

A Monumental Passion: The Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park



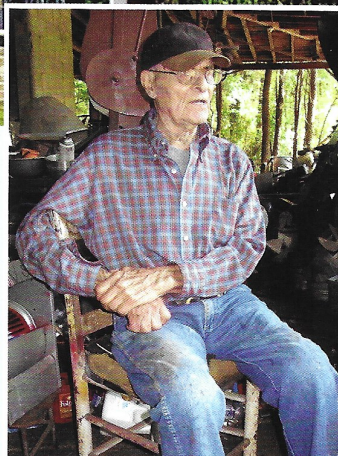
TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS
BY K. JOHNSON BOWLES

Vollis Simpson (1919–2013) was a modern master of kinetic sculpture. He made a living repairing farm equipment and moving houses in rural Eastern North Carolina. Art-making came late in life during retirement beginning in the mid-1980s. When asked, he said, “Never thought I’d be an artist, but I guess I am.”

This May, I drove from Raleigh to Wilson, N.C., to see the city’s progress in preserving and showcasing Simpson’s marvelous sculptures at the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park, the largest exhibition and collection of its kind. Although organized activities have ceased during North Carolina stay-at-home orders, the Park is open free of charge, daily, from 5:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. Like many of us during the COVID-19 pandemic, I welcomed time away from home and relished an opportunity to experience a monumental expression of whimsical joy in color and movement. I reflected on my past experiences with Simpson’s work and

provide an update about his artistic legacy that is preserved in Wilson.

My first trip to see Vollis Simpson’s magnificent whirligigs was on a stifling hot and humid day in July of 2004. Lined by vast tobacco fields, the back roads of Wilson County snaked through pastoral landscapes to a place called Lucama (pronounced ‘Loo-KAH-ma’) about 11 miles south of the city of Wilson. On the journey, one was more likely to come across a cow, possum, raccoon, or deer rather than a human being. As I recall, directions to the Simpson farm consisted of cues such as veering right where a road forked, turning left where the old gas station used to be, past a particular dirt road, and the like. There weren’t many road signs in this rural Eastern N.C. locale. As we rounded a curve, 30-, 40-, and 50-foot tall, brightly colored whirligigs peaked through the trees. I reflected then that the discovery and art world celebration of Vollis Simpson seemed miraculous.



Photograph by Ann Oppenheimer

My daughter, then a fourth-grader, and I were guided by Longwood University colleague David Whaley. I met David when I arrived at Longwood in 2000, and we became fast friends with a shared love of folk art,

among other things. I had often admired an eccentric, seemingly Modernist, brilliant lemon-yellow sculpture by Simpson that occupied a corner of David’s office (and still does some 20 years later). It inspired me to want to know more about Simpson and his work. For our trip, David had called ahead to make sure Vollis would receive us at his farm. We turned onto the unpaved driveway and headed to a barn-like structure. David said, “It’s a shame we can’t see this at night,” noting that many locals enjoyed driving out by night to see the works and dubbed the place “Acid Park.” In the dark, a car’s headlights conjured a spectacular light show as the beams hit the cut-up

highway sign reflectors encrusted on the whirligigs' kinetic surfaces.

As we approached the workshop, one could see all manner of agricultural and industrial machine parts. Wheel drums, bicycle wheels, metal fans, and other types of scraps were heaped around the wooden building. Still visible was the Coca-Cola sign that read "Simpson Repair Shop," although it was now faded and rusted. We found the remarkably fit and trim 85-year-old Simpson donning his steel-rimmed glasses, signature baseball hat, and plaid shirt neatly tucked into his belted jeans as he sat on a metal folding chair near the door.

The barn served as his workshop and storage for all manner of metal and wood, welding equipment and tools, works in progress, and a carnival of brightly colored finished works, both large and small. It would be a conceit to call the space a studio. It was a repairman's workshop packed to the rafters, with all the chaos and telltale dizzying, acrid smells of accumulated enamel spray paint fumes, acetone, oil, grease, welding, old wood, and clay soil. The only respite from the oppressive heat was an old shop fan that helped to produce a cross breeze through the barn's dimly lit expanse.

We wandered blissfully (if not cautiously) through the maze of works overwhelmed by the sheer volume as well as the unbridled wit and inventiveness the works exuded. Primary colors, stars, numbers, and radiating movement reminded me of Futurist, Cubist, and Modernist paintings like *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928) by American artist Charles Demuth (1883–1935) and *The American Gas Works* (1962) by Robert Indiana (1928–2018).

Vollis' quiet humility and gruff independence were present in his matter-of-fact answers to our queries about his work. The words, "I can't sit around and do nothing," ring in my head as I recall how he responded to why he started creating art. By 2004, he had been creating what he called 'windmills' for about 20 years. In a 1996 interview with Jane M. Joel published in *Folk Art Messenger* (#35, Vol. 9, Issue 3), he once mused perhaps he should have started creating the works earlier in his life. When I met him, he had already shown his work at the Atlanta Olympics and been collected by major museums.

