

WHEN THE WORK IS DONE

From Making a Living to Passing Time

Text and photos by Steven Ohrn

Over the last 20 years wandering the back roads of Iowa, I have encountered dozens of men making things that did not clearly reflect any particular ethnic or religious tradition. I was attracted by decorative fences made of old tools, horse hames, and discarded farm machinery; I marveled at clever whirligigs fashioned from used bicycle wheels and cream separator cups; and I admired whimsical mailboxes, bottle trees, and other lawn sculptures that attested to both imagi-

nation and skill. Visible from passing roads, the roadside art drew me off to take a look. Someone once told me that the first rule of getting good photographs was learning to stop the car. I can't remember how often I have found myself suddenly braking, U-turning, or backing up the shoulder of a road.

I remember stopping several times in Cass County after spotting a fence made from horse hames; I pulled over in Floyd County to give cowboy boots and

running shoes nailed on utility poles another look; in Wayne County I was drawn to a shop sign, "Fix Anything But a Broken Heart," painted on a windmill made from a water pump and radiator fan; outside Tama, near an abandoned tourist trap, I was attracted to huge pyramids made from cultivator wheels welded together and painted bright colors; my head spun around in Kinross when I spied a house completely covered with license plates and hubcaps; and in Hardin County I

From left: Boots and shoes on utility pole; fence of horse hames; house covered with license plates and hubcaps; pyramid of cultivator wheels. **Opposite page:** whirly-wheel; propane tank airplane; and "The Muffler Man."





stopped to photograph huge airplanes made from retired propane tanks. These roadside attractions had only two things in common on first sight: they were all made from discards cleverly reused, and they brought attention.

To learn more I had to talk to the makers. When I called about the propane tank airplanes, Ella Winters told me that her husband, Ken, called them "do dads," adding that he "gets these wild ideas" and "loves to work in the shop" on their farm. So much traffic was stopped by Winters' "do dads" that the highway patrol ordered him to tone down his display.

One sight that stopped me time and again was Lawrence Hradak's backyard display in Iowa City. For more than a decade beginning in 1973, the yard was a marvel of gaily painted windtoys. Most of his designs involved whirlybirds and ducks. Mail order patterns increased the variety to include animated figures such as a mule kicking a farmer or a man chopping wood. His most innovative yard art included recycled bi-



cycle wheels, scraps of wood, and tin cans. With scores of windtoys in the yard, Hradak had numerous visitors. He said that "people would go by and see them and stop in."

Oftentimes on the way to work, I would gawk at a sculpture I referred to as "The Muffler Man" outside an auto garage in downtown Des Moines. I wondered about it for some time until I had an excuse to stop and meet its maker, Jack King. King made the sculpture from car parts, plugged in its lightbulb eyes, and placed it outside his shop to attract attention. It didn't work as he intended, but it did attract folklorists who eventually arranged to have the piece purchased as part of the 1996 "Recycled, Remade" exhibit at the Museum of Interna-

tional Folk Art in Santa Fe.

It was these conversations that taught me that if the art was reflective of tradition, it was the tradition of occupations such as farming, construction, blacksmithing, welding, and other mechanically oriented work. The art was exclusively the work of men reaching retirement or who were well into it. These farmers and tradesmen were taking ideas, techniques, tools, and materials used in their work and turning them to artistic ends.

Going to work, having co-workers, and being productive are routines, associations, and satisfactions lost when employment is interrupted or ceases altogether. Illness, injury, old age, seasonal slowdowns, strikes, and economic recessions put people out of work. For persons with identities closely tied to an occupation, involuntary unemployment can be a crisis.

When I was finally able to chat with Hradak, for example, he told me that after an operation, he was idled for six weeks from his job as a carpenter. "I had to stay off work," he said, "but needed something to do." Hradak chose to make yard art from scraps he had around the house.

Obviously, there are countless other responses to feelings of uselessness and boredom. The workers I describe here successfully shifted from making a living to passing time: they resolved their dilemmas brought on by losing their occupational identities and found satisfactory ways to fill spare time and relate to people around them.

