

A Stroke of Genius

WITTENBERG'S ARTISTIC TOURIST ATTRACTIONS



A mural depicting early and current community churches graces the north wall of Wittenberg's Homme Home for the Aging. Rom Rojas of Door County immersed himself in the history of the local churches, including Ho-Chunk Nation spiritual places, to accurately depict these foundations of faith. This mural was completed in the spring of 2006.

BY DENNIS McCANN

Cities famous for their walls are usually not the most hospitable to outsiders. In central Wisconsin, however, little Wittenberg is banking on its walls attracting visitors. The Walls of Wittenberg, which conveniently shortens to WOW, is an effort to revitalize the community's downtown with colorful wall-size murals meant to honor local history, raise hometown pride and, not least, lure out-of-towners. Since WOW's founding in 2005, 15 murals have been created on the walls of city buildings and businesses, an explosion of color and creativity that in turn inspired a new community art space and series of art events.

Like many small rural communities, Wittenberg – east of Wausau in Shawano County – was losing downtown businesses, exacerbated by a new Highway 29 bypass that reduced traffic flow. Local resident Lois Smith had visited Lake Placid, Florida, and came away impressed by what some 30 murals had done to boost tourism and business there. Why couldn't Wittenberg, she wondered, do the same?

And so WOW was formed, charged with the task of bringing out "the beauty and unique character of the Wittenberg area." The first murals were "The Spirit of Wittenberg Still Sings," a look at the community's founding created by school children and completed in 2006, and "Foundations of Faith," a tribute to the region's early churches and beliefs, including those of the native Ho-Chunk people.

Four more were added in 2007, including "A Tribute to Gus and Ann's," which commemorates the couple's famous restaurant on the walls of their daughter and son-in-law's bakery and catering business. If some of

the customers look familiar, well, that's history, too. Later murals honored the community's railroad heritage, added billiard balls and a cue stick to the wall of a popular tavern and paid tribute to volunteer firefighters. One artist, Alan Clough, added a series of geometric shapes intended to confuse and challenge viewers "to figure out if what they see is really there" in a work he dubbed "Optical Foolery." Four murals were completed in 2009, including the "Community Quilt" of 32 painted squares on a wall on the Wittenberg Middle School.

"I think the impact is twofold," says Susan Hanson, a physician and WOW booster. "Number one, there were mostly naysayers in the beginning, and certainly one thing that's happened is there has been a great deal of pride in the murals. And number two, there certainly is traffic downtown now."

The cause of art was given another boost in 2006 when owners of a local business donated their building to WOW, which, after restoration by volunteers, became WOWSPACE – a place for art shows, concerts and other community events. For more about the Walls of Wittenberg and a schedule of art events, including the third-annual art contest that will open June 12, visit wallsofwittenberg.com. **wt**

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