

"INTRODUCTION"

The John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin-- a strong advocate of grass-roots artists since the early 1970s--is currently producing a book documenting 19 grass-roots environments around the state. The project is supported by The Kohler Foundation, Kohler, Wisconsin, an organization which has been instrumental in restoring two sites included in the book.

Robert Mertens, an Associate Professor of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, has spent much of his "free time" over the past five years photographing and mapping the sites and cataloguing the objects therein. Likewise, Dawn Belleau, a reporter with The Sheboygan Press, has spent thousands of her "leisure hours" traveling thousands of miles to interview those artists still living, their families, friends and neighbors; she has also pored through hundreds of newspaper files and historical documents as she put together the written portraits of the environments' creators. Joan Krueger, who is serving as an editor for the book, has written the photo captions on these pages.

JOE BARTA

In 1951, Joe Barta left his position as a high school mathematics teacher and opened the Museum of Woodcarving. He had been carving small figures since his childhood and wanted to devote himself full-time to his craft. The original museum housed some two dozen tiny dioramas illustrating a variety of species of animals; later, Barta built an addition for his major work--life-sized biblical tableaux featuring 20 scenes from the life of Christ. The centerpiece of the collection was "The Last Supper" which was closely modeled after Da Vinci's painting. Barta was self-taught; in fact, he was advised to leave the School of the Art Institute of Chicago after two weeks because his instructors feared that formal training would undo Barta's natural "method and rhythm of carving." After the sculptor's death in 1972, Barta's sister and her son traveled to Wisconsin each summer to operate the museum. Late in 1984, Barta's nephew moved the entire contents of the Museum of Woodcarving to Kissimmee, Florida where he is erecting a new building for the collection.

TONY FLATOFF

"I recycle everything," says Tony Flatoff. "I just hate to see things go to waste." By recycling fans, ventilator blades, bleach bottles, plumbing pipe, wagon wheels, automobile tire rims, castoff light fixtures and a little paint, Flatoff fashioned a giant red, white and blue whirligig in his back yard. He began work on the assemblage more than 30 years ago when he brought home a ten-bladed fan that had been discarded at the hotel where he worked as a handyman. Today, the whirligig comprises 88 fans and is 15 feet high and 25 feet long. And, the mammoth sculpture has influenced other decorative touches on the Flatoff property: Tony built two large, wooden model airplanes, rigged them so that their propellers spin in the wind, painted them red and white and mounted them on plumbing pipe at opposite ends of his flower garden; he also centered a small fan on each of the house's red shutters.

JOHN MEHRINGER

John Mehringer's "Fountain City Rock Garden" once occupied seven terraces in the back yard of his home below the bluffs along the Mississippi River. In its prime, the garden included a windmill and a wishing well, flowers, plants, a birdhouse, several free-standing sculptures and a pair of waterfalls that flowed from the third terrace to the base of the garden and terminated in twin fishponds. Today, however, the rock garden is overgrown and untended and some of the smaller works have fallen victim to time and the elements. Like many other Wisconsin grass-roots artists, Mehringer chose concrete and local rock for his construction and embellished surfaces with mosaics of colored glass shards. Although precise information is scarce, Mehringer apparently began his work in the 1930s and continued to care for the garden until he and his wife entered a nursing home near the end of their lives. He died in 1972.

MARY NOHL

Driftwood constructions and concrete sculptures still populate Mary Nohl's lakefront property despite the persistent efforts of vandals who burned, broke or stole many of her creations. Mary responded to their harassment by rigging elaborate booby traps to scare off the intruders and by making her sculptures larger and heavier and thus more difficult to carry off or destroy. Her works are generally fanciful--dinosaurs, Chagall-like "angels," mammoth human heads reminiscent of the carvings on Easter Island, a fence composed of hundreds of human profiles cut with a bandsaw, bundles of sticks suggesting human or animal forms. She also wages a continuing "struggle" to perfect her oil painting, a battle which has produced nearly one hundred pieces in various stages of completion that are reworked as she feels she has the answers to the questions they present.

