



1. Lucas, Kansas: Garden of Eden exterior  
photos courtesy Hiram Lucke

## S. P. DINSMOOR, LUCAS, AND THE GRASSROOTS ART CAPITAL OF KANSAS

by  
Hiram Lucke

William Carlos Williams, in his five book poem *Paterson*, uses the dog as a metaphor for the poet/artist, “a tapestry hound/ with his thread teeth drawing crimson from/ the throat of the unicorn.”<sup>1</sup> In this scene, the dog (artist) is killing the unicorn (myth, fantasy) and by doing so it is taking control of its own domain and its own art. “No ideas but in things” Williams exclaims in the first pages. These “things” that he is speaking of are the tangible, everyday pieces of life that form the basis of knowledge and beauty, the indigenous materials that are the foundation of Williams’ poetry. In the same way that Williams’ Dr. Paterson searches for a new language and finds it by using resources unique to the area and by “In venshun,” Samuel Perry Dinsmoor and the other grassroots artists of Lucas and the surrounding area have found their own unique voice through native products, their own imagination, and an affinity for eccentricism. Most of the artists would not want to be called artists at all, and some people would argue that they are not artists. However, these people are building art that represents their life and their society. Barbara Brackman, in a brochure for the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, states that “grassroots artists work outside the academic structure of fine art with little formal training. They often use conventional materials, like concrete, in unusual ways. Many of the artists construct environments which are meant to be viewed as a whole.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview, Rosslyn Schultz, Director of the Grassroots Art Museum in Lucas, added, “most of our people around the area that do or did the art are retired and have a lot of time on their hands. They remain very active

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in their later years.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the best-known of these artists was S.P. Dinsmoor, a man who opened the way for other local artists to follow in his footsteps. Using indigenous materials Dinsmoor created pieces of art that reflect his own Populist views on history.

Samuel Perry Dinsmoor was born on March 8, 1843, in Ohio. He served as a member of the Union Army in the Civil War in the 116<sup>th</sup> Ohio in over twenty battles, and he claimed to be present at the surrender of General Lee.<sup>4</sup> He moved to Lucas, a stop along the railway, from Illinois upon retirement as a school teacher in 1888. Dinsmoor was a Populist, a political party that was founded because of “dire economic times coupled with a population already intent on social and financial experimentation.”<sup>5</sup> Their diverse platform included liberal ideas such as “women’s rights, monetary reform, government regulation of banks and railroads, and the dissolution of ‘trusts’ or monopolies.”<sup>6</sup> In 1891, Dinsmoor began, with his first wife, Frances A. Journey (whom he married on horseback) to build what was to be called “The Cabin Home.” This home was not made from wooden planks or even logs, but rather from limestone, or “post rock,” a soft, plentiful rock that can be found only in this area of the country. As Dinsmoor writes, “The floors, baseboards, and window stools are cement. The second story is built of stone logs on the old log cabin style.”<sup>7</sup> By 1907 the house was finished. Many of the “logs” of the cabin home reached 27 feet.<sup>8</sup> However, after completion of his “Cabin Home” Dinsmoor didn’t stop building.

For the next twenty years he created an even stranger structure from concrete. It is a fence, of sorts, that encompasses most of the building. On the west wall, Dinsmoor created an interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Creation story. The other pieces of his sculpture depict his Populist vision of American politics and history. Within this “fence” he also created a mausoleum, trees made of concrete, strawberry beds in the shape of a pyramid, a tool shed, a pool, a bestiary (“my Badger, Owl and Pigeon Roost,” as Dinsmoor put it) and walkway trellis that leads to the yard. And all of this is made from concrete, a new product at the time which, according to John Hachmeister, was not as widely used as it is today: “At the same time that Dinsmoor was constructing his concrete porches and trees, Thomas Edison was attempting to cast a concrete

chicken house, a concept that amused his skeptical family until he proved he could do it.”<sup>9</sup>

“The Cabin Home,” Dinsmoor’s first project, built with limestone and concrete, contains “eleven rooms on three floors” and used “3, 000 feet of molding,” inside the home<sup>10</sup>. Each window ledge and doorway on the first floor is of a different size. The top floor has a cement balcony that overlooks the east yard and the mausolcum . The bascment, although having a low ceiling, contains the kitchen and canning area. He also created furniture for the house. One piece, still inside the house is a table with a checkerboard design that, as a sign tells you, was created from 343 pieces [picture 2], “scrap[s] of trim saved during construction. Dinsmoor fashioned other furniture in the same style for his home. He believed, ‘It’s waste that makes man poor’.”<sup>11</sup> There is also a large fireplace with impeccable woodworking which adorns the main living room. The house is a showcase for the craftsmanship of Dinsmoor.

