



Lucy Ogletree's representation of her folk art haven, *Winter Wheat*, near Sparta, Ontario.

# WINTER WHEAT

by Penny Gumbert

"No matter how bad the winter is, you can't stop winter wheat from coming up in the spring."

There's a folk art haven one mile south of the historical community of Sparta, on the northern shores of Lake Erie. It's the home of Canadian folk artist Lucy Ogletree and her husband, Michael Roberts. Their five-acre plot of land itself reflects the couple's artistic vision of a simpler life, rural and whimsical. Approached down a long road flanked by tall maple trees,

evergreens, and banks of huge hydrangeas that continue to dot the property, the couple's gingerbread-trimmed board and batten home houses Lucy's studio. Upstairs light floods in from the end wall of sashed windows to focus on her easel.

Lucy could always draw, turned on by the thrill it gave her. "The feeling of creativity I got. The 'aha' moment! I always liked that feeling when I was little." Folk artists aim to retain that moment of exhilaration by not having classical techniques imposed upon them.

Shying away from instruction, they prefer the discovery method. "That's really neat because you're not being pushed into this method to do this, that method to do that. There is no method because you're making it up as you go along." Lucy points out paintings to show how far she has come with just two aspects, shading and perspective, recalling her joy of discovery.

**Shying away from instruction, folk artists prefer the discovery method.**



Lucy Ogletree at her easel.

Other than a passion for drawing, Lucy has brought something else to her art. As children, she and her sister often pretended they were putting together a circus. "I used to like the idea of planning things." Her works have much going on

in them and require her ability to organize a scene—a fair in Dresden, a children's party, or a camp-out. "I absolutely love Grandma Moses. I love the idea that she tells stories." Lucy's stories hark back to her own childhood in Thamesville, fa-

amous for being the birthplace of Canadian author Robertson Davies who also used hometown sites in his work. "When we were little, we used to go to my cousins' house, the Shaws, near Dresden. They had a pony we used to ride. They also had baby lambs we used to feed." *Learning to Ride* tells it all. "That's that memory. All the kids in there are my cousins and my sister." *Roasting Marshmallows* tells of summer fun. "When I was little, I belonged to Skylarks and we did a bonfire in the backyard, always with the same kids." Her subjects are close to her heart—her Grandma's influence appears often, as in her quilts hanging on the line



Lucy's Grandmother's china teacups turned into garden lighting by Michael Roberts.



*Mother Nature*, folk art by Lucy Ogletree and Michael Roberts.

in *Church Bazaar*, Grandma in her garden in another. Even Grandma's china teacups, fashioned by Mike into charming little lamps to light their paths, are in Lucy's own garden. "Every time I work in the garden I think of my Grandma." *Witches Brew* charms with its corn stalks in a row, under a full moon and darting ghosts. "Halloween is my very favourite to paint. Again it's the whimsy, I think. I loved painting that one." Her work is reminiscent of Maud Lewis with the fascination of the past and simplicity of theme, but there is a definite difference, says Lucy. "Her work is a lot more naive and very simple. Mine's more detailed." Indeed, Lucy's detailing is apparent in everything she paints—the shingles on a gazebo, the veins in a hosta, the buttons on a boot.

Lucy has changed her medium. "I started out using exterior latex house paint. It's really hard to blend." Now she works in acrylic on Masonite, painting her past: *Spring Tulips*, *Turkey Point*, *Sleigh Ride*. "When I'm doing it, I'm constantly thinking about that time." She has found she loves painting night pictures such as her *Midnight Hour*. "That was fun. I was teaching myself to paint fireworks." She also accepts commissions, having recently completed a painting of a Dorchester family's house complete with children in the garden. Clients can pick a season and, with pictures, she will capture your moment to be remembered.

