



Photos by KEM WIGHTMAN The London Free Press

**PEACEFUL:** Lucy Ogletree is surrounded by some of her works as she relaxes in her studio/gallery with her dogs, Chloë and Susie.

# Memories in paint

Folk artist Lucy Ogletree creates works inspired by her years growing up in Thamesville and the tranquility of her current country home near Sparta.

BY JUDY LIEBNER  
Special to The Free Press

**SPARTA** — Lucy Ogletree had always known she could draw, but she'd never thought of trying her hand at painting. In 1996, however, her life changed when she began delving into her past, and her imagination, to create folk art for her home.

Ogletree, who owns Winter Wheat country folk art store near Sparta with her partner, Mike Roberts, was inspired to try painting when she and Roberts purchased their two-hectare property and a home that was built in 1842. It was this chance purchase that set her on the road to becoming a renowned folk artist whose

work is celebrated through Canada, the U.S. and England.

"When we bought this property, I was looking for some folk art for our house and I couldn't find anything printed that was too much Canadian," Ogletree recalls. "A lot of it was imported from the States. I decided to paint some pieces for our house."

While her career as a painter "just kind of happened," so did the commercial possibilities. Roberts suggested selling her paintings to customers since they were a natural fit with their other product lines — they design and create country crafts for Winter Wheat.

At that point, Ogletree painted several pictures, had prints

made and began selling them.

Ogletree's art is currently sold through catalogues in the U.S. and England, while her crafts are sold in gift shops throughout Canada. Her original artwork starts at \$250, while prints range from \$9.50 to \$50. She now paints full time, although she still helps Roberts design product lines for their store.

Like many folk artists, Ogletree is self taught and draws her inspiration from her childhood.

Most folk artists begin pursuing their craft later in life after having made their living at other jobs, she says. Most have been driven by the desire to create and their work is depicted in wood, quilts, needlework and in paintings.

Ogletree is inspired to paint both by her childhood memories of growing up in Thamesville and by the tranquillity of the Sparta property, which is marked by towering 50-year-old pine trees.

"It's really quiet and peaceful here and I like the country. A lot of my pieces are memory paintings — they have my family in them," she says.

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## OGLETREE: A wonderful innocence in her work

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One painting depicts Ogletree's grandmother stirring a pot of soup on a cast-iron stove. Five cats on the kitchen floor pursue their own activities, playing and sleeping in baskets. Another shows her grandmother feeding chickens in a barn that's illuminated by moonlight.

One particularly whimsical painting, *The Snowmag Factory*, depicts Ogletree, her sister and cousins as children building snowmen. The snow-covered ground is punctuated by small pine trees, while three buildings in the background, lit from within, add to the painting's sense of a cosy, protected community.

Ogletree, who paints in acrylics, also creates a variety of Noah's ark scenes. "I like that story, I always have. It's my favourite one," she says.

Orine Kilburn, a St. Marys-area artist who has painted for 45 years and sold his work internationally, says Ogletree is "an absolute natural. There's a wonderful innocence in her work, which is the quality of a folk artist."

Kilburn says Ogletree's ability to paint her memories "in a very innocent way" sets her apart. "It comes through as being very truthful and yet, in good folk art, there's a sense of humour also. She just paints what she feels and what she's experienced."

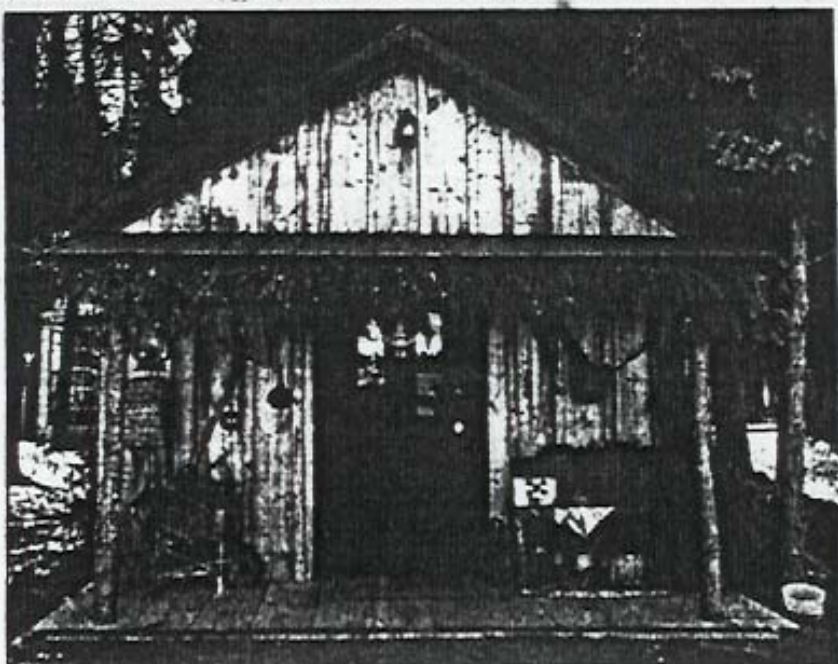
While rural dwellers relate well to the pastoral themes in her work, so do city people who respond instinctively to the sense of joy her paintings evoke. Most visitors, who travel to the store from across Southwestern Ontario, also react positively to Winter Wheat, which Ogletree and Roberts have operated for 10 years.

