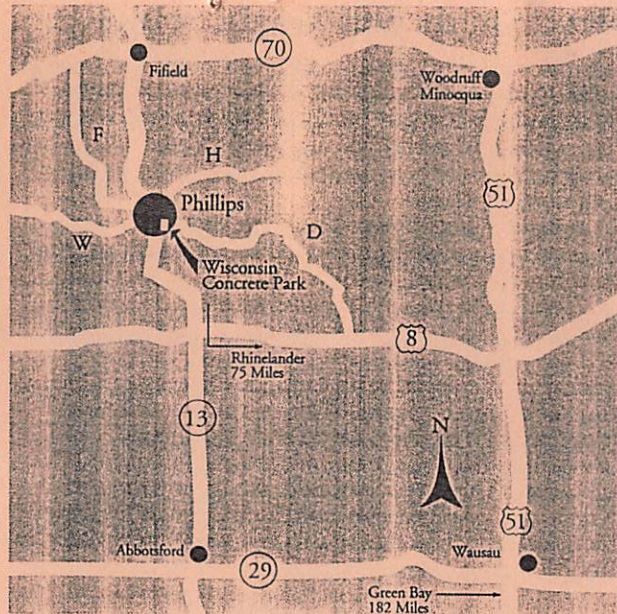




Photography: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Robert Amitt, Robert Mertens.

Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park delights visitors with over 200 powerful figures of mythic and real characters encountered by Smith in his many years as a logger, farmer, tavern owner, and musician. His heroic sculptures embody a compelling and unique personal vision.



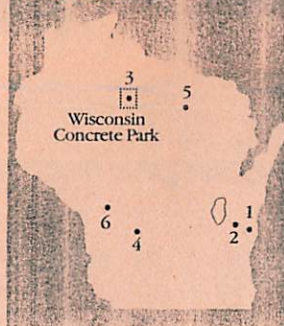
Located in Price County, Wisconsin Concrete Park is located on the southern edge of Phillips, a crossroads town at the intersections of State Highway 13 and County Highways F, W, H, and D. Phillips can be reached by taking Highway 13 north 12 miles from the intersection of Highways 8 and 13. From the north, it is 14 miles south of the intersection of Highways 13 and 70. It is approximately 75 miles southwest of Rhinelander and 90 miles northwest of Wausau.

For further information, contact Price County Forestry and Tourism Departments, Normal Building, Phillips, Wisconsin 54555. Telephone 715-339-4505.

Preservation efforts of Kohler Foundation, Inc.:

1. The Waelderhaus, Kohler (1929-1931) — owned and operated by Kohler Foundation, Inc.
2. Old Wade House, Greenbush (1847-1851) — restored and gifted to The State Historical Society of Wisconsin by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1953.
3. Wisconsin Concrete Park, Phillips (1950-1964) — acquired and gifted to Price County by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1978.
4. The Painted Forest, Valton (1896-1900) — restored and gifted to Sauk County by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1982.
5. Mecikalski Stovewood Building, Jennings (1899-1905) — restored and gifted to Town of Schoepke by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1987.
6. Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto, Cataract (1929-1936) — restored and gifted to Monroe County by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1987.

Kohler Foundation, Inc. Project Sites



Wisconsin Concrete Park
Circa 1950-1964

PHILLIPS, WI



Wisconsin Concrete Park: A Park for All the American People

In 1950, at age 65, Fred Smith began construction of his "Wisconsin Concrete Park." Using his homestead farm in Price County, Wisconsin, this local lumberjack, tavern owner, farmer, and dancehall musician created a fanciful yet powerful outdoor sculpture environment. Grouped together on about 3.5 acres within the 16.2 acre park, the statues represent an amazing personal expression by one of America's unique grassroots artists.

Completely self-taught in his methods of construction, Smith built over 200 figures using wooden armatures wrapped in mink wire and covered with layers of hand-mixed cement. He decorated the figures with shards of broken glass and found objects. As proprietor of the tavern next door, Smith had a ready supply of Rhinelander Beer bottles with which to work. He



delighted in donations to his efforts, readily accepting glass objects from tourists who happened upon his work-in-progress and calling their contributions "damn nice glass." Because his statues were often massive, he built them in pieces, pouring the concrete into molds dug into the earth. Then, when the weather permitted, he

enlisted the aid of relatives and neighbors to hoist them onto their prepared footings, anchoring the statues and attaching various parts with more cement.

