

"Elmer Stubbins: Itinerant Artist" Part I

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By Jay A. Graybeal

Many readers of this column are familiar with our native artist William Henry Rinehart. Far less well known are a number of other local artists who worked in the county during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although they never attained Rinehart's international renown, perhaps none was more colorful than Elmer Bloomfield Stubbins (1868-1942) of Louisville near Gamber who painted everything from landscapes to bar mirrors. A sketch of his life was written by George T. Wetzel for the March 1, 1973 issue of this paper:

"He walked all over Carroll county years ago, snapping photos and painting numerous pictures. Because he never signed his paintings, they are more scarce than hen's teeth. The only recorded facts about him are on his gravestone: "Elmer Bloomfield Stubbins. Born June 5, 1868. Died Sept. 23, 1942". Certain oral tradition about him is yet current among the old people of Carroll county. But until his son was found and interviewed, Elmer Stubbins appeared more a shadowy legend than a real person. He may or may not have been a great artist - that is left to the art critics. But assuredly he was an interesting human being.

The majority of the following biographical sketch is based on material supplied by Herbert Stubbins, his son; the rest of the other informants are named in the story.

The parents of Elmer were William M. Stubbins and Rachel A. Williams who were married in 1860 and emigrated from Pennsylvania to Carroll county, Maryland. The father started the making of paper from rye straw at the Caledonian mill on Morgan's Run near Gamber. The mother, who had been a public school teacher in New Freedom, Penn., taught school also in Carroll county, besides doing the mill's bookkeeping as her husband had no education.

One sister and three brothers preceded Elmer into the world. Then he was born in the family's home near the mill. Because he was a sickly child, his mother taught him at home. Among his studies, she read him the Bible seven times.

A self portrait of a Scottish great uncle hung in the mill office, which Elmer admired and which Herbert believed influenced his father towards art. When 12, Elmer started drawing in pastels while helping in the mill.

Eventually he was allowed to fit up a studio on the top floor of his father's mill, the window of which room looked out on the mill wheel and the northern light so preferred by painters.

Rembrandt he much admired. Herbert agrees that Elmer Stubbins may have identified himself with the Dutch master, in that both were millers' sons.

Visitors to the mill advised the mother her son had talent and should go to an art school. Finally he was sent to the Maryland Institute in Baltimore. But after one week of instruction, he returned home, his reason being he felt well advanced of the elementary lessons they taught.

He once attended a "house dance", where he asked one pretty girl for a dance. When she petulently refused him, Elmer sat in a corner and mischievously drew a charcoal sketch of her, frown and all; which was passed around to the amusement of the crowd.

Riding occasionally on the Tolchester excursion boat across the Chesapeake Bay, he drew charcoal portraits of the passengers for 10 cents a picture.

Oft times he would be called to a farm house where the family desired a remembrance of a just deceased member. Because he lacked a camera he had recourse to an unusual procedure. Elmer would prop up the corpse in the coffin, make a charcoal sketch, then go home and transform it to oils.

With all his art work, he modestly neglected to sign or date it.

He was away from the mill when his mother died in 1896. For some reason his father then deserted it, and thieves entered Elmer's studio, pilfering pictures and art supplies.

Sometime before 1900 John Klee (one of the three brothers running the nearby Walnut Grove Mill) commissioned him to make a painting of it.

Procuring a flour bag used by Klee, Elmer soaked it in a mixture of starch and glue to stiffen it to use for his canvas. On the reverse side was the red and blue lettering: "Walnut Grove Mills -98 lbs. Harvest King Flour".

On his finished picture there is no outside mill wheel as the water from the mill dam came under and through it to turn the mill stones. Behind it Elmer suggested the hill called the Devil's Back Bone. In the right background was a dwelling house, still there today.

Characteristically, Elmer left it unsigned. Klee threatened not to pay for it unless he did. The result was "E. B. Stubbins" in the corner.

Elmer painted a second canvas of the mill but what date is unknown. This second canvas is owned by Claude Oursler of Towson who obtained it from his aunt, Molly (nee Sleysman) Klee, wife of Charles Klee. Though it is unsigned Oursler affirms his aunt said Stubbins painted it.

Though smaller in size, this second mill picture is the better of the two as the artist

lavished painstaking details on the mill stream.

Elmer married Mary Catherin Newton in Baltimore in 1903. That same year the couple moved to Green street in Westminster where Elmer painted a hunting scene on the mirror over a bar owned by John Lippert. When Lippert sold out years later, he took this 16-foot-long painting with him.

An early photo taken of Elmer and his wife showed him to be the tall, slender and

mustached man others, like Arthur Griffie of Gamber, recalled he looked like. The wife's maternal grandfather (Shaffer) had a farm in the old mining town of Louisville near Gamber. Here the couple settled in a little two-room log cabin and Herbert was born in 1905.

Elmer now became a photographer with his purchase of an Eastman tripod camera. One of his earliest photos was a snap of the humble home with the year-old son sitting in front of it.

That small son suffered some malady that crippled him for the first seven years of his life, so that he could not walk. Doctors at Hopkins wanted to break some bones in both legs and operate to correct it. But Elmer was not sure of their method.

So he himself tried strapping his son's legs to a board every night to straighten them out. And in three months, the boy was walking.

Elmer, the photographer, pursued the same itinerant life he had followed as an artist, wandering over the countryside, accepting rural hospitality of a free meal and overnight bed from many farmers. When Herbert was eight years old, he accompanied his father one whole year, carrying for him the camera's tripod and sharing the nomadic life."

The Historical Society owns the smaller of the two paintings of Klee Mill mentioned in the 1973 article. The mill was demolished in a 1957 road building project after the mill dam broke and destroyed the old road and bridge. The Stubbins paintings survive to help document the site and his talent as an artist.
End of Part I

Photo caption: Elmer Stubbins painted this oil on canvas painting of Klee Mill that once stood on Klee Mill Road near Gist. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of C. Claude Ousler, in memory of his aunt Mrs. Charles (Molly) Klee, 1979 (79.1226).