

Rock Sculptures In Arco Were Beautiful Tourist Attraction

by Richard Seimers

ARCO - Drive by the home of Arnold and Jean Stefansen on Johnson Street in Tyler, and your eye will be caught by an attractive planter, decorated with rocks. Look farther back and you'll see a table with two benches, also decorated with rocks. They are remnants of a large collection of rock sculptures made by Jean's grandfather, H. P. Pedersen, and added to by Pedersen's son (and Jean's uncle), Vernon.

Four other examples stand in Anderson Park on Lake Stay, just east of Arco. Replicas of the Statue of Liberty and the Liberty Bell are joined by a majestic ram named "Hugo." All three are in front of a low wall that carries the words, "Scenic Rock Garden." The largest remaining piece is the rock building in Arco.

"We lived across the road from my grandparents," Jean said. "It was amazing watching him put the

stones in."

What started as a hobby for this potato farmer developed into a passion that his wife, Ricka, helped him with.

During the Depression years of the 1930s, one thing the Pedersen farm never lacked was rocks. Pedersen cracked some of the rocks and used them to make bookends, ashtrays, and flowers stands. He would sell them or give them away. Soon his ideas got bigger and bigger.

"He thought this craft was so much fun," Jean said, "that whenever he and my grandmother went, they pulled a little two-wheeled trailer and collected rocks and stones."

To build his sculptures, Pedersen cracked the rocks into smaller pieces. Following patterns his wife had sketched, he constructed a form from metal and wire, covered it with cement, and studded it with stones and pieces



Jean Stefansen with some of the many clippings about the Arco Rock Garden.

- Photo by Richard Seimers

of rock. Jean said he did not like little kids hanging around while he worked, but she was still able to watch him some of the time.

Pedersen gave up farming in 1936 and moved into Arco to operate a gas station. He made his station into another one of his sculptures. He ornamented the building with rock designs on the front and sides, including circles in which multi-pointed stars hung, honoring the Texaco gasoline he sold. Years ago the station was added on to, and became a private residence. Today, Dave and Liz Herzog call it home. They have removed many of the stars, which they said were beginning to deteriorate and become a safety hazard.

all terraced," Jean said. Photos show that on the south end was a farm with a house, barn, and other buildings. Then came the village. There were houses, stores, a church, a grain elevator, and a depot with a train, with small concrete paths winding among the buildings. A castle on a hill overlooked the village. "Little kids used to walk along the little road [that wound through the village]," she said. "That was so much fun."

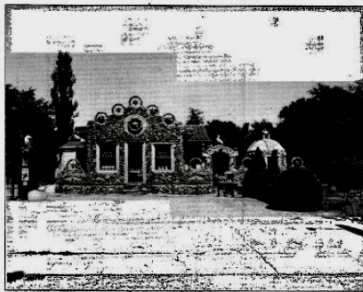
The largest piece standing at the port of entry to the garden was the seven-foot-tall, thousand-pound Statue of Liberty that took about 200 hours to complete. The torch she raised was wired so it would light up.

"I don't know where grandpa

The farmer/workingman/artisan created what may have been one of the first sculpture gardens in Minnesota, and certainly one of the greatest tourist attractions in Lincoln County.

"My grandpa was so talented," Jean said. "He played the clarinet, the flute, the violin, and the

drums." But the most lasting evidence of his talent and creativity are his rock-decorated residence in Arco and the rock sculptures in Anderson Park. There are only a few left, but they are so intriguing they make us wish we could have seen it all.



The station as it once was, complete with gas pump, far left.

- Submitted Photo



The front yard of the service station in its height of glory.

- Submitted Photo



Mr. and Mrs. H.P. Pedersen in front of a rock planter.

- Submitted Photo

riorate and become a safety hazard.

To the east of the building is a rock-decorated arched gate, that was topped with a pelican that also had to be taken down. And next to that is a small dome-roofed building. A sign suspended in front of the small building read, "Visitors Register Here."

The small building had a guest book, because Pedersen's station and sculptures became a tourist attraction. As the number of his sculptures grew, Pedersen built his "Scenic Rock Garden." It was to the east of the station, where a garage now sits, starting near the street where a small airplane sat in front of a wall identifying the "Scenic Rock Garden." Behind it hung a replica of the Liberty Bell with the rest of the sculpture garden extending back from there. The garden eventually had 35 major pieces, including creatures like a pheasant, a hummingbird, and a snake wound around a petrified log. There was a Viking ship, a Dutch windmill, and a lighthouse.

"In the very back there was a miniature village and farm that was

light up.

"I don't know where grandpa found time to do all that, taking care of the station," Jean said. "Of course, my grandma was in there, changing tires and pumping gas."

The Garden attracted tourists. "People in Arco talk about the bus loads that used to come to look at it," Jean said. According to the Lincoln County history, the peak year was 1949 when 4,000 people visited. The guest book that was in the little silo-shaped building mentioned above has been handed on to Jean. The first name recorded was on May 6, 1934. The names run on for 227 pages, ending on November 25, 1951. The name of Lawrence Welk is among them.

Pedersen died in the late 1940s and his son, Vernon, took over. When Vernon moved to Iowa in the early 1950s, the Scenic Stone Garden was dismantled. Vernon took some of the sculptures with him, and Pedersen's other children took some, too, but Jean said it is uncertain where many of them ended up. Three statues and the garden's name were relocated to Anderson Park.



A rock train, station and grain elevator in the village!

- Submitted Photo



The rock garden included a miniature Viking village, above, and a complete village and farm, below.

- Submitted Photo



The Statue of Liberty was an eye catcher in the rock garden.

- Submitted Photo