



The Land of the Living Trees



When people think of Colorado, they naturally think of the mountains and as they drive down I-76 that's either where they're coming from or where they're most likely headed, but don't underestimate the openness of the golden plains. There are treasures on the other side of those rolling, amber hills. Some of those treasures are located in the small town of Sterling, CO, which is about a two hour drive east of Denver and Cheyenne and near the Nebraska panhandle. Named after Sterling, IL the South Platte River weaves its way through the old elms that stretch over the water and give the local parks areas of nice, cool shade. It's there though, in the town's parks and other surrounding government and educational institutions where stunning sculptures rise up giving Sterling the nickname the "City of the Living Trees."

In the early 1980's, Colorado native, Bradford Rhea, was commissioned to create sculptures out of some of the dying trees in town. They were encapsulated in bronze to hold their longevity and each one is incredibly unique giving the tree new life. From an interview with the Sterling Journal-Advocate, Rhea stated this about sculpting, *"I love the fact that it is so much like life, every decision you make is irrevocable. You run into things you didn't expect, and there's no putting pieces back, so you have to learn to work with what you've done."* There is something incredibly poignant about this quote from Rhea, the words sit with you deeply, especially now. None of us expected life to take the turn it took this year but yet we must continue to live each day as best we can and continue to find joy within it.

That's why I was excited, even during a hot, 103-degree Saturday, to venture east from the Front Range to Sterling to see these sculptures in person. It was a nice reprieve and something safe to do during this time. It's also a family friendly venture. Even if you're just passing through from one state

to another, it's worth taking a quick exit and looking around. More information about his sculptures are listed at ExploreSterling.com. (Please note that some of these sculptures are indoors now and with the current safety climate, a few buildings may now be closed to the public, even during the weekdays.)

I also talked with Rhea about his recent projects as well as if any piece of art stood out as a favorite of his. As of late, he's been doing small commissions, a specialty designed coin for the community's fall festival and a beautifully carved staff for the local high school. His favorite project though is the one he is currently working on now at his studio in nearby Merino, CO. He is turning his studio into a sculpture in and of itself. This venture, he states, is incredibly exciting and challenging as he is using materials that he hasn't used before. If interested in seeing this upcoming masterpiece, you can visit his studio at 115 Colorado Avenue. The studio is set up for social distancing and along with masks, you're welcome to stop by. There is a phone number on the door. Feel free to leave a message and, if available, he will meet you for a guided tour.

While there, ask about his commission that he did in 1993 at the request of the U.S. State Department on behalf of former President Bill Clinton. The walking stick Rhea created was a gift for Pope John Paul II. The Pope visited Denver that year for World Youth Day.

On my self-guided tour, I learned that some of the sculptures listed on the linked site above have been moved or are now located at private residences or clubs (*Exordium* & *Golfer* for example.) Therefore, I created a route for you to follow. Also, with the directions, you'll hopefully not worry any locals who see your car go one way, then back, then back again. Small town hospitality was in full-force though as I told a local rancher I was fine when one address led me to a dead-end dirt road (thank goodness for Google Maps.) However, I got to see a bit of the historic Overland Trail on my unintended detour, which is another Northeastern Colorado highlight.

In addition to the sculptures, Logan County also added indigo and orange informational signs with phone numbers and mobile app links to learn more about the story behind the sculptures. Each has a unique spiritual theme and it is a consistent theme that runs through most of Rhea's work.



One of my favorites was *Skygrazers* at Columbine Park where giraffes are grounded together as one, yet stretch skyward in their own individual way. That and the *Minuteman* located in front of the Colorado National Guard building are almost across the street from one another. (Please note though that the informational phone extension located next to the *Minuteman* is no longer in service.) Take your time and munch on a picnic lunch in the park if the day is a touch cooler and enjoy both sculptures in one stop.

Another favorite is located in Prairie Park next to Sterling High School. There's a covered picnic area and water slides near, *Dream Redeemer*. This complex sculpture has a lot to take in, so take your time and appreciate all the intricate details.

Northeastern Junior College is home to four of Rhea's sculptures. Three (*Plainsman Pete*, *The Mask*, and the original *Metamorphosis*) have been moved indoors and are currently inaccessible to the public. However, there is a more recent addition in honor of *Jack Annan* in the outdoor courtyard. Known as Mr. NJC, the Colorado State University alum taught agriculture at the 2-year college for many years.

Another piece of art that is indoors is, *Scion*, which is located in the lobby of the Logan County Combined Courthouse & Jail. This building is closed on the weekends and with the current health climate, access may also be limited during the week.

Luckily, right next door is the visitor's center and in front is a replica of *Metamorphosis* or "the butterfly" sculpture as locals call it. The owners of the original sculpture donated it to NJC as mentioned above, but the replica of bronze and wood is stunning against the backdrop of the emerald cottonwoods framing it from the west.

The library is also only open Monday through Friday and holds two sculptures, *Seraphim* and *Windlace*. There is information on the sculptures on the signs outside of the building. To see the art indoors please note the limited times:

For those that are high risk, you are welcome inside between 9:00am and 10:00am and the general public is allowed in from 10:00am to 6:00pm. Masks are also required.

For a quick reference, please note the routes and map below and enjoy!

OUTDOOR only (Weekends)

Coming from I-76 (either direction - near the Overland Trail Museum)

- 1.) *Metamorphosis* - (Visitor's Center - 102 North Riverview Road)
- 2.) *Jack Annan* - (Northeastern Junior College – 100 College Avenue)
- 3.) *Dream Redeemer* - (Prairie Park - 808 Elm Street)
- 4.) *Skygrazers* – (Columbine Park - 1318 South 3rd Avenue)
- 5.) *Minuteman* - (Colorado National Guard - 1400 South 3rd Avenue)

INDOOR & OUTDOOR (Weekdays)

Coming from I-76

- 1.) *Scion* – (Logan County Courthouse and Jail - 110 North Riverview Road)
- 2.) *Metamorphosis* - (Visitor's Center - 102 North Riverview Road)
- 3.) *Jack Annan* - (Northeastern Junior College – 100 College Avenue)
- 4.) *Dream Redeemer* - (Prairie Park - 808 Elm Street)
- 5.) *Seraphim & Windlace* – (Sterling Public Library – 420 North 5th Street)
- 6.) *Skygrazers* – (Columbine Park - 1318 South 3rd Avenue)
- 7.) *Minuteman* - (Colorado National Guard - 1400 South 3rd Avenue)

For more information on Bradford Rhea and his past projects, please visit his [website](#).

Hollie Perry is a Colorado native whose family comes from the Northeastern part of the state. She loves writing, history, shopping and good food and is excited to explore and share the hidden gems that rural America has to offer.

[Discover Rural](#) is a website dedicated to events, shopping, history, exploring, eating and sleeping primarily in rural parts of Colorado, plus Southeast Wyoming and the Nebraska Panhandle.

