



## SUMMER 1987

### John Ehn and Old Trapper's Lodge

Johan (John) Henry Ehn was born in Violet, a temporary logging camp near Gould City, in Mackinaw County, Michigan, on September 15, 1897. After working twenty years as a government trapper in Michigan, John Ehn came to California in 1941. Ehn built a motel in Los Angeles, and later named the property "Old Trapper's Lodge" to reflect his former occupation. In 1945 he hired a sculptor who worked at Knott's Berry Farm to build a huge trapper modeled after himself. After watching the sculptor for three days, John Ehn decided he had learned all the technical skills to continue on alone. He spent the next fifteen years filling the front yard with larger-than-life sculpted characters from history and fiction, the largest of which is twenty feet tall. Each of the sculptures consists of a strong wire armature covered with cement. Occasionally other materials were incorporated; for example, the core of the "Texas Bed Bug" is a giant turtle shell which came from Mexico.

John Ehn also built "Boot Hill Cemetery," its tombstones inscribed with the fate of those depicted. Figures were modeled after characters from Ehn's favorite folksongs and stories, including Mormon biblical history and tales of the Old West. The faces on many of his figures are life masks of his family. The dancing girls are John Ehn's daughters Lorraine and Louise; Ehn's granddaughter, Judith, and his son, Clifford, form the "Clementine" tableau. The tombstones tell how Dead Beat Dan, Iron Foot Eva, Cold Deck Kogan, Stella Steele and others met their demise. Dead Beat Dan "wanted to leave without paying his rent. He did, one last time."

Outside the motel office are displayed artifacts from Ehn's trapper days—antlers, pots, pans, lanterns, hats, tools, a stuffed



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Old Trapper's Lodge, a Los Angeles environment, faces an uncertain future. Inheritance taxes have forced the family of John Ehn, the site's creator, to sell the 2.6 acre parcel of land on which the site stands.

moose, snowshoes, guns, horseshoes and other objects he collected. John Ehn's motto was "Waste not, want not." On display in the motel office are intricate photomontages and assemblages made of things John collected and things he didn't throw out—horseshoes, nipples from baby bottles, old photographs, coins, guns, animal skins and skulls.

John Ehn died on December 26, 1981, but not before his work was recognized by the State Historic Resources Commission as a California Historical Landmark. Old Trapper's Lodge is one of ten 20th century folk art environments in California to be honored with state historic status. A plaque was unveiled in March, 1985. John Ehn's work has been included in four exhibitions—*In Celebration of Ourselves*, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1976, and *Many Mansions*, at Beyond Baroque in Venice, California in 1983,

*Divine Disorder*, at the Triton Museum of Art in 1985, and *A Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall*, at the the Oakland Museum in 1986.

Because of inheritance taxes, the family is being forced to sell a 2.6 acre parcel of land. Old Trapper's Lodge is located in the middle of the property, and currently interested buyers are not willing to allow the family to exclude the two lots from the sale. The family would like to keep everything on site. If that proves to be impossible, they want very much to keep all of John's work together. If the work must be moved, they want it relocated somewhere that is accessible to the public, and would consider giving the work to a public institution. The family's worst fear is that the work will have to be sold piece by piece and be forever dispersed. SPACES is working with the family on plans to cover a variety of possible contingencies.