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FRANK OEBSER

An early childhood accident left Frank Oebser facially disfigured and painfully shy. Cosmetic surgery when the boy was 13 corrected most of the physical problems, but Frank Oebser continued to live a very isolated existence. He never married, choosing instead to look after his mother and the family farm. His mother died in 1973. To cope with his grief, Frank began building. He started with a 25-foot-tall windmill with red, white and blue blades and a four-seat Ferris wheel, both of which were destroyed by the wind. Today, his collection includes, among other things, a mechanical bucking bull; a motorized scooter; an electrical teeter-totter; a bouncing swing; a merry-go-round with hay bale seats; another four-seat Ferris wheel, this one occupied by a life-size "Chinaman" and a large rooster, both constructed of plastic and canvas and stuffed with hay; two motorized waterwheels; and a 40-by-80 foot pole barn crammed with numerous antique farm machines, all in working order and some "peopled" with his curious life-size sculpture stuffed with hay, dressed in cast-off clothing and given "identity" by plastic Halloween masks attached to their heads. Most of Frank's creations are mechanized for he believes "if it don't work, it ain't worth nothin'." Now 86 years old, Frank relishes the attention his collection has been attracting. He delights in sharing what he refers to as his "playground" and is willing to play with anyone "'cause I like to play." But, he also expresses a nagging fear that no one will take care of his pieces when he dies and that his pride and joy--the working collection of antique farm machinery--will be dispersed.

HERMAN RUSCH

"You could go around the world five times and not find a fence like mine." ~~That~~ is Herman Rusch's assessment of the 168-foot-long fence of orange-rust-colored concrete arches he built in his seventy-ninth summer, ^{which} ~~The fence represents one of numerous "feats of strength" that highlight Rusch's life and bear testimony to his great determination and extraordinary personality.~~ Born in 1885, Rusch was a farmer for most of his adult life. ~~When he quit farming he found that the slow pace of retirement did not suit him so,~~ ^{At} the age of 71, he opened a roadside museum to display the natural oddities he had collected over the years, ^{and} ~~To enhance the museum grounds,~~ he built a three-tiered concrete planter. That construction led to more planters as well as birdhouses, a miniature mosque, sculptures, fountains, the fence and two twenty-foot-tall "sun spires" topped with mirrored stars designed to reflect the sunlight. Although it has been many years since he created his concrete sculpture, Rusch is still robust and brimming with energy; today his pursuits include writing (~~he has submitted a manuscript for publication that attempts to reconcile evolution and creationism~~) and visiting his many friends, ~~activities that he approaches with the same verve that he did his building projects fifteen years ago.~~

Unfortunately, Herman Rusch's property is no longer owned by his family.

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NICK ENGELBERT

A thirst for adventure marked much of Nick Engelbert's youth but he eventually immigrated to the United States, married and settled into the quiet of rural Wisconsin living. In 1936, on the small farm where he raised dairy cows, Engelbert erected the first of a series of large, painted concrete sculptures memorializing the immigrant groups that had settled the area. Besides the double-headed eagle representing the Austro-Hungarian empire, he created a fierce Viking warrior in a rowboat-sized vessel, a miniature Blarney castle, a Carinthian forest ranger and a group of three men in Swiss costumes. Other works included figures from myths, legends and fairy tales; patriotic symbols like the Wisconsin State Seal; animals; and humorous tableaux like the Democratic donkey and the Republican elephant being driven by Uncle Sam with the caption, "Can anyone do a day's work with a team like that?" In his later years, Engelbert spent much time working on his oil paintings. He died of cancer in 1962. The farm is no longer in the Engelbert family; the current owner wishes to keep what remains of Engelbert's work intact.

DAVE SEIDLER

The unknown holds a great fascination for Dave Seidler. He is especially intrigued by the idea of life on other planets, the secrets of ancient civilizations and the mysteries of Earth's murky prehistory. The sculptures and paintings on his cottage property reflect these concerns: a group of "little green men" emerges from the woods as a flying saucer whirs eerily in the trees behind them; four large figures reminiscent of ancient Egyptians or Amazon warriors cluster near a circular altar and a pyramid incised with symbols resembling a mathematical formula; murals on Seidler's garage and shed depict the landing of visitors from space as well as the dinosaurs and flying reptiles of the distant past. Most of Seidler's creations are fashioned from materials he "scrounged": wood, plumbing parts, bits of plastic and metal, circular reflectors. Some of the constructions have been painted with reflective paint so they glow in the dark. Seidler continues to add to his collection.

