

My Experience

Wilson

March 2015

The second of a three-part guide to the lives and people of Wilson and surrounding areas for 2015

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Members of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park team of conservators are Mel Bowen, left, Juan Logan, James Pope, Jefferson Currie II, Barbara Oakley, B. B. Melchior, Donald Davis, Joe Justice and Sam Price.

Restoring Vollis

Team effort and family affair

By Gerard Lange

Conservators involved in the restoration of the late Vollis Simpson's whirligigs have worked through great challenges bringing the kinetic sculptures back to their original glory. This has meant doing numerous tasks including cleaning and treating the surfaces along with restoring, replacing and ever retrofitting parts. After making the frozen gears move once more the team carefully examines the original colors through old photographs and closely inspecting bits or rusted metal to recapture the artist's vision. Simpson spent decades

constructing his whirligigs on his land in the south part of Wilson County. Now the team of conservators has worked for years revitalizing the sculptures and moving them to their new home near downtown Wilson.

Jefferson Currie II began his work on the restoration project doing repair and conservation. Now his role has shifted more to the collections and curatorial side of the field. With 11 whirligigs completed and installed in the park and fifteen ready to be erected, the project is nearing completion. Much of the restoration work will be finished within the next year, but it will take bit more time before landscaping on the park is

installed. In coming months, the city will be building an amphitheater, farmers' market space and footings for more whirligigs.

A personal friend of Simpson and his family, Currie has been involved with the restoration project since the beginning. He applauds the community for being proactive about their support and efforts to preserve the whirligigs. "It's been amazing to see the city of Wilson come together to keep this bit of history in tact," he commented. "I love Vollis and think is important to honor his memory by seeing his wishes through to the end." With the efforts of the many people

involved the whirligigs will be preserved for future generations.

In Currie's opinion, everyone at the restoration center plays an important part in the process of revitalizing the whirligigs. Assisting him in the collections and curatorial work is Donald Davis, in charge of photographing and archiving numerous pieces of information. Working on the mechanical components are Sam Price, Mel Bowen and B. B. Melchior. "Sam can do anything Vollis could do," Bowen commented. Collectively the three men work mostly on repairing or retrofitting parts that make the Simpson Whirligigs move the way they were intended. "Often, decay over time and rust keep the sculptures from spinning like they were supposed to," continued Bowen. Melchior provides skills in lathing, tooling and millwork related to crafting of replacement parts. Since many of the parts Simpson used are no longer available, the team must build them to fit inside of the original casings.

Everything is done to improve the functionality, while maintaining Simpson's artistic integrity. This can be appreciated in the careful craftsmanship of the replacement parts. "We're using UHMW (ultra high molecular weight) plastic to recreate cotton mill rollers that Vollis originally used," Bowen demonstrated. The dense material was color-matched to original rollers and includes a UV preventative to extend the life of the part. Being outside in the elements, Simpson's whirligigs have shown a great deal of wear due to exposure to the elements.

Other than mechanical wear, the paint on Simpson's sculptures has not stood the test of time. When arriving at the restoration facility, most of them are badly chipped, faded, worn away and rusted. Dealing with rust is the specialty of James Pope. Surface preservation is the first line in bringing the whirligigs back to their original glory. Great care is taken to precisely match the original colors and patterns painted on the sculptures. Joe Justice and Barbara Oakley painstakingly work to decorate the whirligigs exactly like Simpson originally did. Sometimes this means brushing on paint and at others, spraying. Justice even occasionally over sprays the paint so it matches how Simpson painted them.

Often the artist used primary colors of red, yellow and blue, along with a lot of white. Generally, one might consider Simpson to have a patriotic palette. For birthdays and Christmas, his family would gift Simpson boxes of paint. Simpson's daughter would go to the local store, grabbing up the regularly used colors, then fill up the box with whatever she could find. Perhaps this explains one anomalously colored

whirligig that was the possession of long-time Wilson resident and arts supporter Edna Earle Boykin.

Boykin bequeathed the whirligig to the Arts Council of Wilson to be sold as a fundraising piece for the organization. The Arts Council commissioned the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park conservators to restore this piece as they have with those destined for downtown. But, unlike the rest, this whirligig was colored with mauves, lavender, pink, peach and a different yellow than Simpson normally used. "These were definitely unusual for Vollis," Bowen commented. Also unusual are several pieces decorating the whirligig of a Southwestern theme. These elements, depicting a bear, cactus and deer skull, were made by a man from South Carolina who would occasionally come up to work with Simpson. Typically, Simpson used airplanes and scenes of farm life to adorn his whirligigs. Barry Page of the Arts Council said Boykin specifically picked these out herself.

"This makes this piece really special,"
Justice

said. "I think the colors were probably picked to go with the theme." This particular whirligig is destined to be installed in Raleigh at Moore's Square.

In addition to the preservation of these unique works of art the Whirligig Park stands to become a major feature of economic and tourism development in downtown. "This project is quite significant for the community," said Juan Logan, conservation manager of the restorations. "Here at the park, we've received visitors from all over the country and internationally," Logan continued. Development of the park is beginning to spread to the surrounding area with businesses and residential areas being planned.

"Zoning in the 1960s through 1980s pushed a lot of businesses out of the area and now they're starting to come back," Currie added. Once completed, the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park will be a major feature for downtown, drawing people from far and wide to witness the work of this incredible local artist.



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Information on area recreation facilities, art galleries and museums.



Wilson in pictures: snapshots of the people and places that make up Wilson.