



*Oshkosh's Very Own...*

## ROBERT LAUTENSCHLAGER

This morning I am sitting here enjoying my first cup of coffee, looking out the window over Lake Winnebago and all the non-resident ducks swimming in front of the house. This time of the year we always spot species of ducks we do not normally see here throughout the year. These “transients” are just stopping by on their pilgrimage north to enjoy the summer and raise a new family. This morning they seem to be acting a bit odd as they search for their mate for this season. Karen likes to say they’re “*Twitterpated*” this time of year. That’s a phrase she’s always liked from the Disney movie *Bambi*.

Most of the ducks paddling around out front this morning are Canvasbacks. They’re fairly large as ducks go, and brandish white and black bodies with a rusty brownish red head. Canvasbacks move in and out of Lake Winnebago each spring and fall during their migratory journey. With the ice recently gone, the ducks are taking full advantage of open water as they select their mate and continue their journey north.

I notice my coffee cup needs filling and make my way back to the kitchen for a refill. On my way, I glance at an oil painting over our fireplace. The illustrator has captured a flock of Canvasbacks, wings set as they prepare to land on a marshy, ice-covered lake which resembles the landscapes of nearby waters that border Oshkosh. I smile as I think of how often those of us in this area, myself included, take what we have around us for granted. All the things being surrounded by water brings.

The artist of the painting is a local favorite.

Robert Lautenschlager had a special talent and was a wonderful artist in his own right. Local legends say that at one point, Lautenschlager was offered a job by Disney to work as an artist or illustrator.

To those who knew him, they called him “Chobby”. My efforts to try to find out where the nickname came from were fruitless. I talked to surviving family members Peg Lautenschlager, Jim Backus and Bill Fauk, but to no avail. Surely, there must be someone out there who knows. But that’s what I found out. The further I dug, the less I came up with. It seems Lautenschlager was a somewhat private individual.

Robert H. Lautenschlager was born on August 14, 1920...the tenth child of twelve born to John Adam and Elizabeth Lautenschlager.

A single man his entire life, Lautenschlager grew up on Oshkosh’s westside and attended Roosevelt School. Lautenschlager descendant and Oshkosh resident Jim Backus shared some interesting family insights with me. “Little information is available on him” Jim related. “There are some newspaper articles I found from the 1930’s that report Lautenschlager winning art awards in school with safety poster contests and the sort.” Evidence his talent was present at even a very young age.

Former Wisconsin State Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager is Robert’s niece and generously shared some information with me from her family memories. Peg’s father Milton (Fritz) was Robert’s brother. “Robert loved the Roxy and ate there frequently.” Peg remembers, as a boy, Robert lived on Sawyer Street, just down from Roosevelt School which he attended as a youth. “He didn’t finish high school. He was drafted into the army and served his duty in North Africa. While in the service, he drew cartoons that were widely published.” After the war, he returned home and with the help of the GI Bill, enrolled in the Layton School of Art. His attendance there was short lived however, as he told people he wasn’t learning anything he didn’t already know.

Peg recalled he was always single and loved to dance. He would use his paintings to barter for what he needed or as a gift on special occasions. “Many times, the paintings were still wet when he gave them to the recipient. When he needed some money for dinner, drinks or entertainment, he would just sit down and paint something...usually a wildlife scene as he was able to produce them more quickly with less need for nuance and blending of color.” She remembers her uncle as having “a certain naiveté” about him. “His thoughts were not always realistic, but he was a decent soul. I don’t think he ever had a negative thought about anyone.”

It isn't galleries, shoppes, boutiques or museums where you would find his work. I've been told by many fellow west-siders through the years that when he needed some money, Lautenschlager would sit down, paint a portrait or two, and sell them word of mouth through friends, acquaintances and some of the numerous taverns up and down Main Street.

His works became very popular in the 1960's and 70's with Oshkosh residents. In fact, many of his portraits were featured in one of Oshkosh's most popular supper clubs...Butch's Anchor Inn. Sea captains, shipwrecks, and ships at sea were just a few of the paintings that hung on the wall of this famous eatery.

One of his more impressive works can still be seen today. In 1960's, Lautenschlager was contracted to paint a wall length mural at Shoreview Lanes on Murdock.



***Lautenschlager Mural at Shoreview Lanes***

Photo Credit: Randy Domer

My research to find what paintings of his might still be in existence took me in several different directions. Mike Miller, manager at Shore View Lanes is proud of the mural that has adorned the wall there for a half century. "I love that painting" Mike shared. "As long as I can



### ***Lautenschlager's Canvasbacks***

Photo Credit: Randy Domer

remember, we would contact the museum and they would send someone out to restore the mural every few years." The Shore-view mural has recently started to show signs of needed attention. For his canvas, Lautenschlager used a concrete block wall. Years of moisture and chemicals continue to take their toll.

Next I was pointed in the direction of downtown Main Street. Two doors south of The Magnet Bar is The Distillery Pub. I walked in and found co-owner James Lee tending bar. I introduced myself, pulled up a stool and there it was, as big as day. A beautiful scenic mural of an American Indian, bow and arrow in hand, stepping out of his canoe to hunt his game. James was glad I stopped in. "You know, nobody pays much attention to that thing. I'm glad somebody is interested." Lee said they recently had it cleaned as years of cigarette smoke and dust had darkened the painting. "We had it professionally done...and just a very little touch up painting too." I asked Lee if they had ever considered selling the mural.

"Couldn't do it" James quipped. "Not only because we like it and it's been part of this bar for so long; it's painted directly on the wood paneling on the wall!"

I thanked Lee for his time, information and photos he let me shoot, and then headed out the door to my next stop.

I agreed to meet my friend Jim Senderhauf for lunch that day. Jim suggested we meet at Jansen's on Bowen Street for a sandwich. He also wanted to introduce me to Julie Johnson. Julie works at Jansen's part time as a server and has been working there for years. An author in her own right, Julie wrote a book titled "Oshkosh Down Under," a work on the tunnels that ran underground from the Athearn Hotel and Grand Opera House.

I walked in the door at the appointed time and found Jim already seated at a table in the back of the restaurant. Jim and Julie were already



***Lautenschlager's Indian, Distillery Pub, Main St.***

Photo Credit: James Lee, April Chase

engaged in deep conversation on the Athearn Hotel. Jim introduced me to Julie as I casually mentioned something about my morning's journey and quest to find Lautenschlager's surviving pieces.

"Well then you'll be glad you stopped here" Julie commented. She pointed over my shoulder to the wall opposite the bar. "We have one right here!" she exclaimed. I had been in this restaurant numerous times and remember seeing the mural, but had not connected it to Lautenschlager.

Owner Brad Cobb was there, so I asked him about the painting. "It was here when I bought the place" Brad remarked. Upon closer examination, I saw a date (1961) painted in the lower corner. According to Peg Lautenschlager, it was common for Lautenschlager to date his murals, but not individual paintings or portraits. The mural depicts a number of European looking men and women making merriment around a long table with food and drink.

Other large murals like this were done by Lautenschlager through the years and have been lost to time. I'm told the old Reeve Memorial



***Lautenschlager, Painted 1961, Jansen's, Bowen St***

Photo Courtesy: Brad Cobb

Union on the campus of UWO had a mural, but it was lost when the building was razed.

There may be more out there...there probably are. People I know that own “a Lautenschlager” say so with the same enthusiasm as if it were a Renoir or Monet. They are always proud of what they have.

On January 2, 1975, Robert Lautenschlager died of a heart attack on Main Street. He was 54 years old.

“Chobby” Lautenschlager was truly one of the people that make Oshkosh what it is today.