



# A WEST END COMPANION

THE ART OF GENE UBRIACO

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## A ‘West End Companion’ Prologue

Stephen Leacock once observed that in every society, “... humour is blended with pathos till the two are one, and represent, as they have in every age, the mingled heritage of tears and laughter that is our lot on earth.”\*

Sault Ste Marie’s fabled ‘West End’ community and the many stories told about life there from 1900 onwards perfectly mirror what Leacock saw as our shared Canadian human experience. This tight knit, harmonious place was wonderfully diverse and multicultural long before such concepts entered our broader national consciousness. In his wonderful history, ‘The West End: A Magical Place Created By Giants,’\*\* prolific Sault author Frank Sarlo describes how the first ‘West End’ generations overcame the hardships of immigration, poverty, and adapting to a new country while experiencing profound joys and sorrows along the way. Frank and many of his second and third generation West End contemporaries built fine lives from their own ‘mingled heritage’ – leaving the old neighborhood behind as they pursued and achieved their dreams in the worlds that lay beyond.

Gene Ubriaco is one of these enduring West End success stories. Gene left the Sault to chase his professional hockey dreams – a life that took him from local athletic stardom to sustained competitive professional success as a player, coach, club executive – and a much admired Sault icon. This West End ‘Companion’ captures another dimension of Gene’s life as it unfolded across North American and international hockey landscapes – his wonderful art. Gene had dismissed the works presented in the following pages as “just my doodles, Bryan – sketching to pass the time when I was on the road!”, followed by Gene’s contagious laughter.

We respectfully part company with Gene on this one. The 27 sketches collected here are warm, evocative, and beautifully constructed – if unintended — time capsules that encompass Gene’s life and times. Each Gene West End and Sault scene is a remembrance of how things were when he Gene was growing up. The now long gone James Street shops, vibrant city scenes, sporting events, festivals, parades, community clubs, churches – the bustle of West End life jumps out from every image. The old neighbourhood was changed forever by so called 1960s era Sault ‘progress’, ‘development’, and ‘renewal’ - but it will now live on forever in Gene’s art.

\*Stephen Leacock (1869 -1944), ‘Humour As I See It’ in *Further Foolishness* (New York: J Lane Publishers; 1916).

\*\*Dr. Frank J. Sarlo, *The West End: A Magical Place Created By Giants* (Sault Ste Marie; Tagona Press, 2024).

This ‘Companion’ is not Gene’s full biography – an important story that deserves to be told someday soon. Instead, we are proud to publish this book as a testament to a true artist proudly celebrating his West End roots.

## **The Sketches**

All The 27 sketches taken from Gene’s collection that have ‘West end’ themes are assembled in their approximate chronological order. They are presented in a way that ensures these beautiful images speak for themselves. The Sault’s Gary McGuffin has kindly assisted with their editing and formatting for publication purposes. An internationally acclaimed wonderful photographer and visual artist who with wife and creative partner Joanie is also a celebrated writer, explorer, and film maker, Gary offers this succinct summary of what Gene achieves with this ‘Companion’ collection: “Absolutely beautiful, delicate folk art styled images that have wonderful ‘forever’ charm and appeal.”

## **A brief Gene Ubriaco curriculum vitae**

Eugene Stephen Ubriaco was born December 26, 1937 in Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. He and his wife Nella were married in 1962. The Ubriaco clan includes daughter Francine, son Gene, and a large extended family – one that exemplifies the West End’s traditional emphasis placed on family, friends, faith, and a commitment to one’s community.

Gene showed early promise in the Sault’s minor hockey system. After signing his first professional contract with the Toronto Maple Leafs’ minor league affiliate (Toronto St. Michaels Majors), in 1958 Gene commenced his professional career with the New Westminster Royals. From 1960 through 1967 (the seasons highlighted in the Gene ‘fun facts’ outlined in the next section), Gene enjoyed American Hockey League (AHL) success with the Rochester Americans, Pittsburgh Hornets, and Hershey Bears.

