

BY HAL SULLIVAN

# Art in The Park

## The Ultimate Outdoor Creative Experience



The Rotary Wheel is prominent at Windsor's Willistead Manor, where the service club will again present Art In The Park on the first weekend in June.

There's a popular notion that the United States Post Office has a motto assuring us that "neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds".

This could be said for many postal services in the world; but there's one thing wrong with it.

It's an urban myth.

Fact is, the US Postal Service doesn't have an official motto; and this slogan was taken from the Greek historian Herodotus in his writings about the Persian Wars of the 4th Century B.C.

But its message does have another, more contemporary application for the people of Windsor-Essex and Southeastern Michigan: that the goods must be delivered, or, in the parlance of the entertainment business: "The Show Must Go On".

There are few examples of this philosophy more proven (and more frequently tested) than the annual outdoor arts, crafts, entertainments, exhibition and sale known as Art In The Park.

This event has known virtually every challenge Herodotus mentioned 24 centuries ago and then some, apart from there being no record of snow ever falling on the outdoor extravaganza which occurs in Canada South on a weekend in early June!

But a look at the origins.

William Saltmarche was a carpenter by trade and a craftsman by skill, endowed with and trained to have an eye for the beautifully turned angle and the creation, with wood, saw, screw and nail, of works of the carpenter's art.

He was born in the community of Rogerstone, north of the British city of Newport, in the borderland between England and Wales.

He emigrated to Windsor, and here he followed his craft with success.

Among his family was a son named Kenneth, with whom the terms Art Gallery of Windsor and Art In The Park will always be associated.

Whether William Saltmarche's instinct for the artistic aspects of carpentry helped inspire his son Ken's natural affinity for the creative and imaginative is a matter of conjecture; but young Kenneth embarked on a career in the demanding world of aesthetic art.....drawing, painting, sculpture and the like.....early in life.

Edward Chandler Walker (affectionately known by his friends and colleagues in those pre-television days as "Mr. Ed") was the eldest surviving son of Hiram Walker, whose Canadian Club brand of rye whisky (that's how the company still spells it: without an "e") was sweeping the world with its blend of smooth, flavourful and delicate consistency.

E. Chandler Walker and his wife, Mary, moved into what is now the magnificent Willistead Manor in 1906, but like many members of his family, including his brother Willis, in whose honour the Manor is named, "Mr. Ed" was not to enjoy it for long.

He died in 1915 at the age of 66; and Mary Walker decided to return to her roots in the United States and moved to Washington.

Willistead Manor and grounds were willed to what was then the Town of Walkerville, with the understanding that they would be put "to public use".

The property was adopted as a park, and the Manor itself served as an art gallery and library for decades.

Walkerville Town, against great objections, became amalgamated with the City of Windsor in 1935.

In 1940, during the darkest days of World War II, there was formed what was known as The Windsor Art Association.

The first Art Gallery of Windsor, with its modest collection, was officially opened at Willistead in the year after the war ended: 1946, and Ken Saltmarche was its Curator from then until his retirement in 1985.

In 1970, he had another of his "before its time" ideas about bringing art to the people rather than trying to encourage the people to come to art.

He proposed to open up the Willistead grounds to artisans who could display

and sell their creations. This was the beginning of Art In The Park.

For the first seven years, The Art Gallery of Windsor sponsored the increasingly popular event. In return for being allowed to sell their works, the artists paid modest fees.....part of which reverted to the Art Gallery for its own financing and upkeep.

And upkeep was needed.

Willistead Manor itself became in desperate need of repair, and the community was even close to losing it because of physical and financial constraints.

By 1975, with the suggestion and encouragement of Mayor Frank Wansbrough, the Art Gallery itself had moved to a disused brewery warehouse in Windsor's City Centre.

This version of the Gallery became the interim Casino Windsor in 1984, and the Gallery itself relocated to the Devonshire Mall, where it stayed until profits from the Casino transaction helped move it to its permanent new home on Windsor's riverfront.

But with all this, back at Willistead, Art in the Park continued to grow.....and even outgrow.

The crowds came and increased, despite the typically unpredictable weather of Windsor in early June.

