he names of Leo and Alma Mehus Studness are synonymous with the arts in the Lake Region. The couple has been committed to bringing the arts alive in Devils Lake. Alma Mehus Studness has done so once again with the generous gift that made development of the Leo and Alma Mehus Studness Chautauqua Gallery possible. The Gallery serves as a strong link to an entity that played an important role in the history of this community as well as an integral piece in the fabric of the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Studness and their family.

Leo Studness was born January 4, 1895, in Churchs Ferry, North Dakota. He was the son of Charles T. and Marit Nestegard Studness, prominent pioneers of the Lake Region. He was educated in Churchs Ferry schools and attended the University of Minnesota where he received a bachelor of arts degree. Continuing his education at Columbia University, he received a masters of arts in 1921.

While Leo was pursuing his education, Alma was establishing herself as a concert pianist. Born the daughter of North Dakota homesteaders
Mikkel and Anne Miking Mehus, music was a fundamental part of her upbringing. Alma received her first piano lessons at the tender age of five from her older sister Belle. Belle would prove to play a vital role in the development of Alma’s gift of music, serving as her sole piano instructor until Alma was thirteen years old. At that time, Belle arranged for Alma to study for six weeks at the Dakota Conservatory in Fargo where Belle was a student.

At the young age of sixteen, Alma graduated from Fessenden High School and proceeded to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Due to her strong foundation in music, she was able to complete a bachelor of arts degree in three short years. Upon graduation, Alma began her career, performing on the Redpath Horner Chautauqua Circuit. During this time, she performed throughout the southwest in New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas.

Following the tour, Alma pursued her dream to study in Europe. She traveled to Berlin and began lessons with Adele Aus de Ohe. While with Aus de Ohe, Alma had the opportunity to perform for the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. He was so impressed with her talent, he asked her to play with his orchestra. With this, Alma Mehus became the youngest American pianist to perform with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. While in Europe, Alma also played with the Oslo Symphony and gave concerts in Germany, Norway, and Italy. Upon returning to the United States, Alma continued her studies at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

In 1924, Leo caught the eye of the young Alma at a party in Leeds, North Dakota. After a four-year courtship, the couple married at the home of a friend in Stanford, Connecticut, on January 23, 1928. Together, they raised two children, Anne-Marit and Charles.

Leo was active in the community and gave endlessly of his time. He served as a member of the Shriners, Masons, and the Devils Lake Elks. He was a past president of the Devils Lake Rotary, Devils Lake Area Chamber of Commerce, Greater North Dakota Association, Historical Societies of North Dakota and Minnesota, Farm Bureau, U.S. Durum Growers Association, and Kappa Sigma Fraternity. He served on the governing board of Devils Lake Mercy Hospital and was a member of the Steering Committee and Priorities Committee ACT, a community development program.

Leo was committed to enhancing the educational opportunities of the Lake Region. In the mid 1960s, when the college decided to make the move from the campus at the Pershing Building to its present site, Leo co-chaired the fund-raising drive which exceeded its goal of ninety thousand dollars. In addition, he served on the Community College Corporation board of directors.

Alma shared Leo’s dedication to increasing educational and cultural opportunities in the community. Alma performed concerts to help raise funds to purchase grand pianos for both the Devils Lake High School and the college. She has twice helped to establish a strings program at the Devils Lake Public Schools. She has been a member of the Devils Lake Music Club, Shakespeare Club, and Sigma Alpha Iota (honorary music sorority). Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, she has given to this community in a way that only she could—she has taught motivated young students. The only thing she ever asked for in exchange was hard work.

The American tradition of Chautauqua will continue in the Lake Region, due to a generous fifty-thousand-dollar gift from Alma in memory of Leo. The Leo and Alma Mehus Studness Chautauqua Gallery was dedicated on November 15, 1995. It serves as a combination art gallery and lecture room. On permanent display is a most fitting collection of paintings by Leo and Alma’s daughter, Anne-Marit Bergstrom, and granddaughter-in-law Candace Bergstrom which depicts life in the Chautauqua era. Other items enhancing the gallery include a beautiful star quilt specially commissioned for the Gallery from Grace Lambert, a member of the Spirit Lake Nation, and a collection of photos taken at Chautauqua events in the early 1900s donated by Marjorie Trangsrud. Complementing the surroundings are original paintings from Bela Patheo, an art professor at St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, featuring lovely portraits of Leo and Alma. This gallery will truly serve to enhance educational and cultural events for yet another generation.