



~Mississippi River Sculpture Park at Prairie du Chien~

Touch History

Fall, 2011

Welcome to the Dedication Edition

Perhaps you came to the dedication of the statue of Emma Big Bear, but couldn't hear what was said because our microphone decided not to work on the afternoon of July 16.

Perhaps you were one of the people who e-mailed your regrets from as far away as California.

Or maybe you decided that it was too hot to travel that day. It was. But about 150 people came to the Sculpture Park anyway, and almost no one left early.

In any case, what you'll find in this newsletter is a few memories from the dedication ceremony, along with a memorable photo, courtesy of local videographer Randy Paske. Plus news about the future and another Hidden Treasure to enjoy when you visit.

Sculptor's Corner



I so enjoyed getting to know Emma Big Bear through working on her portrait.

The unveiling ceremony of the life size bronze figure of Emma Big



Bear was certainly an amazing and gratifying event for myself as an artist. With so much support and so many visitors, I truly experienced the sculpture park as a gathering place for people from all walks of life.

Lance Blackdeer with the Ho-Chunk singers and drum circle brought special songs for the occasion and for the Bear Clan and Emma Big Bear. Clayton Winneshiek helped with the unveiling and people with many stories of Emma Big Bear came to be videotaped after the dedication ceremony ended.

Aaron Kramer, Chief Administrator of City of Prairie du Chien accepted the statue for the City. Father Christian Maxfield gave a blessing for the statue and the event.

Inspired words came from Michael Douglass, our Master of Ceremonies, historical notes from Rogeta Halvorson, and the welcome words from our generous sponsors, Patrick and Janet Leamy.

Dave Fantle, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Tourism, came to the unveiling.

Four people from Vanguard Foundry came from Milwaukee. The people at the foundry did an extra special job with Emma Big Bear. They modified and sculpted the black ash bark that she is holding, sharpened and delineated the beading on her bandolier, put the basket together to make it weatherproof, put special patina variations on her beads and feet and hands and bandolier and generally had to make multiple molds to accommodate her complex pose. That meant casting more pieces and welding them together.

What a glorious celebration for the completion of Phase One of the Mississippi River Sculpture Park! But because this project is so large, it has been divided into phases. It is time to reflect and appreciate what has been accomplished. More sculptures are planned for the future. Meanwhile the focus will be on infrastructure and park amenities, perhaps pathways, an information center, perhaps a visitors' shelter.

--Florence Bird

Videotaped memories

Four visitors with memories of Emma Big Bear brought those memories to the dedication ceremony and related them to videographer Randy Paske. A fifth also brought a framed picture postcard and a basket.



--Joan Liffring-Zug
Bourret, photographer

The basket was purchased almost 60 years ago at the pharmacy in McGregor, Iowa, the town where Armella Kueter and her husband ran a dry cleaning business. Emma Big Bear would appear at the dry cleaners to sell beaded purses, some of which Kueter bought and gave to nieces. The Ho-Chunk woman also sold many postcards that showed a full-color picture of herself as a fairly young woman, taken by a professional photographer (The black-and-white photo to the left was taken toward the end of her life).

Because it was a convenient size, Kueter used the basket often over the years. She's apologetic about how worn it is, and how she's lost track of what she calls "trinkets" that she gave away.

Timothy Mason, who grew up in Marquette Iowa, remembers kids catching carp through the ice in winter and bringing this treat, fresh fish in the middle of winter, to Emma Big Bear, who fished out a coin purse and paid them for it. "She was a common sight in Marquette. People were kind to her, but she was just sort of taken for granted," he says, regretfully.

Arlis White remembers his grandparents bringing him and his sister to Emma Big Bear's tent and waiting outside while the children went in. She always seemed to remember them and greeted them with big hugs and kisses. His memories "bring me back to my ancestors, though they're not as famous as Emma's."

Dorothea Green's parents used to bring her and her sister from their Iowa home to the Mississippi River. First, they'd go to a museum in Guttenberg. But the girls would always ask to see "the Indian lady" north of there, and her parents always complied. "She'd always be sitting on the ground outside of her little dwelling," Green recalls, and she'd give the sisters a memorable welcome.

MRSP board member Rogeta Halvorson says, "I never met Emma Big Bear, but I wish I could have. My memory of her is when my family every Sunday after church would drive by her home in Marquette on our way to the sand bar across from Harpers Ferry. She was always sitting outside on her front porch on North Street weaving or beading while visiting with the locals or tourists. Who knew that in 30 some years my parents would own her last residence and convert it into an Emma Big Bear museum and part of their Marquette winery operation.

