

# Artist To Capture Spirit of Bridge Ironworkers With Memorial Sculpture

**By Karen Gould**

Janice Trimpe says she's been called the "common man's artist" because she sculpts everyday people. This winter, however, she is creating a sculpture of a Mackinac Bridge ironworker, a subject far from common.

These were men who labored for three years, working at heights up to 552 feet above the Straits of Mackinac, in good weather and bad, and almost always in windy conditions. Five workers died while building the structure in the 1950s.

Mrs. Trimpe's sculpture will become a memorial to the ironworkers who built the Mackinac Bridge, to be dedicated Saturday, July 28, at Bridge View Park in St. Ignace during the 50th anniversary celebration of the opening of the bridge.

The sculpture is a composite of a typical ironworker, said the Grosse Pointe Park artist, typical of the men who began building the Mackinac Bridge May 7, 1954, 53 years ago.

"Everything is authentic," said Mrs. Trimpe, who has consulted with ironworkers on the clothing, work boots, tools, and the posture of the men. She made the clothing look like layered shirts, which were worn to keep warm. She replicated the gloves worn by the workers,



From 550 feet above the Straits of Mackinac, ironworkers built a catwalk that swooped down to approximately 200 feet above the water during construction of the Mackinac Bridge. With Mackinac Island in the background, ironworkers focus on building the catwalk, which was used in the construction of the two main support cables for the Mackinac Bridge. Since the cables weighed 12,500 tons and could not be lifted into place, they were assembled on-site. Each cable consisted of 12,580 wires and each wire was approximately the diameter of a pencil. (Vintage photograph courtesy of Mackinac Bridge Authority)

using an original pair as a model.

The sculpture is a composite representing those who drove the rivets and tightened the bolts, and those who worked reinforcing the concrete. The workers were strong, agile, and had a great sense of balance, which she has tried to portray in the sculpture. The men often wore two tool belts, said Mrs. Trimpe, and they carried with them wrenches, hammers, picks, bags of bolts, and rope.

"It was very cold when they were up on the bridge," she said. "They wore overalls pulled way up so they wouldn't trip."

Mrs. Trimpe has designed the ironworker with his feet pointed slightly inward, as they would be for walking on one of the bridge's steel beams. Creating historic accuracy in these details would be easily overlooked by most people, she said, other than an ironworker.

She works in her 2,000-square-foot studio, about two blocks from her house. To accommodate her work, the building has 17-foot tall ceilings.

When completed, the bronze sculpture will stand on a beam, which will be set on a marble base. A plaque will be attached to the base to honor ironworkers and the five men who died. They included three ironworkers, Albert Abbott of St. Ignace, Jack Baker of Pagosa Springs, Colorado, and Robert Koppen of Plymouth, laborer James LeSarge, and diver Frank Pepper.

The sculpted ironworker will stand more than six feet tall, but

when she begins the sculpting process, the worker only stands a few inches high. Mrs. Trimpe began the project by sculpting a miniature clay model of what

the actual piece will look like. Using photographs given to her by the ironworkers, she created

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Artist Janice Trimpe puts the finishing touches on her sculpture. When finished, the bronze work will stand atop a beam on a marble base to memorialize the men who helped construct the Mackinac Bridge. The statue will be dedicated Saturday, July 28, in Bridge View Park at St. Ignace. (Photograph by Rogers Foster)

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