



Clockwise: *Crawf Slack*, played in the village band and organized the Athens orchestra in 1914; *Crawf Slack 2* - Slack was a “student of nature” and quite often painted landscapes; *Crawf Slack 3* - This 1927 Slack oil painting is entitled *Ploughing Time* a familiar scene at that time; *Crawf Slack 4* - This house at 17 Elgin St. North was designed and built by Slack as a gift to his bride in 1882.

CRAWFORD SLACK

“Renaissance Man”

By Sally Smid

If Athens chose a “renaissance man”, it would have to be Crawford Chelson Slack. He was probably the most gifted of village men—a poet, artist, student of nature, and musician. Perhaps more importantly, he was a kindly man who had a very generous heart. Slack was born at Wilstetown in 1855 and had two siblings. His father, Chelson, operated a saw and grist mill. He died when Crawford was only three years old. Crawford married Elma Nash in 1882 and they had one daughter, Miss Mable Slack. She lived in Montreal and died shortly after him. He designed and built the very unique, multi-gabled house for his bride at 17 Elgin St. North.

He apprenticed as a carriage painter in Westport when he was 14 and went on to artistically decorate carriages at the Duncan Fisher Carriage Works on Victoria St. in Farmersville. He continued this trade in Montreal, where he began writing poetry. He worked at the Canada Carriage Factory in Brockville in 1909 before opening his own shop in Athens in 1913.

His painting style was considered to be one of naive and folk art. He usually painted

landscapes, including some local scenes and had more orders than he could fill. Crawford often gave his work away or traded his works in exchange for services, products or often for liquor. Slack’s paintings are now scattered throughout the country and are highly prized. They hang on the walls of the Athens Township Hall and Museum, as well as the Masonic Lodge Hall, where he was a member. Some of his work was appraised and restored by a Carp conservator, as a project honouring Ontario’s Bicentennial.

He wrote music and played the trombone in the Farmersville band, as well as a band in Montreal, then organized the Athens orchestra in 1914.

Crawford found beauty in the ordinary and had a unique sense of humour. He explained his poems as “irregular and rambling” and written in the “language of the common folk”. Some he illustrated and their content was sometimes inspired from stories told around the stove at the corner store, as depicted in the mural beside Hill House on Athens’ Main St. His poem, *The Village*, reflects his love for Athens:

“Needn’t talk ter me ‘bout livin’ in the city with its show, Druther live ‘mong these surroundin’s where the folks are rather slow... Where the golden summer sunset gilds the village church’s dome -- There among the slantin’ shadows, I would druther have my home.”

Crawford died in 1929 after a brief illness with pneumonia. His obituary told of the impact he made on the citizens of Leeds. His obituary described him as “the Athens village character... a charming personality who had many friends”.

Despite his many talents, he remained very humble and didn’t use his talents for great monetary gain. Crawford disliked those who lacked generosity and was not impressed by fashion. He had no use for deception or hypocrisy. “His big generous heart has ceased to beat, but his paintings, poems, and many works, live on to be treasured by his fellow townsmen for countless years to come”. LH