

Henry Beaudry: veteran, war hero, artist

Everybody Has a Story

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Even at the age of 94, renowned Cree artist Henry Beaudry, born on Poundmaker First Nation, still lives as vibrantly as he can.

These days he spends his winter days at Villa Pascal instead of at home on Sweetgrass First Nation, where he still lives independently during the summer months. There, he can usually be found painting on his deck.

When the *News-Optimist* visited Beaudry recently, along with fellow artist and longtime friend Darwin Atcheynum, we found he was still vividly able to recall the events of several decades ago, which led to his involvement in the Canadian forces during the Second World War. It was a defining period of his life.

He was motivated to join the armed forces after seeing a sign during a visit to Paynton. That poster said: "Join the Army and see the world, and kiss the girls in every port."

“I wanted to serve my country,” said Beaudry.

Beaudry was just 19 years old when he signed up for the armed forces. He was underage when he enlisted. He had to backdate his birthdate so he could be accepted into the armed forces.

That same day, Beaudry was on a train to Winnipeg for training, and he was eventually posted to Italy.

He was wounded and after spending weeks in the hospital, he returned to active duty, but while in Ravenna, Italy, Beaudry was captured and taken prisoner by the Nazis.

Beaudry was taken to Austria, and ultimately taken to the infamous Stalag VII-A, the largest German prisoner of war camp during the Second World War.

Life was hard. Beaudry said he was fed garlic and dried bread. He was basically starving to death along with the other prisoners.

During stormy and windy conditions, a number of prisoners were being moved to a new location in Berlin, and it was at that point in the war that Beaudry and a fellow Mongolian prisoner in the Russian army escaped.

They walked for two days in cold and miserable conditions with nothing to eat. Beaudry recalls sleeping underneath the deep snow. His fellow escapee loaned him a sheepskin jacket to keep warm in the tough conditions.

After days of walking, the escapees found a big valley and were taken in by a group of farmers who provided food and gave them a place to stay in the barn. “They’d take in prisoners and hide them from the Germans,” said Atcheynum, recalling Beaudry’s story.

With the war entering its final phase, Beaudry recalls being taken in by the American forces, who cleaned him up and gave him a uniform and food to eat, and he ended up fighting alongside them.

On his days off, he would have a pass to go to Amsterdam and at one point happened to run across the Canadian forces, many of whom instantly exclaimed, “He’s alive!” because they thought he might have been a casualty.

“The Great Spirit guided me all the way,” said Beaudry.

The war years would later be vividly captured by Beaudry in his artwork. One of his most memorable works included a depiction of the prisoners entering the Stalag VII-A prison camp. Another was of himself, captured and being interrogated by the German soldiers.

Beaudry had been given an eagle feather to keep with him during the war, which he lost earlier on the day he was captured. Beaudry signs his paintings by drawing an eagle feather next to his name.

Beaudry took up art after the war ended. As Atcheynum said, it started while he was living in Kindersley, just after he got out of the army.

Beaudry had a job working on the railways, but in his spare time he would create drawings on pieces of paper, and his son would take these drawings to school and sell or trade them.

“Other kids would trade them for stuff,” said Atcheynum, “and the kids wanted more and more.”

Eventually, he moved into doing paintings.

Beaudry’s website featured an anecdote from his first wife, Theresa, who recalled that Beaudry’s first painting was traded by his son for a stack of comic books.

According to Atcheynum, Beaudry’s landlord, who ran a Chinese restaurant, bought some of his paintings one day and that helped Beaudry get going as a painter.

As it turned out, Beaudry needed the money from painting, as he couldn’t work full-time on the railways due to lung problems, a holdover from the days spent in the snow while escaping the Germans.

One of the biggest fans of Beaudry’s work is Chris Odishaw, who met Beaudry for the first time back in 1979 when his parents first opened their furniture store.

“He befriended me,” said Odishaw. “He would actually come in to sell art. He was out selling pieces of art that he has done, and he would sell them for \$10 and \$20.”

Odishaw remembered, too, that people used to barter with Beaudry to try to bring the price of the art down. But, he pointed out, Beaudry was using the money to feed his family.

Odishaw said he vowed to one day be in a position to help Beaudry. In 1988, after he took over the furniture store, he told Beaudry “we should start working together, and I would

start paying him more than what he was getting, and one day we would make him famous. We should start a collection.”

Starting in 1998, Odishaw made an agreement with Beaudry — the artist would do paintings for him exclusively.

As well, over the years, Odishaw said he would “buy up almost everything I could find” painted by Beaudry. He estimates he has almost 1,300 original pieces now by Beaudry.

“When you see some of the pieces, the stories, they are truly amazing.”

Odishaw was also intrigued with Beaudry’s life story — that he was a great-grandson of the legendary Chief Poundmaker and an honoured war hero, not to mention a POW survivor. He called it an amazing story.

Beaudry’s paintings cover a wide range of subjects and Odishaw was attracted to the fact that each of the paintings tell a story.

“He does a lot of early days, the early prairie days with the horses and the wagons and the firewood,” said Odishaw. “There’s a few stories about him in the war. Lots of stories about him in early days at the camps hauling water, one of his favourite’s and mine.”

Beaudry had begun painting before his contemporary Allen Sapp.

“Henry tells the story of him showing Allen how to paint, and Allen seeing Henry paint,” said Odishaw.

Beaudry’s style has much in common with Sapp. He “paints out of his mind and out of his memory.”

“I never saw Henry and never saw Allen painting off something or painting a picture of another picture,” said Odishaw. “They all had their favourites, lots of trees, they all had trees, they had that style.”

Over time, Beaudry’s artwork has made its way to the famous and powerful. He presented one of his pieces to Queen Elizabeth and another to Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

His works have been shown in galleries. Last year, there was a major display at Wanuskewin. And there have been other shows at the Allen Sapp Gallery, one at Venice House, another in Regina and private shows at Battleford Furniture, among others.

Beaudry has also gone to schools to visit students and show them how he produces his works of art.

Now, more people are recognizing Beaudry's artistic contributions. A documentary on Beaudry's life, entitled *H. Beaudry: Covers the Earth Boy*, was completed just recently and has aired on outlets such as CTV, APTN and others.

The "time is right to celebrate this artist," said Odishaw, who pointed out Beaudry's essentially optimistic nature.

"He wants everyone to be happy with what we have."

All in all, for Beaudry it has been a life filled with accomplishment and even adventure, living up to what was predicted of him at an early age.

An old man, Atcheynum said, pointed out Beaudry in a group of kids and said "this guy's going to travel all over the world, he's going to see a lot of stuff, a lot of tough things."

"Sure enough," Atcheynum said, "he went through his life doing everything that old man said."