



# NORTHERN MICHIGAN IN WATERCOLOR

## *The Art of Clara Moon*



A scene from Grand Traverse County, on the road to Elk Rapids—created by Clara Moon prior to 1970. (All photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise noted.)

*By Gretchen Carr*

*Many artists are attracted to the natural beauty of Northern Michigan. For American Regionalist painter Clara Moon, Grand Traverse County was not only a place to launch a successful career as an artist but also an area to which she felt profoundly connected. Having grown up in the countryside near Traverse City, Moon mourned the destruction of old barns and farmhouses and sought to preserve the relics of a bygone era in her work.*



Clara Moon (left) sought out beautiful scenes to capture in paint. Here, she poses beside her work and a friend in Fishtown in Leland, Michigan.



Clara Moon knew that she was an artist from a young age. She is pictured here at ten years old in 1928.



The year is 1926. Eight-year-old Clara Fromholz stands within a patch of raspberries. Before her is a field of wheat bordering her grandparents' farm. Wind sweeps across the field, causing the stalks to sway back and forth. The movement of the waving wheat against the morning sun inspires young Fromholz, and she ponders how to interpret it in her own way. Decades would pass before she would realize the importance of this moment.

Fromholz's immediate surroundings had become her identity. Like other American Regionalist artists, she painted subjects that told stories. Her main characters included an abandoned barn, a canning jar filled with fruit, a single onion, and an empty country school. Her subjects represented her rural heritage, which resonated in her work.

## A Rural Upbringing

Fromholz was born on her family farm. Her parents, William and Frances, were born to German immigrants in the United States.

Yearning for their own land, Fromholz's paternal grandparents, Ferdinand and Johanna, fled Germany in 1872. After an arduous journey with three young children, they arrived at the port of New York.

They resided in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, for a short time before learning that the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad was calling for settlers in Northern Michigan. The family answered the call and acquired 80 acres south of Traverse City. The home that they built on their property was a true example of pioneer spirit. Still standing today, it is honored as a Michigan Centennial Farm.

Fromholz's maternal grandparents, Antone and Mary Limberger, had also both emigrated from Germany. After meeting and marrying in Southern Michigan, they moved to Traverse City, where they managed a boardinghouse for the Greilickville Lumber Company. In 1894, they purchased approximately 60 acres just south of the city—about one mile

from the home of Ferdinand and Johanna Fromholz.

Mary and Johanna became good friends and encouraged the match of their children, Frances and William, who married in 1908. Together with their five children—including Clara—the pair established and maintained a productive farm. William's cash crop was potatoes, but the family also grew corn, oats, wheat, strawberries, and raspberries. Later on, they planted contract pickles and beans, as well as hay.

Because the Fromholzes were self-sustaining, they did not experience the financial hardship that many Americans did during the Great Depression but rather became a resource for others. Fromholz's mother and grandmothers were reputable cooks and hosts—known for their preparation of generous spreads, attractively set with fine linens and place settings. During the Depression, it was not uncommon for friends and relatives in town to come by and request food, and the family always shared what they could.



Ferdinand and Johanna Fromholz's Grand Traverse County home, painted in 1987 by Clara Moon. (Photo courtesy of Don and Sally Eichberger.)

As a young girl, Fromholz was expected to assist with the daily upkeep of the farm along with her two sisters and two brothers. Their chores included watching cows, attending to new plants, gathering eggs, cleaning and filling kerosene lamps, and picking potatoes during the annual “potato digging vacation”—a term recognized and made official by the local country school. One of Fromholz’s primary responsibilities was running errands for her grandparents. She often delivered their mail, which included a monthly German newspaper and letters from relatives in Southern Michigan.

## A Budding Artist

Much of Fromholz’s early learning took place at the one-room Haney School, located two-thirds of a mile from her home. Each grade’s recitations were heard by the whole room, and as a result, all of the schoolchildren—who ranged in age from 6 to 14—were exposed to geography, spelling, math, penmanship, and history.

Later, while attending Traverse City High School, Fromholz enrolled in college-preparatory courses and aspired to become a country schoolteacher. When the county’s normal schools consolidated in 1935, Fromholz realized that her dream was no longer a possibility and decided to enroll in secretarial courses after graduation.