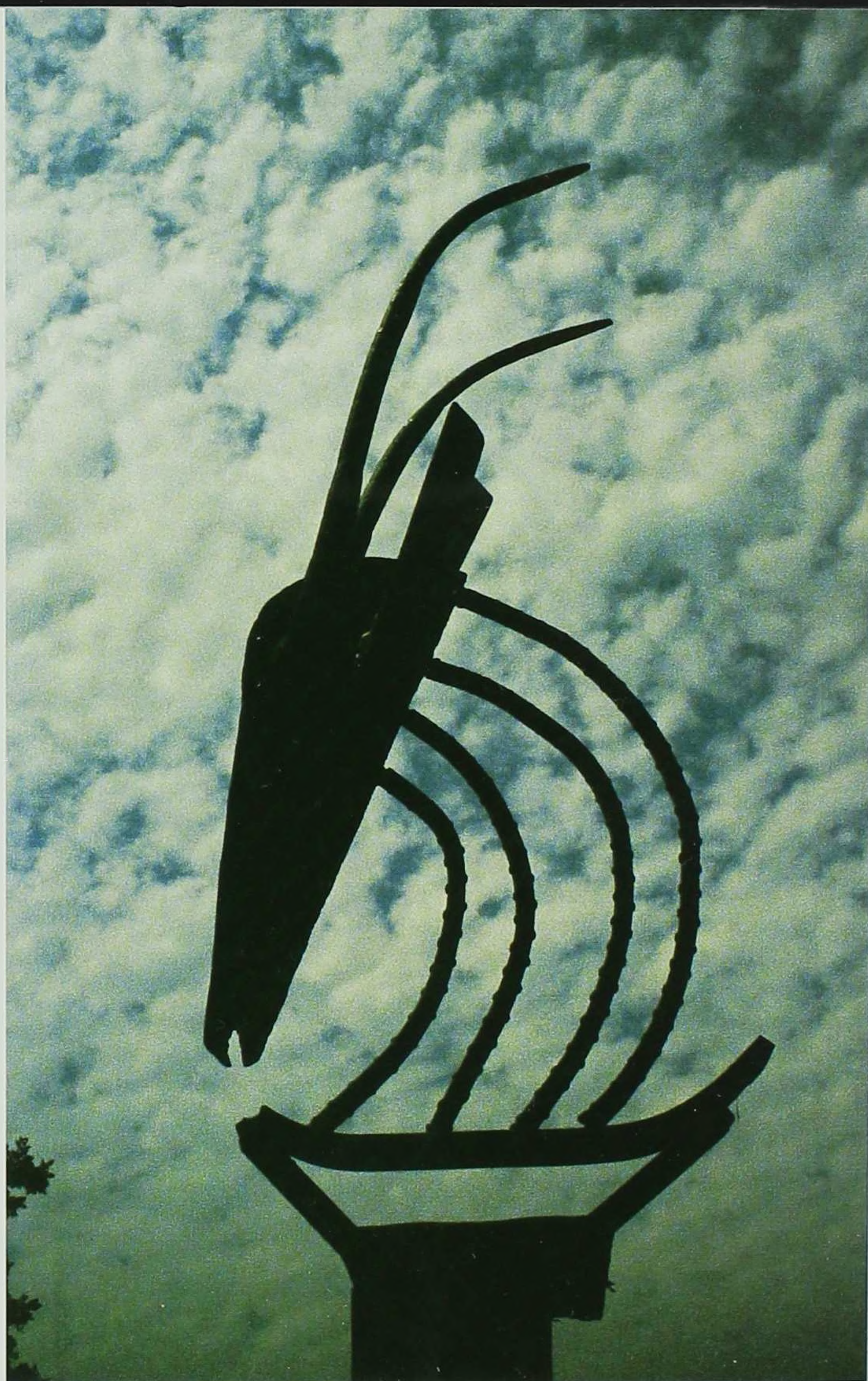
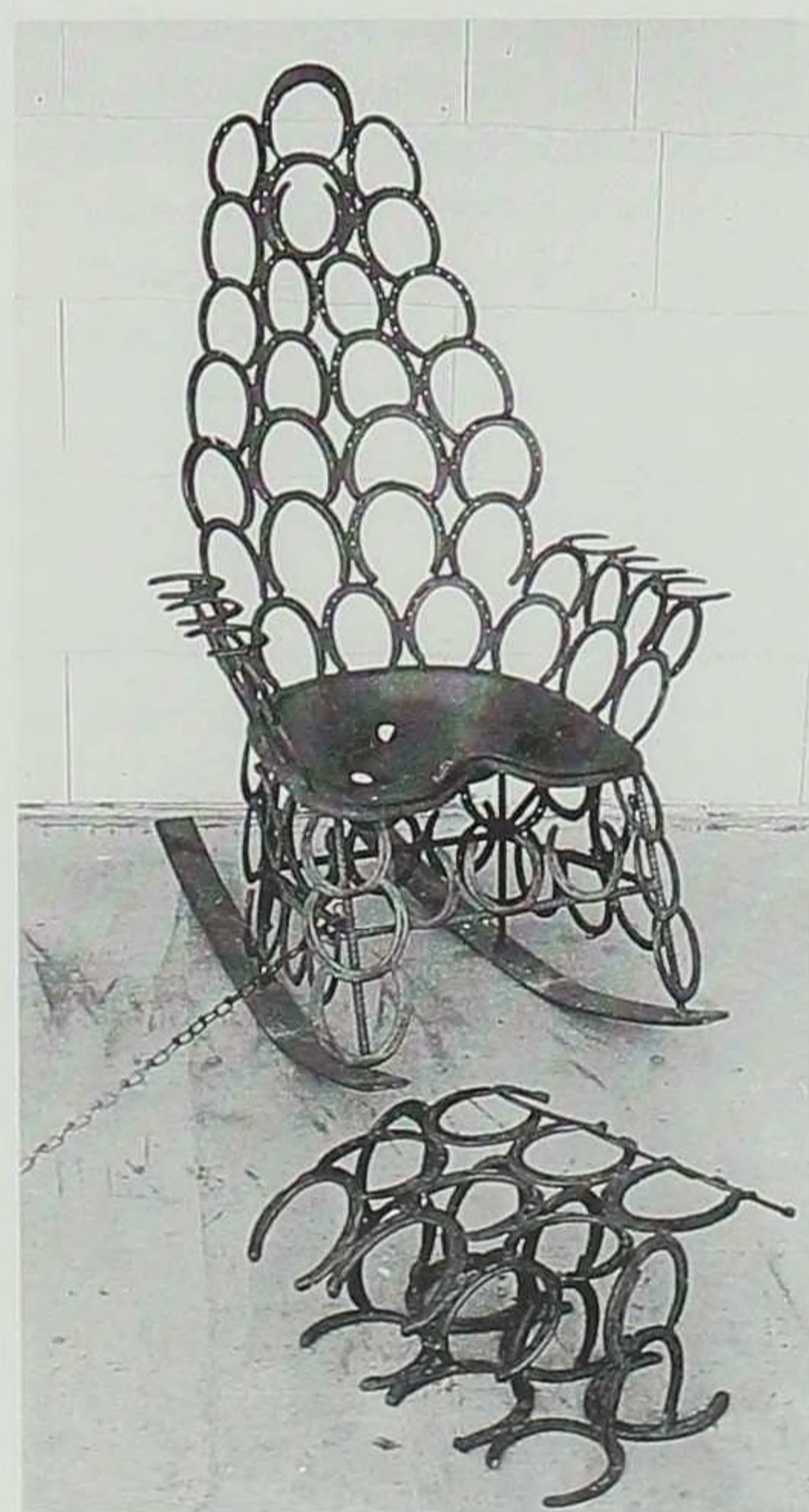
The men I interviewed lacked the camaraderie, feedback, and other support of fellow workers. Whether on a farm or in town, they usually worked alone in their garages or basement shops. They

