

BY EVE JOHNSON

Henri Robideau (christened Henry, but "Henry looks silly with Robideau") used to pass a giant teepee every day on the school bus. The teepee stood on a hill above an orange grove near Escondido, California: fresh orange juice from the slopes below was available in season.

Robideau developed an affection for the teepee, similar to the affection those of us who grew up near Grandview Highway feel for the giant olive jar, at rest now, but once perpetually turning on top of the McLarens Foods building. Robideau carried his affections to the logical end and became, in addition to a photographer, a giantthropologist.

Both the olive jar and the teepee appear in Robideau's photographic exhibition Giant Things, now running at Viewspace Gallery, 3210 Dunbar. So does the hand holding the loaf of bread that once graced the Mother Hubbard bakery on Broadway and Arbutus; a giant wooden geoduck clam from a restaurant in Oregon Dunes; a giant donut from Culver City; and many more.

They are all West Coast Giant Things, except for a group that Robideau captured while researching pioneer photographer Mattie Gunterman's past. Robideau, who earned his living for several years by reproducing historical photographs for the Vancouver Archives and the Vancouver Public Library, mounted the exhibition of her work that is now touring Canada. He is also working on a Mattie Gunterman book.

Lover of Giant Things has a big future . . .

Research on Mattie's life took him to the town of La Crosse, Wisconsin, where she spent her early years. Mattie Gunterman left few traces in La Crosse, but the trip was not a disappointment. Robideau bagged five new Giant Things.

"The Chamber of Commerce brochure told you about Junior Chamber of Commerce barbecues and restaurants, but it didn't tell you where to find the Giant Things," he says.

La Crosse contains: a giant bull, a statue of Hiawatha commemorating the original inhabitants, the Winebago Indians, (who did a lot of travelling west as successive waves of settlers moved onto their land), a giant pizza chef, a "giant ego golf trophy collection" and a giant six-pack of Heileman's Old Style beer. Robideau has combined photographs of the Giant Things with photographs of scenes relating to Mattie

Henri Robideau, photographer of Giant Things



IAN LINDSAY

Gunterman to produce A Tourist's Guide to the Giant Things and Mattie Gunterman Historical Sites of La Crosse, Wisconsin.

In the coffeeshop next to Viewspace Gallery, Robideau turns the pages of his scrapbook, revealing postcards of Giant Things he has yet to see, newspaper stories about Giant Things, lists of Giant Things Captured and Giant Things At Large. Robideau will be leaving paper available so visitors to the gallery can inform him of any giant things he hasn't seen yet.

"This is my dream: to go to this place," he says, passing a postcard across the table. The place turns out to be Sudbury, Ontario. On the card a group of tourists tread the barren ground between a giant penny and a giant nickel. In the background, brown smoke from two smokestacks spreads across the blue sky. Bermuda it isn't.

Although he liked Giant Things as a child, it wasn't until he came to Vancouver in 1970 that Robideau began collecting them. "Really the giant hand is what got me going," he says. "I started noticing others, and they started disappearing." There are of course, plenty of new Giant Things, but they are usually mass-produced in plastic. Giant buckets of fried chicken, perpetually turning, don't interest Robideau. Not unless the giant bucket, like the one in a Mexican neighbourhood of Los Angeles, is surrounded with barbed wire to protect it from spray paint. "Perpetually rotating barbed wire," he says, his eyes taking on a dreamy look.

The giantthropologist doesn't have an elaborate theory of why Giant Things were created. "They're just there to catch your eye," he says. "For a while I was calling them capitalist icons. But I stopped because some of them weren't capitalist." Those would be the giant Easter egg at Vermillion, Alberta, and the giant menorah on a Los Angeles synagogue.

"Giant Things go back in history," he says. "If you ask why people make them now, it refers back to why they made them then." Robideau mentions the giant drawings, visible only from the air, made by Indians in the southwestern U.S. "In Chariot of the Gods they ask 'what could these things possibly be?'. To me it's no mystery; they're just Giant Things."

The exhibition runs from March 5 to March 22. The public is invited to meet giantthropologist Robideau on Tuesday, March 18 at 8 p.m., when he will be at the gallery, talking about giant things.