

St. Michael Historian



Official Newsletter of the St. Michael Historical Society, St. Michael, Minnesota

May 2015, Spring

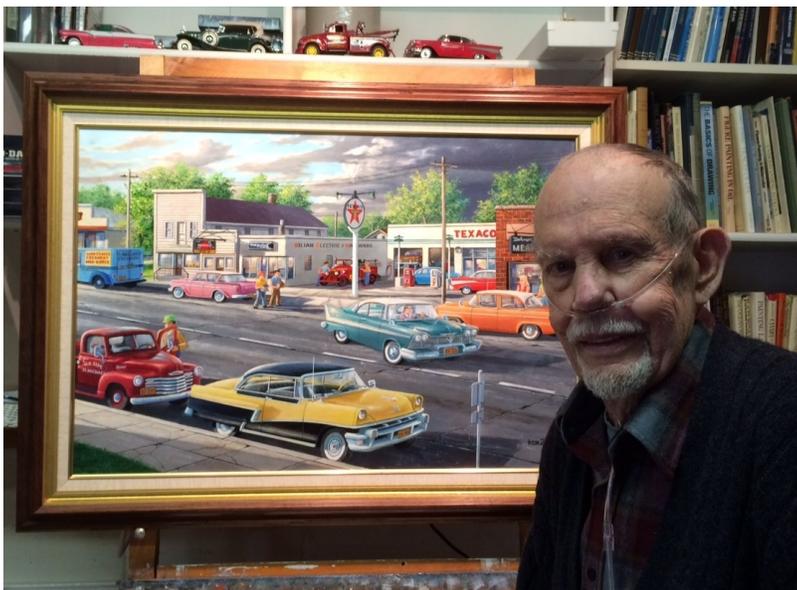
Volume 9, Issue 2

Society Celebrates 10th Anniversary with Commissioned Print

by Bob Zahler

The St. Michael Historical Society is now ten years old. In the spring of 2005 a group of interested citizens, many of whom are still on the Board of Directors, met in the Community Education Building to discuss the formation of a local historical society. By the end of the summer, articles of incorporation and bylaws had been written and a board of directors with officers elected. For the first five years the board met monthly in the former city hall chambers on Lander Avenue, now the Public Works Building; but it had no place of its own to fulfill part of its mission of “collecting and preserving” the history of St. Michael. In November 2010 the society moved into its current office/archives in the new St. Michael City Hall complex. In just ten short years the society has been able to begin the process of preserving and cataloging the records and artifacts of St. Michael along with sharing the history, the other part of its mission, through this newsletter, now in its ninth year of publication. Additionally, the society reaches out to the world through our website which features the ability to access the family research data of genealogist Stephen S. Barthel.

To celebrate these remarkable accomplishments, last fall the Board of Directors decided to commission a painting by nationally known artist Ken Zylla. Back in 2006 the society had commissioned a painting that depicted St. Michael as it appeared in about 1910, but frequently the informal “round table” conversations centered on the memories of St. Michael in the 1950s and 60s. About a year ago this writer glanced up at a calendar on the wall and saw a nostalgic image of small town America in the 1950s with classic automobiles of the era. It was then that the idea was hatched to have an artist recreate a view of St. Michael from that same era, but it was not until the idea was discussed at a monthly Board of Directors meeting that it was discovered that the artist who did the artwork for the calendar, Ken Zylla, lived just a few miles from town in Corcoran.



Artist Ken Zylla poses with the completed painting “St. Michael, USA”.

Ken was born near Foley, Minnesota in 1934 and spent his youth working at the same café in Foley at which his mother worked and also doing a variety of farm jobs. He served in the US Army and was stationed in Germany in the early 1950s. Painting had been a hobby of Ken’s since his youth. He sold his first painting about 1947 for less than \$10 and then continued to paint as a part-time occupation until 1969 when he realized that he could make a better living by just focusing on his artwork. Throughout the next thirty years Ken owned and managed three different art galleries in the Twin Cities and traveled the country marketing his paintings at art shows. Since 2001 he has been under contract with the publishing company of Brown and Bigelow who produce the “America Remem-

bered” calendars featuring Ken’s nostalgic view of America. Consequently, Ken produces at least 12 paintings every year. He is currently working on paintings that will be featured in the 2017 calendar, which will also likely include the print he produced for St. Michael. Ken finds great satisfaction knowing that his artwork not only preserves the memory of mid-century America, but that it helps rekindle fond recollections of a simpler way of life. While Ken has featured views of many different American landscapes in his art, much of the scenery is Midwestern, in particular, Minnesotan. In this regard, Ken has also done a service to our state by presenting to the rest of the world a way of life that Minnesotans have always appreciated including rural farm life and lake and winter scenes. But the most notable feature of the bulk of Ken’s work is the cars, especially those from the 1950s. Ken knows how particular automobile collectors can be about details and he makes it a point to get every automobile absolutely accurate. If he puts the wrong hood ornament on the wrong year of a car, he’ll hear about it from collectors. For St. Michael’s print he wanted to include the kinds of automobiles that would have been found in small town America. To help identify the automobiles, the license plate of each one starts with the last two digits of the year the car was made.

