

Wippich's Rock Garden

Benton County

SOME BELIEVED LOUIS WIPPICH brilliant. Others thought him mad. He was likely somewhere in between, little different than most. But while many trudge quietly through life, Wippich made a loud metaphysical statement. A disciple of Theosophy, he dedicated a quarter-century to turning his home in Sauk Rapids into an arresting, if somewhat chaotic, tribute to the movement's founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Blavatsky helped establish the Theosophical Society in 1875. Its members embraced reincarnation while rejecting the concept of an anthropomorphic God existing outside of nature.

In 1932, when Wippich was working for the Great Northern Railway Company in nearby St. Cloud, he began building his rock garden. Unlike the more ordered Ellsworth Rock Garden in Voyageurs National Park, Wippich's evolved into a jumble of structures and formations. He constructed a 45-foot-high granite tower rising above his shack dwelling, as well as two large granite-and-sandstone "mountains." One featured carved passageways and an altar named the Seven Steps to Hell. The other had protruding concrete slabs extending over a reflecting pool like diving boards. Wippich "preached over his world" from a concrete pulpit cantilevered above the pool, and the garden incorporated other structures, including a Doric temple and a "meditation chamber."

Wippich died in 1973. It is unknown if he returned to his utopia



in another form, as he believed he would. Thankfully, the rock garden has been preserved by a local family that appreciates Wippich's efforts and Sauk Rapids's history.

—DENIS GARDNER

Denis Gardner is writing a book featuring many of Minnesota's National Register of Historic Places properties.

*SOURCES: Ted Sherarts and Karon Sherarts, "Louis C. Wippich: Clown of Molehill," in *Naives and Visionaries: An Exhibition Organized by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 87–93; Mark Haidet, "Wippich's Rock Garden," National Register of Historic Places registration (draft), Nov. 1980, State Historic Preservation Office, MHS; Connie Driscoll, Benton County Historical Society, telephone interview by author, July 17, 2002.



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