

Spirit of the Rivers project sparking interest

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The magnificent bronze sculpture currently taking shape in Hamachek's old automobile showroom on Franklin Street is composed of three larger-than-life Indian figures portaging a birch bark canoe. When finished it will stand along the rim of the lake, between Manitowoc and Two Rivers, and emerge from the darkness at each sunrise.

Public interest in this Spirit of the Rivers project has been increasing, but some people still ask: Why Indian figures?

Aside from the pure aesthetic pleasure this work of art will provide, it is also intended to reflect a sense of the essential character of the human experience here in the upper Great Lakes region and give expression to the distinctive spirit of this particular place. For evoking deep feelings for the past and an understanding of place there could be no truer, more authentic imagery than that of the original native inhabitants of the lakeshore.

The aboriginal people have been here for 12,000 years. They stalked mammoths and caribou along the retreating edge of the great Ice Age glaciers at the very time the melt waters formed Lake Michigan. Their stone and copper artifacts and thousands of their effigy mounds bear witness to their determined persistence in this place. They were the land's long before the land was ours. Therefore, the sculpture will recall the many human generations that preceded us here.

Just as later European settlers, many tribes journeyed here from somewhere else, and like them, most came by water. This was especially so in the mid-17th century. Indeed, most of the tribal people now living in Wisconsin — people like the Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) and Potawatomi — came here as part of a fearful mass migration fleeing the deadly fury of the fur trade wars in the east. Here they sought refuge in a place of safety where they could raise their families and begin again.

Along this lakeshore they formed communities, and while the Spirit of the Rivers monument commemorates journeys and human endurance it also depicts the spirit of cooperation and sharing at the very core of human community. The three figures — the woman bearing packs, the young man carrying the canoe and the tribal elder pointing the way — are the forms of ordinary people about their daily work, bonded together in mutual endeavor.

Such native families emerged each spring from the forest, seeking sunshine and relief from mosquitoes, to establish sprawling fishing camps along the Lake Michigan shore, exactly where the sculpture will stand. Here they remained throughout the summers harvesting and drying fish. In 1818 Capt. Abram Edwards witnessed them while traveling by canoe to Chicago and

observed: "At Twin Rivers and Manitowoc the shore of the lake was lined with Indians (and) ... many were out in their canoes spearing fish."

They also occupied large, permanent settlements which included extensive gardens and corn fields, horse pastures, burial grounds and canoe fleets. The most impressive of these were at Manitowoc Rapids, Two Rivers and at Black Earth north of Mishicot, where more than a thousand people occupied the lodges of that community.

Therefore, when the fur trader Jacques Vieau arrived here with his family in 1795 they did not find a howling wilderness. People had been here for centuries, and during those long ages had formed a profoundly intimate relationship with the forests and rivers and indigenous creatures, acquiring in the process an intuitive understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

The land and lake provided their sustenance, the substance of their cultures, and the spirit that animated their way of life. Spirit of the Rivers celebrates the wonder of where we are, the human experience here and the fundamental qualities we have always shared as people of the Lakeshore.