The 1967 NHL expansion from its ‘Original Six’ to a 12 team league created new playing opportunities for Gene. He was a member of the Pittsburgh Penguins, Oakland Seals, and Chicago Blackhawks before retiring in 1970. Gene’s fine professional career and deep understanding of how to play the game provided the a springboard for his next string of hockey coaching accomplishments. Commencing at Sault Ste Marie’s Lake Superior State (where Gene coached this a perennial elite NCAA hockey program), Gene then became the Pittsburgh Penguins’ bench boss before leading coaching the Italian national team into the 1992 Olympic Winter Games.

He Gene returned to the AHL as the Chicago Wolves first coach and later its director of hockey operations. He became the , becoming the Wolves senior advisor in 2009 – a position Gene retains today. In 2012, Gene was inducted into the Illinois Hockey Hall of Fame, followed by his 2021 National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame induction. Gene's fine career has taken him a long way from the old Sault 'West End' ...

... or is did it? Gene was the product of a remarkably close, cohesive, and supportive community place where talented people so often propelled themselves forward pursuing their ambitions. Successful individuals like Gene invariably brought immense pride to the entire West End community. The 27 sketches collected here are a loving reciprocity – Gene's boundless affection for his early Sault life radiates from every brushstroke.

### **And a 'What if'? Gene Ubriaco as a 29 year old NHL free agent ... today**

It is only fitting that where someone's life and sporting career are inextricably linked that homage is paid to their talent, drive, and determination to succeed. Long time professional sports' observer and Tagona Press contributor Thomas Davies had some fun assembling Gene's career statistics and then analysing them to determine what Gene would likely earn today as a 29 year old NHL unrestricted free agent (UFA) forward (Gene played left wing and centre throughout his career). Thomas selected this notional age as a calculation / projection baseline because the current average NHL free agent player is age is 29.\*

When Gene commenced his pro hockey career in the NHL's 'Original Six' era (the 1960-1961 season), its main American Hockey League farm system (the American Hockey League) had nine teams – meaning that the top two professional leagues had 15 teams in total. The NHL today is a 32 team organization.

In the 1960s, even talented players like Gene might spend most, if not all of their professional careers with AHL teams. Crucially, NHL free agency was not permitted until the 1988 NHL – Players Association agreement allowed a limited free agency mechanism. In 1967, NHL owners thus exercised remarkable control over player contracts. In the 1988 NHL—Players' Association collective agreement, players could exercise free agency rights for the first time in league history. Reduced ownership ability to limit player movements triggered increasingly lucrative playing contracts, no trade

\*As confirmed by numerous hockey specific web sources, including NHL.com

clauses, enhanced retirement pension benefits - an modern day professional athlete's Nirvana compared to when Gene was playing in the old AHL and NHL circuits.

At the same time, in 1967 over 98 percent of all NHL and AHL players were Canadian (the rest were US-born). In 2025, the NHL players' demographic distribution is: 42.5 percent Canadian, 27.4 percent Americans, and 27.1 percent 'international' players (mostly European-born).<sup>\*</sup> European players did not arrive in the NHL until 1973. American hockey (notably NCAA and elite youth development programs) has significantly improved over the past 40 years. Greater North American professional opportunities exist for players today (32 NHL teams) than during Gene's playing career. European professional leagues have expanded over time—another playing avenue that was limited before 1980. Conversely, there is greater competition for NHL spots from US and international players today—all factors that Thomas Davies accounted for in his 'Gene' analysis.

Interestingly, in 1967 an average NHL or AHL team scored 2.98 goals per game (GPG). In 2025, NHL teams average scoring was 3.01 GPG—a virtual tie. Goaltending and defence today have therefore placed a premium on skilled play-making forwards like Gene. A final physical element ... Gene played at 5' 8" and 160 lb., a small player by today's standards. This size factor also influences how 29 year old Gene would fair today as an NHL free agent.

## **Analysis: Gene Ubriaco – projected 2026 UFA**

### *AHL - 1967*

Gene's seven AHL seasons prior to 1967-68: 452 games played / 408 points / **.903** points per game (PPG)

AHL forwards average PPG over the same period: **.55**

Gene's three NHL seasons (1967 to 1970) :177 games played / 74 points

For macro comparison purposes, Gene's AHL PPG totals would rank 120th in the all time NHL points scoring rankings. Only 10 players with more than .90 PPG played in the pre-1967 NHL expansion era.