made things for their own satisfaction, and for the appreciation they received from family, friends, neighbors, or passersby like myself. They preferred to retain and even display outdoors what they made. Occasionally they gave pieces to friends. For the most part, the work was not for sale.

On a porch just outside South English stood a marvelous rocking chair. Dick Harris, a farrier since he was in high school in 1944, had arc-welded scores of used horseshoes together with a tractor seat and buggy spring rockers. Though hefty, the chair



Dick Harris and his horse-shoe rocking chair.



Above: Ken Payne's "chiwara" sculpture, inspired by African art.

was chained to the front porch post (until the house was recently demolished and replaced with a mobile home). Like many blacksmiths and farriers, Harris always has plenty of discarded material to fashion into tables, hooks, racks, and other functional items. He made the rocker in 1977, has had many requests to make more, but "hasn't gotten around to it" yet. Meanwhile, he's still sometimes identified as "the guy with the chair on the porch."

Without the positive rewards of making things as part of an income-producing job, the men describe their activities modestly as "something to do," "fooling around," or as "passing or killing time." Ken Payne, a farmer near Winterset, told me that he "whacks" sculptures out of scraps from around the farm to keep

from “going bananas” while waiting for spring plowing or fall harvest. I was drawn to stop by Payne’s thunderbird sculpture on his mailbox (see back cover). In his yard he displayed a “chiwara” figure inspired by an African art exhibit that Payne remembered seeing in Omaha.

None of the men I encountered has described his activities as “creative”; no one volunteered that he was an “artist” or “folk artist.” Charles Hickson, maker of an impressive junk fence enclosing his front yard, said, “That fence is the closest I’ve come to making art.” When I pressed him further, he told me, “I’m not much of an artist. I have no talent at all that way.”

These Iowa tradesmen and farmers are not intentionally making statements about their occupations, either. Like stories told and songs sung during and about work, the objects have roots in work experiences and reflect occupational concerns and identities. The objects are not, however, traditional in the sense that they are made as part of a traditional occupation. Rather, they are traditional in that they arise from the means and materials of a traditional occupation. Unwilling to let go of their identities as “workers,” these farmers and tradesmen continue to exercise their work skills on familiar materials, but employ them in new combinations. The resulting objects then become conversation pieces facilitating talk about work.

When visiting Mac Hatch in Oelwein, Iowa, I heard him speak proudly of his inventions made at John Deere where he worked as a master welder. He likewise was proud of his welding skills put to new use when mak-



Mac Hatch and part of his welded patio set.



ing a patio set from machine parts. The set illustrates the technological shift from horse to tractor farming. Hatch didn’t boast of his artistic achievements as much as of his abilities to weld unlike metals together. He was certainly appreciative of the changing technology he’d witnessed since the turn of the century in rural Iowa.

Compared to “real” work, the men view their artistic activities as frivolous; to them, the objects they are making have no economic value and little if any artistic merit. For persons used to hard work, such leisure-time activities are hard to take seriously. The fact that I expressed interest made me somewhat suspect. After all, it’s one thing to be frivolous—but to study it?

In Vining, Iowa, I spotted a brightly painted “whirlywheel” turning smoothly in a front yard. It was a type I had been seeing in many parts of Iowa: a set of stainless steel cream separator cups attached to one or more bicycle wheels. The wheels were configured on steel poles in a variety of ways to catch the wind and turn one way or another.

I knocked on the back door to no avail, so I went to a nearby café and learned that the whirlywheel had been a 60th-anniversary present made by Milo Benda from nearby Traer. I drove over to Traer and found Benda, in part due to his mailbox being decorated with a tiny whirlywheel.

Benda, a farmhand just coming in from the fields, was amused by my visit. We talked as I photographed the creations in his yard. He told me that he had seen such “whimsies” in a neighboring town and began making them in the mid-1970s.

