

RG0061.MLS1: 500 Mile Sculpture Garden (1976)

[An overview of the announcement and development of the Nebraska Interstate-80 Bicentennial Sculpture Project, including comments by the President of the University of Nebraska, Norman Geske, Art Thompson, several sculptors, and other individuals associated with the project. Produced with the support of The Nebraska Arts Council and Nebraskans for Public Television.]

July 9, 1975:

Press conference in the Sheldon Gallery of Art, Lincoln, with Dr. Durwood B. Varner, President of the University of Nebraska, announcing the Nebraska Interstate-80 Bicentennial Sculpture Project, a series of 10 major pieces of sculpture to be located at 10 rest stops along the Interstate in Nebraska.

Norman Geske, Director of Sheldon Gallery, announces the invitation for proposals from sculptors all across the country.

Art Thompson, Director of the Sculpture Project, reports that 121 sculptors have expressed interest in the project; 46 were invited to present proposals; 10 were eventually chosen. Thompson names the sculptors, the titles of their works (with photos), and the locations for their installation across the state.

One of the sculptors, John Raimondi ("Erma's Desire"), talks about his work and its placement at the Grand Island eastbound rest area. Mixed reaction to the pieces is reported in brief comments from various individuals.

Aurora, Nebraska: Reception for John Raimondi's "Erma's Desire." Raimondi indicates that "Erma" is his mother, and the work is a monument to her. Some attendees do not understand the work or its title (one woman doesn't want it "in her front yard"), but one man likes it because it "challenges the imagination."

View of the Chief Company facility in Grand Island: The Chief Company will produce the components for John Raimondi's "Erma's Desire." Raimondi comments on the collaboration between industry and art.

Brad Graves, another artist, inspects limestone at Weeping Water in July 1975, but does not feel that Nebraska limestone is suitable for his purposes. Limestone from Bedford, Indiana, would be better.

Paul von Ringelhiem [Ringelheim is the correct spelling] surveys a site with students from Southeast Community College (Milford) in September 1975. His piece is entitled "Arrival."

Hall County Board denies a building permit to John Raimondi's "Erma's Desire" (October 1975). In a meeting with Board members, Raimondi asserts that Nebraska

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should be proud of the I-80 sculpture project because it is focusing attention on the state. Hearings on the entire project are called for.

Senator Ralph Kelly of Grand Island reports numerous questions about the sculpture project from his constituents. Ultimately, Kelly notes, the real question is who has the authority to approve the acceptance of the art works as gifts to the state. In the hearings that follow, speakers point out that the funds for the sculpture project were raised privately. Speakers for and against the project are featured. Many negative responses appear in local newspapers.

Television reporter indicates that Senator Kelly has introduced a bill (Legislative Resolution 108) to accept the sculptures as gifts to the state (January 14, 1976). In the Unicameral debate which follows, Senator Ernie Chambers argues that the Legislature should not make judgments about art and that the project should be accepted without any action by the Legislature. Kelly's resolution passes 25-14; the Department of Roads now has the authority to move ahead on contracts with the artists.

John Raimondi begins his residency in Grand Island; he is shown working with students on the scale model of his piece. He makes very positive comments on the hard work and attitudes of the students involved.

One of the sculptors [Linda Howard] describes the structure of her piece ["Up Over"] to a group of students; the students then go outside to search for similar structures in nature.

Valmont Industries in Valley, Nebraska, will fabricate the materials for the work of Richard Field; Valmont employees are shown working on the piece.

John Raimondi cuts Cor-Ten steel at Northwestern Steel and Supply Co. in Omaha (May 5, 1976). Officer at Northwestern Steel and Supply indicates his interest in contemporary metal sculpture and his strong support of the Interstate project. Northwestern employees are shown working on the sculpture ("Erma's Desire").

Richard Field is shown welding his project at the Gretna rest area (June 11, 1976).

Brad Graves is shown moving large stones to the rest area near York (June 2, 1976). He will do some of the final carving at the site, taking light and shadows into account.

Diners at a restaurant are asked about the sculpture project; responses are generally positive, especially about increasing art awareness in the Midwest. A restaurant employee describes the project as "marvelous," also noting that it will increase tourism.

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Tony Padovano assembles his granite sculpture (with a minor repair) at the Brady rest area (June 3, 1976).

John Raimondi talks about the advantages of Cor-Ten steel for “Erma’s Desire,” noting, for example, that the sculpture will change color over time.

June 27, 1976: Art Thompson reports that seven of the sculptures are on their sites and are ready for dedication on July 4th.

July 1, 1976: Linda Howard assembles her sculpture [“Up Over”] at the Ogallala rest area, only to discover that some of the pieces are missing. She phones to request replacement pieces, and the sculpture is assembled.

July 2, 1976: Hans Van de Bovenkamp assembles his sculpture at the Sidney rest area. The artist describes his piece as “hand-made” and a symbol of the roadway itself.

July 3, 1976: Paul von Ringelheim participates in the installation of his piece at the Blue River rest area.

July 4, 1976: Seven sculptures are completed and dedicated. Photos of the formal dedication ceremony are provided, with the official presentation of the sculptures by President Varner to Lieutenant-Governor Whelan, who notes that Paul von Ringelheim and all the sculptors have made lasting contributions to the heritage of Nebraska.

The dedication ceremony is followed by a series of photographs of the sculpture projects all across the state.

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