

Couple looks for sites that inspired Group of Seven

By Bill Rea

The famed Group of Seven helped capture much of the beauty of the Canadian landscape, drawing their inspiration from many locations.

Jim and Sue Waddington of Hamilton have spent about 40 years crisscrossing the country to locate and photograph the actual landscapes painted by the artists. They recently outlined some of their accomplishments to an audience at Melville White Church near Belfountain.

The event was hosted by the Belfountain Heritage Society.

Mr. Waddington did most of the presentation, commenting they have done several different versions of it. He entitles it *In the Footsteps of the Group of Seven*.

He said they took it on, as a hobby, about 40 years ago, trying to find places that inspired the seven artists, as well as Tom Thomson, who helped form the group, but who died before it got going.

He had a number of anecdotes about their travels.

They were inspired to find a scene painted by Frederick Varley called *Evening in Georgian Bay*. It was of an island, of which there are about 30,000 there, but they were able to find and photograph the spot. Other examples he cited included a streetscape scene in Kleinburg painted by A. J. Casson, as well as a blacksmith's forge in Elora, also painted by Casson (Waddington said the forge is now a Shoppers Drug Mart).

"This hobby of ours is a two-person hobby," he said, adding his wife brings her organizational skills to the effort. He also said they both enjoy orienteering and canoeing, which has come in handy when they have to go into the wilderness looking for various scenes. She also hooks rugs, and Waddington said she created a rug depicting a scene in Killarney Provincial Park that was painted by A.Y. Jackson.

Changing scenery over the years has sometime complicated their efforts. Waddington recalled taking their children on a trek to find a scene painted by Jackson on Nellie Lake (he said his wife had wondered if such a place actually existed). They were able to find the spot where Jackson did the painting, but in his time, the area had been logged out. The tress had returned by the time the Waddingtons were there.

"We thought that was so much fun, we wanted to find more of them," he said.

They contacted the McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg for suggestions on where they could look, but they weren't able to offer much help, so they had to find other ways to assist their search.

He said Jackson and Franklin Carmichael liked to climb to out-of-the-way places to paint.

He observed that five or six paintings by Jackson, including one called *Northern Lake*, had the same hill in the background. Another painting was called *Grace Lake Algoma 1939*.

Waddington said they had been there in 1977, and saw some things that matched the scenes in the paintings, but not the exact spot, so they knew they had to go back, and they eventually found it.

The Group of Seven had a benefactor who owned a cottage on Georgian Bay, and he invited them to spend time there.

"That's where many of them learned their craft," he said. He added Thomson painted several scenes there, although he found the place too civilized.

He related one occasion when Varley and Arthur Lismer were at the cottage at the same time, and sat down to paint the same tree. An argument ensued as to who saw it first, and they compromised by agreeing to paint different trees.

Varley's was entitled *Stormy Weather Georgian Bay*, and Waddington said the tree that was the subject still stands. The tree Lismer painted in *September Gale* is not, but he said they were able to find some of the rocks that had been in the background.

There were some scenes the artists did their own version of. Waddington cited the example of *The Big Rock* by Lismer, commenting Casson did a version of the same scene. And he said Carmichael climbed that same high rock sat on the edge and painted the scene looking down.

It was some time before the Waddingtons looked around Algonquin Park for scenes, because they didn't think they'd find anything. He said the forest had grown a lot since the time when the Group had painted.

Waddington observed that one of the best works at the McMichael Gallery is Thomson's *Woodland Waterfall*. He said most of Thomson's work shows a lot of sky, but there is none seen in this creation. He also said they had a hint of where it was, so they walked along a portage trail, followed the sounds of a waterfall and found it. He explained the trail had been hot and filled with bugs, but things cooled off when they reached the falls. He commented that might have been what attracted Thomson.

It wasn't just scenes in Ontario that attracted the group of Seven. "It turns out they painted everywhere in Canada," Waddington observed.

He said Jackson once got the government to let him ride along on a supply ship that was equipping an RCMP facility in the Arctic, and painted a scene called Pond Inlet Baffin Shore. He added Lawren Harris went up there with Jackson three years later.

Some of the scenes where the group painted have been changed over the years. Waddington cited pictures of a rock Carmichael sat on painting scenes at Grace Lake, commenting the rock was gone when they went to the site in 2001. They found it at the bottom of the nearby cliff, and figured young men had rolled it over the edge. He was able to get some people to help him get it back up the hill.

The Group of Seven also painted scenes in Caledon and the surrounding area.

Waddington said Thomson painted scenes around Forks of the Credit, and one of Casson's paintings of the area hangs at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Waddington said they started this hobby in 1977, but didn't tell anyone what they were up to at the time.

"We just didn't think anyone was interested," he explained.



Jim and Sue Waddington presented some of the results of their searches for the scenes that inspired the Group of Seven. Photo by Bill Rea