Since paper was a rarity at home, Fromholz would often sketch and paint on paper bags. Although her parents were aware of her artistic abilities, it is unclear whether she had yet shared her desire to be an artist with them.

Following graduation, Fromholz worked at the J.C. Penney department store in downtown Traverse City, where she met William “Bill” Moon. The two

married within a year of their first meeting, in April 1938 at her parents’ home. The Moons’ first year of marriage was spent in St. Ignace, Michigan, where Bill worked on a car ferry between St. Ignace and Mackinaw City.

In 1940, after the birth of their first child, they moved to the working-class Detroit suburb of Ferndale, where Bill spent the bulk of his career working at Ethyl Corporation. Clara shifted her creative energies to the work of motherhood and homemaking. She felt fortunate to be able to return to Traverse City with their four children each summer to stay at her husband’s family cottage on the Old Mission Peninsula.

Once Moon’s children had grown, the pursuit of art became the primary focus of her life. She enrolled in design, drawing, and painting courses with instructors from Wayne State University (WSU). During that time, she became a member of notable arts associations in the Detroit area, including the Detroit Palette and Brush Club, serving on the organization’s board from 1963 to 1965. Artists and art professors from the University of Michigan and WSU frequented the club for talks and critiques. The social aspect of juried exhibitions, classes, and presentations brought Moon great satisfaction and prompted her to try new techniques and mediums.

Soon after joining the Palette and Brush Club, Moon first encountered Lewis King. A fellow artist, King had studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and the College for Creative Studies in Detroit. His watercolors of abandoned farms with titles such as *Just Rusting* and *Against the Bitter Wind* resonated with Moon.



William and Clara Moon (center) on their wedding day in April 1938. Clara’s brother, Harold Fromholz (left), and William’s cousin, Beverly Tiege (right), accompany the newlywed couple in this photo.

While visiting one of King’s exhibits, Moon inscribed the following on a promotional brochure: “This is the artist I’m taking from now—Don’t you like his subjects? He says the scenery (barns and farmsteads) is passing all too fast and he can’t paint fast enough to capture it before it’s gone.” Moon’s ability to convey her sentiment and reverence for rural life was taking shape, and her colleagues would soon begin to take notice.

## Field and Way

In 1974, the Moons returned to Traverse City, where they built a Bavarian-style home in the center of an 80-acre woodland swamp. For the first time, Clara had her own studio, which she named *Feld und Weg*—German for “Field and Way.” She found inspiration in the subjects within her immediate surroundings, such as barns, native flora and fauna, the flowers she grew, and the vegetables she raised in her garden.

One local art critic remarked on how Moon’s placement of flowers





Clara Moon (far left) with members of the Detroit Palette and Brush Club in 1967. She served on the organization's board from 1963 to 1965.

within their environment allowed the viewer to escape into the scene. Such feedback from her peers motivated Moon to pursue her craft with determined energy and commitment, especially when it came to landscapes.

Within a few miles of Moon's residence, a large farm was sold to make way for a new resort complex, so off she went to sketch the structure before it was demolished. After many similar artistic outings, she would tell stories of curious drivers pulling over to talk to her about the changing landscape. On those occasions, she often received offers to purchase her work.

Shortly after moving to Traverse City, Moon was featured in her first solo exhibition. Local journalist Betty Bader of the *Petoskey News-Review* wrote a feature story on Moon's work. In the article, she was quoted as saying, "One of the nostalgic sights you see these days

as you pass through the country is a parade of abandoned barns and farm buildings...In so many cases the fields no longer yield crops and a barn or abandoned house looks out with eyeless glaze. A barn—his house—was a monument to the farmer's industry, the individual—his loss of freedom—man cannot make a living on his own today, with his own initiative, industry as he once did but must remain a servant to a big corporation. When you see a farmhouse, old fashioned though it may be, that has no human life within it, and a barn behind that has no animal life within, you see in essence the American pathway of peril from simplicity to complexity."

Bader stated that Moon wanted everyone to remember man's historical ability to make his way using his own individual industry, adding that her paintings captured the bit of Americana that could remind people of how life once was.

In the late 1970s, Moon joined the Northwest Michigan Artists and Craftsmen, the region's first artist organization. Moon soon became a fixture within the group, teaching watercolor with a focus on rural subjects and volunteering as a host for many exhibitions. The exhibitions attracted jurors and artists of note, including Ingrid and Larry Lien—both faculty members of the visual arts department at Interlochen Arts Academy.

