

A Few Words with Vern Rourke

“I don’t care if both of your brothers are well-known artists, you will pay attention in my class or you can leave!” the art instructor at Kansas State University told Vern Rourke in front of a class of about 80 of his classmates. Vern was in Moorhead this past weekend for the 58th Midwestern Invitational Art Exhibit. I had the pleasure of interviewing Vern about his experiences growing up in North Dakota, service in the US Army and other interesting aspects of his life, including at one time being on both academic and social probation at Mayville State College. Vern and his two older brothers Orland and Jim grew up near Langdon, ND. In 1957 at age 17 his father signed for him to join the Army, over his mother’s objections. After basic Vern completed Infantry training and spent nearly two years in Panama. Since Vern grew up on a farm, he knew something about carpentry, masonry and other ‘fixing things’ on the farm as most of us farm boys did. So he was selected for a group of soldiers that did that type of work while in Panama. During his time in Panama, the US and Soviet Union were at odds over Cuba which led to the missile crises. That impacted Vern because his tour in Panama was extended for three months. Vern’s base was on the Gulf of Mexico side of Panama, or not far from Cuba. Upon release from the Army, Vern returned to North Dakota and enrolled at Mayville State. Part way through his first term there, he received a letter calling him back to active duty and reported to a fort in Washington State. Of course all of the people called back and sent to the West Coast immediately thought Vietnam was their next stop. Vern’s assignment was as a regular Army NCO working with National Guard units. Although they were put on alert several times, there were not shipped to Vietnam.

Following his discharge, Vern attended Kansas State and it was there that his Art instructor told him about paying attention or he could leave the class. Following some time at K State, Vern traveled to California in time for the Sixties movement, living in LA but making a few trips with his North Dakota buddy up north to San Francisco in time for the ‘love-in days’ which actually only lasted for a couple summers.

Vern’s two brothers both started art museums in Moorhead. His older brother Jim is the founder of the Rourke Art Gallery Museum. While attending the 58th annual event, Vern had time to visit with old friends and make some new ones. Vern returned to Mission KS where he lives with his wife. The Museum opening on Sunday was well attended and over 90 artists work may be seen throughout the summer during the Rourke’s open hours – Friday – Sunday from 1:00 pm until 5:00 pm.