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Century farm, Opeongo Rd., by Kathy Haycock

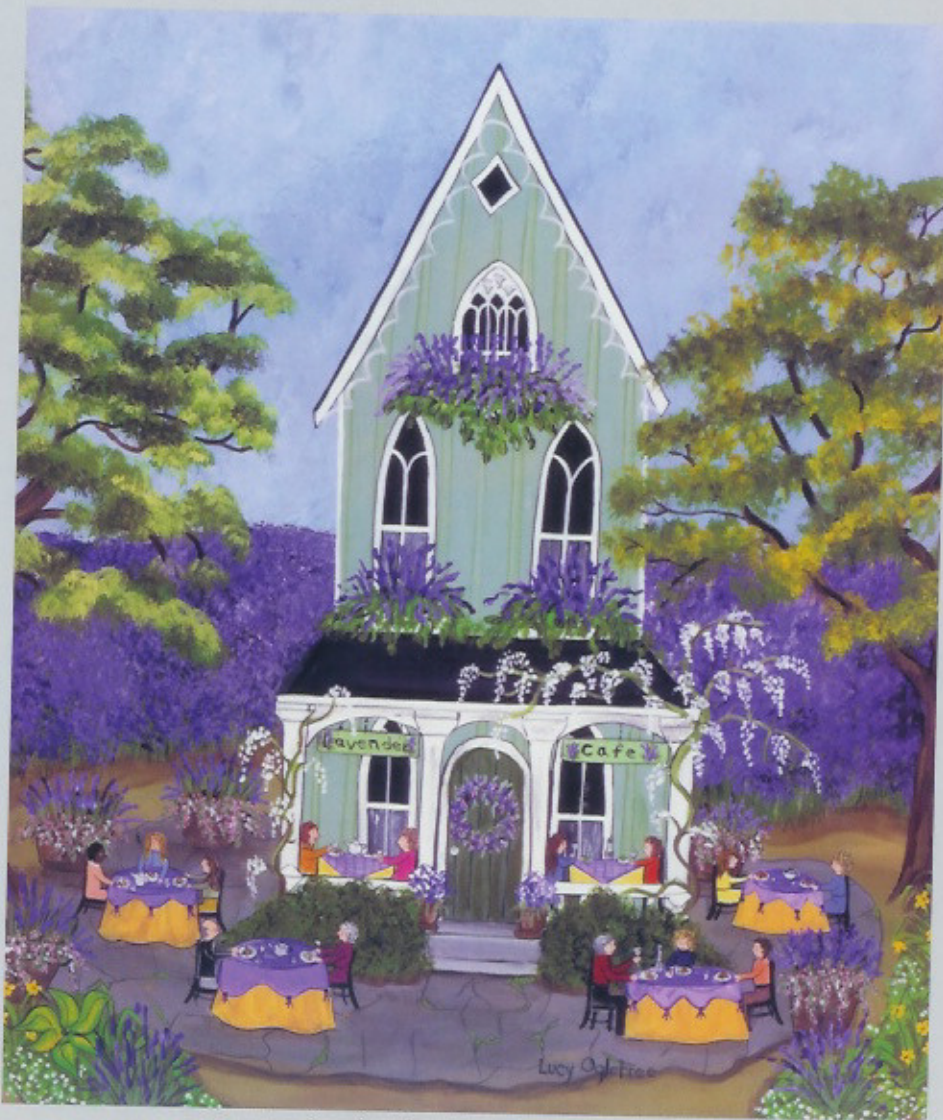
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Lavender Café Folk art by Lucy Ogletree



Church Bazaar Folk art by Lucy Ogletree

**"I want to stay stupid. Then I'm happier... The better you are, the less happy you are with the finished product because it's never good enough."**

Mike is the chainsaw artist and has, with Lucy's eye for colour and detail, produced magical statues that enjoy the more intimate corners of their perennial gardens, designed and tended by Lucy. Their chainsaw sculpture is a collaborative effort, exemplified by *Elton John*. He's playing a piano (life-sized) with Bette Midler perched atop, singing her heart out. There's *Mother Nature* with her "flowering" tea services. *A Boy with Binoculars* spots a flying goose in the trees. *The Garden of Broom People* illustrates Mike's original concepts that tickle the funnybone or tug at the heartstring, the charm of folk art. Mike shares Lucy's philosophy of learning through doing. "We've had wood carvers here and a couple of them have asked if I wanted them to show me how to do eyes properly. I said no. Then I'd be doing it their way. I don't want to learn anymore. I want to stay stupid." The man is self-deprecating. He goes on to explain. "Then I'm happier. I've got to think the better you are the less happy you are with the finished product because it's never good enough."

