5.9: Community, Kindness, and Humor: Looking at the Trolls of Mount Horeb, WI

During the 1980s the Wisconsin Department of Transportation began work on a road that would bypass Business Highway 18/151, the main road running through downtown Mount Horeb, a small town 20 miles outside of Madison. Concerned about the fact that the bypass would divert traffic from the town, thus hurting the local economy, the Mount Horeb Chamber of Commerce embarked on a mission to “Exploit, capitalize, and profit from [their] Norwegian heritage”, and settled on branding the town as the “Troll Capital of the World”, decorating the main commercial strip with troll cutouts, sculptures, and other imagery, and nicknaming it the “Trollway”, a name which today still stands proud, synonymous with the identity of the town.

Dell Upton’s “Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Invented Traditions” considers the ways that themes and behaviors of acceptance, resistance, or reinterpretation of different cultural values engage with identity and authenticity. Upton specifically takes the allegory of an American Indian, Opechancanough, and analyzes the ways that he responds to both local and European cultures, ultimately arguing that the possibility remains that he neither embraced nor rejected either, but instead combined them into what became a distinct, individual identity. To take Upton’s paper and this allegory as a framework to look at the folk art of Mount Horeb allows for an analysis of the cultural influences that led to the creation of the Troll Capital and the Trollway.

These influences, a result of Mount Horeb being uniquely situated at a cultural crossroads between the Scandinavian folk culture celebrated by its early settlers, and the small town American highway culture which would later serve to shape it during the 1980s. This paper then focuses on the relationship between Mount Horeb’s trolls – specifically a roadside cutout painted by Oleanna Cunneen in the mid-80s (fig. 1) – and the larger stories and themes present in Scandinavian folklore which will be discussed in Section I, and American tourist culture, discussed in Section II. It is by studying these relationships through the framework of Upton’s argument that we might focus them back on a discussion of Mount Horeb in Section III, finding a more nuanced understanding of the cultural landscape of Mount Horeb and Southwestern Wisconsin.
I. Scandinavia

Scandinavian immigration to the Upper Midwest, which began during the 19th c. led to a persistent and undeniable influence of Scandinavian visual and folk cultures on the traditions of the region. Subsequently, we see much of the ethos of the Upper Midwest draw from this shared ethnic and cultural heritage, and to think more broadly about the culture of Mount Horeb in this respect, it becomes necessary to analyze the ways in which we see these cultural influences become manifest. Although today Mount Horeb is not overwhelmingly Scandinavian, early in its history nearly three-fourths of its citizens had claim to some sort of Norwegian heritage, something which is still emphasized in the town today through the troll brand. Consequently, a focus on the resilience of Norwegian culture specifically, and in respect to the character of the troll, will offer an understanding of its presence in the folk art and culture of the greater Mount Horeb area.

It is important then when considering the material culture of the Scandinavian Upper Midwest to first look at folk art traditions and to consider how aspects of visual and material culture may inform and signify a cultural identity. Aesthetically, this emerges in the use of artistic techniques such as rosemaling, which underscores Mount Horeb’s name on the town water tower, (fig. 2), and in the architecture of landmarks such as the welcome center, otherwise referred to as the Velkommen building, downtown (fig. 3). These types of infrastructure, both widely recognized as things that would distinguish a place from its surrounding landscape and serve as a landmark, use Norwegian folk imagery as decoration thus associating Mount Horeb with Norwegian heritage. Further illustrative of how ubiquitous this material and visual culture is, shops such as Open House Imports specialize and deal almost exclusively in gifts which celebrate Norwegian heritage such as dala horses, clogs, and rosemalled household goods.

This emphasis on ethnic or craft backgrounds in the folk and popular cultures of Wisconsin is an echo of Upton’s article, suggesting that the distinct cultural influences upon a society – or individual – may push it towards becoming a more unique product of its environment. Furthermore, this trend in the shaping and reshaping of identities and aesthetics which become uniquely representative of a society asserts these elements of culture as authentic to a place or people. They develop, as described in From Hardanger to Harley, “through direct contact and communication between the makers and their audience”, something which is seen again outside of the visual and material spheres of culture. Accordingly, since the visual arts are only a small part of the realm of folk culture, and in order to better understand the cultural and artistic context of the Mount Horeb trolls, it is important that we also look at the troll in the context of Scandinavian folklore.

