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Earlton's Pamela Swainson shows off a piece of her work created during a seven-week artist residency in Iceland. The blue depict family members who still live in Iceland, while the red are those who moved to North America.

Raissa Tetanish photo

# An invigorating visit

## Earlton artist shares experience of seven-week residency in Iceland

By Raissa Tetanish

Sometimes you just have to wait and let your inspiration come to you.

That's what Pamela Swainson, an artist residing in Earlton, told a packed house at the Tatamagouche library regarding her seven weeks spent in Iceland.

"This visit inspired me to take some real experimentation with my watercolours and I was excited where that could take me," said Swainson. From the middle of October into November, Swainson spent a seven-week artist residency, with assistance from Arts Nova Scotia, in Northern Iceland. She started by visiting family in Reykjavik before travelling to Akureyri for the month of November at the Gilfelag Artist Residency.

"My interest in doing the artist residency in Northern Ireland was to do a project related to the massive out migration of Icelanders around the turn of the 20th century to (mostly) North America," she said prior to the talk. "My grandparents – all of them – were part of it. As it turns out, I also discovered extensive family still in Iceland, and many in Akureyri."

The artist said she wanted to learn about all of this, and the lingering repercussions such loss entails.

She told those gathered about her plan before leaving for Iceland – "to paint all these hours and come home with so many paintings."

Things changed, however, and she visited with a cousin – a teacher and principal – whose interest in

art has grown.

"Because painting was still relatively new (to Iceland), she knew some of the artists," she said, adding they had a blast visiting artists and seeing others' works.

This was Swainson's third trip to Iceland, and the longest one. She had already met some of her family, and this trip allowed her to meet even more. She said growing up, her family didn't speak much of the family left behind in Iceland.

"But we didn't think that was strange. There were some letters back and forth, so part of my project was to meet family and explore. It wasn't just about the people who left," she said.

When it comes to the mass migration, Swainson thinks about refugees coming to Canada now and what it means to them in the long term.

"My great-grandmother, when her children were adults, six left for North America and she never saw them again."

Thousands left Iceland around 1850, following a warmer time in Iceland. The population grew before things took a turn for the worse – two volcanoes and an ice pack. There wasn't enough food for everyone, and many chose to leave.

"There were many cases where not every family member left," she said.

Swainson said her great-grandmother was leaving Iceland with her family, however a son was sick and wasn't able to board the boat. The artist said the great-

grandmother had to make a tough decision, and she chose to leave him with strangers.

"There was always a sadness with her. She never got over it. When she was about 80, he came to see her. As a child, he waited for her to come get him."

Along with meeting family and learning more about why Icelanders left, Swainson continued with her artistic abilities.

"I hadn't been using watercolours for years. I was getting frustrated with it," she admitted. "I started to do some of what I had done before and I wasn't happy with how it was going."

Swainson said she wasn't sure why, but it seemed like the quality of the paint wasn't where it used to be.

"I talked to an artist across the street and he felt the same way, but he loved to do plein air," she said. Plein air is painting outdoors, where a painter reproduces the conditions seen at the time of the painting.

"Something about the conversation with him...started to shift something for me. The sun, mountains and clouds played with my mind."

Swainson left most of the paintings done in Iceland behind, including one of another cousin's daughter.

"I felt like what I was bringing back was in my heart."

One of the pieces she did return with, however, was a banner featuring two groups of people. Those in blue were her family in Iceland, while the other end of the banner featured some in red – those who now live in North America. Between them, a boat carrying people out to sea.



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