Once in manufacturing, with contracts all over North America, Mike Roberts was forced into a life change almost two decades ago. "In 1991, the recession hit and I went bankrupt. I had 22 full-time employees and I lost just everything. We rented a farmhouse just east of Sparta from a friend of mine. For the whole winter I sat around crying, thinking my life was over. Who was going to hire me? I was old and always had been in business for myself. At the end of winter, Lucy gave me a kick in the butt. She asked me what I wanted to do for the rest of life. I said, "You know, I want to get back into a similar business, but I don't want to get big again. Never. I'd rather do it all myself." That was the beginning of what would eventually become a business called "Winter Wheat," a title chosen for its optimism. "Because the fields around the farmhouse where we were living were



"Canadian Gothic"

Lucy and Mike in front of the broom people garden.

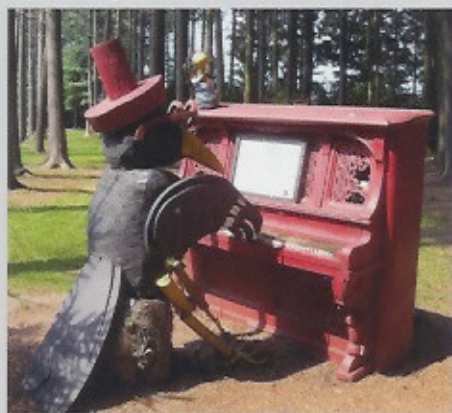
growing winter wheat. And no matter how bad the winter is, you can't stop winter wheat from coming up in the spring." Lucy says that she and Mike didn't create their folk art garden for the public, but rather to express themselves and add magic to their new home.

Now the property, bought in 1997, has a barn designed by Mike that houses folk art by local talent, along with rooms of Lucy's paintings. People like to wander its winding trails that bring you constant surprises, be it a little place to sit, or a creation that makes you laugh aloud. That's why Mike has built little "Wendy houses" where visitors can sit and rest and enjoy complimentary coffee and cookies, as well as the views. His newest little house illustrates Mike's style. "I built that three times because it wasn't like I had in my mind. It started off being a triangle and it looked way too small, so I made it kind of like a shower stall, a little bit." He laughs. "If you don't know what you're doing, don't get in a hurry. Everything in life is perception. If you start out on something and it's not perfect, you know it's not perfect. When you get it done with the cosmetics that you do to it—the people see the perception. They never see the imperfections."

This new cabin is devoted to folk art from the southern states. Lucy belongs to the American Folk Art Museum. "Folk Art is huge in the States. I travelled with them to Alabama, Mississippi and Rhode Island, because they have a club called the Explorers Club. I was the only Canadian. That folk art will quite often have

that religious element." She also brought back some pieces done by Butch Anthony. "I love his stuff. It's all found items."

Found items...much like Mike often includes in his creations. He says, "I kind of like junk." Mike designed the barn, also in board and batten, and he incorporated a rose window. "There was a church on the way to Port Burwell. It was torn down and I bought the windows. I had the original window, so I took a pattern off it. I have a fetish for doors and windows," he laughs. "If you looked behind the barn, there's over 200 windows back there." His little cabins all incorporate old windows with wonderful views. The retail area in their barn has showcases backed by antique windows, perfect settings for folk art. Part of the barn houses Mike's studio, where he indulges his sense of humour and why look at life. His statuary will often come into play when he discovers a dead tree. A new creation is a woman who's wrapped in bark. "This was part of a tree that came down. Lightning hit it. Isn't she neat? I'm going to put a light in behind her." The robe in bark has a slit right up the side, turning the



Elton John accompanies Bette Midler atop the piano.

lightning strike into a fashion statement. "Eerie's good. She's going to go beside my new building out there."

Their art and their property—the little cabins, the barn, and home, the gardens along winding paths, the tall hemlock and pine—attract lots of visitors who stand or sit in quiet contemplation, a respite that is open in all seasons. Mike describes the setting best. "It's a nice place to wake up to in the morning." There's an angel fashioned from deadwood who stands guard over a forest of trees planted in the 1950s by a past owner of the property, the hermit, Fred. The angel wears a gown outlined in filigree, metalwork from an antique cupboard. Her necklace is an assortment of glass door-pulls strung together. Her halo is a saw blade. On her wings Lucy and Mike have inscribed the following poem that they feel describes their setting. □

*Whose woods these are I think I know  
His house is in the village though  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost