

Reg Selfe is long gone but his paintings live on (Part 2)



VINTAGE VIEWS

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When the Great Depression (1929-1939) struck, local residents told me that Reg Selfe was destitute. Wages had fallen and 30 per cent of the Canadian workforce was unemployed. Art lessons or purchasing oil paintings became a luxury and the novelty of having a fine artist living in the village with a posh accent had worn off.

Photos of Mr. Selfe during this time show a gaunt figure. This was when he switched from painting large canvases to small and very small oils, often on thin cardboard. It was during this period when Selfe bartered art lessons for rooms in summer cottages and even gave paintings in lieu of medical services in Tavistock, so said the daughter of one of the longtime doctors in the community, a practice that was not uncommon at the time.

Jack and Lucy Lemp proved to be more than sponsors and patrons; they were sincere friends over the three and a half decades that Selfe lived in Canada. One of the family's oils was acquired by sending dressed chickens and home-cooked, three-course meals to him delivered by their children, Lenny and Anne 'Girlie.' From time-to-time, Selfe babysat them "with a remarkable lack of skill"

said Girlie in a letter to me 32 years ago.

After Canada entered the Second World War in 1939, Selfe's station in life gradually improved, along with western economies. His finances clearly picked up by the late 1940s when he started to exhibit his work at summer resorts like Grand Bend, Muskoka and Bayfield.

Perhaps the high point of Selfe's career was exhibiting with members of the Group of Seven, Canada's best-known fine art painters a century ago. Today, their work is worth millions of dollars. This was not in Toronto or Montreal; it was in the Tavistock Library! The 27 oils on tour were part of the Housser Memorial Collection and were already a sensation before this 1949 show in the village. The prestigious oils were touring the province and Tavistock's librarian, Mrs. Emerson Kalbfleisch, scheduled it to appear in our public library (today Carnegie Manor).

Selfe was invited to display 20 of his own works alongside the famed group's work. Also in 1949, his painting entitled "Silence of the North" was chosen among almost 200 oils to represent Canadian and American art at a show in Windsor under the auspices of

the Detroit Institute of Art. Exhibiting with the Group of Seven and being chosen to represent this continent's finest work were undoubtedly tremendous compliments to "Tavistock's artist."

Ironically, during Selfe's last 10 years in the village, he returned to his first very modest apartment over the newly named "Tavistock 5¢ to \$1.00 Store" (now Home Hardware), a shop that I knew as a boy in the 1960s. He set up a canvas divider again between his living area and his working/teaching space.

By now, Selfe was slightly round, full-faced, moustachioed and well dressed in newspaper accounts and snaps shown to me by a wide variety of friends, but his health started to gradually fail after suffering torn ligaments from a slip on ice. He also developed a heart condition, for which he spent time in Stratford General Hospital in 1959.

Selfe was told he couldn't leave the hospital until he found someone to supervise his recovery, so when Stanley and Beth Schippling visited, they returned to Tavistock with an unexpected house guest. Selfe stayed for 10 weeks and then returned to his apartment over the dime store.

The 153 examples of fine and commercial art that I recorded in my 1994 university research paper and one example of juvenilia (an ink wash he did at age 15) is far from Selfe's complete oeuvre. One painting that I've never seen in person is the large seascape that Selfe is posing with in part one of this article. If any reader knows where this painting is, please contact me at my email address below.

The reality is Selfe had a difficult life in Tavistock simply because the market for his paintings and lessons was small. The village was largely a Germanic and Scottish, agrarian-based economy that only started to have electricity eight years before Selfe arrived in 1924. His love of tea, cigarettes and the bachelor lifestyle was a little at odds with the local way of life. He spoke with an estuary English accent, with rhotic letter R's that many people remembered during my research. This always set him apart.

Despite his differences, it's clear that the local people treated him well, considering his many sponsors, gifts of food and services or local people and businesses accepting in-kind offerings of his paintings. This was how small-town Ontario functioned during this time and Tavistock was no exception.

My memories as a child growing up in the village shortly after Selfe departed for the U.K. in 1960



(PHOTO COURTESY OF STANLEY SCHIPLING)

Reg Selfe and friend Stanley Schippling removed their car seats for the campsite. It's not known why Selfe never learned to drive his car, so he was often accompanied while camping by friends who drove him. This was on the Nith River flats near Haysville in 1944.

overlap some of his experiences. Doors were not always locked, shovelling an elderly neighbour's snow without expecting pay and leaving milk delivered to a door untouched was commonplace in the district back then. Today, I live in a high-rise condo in the GTA and don't know the longtime neighbour across the hall.

By the late 1950s, Selfe was now in his 70s and he yearned for his homeland. In 1960, he bade farewell to his friends, associates and art school students and – for unknown reasons – returned home to Guilford accompanied by Tavistock's police chief, Stanley Melbourne, also English-born. Selfe died a few months later and his three sisters had a modest headstone erected on his grave in Guildford. Part of his epitaph on the stone is "In Unfading Memory of Dear Reg."

In 2007, I visited Guilford, found the Selfe home and met the occupants; no Selfes resided there at that time. I found the cemetery where Selfe was interred in the family plot and was astonished to find that his headstone was missing! However, the stone's foundation and kerb set were intact (a low grave border made of stone, not common in North America).

I know that this was where he was buried because longtime friend Fred Schaefer visited the grave in 1967 and took photos of it. I matched his photos to where I stood in the graveyard and I was able to locate it. This is how I know half of Selfe's epitaph; the other half is illegible in Mr. Schaefer's pictures. The four-sided kerb set was still there but three sides had sunk slightly beneath the surface.

With the heel of my shoe I was able to uncover the other three sides and read inscriptions on it dedicated to Selfe's parents and perhaps an uncle, but nothing about Selfe (I should state that I don't make it a habit of digging in cemeteries). Selfe's three sisters weren't interred there because there were no new stones or foun-

dations. I took photos and departed. My mind was spinning.

The missing headstone is a mystery for the ages.

A question for readers: Does anyone know what happened to the Selfe oil of a Canadian winter scene that hung over the fireplace in the Tavistock Library before it was renovated to the present day "Carnegie Manor?" Shirley Weicker was the librarian in 1994 when I took photos of this oil. If you know, please contact me at my email address below.

The Jan. 22 History Mystery: The question was "What rare physical ailment does one of the people posing have?" Connie Hitzeroth of Tavistock was the first person to respond with the correct answer. The man wearing the bowler hat has one shoe with an extra-thick sole, but his other shoe does not. This is called short-leg syndrome, or anisomelia.

The last article's History Mystery: The question was "What detail is artificial in the setup in the main photo with this article?" This was answered by Connie Hitzeroth again. The answer is an oil painting that's in the process of being completed is never framed. The way Selfe is posed with his palette of paints and brushes in hand implies he was working on it when the photo was taken – not true.

This week's History Mystery: Why are kerb sets (stone grave borders) almost unknown in Canada but widely seen in England, unrelated to grass cutting, tradition or appearance? The first reader to respond with the correct answer will have their name and community or rural route number noted in the next Vintage Views article. Email your answer to me at tim_mosher@hotmail.com.

Correction: An error was printed in part one of the Vintage Views series about Reg Selfe. While that column indicated the name of Reeve Robert Rudy's wife was Helen, her name was actually Doris. We regret any confusion this may have caused.



(PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF RANEY MILLER)

This photo was taken near Elora in the mid-1950s. Reg Selfe is in the centre, Fred Schaefer, Selfe's paperboy years earlier, is on the right, and Horst Burkholz, a loyal patron, is on the left. Surprisingly, they're holding two box cameras which were popular 30 years earlier.