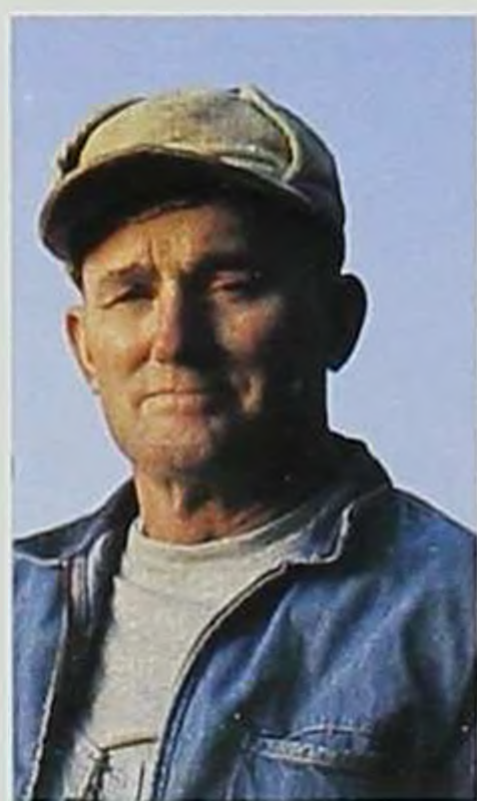
Benda’s creations combine several dozen recycled cream separator cups and new bicycle wheels; their sealed bearings make them run smoothly and silently. He carefully paints the cups bright colors coming straight from cans of Rustoleum. Despite all the care he puts into his creations, he still finds it necessary to completely disassemble them every four to five years in order to strip and repaint them.

Benda thinks highly of his wind machines, but not so highly as to mistake them for art. He always seems happy to get some recognition for his whirlywheels, but he remains skeptical of my making too much of it.

Nevertheless, such artistic acts are more important and revealing than the participants are willing to admit. Rather than focus on the



Milo Benda and one of his whirlywheels.



"art" as such, I think it is helpful to see the objects as links to past ways of thinking and doing, as symbols recalling accomplishments of a working life. The machines used as tools by one generation can become historic symbols to the next, helping us remember and talk about the way we were.

Born in Winneshiek County at the turn of the century, Clifford Foss learned as a farmer to be resourceful and inventive. His mechanical skills were not lost

when he retired from farming. Instead, he began to tinker with discarded objects, turning odds and ends into art. What drew my attention and pulled me into his drive was "Modern Art," which Foss envisioned in 1963. In part it is a tongue-in-cheek statement aimed at fine artists. More important, because it was made from bits and pieces salvaged from machinery Foss used when farming, it is a true conversation piece. Foss listed its parts: "Spring teeth from a quack digger, shovel from an old corn plow, sprocket from a fanning mill, rolling colter from a walking plow, rake teeth from a sulky rake, rake teeth from a Dane hay loader, reel shaft from a grain binder, seat from a manure spreader, wrench for a buggy wheel, wheel from a Hayes corn planter, wrench for a wagon wheel, disk from a grain drill, blade from a circular saw, combination wrench, nut from a wagon

wheel, rings from a neck yoke, teeth from a side rake, corn planter stakes, blade from a tandem disk, claw hammer, fence pincers, mower guards, manure fork, iron clevis, drag teeth, and an iron shoe from Molly, the old mule." Later, in 1989, when "Modern Art" was displayed at the Iowa Historical Building in Des Moines, I overheard visitors attempting to identify the different parts named by Foss. Thus, an unsightly pile of junk to his family and neighbors is a range of possibilities to the handyman with a "waste-not, want-not" outlook.

Occasionally this difference in perception causes problems. Paul Williams, in violation of zoning ordinances, faced losing his treasure trove to a sanitary landfill in Plymouth County.

Williams lives on his parents' farm west of Hinton. A hint of what's there greeted me at the



Clifford Foss
and his "Modern
Art."



Paul Williams and his "Paul's OK Corral" sign (above) and dinosaur (below).

