

Harvey Custer Ingham 1863 – 1931

By William D. Benton, great nephew of Harvey Custer Ingham

It has been many years since the public has had an opportunity to view the painterly works of Vergennes area artist, Harvey Custer Ingham. Ingham painted primarily the local landscape and during his life, a few of his works found homes in local collections but the majority of his works were relegated to attics and barns. Douglas Garno, a former Vergennes resident and sometime helper of Ingham as a child, was the first to arrange a formal showing of Ingham's work at St. Michaels College in 1968. In 1974, Arthur K.D. Healy, a Middlebury College art professor and watercolorist and Richard Adams, a local historian held a show at the Bixby Library in Vergennes. This show was reprised in 1978 with the help of Robert Popick and William Benton. As a result of this exposure, Ingham's work was in demand by local collectors for many years. In May 2010, the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum along with William Benton, Art Cohn and Greg Hamilton exhibited approximately 45 works by Ingham and produced a show catalog with high quality reproductions of each work. This show rekindled additional interest in the life and art of Custer Ingham. Attached to this essay are paintings from the collection of William and Kristin Benton that represent some of his accomplishments. Enjoy the works of this forgotten local artist and see how he represented his surroundings in styles familiar to the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Harvey Custer Ingham was born on December 7, 1863 in Cazenovia, New York. His family moved to Vergennes in 1870 and they lived on Elbow Street and purchased a farm on the River Road (now Sand Road) in Ferrisburgh near the Otter Creek. Little is known of Ingham's youth but he likely attended primary school and spent much of his time in the out of doors fishing, hunting or exploring the area around Vergennes. The earliest work by Ingham is a small oil on board landscape dated September 1, 1882. Inscribed on the reverse in pencil is the note "first attempt and without teacher". This work portrays a naïve, almost muddy foreground with the family farm and reveals the Otter Creek and Green Mountains in the background. Numerous other painters were working in the Addison County area in the late 19th century. Jessie Grandey Converse, Eleanora Bradbury and members of the Robinson Family of Rokeby were known as artists but no firm connection can be directly related to Ingham.

Other early works by Ingham include an oil on board, "Vergennes Falls with Steamer", painted in 1884. This work is painted with broad brush strokes and is one dimensional but exhibits a vibrant pallet of reds and blues. This color pallet will be indicative of many of his early paintings. Other early works include three oil sketches on a single board that represent the Fort Cassin House prior to its fire in 1892, North Point on Fort Cassin and a nocturnal sail boat. In addition, there is a painting of the Hayes and Folardo mill on the east side of Otter Creek Falls painted from the lower towpath on the Otter Creek Basin, this work includes broad brushwork and similar coloration.

In 1886, Ingham enrolled in the “Antique School” of the prestigious National Academy of Design in New York City. He was to study there for a period of two years. In 1888, Ingham painted “Cyrus Butler’s Desk”, an oil on board that typifies the trompe l’oeil still life tradition made famous by William Michael Harnett and John Frederick Peto in the second half of the 19th century. Harnett was known to have maintained a studio at 28 West 14th Street for the period 1886 – 1888 and it is likely that Ingham was aware of this school of painting.

Although Ingham’s painting continues to exhibit a rather primitive technique through 1888, it shows that Ingham had been exposed to other styles of painting in New York. As he furthers his painting career, styles representative of the Barbizon School and forms of Impressionism are embraced recognizing the landscape as an independent subject.

Upon his return from New York, Ingham continued painting in and around Vergennes. The first oil on canvas he painted is a landscape dated 1890 that portrays the City of Vergennes skyline from Comfort Hill. The foreground includes a swamp like landscape with a variety of flora and fauna. In reality, the scene incorporates a deep ravine that Ingham apparently chose not include, perhaps because he did not have the talent to paint an accurate representation of the three dimensionality required for stylistic success.

In 1892, Ingham became employed by William G. Bixby, a local business man with a passion for boats and a camp on Bixby Island off Long Point in Ferrisburgh. According to Bixby’s Journal, Ingham worked for a period of five years helping him maintain property and the engines on his boats. It is also during this period that Ingham began a career in photography in Vergennes. The Bixby Library collection includes photographs of the “Water Lilly” taken in 1892 and the steamers “Nellie” and “Vermont” taken in 1893. A photographic portrait of his sister Ruth D. Ingham is dated June 1896. A painting of Main Street, Vergennes was painted by Ingham prior to the fire that destroyed the third floor of the Sherman Block in April 1896. This painting is almost identical to photographs of Main Street from the period, supporting the hypothesis that Ingham painted from his photographs. Numerous photographs of the Vergennes area, parades, boats and portraits are known to exist with an Ingham stamp and he advertised regularly in the Enterprise and Vermonter newspaper in the early 1900’s. The latest known dated photograph was taken of Agnes Ketchum in 1912.

