

1939-1989 THE MSU YEARS

BY PAT GREEN

Snug in a river bend lined with flower, Leland's Old Art Building stands within shouting distance of Main Street but far enough back that the first time visitor passing by may not notice it.

With its white frame face, dark green shutters, and classic small-pane windows, it could be an early 1900s school or meeting hall in any number of small rural villages throughout the country. But to the thousands of residents and long-time visitors who come back year after year, the Old Art Building *is* Leland – in much the way that Fishtown is Leland. It's a welcome home sign and a touchstone. Its wood floors, walls, and fieldstone fireplace

To the thousands of residents and long-time visitors who come back year after year, the Old Art Building *is* Leland - in much the way that Fishtown *is* Leland. It's a welcome home sign and a touchstone.

Fishtown was always a popular place for MSU art students to paint or draw.



MSU art students were inspired by the beauty of Leelanau County.

and the curved wooden stage echo sounds of dramatic readings, dancers' steps, clattering of keys of an upright piano, and the long-ago voices of summer.

Although Allie Best's long-term dream for the women's club was not fully realized, in 1939, Michigan State College art professor Erling Brauner had been charged by university officials with finding a good location for a summer art school – an artists' colony, as he and others envisioned it. As the story goes, he was traveling north on the Lake Michigan shoreline and happened into a store in Frankfort, where he saw a large photograph of Leland.

As the story goes, he was traveling north on the Lake Michigan shoreline and happened into a store in Frankfort, where he saw a large photograph of Leland. He headed straight up the Leelanau Peninsula for the small fishing village he had just seen and found the Old Art Building, vacant and unused.

He headed straight up the Leelanau Peninsula for the small fishing village he had just seen and found the Old Art Building, vacant and unused.

Professor Brauner managed to make contact with the women's club, and the group, happy to find such an appropriate tenant, voted to donate the building to the College. "People sometimes ask why we couldn't stay in East Lansing to do abstract painting, but after all, one doesn't abstract out of thin air," Professor Brauner would say later. "Even non-representational painters derive stimulation from the light, color, and atmosphere in Leland."

A Five-decade Relationship

So began the 50-year relationship that continues to bring nostalgic alumni back to the Leland campus one way or another. Several of the 370 alumni names in school archives are people who now make northern Michigan home, as either full or part-time residents. Others were sufficiently smitten by the area that they simply came up to summer school and stayed.

Paul Welch, founder of the Northwestern Michigan College art program, was one of them. After his last undergraduate year at MSU in 1957, he enrolled in the

Leland summer program under Professor Brauner. "It was wonderful... so spontaneous," he readily recalls. "Leland was a joy." Those memories were locked in by the smell of oil paint that suffused their summer studio.

True also for Craig Brigham, an NMC instructor who attended summer classes in the late 60s. "The pungent smell of oil paint, turpentine, and wood smoke greeted us each morning as we straggled in for class," he said. "Spattered oil paint was still on the floor from the year before and, for the usually chilly summer mornings in June, there was the beautiful old stone fireplace to warm





our fingers.” In fact, the spattered oil paint stayed on the floor until the Old Art Building Board of Directors decided to refinish it years ago.

For idealistic young college graduates, the summer program meant freedom from rigid classroom routine as well as artistic freedom. They were on their own half the day, then came back to the art building for short critique sessions. “These were days of romance and poetry come to life,” Brigham said. And evenings of beer and burgers at The Bluebird.

Tuition in the start-up years was \$16.50 for the six-week session, whether or not it was taken for credit. Undergraduates and graduate students could receive up to eight hours of credit if they worked mornings and afternoons. Classes ranged from as few as 10 members to 20 or more. Leland residents welcomed them, putting them up in spare bedrooms for as little as \$2.50 a week if they shared the room with another student. They became part of the community, often enjoying the rounds of summer parties as a diversion from their Bluebird burgers.

For idealistic young college graduates, the summer program meant freedom from rigid classroom routine as well as artistic freedom.



MSU Summer Art School students in Fishtown



Sally McKenzie, of Petoskey, was a student in the summer session of 1948, taught by the late Ralf Henricksen. She lived in a big old Main Street house, owned as she recalls, by an old sea captain. McKenzie went on to teach art in the Detroit area for several years before moving to the Petoskey area where she still continues painting.

A Bittersweet Ending

More and more people were discovering Leland and the Leelanau Peninsula, and both students and faculty were having a difficult time finding affordable housing as vacation rentals commanded higher and higher rent. Students in those years came primarily from families who owned summer homes.

In 1989 the Michigan Historical Commission added the Old Art Building to the State Register of Historic Places, in recognition of the MSU-Leland partnership.

David Grath, one of the area's most widely known and successful artists, first visited Leland because a friend was enrolled in the summer program. He has been painting the burnished sunsets and unique northern Michigan landscapes since then. "I camped on the beach, woke up, and found myself in this lovely village," he says. Retelling those experiences still brings a wide smile to his face. He enrolled in the summer program in 1964 and '65.

In August of 1989, the art department staged a 50-year retrospective exhibition featuring the work of 43 former summer students and faculty members. That year the Michigan Historical Commission added the Old Art Building to the State Register of Historic Places, in recognition of the MSU-Leland partnership.

By that time, however, the program had faded into non-existence due to dwindling enrollment. The Old Art Building would sit vacant again until 1992.

Retired MSU art professor Clifton McChesney shared teaching duties with two other instructors, Peter Glendinning and James Lawton, during the 1980s. McChesney and his artist wife Jane lived in the Leland home of a fellow MSU department member. In a 1980 story for the MSU newspaper, McChesney praised the program as an ideal experience for budding artists, but he also foresaw a trend that eventually would bring it to an end.



The MSU Summer Art School sign still hangs today above the OAB entrance doors.



MSU Art Professor Clifton McChesney and artist wife Jane



Last MSU exhibit at OAB before the program shut down, 1989