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The Colborne Art Gallery

The Little Gallery That Could By [Patsy Beeson](#)

A talented and tenacious group of artists teamed up with a generous village council to drive the success of a small community art gallery

Outside, the Colborne Art Gallery is a tidy little red-brick building; with three rather dauntingly iron-barred windows and a door piercing its front-facing wall. It looks like the East Northumberland Land Registry office that it was for 150 years. There it sits on the main street where Colborne's shops run out and the houses begin, keeping company on its west side with the right people - St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church and a law office: Salvation, Legislation and Registration all in a row, one of a trinity which upheld you spiritually, legally and territorially for many years.

In 1992 it ceased functioning as a Land Registry when the provincial government decided to limit registries to one per county or region. Northumberland, having three, transferred the records in its Colborne and Port Hope offices to a larger building in Cobourg, and the two small empty registries, like many others across the province, were offered to their localities for nominal sums (the Colborne building cost the village \$8). But the province attached a proviso: the buildings were only to be used for non-commercial purposes, such as a museum or library.

Five years elapsed and the former registry office languished as no appropriate purpose could be found for it. The village began to despair of



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A Must Read compendium of spring activities that Must Not be Missed!

finding a suitable occupant and faced the unhappy prospect of pulling it down.

Then in the spring of 1997 Wilhelmina Kennedy heard about it. A Dutch painter who lived nearby in Cramahe Township, she wondered about the possibility of turning it into an art gallery. True, the village of Colborne, population just over 2000, didn't exactly leap to mind as an epicentre of the fine arts; hitherto hockey more its thing. Still, it was an attractive building and everything had to start somewhere. But would the village Council agree? An art gallery wasn't one of the roles that the province had stipulated. And worse, there was no money.

Wilhelmina, however, was undaunted. "I went to the Council and asked to see it," she said. "It was empty and run-down and things weren't working." Pipes criss-crossed the vaulted ceilings, and immense nuts and bolts secured the steel frames of the fire doors. But beyond the dirt and neglect she could see it was perfect for her purpose. "So I asked the Council if I could have it to start a gallery. And I told them we wouldn't have any money for rent."

But her idea was welcomed with delight by Reeve George Boycott and the Colborne Village Council. The timing must have been perfect. Not only would an art gallery breathe new life and purpose into the building but plainly the village of Colborne had reached a point in its life when it recognized that there was more to civic life than shops and businesses and was reaching out to the imaginative arts.

The 1997 opening of the art gallery was definitely one of the most exciting things to happen in the late twentieth century life of Colborne.

The building, Council told Wilhelmina, would be available rent-free, reflecting an incredible generosity of spirit that has informed the relationship of the Council - or as it became in 2001, the Township of Cramahe - towards the gallery throughout its lifetime.

At the time, Wilhelmina couldn't believe her good fortune. Brimming with the exciting news, she got in touch with her friends, fellow artists Alice Vander Vennen and Irene Osborne.

So now they had an art gallery, but what next? The three women decided to go the route of a co-operative. And to learn how a co-op worked, they drove out to the now defunct Millbrook Art Gallery which operated as one for years, to consult the members there. Millbrook gave them the advice they needed: the scheduling of gallery-sitting; the paying of monthly dues by members towards such things as 'housekeeping' the building, advertising, printing material, mailing, and so on; and the setting-up of the organizing structure with small committees to look after membership, funding, marketing, and the like.

But first the three had to assemble a good-sized group of artists whose work balanced each other's. "On the way back from Millbrook," Alice Vander Vennen remembers, "we were bouncing along and coming up with names of people who would be right." Like Avril Bull Jones, Alison Seale, Betsie Downie, Kemp Kieffer, Annie McDonald and Ann Wilson, among many others. In fact the "cobbling together of the types and styles of work" (Alice's words) which finally brought together a group of seventeen artists whose work, in the fields of painting, drawing, etching, pottery, and sculpture meshed well together, took over a year. Most of the seventeen they knew. Some they didn't, like Tim Dignam, whose work they had seen and liked but who readily joined the group when invited (In those days members were always invited. Nowadays artists who apply go before the membership to be voted in).

And a name was chosen: the Colborne Society of Artists.

The group faced the task of turning the building into a workable art gallery and presenting their first show. Armed with tools, paint, brushes, and immense enthusiasm, Wilhelmina and her crew of eight went to work. "These were happy days. It was a lot of fun," she recalled. Everything was painted white making the pipes vanish into the background. Then finally the rail for the paintings went up and Tim Dignam and she hung the paintings. "Pictures talk to each other," said Wilhelmina. "It took me hours and hours and hours to get it right because I always want perfection." Tim, too, had an amazing flair for hanging shows. "Wilhelmina and I hung all the shows



from the beginning," he recalled, "and when she left (after eight years, when Tim became Curator) I continued on till this day with a few exceptions." But lately he is stepping back somewhat and the work of hanging is being increasingly shared.

From the beginning, the Council was kept informed of the gallery's activities. "They were always delighted to hear what we were up to," said Wilhelmina. "We were so happy and grateful to have a building free of charge. My thank you to them was a painting which is now hanging in the town hall."

The intention behind the art gallery from the beginning was primarily to have a place to show the artists' work in a setting that was open to the public; but there was also a wider undertaking. As Judith Kreps Hawkins puts it: "We try to promote the arts and make people familiar and aware of them. A measure of our success is how well we reach out to the community."