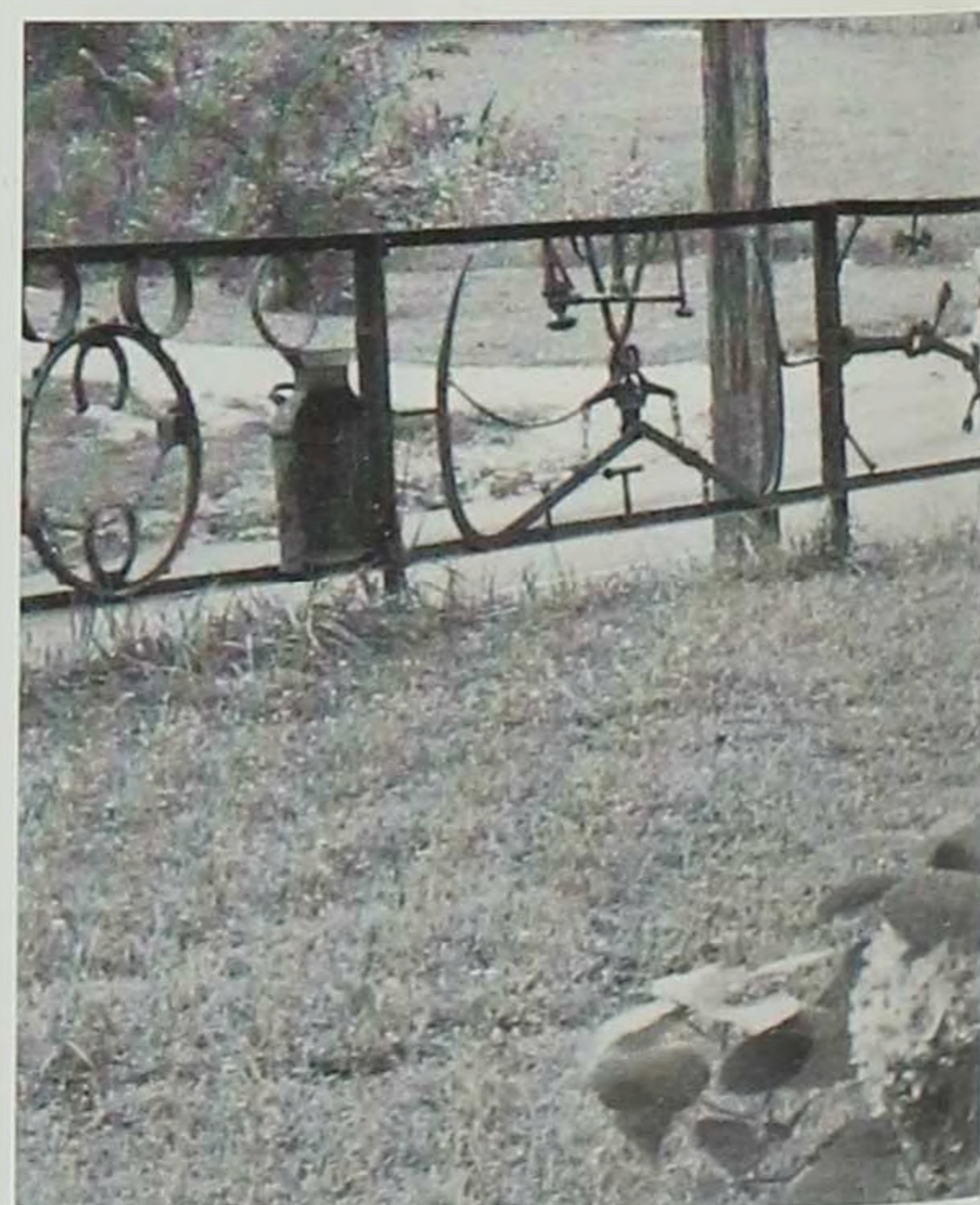


gate, marked by junk sculptures of "Wild West" gunfighters perched on the fenceposts with a sign reading "Paul's OK Corral." Further hints follow down a lane lined with all manner of discarded cars and other junk.

