



The couple in the mural photo are the Mural Artists Filipinas and Keith Heine

HISTORIC MURALS, Part of Athens Revitalization

By Sally Smid

The expression “Painting the Town” took on a whole new meaning over 30 years ago in Athens! After Reeve John Dancy took a trip to Chemainus, B.C. in 1985 and discovered the benefits of painted outdoor murals, he spearheaded a mural initiative in his rural village. Artists were invited to submit sketches that related to Athens’ rich history and a committee chose which would receive contracts. Each artist received \$3700 and they worked 250 hrs. apiece. The paints were donated by Sico and Ramsy Pro Hardware. Grants and local donations helped to offset expenses.

The first works were *Main Street* by Andrea Green, *The Train Station* by Lorrie Maruscak and *Turkey Fair Day* by Mary Lynn Baker. Later came *Old Hartley Saw Mill*, *The Gathering* and *As the Pages Turn* by Pierre Hardy, *Charleston Lake Picnic* and *Hwy. 42 East of Athens in 1890* by Baker, *The Village Bandstand* by John Hood, *Farm Life* by Cathie McGuire and *Athens High School Graduation* by Dan Sawatzky. There are also murals inside Main St. Pizza and in the Joshua Bates Centre. Artists worked hard researching the individual subjects. They all mentioned how much they enjoyed

connecting daily with area residents who passed by to watch them work and often commented about their connections with the history depicted by the mural.

At one time thousands visited Athens when it was declared “The Home of the Murals” and the first in Ontario to feature such murals. Busloads were hosted by tour guide and historian Lois Schroeder. The murals were featured on CTV’s *Regional Contact*, Montreal’s *CFCF*, Kingston’s *CKWS* and a variety of publications. Not everyone was happy with this busyness and some disliked the idea of their quiet village becoming a “tourist trap”.

The murals gradually began to weather and fade, compromising the artistry involved. Building demolitions destroyed the favoured Mill mural and the Farm Life mural. A fire destroyed the mural honouring Edna Chant. The Turkey Fair and Bandstand murals needed to be refurbished. There are now two new paneled murals. One on the west side of Freshmarket, the Joshua Bates mural, which was designed by Tony Endhoven and painted by students of Athens Christian School.

Residents were thrilled to see the Charleston Lake Picnic scene being refurbished and brightened up by artists Dave and Diane Sheridan last summer. It is hoped that the special paints and finishes used will give the mural a longer life. The duo plans to do similar work on the Main St. mural this coming summer. The Harvest Cafe now features two photo murals that give tribute to the early troops and an early Main St. scene. A new paneled mural featuring the B & W Railroad was just completed by artist Keith Heine in tribute to his father Herb. These murals are less susceptible to weathering, less costly, and more easily repaired.

The Mural program is revitalizing Athens in a variety of ways, and is sparking a new interest in local heritage as community spirit is bolstered. This is thrilling to the local Heritage Society and Museum that realizes the potential for the murals to further preserve and promote area history. The group looks forward to eventually connecting the new murals to the 7 heritage interpretive signs and the unique historical buildings in a new walking tour, which will play an important role in the revitalization of this rural community. **LH**