

# WASHINGTON HERITAGE REGISTER

## A) Identification

Property Name: **Gehrke Windmill Garden**

Address: North Dam Park

City: Grand Coulee, WA County: Grant

## B) Site Access (describe site access, restrictions, etc.)

The kinetic folk art windmills are displayed within a chainlinked fence with public access at North Dam Park. The public are able park at the site and walk around the enclosure and observe the folk art collection.

## C) Property owner(s), Address and Zip

Name: USDI, Bureau of Reclamation

Address: P.O. Box 620

City: Grand Coulee State: WA Zip: 99133

## D) Legal boundary description and boundary justification

Tax No./Parcel: Federal Property

Boundary Justification: Boundaries encompass all the elements within the chainlink fence line.

## FORM PREPARED BY

Name: Robert Valen

Address: P.O. Box 86

City / State / Zip: Grand Coulee, WA 99133 Phone: 509-633-8209

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## E) Category of Property (Choose One)

- building     structure (irrigation system, bridge, etc.)     district  
 object (statue, grave marker, vessel, etc.)     cemetery/burial site  
 historic site (site of an important event)     archaeological site  
 traditional cultural property (spiritual or creation site, etc.)  
 cultural landscape (habitation, agricultural, industrial, recreational, etc.)

## F) Area of Significance – Check as many as apply

- The property belongs to the early settlement, commercial development, or original native occupation of a community or region.
- The property is directly connected to a movement, organization, institution, religion, or club which served as a focal point for a community or group.
- The property is directly connected to specific activities or events which had a lasting impact on the community or region.
- The property is associated with legends, spiritual or religious practices, or life ways which are uniquely related to a piece of land or to a natural feature.
- The property displays strong patterns of land use or alterations of the environment which occurred during the historic period (cultivation, landscaping, industry, mining, irrigation, recreation).
- The property is directly associated with an individual who made an important contribution to a community or to a group of people.
- The property has strong artistic, architectural or engineering qualities, or displays unusual materials or craftwork belonging to a historic era.
- The property was designed or built by an influential architect, or reflects the work of an important artisan.
- Archaeological investigation of the property has or will increase our understanding of past cultures or life ways.

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## G) Property Description

The Gehrke Windmill Garden is a partial collection of approximately 120 kinetic folk art windmills handcrafted by Emil & Stella Gehrke. The Windmill Garden is located in North Dam Park, just west of downtown Grand Coulee. The park is located on Federal property, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Department of the Interior at the north end of Banks Lake. The collection was moved to this site from the Gehrke's personal property following the deaths of Emil (1979) and his wife, Stella (1980). The windmill garden fronts State Route 155 and is offset 40 feet from the road. It is highly visible. Just to the west of the garden site is the community Picnic Shelter and lawn area that also fronts State Route 155. The garden is surrounded by a graveled parking lot.

The garden is enclosed within a roughly square, fenced-in area to prevent vandalism. The fence is a 6-foot chain link with one locked gate on the east side. The garden sits on a very slight sloop from west to east. The enclosure measures 65'5" on the north, 76'9" on the west, 68'8" on the south and 64'2" on the east side. The garden has a 3-foot wide concrete sidewalk that encircles the entire enclosure.

The typical folk art windmill is 10 to 12 foot tall. There are a few exceptions to the average height – some windmills are 16 to 18 feet high. Each windmill is mounted on a long metal pipe; a single pipe or joined pipes. The pipe is secured in the ground via a mounting hole and wedged in place. None of the art objects are signed or dated and range in age from c.1960 to c.1979. A typical windmill may be primarily constructed using a bicycle wheel as the turning hub and built out from there. The wind vanes may be hard hats, pot and pan lids, hubcaps, funnels, plastic dishes, or toy sand buckets as well as plastic cups, jello-molds or seashells. Some may have an outboard motor propeller or the fan blades from a vehicle. There are a few that are simple and are topped with a birdhouse or a horse from a child's rocking horse toy. There are also several painted washtub flower containers displayed in the park and some small figurines also made from recycled materials. All elements are painted bright shades of primary colors; mainly red, blue, green and yellow.

