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Grandview now listed as historic place

By Kayla Barnes

It took 10 years but Grandview, the home of Nick and Katherine Engelbert, outside of Hollandale, was recently added to the state Register of Historic Places.

"If Nick was alive today, I think he would be amazed that it is national recognized," said Rick Rolfsmeyer, Hollandale resident, caretaker of Grandview and the executive director of Pecatonica Educational Charitable Foundation (PEC), the non-profit organization that helps fundraise for the upkeep at the Engelbert home.

The Kohler Foundation Inc. purchased Grandview in 1991 with the intention of fixing up the sculptures and preserve the art created by self-taught artist Nick Engelbert. In September 1997 the foundation donated Grandview to the PEC.

Rolfsmeyer and his wife Marilyn, have been caretakers of the property ever since and have been taking great care, along with members on the PEC board, to restore the concrete creations around the home.

Nick Engelbert and Grandview

Nick Engelbert, born Engelbert Koletnik in Austria in 1881, fled Europe during the Austro-Hungarian war to escape further military involvement. He began traveling all



before coming to America, changing his name, and seeking out a dream, like many immigrants.

Rick stated that he said Nick went to Chicago to pay off a grocer's debt, only to fall in love with the grocer, Katherine Thoni. Katherine, a Swiss immigrant, and Nick married in 1913. When deciding where to go for a honeymoon, Katherine suggesting going to Hollandale, Wisconsin, where a brother lived.

Nick fell in love with the place. He was famous in quoting that "if a man can't be happy on a little farm in Wisconsin, he hasn't the makings of happiness in his soul".

He said, "He traveled all over the world but chose Wisconsin as his home."

One thing that Nick did to make it feel more like home was on his dairy farm, Grandview Dairy, he milked Brown Swiss. Engelbert's dairy became the milk supplier for Hollandale after they purchased a seven-acre farm just north of Hollandale, where they raised their four children, Gladys (Bigham), Alyce (Stocklin), Lincoln "Ed", and Ernest.

"When talking with the older people that knew him, they thought he was crazy," Rick said. "I thought,

said no, because of the Brown Swiss."

The statues and sculptures didn't come into the picture until around the 1930s when Nick had some down time due to an ankle injury.

"He gathered a bit of concrete and molded it in his hands, then took some glass and pushed it into the concrete and created a rosette," Rick said.

The rosettes turned into urns, which were given away for weddings or celebrations and then slowly turned into bigger things. During the 1930s and 1940s, he made two statues every year.

would bring them out of the shop or the basement. They would just appear one day," Marilyn said.

In the early 1950s his yard was decorated with 40 concrete sculptures, many with decorative glass imbedded in them, creating a colorful site to see.

Nick's creations were inspired by the Dickeyville Grotto. This site is the third nationally registered site to have inspiration come from the grotto.

While his sculptures and statues may look similar to that of the Wisconsin Concrete Park in Philips,

Nick's glass or knick-knacks embedded in his statues are colorful, bits and pieces of this and that. Smith used brown glass as he owned a bar. Engelbert was a connoisseur of wine so there are more white or green glass within his creations. Not only are the white and green glass, it can be a bit of an "eye spy" game with other odds and ends.

"Neighbors would bring over broken dishes, odds and ends to have him stick in the cement," Rick said.

"I think Nick wanted you to look closely to see what he had tucked in

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Grandview

continued from front

there," Marilyn suggested.

The structures vary from an organ grinder to Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs with Paul Bunyan. One can even see an American Eagle, a Lion and a Lighthouse.

Both being immigrants, Nick paid homage to both their roots by creating statues depicting Switzerland and Austria with the Swiss Patriots statues and the Carinthian Forest Ranger and Deer. Nick also looked at his neighbors and the community and celebrated them as well with a Viking in a Boat for his Norwegian friends and the Blarney Castle for his Irish friends.

Nick also created Old Glory which represented his love for his new country of the United States of America with a concrete globe and an American flag on top.

"He embraced a lot of people around him, signifying we are all under one umbrella," Marilyn said.

"He was very proud to be an American," Rick said.

The grounds have a very whimsical feel, showing off Nick's sense of humor. He created a tall tree like sculpture filled with monkeys that depict every member of his family, creating a family tree. At the bottom sits a hobo or freight hopper, who would ride the trains that once went through the area. That sculpture signified that even those who had no home, had a home at Engelbert's as they had a place to stay and a warm meal to eat.

Poking fun of American politics is a statue of Uncle Sam being pulled by the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey with a sign that used to say "It's hard to get a days work done with a team like this".

Where there was dreaming with Nick, Katherine ran the house. She was a stern woman who had a determination

Her children spoke about how she

Nick did before he left his home. He painted two murals on the wall of the house. It is two trees assuming to be that of the family tree, with Brown Swiss cows grazing in the fields in the background and birds clinging to the branches, with a farm nestled amongst the leaves.

Nick died in 1962 on his birthday. Both he and Katherine along with their son "Ed" are buried in the Hollandale Cemetery.

