

Tale of an Alaska painter

It was a nondescript mountain cabin. The sign read, "Midland Trail Gallery." A gallery? Here on this mountain road in the middle of West Virginia?

Interesting...better go back.

I stepped from the sunny porch to the cool, dim interior where dulcimer music played and a young woman greeted me. There was some tasteful pottery displayed on old, polished tables, but all around on the walls was a surprising display of oil still-lives, lustrous fruits, flowers, burnished metals gleaming from the Flemish dark.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Ohio. The Cleveland area."



PAT
LEIMBACH

THE COUNTRY WIFE

"Really? We grew up in Sandusky."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I'm actually from Vermillion," I said.

"I have a sister in Vermillion! On Gore-Orphanage Road."

"You're kidding! My farm borders Gore-Orphanage Rd."

Small world. We were friends already, so I proceeded to probe their story.

They'd moved here from Alaska, were able to sell their house and buy this 90 acres with house, pond, and studio gallery. Lovely place to bring up their two daughters.

Her husband was the painter. He'd learned this Old World painting technique from a Russian artist in Alaska.

"And thereby hangs a tale?" I ventured.

At that point her husband emerged from the door to the back rooms and introduced himself as David Weaver. He had obviously heard our conversation.

"Come back to the studio and I'll show you the painting that changed my life," he said.

and a Russian icon

From a high shelf he pulled a portfolio and removed from it a color photo of an icon. This religious image, some anonymous saint of the Early Church of obvious Russian Orthodox origins, had been offered for sale at auction in Alaska. The Weavers were captivated by it, but money-wise, it was out of their league. To their dismay, the painting went to a private collector out of state.

David became obsessed by a need to reproduce the painting that it might not be altogether lost to the religious community.

"I'm not even Catholic, but I had this compulsion. I had to paint that icon! I got permission to photograph it, and I did the

painting, but I just didn't have the skill I needed to get it right.

"Then Chereese (his wife) read in the paper that this famous Russian iconographer was to visit Alaska. He is probably the greatest living master of the icon. It's an art form that could only have survived underground during the Communist era.

"Iouri Sidorenko had been protected and encouraged by monks and priests all over the Soviet Union. He had been privy in his training to masterpieces in secret church collections hidden from the Communists for decades.

"I arranged to meet him, and we became good friends. He

asked me to help him immigrate to the states. I agreed, on the condition that he teach me his painting techniques. That's how it all happened," said David, waving an arm around the room at the works in progress.

"Iouri now lives in California and sells his work on Rodeo Drive. We're still in touch."

"And what became of your icon?" I asked.

"With Iouri's guidance I finished it, and we donated it to the Greek Orthodox Church in Anchorage."

I prophesy good things for the Weavers. When you have the saints on your side, who can be against you?

I'm glad I made that U turn.