Outside of the faux log cabin is a baleony that overlooks the entire yard. A lintel underneath the balcony is created by beer bottles. In the home state of Carrie A. Nation, Dinsmoor built this lintel at the height of prohibition. As Dinsmoor tells us, “You can’t drink booze any more. You can only use the contents of beer bottles on those shelves, jugs and mugs on the corner posts to look at.” To create the border, he filled beer bottles with cement and then broke the bottle [picture 3].

After finishing the house, he began to create the sculptures-as-fence that are known as “The Garden of Eden.” On the west side of the fence is the Judeo-Christian Creation story [pictures 4-5]. Here, a visitor can see a visually depicted tale of Cain and Abel. However, what makes the visual portrayal interesting is not the story as much as the way that Dinsmoor created a long, interconnected, and flowing piece of art. The sculpture moves from the murder of Abel toward the north wall. The fenee has Satan, the Eye of God, the Angel of God, the serpent, Adam, and Eve, and two storks, who are the bearers of both light and the children. As Dinsmoor says:

Moses never said a word about them [the storks]. He just wrote up enough to bring down the fall of man. All the preachers talk

2. Checkerboard table



3. Lintel created with beer bottles



about is the original sin. There must have been many things in the Garden of Eden that Moses didn't mention. I have substituted some things that I know were there. The storks were there, because the kids were there; Cain and Abel. The storks always bring the kids. Nowadays they bring them in baskets in their mouths, but the Bible says, "There was darkness on the face of the earth," and these storks had to have lights in their mouths to see which way to go, so they carried the babies under their wings.

For Dinsmoor, just as the myth of a stork bringing a child into the world does not tell the truth of natural childbirth but rather a fantastical story, the Bible too does not tell the whole truth of the story about original sin. Later, Dinsmoor's interpretation of the United States government's actions parallels this logic. Also, Satan, with pitchfork in hand, lights up at night as well, suggesting evil is as much a part of life and myth as rebirth. With the ingenious placement of light bulbs in the head of Satan and the mouths of the storks which carried Cain and Abel, the Garden of Eden became the first structure with electric lights in the town of Lueas, something of which Dinsmoor was very proud.

The story of Cain and Abel moves to the northwest corner where Cain and his wife stand. This is significant as the sculpture moves towards its representation of modern society and the murder of the working person. Dinsmoor depicts Cain trying to ease his wife over to the other side of the wall. To Cain's immediate right, stands the form of "The Trusts" or what might now be termed "multi-national conglomerates" or perhaps "big business." The Trusts have octopus tentacles wrapping around people of the modern world, represented on the north wall (the symbol of the octopus was prominent in the Populist movement at that time<sup>12</sup>) The tentacles are also grabbing a "bag of bonds, a sack of interest, the North Pole, the Panama Canal, and a signboard listing the chartered right that have gone to the trusts and created monopolies. Above the octopus is a concrete American flag, built to swivel in the wind"<sup>13</sup> pointing to the Trusts being involved in matters that pertain to all of society. The tentacles even intertwine with the snake of the Creation story on the west wall, suggesting the trusts are evil

4. Adam, Eve,  
and apple



5. Long, flowing  
work of art



inearnate. These trusts (the tentacles of the octopus) meet their end at the "Tree of Life" by the "Goddess of Liberty" [picture 6]. Once again, we turn to Dinsmoor for his own words.

This is the Goddess of Liberty with one foot on the trusts and a spear in her hand going through the head of the trusts. The trusts' claws are getting nothing. Down below is a man and woman with a cross-cut saw marked ballot, sawing off the chartered rights limb that the trust stands on. That shows how we can get away with [from] the trusts and if we don't get away [from] them with the ballot, they will be shot away with the bullet, as they were in Russia.