Apparently, Harvey Custer Ingham never completed his formal high school education. He was to enroll in Vergennes High School in 1897 at age 34 and graduate in 1900 at age 37. Few paintings are known to have been painted from 1900 to 1905. “Snow Scene on Otter Creek” is an oil on canvas that is dated 1902. There are few local winter scenes known. This painting continues to exhibit loose brushwork but shows progress in the use of light and shadow. Also in 1902, Ingham’s father, Charles D. Ingham passed away at age 80. Custer Ingham painted a technically correct portrait of his father exhibiting a stern gentleman with long gray beard and balding head.

Charles Ingham enlisted in the Union Army in 1863 and was stationed in the Washington D.C. area. Shortly, he was to receive a letter from his wife that indicated she was with child. In a letter home, Charles wrote "If I do not return from the war call him after me. If I return I would like him to have the name Custer". It is believed that Charles Ingham served under General Custer and admired him considerably. Charles Ingham played the bugle and after his death, Custer Ingham was to paint a memorial to his father called "Civil War Remembrance". The composition of this trompe l'oeil still life closely resembles the "After the Hunt" series that William Harnett painted decades earlier. It is composed of his father's rifle, pistol, sword, canteen, bugle and hat hanging on an old door with brass hinges and serious lock. The diagonals of the rifle and sword are balanced by the pistol and canteen while the hat and bugle anchor the composition. The painting hung in the home of Custer Ingham's sister, Mrs. Ruth Benton, the bugle and canteen remain with the painting today. Also at this time, another still life portraying a banjo and sheet music was painted. This painting is not signed but is very similar in technique to the memorial to his father and in keeping with the trompe l'oeil tradition. For a period after this, Ingham built a house boat and spent many summers anchored on the Otter Creek painting the local landscape and fishing.

In 1906, Ingham married Estelle Harris. Ms. Harris was 27 years old and Custer Ingham 41. Mrs. Ingham was a music teacher in Vergennes. Bernice Avery, an older Vergennes resident wrote that Ingham was "a born artist, no money, no one who cared a hoot, no particular job, just a bit of flotsam needing someone but certainly not the woman he married". Douglas Garno, who knew Ingham as a child writes that he thought Ingham an introvert but apparently was wrong. Ingham, he writes "loved to sing and played the guitar and the autumn harp very well. One of his favorite haunts was Daigneault's Barber Shop. He would go to this shop near closing hour and he and a few friends would have a singing party until late at night".

In 1907, William Gove Bixby passed away and bequeathed a sum of money for the construction and endowment of a library for the City of Vergennes. Ingham's close relationship with Bixby led him to paint a portrait by memory that hangs in the Library today. The quality of this portrait is very good, the technical aspects formal and befitting a man of means in early 20th century Vergennes

In 1910, Harvey Custer and Estelle Ingham gave birth to a daughter named Prudence. After only three years of marriage, the couple divorced and Estelle was not to let her daughter see her father again. A portrait of Prudence is known to exist that must have been painted from memory. Apparently, Ingham's lack of motivation and lack of interest in financial success doomed the marriage. Estelle Ingham was very motivated and according to her obituary she was "a pioneer business women in Vermont, having conducted the City Theatre in the Vergennes Town Hall from 1918 to 1931, and giving showings of motion pictures in surrounding towns during this period of special occasions".

According to the July 2, 1914 Enterprise and Vermonter, "H. Custer Ingham left Sunday for Atlantic City, N.J. Later he sailed for England in the company of Robert Van Dusen who is returning to his home in London. Mr. Van Dusen who was a frequent visitor to Vergennes a number of years ago and recently spent a few days in the City. After leaving England Mr. Ingham expects to visit the famous art galleries in Antwerp, Holland and Paris and plans to be away about three months". Ingham's trip to Europe was apparently cut short by the outbreak of World War I and he returned to Vergennes via Cherbourg and Southampton in August 1914, stating: " Numerous paintings of Holland are known to exist. Douglas Garno referred to two oil paintings of the Amsterdam Canal, one of which was hung in the St. Michaels show in 1968.

