

Inkameep art collection priceless

BY WENDY JOHNSON

It was just a white pegboard on a wall, innocuous and utilitarian. It hung in a smaller main room of the Osoyoos Museum for decades, waiting patiently for someone to find and recognize the treasure it was hiding in plain sight.

That treasure—in tempera paint and ink sketches—revealed an almost forgotten story about the Osoyoos Indian Band children at the Inkameep Day School over 60 years ago, and the teacher who encouraged them to explore and celebrate their rich heritage. And it took a newly elected president of the Osoyoos Museum Society who was inexplicably though repeatedly drawn to the collection, to follow her instincts and unlock its secrets.

What enticed Leslie Plaskett to this one wall in the spring of 2000, when there was a profusion of other exhibits and artifacts housed in the 15,000-square-foot museum, which could have piqued her attention?

She did not have a curatorial background, but Plaskett had something that would prove just as invaluable—an intuitive response to the messages in the medium facing her.

Initially she noticed how stunning the pictures were, how talent suffused the pieces depicting cultural legends and traditional dances as well as the daily routines of the young creators. The collection surrounded a photograph of teacher Anthony Walsh and his students at the school and included some information on the Inkameep Day School lo-



Doeskin book cover artist was Ernest Batiste.

cated on the Reserve near Oliver.

Plaskett started to read and says the information contained therein sang to her. Some of the collection bore information pertaining to wartime competitions in London and all at once she realized the impact of those tiny tags awarded by the Royal Drawing Society in 1942-43.

Moreover, many students had signed their artwork with their Okanagan and Christian names, and this singular act so uncharacteristic of the times was eloquent in its simplicity.

There it was, the import of the story—the revelation this priceless collection was created and permitted to

thrive in an era when residential schools were engaged in a calculated assimilation of First Nations into non-native culture.

“That’s when the light came on,” she explained. “Here was a government day school started by Chief George Batiste who wanted his youth educated on the reserve. And although the school kept to the prescribed curriculum with government-approved teachers, the students’ artistic side was allowed to flourish after-hours and on weekends, because one extraordinary teacher cared.”

It was one thing to understand the significance of a collection; it was quite another to find the time to research its history. Plaskett was working full time elsewhere, and her hours at the museum fell under the heading of volunteer.

The matter might have remained unexplored for a few more years, but Fate decided the story’s release from obscurity was imperative and put opportunities in her path.

Plaskett received an invitation to attend a two-day workshop in November entitled “Okanagan Teaching for Understanding History,” which partnered area museum curators with social studies teachers from School District #53 and was funded by the BC Museums’ Association. The outcome would be lesson plans based on local history that would be incorporated into the school curriculum as a resource package.

Plaskett was invited to take the

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Inkameep art

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Osoyoos museum's most important exhibit and discuss it, a directive that caused her some trepidation. Was the collection she chose as important as she believed it to be? No one else had suggested its inclusion. And where would she locate the necessary supporting documentation such as archival materials? The artwork would be useless without them.

"I made a few phone calls to local people who were with the museum in the early days, and I learned about a binder Katie Lacey assembled years ago, containing correspondence by Walsh, as well as letters to him, drawings by the children and their original sketches of the Nativity Scene. But I couldn't find it."

Fortunately, Plaskett had artist Katimavik summer student, Alissa

Paxton, who loved the idea of investigative research. She delved into all the cabinets and files and found the amateur historian's binder. Paxton also searched the Historical Society's material for articles written by and about Walsh. When she learned that the CBC had made a tape of the children in the early-1940s she inquired about that too.

Plaskett went to the workshop at the Grist Mill in Keremeos. She regaled the hushed room with stories that barely skimmed the surface—tales of a heritage honoured on doeskin, paper, *papier*

maché masks and woodcuts and stories about the man who encouraged its expression from 1936-42. And they heard how the artwork was rescued and hidden under Lacey's bed for more than 20 years, when Walsh went to war and was replaced by a teacher who attempted to burn the material. Finally Plaskett told them that Lacy had hung the collection in the first Osoyoos museum in 1963, but when she passed away a year later, the artwork was left for the future to find and recognize.

Jennifer Iredale, curator of the Coastal Okanagan Region Historic Sites with BC Heritage, attended the workshop and was enthralled. She considers the work a lost collection, since not much is known in museum circles about it.

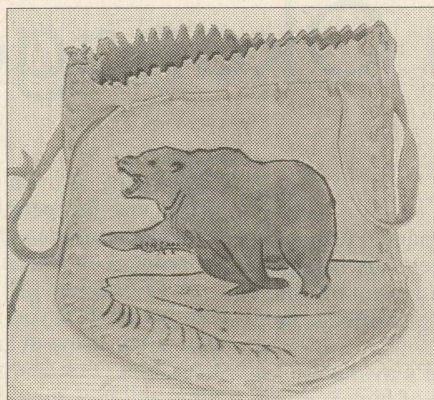
"The drawings and paintings were extraordinary, evocative," Iredale said, adding she returned to Victoria and told Barbara Winters about the collection.

Winters, the coordinator for the newly formed Community University Research Alliance (CURA), arranged for Plaskett to meet Dr Andrea Walsh, an anthropology professor at University of Victoria.

Together, the two women applied for and received a three-year \$10,000 CURA grant to photograph, catalogue and conserve the collection.

The journey from recognition to research grant took almost a year.

They are working with Chief Clarence Louie and other Band members during the project.



Doeskin pouch artist was Mary Ba-



Wendy Johnson/Oliver Chronicle

Osoyoos Museum president, Leslie Plaskett was instrumental in bringing the artwork of the former students at the Inkameep Day School to the forefront. Here she exhibits a painting done by 10-year-old Francis Batiste, who used tempera to bring life to his creation on doeskin.

BC sales

art collection