

Ela Gardner: Farm Woman's Life, Artist's Eye

Marshfield

Her eyes have separated into the setting sun to stay on a row of hay and they're even more calmer than she cares to admit.

Her hands have earned pecked, curled, foot-pain, and pitted wood.

But Ela Gardner also has an artist's eye and a painter's hands - and a deep need to capture on canvas what she sees.

All 65, she's over a lot. When asked how many paintings she's done over the years, Ela admits she's "never kept track."

She looks to Russell, her husband of 60 years, to see if he might have a pen or ink shaker. "It's too hard to remember," she retires daily farmer grin.

There are 147 paintings along in a solo exhibit that began still at the end of this month in the gallery at the library in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin.

In the years she's been painting, this rural Marshfield artist has given away many of her works to family and friends. Her talent as an display at the bank in Lunenburg, and every so often she brings some pictures to the morning hours in Marshfield for the residents to enjoy.

Back Forty

Last year Ela had a solo exhibition in the gallery that's part of the Mabel Taylor Theater Museum. She's been asked to bring her collection other places as well, including at a gallery in Oshkosh.

While Ela has also sold many paintings, she admits she isn't particularly fond of the "back part of it." She used to go to art shows like the one she and her husband had at the farm, but she says, it was a "big hassle" because they carefully loaded up her pictures, set up a display, had the artist's display, and loaded up again for the trip home.

Anyway, she was much too busy painting. "I paint every chance I get," she confesses. Ela is just as hard to pin down when it comes to picking her favorite medium. "I do everything - the whole gamut," she says, "sculpture, ink, pencil and ink. She notes that her favorite medium is whatever she's "working on at the present" happens to be.

Except for one summer many years ago at the Art Institute of Chicago, Ela is self-taught. Former member of the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., Ela has been a volunteer for her art from the Wisconsin Regional Art Association, and has pictures hang in the Wisconsin Center in Madison.

She was a lacemaker in the art world, too. Though art was in her blood, as was farming and raising her family on the farm near Fawn, Ela basically learned that magic rope to paint until their youngest son left for college in 1964. As Russell will vouch, his artistic has made up for lost time over the past 33 years.

Both Gardners grew up on farms in Clark County. Ela went of Grandin, Russell out Russell was two years ahead of Ela in school, as a buddy of her brother, but they both taught country school in Clark County.

The Depression gripped rural Wisconsin, as did the rest of the country. Russell's Ela fell fortunate to have steady jobs - not to mention that they enjoyed Ela, however, only taught couple of years before marrying Russell. In four days, married women didn't work. Russell, however, taught 12 years, even after Ela and he started farming.

Russell says he chose farming over teaching "for the security" it offered. And the Gardners raised their children to grow up on a farm, as they had.

"We felt they could learn the work ethic," says Russell, who worked over 41 years before retiring in 1960 at the age of 72. Their 52-acre farm was one of Grandin's Russell reports that he never milked more than 25 cows.

The Gardners sold their farm to "Annie" in a large Anish community in Clark County, and Ela has captured the Anish way of life in a collection of paintings that will be on exhibit in Wisconsin Rapids. The Gardners' Anish folks are "wonderful people" and good neighbors.

Nevertheless, they use the irony in the fact that the indoor plumbing and all of the modern conveniences they worked so hard to add to their farm over the years were taken for granted by the owners. Finally, however, the Anish built a country school on the farm of those former country school teachers.

When they sold their farm, the Gardners bought a home and some acreage in Wood County, just west of Marshfield. While Ela continues to paint, Russell works full-time teaching music guitar and has a job. Ela has also taught herself how to use a computer and thinks it'd be fun to explore "the web."

Ela calls Russell her "total supporter" - a "jack-of-all-trades" who's "good at most anything" and who frames her paintings for her.

"I can't take too much credit," he interjects. "But his wife stresses that it's hard to do something like this if you don't have someone backing you."

