

Lakeport artist carves out niche with paintings

By MANDY MARTIN
Staff Writer

Martha Robinson has a "thing" for domestic animals. So, too, do a lot of other people, based on the sales of her domestic animals artwork. She has few originals of her own left.

"When I was at Ontario College of Art, people made fun of me because I did a lot of domestic animals. It has turned out to my advantage because there are very few others who do them."

A poster series for Purina pet foods, horseback riding illustrations, and even her first post-graduate job contract resulted from her domestic animal penchant. The Irwin Toy company asked her to construct a life-sized cow out of play blocks.

"I just really enjoy painting them," she explains, a life-size portrait of a Simmenthal cattle head in her hands. "They seem to have diminished in importance in everyday lives somewhat over the years, and I see them as still being there."

"You look at old illustrations, like the ones in the historical atlas, and many animals are included with the homes and farms. In fact, some of the animals seem to be even larger than the home. I think that's because domestic animals were very important in the lives of people then. Today, with our food supplied from grocery stores or other outlets, we seem to be removed from that significance."

Cattle and sheep are also gracious to the artist.

"You could never get a dog to sit like that for hours," she laughs. She knows from first-hand experience. Commissions of cats and dogs are an entirely different research and execution process, often requiring Martha taking a subject photos to capture details available only in stillness.

"I had one woman whose cat had one ear that went up, the other down. I asked if that's how she wanted the pet painted and she said, 'Oh,

yes! That's how he is.' It's interesting what people want included."

Pointing to a portrait of two obviously much-adored dogs, Martha points out the smaller "vignettes" included in the corners of the painting.

"See here the one dog is actually sitting on the head of the other. They wanted that included."

For the past 10 years, she has made a point of attending the annual Royal Winter Fair in Toronto.

"Now, it doesn't matter what my other projects are, I reserve those 10 days of Royal for my painting. I won't miss it. When I first started, I'm sure there were lots of people wondered what that woman was doing painting cows and sheep. But, you know, I've sold almost everything I've ever produced while there. People respond to them for some reason. I now regret not keeping some of those earlier pieces. They're all gone. I have only a few left from last year for myself. That's it."

"For 10 days, I paint the animals. I'm there from nine in the morning till nine at night."

