

FRED SMITH'S
WISCONSIN CONCRETE PARK

"Nobody knows why I made them, not even me. This work just come to me naturally. I started one day in 1950 and have been doing a few a year ever since."--Fred Smith, 1886-1975

Fred Smith was born in Ogema, Wisconsin and, at the age of 18, moved to Phillips where he homesteaded a 120 acre farm, now the Wisconsin Concrete Park. Smith spent 56 years as a logger and pulp cutter in a local lumber camp. ("...Nobody will work after they've been educated. I went to the logging camp. Worked for 99¢ a day.") Arthritis forced him to retire in 1949. The Rock Garden Tavern next door had already been built by Smith, and after '49, this provided him with a small income, a supply of empty bottles for his sculpture, and an audience for his enthusiastic fiddling. He ran the bar, serving only Rhinelander beer, and continued making sculpture until 1964 when crippled by a stroke. ("...right here in town there was a woman sitting right on six horses and going lickety-split. Them ideas are hard to explain, ya know. Might be someting ya see or like or hear from someone else. Could be anything. It's gotta be in ya to do it.")

During his 15 years of labor on the sculpture, Smith created about 250 pieces. ("I put in so many hours daylight to dark...I figured I didn't have much time to do all that work...gotta get it done.") He would start a figure with a couple of strips of lumber, then wrap it with mink wire and barbed wire. The arms and hands were made separately. After the form was made, he filled it with cement. Half of the work was done on the ground, then it was raised on to a footing and completed. The head, arms and hands were joined to the figure and, finally, the pieces of glass and mirror were placed on the sculpture. ("...I just like it and I could get it for nothing. I liked it together. Otherwise your work is too dead. The mirror shines...You find things and find a use for them. Don't cost a cent. People ask me if I need things from all over the country - everyone likes me.")

Originally the park was sheltered by towering pine trees that complimented the northern Wisconsin themes of many of the pieces. A windstorm on July 4, 1977 destroyed a majority of these trees and also a large barn where the garage studio now stands.

After Smith's death in 1975, the Wisconsin Arts Board and the Kohler Foundation began a joint effort to acquire the property and to restore the sculpture. The figures had started to show the stress of continual exposure to the harsh weather changes. The conservators, Don and Sharron Howlett, supervised the onsite restoration from February, 1977 through October, 1978. On September 21, 1978, the property was donated to Price County to be operated as a public county park.

Fred Smith never charged admission to the Wisconsin Concrete Park, although he had many offers, he never sold any of the statues, "'cause it might spoil it for others." He wanted his work to be "...for the American people."

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