

Paintings preserve our mining history

Without them, 'all there is is memory,' Capreol artist says

BY PAMELA CRICH
For The Sudbury Star

Bob Michelutti appreciates and respects the environment and believes the city's efforts to replant trees and vegetation are important to its future.

But he also fears Greater Sudbury might lose its distinct identity when its landscape and rocky hills — made barren by decades of mining and refining operations — cease to exist.

"I have been a member of VETAC (Vegetation Enhancement Technical Advisory Committee) and believe its important," Michelutti said. "But we are soon going to look like all the other communities."

Now retired, the Capreol resident has been devoting time to his passion for painting while trying to keep Greater Sudbury's true identity alive.

Through his art, Michelutti has tried to capture the headframes as they were in their prime.

"Every time a headframe is knocked down and the hole is capped, a piece of Sudbury's mining history goes with it," Michelutti said. "Headframes are a part of our heritage and painting them is a way to ensure future generations get to see them."

Michelutti was inspired by the headframes when he worked as superintendent of environmental services for Falconbridge Ltd. As he worked, he kept his talent of painting and sketching as a hobby, but vowed he would paint the old headframes upon retiring.

"Sometimes the idea takes longer to develop than the actual art," Michelutti said. "I knew I wanted to paint the headframes, but I kept putting it off."

Pressure was applied last year when an opportunity arose for artists to showcase their work at the Canadian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy.

That's when Michelutti put his



ROB O'FLANAGAN/THE SUDBURY STAR

Painter Bob Michelutti is preserving the Sudbury district's rich mining history through a series of paintings of historic mine shafts. This painting depicts the old Creighton Mine.

idea to the canvass and started to paint local headframes.

Using acrylic, Michelutti painted headframes from Creighton Mine, Victoria Mine in Whitefish, Evan and Murray mines, as well as headframes from East Mine and Falconbridge. In all, he made 12 pieces.

The pieces not only depict Michelutti's interpretation of the headframes, but also of local town sites. He relied on black-and-white photos from the Internet and library archives to reveal what the destroyed headframes looked like back then.

He then turned to his imagination to illustrate the headframe's surroundings.

"I'm thankful that someone took photographs of the headframes before they were knocked down," Michelutti said. "But I had to guess what colours were used back then, especially for the town sites and

houses."

Michelutti said painting is a good way to educate people about the city's mining history, but he doesn't try to beautify mining. He does, however, take time to develop the scene and mood. This might mean a dusk background, a headframe after a sun shower, or under the Northern Lights.

"I liven it up with a nice skyline," he said. "But like Sudbury's bare black rock, mining and headframes have their own charm and beauty."

"I don't pretend and paint lush forests. I paint it like it really was — bleak-looking, drab and desolate."

Although Michelutti now spends much of his spare time with his grandchildren, he does have three more headframes in mind to complete the series. He also participated in this year's Studio Tour for the first time in five or so years.

"I also paint normal stuff like

landscapes and sketch other mining scenes with ink and pen," Michelutti said. "But I like painting things that are extinct or are soon to be, like the headframes and the old train cabooses."

Michelutti has the original headframe pieces for sale and also sells prints of both the headframes and other mining scenes. The Mining Association of Canada has all 12 prints displayed and Dynamic Earth has prints of his pen-and-ink sketches.

Michelutti said although it would be nice to have Inco Ltd. or Falconbridge purchase the original work to display, it is more important to him to preserve Greater Sudbury's history.

"Mining is Sudbury's history," Michelutti said. "It's the reason for Sudbury's being."

"If not for painting (and photographs), all there is is memory."