"Since age 10 I have felt close to her, and I value learning more every day about her, her Decorah lineage and the Ho-Chunk people. I've gotten to know her greatnieces and I cherish those personal stories they relayed to me. So July 16 was a special day for me and my parents, who are

proud to name the wine brand Marquette Maid to represent Emma Big Bear."

Richie Towle, who grew up in Marquette, remembers splitting wood for Emma Big Bear and piling it up for her. He learned how to do beadwork by watching her. He watched her start with a black ash log and use a metal piece like a chisel to make the strips that she would weave into baskets.

When Towle saw the statue unveiled, he said to himself, "That's just her!"

A photo to remember



Children are fond of interacting with the statues in the Sculpture Park. They enjoy touching history. As his father, James Blackdeer, and the other three Ho-Chunk singers honor Emma

Big Bear with their music, Peyton Blackdeer wanders near the statue, playing metallic music that probably only he can hear. Emma seems pleased.

--photo by Randy Paske

Who was Emma Big Bear?

A sign beside each sculpture in the park identifies the bronze figure for new visitors. Here's an excerpt of the sign you'll see beside the fifth statue to be added to the park:

Emma Big Bear (Wa'-ka-ja'-ze-winga, b. 1869, near Tomah, Wisconsin; d. 1968, Waukon, Iowa), a Ho-Chunk (Winnebago) woman of the Bear tribal family, who walked in silence, kindness and humbleness, was the daughter of Chief Big Bear and Mary Blue Wing. She was the wife of Henry Holt (Floating in Air), and mother of Emmaline. As a direct descendant of famed Winnebago Chief Waukon Decorah she instilled in her bloodline the fortitude to be honest, strong in beliefs and to march ahead, never complaining of the hardships one may encounter and endure.

Outliving her husband and daughter, Emma Big Bear made a living by selling her black ash baskets, beaded jewelry and ginseng, and by accepting food and assistance offered by the caring, local people of McGregor and Marquette, Iowa. She didn't wander far from the graves of her ancestors. She lived out her days as the last in the tradition of the ancestors who inhabited the pre-historic site near the Effigy Mounds sacred space along the Mississippi River in northeast Iowa.

A thanks to our donors

The board of directors of the Mississippi River Sculpture Park wishes to thank every single donor, more than 40 of you, for all sizes of monetary and in-kind contributions and volunteer efforts that made it possible for Emma Big Bear to come home to rest on this historic rendezvous point and treaty site at the sculpture park grounds near her ancestral home.

Major donors for the Emma Big Bear sculpture are:

Tom and Jean Farrell
Ho-Chunk Nation
Jack & Betty Howe
Patrick & Janet Leamy

Peoples State Bank
Frank Tiller

Top of the list



A question heard a lot at the dedication ceremony was "Who's next?" The tentative answer is this bronze maquette, the one that was displayed on the information table.

At the top of the Sculpture Park's wish list, the first sculpture planned for the second phase of the park, is John Lawler, a nineteenth century engineer and philanthropist. Among other accomplishments, Lawler devised plans for a pontoon bridge strong enough to allow railroad trains to cross the Mississippi River at Prairie du Chien.

You'll be hearing more about this in future newsletters.

Coming Attraction: Fall Sculpture Park event



When the Mississippi River has behaved itself, a cruise on the river has been a great way to meet friends of the Sculpture Park.

We're in the process of planning a fall cruise, probably sometime at the beginning of October -- also known as the month when the trees on the river bluffs put on a spectacular show.

Watch for a newsletter in



mid-September with more details.

And a warning -- previous boat trips, like the one shown here, have sold out fast.

Hidden Treasures

St. Feriole Island Gardens



After you've visited the Sculpture Park, a short stroll west toward the Mississippi River or south down St. Feriolo Island will bring you to more than a dozen different gardens. Most are flower gardens, but a few have vegetables too. Most have comfortable places to sit and enjoy the scenery; some views are enhanced with wind chime music.

The huge tree stump, its holes big enough to crawl through, in the upper right corner of the picture is part of a children's garden that includes a sandbox to dig in and a blackboard to doodle on.

Most of the flowers are perennials. Some of the perennials were transplanted from the gardens of Master Gardeners who tend some of the patches. Some were purchased.

If you've had reason to wonder which perennials can withstand flooding, look for the patches that are too large to have been planted recently. This spring, much of St. Feriolo Island was underwater, some of it for as much as four weeks. Nevertheless, flocks of daffodils appeared when the water receded.

Another clue to the frequency of flooding on the island is the height of the mounds that support electrical equipment boxes. Some of these double as gardens too.

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