While the park is owned by the Bureau of Reclamation it is currently managed by the Coulee Area Park and Recreation District (CAPRD).

## H) Significance

The Gehrke Windmill Garden in Grand Coulee is historically significant as a noteworthy example of a collection of outdoor Folk Art. Designed and fabricated by Emil and Stella Gehrke, the couple rose to artistic prominence later in life (after retirement). While the current art community has not come to an agreement on what the definition of "Folk art" is, most agree that it is a utilitarian or decorative art created by an unaffluent social class of artisans and tradespeople who live in rural areas. Untrained in the arts and living in rural central Washington, the Gehrke's fit this definition and have been formally recognized by numerous academic guidebooks and catalogues as some of the premier folk artists in Washington State.

Emil Gehrke and his wife Stella Veva Gehrke arrived in the Grand Coulee area in 1958. Emil had worked as a millwright in North Central Washington lumber and box factories and reportedly started making his kinetic folk art windmills from scrap and recycled materials around 1960.

The couple travelled thousands of miles to collect scrap material and eventually created over 700 eclectic windmills, whirligigs and merry-go-rounds from about 1960 to 1979. Reportedly Gehrke undertook the mammoth recycling project "for the benefit of children." His aim was to "show the youth of a disposable society that junk is merely a creation of the mind, and that practically any object could be reused." The windmills and other creations were assembled in the Gehrke home basement from everything imaginable - coffee pots, bowls, irons, plastic bowls, frying pans, fan blades and old farm machinery. Most of the windmill hubs were made from bicycle wheels, but each is unique, and no two are alike.

After assembly, Stella would add color using surplus paint. Emil stated that "Balancing is the secret, and you have to do them in a place where there is no wind." Emil and Stella also salvaged old washing machine tubs and turned them into flower planters. Soon the Gehrke's backyard was filled with their colorful kinetic folk art. The washer tubs were filled with petunias and the couple welcomed the public to tour the garden. A sign greeted visitors and a guest book was available for them to comment about the unique folk art they had created. By the early to mid-1970s word began to spread of Gehrke's folk art windmills in both print and television. National Geographic Magazine featured a 2 page color photospread of their work and shortly thereafter art galleries began calling wanting to purchase and display the unique creations. At the time of Emil's death, Eastern Washington University professors Dr. Jeremy Anderson and Chris Sublett wrote that "Gehrke was probably one of the most important folk artist working in Washington State." The University held a special Art Exhibit on campus titled: Whitehead's Display that featured some of Gehrke's work in 1975. The exhibit was composed of four exhibitors, all over the age of 60.

Emil Albert Gehrke was born February 29, 1884 in Ravenna, Nebraska. He worked for most of his life as Millwright, repairing and servicing industrial machinery at lumber

mills and other industrial sites scattered throughout Northern Washington State. He started his career near Entiat in Chelan County. He married Stella V. Pressnall on March 11, 1919 marriage in Central City, Nebraska. Following their marriage, the Gehrke's returned to Washington State and settled into a modest home in the area around Winesap, just upriver from Entiat. During the course of his career, Emil's work took the family to a variety of small communities in the upper, central part of the state including Malaga, Chelan, and Manson. Together they raised six children. In 1953 Emil retired and they moved to Rock Island and then to Leahy before finally settling in Grand Coulee in 1958. It was there that their hobby of building windmills and flowerpots flourished.

