

Manitowoc's Spirit of the Rivers off to Oregon

ON THE MOVE



PHOTOS BY JOSH CLARK/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

"Spirit of the Rivers" artist R.T. "Skip" Wallen, right, helps volunteer Jim Everett wrap up part of the sculpture in his studio Tuesday for its journey to Oregon, where it will be cast in bronze at the Parks Bronze Fine Arts Foundry.

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MANITOWOC - Artist R.T. "Skip" Wallen leaned over a foot-long clay piece in his downtown studio Tuesday, using a sharp edge to form the shape of individual hairs on the form representing a braid of hair.

The segment is one small piece of one of three larger-than-life Native American figures, made from blue foam and covered in clay. The main focus of the Spirit of the Rivers sculpture is a young man portaging a birch-bark canoe. A young woman accompanies him, and an elder greets the newly arrived couple.

This week, Wallen, volunteers and Steve Parks, of Parks Bronze Foundry in Oregon, are dismantling the large figures



As pieces of the sculpture are taken apart and prepared to be shipped, artist R.T. "Skip" Wallen touches up pieces of the monument before they are driven to the Parks Bronze Fine Arts Foundry in Oregon.

into smaller pieces to be hauled to Parks' foundry. The pieces will be carefully reassembled upon delivery and used to make the molds that will be used to cast the final bronze sculptures.

Parks traveled cross-country with a big, white trailer to collect the pieces and to help get them cushioned in bubble wrap and ready for the move. The artists and their helpers are carefully touching up areas and repairing minor damage where the pieces were cut before the big move. The pieces are numbered and identified to be put back into place when they arrive.

That process will take about six months, Parks said. He expects the bronze sculptures will return to Manitowoc in summer 2018 and assembled at the proposed final site, on the Lake

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Sculpture

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Michigan shore midway between Manitowoc and Two Rivers. Experts will weld together the bronze pieces and add a final patina.

Each figure is about 10 feet tall and the canoe will be about 22 feet long.

"There's a little post-partum," Wallen said of sending his project out west for more than a year. "Seeing the pieces cut up, you do worry that something could go wrong."

Wallen, an internationally renowned artist who was born and raised in Manitowoc, first discussed the idea with local art supporters in 2010, drawing plans on a cocktail napkin.

"I took him out for a beer and planted the seed: 'Would you consider doing a legacy piece for your hometown?'" Joe Metzger, a member of the Spirit of the Rivers board, told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin when the project got underway.

Both men share credit for the project's idea. Wallen said a catalyst was a video series featuring Manitowoc, which glossed over the area's earliest inhabitants.

The sculpture depicts an important piece of regional history before Manitowoc County's marine tradition, he said.

Native Americans depended on the waters and built watercraft out of bark, the artist said. Four types of tree wood were used in actual construction — spruce, pine, cedar



PHOTOS BY JOSH CLARK/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN
Bob Wallen, the brother of artist R.T. "Skip" Wallen, helps touch up a section of the canoe before the sculpture is packed and shipped off for bronzing Tuesday in Manitowoc.

and birch — and organizers plan to plant those trees around the final sculpture with signs explaining the significance.

Wallen did a lot of research before kicking off the project. The monument will honor Native American cultures of the Great Lakes region rather than a single tribe. Wallen used tribal designs in both canoe construction and clothing for the piece.

The artist worked with later photos of Native Americans, paintings, museum collections and written accounts in his quest for authenticity.

The project's volunteer

board has raised \$750,000 needed to build and transport the sculpture, but it still needs donations to help cover development of the monument site and future maintenance.

For more details and donation possibilities, contact Spirit of the Rivers at P.O. Box 513, Two Rivers, WI 54241, call 920-793-7214, email spiritoftherivers@gmail.com, or visit the website, www.spiritoftherivers.org.

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A smaller bronze version of the "Spirit of the Rivers" sculpture sits in R.T. "Skip" Wallen's studio Tuesday. The actual monument will stand 10 feet tall on the lakefront at the boundary between Two Rivers and Manitowoc.