FRED SMITH

When he was 63, Fred Smith realized that he was a "maker of monuments." Over the next fifteen years he built more than 200 concrete plaques and statues, decorated with flat stones, mirrors, reflectors, telephone line insulators and fragments from beer and liquor bottles. His subjects ~~matter~~ included angels, and men, women and beasts from history, legends, Hollywood and his own experience. Most were life-size but a few were monumental, like the twenty-foot-long muskie, a ten-foot-tall angel and the sixteen-foot-tall figure of Paul Bunyan. ~~Smith erected the sculptures in the woods surrounding his home and named the area the "Wisconsin Concrete Park."~~

Wisconsin concrete park consisting of

in the woods surrounding his home

Supremely confident of his abilities, Smith was eager for others to know of his achievements and so was delighted when his work was featured in such publications as The Chicago Tribune Magazine (1964) and Life Magazine (1969).

His sculpture park was also part of "Naïves and Visionaries," a 1974 exhibition organized by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Following a stroke in 1963, Smith was forced to curtail his activities although he still planned to add sculptures of African animals to his backyard collection.

However, his health worsened and he was eventually confined to a nursing home where he died in 1976. ~~A year later~~, a major restoration project was begun at the Park, funded by The Kohler Foundation, the Wisconsin Arts Board, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Anne-Marie Foundation.

In 1977

Despite a significant setback when a "blow-down" raged through the Park and toppled many of the sculptures, the restoration was completed by October 1978. The Wisconsin Concrete Park is now in the care ^{of} Price County and is open to the public.

JAMES TELLEN

A furniture stripper by trade, James Tellen had long ^{worked} "dabbled" in the arts during his leisure time, creating oil paintings and small wood carvings and experimenting with copper and pewter metalworking techniques. Hospitalized for a prostate condition in 1942, Tellen became intrigued by the statuary visible in the churchyard across the street from his sick bed. He turned his hand to concrete sculpture shortly after his release from the hospital and over the next 15 years created more than 75 works that he placed in the woods surrounding his cottage. His first project was a 50-foot long fallen log fence and tree trunk gateposts at the entrance to his property. Tellen's subjects included animals (mother bear and cubs, puppies, a goat, skunks), religious themes (Virgin of Fatima, head of Christ, a miniature cathedral) and visions of America's past (Abraham Lincoln splitting logs, Indians, a pioneer farm woman and a cowboy). His sense of humor was also evident in small tableaux with elves and in a scene featuring a group of boisterous drinking men whose antics provoke the disapproval of the "upright citizens" seated near them. James Tellen died in 1957; his family continues to preserve his work.

PAUL AND MATILDA WEGNER

A Sunday outing to Father Mathias Wernerus' Holy Ghost Park was the inspiration that led Paul and Matilda Wegner to fashion a series of ^{patriotic+religious} monuments ^{on} ^{own} ~~of their own on the farm~~ where they raised their children. ~~Like Father Wernerus, the Wegners paid tribute to piety and patriotism.~~ The centerpiece of their project was a "Peace Monument" consisting of ^{a pulpit} ~~two levels;~~ ^{the} upper ^{level} ~~part~~ was a pulpit from which preachers and politicians could address ~~those~~ people gathered on the hillside and in the lower level where a picnic area was fed by a natural spring. Both levels were concrete, decorated with mosaics fashioned of bits of broken glass and crockery. Nearby was an enclosure known as the "Garden of Prayer" and set apart by a fence patterned after those by Father Wernerus. The Wegners also created replicas of the American flag and the seal of the American Legion; a monument to Gold Star mothers; a twelve-foot-long boat named The Bremen after the celebrated ocean liner that traveled between New York and Hamburg in the 1920s and 1930s; and a concrete and glass version of their fiftieth wedding anniversary cake. Their most ambitious construction, ~~however,~~ was "the little glass church," a nine-by-twelve-foot chapel built of twelve mosaic panels, each depicting a church representing a different religious denomination. Paul Wegner died of cancer in 1937; his wife survived him by five years. Their farm is now owned by a grandson.

FATHER MATHIAS WERNERUS

Perhaps the most spectacular grass-roots environment in Wisconsin is Holy Ghost Park. Built by Father Mathias Wernerus (who was assisted by much of the youth and adult population of his parish), the park consists of two large grottoes and two major shrines as well as numerous smaller niches for statuary. The grottoes are dedicated to the Mother of God and the Holy Eucharist; the shrines, to the Sacred Heart and patriotism. Concrete and rock were the primary building materials; the surfaces of the structures are imbedded with bits of colored glass and a wide variety of treasures and oddities donated by Father Wernerus' parishioners. Work on the park began in 1925 and the official dedication was held in September 1930. Although Father Wernerus intended to spend two more years on the park and hoped to construct a shrine to St. Michael, he died in December 1930.