Although non-visual and straying from material culture, folklore and storytelling remain a persistent aspect of the Scandinavian cultural landscape of the Upper Midwest. Von Krogh writes that stories passed from generation to generation, “reflect conscious as well as unconscious needs, values and defenses in the storyteller as well as among his audience”, which indicates that the study of oral storytelling traditions would offer us a unique perspective from which to consider the ways recurring themes, character traits, or expressions of social order might reveal cultural values. Moreover, the fact that something such as the legend is, “More typically presented in a kind of dialogue or informal conversation” suggests that there are patterns of importance placed on the oral tradition over that which is written. Of course, there are times at which a story might be told with more accuracy or written down, but largely this seems to not be the case.

Recurring figures in Norwegian folklore, as in most folklore, include both the hero and the creature or monster. Where heroes such as Askeladden tend to be portrayed in a favorable light, trolls, described in one instance as, “Particularly unsavory Scandinavian monsters”, become subject a less favorable treatment. There exist a number of tales in which
trolls are stated to have tendencies towards violence or kidnapping. We also see, as pointed out by Eastman Attebery, that this type of troll occupies a well-established niche in written literature, both in traditional folk narratives such as those collected by Asbjørsen and Moe and in more contemporary works such as Tolkein’s “The Hobbit”, or in Gaiman’s “Troll Bridge”. Additionally, in the plays of Ibsen, the troll has been used to, “Represent the evil dormant in man”, suggesting the extent to which this characterization of the troll as evil has developed. There of course is an evolution between the early and late literary works, although both engage with similar themes of cruelty and meanness.

In contrast to the ogre-trolls of early folktales and more contemporary literary works, there remains a more pleasant characterization. This is that of the humanoid-trolls – a term borrowed, again from Eastman Attebery to describe those which, “Oftentimes take on the role of the trickster, and have emotions, families, and depth.” In a survey of Mount Horeb, we see a similar representation and characterization of the troll, to the extent that in addition to those that are purely fictitious, we see trolls modeled after individual townspeople. One handout available in the town, deals further with this mischaracterization, stating that:

There are: Kind trolls and mean trolls, Happy trolls and very sad trolls, Laughing trolls and trolls with migraine, Helpful trolls and destructive trolls (vandals)

Although here we do see the unpleasant troll remain, there is more nuance developed, and the monolithic characterization is dismantled, leaving room for the kind, happy, laughing, and helpful trolls that we find along the Trollway.

This is exemplified by the work of Michael Feeney, a local artist who has carved many of the trolls along Mount Horeb’s main commercial road, who employs an aesthetic that leans heavily towards folk art, and assigns each of his works a personality for which it is named – these range from gardeners to peddlers. This again distances the Mount Horeb trolls from existing literary characterizations and further illustrates the adaptation of Scandinavian tradition to meet the needs of the town’s aesthetic and cultural ambitions.

Outside of the use of troll imagery, one of the most places where we most clearly see this cultural resilience is in Little Norway, a “living museum” that existed between 1927 and 2012 in Blue Mounds, just outside Mount Horeb. Home to several recreations of traditional Norwegian homesteads, and most notably a stave church used originally at the 1893 World’s Colombian Exposition, the museum sought to give its visitors an experience that, while by no means authentic, would recreate something of the lives of Norwegian settlers. Behn notes in “A Quest for Norwegian Folk Art in America” that from an art historical perspective, surveys of Norwegian immigration to the United States have neglected to look at antiques and material culture, and especially those which hold personal value. This is one area in which Little Norway was remarkably successful, in addition to the use of a form of spectacle to bring attention to the area.