At the time, the art scene in Grand Traverse County was expanding, with many artists owning independent galleries and the region's surrounding villages hosting summer art fairs. The art department of Northwestern Michigan College became a breeding ground for artists of nationally and world-renowned stature, culminating in the opening of the Dennon Museum in 1991.

That energy invigorated Moon, and she felt that "a day without painting was a day wasted." Much of her time was spent exploring the region, sketching abandoned homesteads and barns before returning to her studio to paint. Moon described those subjects as "sometimes defiant, sometimes bittersweet, and sometimes pitiful in appearance when they are left to show the destruction of time." With that deep personal statement, her mission to capture such impermanent reminders of times past was clearly defined. Many of the barns and farmscapes she painted between 1975 and 1999 were demolished to make way for commercial development.

Moon's work soon gained the attention of prominent regional artists and, even more importantly, patrons. In a local review, juror and artist Jack Ozegovic described her paintings of the passing rural landscape as haunting. Her works



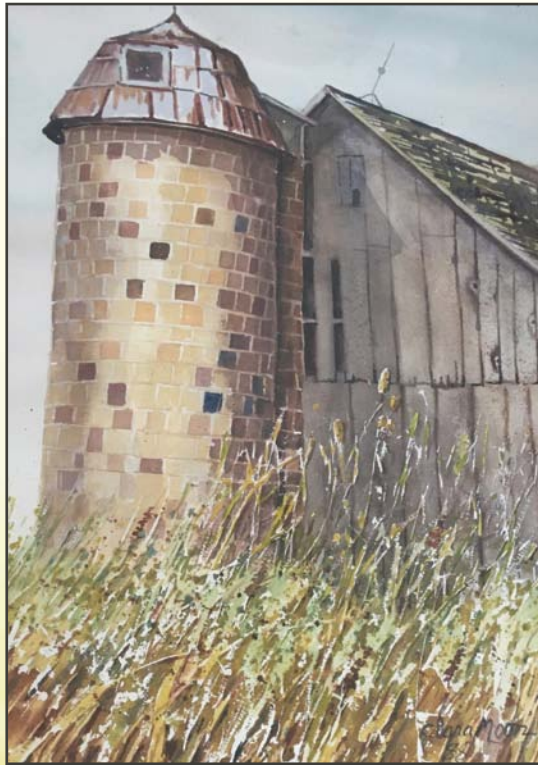
received honored recognition among the regional artist community, winning several first-place awards at juried shows and events. One notable painting, titled *Requiem for a Dairy Barn*, received the People's Choice Award given by the Northwest Michigan Artists and Craftsmen in the fall of 1980.

## Passing Landscapes

Moon often stated the obvious when titling her work, referencing the name of a barn or farm's owner. Bill was a strong supporter of her art, and Clara would often invite him to collaborate on names for her paintings. Sometimes, the titles would convey the perceived feelings felt by the structures or their onlookers. For example, *Undaunted*, painted in 1988, depicts a silo standing up against a neglected, wood-sided barn. Though some of the barn's boards are missing, the structure is held up and strengthened by the confident silo—which gives the barn a certain hope in the face of possible demolition.

The more abstract or comical titles were often given by Bill, a voracious reader of many subjects. *Needed Funds* was the name given to a painting of an old telegraph pole. *Snafu* described a large mesh bag of white onions—some sprouting with their tails becoming intertwined. By the time Bill passed away in the fall of 1992, Clara's reputation as a watercolorist had been firmly established in the region. In his final days, Bill implored Clara to continue painting. She did not know that the years ahead would be her most productive as an artist.

Before Bill's passing, Clara had connected closely with a group of six women watercolorists who painted the region's landscapes. As the founder of the group, Moon



Above: A silo lends strength to a dilapidated barn in this work, titled *Undaunted*, painted by Moon in 1988. (Photo courtesy of Don and Sally Eichberger.)

Below: The November 24, 1980, issue of the *Traverse City Record-Eagle* depicted Moon with her prize-winning painting, *Requiem for a Dairy Farm*. The watercolor won the People's Choice Award at the Northwest Michigan Artists and Craftsmen show earlier that month. (Photo courtesy of the Traverse City Record-Eagle.)



