

Dedication of Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto
Ruth Kohler's Speech
September 2, 1987

One afternoon in 1929 Paul and Matilda Wegner stood before the Holy Ghost Grotto in Dickeyville, a glittering shrine that had become a major attraction for religious pilgrims and sightseers from Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois and Minnesota. That trip changed their lives. It gave focus to Mr. Wegner's retirement years and even strengthened their commitment to each other.

Mr. Wegner was entranced with the Grotto. Staunch Lutheran and patriot that he was, he understood the religious and patriotic impulse that had moved Father Matthias Wernerus to create the massive shrine. In addition, because he had worked as a stone mason in Pomerania before immigrating to America, he understood the potential and limitation of concrete and the other materials used by Father Wernerus.

What Paul and Matilda Wegner saw at Dickeyville that day was like nothing they had ever experienced or imagined. It opened Mr. Wegner's mind to a new realm of possibility, and he began to envision a Dickeyville of his own here on the family farm.

That summer of 1929 Paul and Matilda Wegner undertook their first experimental effort. After attaching wooden planks between the posts of an existing fence, they covered them with wet concrete and set broken pieces of crockery and glass into it. They went on to create a second fence, a birdhouse, and a small doghouse. and their son, Charles, fashioned concrete animals and birds.

With these simple projects behind them, the couple was encouraged to turn their energies toward grander efforts. Over the next six years they filled the area around their farmhouse with the Peace Monument, the little Glass Church, the Bremen ocean liner, the replica of their 50th wedding anniversary cake, and the other wonders you see here.

From the very beginning, both Paul and Matilda Wegner were equally dedicated to the project and shared a close working partnership. Mr. Wegner did the major concrete work while Mrs. Wegner prepared the glass and china used as surface embellishment. In the summers they worked at the farm, while the winters were spent working in their Bangor home-preparing the 12 glass and shell encrusted slabs for the church as well as parts of other works.

I find their use of materials particularly fascinating; ordinary kitchen crockery, beer bottles; Fiestaware of deep yellow, orange, blue and green; iridescent carnival glass; Depression glass in delicate greens, pinks and yellows; ammunition cartridge casings; Indian arrowheads; sea shells; lids from apothecary jars; and china knobs from automobile gear shifts. Like Father Wernerus at Dickeyville, they sought materials at dump sites and received them from visitors who took great delight in seeing their vacation mementos and broken heirloom china assume new life in these extraordinary structures.

The Wegners encouraged visitors to picnic at the site and kept the spring stocked with bottles of soda which the Wegners sold at cost. Apparently the pulpit on the upper level of the peace monument served both preacher and politician who, on a pleasant summer Sunday, might find an audience of several hundred at the farm. The Wegners even had picture postcards made and sold them as souvenirs to visitors.

Still others came to be married. In fact, Don Wegner has noted that about 65 couples were wed there - with the bride and groom squeezed into the chapel and the guests standing around outside. The weddings were a special pleasure to the Wegners who celebrated their own 50th wedding anniversary there. The three-tiered concrete anniversary cake is to me a very personal monument revealing their sentiments about home, family and marriage.

When Paul Wegner died in 1937, his casket was brought to the little Glass Church for a prayer service and was then buried in a small cemetery adjoining the farm. Mrs. Wegner and her son, Charles, made a concrete gravestone and decorated it with crockery and black glass spelling out his name and "Rest in Peace."

Charles, in turn, created a gravestone for his mother after her death in 1942.

I have with me the deed for the Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto property. I am honored and delighted to present it to Mr. David Sullivan, Chairman of the Monroe County Board.

With this deed, Mr. Sullivan, I also pass to you and the citizens of Monroe County the responsibility for the care and nurturing of this historic grassroots art site. It has been a privilege for Kohler Foundation to have played that role the last two years during the period of restoration.

It is now your turn to communicate and preserve the messages built into this significant art environment; love of country, faith, freedom, and peace. Perhaps of greatest interest was the Wegners' spirit of ecumenism - unusual for the 1930's.

On the facade of the little glass church are these words:

ONE GOD
ONE BROTHERHOOD
LUTHERAN JEW CATHOLIC

Of greatest importance, however, is the joy and exuberance we cannot help but feel as this fantastic garden of concrete sculpture glitters around us. During its heyday in the 1930's, the Wegners' Grotto welcomed everyone. An inviting, gleaming presence situated on a main highway, it was a magnet in an era when spiritual and patriotic values were high.

The Grotto is becoming that magnet once again. No doubt artists, art historians, and other scholars will come from throughout the country. I know that a part of the Wegner family visited from Guam last week and more arrived yesterday from Virginia. That pleases and touches me immensely. Through the years thousands of adults and children from Cataract and Sparta and well beyond will be able to view this extraordinary art environment.

The restoration of this site and the wonderful people we have had the opportunity to work with have meant a great deal to Kohler Foundation. Don and Eleanor Wegner, Rose Merlo, Carolyn Habelman, the County Board, local volunteers, and adults and children of Monroe County - THANK YOU.

For over 15 years, as a member of Kohler Foundation in Kohler and director of the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, I have sought and sometimes fought to preserve and document art by self-taught American artists. In all that time I cannot remember a moment which gives me a greater thrill.

Mr. Sullivan, I am pleased as punch to deliver this deed to you and the citizens of Monroe County. We hope you will all enjoy the renewed presence of the Paul and Matilda Wegner Grotto for many years to come.