

Peter Lewis, pleinairist

By SUSAN FLANAGAN

SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM

To many Newfoundlanders, Peter Lewis is a runner. In fact he is one of the best long distance runners Newfoundland has ever produced. Lewis won the prestigious Tely 10 title in both 1984 and 1989 and finished in the top 10 many times. He probably would have won a third time if he hadn't stopped to help a fellow runner who had been hit by a car.

For hundreds of students in Conception Harbour, Colliers, Beachy Cove and more recently Outer Cove and Pouch Cove, Lewis is a teacher. An educator with decades experience who brings learning to life.

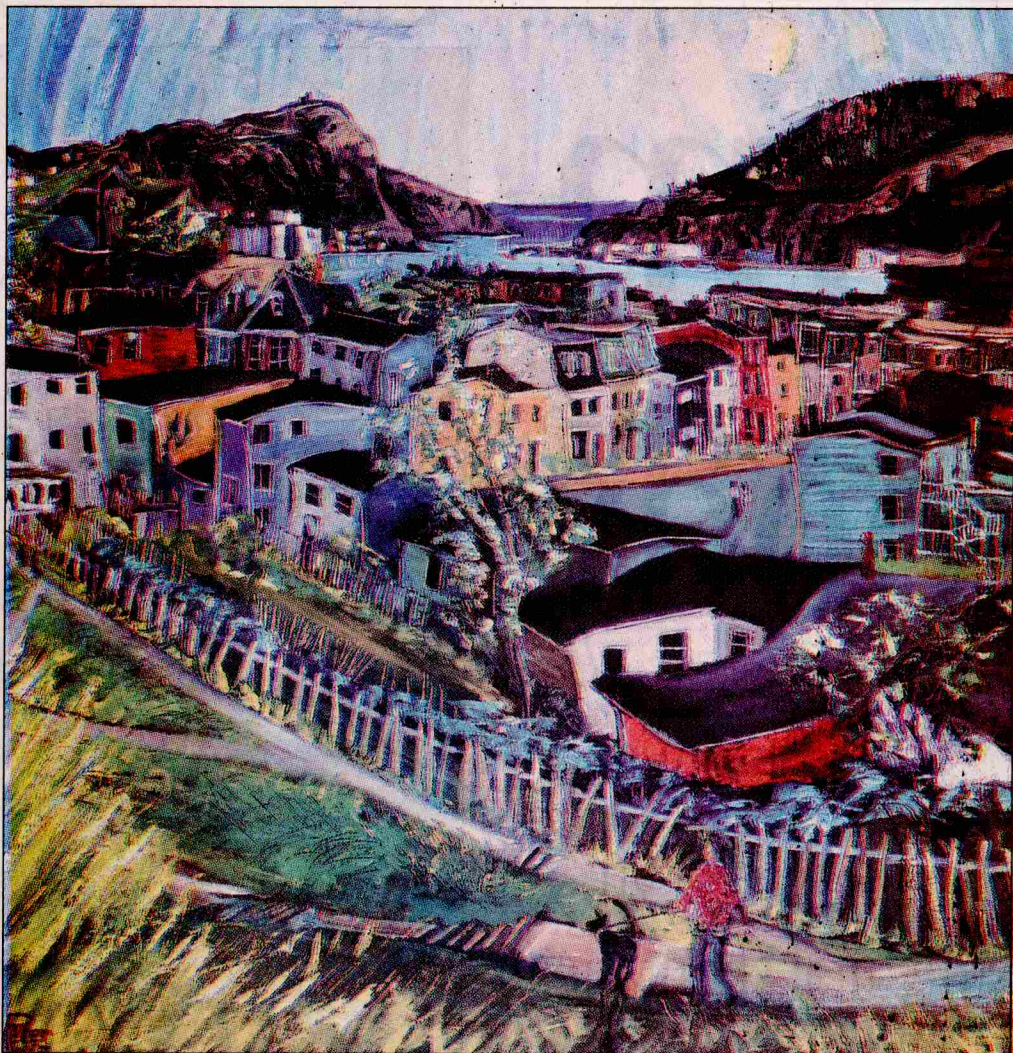
This weekend, if you drop in and see Lewis at the Masonic Temple in downtown St. John's, he'll be wearing a different hat — that of an accomplished artist who works magic with oil on canvas. So how did the school man who spent 20 hours a week running and 40 hours a week in school end up sitting in a field with an easel?

"When I was in my 20s, I was visiting Mike Greene out in Stephenville," says Lewis, referring to a fellow runner. "He said, 'Let's go out in the garage and paint.' I was hooked. Later, I started painting huge backdrops for school concerts."

He didn't get into painting seriously until three years ago when he took the deferred salary option offered by the school board, which allows teachers to take two thirds their pay for two years and then take the third year off to pursue other interests. In 2005, Lewis took courses with eight or 10 artists in the area. Gerry Squires, Jim Maunder, Bonnie Leyton and Elayne Greeley all influenced Lewis, but it was a day spent in Tors Cove at the Five Island Art Gallery with Jean Claude Roy — an impressionist whose work is represented by Emma Butler — that really determined Lewis's style. The painting Lewis completed that day was shown at The Rooms and now hangs in the family living room.

"It's an emotional piece for us," says Tracy Shave, Lewis's wife. "Lewis's use of style and colour changed that day."

Lewis admits the day spent with Roy was a turning point. Like Roy, Lewis is a pleinairist — he paints outdoors, rather than photographing a scene to take home, where he could paint in the warmth and comfort of a studio. When Lewis finds the vista he wants to paint, be it in Upper Island Cove, New Bonaventure or The Battery, he sets up his easel and stays on site until the work is done. If it starts to rain or sleet or hail, Lewis doesn't pack up and leave, he sits



"Tessier's Lane" by Peter Lewis. — Submitted photo

and paints the rain or sleet or hail.

That happened one day in Keels, says Lewis. The painting that he started out to do changed completely with the rain. The painting itself wasn't in danger of being damaged as the rain doesn't mix with the oil paint, but the scene Lewis started out to paint was not the one he left with.

This year, unlike Lewis's first year off school, he's painting full time. He loves his time spent out in the field, and what occurs during the production of the piece is as important as the finished product.

"One day I was painting in Upper Island Cove," says Lewis. "An older gentleman came and showed me a picture of his horse who had died. He asked me to paint it. I took the picture home and painted the horse. I went back and gave it to him." So although the man with the picture of the horse is not in the painting, his spirit made it in there.

"Another one I like is 'Job's Cove.' I like the movement in it," says Lewis. "The colours ... I like the contrasting greens and reds."

Using brush and pallet knife, Lewis's work has an old-school feel. Thick brush strokes and rich skies are reminiscent of Van Gogh. Yet Lewis's paintings are modern, immediate and unmistakably Newfoundland. They are bright and brilliantly off kilter.

"I don't like straight lines," says Lewis, telling the story of the day he painted "Fruit of the Earth, Chapel's Cove," that depicts an apple tree and vegetable garden. When the owner of the property came to view the painting, he took issue with the fact that his barn wasn't straight, says Lewis.

"I tried to explain that it was my artistic license," he says, laughing.

Of the 38 paintings on display at the Masonic Temple, 28 have been sold. Most of Lewis's paintings are quite large, three feet by four feet or larger. The show continues until Nov. 23, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Susan Flanagan is a freelance writer whose favourite work of Lewis's is entitled "Victoria Street."