

PROFILES

with

Jennifer Barr



If it weren't for Josef Drenters Rockwood Academy would be just another stone house with (probably) a clapboard addition.

It took Josef's sense of history and his love for the continuation of that history to restore the Academy to its original form.

Over a hundred years (1850) ago the Rockwood Academy was established by William Wetherald a Quaker minister who established a boys' school in the tradition of his religion.

The huge stone building erected on the outskirts of Rockwood served as a school for 36 years and was then turned into a private residence.

Josef, known as Joe to his friends, came to Quebec from Belgium in the early 1950s. At the time he was studying to be a priest and planned to return to seminary after his parents and large family of brothers and sisters get settled.

But Joe wasn't destined to be a priest, he was already asking questions his religion couldn't answer and was developing the free, very natural, philosophy by which his life has been bound.

Even though he was to become one of Canada's best known sculptors he spent part of his young manhood wandering the country working in a Yukon mine and riding herd on cattle as a genuine cowboy.

By 1960 Joe was farming north of Rockwood on the Jack Frost farm and involved in such mundane activities as shipping pigs and trucking feed. Always fascinated by the Gordon residence on Main Street South in Rockwood, Joe found himself picking up a load of pigs with Jim Milne from the barns in the rear one day. He had seen the place in a dream and found himself caught up in a dreamlike sequence.

When he approached the owner for a tour of the house, he casually asked if the 80-year-old man had ever thought of selling. Funny thing he should ask, the owner replied, just three weeks before he had decided he might sell and here was his buyer. The price? Mr. Gordon named the exact figure that Joe had realized from his first one man art show in Toronto—\$8,000.

No financing till 1978

Joe found himself the owner of the once famous Rockwood Academy, now down to two stories from the original three. A previous owner had filled in the back to the level of the second floor in order to cut down on heating costs.

The huge residence was built on very monastic lines with simple Saxon halls and dormitories on the top floor. But there would be much work to be done before restoration that Joe had set his heart on could be accomplished. The work, although nearing completion, will not be done for many

years yet.

Since 1978 Joe has had the umbrella and financial assistance of the Ontario Heritage Foundation. The Foundation agreed to restore the vital parts of the building in return for the right to protect the historical attributes of the Academy.

"I'm delighted, I don't feel so alone anymore," says Joe.

Up until that time, Joe had only his earnings from his art to finance the restoration, contrary to public belief that the work was being financed by grants. Even though Joe has willed the Academy to Canada after his death, financially he was totally alone for 18 years. The pressure to complete the massive reconstruction program while attempting to continue his work as a sculptor turned Josef into something of a hermit, turning away hoards of visitors who thought the Academy was a public institution.

He says he regrets the necessity to work so hard at the expense of friendships but he is a man with a mission. In actuality, most people who number themselves among his friends find him extremely hospitable and very proud to show off his beloved Academy, taking time for a talk and coffee.

Expo winner

As a sculptor, Joe leapt rapidly to international fame when he won the Canadian competition to provide the sculpture for Expo, Canada's world's fair in 1967. Beating out 14 other entrants with his medieval figures put Joe's name on everyone's lips. The financial rewards were immediately poured into the Academy.

Describing his Expo sculpture, Joe chuckles, "It was a big bizarre thing."

A homage to the pioneers of Canada, Josef says the work was a historical experience symbolizing a thousand years of migration to Canada from Viking days on. A pioneer family, rough-hewn, were incorporated in a boat-like structure cocooned in a structure of old barn beams.

Winning the competition enabled Joe to throw himself into his life's love, bringing to light the history of William Wetherald, his family and his school.

A large portrait of the founder placed in the Academy's entrance hall, fills the visitor with awe when he finds himself looking at the face of Josef Drenters in Quaker garb. Joe says he's not really aware of any likeness but the resemblance of the two certainly stirs latent beliefs in re-incarnation.

When Josef delves into history, he delves. He has visited all the Wetherald's early residences, he has rested in the room the baby William was born in, he knows the Wetherald family as well as he knows his own and he's spent 32 years researching his own European ancestors back to the 12th Century!

The building began to take shape as Joe carefully, piece by piece, took each room back to the original and scoured the area for antiques fitting the middle 19th century time slot. In his travels he absorbed considerable history of Rockwood and Eramosa and is now a walking local history book.

The sunny schoolroom was refurbished with school desks, old toys and many of the writings of William Wetherald in a glass display case.

However, despite Joe's love of antiques and

careful attention to historical detail, the Academy is no museum refurbished exactly, such as public restorations like Black Creek Pioneer Village.

The Academy is foremost a home and strong evidence of Joe's sensitivity to atmosphere is all over the house. Although monastic in flavor, the house is obviously the home of an artist who enjoys the delights of the senses. Classical music is always played on the stereo, coffee cups dot tables, European statues and some of Joe's own work ignore visitors from niches.

The enormous task of removing the in-filling from the rear of the building and restoring the original first floor is now complete. The rear is a delight of landscaping, paving paths, herbs and Victorian rose gardens. The recently restored gymnasium is a welcoming room instead of a storeroom for Joe's collection of century old agricultural implements as it was not so long ago.

