

DULUTH TRADING CO

Trolls stand sentinel over village

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The Wally Keller Tool Museum in the village of Mount Horeb in Dane County showcases about one-third of one man's collection.

Mary Bergin, Jul. 10, 2011

Trolls rule in Mount Horeb, a peculiar, creative and vibrant Dane County village of 7,000. The scruffy, impish troll carvings -- happy-crazed-creepy in expression, dwarfs to giants in size -- have defined and guarded the community since the 1970s.

The first trolls were Norwegian imports. Then, local wood-carver Mike Feeney took over, commissioned by village officials to create a group of the sentinels, and today around two dozen pop up along or near the business route for highways 18/151 -- aka the "trollway" -- that heads into downtown.

Newest is the Sesqueen Troll that flits from one business lawn to another, in honor of this year's Mount Horeb sesquicentennial celebration.

Now the untimely death of a former machinist, antiques dealer and community leader has widened the scope of Mount Horeb's quirks to another species of outdoor art. Flanked by trolls at the visitors' center is Brutus the Temple Lion, a rusty, fierce- and dazed-looking monster made of welded junkyard scraps.

"So far, they get along," jokes Melissa Theisen, executive director of the Mount Horeb Area Chamber of Commerce, of the troll-industrial art mix.

The 1-ton Brutus sculpture was the creation of Wally Keller, who died in a 2009 lawn tractor accident.

"He perfected his craft over the years," Melissa said, and was among the first vendors at the annual Mount Horeb Art Fair, which this month celebrates its 40th anniversary. His artwork began with wagon-wheel tabletops and wrought iron decor.

Still on the Keller family's rural property, north of Mount Horeb on Highway 78, is a menagerie of outdoor sculptures -- including an Oz-like Tin Man -- all made from discarded farm machinery and other contraptions.

He also owned a collection of tools, 3,147 pieces patented from the 1860s to 1960s. Duluth Trading Co. CEO Steve Schlecht bought the tool collection after Wally's death and promised to keep it intact.

Suz Harms, the company's marketing director, says the collection began with pipe wrenches (there are 150) and grew from there, gathered from farm auctions to tool trading shows.

The oldest are horse carriage tools from the Civil War era. About one-third of the collection is arranged as art on pegboards, inside the downtown flagship store for Duluth Trading Co., whose clientele for clothing and accessories includes people who work outdoors, with their hands and in the dirt. The company emits a mix of practical sense, whimsy and humor. Check out the online explanation of Buck Naked Underwear, or the Longtail T (designed to cure "plumber's butt"). Harms describes the apparel as "a little pocket-happy," and says a sense of modesty and femininity are big factors in the women's clothing line. That includes pastel T-shirts -- some with a cell phone pocket, and shoulder loop snaps inside of tank tops -- to keep bra straps aligned.

Deep discounts show up at the company's annual tent sale, set for July 21 to 23 at 170 Countryside Drive, Belleville (18 miles southeast of Mount Horeb).

Mount Horeb whoops it up big this month with a trio of events: the Fire Muster (a fire department fundraiser of music, games, food and fire truck rides), Friday and July 17; Art Fair (150 artists as vendors), Saturday and July 17; and Sesquicentennial Birthday Party (free cake, ice cream), July 17. The village is near a trio of longtime tourist attractions: Cave of the Mounds, Little Norway and Blue Mound State Park. For more: trollway.com, 888-765-5929.

Duluth Trading Co. seeks "real women" models and product testers. Women whose jobs dirty their fingernails, cause calluses or cover them with sweat, paint or pet hair are encouraged to apply.

The roster so far includes a carpenter, landscape designer, farmer, veterinary surgeon and horse trainer.

For more: duluthtrading.com, 800-505-8888 (under "Inside Duluth," look for "Duluth Real Women").