the Vankleek Hill Hydro Reserve (a fund created when the Vankleek Hill Hydro Commission

was sold around 1998) and it was decided that the Community Patchwork mural would be painted anew. New plywood was purchased and treated and a small volunteer crew, led by local artist Lorie Turpin, set to work. That recreated mural is now complete and awaiting installation. But a few challenges remain, such as fitting the once-flat mural around a chimney that has been installed on that wall since the mural was removed. The building’s new owners are mindful of the reinstatement to come and look forward to the repainted mural being restored to its original place.

But the other historical murals cannot be repainted or even touched up. After researching the restoration process, volunteers led by former Vankleek Hill resident Derek Evans had to admit that there was nothing that could be done.

While the community is saddened by the deterioration, artist Lis Skelly says that it is time for other artists to do something new.

Over the years, people have suggested to Skelly that the murals could be “touched up” but she compares that to touching up the paint on your house instead of painting the whole thing: it’s not do-able.

Têtu agrees, suggesting, as Skelly did, that if the murals could be removed with images sold or given to those whose family members are portrayed there, it might be time for a change.

“I am sure the murals mean a lot to people; there are about 75 people included in them from five or six generations,” Têtu commented. She recalls that for each project, the artist duo worked with an album filled with photographs provided to them.

“When we painted the murals, we were told by Sico to expect the images to last for 15 years and we were told not to varnish anything, but to let the latex paint breathe. Everything has a life, and when the paint starts peeling off, that’s when it’s time to sand it down, prime it and do something else,” said Skelly, without regret. “We did these murals to make people happy, so I don’t like to think about our work making people feel bad,” she added.

As relative newcomers, Skelly recalls that she and Têtu and Arber wanted to show history but also celebrate the wooden gingerbread trim on local homes. At the time, she says, people were removing it and some of the gingerbread was in bad shape.

Skelly is matter-of-fact about the long life of the murals, a few of which have lasted for almost 30 years. “They were always meant to have a life. Now it is time for something else,” she ended. Têtu agrees. “These are outdoor pieces and nothing outdoors lives forever. These were ephemeral. The life of a mural has to end, eventually.”