

"Elmer Stubbins: Itinerant Artist" Part II

Carroll County Times article for 5 April 1998

By Jay A. Graybeal

Last week's column presented Part I of George Wetzel's 1973 article about local artist Elmer B. Stubbins. This column concludes the story of this colorful figure:

"Gradually Elmer began to leave the camera at home more and more, and instead wielded his paint brush in its place. He painted scenery on door and window screens. he painted on hundreds of flour bags-for they were cheaper than canvas, selling for three dozen for a dollar. But he still forgot to sign them. His wife remonstrated. Elmer replied: "People pay for my painting-not my signature!" the son recalls.

Some Carroll and Baltimore county churches were reputedly enriched by his brush. Mabel Owings, his niece, states that he painted a religious scene on the wall of Bethesda church (built 1880); which painting, having faded from time, was painted over by some one else. Likewise, Lillian Shipley of Smallwood was certain he painted a Christ with outstretched hands on the wall of the Trinity Lutheran church, but late renovations have lost it to us. Herbert Stubbins recalled his father painted a mural scene behind the pulpit of Trenton Lutheran near Arcadia. It was a scene of Noah's ark with a dove winging above it. A church member interviewed said the wall was empty now.

These church paintings were in a sense some of his "pot boilers"; yet as he was a religious man they may well have represented some of his best work.

He had a lively sense of humor. He once painted a wall in a Reistertown hall. C. J. Huff of Randallstown thinks it was over a livery stable owned by a man named Goodwin. Some local women waxed laudatory over its realism, that the trees almost appeared to be growing. To which Elmer waggishly responded, "they certainly do look real. Even the birds are building nests there".

Some country people were said to have considered Elmer a crank. But Herbert Stubbins believes it was simply the reaction of unsophisticated people who could not understand why a grown man preferred art to farming.

Elmer moved to the Arlington section of northwest Baltimore in the 1920s, living almost opposite Morman Antiques on Reisterstown between Beveledere and Hayward. The antique dealer at times bought some of Elmer's paintings for re-sale.

One day Herbert delivered ice to the old Arlington Hotel and bar. His father was painting a pond scene with water lilies on the bar mirror. A customer remarked something about the bull frog Elmer was adding to the composition. Elmer's reaction was to say that the frog was croaking: "More rum, more rum".

Always capitalizing on his skill in some way, Elmer began to give art lessons for 50 cents each. Possibly because of son Herbert's lack of artistic interest then, Elmer would not let him enter the room where such a lesson was being given. One of these students Herbert met years later and was informed by the man that his success was due to training given by Elmer.

Because the daughter showed a desire to learn art, Elmer began to instruct her. Herbert himself developed his own artistic talent while in the army in the early 1930s.

During Prohibition days Elmer did a social commentary type of painting. It was of a graveyard in which an arm and a leg were seen poking up through a grave. The lettering on the picture was "John Barleycorn is coming back to life." For years it hung in the window of a garage owned by Andy Manger on Beveledere avenue.

Struck with the beauty of C. J. Huff's niece (neighbors in Arlington) Elmer asked him for a small photo of the girl. Not long after Elmer presented Huff with a large oval portrait of the girl, done in subdued pastels and with a photographic realism.

He turned his hand to anything involving paint-even prosaic house painting. Once while painting Huff's kitchen and talking to Huff and his wife, Elmer surreptitiously sketched a remarkable likeness of the pair in silhouette on the wall with his large paint brush.

He moved to Hampden in the 1930s. An Italian who owned a bar on Baltimore street near Arlington avenue requested Elmer to paint eight pictures on the walls there, including one of his Italian home town which he handed Elmer a photo of. Herbert, who was home on furlough from the Army, then was invited by Elmer to aid him in the venture. Herbert agreed, painting a tropical view.

Another example of Elmer's Puckish sense of humor was a job he did for a small store. He was painting a luscious watermelon on the store's screen door. A passerby smacked his lips over the realism of the creation. Elmer answered "Yes; but you should have been here when a boy slammed the door and the seeds fell out!"

There also was the time he was painting some horses on a bar mirror somewhere in Baltimore when a man came for a drink and said, "You're doing a good job there." Elmer made some casual rejoinder. When the man left, the bartender informed him that the stranger was the famous cartoonist, Bud Fisher.

Nostalgia stirred Elmer in his last years of life to think of the old Caledonia mill. And he told his wife he was going to try to reconstruct it from memory on canvas. Beginning in 1939, he worked at it infrequently over a period of time. When he was struck and killed by a car in 1942, the picture of the old family mill sat on the easel, still unfinished."

Although his life ended tragically, Elmer Stubbins was well remembered for his artistic talent and his humor.

Photo Caption: Elmer Stubbins is said to have painted a religious scene on the wall of Bethesda Lutheran Church on Klee Mill Road. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.