



Dinosaur Gardens : The History and Story of Ossineke's Prehistoric Zoo

The Original owner and artist: Paul Domke

On December 31, 1886 Paul Nathan Domke was born to Prussian immigrants, Carl and Augusta Domke, Presque Isle County Michigan homesteaders and pioneers. From early on, Paul's interests were varied and many. In 1906 Mr. Domke joined the United States Navy and soon thereafter was assigned to hospital duties at the Naval Hospital in Annapolis, Maryland. Throughout the remainder of his stay in the Navy, he performed various duties on Hospital ships and at various hospitals in various parts of the world. Leaving the Navy in 1910, he returned to the family farm in Northern Michigan. He married Lora Schultz and worked the farm until a short time later when the couple moved to Rogers City where Paul operated a Standard Oil service station for a time ---- eventually moving to Detroit where his artistic interests took over as he worked as a church decorator.

It is said that Mr. Domke developed a great interest in natural history, bone and muscle structure in animals, particularly long, extinct creatures while he was in the service. When Paul's painting and church decorating business failed in the Detroit area during the early years of the Great Depression, he and his wife, Lora moved back to Northern Michigan and bought a piece of land that he thought resembled the type of terrain that was inhabited by dinosaurs when they roamed the earth. He found this property near Ossineke, MI in 1930. When you walk through the property today, you can see why he chose this site for his future Labor of Love. It is loaded with huge, low land ferns, majestic trees and a natural stream running through it that is full of history and wildlife. First, Mr. Domke built his home in 1930 and then he built three rental cabins and a gas station/art studio from 1931 to 1932. All the buildings still stand today. The revenue from the rental cabins and the gas station got the Domke's through the remainder of the depression and helped pave the way to the start of we call "Dinosaur Gardens" today.

In the summer of 1935, Paul Domke hired workers to build a bridge over the Devils River, clear areas of land, build construction trails and ready certain spots for creatures soon to come. The first display was started in 1935 and later finished in 1936. Mr. Domke first called his new project, "Paul Domke's Garden and Prehistoric Zoo". In the early attempts to create the animals, Mr. Domke tried using plaster of paris and various other compositions for his pre-historic creations. These early building materials proved to be not long lasting and now with the help of a chemist from Alpena's Huron Portland Cement Company, a formula of cement that could withstand outdoor elements was achieved. It was the compound of cement, sand, lime, calcium, stearate and liquid asphalt that Mr. Domke settled on to make his incredibly long, lasting creations from. A firm concrete foundation was the first thing needed for each animal, and then a steel framework with metal lath was needed to support the prepared concrete mixture. This "secret" mixture, that Domke called "cement plastics" needed to be pliable enough for him to sculpt all the various details of each creature. This is why we are carefully stripping old paint off each animal today as we refinish the dinosaur's exteriors to expose the careful, and incredible detail of workmanship Mr. Domke put into each creature.

Mr. Domke took great pride in the research he did in preparing and constructing each animal. He claimed that every dinosaur in the park is the size as it was when they walked on the earth. We understand Mr. Domke made many trips to the Smithsonian Institution and even toured places in Canada to get the info that he needed to be accurate in size and appearance of the Dinosaur.

Close to forty years were devoted to the creation of Mr. Domke's zoo of over 25 prehistoric creatures. Dinosaur Gardens as it is called today has sites that were made from 1935 to 1967. The ownership history does not follow what one would think. Mr. Frank McCourt and his wife Wilma bought the property from Domke in 1960 while animal construction was still going on. Then in 1980, Wilma McCourt sold the zoo to another person for a short time on a land contract and got it back. It was

shortly after that, that Wilma's son Frank, along with his wife Judy bought Dinosaur Gardens and began putting their finger prints on the park. Frank built the current mini golf course and commissioned another artist to build the only dinosaur not built by Domke in the park. And that brings us to today as Gary and Connie Stephan, owners of Connie's Café for 33 years, bought Dinosaur Gardens in the winter of 2013. The Stephan's renovated the Gift shop in 2013 and added an Ice Cream shop complete with a 50 item topping bar.

As you walk around the garden path you can only imagine what the property and surrounding area was like when the prehistoric sea covered the land while the glaciers retreated, then when Mastadons roamed the land with the native Indians hunting them, and finally when lumberman were cutting the huge white pines and floating the logs down the Devil's River to the saw mill on the Lake Huron Shore. All these thoughts plus the amazing story of Mr. Domke and his eccentric, life-long work to build his prehistoric zoo that tied Christ into the evolution of our world. You will find dinosaurs from multiple periods of time that range from over 200 million years ago to 34 million years ago. Animals are represented from all over the world as well from the US and Canada. We feel everyone who would like to make the ½ mile walk around the property would appreciate the experience to see the animals for themselves and to imagine what it would have been like to be on earth during the time of the **"Dinosaurs"**.