# Entertainment & Leisure

## Blyth-based artist discovers mysterious predecessor



### *The art life*

Blyth Festival Art Gallery celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2025, with Exhibition Committee Chair Kelly Stevenson uncovering the gallery's history through local archives. *(Scott Stephenson photo)*

**By Scott Stephenson**
*The Citizen*

Twenty-twenty-five marks the Blyth Festival Art Gallery's (BFAG) 50th anniversary season. Exhibition Committee Chair Kelly Stevenson has been busy combing through various newspaper archives in search of stories of gallery days gone by. What started out as a simple, two-day task has since snowballed into a months-long quest to unravel just a few of Blyth's many artistic mysteries. Last week, *The Citizen* sat down with Stevenson at her downtown studio to hear all about how the distant past is inspiring her present programming ethos.

Stevenson's research really began in earnest when her enthusiasm for local history led her to a position on the Blyth History Book Committee. "I'm doing the gallery section," she explained. "I'd just started, and I thought 'it'll be a quick thing.'" As she sorted through the available information about the BFAG, she found a great many details about the history of the gallery she's been involved with for over 10 years, some of which she knew already, some of which she didn't. Stevenson also noticed a number of small inaccuracies and gaps in the generally-accepted timeline of the gallery's founding. She quickly referred to the digitized newspaper archives hoping to separate the rights from the wrongs.

One of the most surprising things she discovered early on is that 2025 isn't necessarily the 50th anniversary of the BFAG, as the Festival has been displaying art in Memorial Hall since the very beginning, in 1975! "The first year that the theatre festival existed, there was art specifically in the building, to complement the shows. There was no gallery room per se, but they used the stairways of Memorial Hall," Stevenson explained. After a few seasons, the Lower Hall became the Festival's designated display area for local art. "As much as that was a great space to put art up, it was also used for rehearsal at that point, because they didn't yet have the Phillips Studio."

For years afterwards, the Festival's temporary gallery space jumped around from spot to spot in order to accommodate the ever-expanding festival. A generous donation in the 1990s allowed the BFAG to establish a permanent room, with proper lighting. In 1990, the Bainton Gallery opened between the Lower Hall and the Box Office, where it has remained ever since.

As she's scoured the newspaper archives, one thing that has impressed itself upon Stevenson is the sheer number of local people who have volunteered their time and talents to make the gallery succeed for half a century. "I think what's got lost in the shuffle a little bit is that Memorial Hall on the outside says 'Community Hall' on it. Like, 500 times… So we're trying to look at what we can do to bring the community back into this building. We've lost track of some of the other people who had ideas," she lamented.

This year, Stevenson wants to pay tribute to all those past committees, volunteers, fundraisers and supporters that have made the BFAG a reality. People like Betty Battye, a local public school teacher who helped longtime gallery managers Ron and Bev Walker in the formation of the annual Student Show, which has carried on to this day. "She was a massive supporter of the gallery, and the theatre, from the get-go," she explained.

Stevenson has also found herself inexorably drawn to articles involving a Blyth-based artist who died in 1974 - the year before the Festival began displaying the work of rural artists. Her name was Anne Fairservice, and, while she never had any direct contact with the BFAG, Stevenson believes that this semi-forgotten local artist has left an indelible mark on the Huron County creative scene. "Anne was a local woman who grew up just outside of Londesborough. She went to high school in Clinton, and then at some point, in the 1950s, she graduated and went to Detroit," Stevenson explained. Fairservice attended Wayne State University for art. "If you know anything about Wayne State in 1963, it was a fairly radical place."

Scouring the archives has yielded numerous references to the life of this enigmatic artist. There is mention of a recurrent illness, a side hustle as a professional pianist, a time spent in Toronto, working as an interior decorator for Eaton's. "When you look at the amount of things that she accomplished in a short period of time, considering she was also ill… she was a painter. She was a potter. She taught sewing classes, she did caning of chairs, she made rugs in 500 different ways. It's just more and more things."

Stevenson has become intrigued by all aspects of this young artist's life. In 1966, Fairservice and another Huron County woman, Claire Taylor, purchased an old schoolhouse - SS #12 Morris, just outside of Blyth. "They spent a year renovating it, to open a studio/classroom… they seemed to have run that for about three or four years." They called their creative space, "The Country Studio", and its opening weekend festival was attended by both Jack McLaren and Group of Seven member A.J. Casson. "They had concerts. They had classes. They had exhibitions. They did tours of other art things that they tried to take local people to show them, you know, possibilities. They taught conversational French," Stevenson listed. "For some reason, there seemed to not have been a whole lot of community support for it… by 1970, they'd closed up shop and sold the building." Fairservice passed away four years later, while visiting her brother in Montreal.

Stevenson sees parallels between what she wants to accomplish with the BFAG and what Fairservice tried to do with her Country Studio. They both want to make art more accessible to the rural community they call home. "It's become a thing," she stated. "What can we do with the space that we have, that's not a repeat of what else is available around here? What boundaries can we push? What things can we do to diversify the types of artists we have in the types of work? What can we do in terms of more community outreach?"

One such outreach initiative concerns the annual Community Show. "We're really going to try and push this year for younger people to be involved," Stevenson explained. "I have changed some of the rules for that - we're doing away with framing requirements."

She knows from experience that making this one simple change really can make a difference. The annual student show recently dropped the framing requirement, and the range of student submissions has already expanded enormously. "If we're looking at it from a perspective of wanting to open this up to as many community members as possible, in as many different groups as possible, it does not, socio-economically, make sense to say everything needs to be framed. If you're adding an extra financial barrier, doesn't that continue to limit the people that you can get to participate? So we're not having framing requirements - if people want to bring stuff on paper, we'll deal with it."

She's hoping that, through her research, she'll be able to locate some of Fairservice's actual art. "I have not seen what her paintings look like. I haven't seen an actual piece of pottery. I've got like, really badly scanned newspaper photos… I've got nothing."

While she's going to continue to focus on Fairservice, Stevenson is broadening her research to include any and all forgotten artists from Ontario. "You have musicians, you have artists, you have writers - all of these people that have existed, and done things, and kind of been left out of even our own local histories."

### Sudoku Solution

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| 6 | 4 | 9 | 8 | 7 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 3 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 9 | 7 | 8 | 4 |
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