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<sup>\*</sup>James Mirtle, 'Analyzing 2025-26 NHL teams by age, height, weight and nationality' *The Atlantic* (October 2025)

*NHL 2025*

NHL left winger average: **.49** PPG

NHL center averaged: **.51** PPG

*NHL free agency – 2025 (all figures are USD)*

Average forward average annual value (AAV): \$3.8 million

Median AAV: \$3.7 million\*

## **Our ‘fun facts’ conclusion**

Sport statistics and player comparisons provide wonderful opportunities for fans everywhere to ask the eternal question – ‘what if? Anyone who has ever debated questions such as ‘How would Wayne Gretzky, Bobby Hull, Bobby Orr, or Gordie Howe rate if they played today’ knows that individual statistics, the player’s competitive era, and good old personal preferences are always influential.

Taking all the variables identified here into account, it seems likely that in 2025, a 29 year old UFA Gene Ubriaco would have earned ‘top six’ NHL forward status and earn between 3.2 and 3.9 million AAV today on a three year contract. “Bryan, we didn’t play in the NHL – it was the NCL ... the ‘No Cash League!’” - a line followed by more contagious laughter ...

We hope that this statistical spin on Gene’s playing career gives our readers another perspective on Gene's West End art. After all, it was Gene the professional athlete, coach, hockey executive, and devoted family member who is also Gene the talented visual artist.

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\*The ‘average’ versus median NHL salary differs because large salaries such as Edmonton Oiler’s star Connor McDavid (\$14 million AAV) distorts the average upwards.

## The West End Collection

Appreciating the scope and subtlety of Gene Ubriaco's art does not require a strictly chronological presentation. He would sketch pieces from time to time inspired by his memory alone, working without the aid of period photographs or similar materials. Gene often created these works when 'on the road' during his professional hockey career. For this reason, the collection is presented as a series of interconnected themes. West End and other Sault Ste Marie street scenes, sporting events, or iconic community institutions are grouped together. This Collection thematic approach is inspired by how Frank Sarlo depicted the 'West End' in his 2024 work cited above, particularly in Fank's Book Four, 'Memories of the West End'.

Gene had no formal art training prior to commencing his adult life long sketching career. His 'doodles' characterization included in the Collection Introduction is delightfully modest and self-effacing. By its nature, 'doodling' conveys a sense of fun, light heartedness, even providing a doodler with a brief escape from life's day to day pressures. When we recall that Gene often sketched in his hotel room when travelling during his hockey playing, coaching, and club senior executive career, the fact that his familiar 'West End' sights, sounds, smells, and street life would inspire these works is not surprising. Even the most contented and self-assured individuals have memory triggers that even decades later that seem so real - "I remember it just like yesterday!" Gene's works were created in this fine, nostalgic spirit.

These Collection images may be doodles or seemingly simple drawings when given a first cursory glance. For those who know what the 'West End' was in its 1950s heyday, Gene's doodles are a remarkable treasure trove of important City history. His recollections of shops, food stores, annual festivals, and the general pace of West End life and times are at once formidable and compelling—a finely crafted folk art tapestry divided into 27 panels.

Collection Part 1 is pure West End, a series of recollections that Gene has refashioned into vignettes comprising the larger community history. In Part 2, the images reflect how Gene's Sault life became extended as the Ubriaco family grew with the City into the 1970s and 1980s. A Christmastime 2024 sketch of Precious Blood Cathedral brings Gene's work full circle.

## Part 1 – The Old Neighbourhood



Albert Street, 1940s

Albert Street was a main old West End north - south commercial thoroughfare, an area bounded by Gore Street (east), Algoma Steel (West Street plant entrance), CPR railway tracks (north), and the St. Mary's River Canal (south).