John Hachmeister, in his essay "The Garden of Eden," points out that Dinsmoor, being a Populist and believing in the main tenets of the party, was influenced by the ideas of Sarah E.V. Emery, a worker for the Women's Rights movement, major Populist proponent, and author of *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*. Dinsmoor paraphrases her when he refers to "her call for peaceful change through the ballot to avoid the necessity of violent change through the bullet."<sup>14</sup> He quotes her again in *Pictorial History of The Cabin Home in Garden of Eden Lucas, Kansas* when he asks, "The flag protects capital today better than it does humanity. It drafted the boys but asked the money to volunteer. See the difference?"

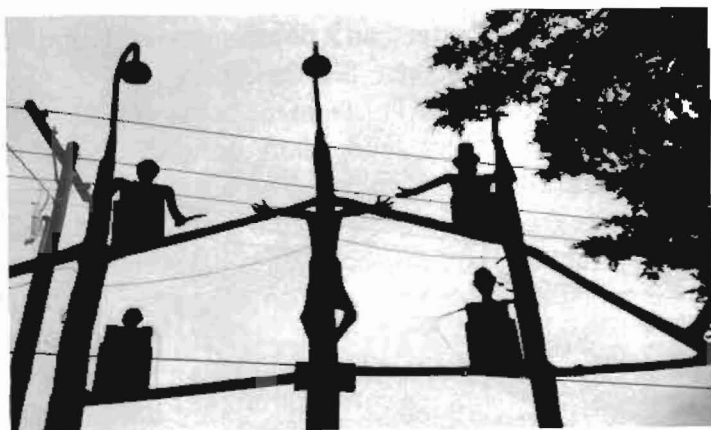
Below the tentacles of the Trusts on the north side, Dinsmoor gives us his version of the modern food chain, or what Hachmeister calls Dinsmoor's look at social Darwinism. The octopus has both a woman and a soldier in its grasp, the woman by the waist and the soldier by the knapsack. The woman is chasing the soldier, who is pointing a gun at an Indian on the next tree. The Indian has an arrow leveled at a dog. The dog is after a fox, who is after a bird who is after a worm eating a leaf. For Dinsmoor, this chain represents modern civilization. Because, as Dinsmoor believes, society is no different than the animals in nature, he points out with a sarcastic practicality that those without power in society must fall to the trusts in the same way that the worm will fall to the bird.



6. Goddess of Liberty



7. Crucifixion of labor



Dinsmoor, without a doubt, was a Populist who believed in the rights of the individual and saw that the problems of the country came from the presence of monopolies and big business, and too much government interference in society. His embrace of Communism points to his belief that the rights of the workers should be in their own hands. Dinsmoor's acceptance of liberal thought and practices to rebuild the government and his insistence that if peaceful means fail then violence must be used puts him in a strange position for his day, as his thoughts were seen as controversial, even agitative, by the society around him.

As the fence moves across the north to the east corner, we come to the "Crucifixion of Labor," the only unfinished piece in the Garden, left uncompleted because Dinsmoor went blind in 1929 [picture 7]. Hachmeister claims that this was a popular image of labor for the Populist party. In the middle of a cement tree hangs a man in the familiar pose of Christ on the cross. Underneath the feet of this man is a sign which reads "Labor." To the figure's right are a Doctor and a Lawyer; to the left are the Preacher and the Banker. "I do not say they are all grafters, but I do say they are the leaders of all who cat cake by the sweat of the other fellow's face," Dinsmoor explains. Once again, Dinsmoor's belief that the workers should hold the control of their own lives surfaces, this time even more clearly.

The movement of the sculptures from the Creation story to the crucifixion gives Dinsmoor a common center with which to open his discussion of Populism with the people who lived around him. Just as great artists such as James Joyce use the *Odyssey* as a reference for *Ulysses* or Bebop Jazz musicians like Charlie Parker use "Cherokee" to work off of and embellish with their own theories and talents, Dinsmoor uses the Bible. He was not blaspheming the Christian God, as most believed, but instead using it as a way to communicate modern problems facing Labor and the common person. This tactic was lost on most of the community around him, it seems.

