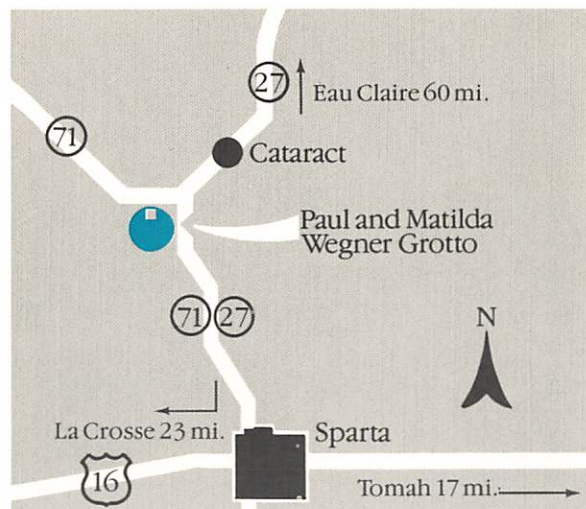


In the midst of the Wisconsin countryside north of Sparta, there suddenly appears an unusual sight — a fantastic garden of concrete sculpture decorated with thousands of glittering glass shards. Transforming ordinary materials into an ambitious series of patriotic and religious monuments, Paul and Matilda Wegner created a remarkable “Grotto.”

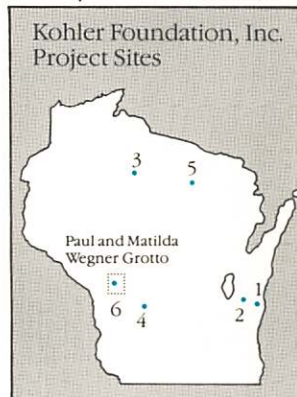


Located in Monroe County near the community of Cataract north of Sparta, the Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto can be reached by taking Highway 71-27 at Sparta north 9 miles where Highway 71 turns west to Melrose; the Wegner Grotto is $\frac{7}{10}$ mile west on Highway 71. When traveling on I-90 from the east or west, take the Sparta Highway 71-27 turn off to the north. From the north, where I-94 intersects with Highway 27, take Highway 27 south through Black River Falls to where it joins Highway 71, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of Cataract; take Highway 71 west $\frac{7}{10}$ mile.

For more information about the Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto, write the Monroe County Local History Room, Route 2, Box 21, Sparta, Wisconsin 54656. Telephone 608-269-8680. Hours are Monday-Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The Local History Room maintains an exhibit and research materials documenting the site.

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.



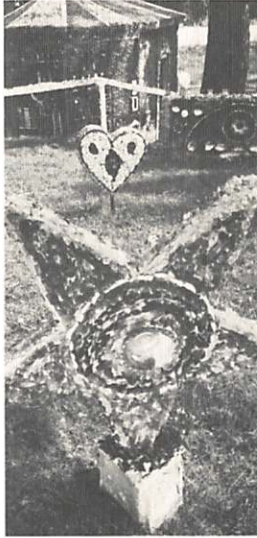
Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto Circa 1929-1936

C A T A R A C T , W I



The Wegner Grotto: A Grassroots Art Environment

Paul and Matilda Wegner began building the Grotto at their farm home near Cataract, Wisconsin, after their retirement in 1929. Developed over a period of several years, the extraordinary sculpture environment slowly grew to include a fanciful American flag, a giant reproduction of the Wegners' fiftieth anniversary cake, a glass-encrusted birdhouse, and a twelve-foot concrete facsimile of the celebrated Bremen ocean liner of the 1930s. Other constructions were religious in nature. The magnificent Prayer Garden, Glass Church, and Peace Monument once served as places for quiet reflection, wedding ceremonies, public preaching, family picnics, and community gatherings. Still surrounding the yard is an ornate fence with a concrete archway which spells out the word "Home" in crushed black glass.



The Wegners engulfed the Grotto in color and light by decorating their concrete sculpture with a brilliant mosaic of shattered glass and broken crockery. Hidden within the thousands and thousands of sparkling shards are a number of curiosities — broken beer bottles, iridescent carnival glass, old heirloom china, the remnants from a few porcelain figures, seashells, Indian arrowheads, and gunpowder casings. It is the Wegners' fantastic vision and their imaginative use of such unexpected materials which make their Grotto a significant work of art.

Neither Paul nor Matilda Wegner received any formal training in art. Their imaginative Grotto arose from a powerful personal vision outside the academic tradition of fine art and beyond the ethnic or community traditions of folk art. Such "outsider" artists, also referred to as

self-taught or grassroots artists, have built other unusual art environments around the state. In fact, it was another of these wondrous creations, the Holy Ghost Park by Father Mathias Werner in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, which inspired the Wegners to begin their amazing "retirement project."

Paul and Matilda Wegner — Immigrants, Farmers, and Self-Taught Artists



Paul and Matilda Wegner emigrated from Germany in 1885, settling first in LaCrosse, Wisconsin, where Paul worked for the railroad. In 1889 they purchased a farm at Tubbs Corners near the village of Cataract in Monroe County. The couple farmed the land until 1916 and raised five children.

In 1916, the Wegners moved to Bangor, Wisconsin, where Paul owned and operated a car dealership. They retained ownership of the farm, leaving the actual operation to their son Charles. After Paul's retirement in 1927, the couple continued to live in Bangor during the winters but spent their summers at their Cataract farm.

With the time provided by their retirement, the Wegners began construction of the Grotto at their summer home. The building continued from 1929 until after 1936. On-site construction was accomplished over the summer months; however, many pieces, including the walls of the Church, were created in Bangor during the winter months and then transported to the farm for installation.

On March 19, 1937, Paul Wegner died after a long illness. His funeral was held in the Glass Church. Matilda continued to work on the Grotto, adding finishing touches to many of the pieces and creating colorful embellishments for the nearby cemetery where Paul was

buried. Matilda died in 1942. Paul's and Matilda's graves are marked by monuments similar to the sculptures found in the Grotto.



Restoration and Preservation

The Wegner Grotto, known locally as the Glass Church, was owned by the Wegner family until purchased by Kohler Foundation, Inc. in 1986 as part of its commitment to the documentation and preservation of significant outsider art environments and folk architecture. Restoration, funded by the Foundation, included extensive structural stabilization and surface repair of the sculptures as well as landscape clearing to re-establish the environment. The site was gifted to Monroe County in September 1987.

The Wegner Grotto and other creations by self-taught or grassroots artists from throughout the state are an important part of Wisconsin's cultural heritage. Their extraordinary vision promises to inspire the imagination of many generations to come.

Wegner Grotto Chronology