It is estimated Emil and his wife built well over 700 whirligigs/windmills. At the time of Emil's (July 6, 1979) and Stella's death (May 29, 1980) several hundred were left. While none of the objects they created are signed or dated, the oldest windmills/whirligigs are approximately 55 plus years old. After they both passed away, some of the folk art was sold to private investors, others were given to family members and friends, and over one hundred were moved to the current Windmill Garden site. At one time the name "Garden of the Wind" was used as a descriptor for the park, but it never stuck. Before their death's, the Gehrke's sold some of their collection to the City of Seattle for display at the Viewland/Hoffman Electrical Substation (Fremont Ave N & N 105th St). Under the one-percent-for-the-arts program, in 1976 the city purchased 27 works for \$2,016 from the then 92 year old Emil Gehrke. Seattle artists Sherry Markowitz, Andy Keating and Buster Simpson worked on the substation art project and planned the display. The collaboration between artist and architect garnered the project several design accolades including a national AIA Merit Award.

Upon the Gehrke's death, a group of concerned citizens, led by Elsie Snook, attempted to work with the town of Grand Coulee to assume some or all responsibility for the garden and its upkeep. At the urging and with the assistance of Saving & Preserving Arts & Cultural Environments (SPACES), an arts advocacy group based in Los Angeles, a grant was sought and received from the Washington State Arts Commission to help acquire a grouping of windmills and whirligigs and to create a dedicated installation on public land. Led by EWU Art Department professor's Dr. Greg Hawkins and Chris Sublett, and Geography Department professor Dr. Jeremy Anderson, several hundred hours of volunteer time were donated by the community to build the current garden and bring the remaining Gehrke windmills to that location. Today, a small group of citizens and the Coulee Area Park & Recreation District provide maintenance of the grounds and display.

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## I) Documentation

Xerox and attach any information or evidence that supports the property's significance.

*Written Sources (books, articles, newspapers):*

National Geographic Magazine, December 1975, pages 826 & 827, photo spread/text

Washington Curiosities, Harriet Baskas, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Wind Powered Wonders, page 272, Morris Book Publishing, LLC, Copyright 2008

Seattle Times Travel section, July 23, 2008, By Nancy Bartley, article mentions the Gehrke Windmill Garden in Grand Coulee, WA

Spokesman-Review, July 12, 1994, page B1, On the Road, By Doug Clark, addresses the Gehrke Windmill Garden in Grand Coulee, WA

Washington State Arts Commission Project Proposal Application, October 1979, Submitted by the City of Grand Coulee, WA (includes a letter sent to an interested individual from Los Angeles, CA regarding the Gehrke Windmills, March 11, 1980) [attached]

"Millmaker Emil Gehrke Is One of a Kind" - Spokane Daily Chronicle: Dec 20, 1975. pg 23.

Sellen, Betty-Carol - Self-Taught, Outsider and Folk Art: A Guide to American Artist, Locations and Resources, Third Edition, McFarland & Co. Inc., Jefferson, NC, 2016. pg 160.

"Windmill Art" - Spokane Daily Chronicle: July 18, 1977. pg 5

"A Rainbow of Color in the Golden Years" - Spokesman Review: Sept 21, 1974

"Junk Transformed into Windmills" - Spokane Daily Chronicle: Oct 20, 1972. Pg 3.

"Memorial Perpared for Sculptor Gehrke" - Spokane Daily Chronicle: Jun 21, 1980

"Better Than Medicine" - Spokane Daily Chronicle: Sept 21, 1976.

Obituary - Stella Gehrke - Spokane Daily Chronicle: June 3, 1980.

"City Light Asks the Neighbors" - Seattle Daily Times: May 16, 1976.

"Arts Commission has uneventful Meeting" - Seattle Daily Times: Oct 6, 1976

"Winds of Change" - Seattle Times: July 15, 1977. pg A14.

"Art Comes To A Seattle Substation" - Seattle Times: Nov 6, 1977.

"Substation Sculpture: The Gehrkes Created 27 "Whirlygigs" From Junkyard Treasures" - Seattle Times: June 9, 1979.

"Public Art: Are We Getting Our Money's Worth" - Seattle Times: Sept 21, 1980. Pg F6.

"Odd Beauty: City Substation Praised" - Seattle Times: March 8, 1981. Pg F16.

