This is still home for
an American art icon

By Tawsha Hubbard

In a modern log cabin in Idabel, complete with a Whippet dog stretched out by the fireplace and surrounded by black and white family photographs from a lifetime, lives one of America’s most important figures of the modern pop art world – Harold Stevenson Jr.

He has been described as one of the art world’s living icons with work that spans almost seven decades. And his work, alongside Andy Warhol and other artists of the time, is part of a generation that was once classified by a 1962 art show in New York City as the New Realists.

Even with all of his fame and successes across Europe and in the United States, Stevenson remains a longtime resident of Idabel. And as he says, he never really left.

“Someone came up to me at the post office recently and this lady said to me, ‘Out of curiosity, Mr. Stevenson, just when did you leave Idabel?’”

I said, ‘Darling, you must be new in town because I never left Idabel.’

“I kept coming back through all of the years, whether I was staying in France, England, Italy, wherever, and in other words, I have always had the same legal address at my family’s home, literally,” said Stevenson.

His family can be described as one of the first pioneer families to arrive in the community “besides the Native Americans.” His grandfather came to the town in 1902, years before Oklahoma was a state.

“Every time, he was a doctor. Doctor Dave Stevenson. I love that name. I think it was just barely called Idabel then. So I think I am just about as native as we can get.”

Stevenson said his family home, which he still owns, was one of the first brick residences in the town.

“There is a funny story about that house. The Wootens were bricklayers and they wanted to start building brick residences for people, so they chose my grandfather.

“They said, ‘Now, Dr. Stevenson, you know the hand-cut bricks are still a little bit cheaper than those machine-cut bricks.’ And my grandfather said, ‘These hand-cut bricks will do just fine.’

“I believe now it is the only home with hand-cut bricks that still exists today,” said Stevenson.

For his parents’ wedding gift, his grandfather gave them the gravel pit outside of Idabel.

“Most of the streets of Idabel were made from my gravel pit,” said Stevenson.

He was born March 11, 1929, to Harold Stevenson Sr. and Mary Jim Stroud Stevenson.

“Her middle name was Jim because her grandmother’s brother was a doctor during the Civil War. He was present to oversee the birth of my mother,” said Stevenson.

“I love history,” he added.

At the age of 10, Stevenson became a serious painter, and he was largely self-taught.

“Up until that time, I wasn’t too serious. I mean, I invented painting for myself. And prior to that I had elocution lessons at age three with the girl who lived across the street from me, Helen Arden. We were performing at age four. I guess the path of my life was already destined for the arts one way or the other,” said Stevenson.

When he entered the second grade, it was then he first decided to become a painter.

“Mrs. Edna Brown, my second-grade teacher, always told a story. She said, ‘Weil, I decided to let Harold to go on drawing because I couldn’t distract him from that.’ She was a wonderful person and she came to visit me when I was living in France, said Stevenson.

“So I began at the house in town.”

Stevenson said he learned all about the art world right in Idabel.

“Well, one of the things that was a great challenge to me was before I went to New York; I already knew what was going on in the art world. I learned through magazines and books. The library in Idabel was very small. But it was amazing how much information could be had by the library.”

Stevenson recalls the history of the library in Idabel.

“During World War I the city built a little house that was lodged in the middle of Central and Main Streets at the crossroads. It had just one door. And when the war was over, they moved this little house as it were onto the courthouse lawn and

(See Stevenson, page two)
Stevenson still calls Idabel home

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it became the first library.

"And as I lived close by, I found my way to the library very quickly. So you know, by WWII it was still there. There was no other library," said Stevenson.

At the age of 10, Stevenson found a way to reach others with his artwork. He opened a studio downtown.

"I sold paintings out of there. I painted all of these people that lived there and that was everybody. People came there like they went to the drugstore, city hall or something," said Stevenson.

He was the only art studio, so everyone came to it like it was a public building — which pleased me. And as they came I painted them. If didn't take me very long to do. I did it fast in my own style of painting. I paint the human figure and I have always been since that first studio," said Stevenson.

When it was time for college, he attended the University of Oklahoma in the 1940s. By 1959 he arrived in New York. It wasn't long before he found himself as part of the New York art scene.

His arrival in New York

"Andy Warhol and I both met when we came to New York in the same year. He was Andy very well," said Stevenson.

He was one of the first people I met. Nobody knew him then.

Stevenson enjoyed success in 1949 with three one-man shows in San Francisco, Dallas, University of Oklahoma, and the Oklahoma Art Center.

It was during this time he helped Warhol get his first exhibition at the Bodley Gallery in New York.

