

Romano Gabriel was born in Mura, Italy sometime between 1888 and 1897. He worked with his father as a furniture maker. In 1913 he emigrated to America and settled in Northern California. After serving in the United States Army in 1918, Romano returned to Eureka.

In addition to working as a carpenter, lumberyard worker and gardener in Eureka, Romano was also a real estate entrepreneur. Between 1924 and 1953 he bought several lots of land, and built houses on them, ~~before the~~ days of building codes. Romano did all the work himself, from plumbing to electricity, and sold the houses when they were finished.

When Romano semi-retired in the early 1950's he began building a wooden garden as a pasttime. He said that the climate was too poor in Eureka (salty air and no sun) to grow flowers. When he died, the front yard of his house was covered with carousels, whimsical animals, gigantic flowers, fantastic trees, pin-up girls, Roman soldiers, marching carabinieri, priests, hula dancers, nurses, Italian salami, lumber-jacks, dancing men and caricatures of famous people, including the astronauts Lovell, Swigert and Haise. Romano also used the garden for his personal political and anti-papal propaganda making several derogatory signs in Italian, as well as sculptures of the Pope.

Romano first used a hand saw to build his garden, acquiring an electric one later. He was still repairing old saws and buying new ones in the early 1970's. Materials consisted of scrap lumber, ends of fruit boxes and paint from the dime store. Sculptures extending above the roof were braced to withstand high winds. Many of the pieces were animated by motors. Romano constructed the motors, belts and roller systems himself.

Little is known about Romano's life history. He made many trips to Switzerland and Italy, often visiting relatives, and staying for two and three month periods at a time. Romano remained single after the death of his girl friend. Despite a solitary reputation, he enjoyed boarding the tour buses that began to stop outside his house. Sometimes he watched the buses arrive from inside his house and secretly activated the animated pieces. He delighted in the amazement of the tourists as the garden began to move.

Romano said that he was going to be famous all over the world. Unfortunately, by the time the gardens were included in the seminal folk art environment literature and exhibitions of the mid 1970's, he was already in a nursing home and only vaguely aware that his prophecy was coming true. Romano died in March 1977, the same month that the California Arts Council gave the garden its first official recognition. In 1979, pieces from the garden were included in an exhibition that the United States International Communications Agency toured to Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania.

Romano dreamed of leaving the garden, in its entirety, to the city of Eureka upon his death. However he didn't make a will and, when he died, the property was privately acquired and the garden was dismantled. After five years of community effort, a major portion was reassembled in a permanent exhibition in Eureka's "Old Town."