

Norfolk Insider

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“Ninety-five-year-old Artist Decorates Water Bills”

Artist Keith Roll has better dexterity than many people 30-40 years younger than he. At age ninety-five he can draw a three-inch long bird that has tiny detailed eyes and varied shading on its wings and back. It takes him just an hour or so to draw one of the beautiful pictures he creates on water bill envelopes he sends to City of Norfolk billing clerk, Tammy Stephenson. She has a collection of dozens of the envelopes with intricately drawn pictures from Roll. They include one of a kitten peeking out of a pumpkin or a little boy kneeling praying that the cost of



water doesn't go up. Roll estimates he's drawn on about 4,000 envelopes sent out to relatives, friends or billing agencies. For Tammy, he always tries to have water as a theme. One bill envelope shows three penguins looking out over the ocean discussing that the Elkhorn River must be running through Roll's meter.

“I try to make them funny,” Roll said.

Roll began drawing as a high school student in St. Ansgar, Iowa, designing backdrops for musicals, and play programs. He wrote stories and drew cartoons for the “Spirit of '76” a military newspaper he published as a soldier in the Amphibian South Tank Battalion 776 in World War II.

In 1950 Roll and his wife, Alice, moved to Norfolk so Roll could work for the Norfolk Daily News in the illustrated ads department. He drew many of the signature signs that are still around Norfolk and in surrounding communities.

Roll retired after 30 years working as a graphic artist for Huse Publishing Company and then travelled around the country for 13 years before settling down in Norfolk and picking up his artist's pens again. He has drawn on envelopes for people all around the U.S. and in France and Sweden with some of his drawings exhibited at the

Elkhorn Valley Historical Museum.

Roll keeps meticulous records and copies of what he's drawn so as not to send the same design twice to anyone. Using ordinary felt pens he drills a hole at the top of the pen and puts in drops of alcohol one at a time to make the color lighter as he shades a flower petal or fills in a sunset blending the colors to make just the right kind of pink or orange.

“Even though I try to slow down, 9:00 a.m. finds me at the art table,” Roll said with a smile.