

The Rockwood Academy.

Yosef Drenters' greatest sculpture

by Mark Holmes

According to Andrew Drenters the Rockwood Academy was his brother's greatest sculpture.

Before he died, Yosef spent 23 years sculpting a 134-year-old limestone ruin into a looking glass to Canada's past.

Some people called the Rockwood Academy, located on Highway 7 in Rockwood, a derelict and a ruin, but a 30-year-old sculptor, artist and jack-of-all-trades saw something more than a broken down building.

In 1960 Drenters, working across town, noticed the roof top of the academy jutting above the heavily treed lot. His curiosity got the better of him when he found out what the building used to be and he was surprised that despite living only a few miles away, he and his family had heard nothing about the Academy.

The Rockwood Academy was founded in 1850 by William Wetherald, an English Quaker, and functioned as a private boys' school until 1882. During its history it developed a reputation as one of the finest educational facilities and produced such influential people as the Hon. A.S. Hardy, the fourth premier of Ontario, Sir Adam Beck, one of the founders of the Ontario Hydro system and James J. Hill, the railway magnate who built the Union Pacific Railroad.

Fascinated, Drenters visited the Academy and despite the disrepair he decided almost immediately to purchase the building and restore it to its former grandeur.

Since the academy ceased to function as a school in 1882 the building changed hands several times and in the next 78 years it fell into a terrible state of disrepair.

The once carefully tended gardens dwindled into patches of coarse grass and undergrowth and dirt and manure had almost buried the first floor of the building. The roof had deteriorated to the point where rain, snow and sun had rotted the beams and planks and the floors inside had sagged as much as 12 inches in some places.

"Yosef was a man who had a passion for the past," said his brother Andrew. "When most people would have shaken their heads and said the building was a write-off, Yosef was instead inspired and with the patience and dedication that marked all of his work he began to reconstruct the Academy."

Yosef Drenters was born the son of a blacksmith in Poppel, Belgium, in 1930.

While growing up both Yosef and his brother Andrew were lucky enough to have a teacher who saw artistic talent in the two boys and encouraged them to draw and create.

"Yosef was also a very religious man," stated his brother, "which had a profound impact on his art."

While still a young man, Yosef decided to join a monastery to be trained for the priesthood. Yosef completed most of his studies, but before being indoctrinated into the church he discovered that his life's calling lay outside the church.

"Yosef told me many times about the day he left the monastery," remarked Andrew. "He said that when he walked out the door the birds were singing and he felt a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. He had never felt so free in all of his life."

In 1951 the Drenters family came to Canada in hopes of finding a new life in a new country and for a year both Andrew and Yosef worked as lumberjacks in the towering forests of British Columbia.

After a year Andrew and the rest of the family headed east to establish their homestead in the rich farm lands in Eramosa, but Yosef headed north to find work in the Yukon asbestos mines.

It was in the Yukon that Yosef really started to develop his talents as an artist using the unspoiled beauty of the north as the subject for much of his work.

In 1953 Yosef fulfilled his father's dream to have the family together in Eramosa and both Yosef's and Andrew's art came under the influence of their father.

"Our father, a blacksmith by trade, found plenty of work to do on the farm and blacksmithing, but he also found time to forge iron sculptures that were simple yet symbolic of his religion and God, said Andrew.