Williams inherited much of the junk from his father, who used scraps when working as a blacksmith. Williams continues that tradition when rummaging through

piles of machinery, imagining parts becoming pieces of a whole new thing. Sometimes he makes a dinosaur or a fanciful bird; other times he creates romantic images of Indians; and occasionally he fashions a fig-

ure like a blacksmith, personally familiar to him. The process of re-assembling past scraps into new configurations can be compared to storytelling. It's a tradition that Paul Williams has passed along to his own son.



In the case of Charles Hickson, accumulating tools led him to make a "junk fence." Until retiring in 1977, Hickson did auto body work. Having grown up on a farm, Hickson was fascinated with old tools and farm machinery. His fascination led him to auctions and a major clutter in and on his garage. Building whirligigs, a Ferris wheel, and windmills used some of the pieces, but a much more ambitious project was at hand. A visiting friend told Hickson about a fence "made of junk" he'd seen in Texas. Hickson went to work. He chose steel army cots from a garage sale as the structure of his fence: "They were uniform size, see, that's what I liked about them." He removed the bed springs and without a formal plan, arranged tools and parts of machinery to fill 23 frames and



Charles Hickson and his "junk fence."

nearly 140 linear feet. "As I saw it, I put it together," he explained. He painted the panels black and surrounded his front lawn with them. He told me that there's never been a complaint from the neighbors; in fact, "Everyone who has seen it has liked it."

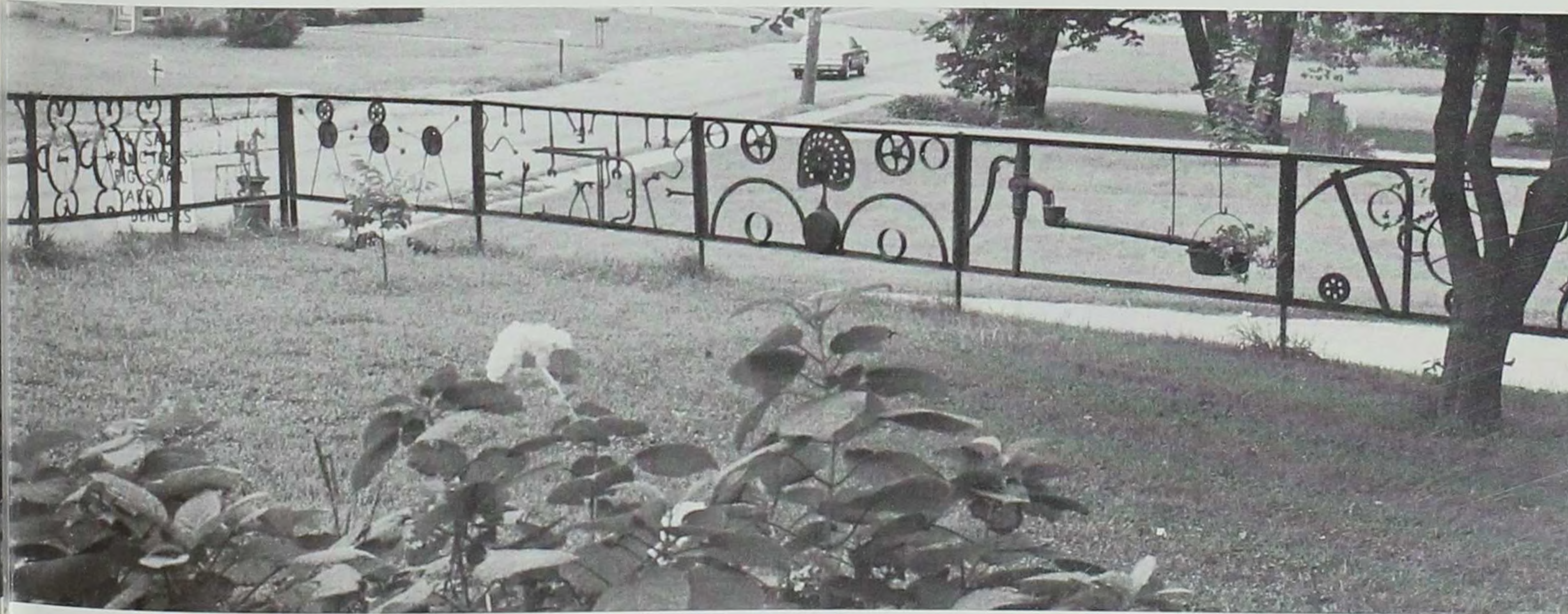
A huge horse and rider in Plainfield, along U.S. 218, has been a hit since David Limkemann put it on his front lawn in 1988. A welder by trade, Limkemann gathered 874 used horseshoes from farrier friends in Iowa, Minnesota, and Texas. The horse and rider are painted black.

