

Erika Nelson – World’s Largest Things

This is Kansas Profile. I’m Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What is the Next Big Thing? Maybe it is the World’s Largest Thing. Today, in the third and final part of our series on grassroots art, we will meet an artist who has developed a specialty in the World’s Largest Things. When she’s not on the road, this artist can be found in rural Kansas. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Erika Nelson is a visionary artist, national researcher and speaker on the topic of roadside attractions such as the World’s Largest Things. As an expert in grassroots art, it is fitting that she makes her home in Lucas, the Grassroots Art Center of Kansas.

Erika grew up in Missouri. As a child, she lived near a town which had painted its watertower to look like a giant billiard ball. In fact, it was called the World’s Largest 8 Ball. Her grandparents lived up north near the supposed home of Paul Bunyan and the Babe the big blue ox. Perhaps those experiences shaped an early appreciation of unusual, oversized artifacts.

Erika got her bachelor of fine arts degree from Central Missouri State University and an MFA from the University of Kansas. She enjoyed the creative and unusual. Her first public art endeavor was a Spam carving workshop. “I always had a soft spot in my heart for these odd, offbeat things (such as I had seen as a child),” Erika said. Erika started traveling to visit those attractions which might be termed the World’s Largest Things.

“I was mapping and recording these as I traveled,” Erika said. “Then I wanted souvenirs and reminders of them, so I started making small replicas.” Using her artistic talents, she started making small models of these distinctive landmarks.

In Kansas, she came to the community of Lucas which had become a center of grassroots art. “The town was so open and welcoming,” Erika said. She volunteered at the Grassroots Art Center and then found a house next door to Lucas’ Garden of Eden. It was such a good value that she bought the house and stayed.

Erika continues to travel extensively. She is a part of the Kansas Humanities Council speakers bureau and the Kansas Arts Commission Arts on Tour roster. As a working artist, she is involved in various public art projects such as community murals. She has created exhibits as far away as Philadelphia and the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

In 2007, she created a non-profit organization relating to history, preservation, production and promotion of the distinctive roadside attractions known as the World’s Largest Things. These are those unusual artifacts such as the World’s Largest Ball of Twine as found in the rural community of Cawker City, Kansas, population 510 people. Now, that’s rural.

Erika’s travels have literally taken her coast to coast in her quest to study these attractions. For example, the World’s Largest Box of Raisins is found in Kingsburg, California, the World’s Largest Ketchup Bottle is found at Heinz Park in Pennsylvania, and the World’s Largest Beach Ball is in Pensacola, Florida. Erika has catalogued more than 500 of these remarkable, quirky attractions around the U.S. She has even appeared on the TV show Conan.

One might expect to find more of the World’s Largest Things in Texas, but that state ranks third behind California and Minnesota. (Kansas has a very respectable 17.)

As mentioned, Erika has created small replicas of these landmarks. That has now become – are you ready for this? – the World’s Largest Collection of the World’s Smallest Versions of the World’s Largest Things. Erika has created a traveling road show which displays this remarkable collection. She also consults with community members who want to create their own version of the World’s Largest something. “For many communities, these things can be a point of pride or hope,” Erika said.

For more information, and the entire list of biggies, go to www.worldslargestthings.com.

What is the Next Big Thing? Maybe it is the World’s Largest Thing. We commend Erika Nelson for supporting grassroots art and helping communities grow their identity through the World’s Largest Things. Such larger-than-life symbols can make a big difference.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.