

John Stelkia created this scene of two men in an arrow fight sometime between 1936 and 1942. Many of the drawings done by the children at the Inkameep Day School were visualizations of legends as well as daily routines.

## Lost Okanagan artwork resurfaces

BY WENDY JOHNSON

Anthony Walsh's greatest achievement began with the encouragement he gave a little boy at a school picnic in 1935. When young Johnny Stelkia shyly told Walsh he knew an Indian dance, Anthony responded with enthusiasm.

Walsh, who was Parisian-born of Irish parents in 1899, was a teacher at the Inkameep Day School on the Reserve and up to that point it was unusual for a white person to express any interest in native heritage.

Stelkia obliged. Walsh later wrote that he watched the small boy become a bear, because his story was about a bear.

"There before our eyes a bear walked and rolled and talked in the Okanagan dialect," he said at the time.

And it was the realization that the kids and adults equally enjoyed this display of cultural knowledge, which really benefited the children under his tutelage.

He quickly understood that these were more than dances or children's games, their steps grew out of history and legends, and carried a wealth of meaning in their moves.

If dances spoke volumes, what would their art and stories tell? Walsh encouraged his students to bring their culture to school.

Pictures tumbled from their fingertips onto paper, as the children, secure in their surroundings, gave Walsh an insight into their rich culture and showed him the depth of their beliefs and affinity with nature. Many signed their works with their Christian and Okanagan

names, and he helped them nurture a better understanding and appreciation for both worlds.

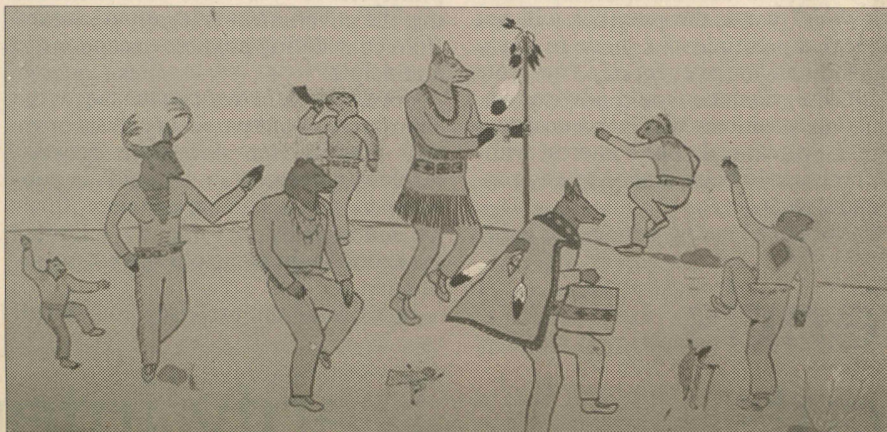
Walsh remained at the school for 10 years, living in a bed/sitting room in the school and sleeping on a straw mattress. There, the students helped him chop wood and they looked after each other until the war called him elsewhere in 1942. In that time the teacher brought his students to the attention of Walt Disney, the Royal Drawing Society and various governments, as they thrived under his support.

Unfortunately, the school had difficulty attracting teachers after Walsh departed particularly teachers who would seek to balance the curriculum with culture.

A series of teachers came and went. One of them disapproved of Walsh's methods so completely that he had the school children put their own artwork into a fire.

Thankfully, some of the paintings were salvaged before they could be destroyed and they were hidden under a bed for decades, waiting for the moment when someone would recognize their value.

Now, several of those paintings by such talented artists as Francis Baptiste (Sis-hu-ik), John Stelkia (Thith-Hak-Key), Bertha Baptiste and Edith Kruger will be on display at the Old Firehall/Art Gallery from Friday April 19 until Tuesday April 23, during the Arts and Culture Festival.



This drawing by John Stelkia was a representation of a photograph taken of his people doing a traditional animal dance. Notice how the humans have morphed into the animals they emulated? To a young boy's eyes the magic of such a transformation was inevitable.