

Remembering

Joe “Toes” Urbani

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by

Fred South
Prophetstown Area Historical Society
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Introduction

Years ago there was a fellow who moved around Prophetstown on his wheel chair. This is not unusual in our town because we have Winning Wheels where many are in wheel chairs live. But this particular fellow was different because he did not use an electric chair. Instead, he used his bare feet to propel his chair. His name was Joe Urbani, but you might have known him as Joe Toes.

Joe was born with a deformity in his hands, making them quite useless. So his feet became his hands. He amazed all who knew him with the dexterity in his feet. At one point he had a pottery shop located at 217 Washington St.

Here you will read a story about him that Marge Sommers wrote for the *Sterling Gazette* back in October 1983. Following that there will be a short update on Joe.



Joe Urbani Is Unique

10-8-15-1983

Prophetstown Man To Appear On Upcoming 'That's Incredible'

BY MARGE SOMMERS

**Prophetstown
Correspondent**

Joe Urbani of Prophetstown is a unique individual.

So unique that producers from "That's Incredible" decided to feature him in a segment of their show to be aired on Monday, Oct. 10 to be televised by WQAD-TV, channel 8, (or channel 7 for those in Morrison and Prophetstown having cable) between 7 and 8 p.m.

Unique was once limited to the definition of "alone of its kind," with usage now extended to mean unusual or rare.

Joe is that kind of indi-

vidual, unusual and rare.

Urbani is a familiar figure in and around Prophetstown. He has been up and down most of the streets in the city since his arrival here almost exactly four years ago to take up residence at the Winning Wheels Care Center.

Since birth, Joe has had little use of his hands, as a result his feet have become his "hands."

Joe has trained his feet to do all those things that most do with their hands, washing, eating, and in more recent years, making pottery.

Joe's initial exposure to pottery came as a resident of

the former Dixon Developmental Center, where he resided most of his lifetime, until coming to the center shortly after they opened their doors.

The "incredible" potter gives much credit to his first teacher, Bruce Keller, of Dixon, a teacher at Sauk Valley College, who came to the Dixon school for classes.

After studying under Keller for about a year, Joe also spent two summers working under Keller's former instructor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, who conducted summer workshops for artists.

Keller saw to it that Joe

was one of his students who spent eight weeks for two consecutive summers potting six hours a day, five days a week, at the workshop at South Bear Creek, near Decorah.

Along with an internship at Northern Illinois University at DeKalb, for about a year, this has been the extent of Joe's formal training.

Joe is still not sure who gave the suggestion to the producers of the show, but thinks it may have come from his instructors at Northern.

"I've been potting ten years now," Urbani said, and his work is the testimony of his labors.

Urbani will be featured in his workshop and in the basement of the American Legion Hall in Prophetstown, which was made accessible

to him, and "the rent's cheap," he added. He first began working in a storeroom at the center.

He was able to purchase a new kiln which he paid for through the sale of his work.

Urbani orders his clay from Elk Grove Village, which is delivered to his new location, where he mixes it and lays it out in bats to dry to the desired temperature for working.

"This all depends on the humidity," he said. "but usually it takes two or three days to be just right." He usually works about 100 pounds of clay at a time.

"What I really would like to find is a used pug mill," he explained. "it would mix about 400 pounds of clay at a time, about six or eight hours of work for me."

Watching Joe work with

the tools of his trade is amazing, in fact, incredible.

He works with a steady foot and handles the finished product with the gentleness of a baker.

During the process, the only thing Joe can't do for himself is loading the kiln. He usually calls on friends Mark or Randy Jacobs, from next door in their print shop.

Mark will also be featured in the TV segment, shooting pool with his friend. Naturally, Joe uses his feet to play pool, and is exceptionally good.

Joe was doing a glaze firing, which would be completed in about nine hours. "It's a little boring sitting down here when I'm working," he said, "it would be nice to have a ground level place where I could see

(Continued On Page 7)

what's going on around me."

While waiting for the kiln, Joe spent in-between hours throwing some new pots, including a pumpkin jar for Halloween. His finished pieces bear his logo, a toep-rint.

Each time he flipped another switch, the kiln grows gradually warmer, with the stoneware glaze requiring a temperature of about 2,135 degrees Fahrenheit. He explained, his kiln works on the oxidation method with electrical firing.

Included in the "That's Incredible" segment may be some footage of Joe in the game room at Winning Wheels, leaving the facility in his "foot driven Cadillac," in his studio and at the bar next door shooting pool.

Maybe they'll return some day to film some of Joe's other "incredible feats." Joe recently studied welding, has done some canoeing, and is working on getting his drivers license, "This would give me a lot more freedom," he said and concluded, "I've met a lot of nice people here, but it would be nice to be able to get around on my own."

Right now, his main interest is pottery making, and he's proud of the sign overhead, "Joe Toes Potter Shop."



CHECKING THE KILN - Joe Urbani, Prophetstown, is shown checking the kiln which he uses to glaze his stoneware pottery. Urbani will be featured on a segment of ABC's nationally televised program, "That's Incredible," on Monday, Oct. 10 at 7 p.m. (Next Week Photo by Marge Sommers)

HARD AT WORK -- Shown in various stages of his pottery work is Joe Urbani of Prophetstown who will be featured on the Oct. 10 episode of "That's Incredible" to be broadcast over WQAD-TV. The name of his business is quite appropriately named, "Joe Toes Potter Shop," since he uses his feet to create his art work. (Next Week Photo by Marge Sommers)



Up Date on Joe “Toes” Urbani

From KWQC October 1, 2018.

Joe Urbani, affectionately known as "**Joe Toes**", is a beloved community member from Rock Falls, Illinois, recognized for his remarkable ability to perform daily tasks using his feet due to a congenital disability affecting his hands. He gained local fame for his positive spirit, kindness, and talents such as shooting pool and sculpting with his feet. In October 2018, he became the victim of a hit-and-run accident while in a wheelchair, prompting widespread community support and a police investigation. The incident drew national attention, with residents expressing outrage over the attack on a disabled man and rallying behind his recovery. Joe was hospitalized in Rockford, Illinois, but is expected to recover.

I searched Ancestry, Family Search and Facebook.
This is all I could find on Joe.

Name	Joe A Urbani
Alias	Joseph A Urbani
Birth Date	29 Oct 1953
Previous Residence Date	01 Jan 1999-01 Mar 2001
Previous Residence	Rock Falls, Illinois 61071
Previous Residence Postal Code	61071
Second Previous Residence Place	Sterling, Illinois 61081
Second Residence Postal Code	61081
Second Residence Date	1 Jan 1997
Third Previous Residence Place	Sterling, Illinois 61081
Third Residence Postal Code	61081
Third Residence Date	01 Jun 1993-01 Jun 1997
Event Type	Residence
Event Date	from 1 Jan 1999 to 1 Mar 2001
Event Place	Rock Falls, Whiteside, Illinois, United States
Event Place (Original)	Rock Falls, Illinois, United States
Household Identifier	238091563