"A lot of people like coming here because it's so peaceful," Ogletree says. "It's more than just a store — 30 per cent of it is the store and 70 per cent is the ambience. That's what they're coming here for, it's the surroundings," she says.

That's not difficult to understand once guests have visited Winter Wheat. A long laneway is sheltered by pine trees which give a sense of protection, as if visitors are entering an enchanted forest.

At the front of the property, large wooden angels crowned with barbed-wire helms stretch in a seemingly endless line along a split-rail fence.

Further down the laneway, a huge wooden rabbit with a clock



**RUSTIC:** This former garage is now the studio/gallery where Lucy Ogletree works.

under its paws is surrounded by an assortment of whimsically shaped clocks set to different times. A sign proclaims: "This is the place where time stands still."

Visitors, who often lead hectic lives in cities, drive slowly up the laneway, Ogletree says. "That's what that rabbit's about — getting people to unwind."

Ogletree and Roberts' home, with its Gothic peaks and Victorian trim, emerges from the forest, as does a small rustic building where Ogletree paints. Once a garage, Roberts has altered it to resemble a pioneer-era home, complete with a front porch and farm implements which decorate the exterior.

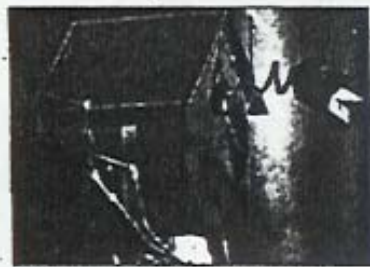
Inside, comfortable twig furniture and tropical plants form a perfect backdrop to Ogletree's paintings, which hang on the walls.

Visitors are welcome to sit down and enjoy a free cup of hot cappuccino or tea and a cookie.

Nearby, scaled-down replica Victorian homes and a general store, surrounded by a fence, provide shelter for Roberts' and Ogletree's turkeys, seven rabbits and a goat named Yoshi.

Chainsaw carvings, which Roberts creates and Ogletree paints, are nestled in amongst the

local pet adoption facility. While many chainsaw carvings are of Canadian themes, such as bears or lumberjacks, Roberts' carvings are pure folk art and quite primitive, Ogletree says. In a clearing beneath 22-metre pines are immense carvings of angels, as well as a delightful carving of a woman who holds a large watering can and appears to be watering huge metal flowers. Next to the clearing is Winter Wheat, a pine board and batten building Roberts designed and built in 1997. It resembles an old general store with a front porch that is bursting with twig furniture, baskets and wooden bird feeders, as well as less conventional items, including a snow woman carrying a suitcase. Inside, the building houses 10 seasonal employees who work in the wood working shop and in the store. Wooden crafts range in price from \$5 to \$100 and include geese flying south, rustic bird houses and mail boxes, as well as attractively framed prints of Ogletree's work. Ogletree, who travels to the southern U.S. to collect folk art, says she can't foresee a time when she won't be painting. "I enjoy the creativity and doing what I like to do for a living. I will always do this," she says.



**NOVEL:** A unique birdhouse, available at Winter Wheat.



**WHIMSICAL WELCOME:** There's even a light touch to the folk-art shop's sign.



**GUARDIAN ANGELS:** The fence posts along the Quaker Road entrance to Winter Wheat are topped with wooden ornamental angels perched atop bird houses.

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