Reaching out to the community - to the widest possible audience in the Northumberland area - is vital to the gallery's wellbeing, but achieving this in a small community can be a serious uphill struggle. Barbara Buntin, now chair of the Society, is entirely clear-sighted about the realities. "We're very lucky in most ways," she said. "We're not having to pay rent, and it's very much with the help of the township that we've been able to make a go of things - we couldn't have on our own. But we're in this very small town of Colborne and we have to get customers, which is a considerable challenge as there's no through traffic in this area to give us the visibility."

And customers mean sales. "It's unrealistic to think they don't matter," Buntin pointed out. Membership fees don't meet the rising costs of utilities and advertising and keeping the gallery in good shape. A number of years back a Trillium Grant, gained with the township's help, paid for a new roof and work on brickwork and windows. But expenses relentlessly arise. When paintings sell, a percentage of their sale goes towards defraying them.

But a most exciting boost to the gallery's profile was received in 2009 when it was given a grant from the Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC), and highway signs promoting the Colborne Gallery were installed on the 401. "The grant provided the start-up money," said Barbara, "and it's now up to us to maintain the highway signs."

Reaching out to the community can take other forms too. Two events recently brought in newcomers. One, a Canada-wide event called Culture Days last September offered a highly successful series of free mini print-making workshops to the public, attracting both adults and children from as far away as Peterborough. It may become an annual event. The other, called October is Arts Month, organized in conjunction with Spirit of the Hills, the Arts Council of Northumberland and Brighton Arts Council, brought in a class of kindergarten and Grade One children for a tour of the gallery with related activities, and plans are to repeat this sort of event. And about once a year there's a concert and a poetry reading to bring in different audiences.

This past January there was an air of anticipation as group members congregated for the first show of the year. There's a sense of excitement mixed with justifiable pride as it's a very good show. This is what the gallery is all about. Here too is the administrator, Yoka Jeronimus, Wilhelmina's sister, a constant presence at the gallery who is invaluable to its operation, frequently sitting the gallery herself. Perfectly turned out, she is there to greet guests warmly and help make all run smoothly.

The front two rooms hold a handsome and thought-provoking exhibition by a guest painter, Eileen Menzel, called The Wall Series, of mixed media paintings based on the significance of walls: some defensive, others protective, but ultimately all of them problem-solvers depending on their political, social and personal circumstances. The walls, in a variety of styles, range from Israeli security fences and war-time fronts to psychological barriers of indifference and denial.

The back rooms contain works by the co-operative members themselves. In 2011 there are eighteen of them, mostly painters, but with a wonderful mix of workers in other media.

Looking around, it's evident the gallery is no less loved than at its inception;

still white and full of light, its rooms displaying works in which there are no limits to the imagination of its very talented members, no holds barred on the directions their creativity takes.

"You never know what you're going to see when you come into a show here!" said Irene Osborne proudly. "What makes this gallery so vibrant is that an artist's work may evolve and change. We're given the freedom to grow."

Kreps Hawkins work is a case in point. When she joined the group her body of work was of unique whimsical sculptures "of odds and ends and found objects and mixed media." Then one day she suddenly felt a longing to pick up a paintbrush, but held back fearing there were already enough painter-members and that the group's balance would be upset. But the others encouraged her to evolve. Nowadays she is highly creative in both media.

There's no escaping the strength of the esprit de corps that pervades this group of artists. They speak of the stimulation of working and sharing together, inspiring each other, of mutual respect and 'measuring up'. Buntin, a printmaker of beautiful enigmatic images, observes that "we have an impact on each other for the good - we've talked about this as a group".

Has the gallery changed much over the years?

Osborne doubted she could answer objectively. "I'm not aware of any change, but I think we just keep getting better. Certainly our profile's much higher. People see the signs on the highway and come in, and that gives us more of a presence."

"We've grown a lot," Tim felt, looking back. "There aren't many of us left from the beginning... but we're still thriving and we've established ourselves strongly in the community. We're a great group of artists that gets along very well, with new projects and ideas on the go all the time. I'm very pleased and privileged to have worked with them for all these years."

So what's in the future for the gallery? Starting this year, there will be eight shows a year, up from seven, so the demands on everyone will increase as the artists are expected to exhibit each time. Four shows will feature a member's work. Kreps Hawkins speaks of the discipline that results from being members of the collective. "You make a commitment to a co-operative and if you can't keep it, you're out." Also there will be two shows with guest artists this year, Menzel being the first.

Perhaps the biggest excitement this year will be the installation this spring of a commissioned sculpture to be erected outside the front, making the Colborne unique among the area's galleries. It is by Claus Heinecke, a member, who is kindly donating it. Entitled Empathy, it will consist of two interlocking cylinders echoing each other in size and shape. The idea behind Empathy, says Heinecke, "...is about walking in another's shoes; of observing the concept of 'Do as you would be done by'."

Against all odds the gallery continues to flourish in its small community. Spirit, guts, hard work, loyalty, imagination and enormous talent are all in the mix of its success. But one of the major reasons underlying it is summarized by Barbara Buntin, "We owe a great deal to the Township of Cramahe for our longevity and continued success. The opportunity to create a gallery in a beautiful historic building is rare and the fact that we're able to do so with financial and community support is a tribute to the township's foresight. We're a hard-working and creative group, but we never take this opportunity for granted. It's unique".

The gallery's website is www.thecolborneartgallery.ca

Hours are 12 - 4pm, Sat & Sun. (Jan-Mar.) and 12 - 5pm, Thurs -Sun. (April - Dec.)