Painted in 1987, Clara Moon's *Snafu* claimed multiple ribbons in a Traverse City competition.





In this 1993 photo, Clara Moon (center) paints alongside members of the Northwest Michigan Watercolorists—a group of six female artists who painted regional landscapes. The club, which met and held annual shows for 15 years, was founded by Moon.

met with her colleagues to paint and support each other's work and exhibits for 15 years. Each year, they held a collective show called "Images of Traverse." Those annual exhibits helped secure Moon's reputation as *the* artist who was recording the passing rural landscape of the Grand Traverse region. It was a marked point in her career when it was common for her to receive letters from the descendants of farmers requesting commissioned pieces. As the subject matter was of great interest to Moon, the resulting work did not disappoint her patrons.

One of Moon's last paintings was of the Port Oneida Schoolhouse located within the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Painted by Moon at the age of 90 in 2008, the work was the featured image for the wedding invitation of one of her

granddaughters. Her brushes and palette were soon after put away.

In her final years of life, Moon resided at her husband's family cottage on the Old Mission Peninsula. Her door was always open to friends and family, the latter of which included her 4 children, 13 grandchildren, 27 great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandson.

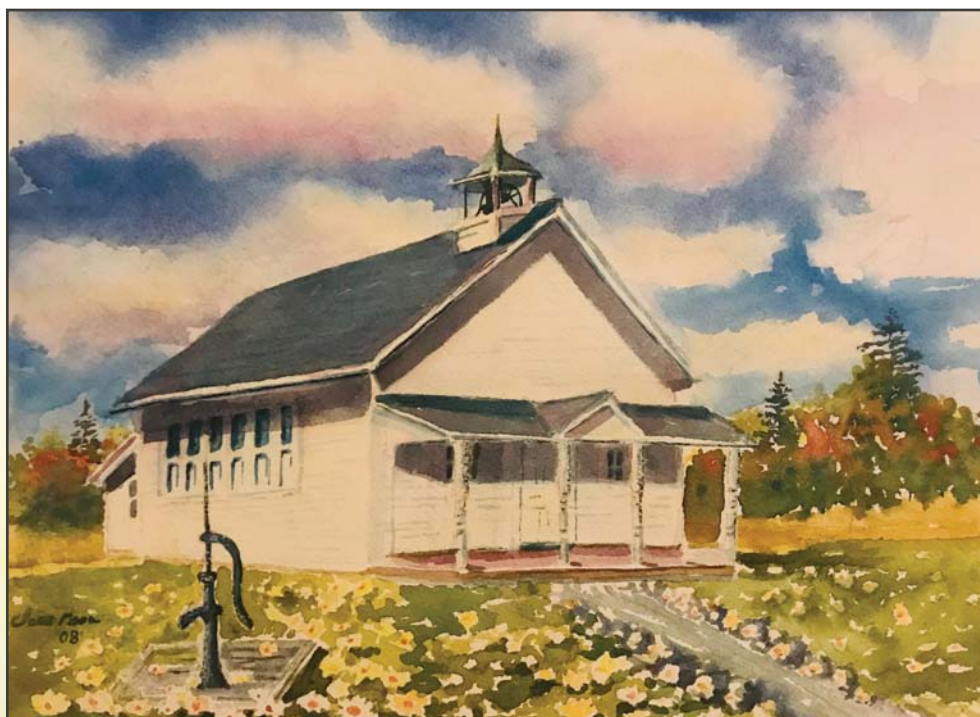
In June 2020, Moon passed away surrounded by her family at the age of 102. She was laid to rest alongside her husband at a cemetery nestled within the pastoral hills and valleys of Ellsworth, Michigan—the place where Bill had spent his boyhood years. To the east of their grave site stands the frame of a gambrel barn, built into the hillside. Most of the vertical board siding has been destroyed by the elements, exposing the hand-hewn beams and

the farmhouse on the opposite side. The fieldstone foundation proudly holds what is left of the monument, paying tribute to a time and a place that is no longer—and perhaps to an artist who made it her mission to preserve such places forever.