The period from 1915 to 1925 may have been Harvey Custer Ingham's most prolific as a painter. The trip to Europe must have been extraordinary for an artist who had spent most of his life in rural Vermont. He was exposed to landscapes from the French Barbizon School, airy landscapes of the Hague School and the works of the Impressionists with their color patches and remarkable treatment of light and color. During this period, Ingham's work included local landscapes, scenes of the Otter Creek (he was known to have his house boat anchored at the mouth of Otter Creek in August 1915) and imaginary landscapes with castles and mystical figures. The works of George Inness are reflected in dark landscapes with foreboding skies. The impressionists are represented by a scene on the Otter Creek with a fisherman in a red boat, bright foliage and a rainbow. Later, he returned to his former realist style representing the local landscape, this time sprinkling Lilliputian figures about representing the leisurely pace of life in rural Addison County.

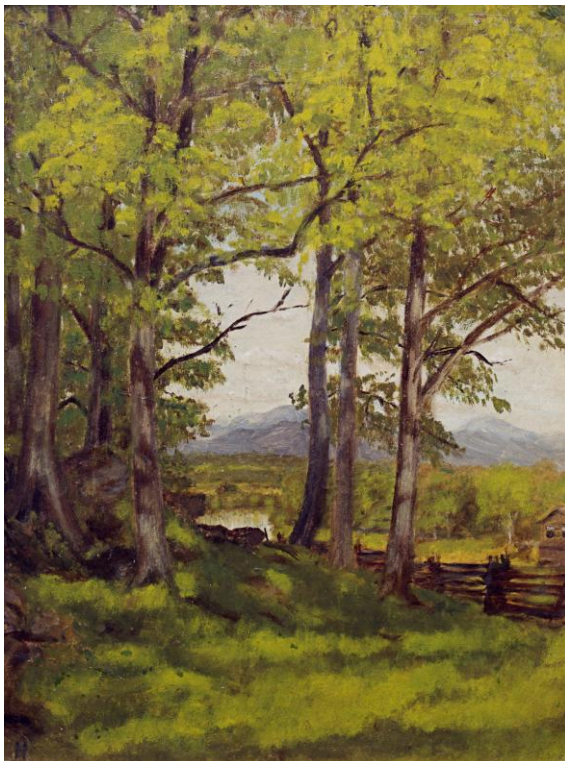
By 1925, Ingham was 62 years old and had been experiencing bouts of ill health. He was known to have travelled south for a period. Two paintings exist dated 1927 with the address 517 West Church. These are assumed to have been painted in either Georgia or Florida. His paintings at this time were sentimental, scenes of the old farmstead bathed in pink hues. He returned to Vermont and lived with his sister Ruth Ingham Benton on North Maple Street near his family's first home on Elbow Street. In time, Ingham would lose much of his memory to dementia and he was sent to the State Hospital in Waterbury, Vermont where he died on February 5, 1931.

A few of Ingham's paintings found their way to local residences and collections. After his death however, the majority of his catalog were stored in a barn on the property of his sister Ruth. The paintings were lost for years and only when they were about to be destroyed did a few local art collectors obtain the bulk of his works. These paintings were enjoyed for what they were, depictions of local life and landscape. A few paintings changed hands and new works were occasionally found. After the St. Michael's Show in 1968 and the Bixby Shows, Ingham's work was appreciated and in demand locally. Portions of local collections were dispersed at auction in the 1980's and while many works remained in Vermont it is assumed that many left the area and will never be found.

So who was this man, Harvey Custer Ingham? According to notes from many who knew him, he was an enigma, a loner to some and a companion to others. A man of many talents, who chose not to focus and excel but to dabble. A naturally casual man with more time and perhaps therefore, a greater possibility of recording passing events. Disdain for the niceties of life lends itself to the observation of nature and life in it.

