

# enchantment

The Voice of New Mexico's Rural Electric Cooperatives

Continental Divide  
Electric Cooperative

May 2019



THEATRE



**SAVING SMALL-TOWN  
MOVIE HOUSES**

Richard Swenson's home is a museum of fantastical metal creatures. Shoulder-high horses greet you at the street. The walkway flows past pelicans and owls, dragons and a T-Rex. Inside, a giraffe and more horses tower behind the couches. A wall holds a dozen flying pigs. Smaller pieces sit on shelves, tables, and counters. Art is everywhere.

The closer you look, the more you see. Old tractor parts, tools, bicycle chains, and silverware transform into realistic or mythical animals. The static metal sculptures have playful expressions and a surprising sense of movement. Some include hidden puns: a spoonbill with a spoon for its beak, a lightning bug made from a burned-out light bulb, a horseshoe crab built around a horseshoe.

The horses are Swenson's favorites. "I have what appeared to be the misfortune of being raised in poverty on a subsistence farm in North Dakota," he says. In reality it was fortunate, because, "I was raised with horses." He took care of them, and during World War II, he ran the plow with them.



Such advances in technology "made us who we are today," he says, so "it's a symbol to me."

When his wife, Vivien, retired, they moved to Los Alamos. "We wanted to retire in a community that's still intellectually engaged," Swenson says. "We didn't want to live in a big city. We wanted to get closer to nature. You put those things together, and Los Alamos comes out."

Swenson began sculpting metal animals in 2000. To prepare for an upcoming gallery show, he worked seven hours a day. Most of the time, he doesn't use pictures for reference. Instead he relies on his memory. A cheetah sculpture is one exception, because, he says, "I didn't grow up with cheetahs."

Vivien, formerly a world-renowned cancer researcher, says, "He's really good at looking at something and seeing what you can turn it into." Railroad spikes form the bodies of grasshoppers. A dog sculpture shows little resemblance to the bicycle that provided its parts. Yet somehow Swenson sees the potential in these chunks of junk metal.

## FROM JUNK METAL TO CREATURES OF ART

Life took him in many directions before bringing him to scrap sculpture. He served as a Navy Seal. "I got to dive and learn marine animals, so I have a rapport with the ocean too." The G.I. bill got him to college where he earned advanced degrees in Physics and Mathematics. He then worked on underwater acoustics for anti-submarine warfare.

"In that capacity, I was on the front end of technology. On the other hand, I came from this agrarian background. I was raised with animals in nature. So I had this duality. The theme I use is the primacy of nature over the industrial society. I witness our society losing its rapport with nature, especially with kids. I think that's a tragedy. The message I try to bring is that we're mesmerized by technology, but we are still a creature, we have to respect nature."


After retiring, he collected old John Deere tractors. "You can imagine how as a boy I coveted tractors!" He collected and restored 64 tractors over a decade. Then, he says, "I had all this junk left over, so I started welding it together." His science background comes through as he describes his artwork. Many of his sculptures use connecting rods, a major advance in the industrial revolution.



Swenson didn't expect to have his work shown in galleries and museums. "I don't do it for money. I could make more money as a welder. The reason I do it is to get rid of it so I can make more."

Vivien adds, "I tease him that other wives get diamonds. I get junk metal." Then she shows off the beautiful little treasures he makes her, such as an abstract couple embracing. Vivien, "totally a city girl" from Hong Kong, prefers his smaller pieces. "When he makes a big horse, I want a little pony," she says. "When he makes a giraffe, I want a baby giraffe." Thus pieces of all size fill their home.

For a new gallery show in Santa Fe, he completed what will be the last of his large sculptures. Los Alamos doesn't provide a lot of old farm machinery, and he's running out of the metal left over from his tractor renovations. "But I'm 85, so

that's okay," Swenson says. Still, he shows few signs of slowing down. He keeps up with politics and technology, and he worries about the future of the planet and humanity. But, he says, "When I do junk art, that relieves me of all that concern." Even better, "It brings joy to people. I can see it in their smiles." 

Photos by Phil Miller.