





# *Restoring treasures to past glory*



Ornate century-old handmade stained glass

**By Charlene Peck**

**A**s a child, Elizabeth Steinebach would sit quietly on the wooden church pew, mesmerized by rainbows of seemingly divine light streaming through massive stained glass windows.

Oblivious to the religious messages in German and Latin, her impressionable mind was captivated by resplendent hues dancing in art.

In high school, while other teenage girls were selecting home-economics courses, she managed to join an elective stained glass adult education class as its youngest student. An introvert by nature, who describes herself as highly sensate, Steinebach knew she'd found her niche.

"Pretty much everything I experience, I take it deeply inside," she explains. "It percolates and then comes out as art, in the garden, in cooking or sewing. It's pretty much everywhere."

Thirty years later, after travelling throughout Europe to tour cathedrals, taking countless workshops to learn new techniques and working in various studios to refine her craft, Steinebach now spends her happiest days immersed in her element inside her Orrville stained glass studio.

And that's where Lauralee Kennedy of Pointe au Baril and Steve Wohleber of Britt found her when church windows in their communities





(Left) Elizabeth Steinebach at her Orrville stained glass studio.

(Below) Stephen Wohleber and Father Neil Campbell on May 14 with the newly installed narthex window.



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(Right) Florence Universal Church,  
Pointe au Baril



were in dire need of skillful care.

When Steinebach examined the three triptych windows from Pointe au Baril's Florence Universal Church in the fall of 2011, they were in a sad state of disrepair with several broken panes, deteriorating lead and damaged solder joints. They sagged with age.

"We had to do something with them because the glass was starting to fall out," recalls

Kennedy, a member of the Florence Universal Church board.

Commissioning new triptych windows had actually been one option for the congregation, until Steinebach determined she could restore the originals to their former glory.

"To be able to restore them to the way they were, I think was more important than putting something else in there because those windows

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Elizabeth Steinebach in her element



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are so much a part of the church's history," Kennedy explains.

Many in the community have a sentimental attachment to Florence Universal, Pointe au Baril's only church. A good number – along with a few islanders – have exchanged wedding vows within those walls. Others like Bill Kennedy, who chairs the Florence Universal Church board, have a family connection with this well-loved structure, built in 1898 in Byng Inlet. By the early 1930s, a population shift resulting from the closure of the lumber mill at Byng Inlet left the church without financial support. Meanwhile, in Pointe au Baril church services in Pointe were being held in the CPR station.

"Then they found that they could get this church from Byng Inlet and the decision was made to buy it for \$200 and bring it to Pointe au Baril," explains Kennedy.

His grandfather, John Perks Sr. – the first to homestead at Pointe au Baril Station in 1907 – was in charge of dismantling the church in Byng Inlet. It was put on a flatcar and brought by rail to Pointe au Baril, where horse and wagon transported it to the docks. From there, it was scowed to the present site on South Shore Road, where, in 1936, John Perks Jr., Bill's uncle, supervised the re-erection of the structure as a non-denominational church.

Grace Wright of Pointe au Baril, an organist on and off over the years since 1929, has been connected with the church and its windows since she moved to Byng Inlet as a child in 1926.

She remembers when the building was brought to Pointe au Baril: "It was quite a job to dismantle it and bring it to the present site but the windows weren't harmed at all. Not one was broken."

She doesn't know for certain how old the windows really are. Steinebach, however, speculates that they may even have been previously recycled from elsewhere in the Peterborough diocese, as was a common practice during that era.

Not surprisingly, a challenge of restoring the Florence Universal windows was sourcing vintage glass.

"Canada used to have three to five wholesalers and we're down to one in Ontario," explains Steinebach, who travelled to New Jersey to find hand-made glass imported from France and Germany.

Although comprised of new material, it was made by hand using techniques and methodology from the turn of the century. Compared with modern stained glass craftwork, Steinebach says, without question, the old methodology is much more labour-intensive.

She toiled meticulously as if mending treasures, and at times, was tempted to reason



that rebuilding would have been a better – and far easier – approach than restoring.

“But it would have lost the history and this is where, thinking of antiques, if you re-finish that historical table, you de-value it, if it’s done poorly,” Steinebach explains. “So I’m salvaging the frame, salvaging the pieces of glass, and making sure they go back into the exact places I’ve taken them out of. Everything is numbered, photographed and recorded. It sounds like a lot of fussy details, but it makes those windows as authentic to the original as possible.”

The process also allowed for more handwork, so she could achieve the ornate variations inherent in the original design.

“One of the things that stained glass artists realized, even back in cathedral times, was that only God’s work is perfect,” Steinebach says. “Man-made work you do, as best you can. So, that’s not to cut corners and do a shoddy job, but there has to be that element of almost imperfection, that makes great art great.”

Ultimately she hopes the windows will offer the congregation that ‘awe moment that inspires’.

“The story is right there behind the altar for everybody to see – the vine, the resurrection, the life-death cycle, the chalice of the red blood in the sacrifice, the green of renewal and the blue of



**The Church of the Holy Family narthex windows arrive in Britt for the May 14 installation.**



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Church of the Holy Family window donated by L.G. Brueckner

the waters of everlasting life,” she explains.

It’s all highly symbolic, yet she feels some people going into churches today forget the richness of the windows.

#### Holy Family Church, Britt

At the Church of the Holy Family in Britt, two simple stained glass windows in the entry have separated the mundane from the religious since the 1930s.

“The front vestibule had some foundation issues, so over time, the windows got out of wack and started to come apart,” says Stephen Wohleber, who turned to Steinebach to have them repaired and strengthened.

Like the Florence Universal Church, the Holy Family Church had also been salvaged and moved, ironically, from a nearby location on the opposite side of the Magnetawan Inlet.

The Holy Family Church was moved in 1929 to its present location from just further west in Britt.

Wohleber, a local history buff, suspects that since all windows are consistent in style and glass within a four or five year time period, a call was likely put out to the community around that time for stained glass window donations in the newly relocated church.

“Every window is subscribed by one of the families in Britt, which is kind of neat,” says Wohleber, whose grandparents, the Brueckners, donated the narthex windows.

For Steinebach, the main difference between the two church projects was the painting. The older Florence Universal windows required more decorative applications, while the Holy Family windows only needed minimal painting for the donor’s name in the bottom panels. The rest, she says, is nice cathedral glass.

Bottom pieces of had slipped downward, actually tilting forward, although fortunately, none had broken.

“They really just needed to be taken apart and put back together with new caning and soldering and reinforcement,” Wohleber explains, noting that the foundation of the church porch was also repaired.

When the new stained glass windows were re-installation on May 14, a third reinforcement bar was added to the frame.

After the re-construction of each window, Steinebach applies a waterproof material that acts as a sealant.

“This will eventually erode out,” she points out. “It contracts and relaxes with lots of rain and too much wind.”

Still, she anticipates the waterproofing and strengthening will help these five stained glass beauties to last the next 75 to 100 years, inspiring young and old sitting on the pews inside. \*



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