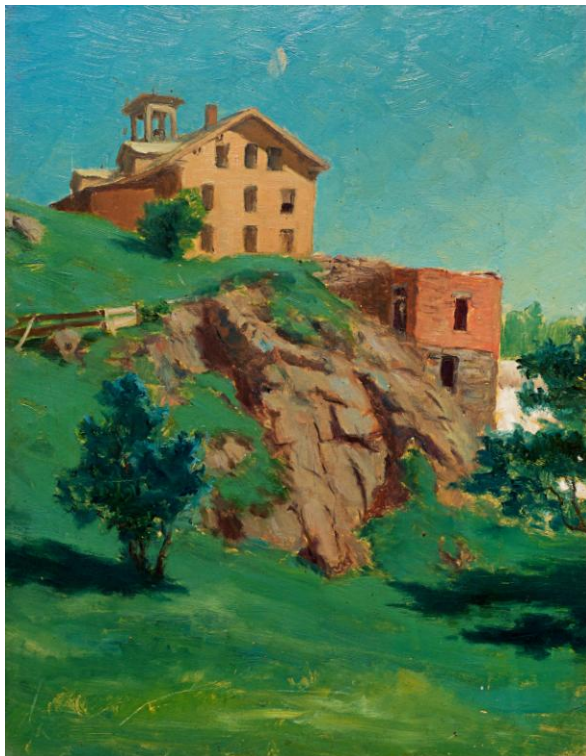
According to those who knew him Ingham was a “lover of nature as shown in his painting of the countryside”. Douglas Garno related that Ingham “always wore a derby hat... One person I interviewed said she believed he slept with his hat on... What’s more he usually had on a celluloid collar and cuffs. The cuffs protruded down over his hands. If you engaged him in long conversation he would start sketching on the white cuffs”.

Here we are, investigating a man who left little in the way of personal information but a legacy of artwork that portrayed rural life with simplicity, grace and charm. His scenes typified rural Vermont, with the common man and common place his subjects. They became, by act of creation, unpretentious anecdotes of life, swathed with the natural light of the outdoors. As A.K.D. Healy wrote, “Custer Ingham, Vergennes artist (will) be remembered as one who was interested in absorbing the attitude and the techniques of a revolutionary period in world art.



Landscape on board, dated 1882. signed on reverse: “first attempt and without teacher”, 12” x 9”.

Sketch board, oil on board,
Unsigned, ca. 1885, Fort Cassin
hotel, upper left, Nocturnal sail,
upper right, view of the
Palisades, 11" x 13".



View of Hayes, Falardo and
Parker factory from below Otter
Creek Falls, oil on board,
unsigned, ca. 1885, 14" x 11"



Main Street, Vergennes
Unsigned, ca. 1890
oil on canvas, 10" x 14"

Prior to 1895 fire that
destroyed the third floor
of the Stone Block.



Day's Catch, oil on
board, signed on boat
seat, ca. 1900, 8" x 12"



The Farm, signed on
signed lower left, oil
on canvas, ca. 1910
11" x 17"



Sailing on Otter
Creek, signed on
reverse, oil on board,
1910, 12" x 18"



Scow boat with
Rainbow, signed
lower right, oil on
canvas, ca. 1915
13" x 20"



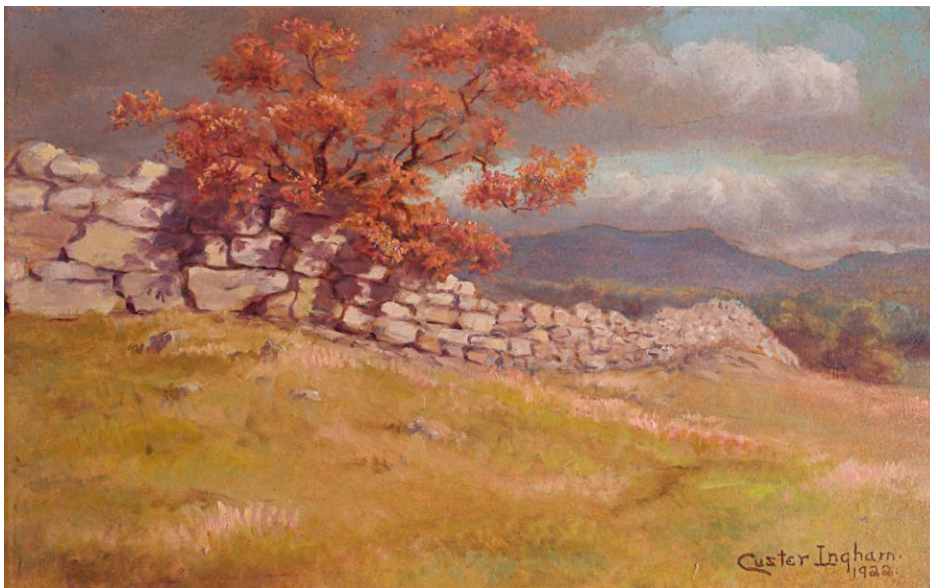
Westport, NY sail Ferry,
Signed on reverse, 1919
Oil on board, 22" x 18"



Civil War Remembrance, unsigned, oil on canvas, 47" x 36"
A tribute to Charles Ingham, father of Custer Ingham, who was a soldier in the Civil War, passed down in the Benton/Ingham family. The canteen and hat braid remain in the family.



