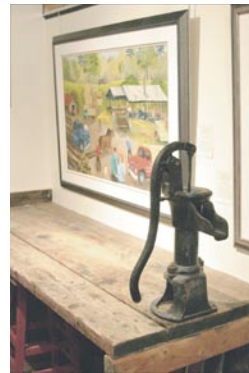


A home to cherish

Article by Judith Ruan / Photographs by Laura Bombier



Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler's art now lines the walls of the home where she grew up, now called Cherish Creek, which is the setting for her book, *The Winnie Stories*. Throughout the house, antiques and other memorabilia echo elements in her stories, which portray life in the 1950s as seen through the eyes of an adolescent girl.



Vankoughnet is a tiny cluster of houses nestled into the countryside, along the Black River, in Oakley Township, in the south east corner of Muskoka. Once a busier place, its homes and halls echo with tales from the past.

There are still two churches, one Anglican and one Presbyterian, anchoring the community. A community centre has given new life to the "new school" – it replaced the original, one room, S.S. #1 Oakley but, in turn, became redundant with the advent of bussing. The old Orange Hall now stands vacant, and a little forlorn, and the old general store, with its cheery woodstove and jars of candy, is no more.

On one side of the road, leading into the village from Hwy. 118, set back beneath mature trees, and surrounded by six acres of lush green in summer and pristine white in winter stands a large white-

sidéd house. It is trimmed with deep red and a weathered blue, and is marked by an imposing Muskoka granite chimney that dominates one side. This is "Cherish Creek," the home of *The Winnie Stories*. The name Cherish Creek is not as old as the house itself; it sprang from the creative imagination of artist/author Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler, as did the collection of 13 paintings and 12 stories that depict life in this house in the 1950s, and comprise *The Winnie Stories*.

First, you must learn a little about Winnie and her childhood, and about the lovely home which was as much a part of her as Green Gables was of Anne.

Winnie is at "that in-between age" when the reader first meets her but we see her "growing toward adolescence" as the stories progress. Of course, Winnie "had no idea what adolescence was



and, furthermore, she had no intention whatsoever of going there.” She is the third youngest of eight siblings – three girls and five boys – who live with their parents, two uncles and Grandma in the home now known as Cherish Creek. Mamma had come from the city to teach school in the village. After marrying Winnie’s father, they had lived with Grandpa and Grandma and two uncles, at “the old place” on the outskirts of the village. As the family grew, the new house was planned and built to be “big enough for all of them at the time and accommodate any more that came along.”

These stories portray life in the 1950s, through the eyes and experiences of Winnie and her family, and depict their life in a small but caring community. As readers, we have the pleasure of accompanying Winnie to church and to school, then to a First of July picnic, a Christmas concert, the fall fair, a square dance and even to visit her first apartment and on a trip to the city for glasses. It is always “home” that remains at the heart of the stories and clearly in the heart of the characters.

The stories are simply told but capture, with meticulous care, both the joys and sorrows of life’s journey. The events and characters are so recognizable, even commonplace, that the reader can’t help but pause and say, with remembered pleasure, “Ah, yes,” as personal memories start bubbling to the surface. Each story is illustrated by a painting. Each one contains an abundance of detail and glows with jewel-like colors. The attentive viewer is rewarded with even more stories from these richly imaginative surfaces than the text reveals.

There is a sense here of the importance of remembrance and a realization that knowing who you really are comes from a complexity of simple and often overlooked events, the daily interactions of family life and childhood. Grandma calls it “living from the heart.” Although the author notes the stories are fiction, based on her childhood experience, like all good fiction, they contain many truths.

Like Winnie, Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler is the third youngest of a family of eight children raised in this house by parents, Claude and Lila Boyes, grandmother Lottie Turner Elliott and uncles Cyril and Bill. Gwen and her husband Jim, along with two sons, Matthew and Justin, purchased the property after her mother passed away, and “came home” in 1991. Jim is the minister at Knox Presbyterian Church in Gravenhurst and both sons now have their own families, adding yet another

generation to the family history of the house and area.

Several of Gwen’s brothers and a sister live nearby, so there is still a constant flow of extended family through the doors. There are, in fact, now six generations of the Boyes family who live or have lived in Vankoughnet and, altogether, seven generations who have resided in Canada.

Gwen started painting in her early 20s when a car accident reduced her mobility for a while and her mother, also a painter, gave her some paints to pass the time. She has been involved in many juried exhibitions, as well as having had several one-woman shows of her work. She wrote the first story of this collection, “When Dreams Come True,” after her father passed away, and had it printed as a Christmas present for members of the family. However, she pointed out, “Once I began writing, the stories just kept coming.”

The first painting developed after she challenged her art students to portray some aspect of their earlier lives on canvas. In the same year as her book was released, Gwen was the recipient of the Muskoka YWCA’s 2004 Woman of Distinction award, in the arts category.

Now, let’s explore Cherish Creek, the home so lovingly portrayed in *The Winnie Stories*. The magic of this house is that it combines the elegance young Winnie identified with her Aunt Anne and her town apartment and the hominess she identified with her grandmother and her own home. Heritage colors are used throughout, with lots of red in various hues. They contribute to the sense of warmth and comfort that pervades each room.

