

2006 Arts & Culture Wall of Fame Inductees

JOHN BURTONIAK

Born in Manitoba, John Burtiak moved his family to the Niagara Peninsula in 1943. After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Ottawa as well as his Bachelor and Masters of Library Science, he joined Brock University's staff in 1965 and retired in 2001 after 36 years of service.

As an author, presenter, and historical tour guide, John co-authored *Railways in the Niagara Peninsula* and *The Mighty Niagara: One River, Two Frontiers*, a work examining the similarities and differences between the two sides of the Niagara River. In 1979, he founded Brock University's Niagara Peninsula History Conferences, which were held annually until 2001.

While working with Brock University Library's Special Collections, Burtiak developed the Niagara Collection, including printed and original works relating to all aspects of the history, development and character of Ontario's Niagara Peninsula and New York's Niagara Frontier. This specialized local collection has national significance. John Burtiak's Niagara Collection, housed at the Niagara Falls Art Gallery, includes more than 400 Niagara engravings, lithographs, aquatints, serigraphs and etchings, as well as early illustrated travelers accounts and guide books.

John has served on numerous Provincial and Regional community boards in the past, including the City of Niagara Falls Board of Museums. He is currently the President of the Lundy's Lane Historical Society, Old St. John's Stamford Heritage Association and the Niagara Falls Art Gallery.

John Burtiak received the Province of Ontario Bi-Centennial Medal in 1984, and the Ontario Outstanding Achievement Award for Volunteerism in 1992. He also earned Ontario's Municipal Recreation Association Award for Volunteer Contributions, the City of Niagara Falls' Volunteer Recognition Award and other Heritage Awards.

FRANCES MARY CORFIELD

Frances came to Niagara Falls in 1947 as an English "war bride" and having a great interest in her new community she served on the Executive committees of many of its organizations.

Having a special interest in art she belonged for many years to the Niagara District Art Association and as Secretary and later as Vice-President, organized yearly public exhibits and member's Jury Shows. Interest in Theatre Arts led to helping to present and the costuming of scenes from Shakespeare for Stamford Collegiate students and as a member of the National Film Board Council and licensed projectionist, she brought film programmes to many local groups.

Frances is a Past-President of the Lundy's Lane Historical Society and during her tenure, organized a Junior Historical Society. In 2001 she was appointed to the City's Municipal Heritage Committee and chaired its 2002 Heritage Week project.

A long-term resident of the premises now the Battleground Hotel, she provided assistance to the restorers with her knowledge of the site, and in 2002 was honoured with the Stamford Collegiate Alumni's "Barbara Frum Memorial Award".

A dedicated promoter of Niagara Falls history, art and culture, Frances is a great asset to her community.

HILDA DANKS

Hilda Danks was born Hilda Lawrence in 1893 in London, England, and immigrated to Canada in 1930. Her watercolour painting began as a hobby in 1935 and soon became a passion. Hilda studied watercolour painting with numerous well know Canadian artists. Her work was first accepted for jury shows in 1952 including exhibitions in Montreal, London, Hamilton and Waterloo.

Living in the Chippawa and Niagara Falls area paved the way for her inspirational works, largely due to the nature and the people around her. Old barns and rural landscapes became alive in her eyes. She found much variety in subject matter, painting flowers and plants with obvious affection. She later focused on portraying people through the clothes they wore, the furnishings of their homes or the stores they shopped in. Her still-life studies suspended action neatly caught to intrigue the viewer into imagining events before the painting was done.

In 1945, Hilda was one of the founding members of the Niagara District Art Association and held numerous executive positions, including President, for many years. In 1958, Hilda was awarded a lifetime membership in the Niagara District Association in appreciation of her contribution to the society. In 1961, she was elected a member of the Canadian Society of Painters of Watercolour.

In 1970, one year after her death, the Niagara District Art Association commissioned a sculpture in honor of Hilda Danks. Each year, at the Annual Juried Art Show, the name of the Best Watercolour Artist is engraved and added to the sculpture. The sculpture makes its home at the Niagara Falls Public Library.

R. NATHANIEL DETT

Nathaniel Dett was born in Drummondville (now Niagara Falls) on October 11,1882. When he was a small boy he learned to play the piano by ear while listening to his older brothers take lessons. Upon hearing him play, teacher offered to teach him for free.

The family moved to Niagara Falls, New York where Nathaniel attended the Oberlin Conservatory of music, graduating with a Bachelor of Music degree with honours in 1908. He later studied in France at the Fontaine Bleu School of Music.

Throughout his life Nathaniel taught music at various musical institutions and created many poems and musical compositions. He conducted chorals and performed many concerts in Canada and the United States, where they were heard on CBS and NBC.