The duality in the role of the troll character in arts and literature, and the broader artistic and storytelling traditions of the Upper Midwest are significant in a study of Mount Horeb’s folk art in that they allows us to consider the image of the troll in a wider cultural context. Mount Horeb, a town deeply rooted in its Scandinavian identity is defined by landmarks such as Little Norway and a water tower featuring the town’s name underscored by rosemaling, in addition to roadways, restaurants, and a town mascot that references the Norwegian troll. All play into a desire to differentiate from other small towns and to attract attention from passengers in a speeding car, something which is far from unique to Mount Horeb, and in fact aligns with a broader tradition in American culture.
II. America

If we consider the relationship between Mount Horeb’s trolls to their Scandinavian cultural roots, then we must also consider the equal importance of their position in small town America. Roadside attractions – landmarks such as Cadillac Ranch or Carhenge – and other oddities have long been used to draw motorists off of the highway and towards downtowns or Main Streets to bolster local economies, and it has been argued that this phenomenon is uniquely American. An analysis of both the wonder that is the roadside attraction illustrated here by Dr. Evermor’s Forevertron (fig. 4), the Dickeyville Grotto (fig. 5), and a sculpture of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Ox (fig. 6), as well as the commercial strip exemplified here by downtown Las Vegas, will afford a context in which to think about how Mount Horeb aligns itself with these traditions.

The importance of the highway to American culture cannot be understated. In fact, it has been said that the American, “National character [has] come to be embodied, to a large degree, in the image of restless wanderers”, something which ties the most essential spirit of this character to the open road. Like the culture of Scandinavia this is rooted in artistic traditions which draw from folk traditions, there is a persistent tendency in the arts of the American roadside to align closely with common practices of American folk art, using of found objects, combined with a sense of heart and humor. This can include both the visual forms of art – which commonly reference the outsider and self-taught, illustrated by Dr. Evermor’s Forevertron and the Dickeyville Grotto, as well as In “Sublime Spaces and Visionary Worlds”, Umberger discusses the vernacular and outsider art and architecture of the United States, particularly that in the Upper Midwest and in Southern Wisconsin.

Here, we find massive sculpture parks such as Dr. Evermore's Forevertron in Sumpter, WI, and the Dickeyville Grotto, in Dickeyville. Both take materials conventionally used in industrial work or construction – scrap metal, concrete, stone, glass, or farm tools, and repurpose them into works of art, with the artist relying on skills that are self-taught. These massive forms announce a place as itself, expressing a distinct local culture, even if the local is so specific that it becomes representative of an individual, and of these pieces relates the arts of the outside as well as the roadside, ultimately tying them back to the folk arts of Mount Horeb.

However, this is not always the case, as in other works we find the influence of oral storytelling tradition in addition to artistic and craft traditions. In Northern Minnesota, we find a roadside sculpture which takes equally from artistic tradition and those of storytelling and community. These ways that roadside sculpture and oddities relate to local and regional folklore is written about extensively by Marling, Harrison, and White in their book “Colossus of Roads: Myth and Symbol Along the American Highway”. They write that the sculpture of Paul Bunyan and Babe the Ox in Lake Bemidji, Minnesota, has roots in Depression-Era storytelling, when stories of his feats became “fables testifying to the force of the American will”, and that as more stories were told, the character assumed “the awkward solidity of real life”. The increasing popularity and subsequently, increasing authenticity of the Paul Bunyan myth, inspired the creation of visual representations of his story and in 1937, a sculpture of Bunyan was constructed and placed in a field next to a main road in Lake Bemidji, MN. The sculpture shares a number of conventions with the trolls currently on display in Mount Horeb – most notably an aesthetic simplification of form, and thematically an inspiration taken from a cultural heritage. Whether this is a more recently developed heritage as in Lake Bemidji, or a longstanding one as in Mount Horeb, both find themselves transmitted into the arts and visual culture of those who claim it. In this manner, we see the art of Mount Horeb align once again with American popular culture.

The cultural microcosm found in rural Northern Minnesota echoes and validates that in Mount Horeb – both are communities which take some element of local storytelling or heritage and reinvent it to be used as a visual identifier.
Just as a massive lumberjack and ox mark the landscape as “Lake Bemidji”, trolls dotting a commercial streetscape identify Mount Horeb, representing a local heritage that informs local identity. However, there is also a clear influence of the American commercial strip on Mount Horeb in addition to that of the American roadside attraction. The commercial strip is part of a commonplace trend in business and city planning, and we see this play out both on the scale of small town Main Streets and on something of more acclaim, such as the Las Vegas strip.

