



Dom Viscone's Concrete Garden

By Robert Hirsch

While I was driving on South Park Avenue towards Hamburg just past Mile Strip Road my eye was drawn to a corner plot containing hundreds of statues of religious figures, patriotic symbols, and animals. I parked my vehicle and before I could even enter the premises I was greeted by a friendly and robustly built white haired man who identified himself as Dom Viscone, the owner of Highland Garden Craft. Soon we were seated in a shady area near his workshops at the back of his property where Dom began to tell me how he

came to be the architect of this unusual landscape.

For many generations in Italy, Dom's family had been in the business of making religious statuary. Dom's father immigrated to the United States in 1902, coming through Ellis Island, and then establishing a similar enterprise in St. Albans, Long Island. He later moved to Buffalo where Dom was born 85 years ago. Dom grew up in Buffalo, learned the business from his father, graduated from Buffalo State, and was hired by Curtis Wright on Genesee Street where he worked as a designer and test pilot

for the P-40, C-46, and other military aircraft during World War II. He was also in the National Guard, joining when he was 15 (receiving \$21 a month), and served in the 44th Division. He was deferred from active service due to his work at Curtis Wright. After WW II, Curtis Wright moved out of Buffalo and Westinghouse moved in. Westinghouse hired Dom as an engineer where he worked on the first atomic submarine and for water projects in Israel.

In his spare time, Dom started his own statuary business, Highland Garden Craft, in 1947. Over the years his business grew and in 1956 Dom quit Westinghouse to become a teacher. Having the summers off allowed Dom to develop what he claims is Western New York's largest hand-manufacturer of concrete garden ornaments and cast stone religious statuary. Dom began his educational career teaching mechanical drawing and mathematics at Burgard Vocational High School on Kensington Avenue, where he taught until 1986. Then he became the assistant principal at Seneca Vocational High, but didn't like being a disciplinarian. Dom says: "I'm a teacher, not a castigator. So I transferred back into the classroom at Emerson Vocational High School and then to McKinley High School from where I finally retired in 1990. The thing I enjoyed most about teaching was having daily contact with lots of different kids. I was a good teacher because I could talk and explain things

at whatever level my students were at."

When I asked Dom to describe what he does at Highland Garden Craft, he simply says: "This is my love, right here. It's in my blood and it is a lot of hard work." Laughing Dom continues, "This is a luxury business. You don't need it, but if it is done right you want to buy it. I also do a lot of work for churches, including Our Lady of Victory, making and restoring statues. Right now I'm repairing a one that was made in 1881."

In addition, Dom does custom work. First he makes a plaster of Paris model that the customer okays, then he makes a rubber mold, from which he casts with regular concrete just like you would use on a sidewalk. Next the piece is allowed to harden, which takes about 24 hours during the summer. Then the mold is opened up, the piece is removed, and finished. The finishing process involves hand sanding, filling in imperfections, letting it dry, and finally painting it. Using this method one unique piece or numerous copies can be fabricated.

Coming off the coldest July on record, Dom grumbles: "This is our busy time of year. We do most of the work outside and the weather this summer has been terrible. We can't get anything done! But people still come and they want religious statues so they can build their own little home and garden shrines." Although the work is labor intensive, a three-foot Madonna can be purchased for as little as \$60.00.