While most of the cars are ones that Ken drew from his memory, there are a couple of vehicles placed in the painting by special request, notably “Susie”, the 1929 Chevrolet fire truck still used in parades by the St. Michael Fire Department, and the pink 1960 Nash Rambler that was owned by Alex Dehmer. Alex’s car, and the two young men walking behind it, were included as sort of an “inside joke” to those who remember the infamous July 4th prank of 1960 when a few of the local boys lit off a casing keg full of silver salutes which not only blasted away the mud from the rear fenders of Alex’s car, but also shattered the windows of the principal businesses along this section of Central Avenue. While the event took place in the evening and involved at least five young men, Ken used his “artistic license” to make it a daytime scene and just included two of the pranksters. Most people are not likely to catch the joke, but that’s sort of the idea: a wink and a nod to those who know the story that is only hinted at in the print.

While there was no photograph that showed this view of St. Michael in 1960, Ken worked from numerous photographs and the memories of others to recreate this image. As society president Sheldon Barthel remarked, “It’s as if Ken grew up in St. Michael and painted this from his own memory.” Among the details that Ken included is the second story door from Schumm’s Store that leads to nowhere. Those old enough to remember or who have seen photos may recall that at one time there was a porch on the front of the store and that the door led out onto the roof of that porch. Sometime in the late 50s that porch was removed, and for awhile that door remained with a precarious drop to the pavement. It’s quirky things like this that make Ken’s art both authentic and fun.



Here Ken Zylla shares memories with St. Michael Historical Society President Sheldon Barthel just before handing over the completed painting to the society this past March. Ken paints nearly every day in his studio at his home in Corcoran where he is surrounded by his reference books and car models that help him achieve accuracy in his paintings. Although he is nearing his 81st birthday, he is driven by the love of both painting and history to keep producing art.



30 Years Since Star and Tribune Article put St. Michael on the Map

Was this the Turning Point from Small Town to Suburbia? by Bob Zahler

On April 27, 1985 St. Michael was the focus of two articles written for the “Neighbors” section of the Saturday edition of the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* newspaper. The first article, written by staff writer Dave Wood, was titled “St. Michael Boasts Progress Amid Tradition.” The second, written by staff writer Peg Meier, was titled “Cooking for School Kids is a Go-go Job.” Together, the two articles provided a glimpse of life in St. Michael at one of the last moments it could claim to be small. Not long after the publication of the articles things started to change rapidly. While it’s impossible to say for a fact that the articles were the reason that St. Michael started to boom, they definitely gave the town some positive publicity and may have at least brought attention to an area that, up to that point, had been mostly overlooked by many looking to get away from the Twin Cities without getting too far away.

Dave Wood’s article, in particular, painted a scene of St. Michael life that even people who grew up in St. Michael had to find inviting. Perhaps we just took it all for granted. During his visit Wood managed to run into all the principal characters in town: Lowell Zachman, Joe Dehmer, Roy Simms, Erv Bruner and several others. On this particular day Lowell seemed to be on fire with his humor, to the point that Wood called him “St. Michael’s answer to Henny Youngman.” Lowell said to Wood, “When I was a kid, 8 years old, we’d get out of church and the old man would take us to the bar and we’d have a beer. One Sunday, I wanted a candy bar. The old man said, ‘Shut up, kid, and drink your beer.’” While sitting in the St. Michael Café, Roy Simms walked in and Lowell remarked, “Here comes the retired banker. You know it was so cold last winter that Roy kept his hands in his own pockets.” It was classic Lowell banter. But it was not just Lowell’s humorous antics that Wood captured. He also drew a picture of St. Michael that showed how we had managed to hang onto our German-Catholic heritage while promoting business growth as well. Wood interviewed Elmer Eichelberg who was mayor at the time. “Ike” was quoted to have said, “We’ve grown from 1,150 people when I came in 1968 to about 1,800 now.” “If Frankfort Township, which surrounds us on three sides, doesn’t want parts of it annexed, then we’ll end up landlocked” (St. Michael annexed most of Frankfort Township in 1996.) Wood also visited with parish business administrator Mary Ann Andrea and parish school principal Sister Mary Lou Elgroth, who both emphasized the gentle growth that was starting to take place. Yet with the growth there was still the tradition and friendliness of a small town—or “Gemütlichkeit”—as Wood put it. Everywhere he went people invited him to the bar for a beer or back to town in the summer for the Bierstube. This was typical German hospitality. If you were tired of the coldness of urban living and longed for the warmth of a small town, who wouldn’t find the St. Michael that Dave Wood pictured inviting?

