



Gary Zell and friends have built a rustic “town in the pines” on his property, tucking the buildings between pine trees.

Photos by Jackie Mayfield

“Town In The Pines” Started With Saloon

To celebrate their 40th anniversary, Gary Zell jokes that he built a saloon for his wife, Ruth. Sixteen years later, the Zells and their retired friends have added several other buildings to create a rustic town in the pines on their rural St. Johns, Mich., property. It’s become a popular gathering site for card-playing friends, a venue for weddings, and a place to host an annual summer party.

Because the buildings are small and not on permanent foundations, Zell calls the structures “lawn ornaments that look like buildings.” They are tucked in gaps in the pine trees the Zells planted in 1980. The structures were inexpensive to build since materials are recycled, donated or purchased used.

For example, the saloon walls were made from an old tool shed the Zells’ oldest son tore down. They used a chainsaw to cut the back wall into pieces, hauled and then screwed them together for the walls. They made floor boards and a false front from lumber sawed up from old cottonwood logs. Friends donated café doors for the saloon doors, and it’s furnished with a chandelier and old furniture.

The next building they tackled was a jail because “a saloon and jail” go together, Zell says. Walls are made from cedar siding salvaged from a garage, and the jail bars are from a cow barn that had bars on the windows.

Other buildings include a general store with 100-year-old leaded glass rescued from

a city cleanup, and a one-room schoolhouse with old school desks from an area school, a bell and some of Zell’s 1949 schoolbooks.

The “fanciest” and most challenging building is the chapel. It has stained-glass windows made by a local artist and pews made of wainscoting found at the city dump. The pews are based on the pattern of a local church and painted white. The steep roof and 20-ft. high steeple with a gold cross made the chapel the most dangerous building to work on.

“We had a couple of men in their 20s on ladders put up the steeple,” Zell says.

The Zells’ favorite building is the log cabin, with a wooden fireplace with photos of ancestors on the mantel, a mural with horses representing the five civilized tribes of the West, a collection of arrowheads found on Zell’s home place, and a cowhide rug the couple picked up in their travels. It captures the life of families before them, Zell says.

“Every couple of years we get the bug to do something,” Zell says of himself and retired friends. “When we get together we do more talking than working. And we have no floor plans or building codes.”

Still, the “lawn ornaments” turned out well enough to draw a crowd when the Zells host a party in the summer. Guests bring dishes to pass and there’s a beer keg in the Conestoga wagon and live country western music from a couple of musicians on the saloon porch.

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Seven stations within Ted Galaty’s 2-acre hemp maze provide facts and information about the crop, while also providing entertainment.

Hemp Maze Entertains, Educates

Moving through a maze in a 10-ft. tall hemp field is different than walking through a corn maze. It’s a bit like traipsing through a jungle, despite Ted Galaty “bushwhacking” the hemp with a machete every week to keep the trails open.

The maze is Galaty’s creative way to educate the public about hemp on his Zumbrota, Minn., property as part of a pilot research project in the 2014 Farm Bill. Seven stations within the 2-acre maze provide facts and information about hemp.

Galaty created his first maze after moving his haunted attraction business from Rochester, Minn., to the 9 1/2-acre property that has a farm house, barn, and outbuildings that provide 10,000 sq. ft. of interior haunted space.

Growing hemp instead of pumpkins and corn creates diverse opportunities. Galaty is certified to raise hemp for medicinal CBD oil. But much of the hemp acreage he grows includes industrial varieties used for grain (protein powder, health bars, Omega 3 and 6 supplements, etc.) or for fiber.

“We made our first hemp maze in 2018. And for our first 2 years we raised a grain variety that was about 6 ft. tall,” he says. “In 2020 I ordered seed for a Han Ma fiber hemp variety from China.”

The 10-ft. tall leafy plants are ideal for setting up the \$6/person maze. Most visitors are adults interested in hemp or growing it. To provide even more information, Galaty offers a golf cart tour for \$15 (includes the maze). He grew 11 varieties in 2020 and sells CBD oil and other hemp-derived products at his hemp farm store.

The maze became a “Haunted Cannabis Field” for this year’s “Fright at the Farm” attraction. It was a good substitute during the pandemic when there were restrictions on indoor events. After closing at the end of October, Galaty harvested the fiber hemp and plans to make hempcrete, a mixture of water, lime and hemp hurd (the inner part of the stalk), which can be used like adobe.

“I plan to make demo huts with it. Also, you can use the hurd for bedding for chickens and horses. It’s highly absorbent and dust-free,” he says.

For more information, check out Galaty’s website and online store.

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Retired engineer Charles Lyons bought this set of Riblet Traction Wheels and chased down their fascinating history.



He Tracked Down The Story Of The “Square Wheel” Inventor

By Lorn Manthey, Contributing Editor

An Iowa farm boy invented and patented one of the most unusual ideas in agricultural history. Royal Riblet and his brother Merwin conceived and built a highly complex square track mechanism in 1915 that they said could provide greatly improved traction for round wheels. More than a century later, retired engineer Charles Lyons bought a set of the “square wheels” and chased down the inventor’s history.

“I was a 10 year-old farm kid in 1952 oiling up an old Case steam engine at our local fair when I heard this incredible noise over the sound of the engine and saw a cloud of dust in front of the grandstand a great distance away,” Lyons recalls. “That was the first time I saw or heard a tractor with square wheels. The experience slipped my mind until 2002, when I visited a neighbor who had a set of unusual square wheels bordering his drive-

way. Eventually I bought them from him and now they’re along my driveway.”

With the unique wheels in his possession, Lyons set out to learn more about them. He learned that Royal Riblet, a Washington farmer, submitted drawings for the idea in 1913 and was granted a patent in 1915. “The complex system had 16 two-foot wide tread plates that could surround any size wheel, riding on complex rocker arms that when the vehicle was moving, created the loud clamor that I heard as a kid at the fair,” Lyons says. Riblet envisioned the system would provide traction for wheeled vehicles without the expense of buying a tracked machine.

“The idea was probably a good one,” Lyons says, “but the complex engineering didn’t measure up because of numerous moving parts without any bearings or greasable fittings, so rust from inactivity would seize them up fairly quickly.”

Even those problems didn’t prevent the Riblets from revising the idea and applying for additional patents in 1917 and 1929, the latest which was designed on a 4-wheeled chassis. The U.S. Army tested the square wheel idea at the beginning of WW II, but nothing came of it.

Royal Riblet’s inventiveness continued in the 1920’s from his Spokane-area farm where he developed a pattern sprinkler system,

a mechanical parking garage, and other mechanical devices. In 1924 he designed and built a 3-story Florentine-style mansion situated 450 ft. above the Spokane River Valley. Riblet’s imaginative architectural marvel was one of the first homes wired for electricity and his grounds included a life-sized checkerboard, 4 acres of terraced gardens, a pool carved in basalt, an enclosed croquet court and a red-roofed stone gazebo. Guests reached the hilltop estate on a 5-passenger tram, a precursor to the Riblet Tramway Company, which eventually built a system to span the Spokane River.

In 1979 the Estate was designated a national historic landmark and in the early 1980’s it was transformed into a destination winery by Harold and Marcia Mielke.

Lyons says the destination winery welcomes more than 65,000 visitors annually from around the world, and all of them can get a historical glimpse of the Riblet invention while viewing the square wheel tractor and informational placard on display in front of the winery. “The idea was definitely unique, and it’s nice to see that its history is being preserved, even though it was never widely accepted,” Lyons adds.

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