

OUR TOWN



Christmas Card, Whyte Museum

ILLUSTRATION BY **PETER WHYTE**

The 1930s were a simpler time, a time when forest animals would sit patiently at easels learning to paint. A time when bears wore the sort of thick-rimmed black glasses that would later be favoured by architects. A time when moose, although diligent students, were somewhat profligate with their paint.

At least that's the impression conveyed by the Christmas cards sent by Peter and Catharine Whyte started sending to their family and friends soon after settling in Banff, and continued sending for the next 30 years, until 1960. The pen-and-ink images were Peter's work; the letters tucked inside were Catharine's contribution. And if the cards were fanciful—bears do many things in the woods, but landscape painting is not among them—the letters speak of a time when people communicated not by e-mail or acronym-laden text messages, but by handwritten letters.

For Catharine, this was particularly important. Her family was back in Massachusetts (the couple met in 1927 while Peter was studying in Boston), and letters were a lifeline. For researchers who visit the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Catharine's correspondence serves another purpose. "She really brings things to life and includes a lot of intimate details about the things

that were going on in the community," says Katie Daniel, who handles marketing and communications for the museum. Those details include the projects the Whytes were working on, where they had painted that summer and who had visited. These visitors included J.E.H. MacDonald, a member of the Group of Seven, as well as many lesser-known painters. "The Whytes were gracious, open-hearted people who helped out lots of folks, especially if they were interested in the arts," Daniel says.

If you're interested in the cards, some of the originals are included in *Whyte Winter Wonderland*, an exhibit that runs through January and also features 14 new watercolours by Takao Tanabe. If you still can't get enough, the gift shop is selling three collections, each of which contains reproductions of five of Peter's drawings. The sets of 20 cards cost \$24.95. The image above is part of one set. Given Peter and Catharine's generosity and dedication, it is only natural to assume that they were the ones leading this motley group of students.

But while it is tempting to think of them as patron saints of Banff and unflagging lovers of its beautiful winter scenery, the Whytes were only human. For proof, take note of the card—also on sale—that features the couple enjoying a stroll on the beach at Waikiki. **S**