

## CANMORE ARTIST CELEBRATES NATURE AND PEOPLE IN DIVERSE ART FORMS

By Joyce Hildebrand

At 91, Elsie Vickery – a long-time AWA supporter, artist, and nature lover – exudes a *joie de vivre* that shows no sign of abating. “I figure I must be living under a lucky star,” she says. Her self-effacing humility belies a robust strength of character that emerges during our hour together in her Canmore home.

Elsie’s one-storey house sits on a huge lot sandwiched between large modern split-levels. As we enter, we feel as though we have stepped into an underground set for *Watership Down*. We follow her through dark cozy rooms and along low-ceilinged hallways, the walls covered with oils, drawings, watercolours, and leather-tooled pictures.

“I won second prize for that one at the Hamilton Art Show,” she remembers, pointing to “In the Park,” a large, finely stitched piece of fabric art filled with animals and whimsy. Shelves and tables hold sculptures in various media – clay, bone, metal – many of them her creations. An early self-portrait shows a face filled with a self-assured independence.

The third of four girls, Elsie was born in 1914. Her grandfather, she tells us with pride, was a member of the first parliament of Canada. Before Elsie’s birth, her parents had travelled to Calgary, then just a town, from Nova Scotia by covered wagon.

Though she can’t remember exactly when she moved to Canmore (“I’ve been here quite a long time...”), she recites her childhood address in southwest Calgary with no hesitation and remembers clearly her regular trips across town, by foot or streetcar, to the Calgary Institute of Technology and Art in the north, where she earned a diploma in arts and crafts. “When I got to a certain age, I was very passionate about art, and I took all the courses I could get my hands on.”

As we enter her tiny studio, the only room awash in natural light, she points out an abstract oil of alpine scenery, another of her works: “I don’t like ‘pretty’ mountains,” she says



Elsie Vickery

matter-of-factly, going on to describe them as “awesome” and “strong.” Her appreciation of nature, so evident in her art, eventually led her to the AWA.

“I didn’t like some of the treatment the animals were getting,” she explains when asked about her decision to support the organization, and then she draws our attention to a long, calligraphed quotation of Henry David Thoreau: “In wildness is the salvation of the world...”

Elsie is quick to clarify, though, that her vision extends beyond environmental concerns: she supports at least ten different organizations. “This woman started her own business by sewing for people,” she explains, reaching for a postcard of a wheelchair-bound Sierra Leonean woman at a sewing machine, part of a CAUSE Canada project. On the shelf beside her is a pin sent to her by CARE, another international relief and development organization, for her ongoing contributions.

As a young adult, Elsie’s love for the mountains drew her to Canmore. The story of the move from Calgary begins with the 2x10 timber beams spanning the sitting room ceiling – this is the original ceiling of the one-room trailer that she had transported from the city to the small municipality. “The land around here was mostly under water because they didn’t have the dam then, you see,” she explains. “If you wanted to live here, you had to live in the middle of a pond of water. So that’s what I did.” She chuckles about the price tag of \$30 for her two large lots.

Once the trailer was in place, she began construction. On days off from her Red Cross job in Calgary, teaching arts and crafts to veterans at the Colonel Belcher, she bussed out to Canmore to add extensions: “There wasn’t anybody to hire to do the carpentry, so you had to get busy and do it yourself.”

Occasionally her sister and brother-in-law, who lived in Canmore at the time, helped out. Does she have any assistance maintaining her home now? “No, I look after it myself,” she responds. “After all, if you build it, you know how to fix it!”

While her sisters married and raised children, marriage never seems to have entered Elsie’s mind. “I didn’t have any desire to marry. I kept busy and happy, so I didn’t think of it.” She can no longer keep busy with her beloved arts and crafts, though, since her fingers are gnarled with arthritis. Instead, she reads – mostly about eating healthy (“That’s what I blame for living long!”) – and tends her large garden of trees, shrubs, and perennials. She tried growing vegetables but the carrots were irresistible to young thieves. She shrugs nonchalantly. “You don’t like to have them go to jail, so you stop growing vegetables.”

As Elsie shows us to the door, we pass a spinning wheel, built in 1890, tucked into a corner. “It wasn’t an antique when I bought it, but it is now!” she quips with a grin. A lucky star? Maybe, but her longevity and contentment may have as much to do with creativity, a connection with nature, a positive outlook, and an enduring sense of humour.



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