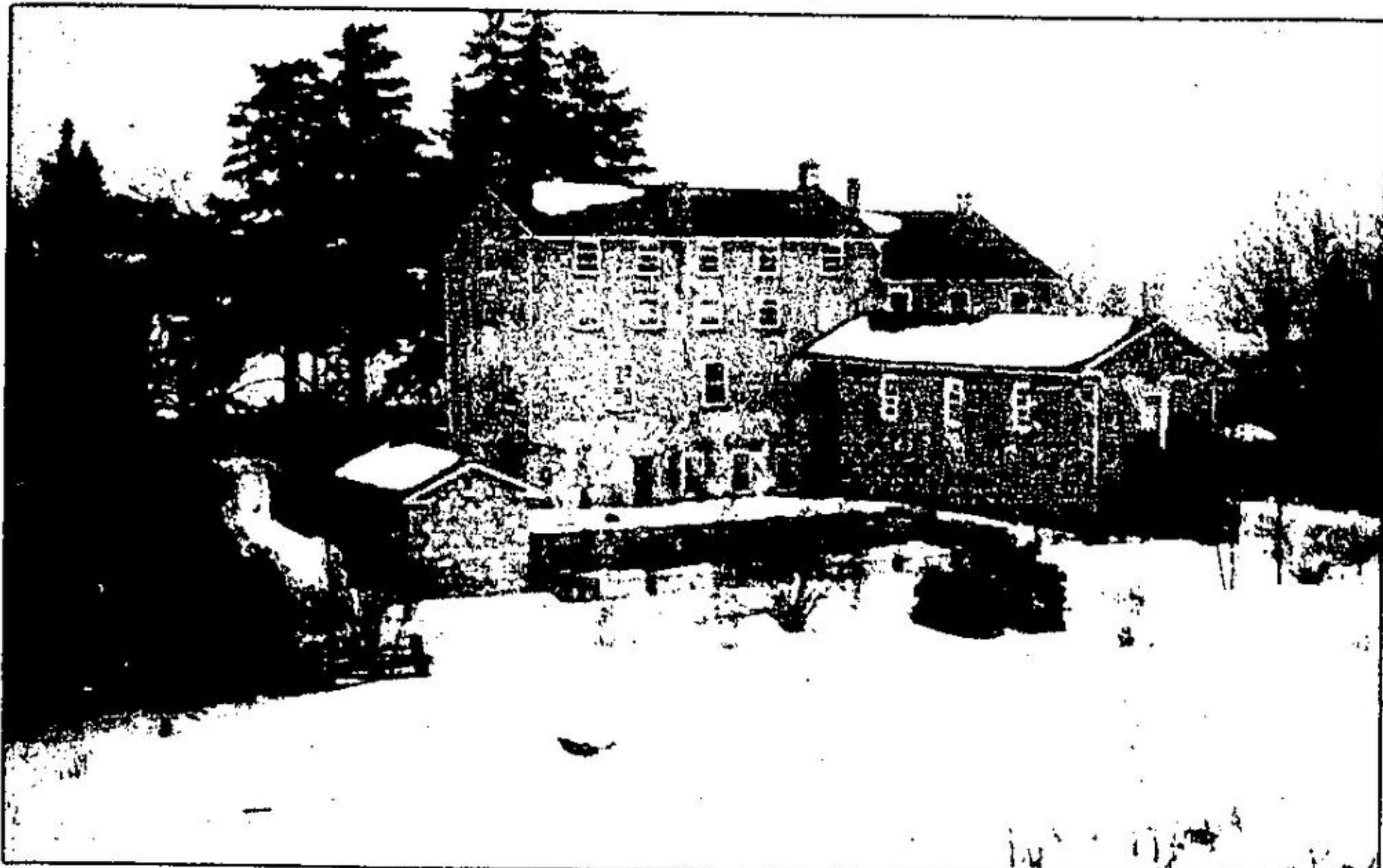
Andrew's father's influence followed the two artists throughout their lives and the many sculptures in the gardens around the Academy bespeak Yosef's faith in God.

"My father, Yosef and myself all believed that our art was like a prayer to God," said Andrew.

At the time Yosef took over the Academy his career as an artist had blossomed and his work was being shown at numerous galleries and art shows.

Group of Seven painter A.Y. Jackson became a close friend of Yosef's and the two used to sit around and banter about their work.

Andrew said: "I had no idea that Yosef's



The Rockwood Academy was Yosef Drenters' greatest work.

work was so widely known among other artists and the public until after he died and bags full of mail arrived expressing regret and condolences."

When Yosef took over the academy he didn't have much money so he sculpted and painted, sold his work and used the money to buy materials for the restorations.

The first job at the Academy was to repair the roof and because of the magnitude of the job, Yosef enlisted the help of his brother Andrew to help him.

It was the first real exposure to the Academy that Andrew had and he too fell in love with the historic old building.

"Instead of using the readily available and easy to use tar shingles, Yosef had to have the split cedar that was used in 1850 to

crown the building," said Andrew. "Even if it meant splitting the wood himself."

Yosef had painstakingly researched the building as well, dedicating himself with patience and perseverance to restoring the Academy to its original state.

As well, Yosef jacked up the floors and installed massive hand hewn beams, scavenged from ancient farm buildings.

Outside, tons of soil were removed to re-expose the first floor of the building and each shovelful was sifted for pieces of old furniture, dishes, stove parts and cutlery that had been discarded in the last 100 years.

The stone walls that once enclosed the gardens were rebuilt stone by stone and a small chapel was erected in the garden for worship and contemplation.

Andrew helped when he could and one of the biggest jobs he could remember was the construction of a two storey log home and an 1800's bake house.

"The restorations were far from complete when Yosef died, but his research will be invaluable in future work," said Andrew. "Everything Yosef did was an art," concluded Andrew, "and he dedicated his life to helping and teaching others."

Even when Yosef Drenters died he made sure that his work would continue to help others. He left the Academy to the Ontario Heritage Foundation on the condition that his brother and his family be allowed to live there. The conditions he left ensured the Academy wouldn't become a dusty old museum, but rather a living part of Canada's past.

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