Lastly, Dinsmoor's Garden holds a mausoleum. With this building, he has taken control of his own fate once again. In the mausoleum, Dinsmoor himself is encased in cement and glass, along with his first wife, whose coffin is encased completely in cement below his. Above the



8. Florence Deeble's Mt. Rushmore sculpture

mausoleum, there is an angel that hangs over the edge and inside the building there is a cement jug, which can hold two gallons of water, in case "I have to go below." For a nominal fee, you can still view the body of S.P. Dinsmoor (no pictures, please) as he slowly decomposes.

Architecturally and aesthetically amusing as these works may appear, there is more to Dinsmoor's story. While eccentric to say the least, he was ingenious and crafty in his communication. Dinsmoor conducted his own tours of the Garden until his death in 1932. He created his world for show and to make money from the visitors (the worker taking care of himself). But, in his search for attention and expression, he inadvertently re-created a town in his own image. While he worked on the "Cabin Home" and the Garden, local children frequently would watch him build. Some of them even played with Dinsmoor's children. One person remembers that students tied their horses at the Garden while they were attending school. Rosslyn Schultz relates a story from Florence Deeble, a woman who would later create her own environment from concrete. "Miss Deeble's aunt lived about where her (Florence's) house is now, (a block from the garden). Anyway, when she would go over to her aunt's house, she could sit on her aunt's lap and watch Sam [Dinsmoor] building the Garden of Eden. So I imagine that that had an influence on what she was doing in her later life."

Within Lucas and the surrounding area, there are at least five other artists influenced by Dinsmoor. Within the last few years, the town of Lucas, along with the Kansas Grassroots Art Association, has created the Grassroots Art Center in downtown Lucas, two blocks from the Garden, which houses pieces by artists from Lucas and others that live in other areas of the state of Kansas. One block away lies the house of Florence Deeble and her Dinsmoor influenced rock garden. In the nearby towns of Laray, Wilson, and Portis, Leroy Wilson, Ed Root, and Inez Marshall used materials common to the area to create their own Dinsmoor-like environments. In a sense, the art in and around Lucas became the reality of John Fiske's statement, "Consciousness is never the product of truth or reality but rather of culture, society, and history."<sup>15</sup> Because of the atmosphere of creativity that Dinsmoor fashioned, the artist's work was seen as an expression of art. Also, because of the isolation of the area in

which these people lived, the art both grew from Dinsmoor and from their own sense of individuality within their small communities.

One block from both the Garden and the Grassroots Art Muscum lies Florence Dceble's backyard rock garden, one of the most prominent works influenced by Dinsmoor. Her garden has landscapes that resemble postcard snapshots of actual places, such as Mount Rushmore [picture 8], Mount Eisenhower, and an "Indian Pueblo Village." Like Dinsmoor had before her, a young Deeble created these picces out of cement. She too gave tours of her yard until recently, describing and telling stories about each piece.

In her later years, she has become a historian for the town of Lucas. As her faculties have diminished, she has relied on busts and figures that she finds at auctions and sales to represent the people of her works, homages to the forebears of Lucas and Kansas. She has created a piece that she calls the "Kansas Mount Rushmore." On it she has placed a Bacchanalian figure to represent Dinsmoor, and the local Lucas Opera singer, Bess Heine, represented by a wild, hollow-eyed, crazy-haired woman. At the age of 98, Ms. Deeble is the only living praetitioner of grassroots art currently in Lucas.

Miller's Park, or its ruins, represent yet another Dinsmoor influenced artwork. Roy Miller and his wife created replicas of Colorado's Royal Gorge, the Rocky Mountains, and a eity's jailhouse out of roeks and cement. During its time, Miller's Park was more than an artful oddity, as it was created to be a rest area on K-18 with a water fountain and picnie benehes. Sometimes, it even compeeted for tourists with the Garden of Eden. Rosslyn Schultz explains:

People would go there for their birthday parties or for their anniversaries. The Millers would let anyone do that. It was a rest stop for K-18. Once, the people who were giving tours at the Garden didn't have any business and they were wondering, "Where is everyone?" So, one of them went out to the street to look down the road and there about fifteen ears sitting around Miller's Park. Someone was having a party and others were just stopping there to rest and look at everything.