Historic recognition

"We have always wanted to do this," Rick said about getting the property officially registered as a historic place.

The long process was finally fulfilled in November 2023 after their application was submitted in 2021 to the Wisconsin Historic Preservation Board. Covid-19 put a hold on this but last fall Rick received a phone call that all of their hard work was to be heard at the board last meeting of 2023.

There was a lot that needed to be done for the application to be considered. They needed to document every single thing within the home and the grounds from several different angles and had to do a lot of background research on the Engelbert family, especially Nick.

"I called up and asked what it would take to get this done? They said to hire someone. We are self-taught people. We are rural farmers. We can do anything. We can do this ourselves," Rick said.

There was a lot the Rolfsmeyers and the board did themselves but they did get great help from the Kohler Foundation in documenting everything on the grounds.

"The Kohler Foundation has been a big part of keeping this place as good as we can with funding and helping with programming," Marilyn said.

conservators and restoration specialists. Their next big restoration project is Paul Bunyan and his axe, which is a large and heavy sculpture. One of the last pieces to be restored will be a fence Nick created that went around the property, which has fallen over and become tangled in the weeds.

Educational aspect

After some vandalism in 1998, Marilyn reached out to Pecatonica School District and area schools to teach them about the importance of art but most importantly Nick's art.

"It is important to bring the kids here and for the community to have ownership over this place as well," Marilyn said.

When visiting the John Michael Kohler Art Center in Sheboygan, Rick and Marilyn fell in love with the arts pre-school they had and wanted to do something like that at Grandview. The PEC Foundation also goes into Pecatonica Elementary during the fall and spring for their After School Art Program to help enhance the art program in the district.

"Education was important to Nick, especially rural education," Marilyn said.

"All of his children had advanced degrees, which spoke to the importance he saw in education," Rick said.

During the summer months there are events and activities filling the grounds at Grandview. One year they were able to receive a grant that allowed them to build a shed. Students mixed up mortar and placed it on the outside of the shed. Random objects were then stuck into the concrete sided shed, just as Nick had done in his art.

"Kids would bring in things and stick them on the wall. It was just amazing. Some were quite thoughtful and they were putting

Her children spoke about how she used to walk from Hollandale and Argyle, selling farm equipment door to door out of a catalog. When it would get late, she would stay at whomever's home she was at and then the next day keep going until she reached Argyle. Once she got to Argyle, someone would come and pick her up.

"That is pretty wild that it only happened 100 years ago," Marilyn said.

"They were opposites, her and Nick, but she was a determined woman," Rick said.

Getting too old to continue creating his statutes, his son-in-law gifted him some oil paints. He began creating scenes from his travels around the world and also from his world in Hollandale. Many depictions from around the Hollandale area are still being identified but the Rolfsmeyers knew of a few places within the photos. Throughout the family house, there are prints of many of Nick's original paintings. One of his drawings is depicting the Massey farm on Hwy 191. Several original paintings were gifted to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan.

After Katherine passed away in 1960, Nick decided to move out East to live with his daughter, Alyce. One original painting that quite literally hangs in the home is the last thing

Marilyn said.

Rick also contributes a lot of the success of the PEC Foundation to Robert and Janet Negronida, who was on the Pecatonica School Board with Rick when the school district was going to take care of Grandview but it fell through. Negronida told Rick that it would be neat to be a historic site.

"He said this truly is a historic site," Rick said about Negronida.

The unique thing about Wisconsin is that if a place is on the state register they are then automatically on the National Register of Historic Places as well. Iowa County has several places registered as historic places due to the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings and designs. Grandview is not the only site in the town of Moscow to be on the National Register of Historic Places. The McCoy Rock Art site, also known as the McCoy Rockshelter, was added to the list in 1991.

"This is good for us no matter what. It is good for fundraising, good for publicity. We want people to stop in Hollandale and support the community," Rick said.

Bit by bit they are slowly restoring more and more of Grandview. The last thing that was restored was Uncle Sam, which cost around \$30,000. The weather is hard on the sculptures. The hardest part about getting pieces restored is finding

thoughtful and they were putting their mark on it," Marilyn said.

"We believe Nick would appreciate it," Rick said.

The PEC Foundation has been well supported by the Ruth Kohler Foundation for the Arts, continuing to receive funding every year. They are also part of the Wisconsin Art Environment Consortium along with eight other Wisconsin art attractions to help build awareness of and appreciation for their sites where the builders have transformed homes, yards, churchyards and created other worldly realms with their art.

There is also the support from those living members of the Engelbert, Thoni, and Koletnik family. There are still Koletnik family members alive today that live in Poland and keep in touch with Grandview.

"I think it would behove him (Nick) to think that this is what it is today and he has inspired so many people," Marilyn said. "It was his own passion, his own mission, never expecting it to grow into anything more."

"They were both just immigrants. Look at this wonderful gift that immigrants gave us," Rick said.

