

## **GETTING TO KNOW EARL STIELER**

*By Diane Bonfonte*

Earl Stieler is a name familiar to many from weekly Sunday worship prayers. Recently, I visited with Earl at his remarkable home to do this personal profile that was highlighted by his warm hospitality and a marvelous “high tea”.

Earl’s paternal great grandfather settled in Waterloo County from Pennsylvania and his maternal grandparents came from Austria to Berlin. His parents purchased a working farm, barn and all. Their property encompassed the land stretching back to the train tracks at Gage Street and extended towards Union where Belmont is today. They lived in a yellow brick house - 207 Glasgow Street/near Belmont. Eldest sister Lillian was born in 1922 (now resides in Kitchener) and Earl followed two years later.

Earl’s father worked at McBrine Luggage. By the time Earl was five, his father built their house on Stirling Avenue. The family grew - a brother and two sisters, now deceased. Nine Pines Public School was one room with grades one to eight. The red brick building stands today at the corner of Ottawa/Fisher Hallman, Kitchener. A fair walk to make as a young child although Earl today still enjoys a daily brisk walk. He went on to attend KCI. The family moved to the St. Mark’s area and joined in 1940. Earl and Lillian were confirmed by Pastor Jacobi and both have many memories of this great teacher and orator.

The family enjoyed going to the movies at the Lyric and Capital Theatres. Earl and his sisters especially went to follow weekly Saturday matinee serial movies at the small theatre on College Street. He was always impressed with set design - the grand musicals of Fred Astaire, historical movies of Rebecca and Wuthering Heights starring Errol Flynn, Bette Davis and others were (and still are) favourites. These fostered his interest in the arts, design, travel and architecture which influenced all aspects of his life to this day. At the age of nine, he built a small, revolving stage out of wood so he could change its sets. The whole family became entertained with each new design which also included lighting and special affects with coloured cellophane he salvaged. Coat boxes became buildings for this stage. At the end of Earl’s first year at KCI, he won the school’s Arts Award. This was only the beginning...

After KCI, Earl’s first job was at B.F. Goodrich (King/Victoria Streets) as a cost accountant. He was responsible for determining the manufacturer’s price for footwear – boots and all kinds of men’s and women’s shoes. Competitors of Kaufman’s just across the street!

Earl eventually studied drama and theatre at Lake Forest College, Illinois and Hamblin College in Minneapolis and history/art at the University of Waterloo. In the 1960’s he began working in U. of W.’s Creative Arts Department. Throughout the years he was simultaneously the Director of Operations for the Theatre Of The Arts and Humanities Theatre, Administrator of the Art Gallery, designed sets for university productions and decorated for special events including fund raisers. As well, Earl attended the American Floral Art Design School in Chicago and applied this knowledge to a range of bridal and church flowers for countless weddings. During the 1970’s, he arranged flowers for many weddings of the students who worked for him in the Theatres. Last year, he was thrilled to do the flowers for the wedding of the son of one of those students. Also, if the Presidents were hosting University business either at home or on campus and wanted flowers arranged, Earl’s talents were enlisted (for years).

Even though Earl retired in 1991, his talents have been sought by many to become clients but he has also he volunteered his talents. There are three design projects in particular that he is most proud of and most grand and perhaps will spark your own memories. These and so many more he has preserved in an album with photos, news clippings, letters etc. It was fascinating (and overwhelming) to peruse it since this chronicled Earl's lifetime of involvement with so many organizations and people.

One evening in the summer of 1957, Waterloo presented a centennial year historical pageant separated into scenes which depicted important events in the development of the City. This unfolded over an hour. The K-W Record noted 1,800 attended. Earl designed an 80 foot wide, two-tiered stage which was erected at the end of the race track oval located in the open green area of today's Waterloo Park (by the tennis courts). The day prior, it poured and the orchestra pit that was dug with an organ in it had to be dried. This was the event's only glitch. His design sketches look like they were drawn yesterday. Some of the costumes were on loan from the CNE which presented on its grandstand Broadway style shows. He oversaw a cast and crew of 350 - stage hands, wardrobe, animal handlers, lighting, local choirs and dancers. Boy Scouts were involved.

It began with a Conestoga wagon emerging from the trees and traveled down the slope to the front of the stage. In the slope were tepees and Indians. For the WWI era, the 54<sup>th</sup> Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (Earl is a member – he was active in their medical corp during the 1940's) and the Royal Canadian Artillery simulated a battle. Special affects for these war sequences were created especially by Hand Fireworks. Oh, and the renowned Waterloo Band played too.