In her article, Peg Meier followed the busy schedule of public high school cooks Mary Ann Helgeson, Monica Heuring and Karen Voss. Again, the picture painted of our school was one where one couldn’t help but believe that it’s a great place to be. Mary Ann was quoted to have said, “Oh, I know the kids would like pizza and beer every noon. They’re good kids here. I love ‘em.” Then later Maier comments on the school atmosphere, “Head custodian Merrel Schumm, who has stood around the cafeteria with hands on hips looking tough so the kids won’t get any smart ideas of food fights or being otherwise obnoxious, sweeps up before the next shift. This is a *clean* school. No graffiti, No litter.” What was made clear by Meier’s article is that in St. Michael people work hard, have pride in their facilities and keep a sense of humor. No doubt this made the town sound like a great place to raise a family.

One of the interesting comments made by Mayor Eichelberg to writer Dave Wood foretold the big question with which the town had to come to grips. He said, “Some people want the town to stay the way it is. Not just old people, either, but younger families who have just moved in. I can understand that, but it’s something we’ll have to deal with.” Perhaps the growth was unstoppable. And while this is still a great place to raise a family, clearly, the same feeling of Gemütlichkeit of 1985 was lost amid the progress.

**St. Michael
Historical Society**
11800 Town Center Drive
St. Michael, MN 55376

Phone: 763-416-7967

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.saintmichaelhistory.org

Like us on **Facebook!**

Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.

Chief Editor: Bob Zahler
Editors: Sheldon Barthel
Stephen S. Barthel
Stephen D. Barthel
Sara Casalino

A Message from the President

Exciting times are ahead as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the St. Michael Historical Society.

Elected to new three year terms on the Board of Directors at our April annual meeting are Harvey Zahler, Bob Zahler, Harry Welter, Earl Vetsch, and Crystal Sayen.

If you look to the sidebar on the left of this page, you'll notice that our web address has changed. Please make this change also in your bookmarks on your computer browser now. Our new website address will now be www.saintmichaelhistory.org and will have many innovations not available on the website we are now leaving. The old website will redirect to the new website for a short time as all updates are now being done only on the new website. The reason for the switch? We felt that with the ever-increasing data needs of the membership and the need for a more powerful server with more speed and memory capabilities, it was time to make a change. Members will now also have the ability to pay their annual dues and purchase items from the "Store" tab online through PayPal if they so desire.

As part of our tenth anniversary celebration, we have commissioned nationally renowned artist Ken Zylla to do a painting for us depicting a street scene of downtown St. Michael in the year 1960. Limited Edition prints numbering up to 500 are now available at this time and may be purchased framed or unframed. Special pricing will be available if purchased through the St. Michael Historical Society. The public will be invited to a grand unveiling of the print and painting at our meeting in July, and the artist will be present to personalize any artist proofs purchased at that time. For more information or to purchase a print and/or see framing options, please call me at: (763) 497-4205 or email me at: srbarthel@charter.net

Sheldon Barthel, President
St. Michael Historical Society

Upcoming Events

- Monday, June 8, 7:00 PM** Monthly meeting followed by a presentation by Stephen S. Barthel on the topic "How to upload photos and other items to the web".
- Monday, July 13, 7:00 PM** Monthly meeting. At 8:00 PM we will have the formal unveiling ceremony of Ken Zylla's latest painting, "St. Michael, USA." The artist will be there to sign and personalize artist proof prints for anyone interested in purchasing them that evening. Orders will be taken for 500 Limited Edition prints and 50 Artist Proofs. Refreshments will also be served.
- Monday, August 10, 7:00 PM** Monthly meeting.

All meetings are open to the public and held in the Gries and Lenhardt Conference Room adjacent to the Great River Regional Library in the St. Michael City Hall complex, 11800 Town Center Drive.