Both of these step off from the traditional “High Street”, and although we may think of the vast spaces, high speeds, and bright lights found in downtown Las Vegas rather liberally when applied to downtown Mount Horeb, the relationship between the two cannot be lost upon us. In both, the user – whether presented as the traveler, the driver, or the pedestrian, “relies on signs for guidance”. These signs, whether they come in the form of troll sculptures or bright, glowing neon, then exhibit a reliance on the ability to communicate visually and quickly, and fulfill their function of being able to identify a place within seconds.

Furthermore, Wisconsin folk traditions take from both the ethnic histories of the state and the distinct popular culture which has developed in the time since its early settlement. For instance, the very title of the Kohler Art Center’s From Hardangers to Harleys: A Survey of Wisconsin Folk Art, gestures toward Norwegian artistic and musical tradition as well as the iconic Harley-Davidson manufactured in Milwaukee. These influences push the folk arts and culture of Wisconsin to reconcile the two cultures, resulting in a distinct set of values and signifiers that become representative of the state.

To circle back to a discussion of the arts of Mount Horeb, then, this broader trend seen in the folk arts of Wisconsin – like that of the commercial strip – is still at play when we bring it to a smaller scale. Local tradition, whether or not it calls upon an ethnic heritage, still impacts the identity of a place or person.

When we consider this in relation to the commercial landscape of a town, it becomes even more important to something such as branding. Subsequently, the use of the troll as a town symbol references a shared and valued cultural heritage, and the transformation of this element of a shared past into a defining and marketable signifier of a town, aligns a troll cutout such as ours with American cultural tradition. An examination of the advertisement and folk art of Mount Horeb in this context will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how it fits into larger themes in American culture. This then allows for a more nuanced understanding of Mount Horeb’s culture, and its relationship to both its Scandinavian and American cultural roots.

III. Mount Horeb

After looking at Oleanna Cunneen’s troll cutout within the broader of Scandinavian folklore and folk art, and American highway culture, it is essential that we return to look at it once again in the context of Mount Horeb’s history. This makes an allowance for an understanding of how these themes weave together to create and define a local culture, and how that culture might produce something such as the object in question – a roadside cutout, silhouetted and painted in the image of a jolly old troll.

This troll cutout (fig. 1), designed and painted by Oleanna Cunneen, was made in 1984-1985. It is made of 0.5 in plywood, and is 46.5 in tall by 18.5 in wide. The troll is an aging man with a white beard and frizzy hair, four fingers on each hand, and four toes on each foot. He is grinning with a single toothed smile, and has wide, excited eyes and pointed ears. He is wearing fine blue coveralls, with red accents at the cuff and chest, all fastened with grey or perhaps silver buttons. A sparrow is perched on his folded hands, and on his head is a smaller female troll. The cutout is attached to a metal pole with two sets of screws – allowing it to be staked into the ground. There are a number of places around the edges where the plywood has chipped off, a result of its being displayed outdoors along the side of a busy
road, although the paint itself has not weathered or faded. An important question though how this cutout relates to the
trolls displayed in Mount Horeb today, which aligns our object with a historical narrative, as Cunneen was not the only
Mount Horeb area artist to work with the theme or imagery of the troll.

Michael Feeney, also a Mount Horeb local, carved a number of the trolls seen downtown as mentioned in Section I of
this paper. While working with the same subject matter, and like Cunneen adding distinguishing characteristics to his
trolls that might model them after specific Mount Horeb citizens, Feeney’s work differs from Cunneen’s in a number of
ways. It is important firstly to note the difference in medium – where Cunneen painted plywood cutouts or sculpted
smaller trolls out of clay or plaster around a metal armature, Feeney’s work is done in wood and carved by hand.
Understandably then, there are striking stylistic differences between the two. We can take, for example, the fact that
Feeney abstracts his figures much more than Cunneen; for instance, if we look at “The Tourist Troll” (fig. 7), we find it
becomes much more solid, less detailed and more geometric than Cunneen’s, whose trolls are highly illustrative.