For U. of W., he designed and oversaw production of two parade floats per year. In the 1960's, St. Mark's had a nativity scene float in K-W's annual Santa Claus parade and members wore costumes. All designed and co-ordinated by Earl.

His second project was during Canada's centennial year (1967). He was commissioned to turn The Aud into a formal ballroom to accommodate 2,000 for dinner and dancing. Boards were placed on the backs of chairs of a row so they could be used as tables. Apparently, it was quite the evening of glamour and celebration.

He recalls his "third as quite outstanding". This is K-W Oktoberfest's King Ludwig's Castle. He designed it to replicate the original found in Bavaria. It took months right from its inception - designing construction, templates, production and completing the interior of murals and artifacts. Wunderbar!

As a volunteer, Earl has been involved over many years with many community events/balls - K-W Symphony, K-W Little Theatre, Cancer Daffodil Tea, Big Sisters and Mosaic. It's hard to mention any public venue in K-W that Earl has not decorated.

He reached beyond K-W. Earl in 1999 along with others from K-W, won bronze for a snow sculpture at a Colorado winter festival – a male head, 10 feet x 10 feet x 10 feet. In Minneapolis, 10,000 attended a T.S. Elliot production of "Murder In The Cathedral" he produced – there a back to K-W in 24 hours! During the 1970's, he designed for Karwartha Lakes summer theatre - a show per week. Earl even designed Christmas cards for the Indian Association of Canada to sell to raise money to go to improve educational opportunities for children in India. His fascination and appreciation for far eastern countries, their peoples, architecture and cultures remains. Earl said of the colours one finds "accentuates every aspect of life itself".

Earl has also traveled (often several times) to “every continent, except Antarctica” (yet there is still time). In the summer of 1968, he took part in a “dig” as staff artist near the town of DeirDibwan in Jordan (West Bank) which included five others from WLU. He returned in 1970 and was commissioned by the mayor to design a monument to commemorate the site and the dig’s achievements. It is 30 feet in diameter made with ancient stones and topped with Byzantine columns – all materials found on site. He was allowed to keep a few pottery pieces circa 3,000 to 4,000 B.C. Earl’s home is a showcase of art, sculpture and travel treasures.

Back to St. Mark’s. Earl said he has done “about everything a lay person was allowed to do” - council, usher, committees, visitation to all members when the church had such broad programs. He particularly enjoyed teaching and leading VBS and Sunday School creative/craft programs and directed St. Mark’s stage productions (not all Biblical). In the late 1950’s, he created Biblical murals to decorate the sanctuary and for Christmas, he helped with the pageants over the years and in the late 1960’s, designed and made white chandeliers that hung along the narthex. They still exist in storage today! Pastor Jensen he recalls was a “great humanitarian” and Pastor Schweitzer as “a friendly, charming and fun gentleman”.

Like many Lutheran men, he was an avid Brotherhood member even serving as Eastern Canada Synod Brotherhood President which took him to conferences throughout Canada and the United States. The Brotherhood often hosted guest speakers in the Parish Hall and presented “Minstrel Shows” (even in black-face) and other vaudeville-like productions which filled our Parish Hall and K.C.I.’s auditorium. They organized fund raising and social events as well as Camp Edgewood work crews.

Additionally, Earl was active with the YMCA (located at the corner of Weber/Queen Streets). In the 1950’s, he was the local President of its Social Education Program and eventually became President at the national level. In 1958, he was appointed Canada’s representative to the World Alliance of YMCA headquartered in Geneva. Traveling across Canada and in Europe added to the joy and enthusiasm he had in fulfilling the expectations of this position including conferences.

Recent testing has shown that his cancer is under control. Today Earl attends productions in Stratford and Toronto. His passion and love for the theatre remains. He continues to regularly enjoy the company of his sister, nieces, nephews and many friends. Hosting dinner parties and “tea” in his home are welcome activities mixed with quiet time reading the books from his full library shelves. Earl continues to travel with a special love of shipboard life. There is so much more to share about of his many artistic pursuits affiliated with K-W Musical Productions, K-W Little Theatre (for 20 years), WLU Opera Department, Conrad Grebel College and Kitchener’s Trinity United Church drama groups - historical, religious and contemporary works. Through Earl’s work in K-W Little Theatre, he was frequently approached to direct in the 70’s and 80’s religious and secular dramas in urban and rural Mennonite congregations (chiefly with teenagers) even as far as Tavistock.

Earl has been blessed with a life that seemed to never have a dull moment encompassing many fascinating adventures, community experiences and many friends. There is no doubt there is still more to come! I suggested he should write his autobiography and that I would be first in line to read it.