The addition of a chapel in keeping with the architecture is Joe's only departure from the original. He wanted a place for meditation so he spent 14 years gathering old stones and started to place them one on top of another until the chapel appeared.

Full circle

To talk of the Academy would take a book—to talk of the man, Josef Drenters, would take a series.

I've never before met a man such as Joe who

has the face of a priest, the mind of a saint and the body of a lumberjack. Sometimes his vocabulary matches his body!

Although considered an academic in some areas, Joe Drenters is a confirmed realist. A student of history he nevertheless is very much a part of today—"I love big cars".

"There's a great danger in being idealistic—a self peril—you forget about your own survival when you pursue knowledge and history—it can be addictive."

Joe values his freedom above all. "Man should make himself free, that's what it's all about."

He explains his early years trained in classical study under the rigours of monastic discipline encouraged him in this philosophy.

One gets the feeling Joe is an historian first and an artist as a means to an end. He has the soul of an artist and says he loves to live art. "It's the execution that hurts."

"Spiritually experiencing it is beautiful but physically (producing the art) it always falls short of the idea."

Josef's goal with his restoration is to return the Academy to its original purpose, that of furthering education. He's not clear how this will be accomplished but wants the building opened eventually for a school—full circle.

Josef Drenters is one of those rare human beings who seems completely happy and at one with his mission in life. Knowing him is a pleasure and I'm glad I do.



Josef Drenters with Rockwood Academy founder William Wetherald, in portrait.



Town of HALTON HILLS 877-5185

HALTON HILLS JILLS GYMNASIAC CLUB TRY-OUTS

WHEN: Monday, August 25th, 1980
WHERE: Georgetown District High School (Gyms 1 & 2)
TIME: Registration 8:30 p.m.
Try-Outs 7:00-8:30 p.m.

The Halton Hills Jills Gymnastic Club have both competitive and pre-competitive gymnastic programs operating from September through till June.

Practice schedules vary depending on the group, however, most gymnasts will practice 1 weeknight and either Saturday or Sunday.

The try-outs are open to any interested girls age 5 and over.

Please come dressed in gym suit or shorts and a T-shirt.

Attention Y.B.C. Bowlers!

LEAGUE PLAY BEGINS SAT., SEPTEMBER 13

REGISTRATION DATES

- Saturday, August 23 - 10 a.m.-4 p.m.
- Thursday, August 28 - 7 p.m.-9 p.m.
- Saturday, August 30 - 10 a.m.-4 p.m.

Y.B.C. REGISTRATION CAN BE MADE IN PERSON OR PHONE ACTON BOWLING LANES 853-0170 Registration Fee \$2.00

BOWLING RATES:

- Bantams (2 games) \$1.50
- Juniors and Seniors (3 games) \$2.25

* Y.B.C. Rentals On Bowling Shoes 20¢ per pair

AGE DIVISIONS:

- Bantams NOT 11 Years of Age December 31/80
- Juniors NOT 14 Years of Age December 31/80
- Seniors NOT 18 Years of Age December 31/80



Fate of trees a worry

Regional Public Works Committee is concerned over the number of trees to be destroyed by the Ministry of Transportation and Communication's preliminary design plans for the reconstruction of Highway 25.

Committee members viewed the proposed design during a meeting at Halton Regional Museum Wednesday and noted the plans included no indication as to the number of trees the road improvement design would eliminate. Reconstruction will begin at Highway 401 at Milton and continue north to Acton including the addition of a truck climbing lane on the Escarpment.

Improvements to Highway 25 from 401 interchange to the intersection at Sideroad are not currently included in MTC's five-year plan but the Ministry is hopeful provisions can be made for their inclusion.

Public Works Committee Chairman Ron Plianche suggested

design maps be posted in Regional Council Chambers along with indications of trees to be destroyed by the reconstruction. Approval of the MTC plan was deferred to another meeting where calculations of tree destruction would be available.

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 - shoulder or butt pork chops 1.19 lb.
 - Maple Leaf 5-6 lb. average Ready-to-Serve
 - picnic style pork shoulders 1.29 lb.
 - Maple Leaf 3-4 lb. average
 - s.p. cottage rolls 1.59 lb.
 - B-B-Q Ready breast quarters wing on and legs back attached
 - fresh chicken parts 1.09 lb.
 - Maple Leaf 500 g pkg
 - side bacon 1.79
 - Maple Leaf 175 g pkg. assorted popular varieties
 - luncheon meat .59 pkg.
 - Schnelder's 500 g pkg.
 - beef steakette 1.99

- Canada white vinegar 128 oz. 1.29
- Neilson reg. or California iced tea 24 oz. tin 1.99
- Quench ess. flavour crytals 4x3.5 oz. 1.39
- Camay pink or white 3's bath bar soap 140 g. 1.59
- Neet tube 80 g or lotion 100 ml hair remover 1.65

- Foodland coffee whitener 375 g 1.29
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