

A Great American Artist - Jefferson Avenue's Carl Peters

Part One

His grave at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in the village of Fairport is as modest as can be. At times the flat marker is obscured completely by the fallen needles from a towering pine tree nearby. The man was as humble as the grave. A man of few words, yet a man who spoke volumes with his paint brush.

Carl William Peters was born in 1897, to German immigrants residing in a modest house on Caroline Street in Rochester. His father worked as a mechanic, repairing newspaper presses. When Carl was about 12 years old, his father's employer suggested it would be a good time for him to retire. His parents scraped together the down payment for a little fruit farm on a dirt road in Perinton, recently renamed Jefferson Avenue, formerly Basket Street. Carl and his five brothers and sisters would quickly learn about life on a farm.



Irondequoit Bay – by Carl W. Peters, 1953 (from a private collection)

Even as a child, it was apparent that Carl had a raw talent for drawing. With his parent's support, he quit high school to concentrate on his chosen vocation. He enrolled in drawing classes at Mechanics Institute, the predecessor to Rochester Institute of Technology. He also labored on the family farm, and in a Rochester art studio that created large canvas scenery backdrops for theatrical productions in New York City. As a junior member of the staff, he carried buckets of paint to the senior artists, and did some painting himself. He rode his bicycle the seven miles from the Jefferson Avenue farm to the studio on Halstead Street.

Carl was consumed with his chosen profession. While continuing at the scenery studio and his classes, young Peters honed his skills working for the Stecher Lithography Company, as a designer of postcards. At the age of 19 he earned his first significant prize, for the best poster representing the Rochester Pure Food Show. Shortly after, a new opportunity presented itself. Many artists travel to France to practice their craft. Carl Peters did as well, as a private in the United States Army. His experience as a scenery painter served him well in France, where he was assigned as a camouflage artist.

Carl survived the war, and accelerated his artistic activities upon his return from Europe. In the early 1920's, he studied in Woodstock, New York at the Art Students League Summer School. Here his artistic style was refined, in what some have described as a blend of impressionism and realism. The life's work of Carl W. Peters was set. He would be an artist, every day, every year, for the rest of his life. Many in our community may not recognize the level of accomplishment of our Jefferson Road artist. Carl Peters became nationally known for his impressionistic landscapes when he won several prestigious prizes and awards. In 1932, he became the first artist in history to win a third Hallgarten prize, sponsored by the National Academy of Art. Today, two of Carl's paintings reside in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Art in Washington, DC.

Written by Bill Poray, Perinton Town Historian Published in the Fairport-ER Post, 03/28/2013