There is, in each room, something of interest to see, wherever the eye rests. It might be an interesting piece of furniture, an arrangement of articles on a table, or one Gwen’s paintings that grace the walls.

A large granite fireplace dominates one side of the living room and we learn in *The Winnie Stories* what happened when an old wicker chair was placed inside to burn. On the opposite side of the room sits a mahogany, upright Heintzman piano, placed just exactly as when Winnie’s parents sat at it to sing.

Although not everything in the house has been included in Gwen’s stories (yet), almost everything must, undoubtedly, have a story to tell. There is an oak secretary that was a wedding gift to Jim’s parents, and a pine blanket box that belonged to an aunt. Grandma’s old treadle sewing machine sits



under the window in the dining room and her walnut chest of drawers is still upstairs. An exquisite hand-carved duck sits in the living room – a treasured gift, recently hand crafted by a friend.

That this wonderful, eclectic collection of cherished treasures has been brought together with an artist's sensitivity for relationship, color and harmony is evident from the sense of comfort and pleasure one gets while wandering from room to room. Everything just seems to belong.

Gwen and Jim added a small office at the rear of the house, off the back kitchen, and partially removed a wall between the original master bedroom and "Grandma's room" to create a sitting area or, as Grandma would have described it, "a place of quiet repose." Little else has been changed structurally. They did remove carpet on the ground floor and discovered the original hardwood in both the living room and dining room, Gwen notes. She had always remembered linoleum on the dining room floor, so the discovery of hardwood underneath was a welcome surprise. A talented nephew has added a chair rail to the dining room, matching it perfectly to the

original woodwork.

There are many things that might have been changed by owners less charmed by the historical features of the house; but then, some of the magic would surely have been lost. For example, in the back kitchen, there is an old cast-cement wash tub, exactly where it has always been. Gwen says she is often asked when she is going to get rid of "that old thing" but, she adds quickly, "I love it, and it's so handy for clean up when my art students are here."

The downstairs bathroom has only a toilet in it – the sink is on the wall just outside the door. It was designed that way purposely, so two functions could go on simultaneously, which was a necessity in a large household. "It still works very well," laughs Gwen.

The house was built by Claude Boyes, Gwen's father, in the 1940s and reflects careful planning, ingenuity and carpentry skill. For example, all the wood trim, including lovely glass-paneled doors that lead from both the front sunroom and the dining room into the living room, and the stair banister and balusters, were hand crafted by him.

The "back door" – actually on the



side of the house – opens into an enclosed vestibule from which one staircase descends to the cellar and another ascends to the back kitchen. The door is a standard width but, on one side, a swinging panel increases the width to allow large items to pass through. On the third floor there is a cut-out in the floor. When it is raised, furniture and mattresses can be moved up or down. The narrow staircase, with a turn at the bottom would not allow such access.

One of the most interesting examples of her father's practical yet creative spirit is the large kitchen table. Built to accommodate 14 people "easily," its ample top slides on runners to allow access to large bins at one end, designed to store 100 pounds of flour and 50 pounds of sugar. Along the sides are drawers for storing the usual cutlery and kitchen implements, as well as pies and baked goods. Anyone living in the country knows that mice have an uncanny ability to get into almost any cupboard but, because of the way this table is designed at the bottom, it has been able to baffle mice over its many years of service.

For extra seating at the table, Gwen's mother would make pillows for the tops of 100-lb. lard tins. These could be used when needed and pushed under the table, out of

the way, when not in use. Lard, like flour and sugar, were in constant use. Her mother's recipe for bread, included in *The Winnie Stories*, made seven loaves at a time – none too many when feeding a large household that often included hired hands, as well as visitors.

The second floor corridor of Cherish Creek gives access to three bedrooms and the master bed-sitting room, along with a bathroom. Currently, these walls are hung with the original paintings from *The Winnie Stories*. Just at the top of the stairs, a smaller corridor veers off to the left, leading to a narrow door. When this door is folded back on itself, it reveals a staircase connecting the second and third floors. Originally, the third floor housed two bedrooms – in *The Winnie Stories*, one was for the boys and one was for the uncles. Now, one room is used for storage and the other has become Gwen's studio. A large easel sits in front of the window and the smell of paint and turpentine perfumes the air.

In the summer, Gwen can be found working in a small log building across the lane from the house. This building was originally the home of relatives on her grandmother's side, and once served as a cook-house in a logging camp. Gwen's



father had it moved to the property as a carpentry shop. Now, it is the summer home of Cherish Creek Studio.

When Thomas Boyes and his wife Mary left Longueil, Quebec, in the 1870s to take advantage of grant lands available under The Homestead Act, they joined a stalwart group of pioneer families who braved hardship and deprivation to lay the foundations for the Muskoka we know today. As they toiled on the land to make a better life for themselves and their families, they could never have imagined a future, six generations hence. However, they would, no doubt, be gratified to know the roots they set down, have been nurtured through succeeding generations, and continue to be held dear at Cherish Creek. **M**



Artist/author Gwendolyn Boyes-Sitler's book, *The Winnie Stories* (which she's holding, above), is based on her own childhood in the Vankoughnet home, Cherish Creek.