This is particularly evident if we look at one of Cunneen’s troll sculptures (fig. 8). Here, the exaggeration of the figure
comes not from simplification as in Feeney’s, but from a high contrast between the raised and recessed facial features,
and a proliferation of detail. The troll becomes more elfin than rock-like. Interestingly, though, both express a sense of
humor and a playfulness that references the role of the troll in the tourism of Mount Horeb, and breaks from their
conventional portrayals in literature. To understand this further it is necessary to think about the creation of these trolls
within their original historical context.

During the 1980s when a bypass of Business Highway 18/151 was constructed, the decrease in the number of people
who would be driving through the town center became a concern. With natural traffic drawn away, it became necessary
for Mount Horeb to establish a town brand – some form of spectacle, wonder, or awe that would bring traffic back
towards town. The Chamber of Commerce assembled the Mount Horeb Advancement Association to decide on which
actions to take in the development of a town image. With goals such as to, “Exploit, capitalize, and profit from our
Norwegian heritage,”, and to, “Coordinate the troll theme with the ethnic concept”, the relationship between
Scandinavian tradition and American branding once again cannot be forgotten. The troll, then, aligns with this larger
brand in its emphasis on community, kindness, and humor, responding to influences from the small town and a distant
homeland in Scandinavia. Accordingly, a discussion of the history and cultural landscape of Mount Horeb is directed
back to the troll cutout. Representing an early point in the story of how Mount Horeb became the “Troll Capital of the
World”, it reflects the beginnings of a cultural identity that still remains today.

In a discussion of the folk art of Mount Horeb one would be remiss not to discuss, at least briefly, the influence of
Oleanna Cunneen. The pride that Cunneen took in her Norwegian heritage is evident. Born to a Norwegian American
and a Norwegian immigrant, Cunneen undoubtedly grew up surrounded by Scandinavian tradition. Although she was
most widely known for her prolific storytelling and her work as a guide at Little Norway, she worked in fashion –
designing bunads, as well as practiced painting, embroidering, and making troll sculptures. Cunneen worked extensively
with the art of rosemaling and played an important role in the social community of Mount Horeb.

While some of the first roadside trolls were made by a Delos Kobs and students at the area high school, Cunneen had
been making sculptures and figurines – such as fig. 8 – of the creatures prior to their adoption as the town brand, which
afforded her a larger platform upon which to display them. After these early trolls were used to decorate the roadside,
being placed in front of a number of downtown businesses, a number disappeared and it was gathered that, “They must
have been very popular since most of them were stolen the first summer.” This is a slight ironic twist when we consider
the vandal trolls of early literature. Still, even after the disappearance of a number of cutouts, some remained, such as
fig. 1, Cunneen’s troll cutout which will be displayed at the Driftless Historium, representing a specific moment in Mount Horeb history which still has modern iterations today.

The embrace of the imagery, character, and spirit of the troll is prevalent throughout the culture of Mount Horeb. Stoughton, located just East of Madison, hosts the largest celebration of Norwegian independence in the United States, and across the state there are various roadside oddities such as the aforementioned Forevertron in Sumpter, the Dickeyville Grotto, or the Tin Man Mailbox in Black Earth, all attracting attention to shops or downtowns, or that at very least serve as photo opportunities for those who happen upon them; despite not being alone in its pride in Norwegian heritage, or its playfulness and folk art roots that embrace the culture of the American highway, Mount Horeb is distinctive in its combination of the two.

Analyzing this combination of ideas and influences in the context of Mount Horeb’s culture then leads us back to Upton. The resonance of his description of the Opechancanough allegory, describing how the stitching together of different cultures to create a unique, authentic, and personal identity frames the story of Mount Horeb, and it becomes clear that the melding together of Scandinavian and American traditions creates a distinct cultural landscape that remains authentically "Mount Horeb". We see this in the use of trolls to both emphasize Norwegian cultural roots, and to establish a sense of wonder and marvel about the town which continues to bring in travelers and tourists who would otherwise never have driven down the Trollway.