From the moment she stood in her parents' field at the age of eight, observing the swaying wheat fields, Moon knew that she was an artist. Her paintings were a simple expression of longing for a landscape that honored the industriousness of the individual. 🇺🇸

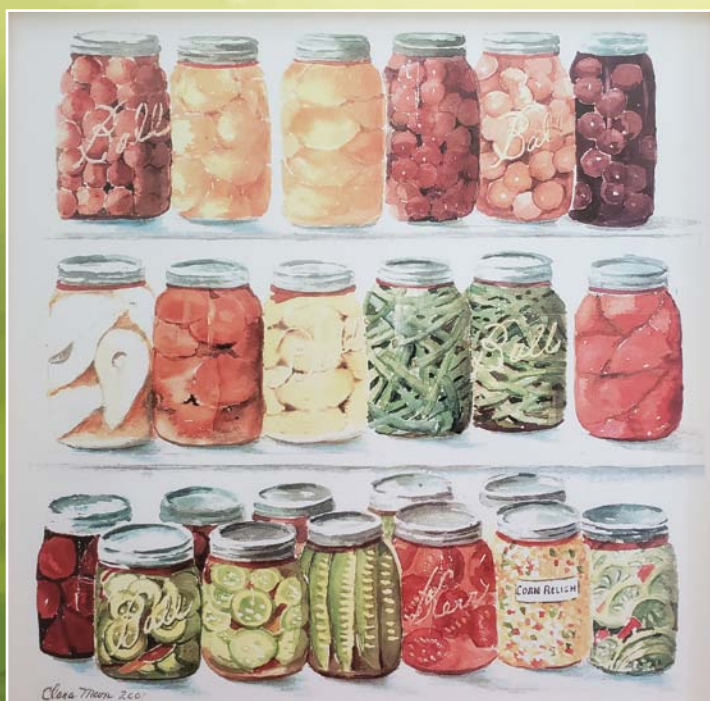
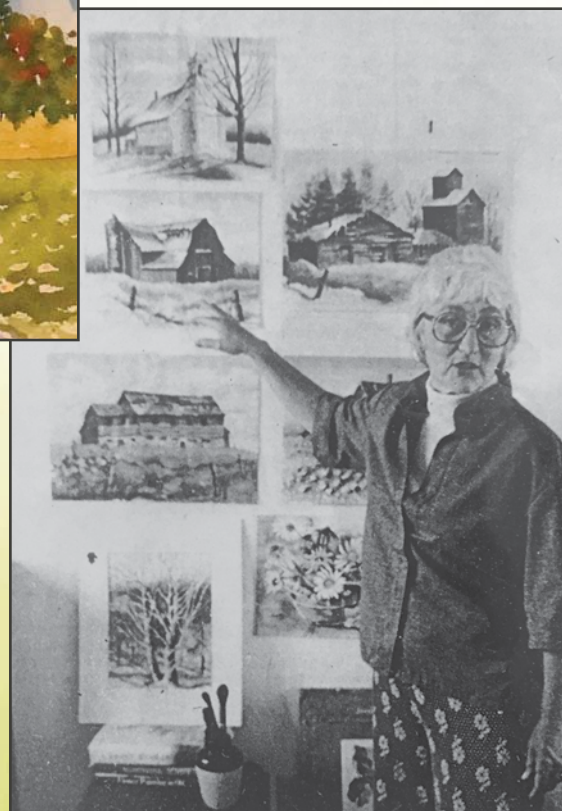
**Gretchen E. Carr** is a cultural historian, writer, and voice-over artist residing in Traverse City, Michigan. She is the fifth grandchild of Clara Moon.





Above: Moon's 2008 painting of the Port Oneida Schoolhouse in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore was one of her last. The work was featured on the wedding invitation of one of her granddaughters. (Photo courtesy of Sarah Eichberger and Jacob Wheeler.)

Below: The *Traverse City Record-Eagle* printed this picture of Moon with several of her works ahead of the 1979 Summer Show. (Photo courtesy of the Traverse City Record-Eagle.)



Above: Colorful jars display a bounty of farm-fresh fruits and vegetables in this 2001 painting by Clara Moon. (Photo courtesy of Karl and Rebecca Eichberger.) Right: A Grand Traverse County maple shack waits expectantly as sap drips into buckets hung on nearby trees. Moon captured this early-spring scene in 1988. (Photo courtesy of Senator George McManus.)

