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Where art thrives: Group blends different artistic styles, spreads creativity in region

By JOE NICKELL of the Missoulian
Photographed by LINDA THOMPSON of the Missoulian



Bob Korn throws in his *Kornutopia Pottery studio* North of Seeley Lake off of Highway 83 Wednesday morning. "Throwing (pottery) is the part I like to do best," says Korn who is a member of *Alpine Artists Inc.*, a non-profit organization that serves to promote the arts in the Seeley-Swan region. LINDA THOMPSON/Missoulian

Seeley Lake - To get to Russ Abolt's Third Life Studio, just take a drive north from Seeley Lake through the dense woodlands along Highway 83, until you get to Falls Creek Road. Turn right onto the dirt road, then wind through the ever-more-dense conifer forest for about a mile and a half. As you ponder the fact that you haven't seen any sign of domestic dwellings for miles, hopefully you won't miss your next turn, at Forest Service Road 9550. Trust the numbers and follow the road, ever deeper into the foothills of the Swan Mountains, till you get to the "end of county maintenance" sign. There, you'll notice a sign that says "Abolt/Clarke."

You're mostly there now.

Just go left at that sign, drive another mile, then take a right at the sign that says "Abolt/Davis," then go straight past the turn-off to Jim Bob's Cabin. And then, you're there.

Simple, right?

Well, not exactly. Indeed, for big-city visitors, the journey may feel more like a setup for a bad horror film than a retreat into an idyllic paradise: "Honey, are you sure we took the right road?"

But for those who trust the journey, the rewards are rich indeed. Abolt, a former manager of a manufacturing trade organization based in Washington, D.C., has devoted his own third life - retirement - to transforming found scraps of wood into works of art.

"I'm only interested in wood in its third life," Abolt explains in a warm baritone voice that should itself soothe any harried visitor. "In its first life, wood stands alive. Then it stands dead. Then it falls to the ground. I only pick up the stuff off the ground, and that's what I use for my artwork."

Abolt has made a name for himself up and down the Swan Valley for his creative uses of such detritus. He has used scraps from the tumbled giants of the forest for table bases and lamps, wall hangings and garden sculptures.

Anyone is welcome to stop by, any time of the day, and wander through the sculpture garden that Abolt has created on his 90-acre property. Along the pathway to the sparse, yet inspiring, garden are signs reflecting Abolt's own aesthetic and life philosophies, including a famous quote from Henry David Thoreau: "My profession is always to be alert, to find God in Nature, to know God's lurking plans, to attend to all the oratorios and the operas in nature."

"That's the real joy of my artistic work ... being out in the woods or walking on a beach and finding a piece of wood that speaks to me," Abolt says.

"There is so much inspiration to be found in nature."

That's why Abolt moved to this remote spot far from the bustling U.S. capital back in 2000. It's also what brought artisans like basket-maker Jennifer Dyer, potter Bob Korn, and woodworkers Jerry and Martha Swanson to the Seeley-Swan Valley. Each came for his or her own reasons; but all have stayed because they've found both the solitude they sought, as well as a sense of artistic communion here.

Since 1991, that sense of communion has been bolstered by Alpine Artisans Inc., a nonprofit organization that serves to promote the arts in the Seeley-Swan region. On a recent tour of the studios of several member artists, the organization's contribution to area culture was a common theme.



The porch of a log cabin on Korn's property serves as gallery space for his work.

"Alpine Artisans really helps me associate with other artists," said Korn, a retired educator who runs a pottery studio north of Seeley Lake. "That's really important to me. There aren't other potters up here, but you can still feed off other artists even if they're doing other stuff. We bounce ideas off each other and remind each other that there's somebody out there interested in what we're doing."



Basketry by Jennifer Dyer and a wooden bowl by Jerry and Martha Swanson are some of the pieces of artwork by member artists of Alpine Artisans Inc at Grizzly Paw Trading Co. in Seeley Lake.

With more than 100 members - many of them not artists - Alpine Artisans has evolved into an organization that provides more than camaraderie; it also helps organize studio tours and workshops, present concerts, and produce events such as the Loon and Fish Festival, which takes place on May 24 in the Seeley Lake Community Hall.

Along the way, the organization has managed to put sparsely populated Seeley-Swan on the cultural map of Montana. Just this year, a special "Crown of the Continent" regional tourism map produced by National Geographic singled out Seeley Lake and the Alpine Artisans' self-guided artist studio tours as a worthy stop for culture-seeking travelers.

"Art requires solitude - that's why Martha and I have separate woodworking shops," said Jerry Swanson, who together with his wife Martha owns SwanWoods, a small woodworking operation that specializes in beautiful handmade hardwood salad bowls, vases, and serving utensils. "At the same time, we really value the sense of connection we have with other artists in this area."

The couple also treasure the interactions they have with visiting travelers, who often drop by the Swansons' wood shop during the self-guided artist studio tours that are organized by Alpine Artisans.

"When people are traveling, often part of their vacation is introspection," said Martha. "A lot of our visitors are thinking about what to do next in their lives, and they are often very interested in talking with us about the choices that led us here to where we live and what we do, and talking about their own dreams. That's a very meaningful experience for us as well as, hopefully, them too."

"One of the things we want to get out there is the fact that our studios are open spaces," said photographer Ken Dvorak. "We want visitors. Most of us, if people just get in touch and let us know that they're interested in visiting our studios, we're more than willing to facilitate that."

Getting there, in some cases, may be a bit challenging. But leaving is truly the hard part.