Smith's characters came from local legend and personal acquaintances as well as mythic heroes and contemporary newsmakers. Built over a 14-year period, his prodigious output included Ben Hur, the Lincolns, a double wedding party, an itinerant cowboy beer drinker, Sacajawea, Mabel the Milker, and Paul Bunyan. Together with the many others, these figures reveal Fred Smith's interpretation of his northwoods culture and of the world beyond. They are his own means of storytelling sprung from his passion to create. "It was in me," was the explanation he offered.

Fred Smith: Self-Taught Sculptor

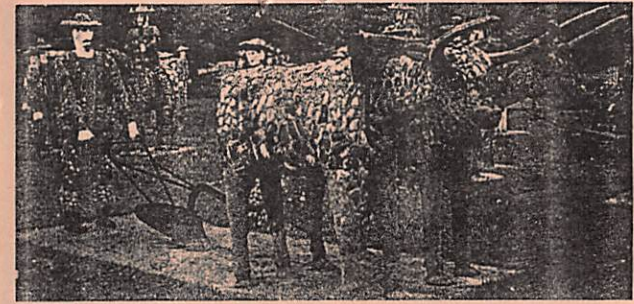
A true son of the northwoods, Fred Smith was born in 1886 to German immigrant parents in Price County, Wisconsin. Like many others of his era, Smith went into the wilderness early in life and stayed there, off and on, until his arthritic body demanded that he find a more comfortable lifestyle.

A man of great physical strength, Smith was a logging legend in his own time. Eschewing the use of modern machinery, he and his team of horses worked long winters felling the virgin northland timber. During the warm months, he and his wife Alta would farm their 120-acre homestead, raising ginseng for the export market and cultivating an expansive flower garden used free of charge for local social functions. A self-taught fiddler, Smith eagerly played at local dancehalls and musicales. He was gregarious, self-confident, and generous. During his early life, the driving force to create and produce was expressed through his tireless physical labors and his music. But, as he grew older he found other avenues of creativity.

One was the building of the Rock Garden Tavern from the glacial rubble that had clogged the many farm fields in the area. But, the most significant of these creative labors was the construction of Wisconsin Concrete Park.

Smith's first cement piece was inspired by a picture of a large antlered deer jumping over a log that he had first noticed on a boy's sweater. His 14-year obsession culminated in the over 200 figures now in the park. He continued to work, welcoming both visitors and the increasing notoriety, until a stroke in 1964 finally halted further labor. Confined to a nursing home in 1968, Smith anxiously planned for additions to his park until his death in 1976.

Though he did not live to see the restoration of his park, it was with much personal satisfaction that he acknowledged public recognition for his efforts.



Restoration and Preservation

Shortly after the death of Fred Smith in 1976, Wisconsin Concrete Park was purchased by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in order to preserve this unique and fascinating art site. The hard Wisconsin winters and a decade of neglect had begun to take their toll on the fragile cement construction. Quick action was deemed essential to the preservation of Smith's visionary environment.

The Wisconsin Arts Board, the state arts agency, undertook the restoration of Wisconsin Concrete Park in February 1977 with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the State of Wisconsin, and private contributors. Cleaning, patching, re-footing, and landscaping were well underway when a devastating wind storm struck the area in July 1977. Over 70% of the figures were damaged, and hundreds of the tall pines planted by Smith decades earlier were uprooted. Smith's barn, which was used as a studio by the conservators, also was destroyed.

The storm actually allowed for more thorough restoration. Because many of the sculptures had been broken open, the original rotted wood armatures could be replaced with steel. Various strategies were used to reassemble the pieces, in an attempt to make them more impervious to extreme climatic conditions.

Restoration was completed in the fall of 1978, and on September 21 of that year the Wisconsin Concrete Park was gifted by Kohler Foundation to Price County for use as a public art park. It is maintained and preserved by Price County. Additional conservation measures were undertaken after a second major storm in 1987 and have been necessary intermittently since then.

Wisconsin Concrete Park Chronology