Limkemann's spectacular horse is lit year round with Christmas lights. Seasonally, Limkemann changes the sculpture. At Christmas the rider holds a tree, on the Fourth of July he carries a flag, during the summer he holds a parasol made from aluminum horseshoes, at Halloween a ghost hovers overhead, and for Thanksgiving, the horseman carries a turkey made from horseshoes painted white.

After stopping and seeing the

horse and talking with Limkemann's daughter, I arranged a return visit to see and learn more. The horse dwarfs a modest house along the highway; the basement also holds a treasure of Limkemann's creativity. As we were going down, he confessed that there "must be something wrong mentally for someone to bring old junk into the house." I couldn't agree. Limkemann has reused nearly 7,500 old horseshoes to create a wide variety of furniture ranging from a filigreed canopy bed, a round table and benches, a dressing table and bench, and a rocking chair and stool. What distinguishes the furniture is that it is all made entirely of horseshoes—even the rockers.

Though smaller in scale, Limkemann's sculptures are even more remarkable. He began recycling his daughter's worn horseshoes in 1982, making a horse and rider. That was popular with her friends, and requests for more followed. The next year, he was laid off for a few months from his welding job. After working for 30 years, Limkemann found that he





Paul Williams and his "Paul's OK Corral" sign (above) and dinosaur (below).



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David Limkemann and his horse and rider.



"had time on his hands." To fill that time he continued working with recycled horseshoes, making sculptures that recalled his growing up on a farm in the 1930s near

Castalia, Iowa. His farm memories include a bobsled and horse-powered machinery such as a manure spreader, side mower, and hayrack and loader. Other imagery came from rodeo events in which his son competed: calf roping, bull dogging, bull riding, clowning, and team roping. Other recollections include a couple in a horse-drawn sleigh, a man and woman fishing from a boat, and two old men throwing horse-

shoes. As a guitarist who enjoys jamming at bluegrass events, Limkemann also depicts musicians. A particularly complex piece includes a multitude of musicians playing for a pair of dancers mounted on a music box. The sculpture, which includes a clock, stands on the television. It was a 40th-anniversary gift to Limkemann's wife, Marian.

Despite his obvious talent, and the public setting for his monumental horse, Limkemann has been surprised by the "unreal" interest that people have shown: "It never entered my mind that it would attract so much attention." Publicity in such magazines as *Western Horseman* and *Truckers News* "really messed me up" because of orders, he told me. He's not doing it as a business, and orders make him nervous because he fears disappointing people. Limkemann is a modest man; a plaque on the horse says, "Only God Gave the Ability."

The farmers and tradesmen I have met here in Iowa unintentionally signify and justify through their artwork their continuing worth, which in times of full employment was measured by a good day's work. They continue to use their skills and cleverness to create things that help them recollect what they used to do for a living. By staying busy with occupational skills and materials, they mimic work in leisure time. ♦

Steven Ohrn is historic sites manager for the State Historical Society of Iowa and author of books and articles on Iowa folklore. The Society is actively collecting items like those featured in this article; for more information, contact Ohrn at 515-281-7650.