### Practice at the Gardens, 1950s

The Sault's Memorial Gardens (1949) was a part of the bustling Queen Street West district that had initially extended eastward from the traditional West End boundaries after 1910. A typically busy winter street scene where a City bus, taxicab, young hockey players, shoppers, and now long gone commercial enterprises are prominent.



### Dominion Day, 1960s

A vibrant, colourful James Street scene on the annual July 1st holiday. Bunting, banners, open market stalls, and pedestrians all part of this lively, festive streetscape. The West End was well known for its wide array of grocery stores and specialty food shops - this image captures several notable ones, such the 'Red & White' store.



### **Our Lady of Caramel Church, 1950s**

Founded in 1910 at Cathcart and Allan streets as Our Lady's Church, this Roman Catholic institution played a particularly significant role in West End community life until its 2010 closure – another aspect of this bustling, lively Sault district. As the sketch inscription confirms, Gene created this image in 2013.



### Community Night, July 21 1953

Community celebrations were much anticipated events in the post-World War II era. Busy streets, parade floats, and lots of colour in the Sault summer months. The floats were simple, the Queen Street crowds were cheerful and enthusiastic - a fun, inclusive West End time. On the 'Mino Pezutto and the Merry-men' float, Gene's father was playing guitar.



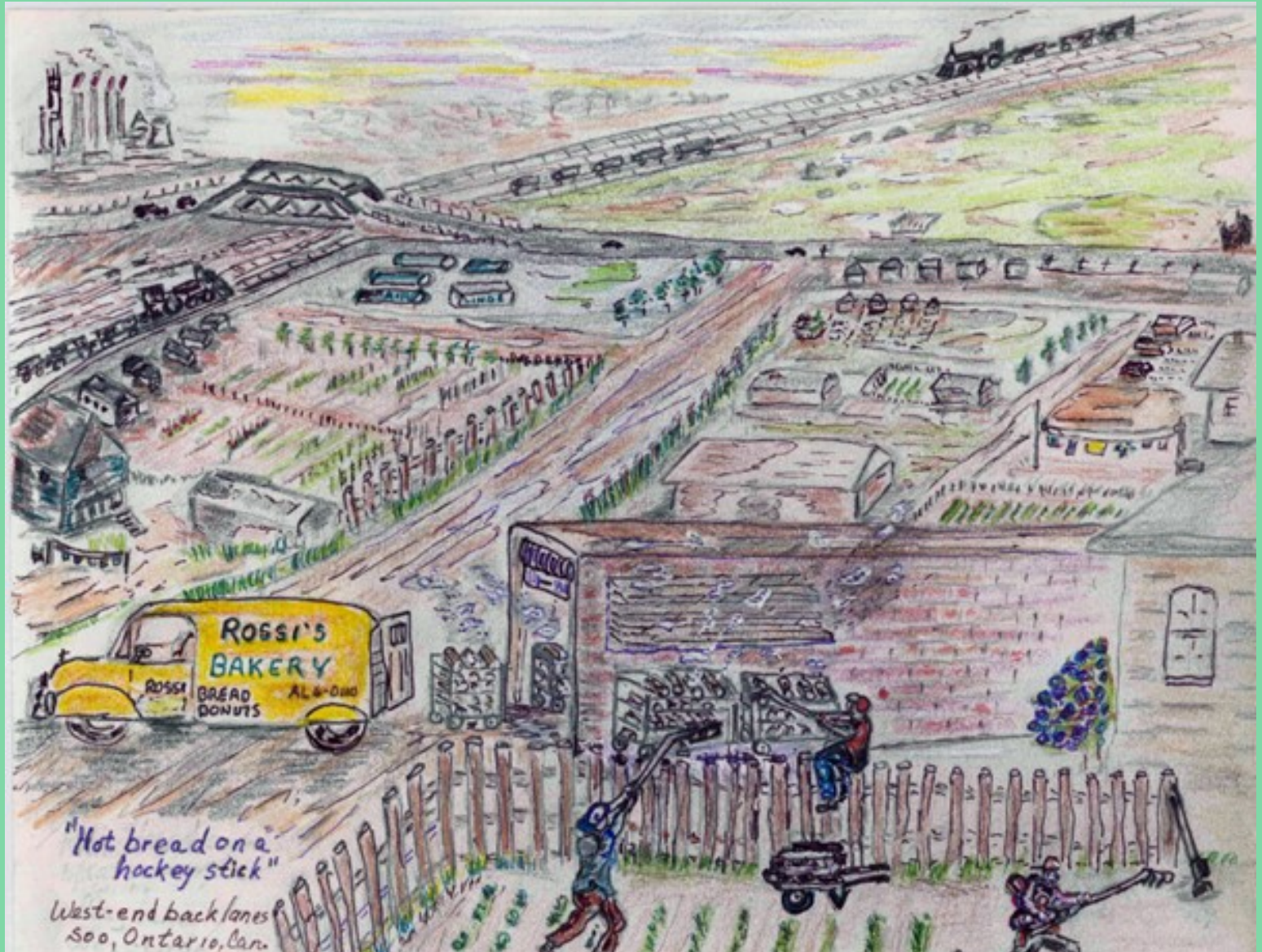
### James Street Rink, 1940s

This famed Sault outdoor facility was a second home to many West End hockey players. Gene Ubriaco and fellow NHLers Lou Nanne, Phil Esposito, and Tony Esposito all played here as youngsters. A small potbellied stove that heated the little rink shack was the players' Godsend on cold winter evenings.



### Marconi Hall Memory, 1950s

Where Our Lady of Mount Caramel was a West End spiritual epicentre, the Marconi Hall represented its cultural community counterpart – a hive of activity and connectivity for young and old alike. Boxer Joey Brunette was a Sault legend - Ontario 'Golden Gloves' Bantamweight champion and later a pro fighter.