On a trip to France, he decided to stay and in 1959 Stevenson became a resident for 20 years.

"I have lived in France and Italy. But I fell in love with Paris many years ago in the Fifties," said Stevenson.

"This is fair to say: You know, I never did become a New Yorker in spite of all the times I have lived there and whatnot — unlike so many people who go to New York and in two days are really New Yorkers.

"But I did fall in love with Paris. I became a part of that life. In the late 1950s, all through the Sixties and Seventies, I had my own studio and apartment.

"I think the thing I was most proud of in Paris is I had my own telephone in my own name. I al-

Edie Sedgwick

It was during this time when Stevenson became fast friends with socialite-turned-Warhol-protégé Edie Sedgwick.

"I spent a lot time in Italy. I loved Venice. I produced a lot of sculpture in Venice, in glass," said Stevenson.

"I saw success with his one-man show at the Galerie Le Cour d'Ingres in Paris in 1960.

It was in 1962 his one-man show Le Sezession Fontainebleau at the Galerie Léonard. It included the portrait of Lord Willoughby of Eresby in 25 pieces.

Willoughby was the grandson of Lord Astor, who was Nancy Astor, the first woman to serve as a member of the British House of Commons.

"Timothy and I were great friends. He died in 1963. It was curious because he invited me to go on board this bateau. I had always been afraid of water," said Edie, "Oh, Timothy.

Stevenson remained on land.

"He wanted to go to Corsica in this boat. He was lost at sea with his crew. But that's why I'm still alive today," said Edie.

There was a Neoclassical exhibition of pop artists debuted in 1962 at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. One of Stevenson's most famous paintings, "Eye of Lightning Billy," was among those included.

"Roy Dale Billy, a McCurtain County resident, better known as 'Lightning Billy,' was the model for it. In fact he was a model for my paintings. But that painting was very famous," said Edie.

Stevenson's work has been described as a "lifelong experimentation with the sensual possibilities of figuration." And as in many of his paintings, he explores the extreme cross-up of body parts, like the Billy painting that is a close-up of Billy's eye presented in six pieces. Together the piece measures 10 feet by 15 feet.

"The show toured all over the world. There were about a dozen of us in the show," said Stevenson.

Around this time Stevenson appeared in Warhol's first film.

"I became the subject of his first movie which is a black and white silent film called "Harold,"" said Stevenson.

Stevenson also appeared in several other Warhol films including "Heat Wave" where he is credited as Harold Childre.

Also in 1963 in Paris his four-stories-tall painting "El Cordobes" was exhibited on the Eiffel Tower.

"The face and hand of the matador El Cordobes is the subject of the painting," said Stevenson.

In 1964 Stevenson had three one-man exhibitions at the Richard Feigen Galleries in New York.

During his tenure in France he traveled to Italy, England, New York and back to his home in Idabel, often bringing known celebrities to Idabel.

"He would have incredibly famous friends from all over the world come visit him at his Idabel studio - people like Lord Snowdon of the British Royal Family, a long-time friend, famous movie stars from Hollywood, celebrated authors and writers from the highest levels of literature, and renowned stage performers from Europe," said Ron Clark, former Idabel resident and fellow artist.

When the painting was exhibited in 1963 at The Richard Feigen Gallery at Los Angeles, the movie "Haskel" was shown as well.

"It was the first time a movie was shown as a work of art. That was very adventurous for 1963. There was a direct flight from Paris over the North Pole to Los Angeles that I took for the show," said Edie.

"I met Gloria Swanson in the 1960s. Well, she was a very good dancer. When I was introduced to her, for once I said the right thing. I said 'Miss Swanson, would you like to dance?' And she said, 'Well, if you've got a good partner, I'd be delighted.' So we danced.

"We were at a private party where there was an orchestra and it was a very fancy party. Gradually everyone left the floor and Gloria Swanson and I were left alone on the floor. The orchestra went into a tango, so I couldn't abandon the moment. When I took her back to her table she said, 'Well, he was just as good as Rudolph Valentino.' It became a big story," said Stevenson.

Stevenson recalled.

"As a matter of fact, after that we had lunches and dinners together many times. Once I was telling her about being in Andy Warhol's films and she said, 'I never heard of him. Does he work for Metro Goldwyn-Mayer?' I answered, 'Hardly.'"

"You know, there is that moment where people don't realize what's

Shown are Edie Sedgwick, (left) and Harold Stevenson Jr. at Warhol's original Factory in New York City in 1964. (Photo courtesy of the Harold Stevenson collection, photographer, Danny Williams)