Figge's Bottle House

By Bonnie Bethel and Marilyn Gregory

How many different ways can you think of for using a bottle? Drinking out of them or storing stuff in them would more than likely be a couple of common uses. In 1926, in the town of Kirksville, Missouri, a man named Mr. Fred Figge had a very unique idea for using his bottles. In fact, we can almost guarantee you that there was never another one in town just like this. He made his house out of bottles.

The house was located on the corner of Missouri and Osteopathy streets, where the Theta Psi Fraternity house is now, and it turned out to be quite a showplace. People came from miles away just to see the place and take pictures of it.

Our information came from Mrs. Della Stewart, who lived right across the street from him when he was building the house. She was able to tell us step by step how and why he built this house.

It was in the year 1926 that Mr. Figge decided to build the house. He was about 50 years old at the time. He decided to build this house because his daughter and son-in-law lived with him in his first house. He didn’t get along with the son-in-law very well, so he decided to build himself another house so that he would not have to live with them anymore.

“He bought an old toilet that was a pretty good size. It was a two-holer. He actually lived in this until he was able to get a room finished that was big enough for a bed and an old monkey stove. For cabinets, Mr. Figge nailed orange crates onto the walls.”

For a living, Mr. Figge used an old white horse and wagon to haul junk for people. “He junked around all over town with this old horse to haul trash. When he happened to find a bottle that he liked, he’d pick it up and take it with him. He’d take a nail and drive it into the wall, which was made of old boards he had found, and he’d wire that bottle onto this wall on the outside with an old piece of bailing wire, and just kept going around the house in rows until he got it all covered. There were all different colors of bottles, beautiful ones. A lot of them would be worth a fortune today.”

Mrs. Stewart remembered what it was like after the house was totally covered with bottles. “When the wind would blow you’d have to hear it to believe it, but them bottles would kind of crack together, and chime. My land, you could hear it for probably a block. They’d just chatter, beautiful sounds too, because some of them were quite heavy. He had whiskey bottles, and every other kind of bottle you could think of.”

Later on he built another structure on the hill behind the bottle house which served as a church for people in that vicinity. Mrs. Stewart recalled attending services there.

After Mr. Figge died, the house was destroyed by kids who would go by and throw rocks to break the bottles, and finally it was torn completely down.

This house was a good example of folk architecture—something built without blueprints or any sort of planning. It was totally taken from Mr. Figge’s imagination and he built it with supplies that he had on hand or found. It was a house that you could not only see, but also hear—The Kirksville Bottle House.

Photos Courtesy of Mr. Bill Stoukas

Whenever he found a bottle he liked, Figge wired it to his house, gradually covering it completely.

Mr. Bill Stoukas posed by the bottle house during the time he attended medical school in Kirksville.
FIGGE’S BOTTLE HOUSE

One of the best examples of Kirksville folk architecture, the Bottle House was built 55 years ago by Fred Figge. It was a predecessor to today’s recycling movement, since he built it entirely out of materials that had been discarded by others.
Photocopy of photograph owned by Virginia Budd
(The Bottle House, built by Fred Eggert)