

Spinning present with past/ Falcon man spends retirement finding,

by [BILL MCKEOWN](#)

From piles of rusted iron, Ray Balsick refashions history. Ray, a short, stocky guy who wears coveralls and a shy, endearing smile, is a windmill chaser. His business card says he and his wife, Louise, are polka dancers, too. But mostly he's a windmill, has been since he retired from his Calhan ranch 10 years ago and moved to a brick home near Falcon.

Thirteen windmills Ray rescued from the ravages of rust and time stand in a field behind his house. Some are squat and wooden and gaily painted. Others are thin, graceful contraptions of metal and tin. Ray reckons he's got the guts of 15 to 20 more windmills lying around his shop. It will take ingenuity and thousands of hours of painstaking craftsmanship to put them into the wind again.

Ray, 73 this week, is a quiet man, better with his hands than his mouth. He isn't the type to draw great import from what he does in his shop. He doesn't talk about rescuing a bit of Americana, or preserving a symbol of our forefathers' epic settlement of a sweeping land. It's just a hobby that keeps him busy, he said, and his wife doesn't mind all the hours he spends behind the house, all the miles he drives to farm auctions and down country lanes in the Midwest to find scraps of long-disassembled windmills.

"She likes it. ... She tolerates it, let's put it that way," Ray said last week of the woman he's known since childhood. "A lot of old guys restore tractors or old cars. This is what I do."

The fact is, though, without Ray and about 200 other windmillers around the country - "a bunch of old guys mostly" - the windmill would be an artifact from an earlier time, preserved in old photos and by glimpses of an occasional modern version in a distant field.

Windmills once were a ubiquitous shape on the American landscape, used to draw water from wells for livestock and domestic needs. Tens of thousands of them dotted fields in Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Kansas, marking the progress of settlers as they moved west, into waterless land. Railroad companies pushing to the Pacific built hundreds - placing them every 10 miles or so along the tracks - to feed steam locomotives. In the 19th century, about 200 companies made windmills. Traveling salesmen hawked them, standing scale models on farmers' kitchen tables to show their unique features. By World War II, the expansion of electrical lines into rural areas and the development of efficient electric pumps doomed the machines. Three companies, one of them small, make windmills today, mostly to fill stock tanks in fields far from electrical lines.

In their heyday, windmills came in a dizzying array of designs and sizes. In areas where the wind blows strong and constant, such as the Sand Hills of Nebraska, windmills with small blades stood low and squat on sturdy wooden bases. In country with light winds, such as Minnesota, big-bladed windmills often soared 60 feet into the sky on spindly metal towers. Few windmills, Ray said, dotted the mountainous West, where streams limited the need for them.

As Ray wandered among his Eclipse, Aeromotor, Zephyr and Dempster windmills, he became animated, pointing out their features and their idiosyncracies. Ray said he doesn't have a favorite among his 13 windmills. He likes them all. But the wooden Eclipse and the metal Aeromotor standing near it are old friends.

The Eclipse came from a ranch his wife's family worked near Calhan. It has huge wooden fins, hung in a wheel divided in six sections. Each fin in a section was cut at a different angle to catch the wind properly. Ray spent hours on his shop floor plotting out the cuts he'd have to make with his saw to duplicate the 96 original fins, all of which were rotted away.

The Aeromotor stood on the ranch his father homesteaded nearby in 1899, and he links his fascination with windmills to watching the Aeromotor spin and pump, spin and pump throughout his childhood. He thinks his dad probably paid \$20 to \$25 for it. Aeromotor still is in business, selling a design that hasn't changed much since 1933. Ray figures a new one costs about \$5,000.

He has no grand mission, no plan of attack on when and in what order he'll restore the guts of the 15 to 20 windmills he has about his shop. He's not sure what's to become of the dwindling number of windmills still standing in America or the bones of downed ones rotting in fields. Young folks don't seem too interested in them, he said. But Ray managed to pass on his fascination with windmills to his son, Andy, who works the family ranch, and his grandson, Garrett.

Andy has started to drive to northern Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma and Nebraska to search out the piles of scrap only a windmill would recognize as once-stately wind machines. Garrett collects toy windmills. He has about 20 and wants more. Garrett is too young, but Andy learned there's a rhythm to this windmill business, and it's a lot like a slow-turning blade in a light breeze. It can take years to track down parts, trade for others, send out borrowed parts for casting at a foundry. Then there's months of cleaning rust from gears, shaping wood or bending tin blades, building towers that won't fall.

Raising a windmill back into the wind is a slow work of art and not for the impatient, Ray said. "You don't want to start in on one of these if you're in a hurry to get something done," he said in his laconic way. "That's why it's a hobby." If you head east on U.S. Highway 24 and look south about a mile past Falcon, you'll see Ray Balsick's 13 windmills against the horizon. It's a good bet Ray will be in his shop in the shadow of them.

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