With a slight smile on his face Dom

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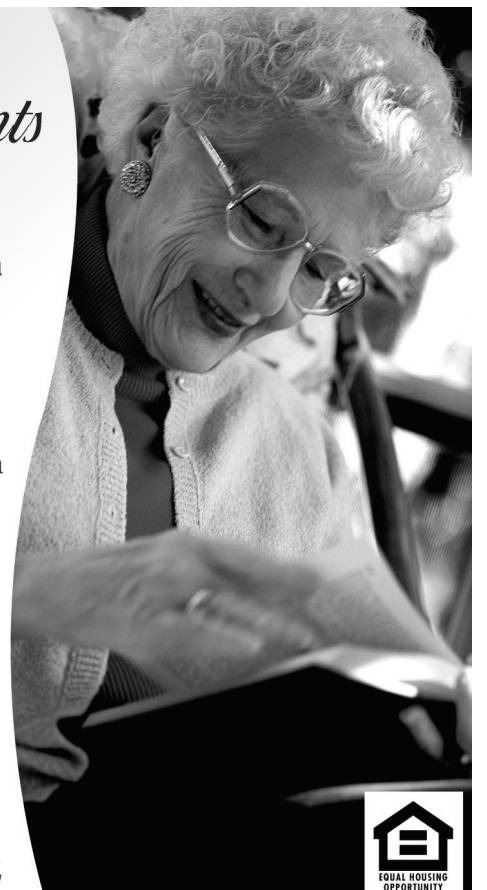
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tells me that hunters are also regular customers. "They shoot a deer, bring me the antlers, and I attach them to a life-size deer that I have cast. The problem is that squirrels eat the antlers because they contain potassium so I replace them with ones made of cast aluminum."

"I have a son and a daughter who worked in the business when they were young, but both became teachers and aren't interested in continuing in the

says he still loves working with Dom who is a great hands-on teacher.

Dom says he is both an artisan and businessman. "I think the qualities that have enabled me to stay in business for 55 years are patience and the desire to do things right. I care about what I do. I get many repeat customers. First it might be the grandparents, then their kids, and then later the grandkids. People recognize quality and that is how I stay in business."



Dom attributes his long and active life to the physical nature of his work, being able to spend time outside doing something he loves, and his ability to interact well with all sorts of people. As he leads me through the multitude of

business. So I hire neighborhood kids. Today there are three of them working."

Dom takes me into his big workshop that is crammed from floor to ceiling with over 3,000 molds, hundreds of cast pieces, from a magnificently made 125 year old St. Anthony statue to Snow White and the Seven dwarfs, countless tools, paint cans, and miscellaneous items used in making the statues.

As we are talking, Brad and April Rydzik stop by. Brad, who is 40 years old, started working with Dom when he was 12 years old and has worked off and on ever since. He moved to Florida, got a teaching certificate, and recently moved back to Buffalo where he has been doing substitute teaching while looking for a full-time position. Brad

statues in the front of his business back to my vehicle he is already affectionately calling me "Bobby" and inviting me to visit again soon.

For more information contact Dom Viscone at Highland Garden Craft, 4243 South Park Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14219. 716/822-0957.



grill chicken, pork and lamb marinated in olive oil, lemon and rosemary. I even have recipes using rosemary in cookies and cakes. I am a lover of this Queen of Herbs but unfortunately, like a lot of overzealous lovers, I don't seem to be able to bring myself to say goodbye. It

looks so happy growing nonstop in the September sunshine, that I sometimes wait to bring it indoors. BIG MISTAKE!

Rosemary needs to come indoors before the heat is turned on, which in Buffalo is often sooner rather than later. It needs to be placed in a cool sunny window away from heat vents. Give the Queen a long luxurious bath, using insecticide soap to rid it of white fly and spider mites. Re-pot it in good potting soil and place in a tray of pebbles that you keep moist. "Ros" in Latin means "dew" and "marinus" means "sea", so keep your plant roots dry and its leaves misted. DO NOT OVERWATER! Hopefully, with this little bit of pampering, the Queen of Herbs will give you the pleasure of her company throughout the long winter months to come.



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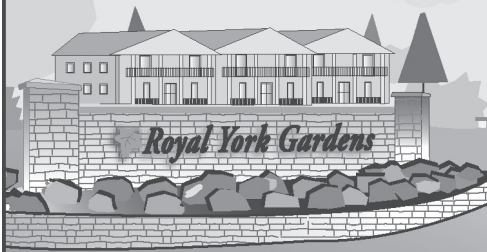
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