### Hot bread on a hockey stick, 1940s

‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way’ – crafty West End boys using their hockey skills off ice to score some baking treats. There is a wonderful, zany story depicted here. The City’s best known sporting equipment (hockey sticks) used for youthful subterfuge - although Rossi’s Bakery may have seen it differently.



### Sault Memorial Gardens, 1949

Today only the iconic Memorial Tower remains from the original Gardens structure. It was the first Northern Ontario arena with an artificial ice surface. The Detroit Red Wings NHL team had a large City following, due in part to the Red Wings annual preseason training camps being held 'across the River' in Sault, Michigan, between 1948 and 1958.



### **A West End Christmas Scene, circa 1950**

A hotel, horse drawn sleds, homes, hockey, industry, and the impressive Church – the West End physical area spanned only 0.45 square miles (1.2 km<sup>2</sup>, 288 acres). Horse drawn wagons remained a West End street feature into the 1950s.



### **A West End Tradesman, 1940s**

Long before specialty appliance shops were commonplace, mobile tradesmen were a feature of West End commercial life. The streets were safe and accessible,. They readily accommodated all kinds of traffic - cars, trucks, horses, wagons, and pedestrians - busy yet never overcrowded.



### **Rolling the Rink, James Street 1940s**

Everybody pitched in throughout long Sault winters to keep the James Street rink surface smooth for what was often nonstop, sun up to sundown hockey





### Night Hockey, James and Albert Streets, 1940s

The West End boys' hockey passions were not confined to the James Street Rink and Memorial Gardens – snowy winter streets were popular alternatives. Playing under the street lights, dodging the occasional vehicle, and braving the cold were all part of the fun.



**‘Chop to Cement’ – First day of Spring, James Street, early 1950s**

Long, cold Sault Ste Marie winters meant months of steady ice and snow accumulation along the West End streets – clearing them off to the pavement surface meant that Spring was near.



### Queen Street, 1950s

A busy winter scene plays out along this prominent Sault commercial district. Its then thriving businesses included the Algoma Theatre, Lawrence's Drug Store, and Rooney & Mervyn. The Doran's truck was part of Doran's Brewery, established in 1907. Doran's would eventually become Northern Breweries, North America's first employee-owned brewing cooperative (1977).



