

An Immigrant's Strange "Towers of Gratitude"

By HENRY P. CHAPMAN

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD Sabatino Rodia's eyes were as big as pizzas when he landed in America in 1891. For him, it was a genuine love at first sight.

Thirty years later, he began expressing his gratitude to the U.S.A. by building structures that were as fantastic as something in a fairy tale. For 33 years, the Italian-born tile setter wove tons of cast-off pipes, bed frames, and discarded bottles and crockery into intricate conical webs which today spiral 10 stories into the Los Angeles sunshine.

Then, at 75, Rodia just walked away—why or where was not known for years.

The abandoned cluster of towers stood like a bevy of neglected beauties, winking their thousands of glass eyes for attention. Children found them a veritable Disneyland, but most people in the neighborhood referred to them as "those 100-foot piles of junk." In 1957, the Los Angeles Building Department deemed the towers dangerous and ordered them removed.

But two men who looked upon them as works of art came to the rescue, and soon William Cartwright and Nicholas King were joined by attorneys, engineers, architects, and ordinary citizens in an effort to save the towers.

Artists and sculptors wandered through the maze of steel and mortar admiring Rodia's sense of design and proportion, his dynamic use of color and texture. Technical experts who examined the towers were astounded. There was no welding in evidence! Nor a single rivet! Rodia had simply wrapped chicken wire around the joints, covered that with mortar, then

more chicken wire, then more mortar.

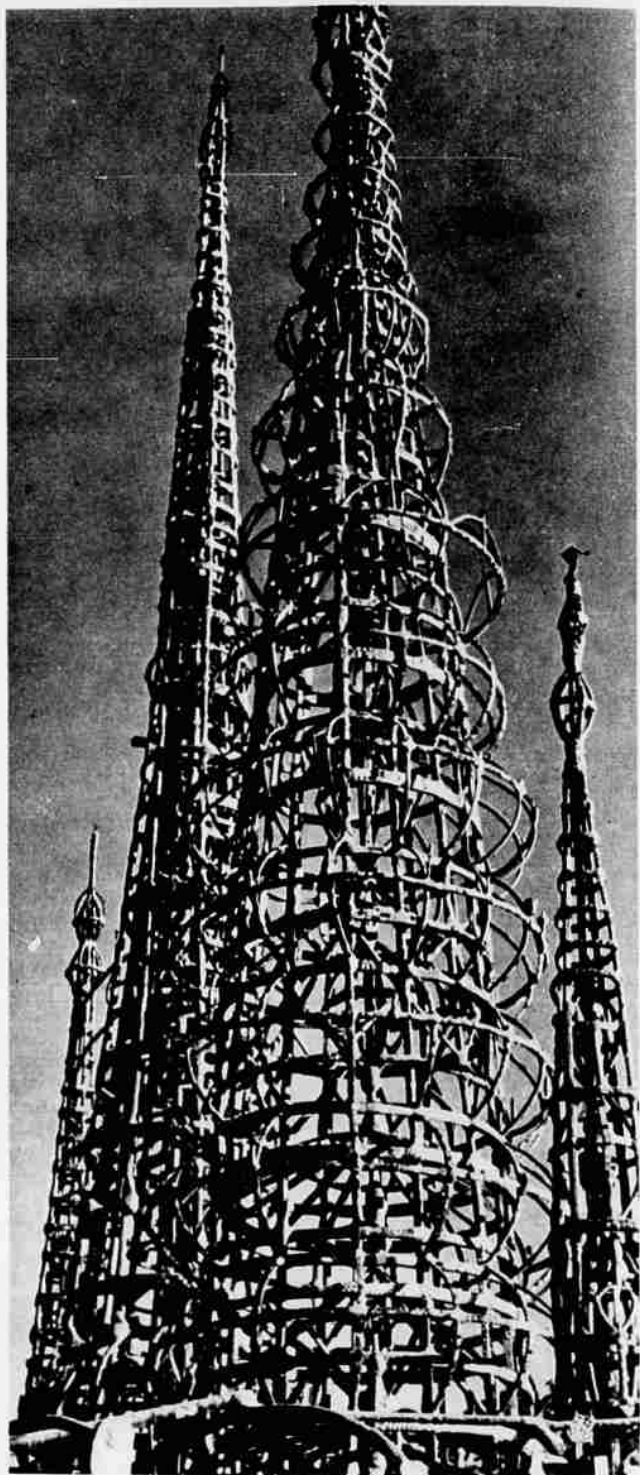
After long, dragged-out hearings, the Building Department proposed that a pull test be made on Rodia's tallest spire. Scaffolding and rigging were erected, and machinery began applying stress slowly—100 pounds . . . 150 . . . 200. If the tower were unsafe, a pull force of 350 pounds would topple it.

"Three hundred pounds right now!" a workman yelled. Spectators raised their opened hands in unconscious gestures of holding up the tower. "Three hundred and fifty pounds!" The crowd roared out with cheers. But the test was not over. Stress was increased to 500 pounds . . . 600 . . . 700! By the time it reached 10,000 pounds, something had to give—and it did. Like a chuckle, a solitary seashell tinkled off the tower to the pavement. The test was over.

EARLY THIS YEAR, members of the Cultural Heritage Board of Los Angeles declared the structures a "work of art" and designated them "a cultural and historical monument."

The glow from the spotlight of publicity on the towers was reflected into the tiny town of Martinez, near San Francisco—and found Rodia living contentedly in his self-imposed obscurity. Why had he deserted his towers? Rodia sucked on his pipe, then answered in a puff of smoke, "Some people thought I was crazy."

Rodia's towers were not planned. "A million times I don't know what I do next," the 84-year-old immigrant said. "I have nothing on paper. Only here," he tapped his temple, "and here," he tapped his heart. "I want to do something for the United States—because there are nice people in this country."



Sabatino Rodia gave more than a third of his life to creating huge structures that are fantastic—even for California