9. One-quarter size Model T



10. Inez Marshall's wagon scene

Sadly, like most environments created by grassroots artists, Miller's Park has since been destroyed. Some sections were moved to a local museum in Hays, some were taken by the artist's family and others have been lost forever. The park only exists as a whole in pictures that adorn the walls of the Grassroots Art Center in Lucas.

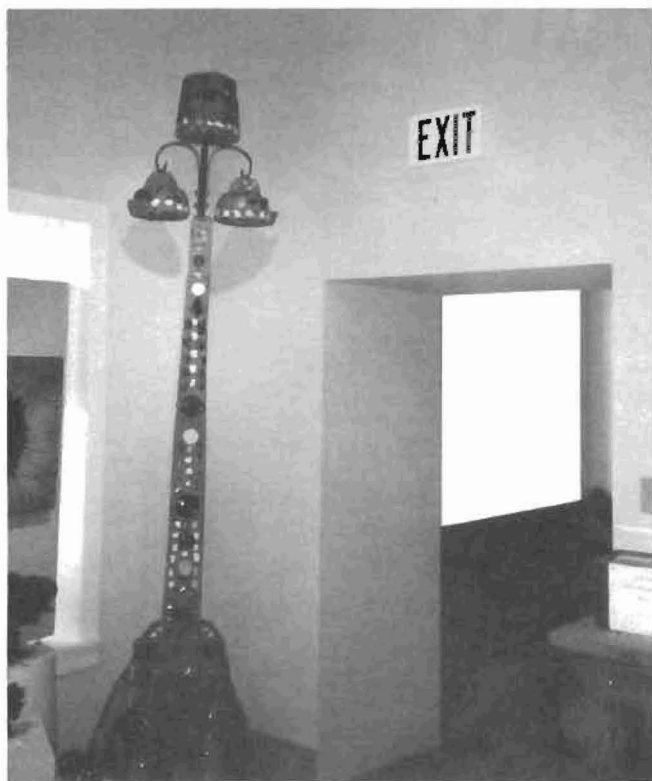
In the Art Center, there also lie exhibits by three people who lived outside of Lucas, but were close in spirit and location. Sculptress Inez Marshall, of Portis, Kansas, in a neighboring county to the north, was a jack-of-all-trades and once a truck driver. Her career as an artist began during her recovery from injuries sustained in an accident. One day, out of boredom, she decided to carve a piece of limestone. In Portis, she created the Continental Sculpture Hall, a storefront in the downtown area. "Visitors paid admission for a tour of the environment, guided by the artist herself. Marshall's carefully rehearsed tour—with dramatic gestures, special lighting, and tape-recorded recitations—was a performance to remember."<sup>16</sup> Inez created a miniature schoolhouse as well as a hospital, both three dimensional sculptures with people inside and outside the buildings, a painting of the "Last Supper" on a piece of limestone, complete with frame, "a one-quarter size Model T [picture 9], adult and cub polar bears, . . . figures of Abraham Lincoln and his family, . . . a full-size Harley Davidson wheel that was to go on a full-size Harley that was never finished," as well as hold-up scene with a wagon that stands about four feet tall [picture 10], a playable guitar, paintings and portraits, and many other pieces<sup>17</sup>. Inez created the people and other smaller pieces of her works from "composition rock," as she called it, a combination of dust from larger pieces of limestone and special, secret ingredients that she wouldn't reveal. Some of Ms. Marshall's works are in Topeka, at the state history museum, some she gave as gifts and others were bought by admirers. But none of her pieces of art are at the bottom of Wilson Lake, like the larger pieces of Ed Root's "trash art."

Mr. Root lived in the area between Wilson and Lucas, where the Army Corps of Engineers in 1964 finished Wilson Lake. He created hundreds of pieces of sculpture from concrete and from pieces of everyday material—glass, china, wheel rims—lying around his house.