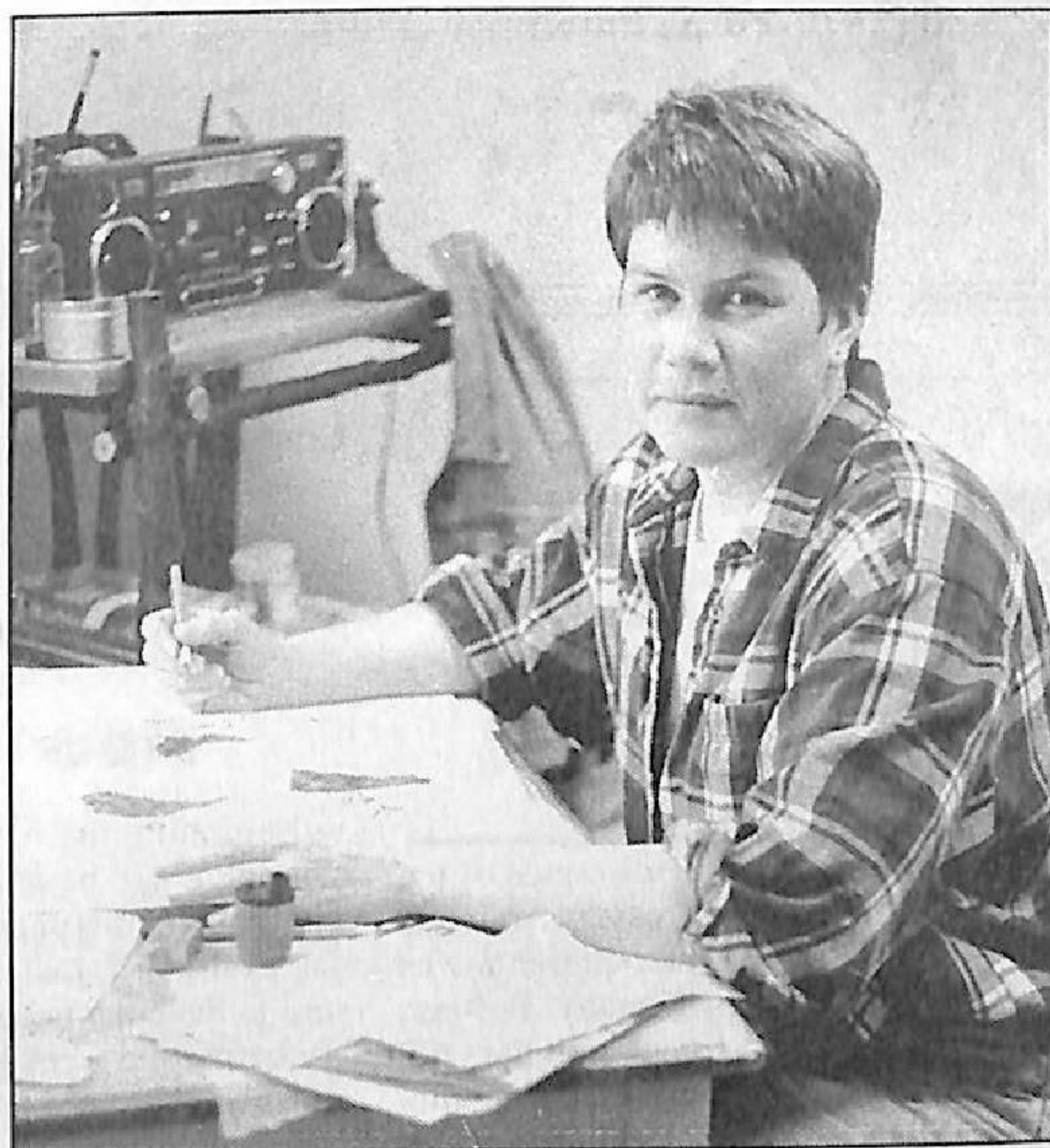
Balanced on a tiny stool, the pallet rests flat on her lap.

"I'm used to working on a flat surface, and in a small space," she explains as she sits on the lone chair in front of the very small wooden table tucked into the corner of a huge second floor room that serves as her studio in Colborne.

The enormous expanse of barren 10-foot-high, eggshell white walls does not mute the prolific and prodigious activity confined to two corners of the room.

In the corner opposite the desk, chair, shelves and small cupboard hang the prototypes for 10 wallpaper border designs. The work has been intense and evolutionary since last September.

"It's through a friend of mine in Toronto who has a contract with a wallpaper company in New York," she explains. "Each year, they put



Lakeport artist Martha Robinson has an affinity for domestic animals. "Almost every work I've done at the Royal Winter Fair has sold," she notes, as she touches up Simmenthal cattle studies in her Colborne studio.

PHOTO BY MANDY MARTIN

out books of new borders and wallpaper designs. Originally, they suggested 10 border ideas for children. I had to research them and then come up with designs."

Now, with a February deadline looming, the company has selected the seven designs it plans to market.

"One of the designs was based on four-wheel vehicles, which I knew nothing about. But, I picked up a magazine, and several hours later I couldn't believe how involved it all was. It's a whole other world."

"When my instructor at the Ontario College of Art sent us off to draw cars at the car show, I used to wonder what possible use could it be: I would never be drawing cars. Well, here I am, drawing vehicles. I believe everything comes together sooner or later in your life," Martha laughs.

Another border features panda bears in striped diapers. Yet another has dinosaurs on roller blades.

"I have to research these things. You have to know what you're illustrating."

The large, complimentary design to accompany the border is done by her friend in Toronto.

"It's a very technical and detailed process, but I enjoy getting into it, figuring it out," Martha explains.

Each border pattern repeat is only 20.5 inches long, a design challenge that is not new for Martha. Already, several of her designs are being marketed world-wide. There's a sportsmen's border with sly fishing tackle and fish; poultry border featuring rooster and hens; and a winter wild bird border, amongst others.