***Oral History/Interviews:***

Unable to find any such histories...

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**J) Map and Photographs**

*Attach copies of historic maps or photos if available, and current photos ( 5 x 7 B & W). Include a current map – appropriate U.S.G.S. map and parcel map – with the location of the property and its boundaries clearly marked. (see instructions)*

# Gehrke Windmill Garden



Google Earth - Edit Placemark

Name:  

Latitude:

Longitude:



# Gehrke Windmill Garden



Color view of Gehrke windmills and whirligigs at the Gehrke House – c. 1975

<http://menzelphoto.photoshelter.com/image/I0000J2MBQLvNA6w>



## Better Than Medicine

Emil A. Gehrke at 92 says "gay colored flowers do more to heal sick people than most medicines." So he goes right on building the windmills which twirl about his residence and yard at Grand Coulee, Wash., and painting the flowerpots outside his house in bright and cheerful colors. Gehrke uses just about

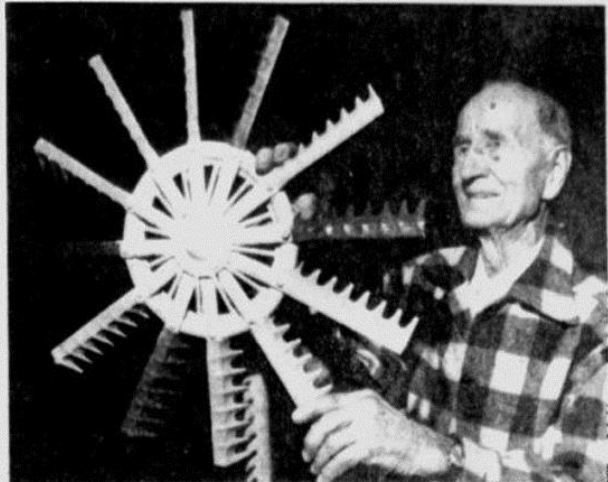
anything to fashion the eye-catching windmills — saucepans, plastic dishes, funnels, tin cups and hubcaps, to mention a few. Gehrke says he has made 315 windmills since he was 80. About 200 of these have been sold. (Colorphoto by Esther Rice, Coulee Dam.)

View of Gehrke windmills and whirligigs at the Gehrke House. - Spokane Daily Chronicle – Sept. 21, 1976

# Gehrke Windmill Garden



Mrs. Emil Gehrke inspects one of her husband's windmills. This one is made of plastic bowls, a lamp base and an old telephone. The North Grand Coulee woman paints the mills. Photos by Clint Watkins.



Threshing machine shakers, which are used here as windmill arms, are a favorite find of Emil Gehrke. Describing himself as "a leap year freak," he says he has celebrated only 22 birthdays, but confides he is actually 91.

Stella & Emil Gehrke pose in front of their windmills and whirligigs creations.

- Spokane Daily Chronicle – Dec. 20, 1975



The world of windmills created by Mr. and Mrs. Emil Gehrke attracts the interest of neighbors, friends and virtually all who pass by their unusual display in Grand Coulee. Mrs. Gehrke, above left, enjoys working in their unusual garden almost every day. A re-

sired millwright, Emil Gehrke, above right, handcrafted each of the more than 130 windmills in their yard. The materials used range from pots and pans to washing machines and bicycles.

Stella & Emil Gehrke inspect their windmills and whirligigs creations in the Gehrke yard.

- Spokesman Review – Sept. 21, 1974

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Views of Gehrke installation at Viewlands- Hoffman Substation in Seattle



Image provided by: <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/OW9BFH33DPU/maxresdefault.jpg>



Image provided by: [http://bestseattleparks.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IMG\\_9907.JPG](http://bestseattleparks.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IMG_9907.JPG)



Image provided by: [http://bestseattleparks.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IMG\\_9904.JPG](http://bestseattleparks.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IMG_9904.JPG)