Nathaniel was presented with honorary doctorates from Harvard University and Oberlin. He also received many gold medals and various prizes from different foundations and associations.

As a composer, Nathaniel Dett was known for his work on African American spirituals, as a teacher for nurturing many musical students, and as an outstanding soloist performer.

Nathaniel Dett died in 1943 and is buried in Fairview Cemetery in Niagara Falls. The music of Nathaniel Dett is still performed today. Canada's Nathaniel Dett Chorale bears his namesake and performs his music.

FRANK H. LESLIE

Frank Leslie was born in 1876 in Toronto but grew up in Bruce County where he became a schoolteacher and the county correspondent. Soon he became a newspaper publisher, purchasing the weekly Tavistock Gazette. Looking for better prospects, he later sold the modest Gazette, and moved to Niagara Falls to purchase the Review - a weekly newspaper. Under his careful and clever guidance, the paper saw a dramatic increase in circulation and Leslie quickly became an active promoter of the Niagara Falls community. In 1917, he became a member of the Canadian Press - Canada's national news gathering cooperative. He was known as the Dean of the Canadian newspaper publishers for his longevity and prominent role in the industry.

For decades, Frank also ran a successful commercial printing company, becoming famous for producing picturesque postcards of the Niagara area. Frank Leslie was particularly passionate about local history and wrote numerous articles over his lifetime. Actively promoting Niagara's history, he often reserved space in the Review for local history writers. After the First World War, thousands of columns appeared in the Review on a regular basis. Frank contributed to several historical publications, including Niagara Falls Canada - a History, the Kiwanis Club of Stamford's Centennial History of Niagara Falls in 1967, and was still writing on the subject when he was over ninety years of age.

In his last years, Frank Leslie was Honorary President of both the Lundy's Lane Historical Society and the Willoughby Historical Society, and played an active role in the foundation of the Willoughby Historical Museum in 1968.

Frank H. Leslie died in 1969 at the age of ninety-two, after spending nearly seventy years as a local writer, publisher, newsman and promoter of Niagara Falls.

JOHN PETRELLA

John was born in Italy where at a young age he developed an interest in nature. After coming to Canada at the age of 15, his passion grew to fuel his creative desires.

John began his career in the field of fine arts. His paintings of nature and wildlife not only garnered rave reviews and international success but also won him many awards, including one for Outstanding Achievements in the Visual Arts. His subsequent move to still photography won him further acclaim, as he became a master in painting with light and colour.

The decision to step into the motion picture arena was as inspired as it was inevitable. John's imaginative visual palette is now augmented by the further option of playing with time. John's outstanding work as a Director of Photography has revealed a daring sense of composition, an eye for capturing the perfect camera angle and an unrelenting zeal for pushing the boundaries of convention. His images speak of Ability, Passion and Dedication to the Poetry and Artistry of Motion Picture.

John's greatest accomplishments to date include the magnificent "Niagara, Thunder of the Waters" aired on PBS, winner of Best Video of the Year (1999); "The Secret World of Gardens," a 13 part Home and Garden television series, nominated for a Gemini Award (2000 & 2002) for Best Cinematography and "Echoes of the North", a one hour natural history documentary film, nominated for 3 Gemini Awards and several international film festival awards (2002).

BRETT POLEGATO

Brett Polegato was born in 1968 and raised in Niagara Falls. He was hailed the winner of the prestigious Cardiff Singer of the World Competition in 1995, going on to win many other major competitions around the world. Brett also received the William Matheus Sullivan Foundation Grant for Opera, and a Canadian Council Career Development Grant.

Brett has appeared on several of the world's most distinguished stages, including those of the Lincoln Center, La Scala, Concertgebouw, Opera National de Paris, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Houston Grand Opera, Carnegie Hall, and others. He participated as a soloist in the Grammy Awards and won Best Classical Recording of 2003. Brett performed as soloist with some of the world's greatest symphonies, including the Boston Symphony, National Symphony Orchestra, Kennedy Center, Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchestra in Munich, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, and many more.

Brett has recorded many of his opera performances and has joined other artists in recording many CDs. He appears frequently throughout North America, Europe and Japan, and is considered one of the world's leading baritones.

HELEN WAIMEL ROBERTSON

Helen was born in Estonia, where she developed her appreciation of the arts and began her first sculptures in clay. She immigrated to Canada in 1926 and moved to Chippawa in 1950 where she continued to create and develop her art, working in clay and cast bronze.

Throughout her youth and college years, she won many awards for her sculptured creations, including a scholarship to Ontario College of Fine Arts where she graduated with the Governor General's Medal.