11. Ed Root's sculpture



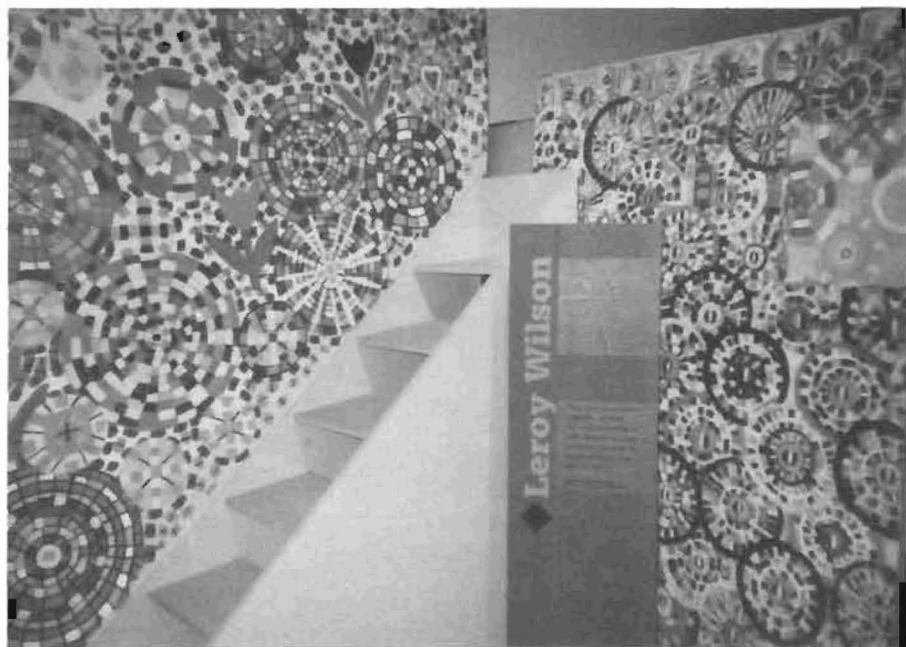


12. Lamp made of "found" objects by Ed Root

“[He] regarded all objects around him as raw materials to be incorporated into his pieces. The surfaces read like an archaeological record of the Root family. . . he rolled family photographs and entombed them in slender glass jars, and then fastened the jars to a concrete base.”<sup>18</sup> Root, like Marshall, gave away many pieces, but he is the only one of the group that made duplicates of some of his works, an anomaly in the field of grassroots art. Root constructed pieces from crepe paper and metal as well. Tragically, “A three room environment in Root’s house at the original site was lost [because of the construction of Wilson Lake].”<sup>19</sup> He made hundreds of pieces, and as with most of these artists, they were bunched together to be viewed as an environment rather than separate pieces [pictures 11-12]. Root’s pieces are marvels not only because of their surfaces of glass and other materials in cement, but because of their construction from molds. But, as Rosslyn Schultz attests, it isn’t as simple as putting pieces of broken glass into cement. “When we were making the sign that is outside of town [a sign that announces Lucas as the “Grassroots Art Capital of Kansas”] we had a lot of trouble putting the pieces into the cement because they would just sink to the bottom. You couldn’t keep your design because it keeps disappearing.”

While Root and Marshall have significant representation, one of the smallest displays in the Lucas museum is that of Leroy Wilson. It has two walls, a sink, a set of stairs, and a mirror. Unlike the other artists, Mr. Wilson didn’t create these items out of concrete or by gathering rocks. He painted and re-painted his basement walls for years with intricate designs and bright colors. No person in his family knew of this basement until the Wilsons were killed in a car accident in 1991. Then, his sons went downstairs and discovered their father’s pastime. “During holidays and family dinners, Leroy would always be leaving, say he was going to go home and paint. His relatives would always wonder if they were going to get these landscapes for Christmas or whatever, and they never did,” Rosslyn Schultz explained. Mr. Wilson came close to having his painting seen by the public before his death, but his wife shot it down. “He wanted to paint his truck once, and his wife wouldn’t let him. So he missed his chance for local fame” [picture 13].

