

My Life as a Transplanted Northern Mainer Culture in Northern Maine (yes, there IS some!)

Lots of folks unfamiliar with Aroostook County, Maine have a somewhat-skewed view of what it's like here. Many people, when they picture Aroostook County (assuming they've even heard of it), envision a desolate place full of millions of acres of potato fields as far as the eye can see, with top-heavy potato trucks and logging trucks racing up and down the roads, piloted by rugged (possibly French-speaking), hardy men who are dodging moose at every turn as they shepherd their huge, noisy, bouncing chariots along narrow, serpentine, roller-coaster roads surfaced only with packed dirt. These same people, when imaging what it's like here, conjure up images of harsh and lonely winters featuring sub-zero temperatures and hundreds of inches of snowfall, the high-pitched whine of snowmobiles ever present.

This vision of Aroostook County – although somewhat exaggerated – isn't terribly inaccurate (except that I and most of my friends and neighbors don't consider it “desolate” – but then, desolate is a relative term, isn't it?).

But that's not all there is to Aroostook County. People, we have *culture* here. Seriously.

By way of introduction to culture in Aroostook County, allow me to describe to you a most-enjoyable evening I experienced last night in the small city of Presque Isle, Maine.

On the evening of the first Friday of every month, the First Friday Artwalk happens in downtown Presque Isle. The event is headed up by the owners of Morning Star Art & Framing, a very nice shop located in a beautiful, brick-faced, high-ceilinged historic building on the city's main street.

The Artwalk is an organized way of showing off work produced by talented local artists, of which there are many. Each Artwalk features six to eight venues, most within walking distance of each other. Each venue displays the work of a particular artist. At some venues, the featured artist is present during the Artwalk, and he or she might give a talk during the evening.

Yesterday was the first Friday in January, and I attended yesterday evening's Artwalk with Jeff and Linda Martin (these aren't their real names; I'm using pseudonyms to protect privacy). Jeff and Linda are neighbors of mine. Jeff, an accomplished artist, was the featured artist at the Morning Star shop for yesterday's Artwalk. His specialty is wonderful monochromatic pencil drawings of trees, lakes, meadows, brooks, and mountains. He also produces lovely acrylic nature paintings.

When the three of us arrived at Morning Star, we saw that thirty or so of Jeff's pieces were displayed prominently and tastefully throughout the store. On a counter normally used to service custom-framing customers, a nice Pinot Grigio nestled in a bucket of ice, alongside a delicious-looking array of gourmet cookies and candy.

After spending twenty minutes or so looking through the display of Jeff's wonderful artwork, I had a detailed discussion with the store's owner about a large print I'd like to have matted and framed.

After a few more minutes of small talk, Linda and I began our tour of the various Artwalk venues, leaving Jeff at Morning Star so he could mingle with customers.

Our first stop was Café Sorpreso, a cozy, European-style café across the street from the Morning Star shop. On the walls of the café were several stunning pieces by the artist Tim Gagnon, a very talented native of Aroostook County. Some of the pieces on display were part of Tim's "Surreal Landscape" series, which plays up stunning juxtaposition of nature and hard geometry.

Linda and I next crossed back to the other side of the street to visit the Oasis Salon, where jewelry artisan Hannah Gartley displayed her custom creations: new jewelry made from vintage pieces.

Our next stop was a couple blocks away at the Wintergreen Arts Center. We arrived too early to meet the featured artist, Lara Cannon – but the trip wasn't wasted, as we were both fascinated by the unique and very lovely window treatments in the front windows. At first glance they looked like beautiful lace curtains, but upon closer inspection we realized they were actually made of *paper*; the artist had created them by folding the paper and then cutting the paper with scissors or with some other implement to make a delicate and delightful design consisting of leaves, birds, flowers, and other lovely things found in nature. It's the same technique children use to make paper "snowflakes" except that creation of the paper curtains was obviously planned and executed very, very careful and precisely.

We then visited an electronics store called Stew's Downtown Sight & Sound, where we were treated to a showing of the documentary film *Old Maine Swedish Farms*. We were privileged to meet the maker of the film, Brenda Nasberg Jepson. Ms. Jepson trained in Europe as a BBC producer/director and then owned and operated an award-winning production company in London for several years. While enjoying fine wine, coffee, and sumptuous Swedish desserts, we were treated to a really interesting talk by Ms. Jepson during which we learned she is a volunteer documentary filmmaker for the Maine Public Television System. Her production company, Crown of Maine Productions, has created an extensive library of documentary films about Aroostook County. I couldn't resist buying two Crown Of Maine Productions movies on DVD: *Greetings from Aroostook* and *Old Maine Swedish Farms*.

After leaving Stew's, Linda and I circled back to the Morning Star Shop, where we sipped some drinks and were treated to folk music by several local musicians.

As the mini-concert at the Morning Star was wrapping up, the three of us, tired but happy, trekked back to the municipal parking lot, where we brushed lots of fluffy snow off our vehicles and headed for home.

Normally, each Artwalk features a couple other venues not mentioned here: the Reed Gallery at the University of Maine at Presque Isle (abbreviated "UMPI" and known affectionately as "UMP ee"), and the Presque Isle Library. UMPI was closed for holiday vacation, and the library was undergoing renovations, so neither participated in this particular Artwalk.

What else is there to do in and near Aroostook Country, culture-wise?

- You can attend a dinner-theater production presented by the Presque Isle Community Players.
- You can take a class at UMPI.
- You can attend a concert or lecture at UMPI.
- You can attend an event at the Forum Auditorium in Presque Isle.

- You can enjoy gourmet dining at The Horn of Plenty restaurant in Houlton.
- You can cross the border into Canada, where more cultural opportunities abound.

I moved here so I could live in a beautiful, rural setting among people with small-town values. I didn't think I'd have much opportunity to take part in cultural activities; I was prepared to drive a few hundred miles to avail myself of such things and thought I'd do so only occasionally. Imagine my delight in discovering the cultural smorgasbord Aroostook County serves up!