

History and RALA craftsmanship converge at circa-1850 schoolhouse

by Robert Lowell Goller

The wooden floors that once felt the pitter-patter of 19th- and early 20th-century pupils at the District #7 Schoolhouse on Olean Road now feel the footsteps of visitors appreciating the work of Roycroft Renaissance artisans.

The circa-1850 one-room schoolhouse, featured on the poster for the Roycrofters-At-Large Association's 43rd annual Summer Festival June 29 and 30, is now home to Roycroft Artisans' Schoolhouse Gallery, where the work of Roycroft Renaissance artisans is highlighted.

"It's the only gallery that features only RALA artisans," says RALA Master Artisan and gallery manager Ben Little. "People appreciate that."

In addition to the gallery, the historic schoolhouse also contains RALA's office headquarters. The District #7 school, known informally over the years as the Blakeley Corners School, served grade-school students for nearly a century, from its construction around 1850 until 1948, when the East Aurora Union Free School District closed the building and began transporting the Blakeley Corners-area pupils to the Main Street School in the Village of East Aurora.

A binder in the vestibule takes gallery visitors back in time. Among the items preserved in its sleeves: Photographs of students and their teacher lined up in front of the schoolhouse; a "Memorandum of Hiring" for teacher Lottie C. Butlin, who was paid \$7.50 per week for 20 weeks during the fall 1895 term; and a more modern photograph of former students who gathered at the gallery for a reunion.

According to one historical account inside the binder, the building was used as a schoolhouse during the week and for church services on Sundays. "On Friday nights, parents of the students would sometimes hold a square dance at the school house," the historical account notes.

The old schoolhouse had a variety of uses after the school district closed the building more than seven decades ago. Antiques were stored there when wood craftsman Tom Harris purchased the building in 1984. Harris, now a Roycroft Master Artisan Emeritus, had been renting a shop for his cabinet-making business on Main Street across from Park Place. Ben Little, who was operating his cabinet-making business out of his basement, joined the operation a short time later. In January 1988, the Schoolhouse Gallery officially opened. With the addition of a workshop in the back, the original schoolhouse became a showroom for not only Harris and Little's woodwork, but for numerous other Roycroft Artisans and Master Artisans who earn the distinction—and the right to use the Double R logo—after a strenuous jurying process that includes annual reviews. After five years, the jury may elevate an Artisan to Master Artisan status.

Around 1999, Master Artisan Thomas Pafk joined the partnership. He built a second workshop behind the schoolhouse and moved his operation from Clarence. Following Tom Harris' retirement, Ben Little and

his wife Karen have overseen the gallery in the old schoolhouse even though they are officially retired themselves. Ben prefers to use the term “pretty-much retired.” He and Karen split their time between East Aurora and Colorado, where they can be closer to their family, and Ben continues to produce pieces in his shop when he’s in East Aurora during the summer months.

With the continued success of the gallery, and the more recent addition of the RALA headquarters, Schoolhouse #7 has become an embodiment of the Roycrofters At-Large Association and the craftsmanship and history it represents.

The Roycroft Artisans’ Schoolhouse Gallery is located at 1054 Olean Road, south of the Village of East Aurora, and is open six days per week, from 10 a.m.-4 p.m. It is closed on Sundays.



Today, 1054 Olean Road is home to Roycroft Renaissance artisans, but for nearly a century it was the one-room schoolhouse for students in the Blakeley Corners neighborhood. The historic schoolhouse is featured on the poster for the Roycrofters-At-Large Association’s 43rd annual Summer Festival.

Images from a display at the Roycroft Artisans’ Schoolhouse Gallery