Through her friendship with the artistic world she has experimented with new techniques, developing a style between realism and the abstract. From clay and bronze she moved on to work in hammered copper, and chiselled and polished composite stone, and explored bronze-like plastic materials for outdoor sculptures.

Several of Helen's sculptures and reliefs are displayed throughout the Niagara Region. She designed the Canadian Coat of Arms in the St. Catharines Federal Building, the coat of arms in the Customs Building in Niagara Falls, as well as sculptures for various schools throughout the Region. Rodman Hall has a small collection of her work, and her fountain entitled "Freedom" ("Boy with Bird") is featured at the Niagara Parks Commission's Greenhouse. Her works are viewed by the public daily and are greatly admired.

Helen Waimel Robertson passed away in 2002, but her life's work will live long and generations to come will appreciate her talent.

ANN SPEEDIE

For more than 30 years, Ann Speedie's mission was to bring culture to Niagara Falls. Ann was originally a board member of the Community Concerts but was concerned with the American slant. In 1975, Ann, along with other volunteers, founded Niagara Concerts, serving as President for several years and representing Niagara Concerts on the Ontario Arts Council. In addition, her responsibilities included the researching and booking of various artists for each season. Outspoken, eccentric, and passionate about the Arts in Niagara Falls, Ann was acclaimed by her peers as "unstoppable - the enthusiastic and energized member of the board."

In 1992, Ann was the recipient of the prestigious "Community Honours - Lescarbot Award," presented by Rob Nicholson, Member of Parliament on behalf of the House of Commons for her many outstanding contributions to the cultural sector of our region. She has also received recognition from the Famous People Players.

Along with many advisory capacities, Ann was also one of the founding members for the Arts and Culture Commission where she served until 1997. She had also been involved with the local Opera Guild, and was a member of the Shaw Festival Committee and the Kingsbridge Theatre in Chippawa. Ann was also instrumental in keeping the auditorium at Kingston College (formerly Niagara Falls Collegiate Vocational Institute) open.

Ann Speedie passed away on December 15, 2004. She is greatly missed by those who knew her and by those enriched by her passion for the arts.

SAMUEL THOMAS

Samuel (Sam) Thomas is known as a meticulous researcher and uncompromising artist. In 1979, Sam was encouraged by a mentor to resurrect the 18th and 19th century Iroquois beadwork styles. He envisions breaking down cultural divisions through the sharing of knowledge and the creative process. Sam is a self-taught artist through museum pieces, books, illustrations and collector pieces. He developed and implemented his own style of completing various objects made of embossed three-dimensional beadwork. His work ranges from small whimsical items such as needle cases, various holders, hair clips, and jewelry boxes, to much larger items such as purses, moccasins, cushions, and various sized boxes. Well known for his intricate work, Sam was sought after to complete traditional outfits for men and woman in television productions.

Some of Sam's accomplishments include a series of successful collaborative beadwork workshops that spanned two countries and involved 800 people of all races and nationalities. Building on the success of that project, he turned his attention to reviving bead traditions in Kenya. Produced in cooperation with North American organizations and the Kenya villages, this project culminated with the completion of a six-foot fully beaded "Tree of Peace".

Sam Thomas is the Creator and Curator of Ska-Ni-Kwat: The Power of the Good Mind, and Through the Voices of Beads, a Royal Ontario Museum exhibition. He has been invited to participate in many exhibitions including one at the United Nations Headquarters. His works are exhibited in permanent and private collections in Canada and throughout the world.

Sam is responsible for the recovery of several "lost" techniques and masterminding an international mission to garner respect for the Iroquois beadwork.

DOREEN WALKER

Doreen Walker has been actively involved in sharing her many artistic talents with the community of Niagara Falls for over six decades.

Doreen's passion for the arts led her to initiate a dance school in 1949, and for twenty-three years she trained and nurtured young dancers while entertaining the public with recitals and numerous performances. In an effort to bring musical theater to the Region while also providing a solid training ground, in 1960 Doreen founded the Niagara Falls Music Theater and sought out experienced local professionals to assist her in bringing talent in the Niagara community to a much higher level.

Seeking to provide the youth with a positive activity in a creative and productive atmosphere, Doreen started the Niagara Youth Studio Theater in 1966. She lent her time and talents to training the group as well as directing and choreographing their productions.

In 1969, Doreen founded another performing group of twelve "Young Canadians," who became international ambassadors of goodwill for Niagara Tourism, promoting the Niagara Region and all things Canadian. They performed a total of 302 performances throughout Canada and the United States including Disney World in Florida. In 1972, Doreen received the Muir Misty Award for her community involvement.

With her active days behind her, Doreen is still involved with the arts as a Music and Dance patron of the Stamford Kiwanis & Dance Festival.