

## Art collection

Steel Jan 30/07 p.4

### • Story continued from page 1.

He bought over 120 paintings dating back to the 1920s, along with a few editions of a book Stockelbach penned in the early 1950s.

"I ended up with virtually all that was left of her life's work," he said.

Ever since, the couple has been trying to learn more about Stockelbach.

•••

Lavonia Ruth Hunter was born in 1874 in Belleville. She taught school in Plainfield for a year before moving to Ottawa to work as a librarian.

While there, she met and married Dr. Fritz Stockelbach, a Danish chemist. The couple moved to New Jersey, where Fritz had established a chemical manufacturing plant.

When her husband died in 1948, Lavonia Stockelbach had the talent, ambition, and funding to explore her interests.

Since 1930, Stockelbach had been refining her preferred method of painting using a 15th-Century Chinese technique of tiny lines of paint. Usually she used five to seven different colours and shades to create the images of birds and plants.

The pictures were painted onto thin slices of wood a hundredth of an inch thick. To reinforce her art, Stockelbach sandwiched a piece of photographic paper between two wooden wafers.

"She experimented with maple, beech, and American holly, and settled on the American holly," said Brisley.

When many of the paintings are held up to a window or other light source, the wood grain becomes visible.

But even without backlighting, Diane Brisley said, they're still remarkable.

"The fact that they're miniatures — that must be very difficult," she said.

"They just shimmer," she said, holding up an iridescent rendering of another bird. "She seems to have captured that look when the sun hits them just right."

By 1937, Stockelbach was exhibiting her bird paintings in

## Quick Facts

### Quick facts about Lavonia Ruth (Hunter) Stockelbach

- Born in Belleville in 1874;
- Died at age 92 and was buried in Belleville after living most of her life in the United States;
- Painted dozens of pictures of birds, flowers, and other plants on small slices of wood, then exhibited them around the world;
- Wrote, illustrated, and published *The Birds of Shakespeare*, detailing the birds mentioned in the bard's plays, in 1954;
- Over 100 of her paintings were bought by Diane and John Brisley, now Demorestville residents. The couple continues to research Stockelbach and her art;
- On Sunday, Feb. 18, from 1-4 p.m., the Brisleys will sell much of their collection following a public lecture at Belleville's Funk & Gruven A-Z at Bridge and Pinnacle Streets.

England; eventually they reached the American Museum of Natural History, where she was an associate member.

An exhibit of 62 paintings of European birds mentioned in the plays of William Shakespeare appeared at Stratford-on-Avon, where the author also lectured on her subject.

In 1954, the collection found a permanent home in *The Birds of Shakespeare*, a hardcover book written and illustrated by Stockelbach.

Later that decade, Stockelbach painted the 10 floral emblems of Canada's provinces; they were to be used on Royal Copenhagen plates made by Denmark's Georg Jensen company, but John Brisley said he has yet to find confirmation of that.

What the Brisleys do know, however, is that Stockelbach continued to paint until at least 1963, and in her 80s penned two series

of articles on birds and Canadian flowers for *The Intelligencer*.

"She continued to come to Belleville almost every year to do things, to be engaged in social events," John said.

"She was 91 and she went on an around-the-world tour," Diane said.

Stockelbach had planned to return to Belleville to sponsor a 1966 centennial project. But she died before that could happen, and is now buried somewhere in Belleville, John said.

A 1969 plaque at Albert College acknowledges the bequest the private school received from her estate, but it appears she's otherwise forgotten.

"Nobody's heard of her; nobody knows anything about her," Diane said. "It's too bad she's not recognized. That's what we think is a shame."

"We read somewhere that she'd hoped they (the paintings) would go back to Stratford-on-Avon, but that would've been up to her heirs," John said. "It never happened."

"There's more research to be done," he said, adding he wants to confirm where else her art may have been used on stamps, plates, etc.

The Brisleys moved to Demorestville in the 1990s. Though they treasure their Stockelbach collection, they said they've realized they don't need so many paintings.

"They're languishing in drawers here," John said, explaining they've already decorated several walls of their home with her art. "You cannot possibly put it all out."

So on Feb. 18 from 1 to 4 p.m., the Brisleys will sell two copies of her book, *The Birds of Shakespeare*, plus the collection of 62 original paintings published in the book. About 35 more paintings of birds and botanicals will also be sold.

The sale will be preceded by John's lecture on Stockelbach and her art, and will occur at the Funk & Gruven A-Z antique store on the north side of Bridge Street at Pinnacle Street.

"We'd like to share them with the people of the Belleville area," John said. "We're hoping somebody will come who will have something of hers or know something about her."