



Features

A concrete landscape

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At McCourtie Park, what looks real are actually unique sculptures

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As dusk approaches and the winds ruffle the autumn leaves, their shades of gold and red casting a kaleidoscope of colors in the bubbling brook that winds its way through McCourtie Park, you might catch a glimpse of a woman dressed in a long blue gown moving quietly across a bridge.

Or is she wearing black? Ghost hunters disagree on the color of her dress, but the suggestion of a gentle presence is just one of the unique features of this roadside park in the tiny hamlet of Somerset Center, Mich.

W.H.L. McCourtie, owner of the Trinity Portland Cement Co., had a fondness for both concrete and whimsy. His estate, known as Aiden Lair, was the perfect place to create a fantastical garden. It looks like a fairy tale run amok. Concrete chimneys created to look like tree trunks rise out of an underground rathskeller built into the side of a hill where McCourtie (known as Herb to his friends)

played poker with such Detroit bigwigs as auto baron Henry Ford. Local lore says tunnels used to run underground here, perfect for bootleggers to smuggle in liquor for those all-night poker games. Seventeen folk art-style bridges cross the meandering stream on the 42-acre property.

Kim Gallagher of St. Joseph has extensively researched McCourtie Park as project manager for the Southwest Michigan Regional Planning Commission, located in Benton Harbor. Gallagher manages U.S. 12 Heritage Trail, which stretches from New Buffalo to Detroit. McCourtie Park is one of the historic stops along the trail, and Gallagher says that though information is hard to find, these unique sculptures, called El Trabejo Rustico, Spanish for rustic work, were created by Mexican artisans Dionicio Rodriguez and Ralph Corona of Texas (Mccourtie had made it rich as a Texas oil man before returning home to Somerset). Gallagher says these creations are also known by the French term faux bois, or fake wood, which is a complex process of shaping, molding, staining and adding texture to the concrete so that it looks real. An almost forgotten technique for years, this early to mid-20th century folk art is enjoying a resurgence in interest.

"I was really amazed at how beautiful it is," says Gallagher about when she first visited McCourtie Park. "It's the second largest collection of this folk art in the United States. It's hard to find if you don't know where it's located, and it's a treasure that needs more support for preservation.

"To me, it's well worth the drive, and it's only two and a half hours from the Twin Cities, and it's something you would never see anywhere else. To me it's the most concentrated collection in one spot. There's quite a bit in San Antonio, but it doesn't seem to be so concentrated."

Built in the early 1930s, each bridge is unique and beckons walkers to cross over and into wooded glades that in the fall are ablaze with color. One bridge, surely a home for hobbits, has the look of a thatched cottage, albeit a concrete one. A simpler bridge is designed to resemble an old-fashioned swinging bridge, the concrete scored to replicate ropes and wood; planked seats, also out of cement, invite visitors to stop halfway across and rest.

Weeping willows crowd the sides of the stream, dripping long, feathery branches on the water.

Secret glens offer seating and elaborate birdhouses, including several tall purple martin homes that can shelter more than 200 birds.

This place of enchantment is often empty, even though it is right off U.S. 12. Maybe gnomes have stolen the signs marking it as a park, so look for street signs as it is on the northwest corner of U.S. 12 and South Jackson Road.

After turning north off U.S. 12, take the unmarked road on the left. There is no admission fee.

In an interesting aside, U.S. 12, originally called the Sauk Trail, was the first east-west route through the state and was originally a trading route used by both Native Americans and early settlers.

There's no Web site or direct number for McCourtie Park, but the Lenawee County Convention and Visitors Bureau handles queries, even though it's officially in a different county. That number is (800) 536-2933.

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