What is it about this area of the country that causes people to create



13. Painted walls in Leroy Wilson's basement

these environments? Is it something in the water? The air? A mystical force that hovers somewhere in the clouds? Or is it the fact that most of these people worked as farmers or other labor intensive fields and, upon retirement, had to keep their minds occupied? And why concrete? Of course, not all of these questions can be answered easily. In the late 1980s, a humanities council was formed to answer the question, "Why Lucas?" They found that Lucas, unlike the neighboring town of Wilson, had a diverse group of settlers and immigrants from Russia, Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. This diversity led to a freedom of personal choices for all involved. However, these ideas don't fully answer the question. What would drive a person to do this? Dinsmoor liked a good argument and less government involvement. Florence Deeble was a school teacher driven by her need to teach the people of Lucas about their past. Leroy Wilson worked in painting rather than cement or rock, keeping everything hidden. However, what is important to remember is that Dinsmoor's ingenious use of indigenous materials (limestone rock and cement) led others to experiment with their creativity, a creativity manifest in farming itself. "Being a farmer takes a lot of creativity. If a piece of machinery breaks down, the farmer may have to take a piece of wire and find a way to use it in fixing the machinery," Rosslyn Schultz adds. In a world that contained no billboards for communication, Dinsmoor, as well as the others, created ways for their soul to speak to the world.

Dinsmoor created his own art out of everyday material in order to communicate to those people whom he was trying to reach, the workers. Dinsmoor used the maxim of William Carlos Williams, "No ideas but in things," to its greatest potential. The things that he used: limestone, concrete, the Bible, labor, a belief in the people of society, the pioneer spirit, were all "things" which were indigenous to his area. Like Williams, Dinsmoor used these as the basis of his art. Myths tend to build themselves around people, especially if you are an artist. The stories of Dinsmoor's craziness grew and grew until "in the 1960s, [he] was remembered as an eccentric, libidinous crackpot and a religious fanatic. . . to better fit the mold of 'quirky' and 'weird'."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Williams writes of the inhabitants of Paterson:

. . . It must be a great  
thing to have such a pastime.

But you were always a strange  
boy. . .

Your father was such a nice man.  
I remember him well

Or, Geeze, Doc, I guess it's all right  
but what the hell does it mean?

These are the people who find the artist strange. Such words can be said of Dinsmoor as well. His building skills, as well as his ability to create a piece of art that people can discuss in an open debate, should far outshine his antics.

## NOTES

1. All quotes of William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, (New York: New Directions, 1992).
2. Barbara Brackman, *Kansas Grassroots Art*, (Pamphlet, Kansas Grassroots Art Association).
3. All quotes by Rosslyn Schultz are from a personal interview, Oct 30, 1998.
4. James J. Fisher, "Colorful Heritage Celebrated," *Kansas City Star*, Oct 15, 1996, B1.
5. John Hachmeister, "The Garden of Eden," *Backyard Visionaries: Grassroots Art in the Midwest*, (Lawrence, KS, UP of Kansas, 1998), 33.
6. *Ibid.*
7. This and all following quotes from Dinsmoor are from *Pictorial History of The Cabin Home in Garden of Eden Lucas, Kansas*, Lucas KS, Garden of Eden, unless otherwise noted.
8. Bill Amundson, S.P. Dinsmoor: *The William Blake of the American West*, October 15, 1998, <http://www.netreach.net/~mcreep/tilt/dinsmoor.html>.
9. Hachmeister, 33.
10. Amundson, 2.
11. Hachmeister, 35.
12. "Popular reform literature of the time used the octopus as the symbol of both social Darwinism and large corporations in general. The . . . flag. . . symbolizes Dinsmoor's

and Populist anger over the federal government's active role in monopolistic practices. When state legislatures passed laws protecting local citizens from the predatory practices of the monopolies, the United States Congress nullified them." Hachmeister, 35.

13. Ibid.

14. Hachmeister, 46.

15. John Fiske, "Culture, Ideology, Interpellation," in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 305-311.

16. Cathy Dwigans and Ray Wilber, "Survival of Grassroots-Art Environments," *Backyard Visionaries*, 122.

17. Ibid.

18. Gregg Blasdel, "Ed Root and Dave Woods: Grassroots Artists, Defined or Not," *Backyard Visionaries*, 7.

19. Dwigans and Wilber, 120.

20. Hachmeister, 28-9.