

Perception of death exhibit at Cobblestone

4-15-10

BY C. W. LATTIN
Orleans County Historian

Perception of "Death" is the title of a new exhibit now mounted in the Danolds Room at the Cobblestone Museum.

Its first viewing will take place Monday at a conference being held in Childs. It is perhaps the subtitle of this exhibit that is more descriptive: "The Ubiquitous Victorian Shadow Box." Webster's dictionary defines shadowbox as "a shallow enclosing case usually with a glass front in which something is set for protection and display." Likewise, Webster defines ubiquitous as "exhibiting or being everywhere at the same time."

During the second half of the 19th century in the Victorian era, the shadowbox was a staple in many a home parlor setting. The exhibit "Perception of Death" shows more than 20 Victorian shadow boxes with a variety of well-preserved items of no particular theme. The range is broad, including religious figures and memorial items such as human hair, stuffed birds, wedding-related mementos, handicraft work and a stuffed fox. It is this

Vol. XXXII, No. 15

Bethinking of Olde Orleans

item that is of local interest. The story goes that sometime in the 1880s, Francis Harling lay near a fox run in a Barre swamp almost all day before this specimen came along. At the time, Carl Akeley of Clarendon, who was in his late teens or early 20s, was learning techniques of taxidermy under the tutelage of David Bruce from Brockport. Knowing Akeley, Harling purposely procured the fox for him to mount.

The fox is depicted in a large gold-framed shadow box just as he has killed a

partridge. This is one of Akeley's early works as it is signed on the reverse side of the glass, C.E. Akeley, Clarendon.

In the late 19th century, Akeley went on to become the great world renowned African explorer and established African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.

He was noted as being one of the first taxidermists to place specimens in their natural surroundings and traveled with Theodore Roosevelt and George Eastman on several safaris. One of his staunchest supporters was none other than J. Pierpont Morgan.

Unfortunately, Akeley died in his early sixties before he had a chance to complete his life's work.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

This particular fox, however, is testimony to a great man's artistic genius. For many years it hung in the parlor of the Harling residence on East County House Road near Albion. It was then inherited by Walker Harling, son of Francis, and passed on to his daughter Agnes Harling Seager, who kept it

in the attic for more than 40 years.

In 1979, her son John Seager presented this large shadowbox to the Cobblestone Museum in memory of his parents, John and Agnes Seager.

Our picture taken in 1979 shows John Seager with his great-grandfather's fox.