The Gardners had three boys, all of whom received higher education with a soul. Ela says neither she nor Russell ever expected any of their sons to farm, although they might have chosen farming as a career, that would have been fine. But they wanted their boys to have the opportunity to choose his own life's work. All three worked their way through school, earning Scholastic honors.

Russell, Jr. is a medical doctor who, along with his teaching at the University of Wisconsin. He and his wife, Suzanne, live in Galveston, Texas. The Gardner's middle son, Wayne, and his wife, Ann, are in Port Aransas, Texas. Wayne is chairman of the department of gastro-



She's a farm woman. She's an artist. To Ela Gardner, farming and painting have much in common, each hinges on a certain kind of love. This Wood County lady has made a name for her style, and her works done in every medium from canvases to watercolors. Above, she stands with her husband of 60 years, Russell, another a supporter of her endeavors. Also on this page is a miniature gallery of Ela's. And she has a real display - 147 paintings - until the end of August in the Wisconsin Rapids library.

Story and photos by Jane Fyksen



enter at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as director of the Marine Science Institute at Port Aransas. Their youngest son, Keith, also had PhD behind his name. He was in physical rehabilitation and working in San Francisco when he lost a battle with cancer in 1995.

The Gardners have five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Two of their grandsons are art majors. As a young mother on the farm, Ela explains that her artist's eye was in conflict with ranchwoman's iron. "I thought art, but I didn't do it," she notes. "Oh, I did a little when Russ was a baby, but I did it in earnest, I'd neglected everything else. So I let it go until later."

"Like all artists, Ela feels compelled to create. She enjoys painting for the "challenge" it offers. She does most of her painting in her studio, an outbuilding on their property. Some of her painting is "from memory" and some is done using "reference" - whatever I need to get my point across," she explains.

Ela says "more challenging than anything else" are figure studies. "to paint people and create a certain 'feeling.' If I feel like I've succeeded in bringing out a mood, I feel satisfied," she reports.

She doesn't keep her horses in her studio, but

paints whenever "the mood strikes," which she says, "is whenever I have time." Ela admits, though, that she's generally at her easel in the morning. "I'm more of a morning person. It's out of many, many years up and out to the barn at the crack of dawn."

Not surprisingly, many of Ela's paintings are scenes from her days on the farm. She's done a couple of "muddy footprints." One is of Russell, her, and the boy rushing to help up the hay before brooding chicks went to bed of rain. Ela is driving the tractor in that painting, her hair flying in the wind.

Another is the Gardner family out in the woods in the winter. Ela and the boys are sitting under a big log being heated on a fire pit by a team that her husband is driving. The scene is just yet for both Russell and her. Lightning struck a tree - an old giant tree - was about four feet across.

"I worked two days cutting it down - with a crosscut saw as those days," the retired dairy man recalls.

A third landscape painting is of her farmstead. (Many of Ela's subjects are scenes from everyday life on the farm.)

"Usually I have something else I want to paint before I get out with the saw. I'm a little degraded after noon. I have two

many ideas and not enough time. It really is a problem - by the time I do my housework and eat."

Ela finds painting in oils the most challenging, merely because they take time to dry and she gets "a thick sensation" with an oil down. Sometimes, however, she purposely puts a painting aside because she's having problems with it and is dissatisfied.

"I usually finish there in the long run. Sometimes it takes awhile, though. But I never stop completely," she says, adding, "I think that's true with most problems, don't you?"

One figure study Ela did from memory is of Grandin Koser, a grey-haired former neighbor boy who when she can recall from her childhood. This elderly woman had an "inexhaustible supply of milk," says Ela, describing her as "a kind old lady who was abandoned 100 years ago."

After the painting, that's part of the exhibit in Wisconsin Rapids, Ela has written "I and I have captured to my satisfaction an interesting scene that she appreciated to me as she had seen it, as a restriction to an age creeps up on me."

This photo retitled farmwife - with an art eye and painter's hand - is heret an important