

Mineral Springs unveils very Alton art installation

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – Mineral Springs Mall now has an exact likeness of the skeleton belonging to the mythical Piasa Bird.

Crafted by Tom Rother, of Upcycled Woods N Welds out of Batchtown in Calhoun County, the Piasa skeletal structure was made using recycled chains, reinforcement bars and a Freon tank cut to pieces and welded back together. Rother said the impressive sculpture located outside It's Raining Zen in Mineral Springs Mall is the fourth such Piasa Bird he has crafted, and he is looking to make more of them in the future.

“I've been welding for about six or seven years,” Rother said. “I got out of college as a potter, making clay work, and I got into the painters' union and painted the inside of churches for about 14 years. I lost that job and started sculpting out of metal.

“I've lived in the area for 30 years, up in Calhoun, and I've probably sculpted him about four times. He's just like a legend out here, you know?”

Rother also sculpted the eagle located at Aeries Winery using Freon tanks, and made another Piasa Bird, which stands outside the Grafton Pub (formerly Piasa Pub). That one is actually for sale at a rate of \$1,800.

Dave Nunnally, who owns and manages It's Raining Zen with his wife Donna, said he would like to showcase his Piasa within Mineral Springs, adding he hopes other local businesses follow suit with their own take on Alton's very own mythical cryptid.

“I'm from Oklahoma, and we have thunder birds there,” he said. “So, when we came to Alton and opened the shop, I was in love with the Piasa Bird. Everyone here seems enchanted with the myth as well.”

Nunnally said in former travels to places such as Virginia Beach and the Germantown District of Memphis, businesses had shared celebrations of mythology. In Virginia Beach, businesses had different depictions of mermaids and, in Memphis, quarter horses were decorated. Nunnally said he hopes to see something similar in Alton with the Piasa Bird.

“Town pride and tourism here has never been better,” he said. “With *The Small Business Revolution* coming into town, and all the additional media attention, we are having more people than ever come through. Look at how busy we are in the middle of the afternoon on a Friday.”

The Piasa at Mineral Springs may be displayed in the window in coming months. He said the recycled and rusty nature of the sculpture at Mineral Springs properly displays the spirit of the shop and the culture of Alton in general.

Rother said he would gladly make more Piasa Birds for people in the area. He can be reached via cellphone at (618) 910-7104 or home phone at (618) 576-2820. His wife, Terri, also creates upcycled art, using driftwood to make small fairy gardens.