Simpson patiently spoke to my young daughter and encouraged her to make her way through the meadow around the large pond to discover his large-scale

windmills, as he called them. "See if you can find the guitar player," he coaxed. While still spectacular and awe-inspiring, the paint had begun fading, and rust had begun to accumulate. Some of the moving parts no longer responded to the wind's encouragement, and kudzu began to overtake the works. David and I lamented the whirligigs' fate. What would become of these magnificent giants when Vollis could no longer care for them or when he passed away? I was resigned to the notion that at least the work had existed.



David and I shouldn't have worried. Both the North Carolina Arts Council and people in and around the City of Wilson also believed in saving the works for future generations. According to Jeff Bell, Director of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park, it was a fantastic convergence of ideas culminating in the work's preservation.

Saving the artworks would also help to revitalize Wilson. From 1890 until about 1990, Wilson was renowned for its tobacco auction warehouses. Even today, the city proudly touts its former glory and 19th-century moniker, "The World's Largest Tobacco Market." Its warehouse district is on the National Register of Historical Places. An economic downturn and changes in the way manufacturers bought tobacco turned Wilson into a town of empty buildings by the end of the 20th century. People believed a whirligig park

honoring Simpson could create tourism and spur economic development.

In 2010, the City of Wilson, Wilson Downtown Properties, Wilson Downtown Development Corporation, and the North Carolina Arts Council partnered. The group worked with thousands of stakeholders, and a vision took hold. A not-for-profit

organization was formed to purchase works, manage their care, and develop programming.

With Vollis' and his wife, Jean's blessing, the organization purchased 31 large-scale works that had been on the farm's grounds and some 50 smaller works. (In accordance with the original agreement and partnership with the Kohler Foundation, one of the large-scale works is owned by the Kohler Foundation. The Kohler-owned piece is not on view at the Park in Wilson. The Park holds and maintains 30 outdoor pieces.) To imagine the scale of the project, consider the tallest work is "Christmas Tree" at 60-feet tall; the widest is "V. Simpson" at 55-feet wide, and the heaviest is "Mule Train" at 13,500 pounds. And in 2013, a groundbreaking ceremony for the two-acre Park took place on a vacant lot that had once been the site of Wilson's first tobacco warehouse. Plans developed that envisioned a green space to mimic the shape of the pond at Simpson's farm. The whirligigs would be situated according to their original locations and juxtapositioned on concrete pathways allowing for visitors to stroll easily from work to work. Vollis and Jean attended the ceremony, but, sadly, Vollis passed away on May 31, 2013.

The Folk Art Society of America held its 2013 annual conference in Raleigh, N.C. The attendees traveled to Wilson and observed the Park's progress. By this time, numerous works had been moved to Wilson from the Simpson's farm in Lucama. Moving each whirligig was a monumental task requiring cranes, large flatbed trucks, and taking down power lines. Imagining the highly complex process and all the people involved makes one marvel at Vollis Simpson's genius even more. Simpson assembled and maintained the works virtually alone on his farm. Only occasionally did he have someone help drill holes in the ground with specialized well-digging equipment.

The professionalism of the Park's leaders as well as their dedication to Simpson's memory was evident from the beginning. At the Park's conservation headquarters, the partnerships with National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Tuckerbrook Conservation, and DuPont were ensuring the highest standards of conservation by conducting research and developing protocols. Not

only did the materials and surfaces need refurbishing, but the mechanical aspects required special attention. It is worth noting that "Mule Train" includes a 24-foot fan that activates 15 different elements. The Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park opened to the public in 2017.



While the viewing experience is quite different from walking through tall meadow grass, smelling honeysuckle, and seeing ducks on the pond after a drive in the country, it was awe-inspiring to see the works restored to their original colors and pristine working condition. Visiting the Park on a windy day made it all the more spectacular.

Today, 29 works are on view. One work that was conserved early in the process is back in conservation headquarters after the team updated some of the preservation protocols. The Park continually consults with partners on issues such as long-lasting, fade-resistant paint and also works with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to procure the reflective

highway sign materials that Simpson used in his work. The Park's commitment is evident in the spectacular appearance of the works, the thoughtful interpretative signs, consistently placed labels, and well-designed environment, including a pavilion for festivals, fairs, and farmers' markets and a green space for concerts.

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While the City of Wilson maintains the grounds of the Park, the care of the works and programming are the responsibility of the Park. It has been a beneficial partnership. The vision to preserve the works has been fulfilled (though on-going care and educa-

tional programming is essential), and the City of Wilson's revitalization has begun. Approximately 100,000 people visit the Park annually, property values in the city have improved, and economic development has been spurred.

During a telephone interview, Park Director Jeff Bell reported that programs continue to be developed to highlight



Simpson's work and their importance. Later in 2020, a museum is set to open adjacent to the Park. The museum will feature smaller works on a rotating basis ranging in size from six inches to six feet, educational displays, and short documentary films about Simpson and the Park's work. Bell also encouraged visiting the Park, joining the Park's Facebook page,

and making contributions. More information can be found by visiting: <https://www.wilsonwhirligigpark.org/> and <https://www.facebook.com/V.S.WhirligigPark>.

The Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park is a testament to Simpson's passion, vision, and hard work. It is an inspirational reminder of how people working together can preserve art and culture while

enhancing the life of a community. What a wonderful reminder of the power of the human imagination to inspire hope and beauty! I think we all need more of it during these difficult times. 📌

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