Fishing in
Vergennes Basin,
signed lower left,
oil on board, ca.
1920, 16" x 23"



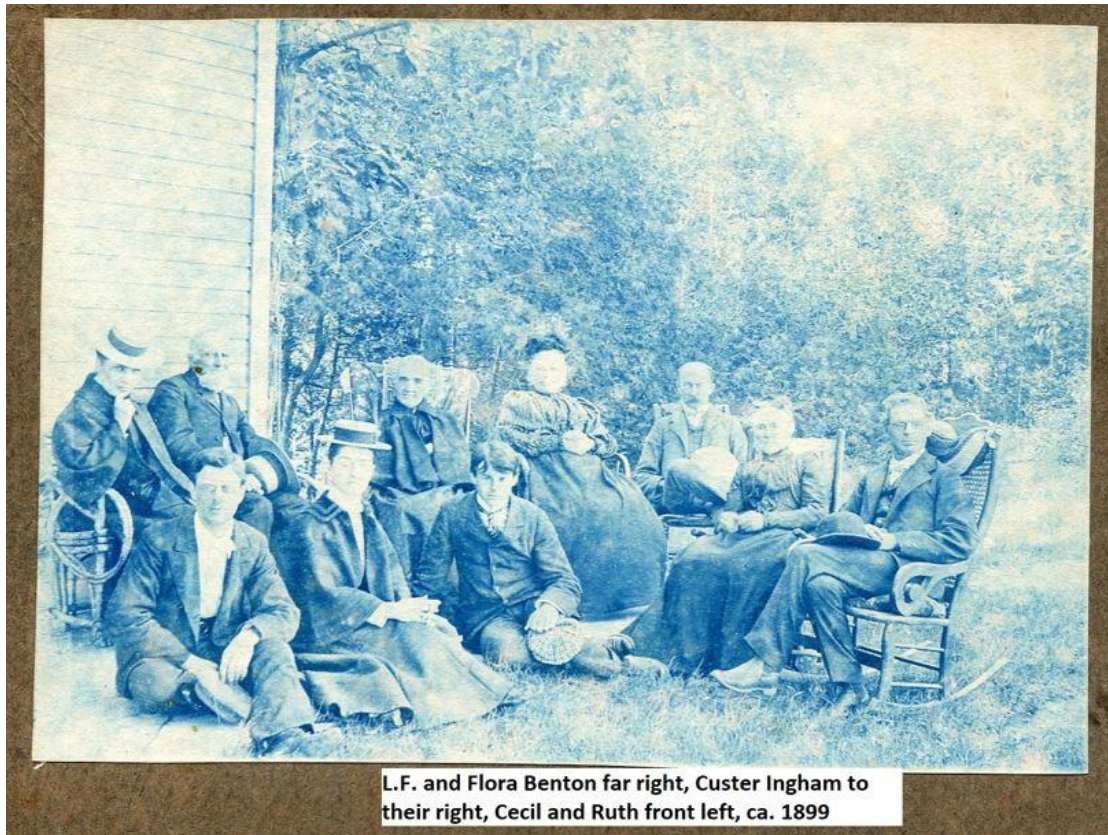
Mount Abraham
from the Farm,
signed lower right,
1922, oil on board,
14" x 22"



The Baseball Players, signed on reverse, oil on board, ca. 1925, 20" x 28"



A Walk down the Road, signed lower right, oil on canvas, 1925, 13" x 20"



L.F. and Flora Benton far right, Custer Ingham to their right, Cecil and Ruth front left, ca. 1899

Photograph of the L.F. Benton Family at their North Harbor camp later known as Camp Marbury. Custer Ingham is third from the right with the mustache. His sister Ruth and her husband Cecil Benton are front left.

Sources and references:

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Lake Champlain Maritime Museum "Through the Eyes of Custer Ingham", showing of 45 paintings, summer 2010.