### **Last Out! West End Field, 1950s**

Hockey has long dominated the Sault winter sports scene, but summertime baseball has long secured its own prominence in the City's cultural history. The Empire and New Toronto hotels across the street were often targeted for liquor licensing offences - notably serving working men earlier or later than permitted under restrictive post World War II laws.



### **‘A Sunday Afternoon’ on James Street, 1950s**

The post-World War II period (1945 through the early 1950s) was a prosperous one for many James Street businesses – and the beginning of the end, as the 1958 Highline Bridge closure changed the West End traffic patterns forever. Commercial traffic fell, and the once vibrant Jamestown area declined.



### West End Parade, 1950s

Another much anticipated West End celebration that now exists as an evocative community memory. By the later 1950s, West End demographics had changed. Many of the second and third generation families that built and sustained a West End community identity moved away into other, newer City districts.



### Backyard, 1950s

Even a small West End house could provide room for a makeshift hockey rink where youthful sporting enthusiasm was always on display. In this period, television was rapidly gaining popularity, but children and adolescents were far more inclined to play outdoors in all four seasons.

## Part 2 - Other Times and Places



**A Sault Christmas Scene, 1970s**

Gene's family operated their successful Ubriaco's 'Take Home Italian Eatery Pizza' at Trunk Road and Pim Street locations. Where the West End food stores and eateries in Gene's youth were all independently owned, there is irony in Ubriaco's being flanked by two nationally known franchise operations.



### Hope Your Santa Delivers! Trunk Road, Sault Ste Marie, 1970s

Trunk Road (an extension of TransCanada Highway 17) emerged as the City's main east – west artery when the Sault's commercial community began migrating north from its traditional Queen Street roots. This scene also captures an Ubriacos extended family feature: Chuck Gassi ('Chuck's Pizza') is Gene's ('Ubie's) son-in-law.



Ubrico Family Christmas Whimsy, 2008

The entire extended Ubrico – Gassi family and their pizza businesses are captured in this sketch

## Sudbury District Scenes



### Copper Cliff, 1950s

The famed nickel mining town is now part of Greater Sudbury – and the birthplace of NHL legend and Hall of Famer George Armstrong (1927-2021), a Gene Ubriaco playing career contemporary



### **Garson Mine, 1940s**

First developed in 1908, Garson has been a major player in the Sudbury region nickel industry throughout its history. Near Northeastern Ontario neighbours (approximately 3 hours apart by road), Sudbury and the Sault are longtime, often bitter Ontario Hockey League (OHL) rivals.



### Pittsburgh 'The Igloo,' 1961

This unique arena housed the AHL Pittsburgh Hornets (Gene was a 1961-1962 Hornet). The Pittsburgh Penguins called the Igloo home until 2010. Gene played for and later coached the Penguins here. Penguins legend Mario Lemieux had his best ever scoring season under Gene's tutelage (1988-1989, 199 points).

### Part 3 – The Final Word



#### Precious Blood Cathedral, Sault Ste Marie 2024

Precious Blood Cathedral (established in 1878) is the only Sault Roman Catholic church that predates the West End's Our Lady of Carmel Church (1910).



Central United Church, Sault Ste Marie 2025

An 'East End church constructed between 1911 and 1913, with its large, imposing structure built from red tinged Sault sandstone quarried in the St Marys Canal during hydro-electric power plant construction period.

## Epilogue

One does not need to have strong West End roots or even any specific Sault Ste Marie associations to appreciate Gene Ubriaco's art and its subtle, compelling power. Our Collection readers will likely conclude that Gene's playful dismissal of these works as mere 'doodles' is modesty personified – but creating true, compelling art does not necessarily involve years of labour to acquire fundamental importance. There are no blueprints or templates for telling good stories in pictures or words – just passion and talent.

Gene's West End images and his wider Sault memories depicted in this Collection have not been filtered or softened by his undoubted love for the place that helped make him. Gene continues to make outstanding contributions to family, the game, and his community. The West End neighborhood's story is presented through Gene's unique creative lens, just as Frank Sarlo described this same 'Magical Place' in fine, detailed prose. One can only hope that the West End ethos and its community spirit will live forever.