More exhibitors wanted to be represented; more people wanted to attend.

In 1978, the Rotary Club of Windsor (1918) entered into a mutual profit sharing agreement and volunteered to assume the increasingly complicated management and operation of Art In The Park.

Ken Saltmarche estimated that from 20,000 to 25,000 people attended the first two day event in 1970.

60 artists set up displays, only to have some of them blown down by a brief but violent thunder and rainstorm which blasted through the park on the Sunday afternoon. (Such events have become, if not a tradition, a much worried about possibility every year.)

On brighter note that first year, the weather did clear and the event hosted a surprise and unannounced guest: the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, W. Ross Macdonald.

By 1975, Art In The Park was bursting at the seams with from 80,000 to 100,000 people attending, and more than 250 artisans presenting exhibits and ►

entertainments. Bursting at the seams is no exaggeration.

As one harried Rotarian observed, the iron fences and narrow cement pillared gateways installed by the original owners of Willistead were meant to control access; in other words: they were there more to keep people out or at least, allow them admittance in limited numbers, rather than to function as immovable turnstiles for paying customers.

And traffic.

Police were kept hopping to control visitors who parked in driveways, in alleyways, on lawns and anywhere else they could find a space.

Free shuttle bus services had to be set up. But there was an unexpected bonanza for residents living near Willistead, and many of them took advantage of it.

One veteran of the usually placid residential neighbourhood told a reporter, "Never have I ever seen so many yard and garage sales on the same block on the same days as I have since Art In The Park came along!"

And of course, there's always the weather: often pleasant, but there's scarcely been a weekend when Art In The Park hasn't been challenged by the whims of nature.

1980 was a particular case in point.

The first day might have been better named "Art In The Lake".

A violent wind and rainstorm wreaked havoc on the exhibits and attendees, and forced the organizers to close the gates at 3 in the afternoon.....the first occasion on which the event had to close early.

Even at that, some of the exhibitors wanted to wait it out. They thought the early closure decision should have been left up to them; not the organizers.

Fortunately, however, the storm turned out to be the leading edge of a cold front; the weather cleared for Sunday's activities, and although the temperatures changed to being uncharacteristically cool, thousands more people returned the next day to the now battered Willistead Park and its dauntless exhibitors, and the event managed to be a success.

It was no picnic for the then Parks and Recreation Commissioner.

The late Harry Brumpton said the park was "suffering" for its support of art.

There were huge ruts in the grass where cars and trucks had moved in to set up and then hastily take down the exhibits...

not to mention the deep footprints made by attendees who found themselves scrambling to escape the downpour and the fierce winds.

But then, Art In The Park has always produced its share of ironies.

Why else would the cool but sunny Sunday that immediately followed Saturday's chaos set attendance records for the time?

Perhaps because most patrons and artists have become philosophical about an art show that depends on the weather as well as the quality of the exhibits and the quantity of visitors.

Art In the Park remains one of Ontario's, and Canada's, best known and well patronized events of its type. In fact, the Rotary Club of Windsor has since initiated a cool weather and indoor version of the same thing.

Winter Art In The Park began in 1992 at the Fogolar Furlan Club and enjoyed considerable success.

Then it moved to the St. Denis Centre at the University of Windsor.

A combination of organizational circumstances forced the cancellation of last year's edition of the Winter version, which had been traditionally held in November, but 2004 will see the usual hundreds of artisans and thousands of visitors flocking as usual to Willistead on the weekend of June 5th and 6th.

Yes: the weather will be unpredictable; and yes: there will be shuttle buses; and yes: a lot of people and good causes will be helped.....again.

Art In The Park.

It's a festival: an aesthetic and social experience which is enlivened by entertainment, food.....and that daring toss of Olde Walkerville's coin in a bet about what conditions it will meet every year.

E. Chandler and Mary Walker were business people; sociable; lovers and collectors of fine art.

This festival is only one of the many legacies we can remember them for, and thank them and Ken Saltmarche and the Rotarians and everyone else who keeps the tradition alive and so much anticipated every year.

So.....is it all that much a leap of faith to imagine "Mr. Ed" and his Mary looking over the proceedings every June..... and smiling? WL