

Michael Bird



Michael Bird was a university professor who spent many hours driving around the local countryside while his contemporaries combed library book stacks. It was his passion for folk art that took him into farm kitchens for the stories behind an elaborate butter press or an embroidered towel.

Bird, who taught everything from religion to art and film for 34 years at the University of Waterloo's Renison College, wanted to know every detail about the Germanic folk art he collected.

“In recording and remembering minutiae about each piece, he revived and kept alive the work of many fine artists from this region who would otherwise have remained totally anonymous in the greater collecting world,” said Susan Burke, the curator at Joseph Schneider Haus in Kitchener.

Bird, who died suddenly of heart failure in 2003, left a legacy of scholarly research and folk art collections to enrich the lives of both serious students and the simply curious. His greatest contribution was his knowledge about Pennsylvania German *fraktur*, a form of calligraphy. “He took a childlike delight in what he found, seeing beauty even in the functional pieces,” it was once written.

He began collecting in the early 1970s and by 1984 had assembled a collection of 640 pieces of folk art, primarily from the Waterloo region. Bird then donated this huge, well-researched “Canadian Harvest” collection to the Joseph Schneider Haus. After his death, the Schneider Haus mounted an exhibition of the finest pieces from the collection to commemorate Bird's generosity.

As a professor of religious studies and fine art, he wrote several books including *Canadian Folk Art: Old Ways in a New Land* (1983) and *A Splendid Harvest: Germanic Folk and Decorative Arts in Canada* (1981). His final book, *O Noble Heart* (2002) examined the spirituality of *fraktur*.

Bird was also a passionate teacher who was known to sit with his laptop computer in the dining hall so that he would be accessible, and it was once written that, “He was always, inevitably, surrounded by students.” Bird was also an accomplished pianist who put himself through university by playing jazz at roadhouses.

A story that highlights his dedication to his students occurred in the summer before he died. He was concerned about the dearth of good textbooks for a course, so he wrote one – a 240 page manuscript that was ready for students in the fall term.

Bird was born in the small community of Belle Plaine, Iowa in 1941. He graduated with a PhD from the University of Iowa after taking a wide variety of courses including physics, cinema, art and literature in his undergraduate years.

“His courses were always eclectic, and his students loved them and him. Together they learned what it meant to study sacred places, take journeys, quests and pilgrimages, investigate religion and art, labyrinths and mazes, religion and film,” his obituary read.

Photo courtesy of Region of Waterloo Joseph Schneider Haus