It might be the world's longest title: The World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things Traveling Roadside Attraction and Museum.

It certainly should count among the world's most unusual occupations. And that's what it is for Erika Nelson, who makes her living taking her art on the road from Lucas in north-central Kansas.

"I'm going to blame it all on Dad," Nelson said. "It was ingrained early on that you always look at the fun stuff."

"I think she can take credit herself," Dwight Nelson, her father, said.

Erika's father lives in California, Mo., 12 miles from the World's Largest 8-Ball, a spherical water tower in Tipton, Mo., painted in honor of a local company that made pool tables. He grew up with Paul Bunyan (18 feet tall) and Babe the Blue Ox at Berndt, Minn. "We just assumed that all towns had something like that," he said. "There was a big duck up the road."

Blackduck, Minn., has three large duck statues, and Ashby, Minn., has a big coot. Though not all towns have biggest things, Erika Nelson has been to most of them that do.

"I don't make the world's smallest version until I've seen the world's largest thing," she said.

Then her smallest version goes into the collection in the traveling show, a Ford Econoline van.

Though painted like a billboard for a sideshow, the van is the main attraction.

Its passenger side windows are a display case of tiny replicas of such attractions as Babe the Blue Ox and the World's Largest Can of Spinach. Inside, she has photographs showing her smallest versions sitting with their originals and a library of books on roadside attractions.

The miniatures are made by hand.

Nelson sometimes starts from scratch and sometimes converts an existing piece. The world's largest otter, for example, started from a figurine of a wiener dog, which was cut and stretched then painted.

The creation of large things seems to be a New World phenomenon. Canada and Australia are the two other countries that have big things. The attitude, Nelson said, seems to be: "We may not have a lot of history, but we can build a big chicken."

Nelson said she started making miniatures while she was teaching three-dimensional art at The University of Kansas. She got her master's degree there, while continuing her roadside explorations, taking two- and three-day trips "just to see stuff."

Like the World's Largest Bottle of Catsup (Collinsville, Ill.), the World's Largest Talking Cow (Nellsville, Wis.) or the World's Largest Concrete Pecan (Brunswick, Mo.).

As a three-dimensional artist, Nelson naturally had to go to Lucas to see the Garden of Eden, a sculpture garden of concrete and stone with figures ranging from Adam and Eve to a log cabin to a U.S. flag.

At the time, she was living in the van. "There was a house for sale for less than the price of a used car," Nelson said.

So Lucas, 16 miles north of I-70 in Russell County, became home.

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She painted the 14-foot, decommissioned satellite dish with scenes from Lucas.

“She’s been really good for the community,” Dougherty said. “I hope we can keep her.”

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Please see REPLICAS, Page 3B
Replicas: Unusual museum to roll into Topeka in July

Continued from Page 1B

making her inaugural tour in 2002. When she took her show on the road, she started making calls to see who would pay her to come. “The more and more I’m out there,” she said, “they’re calling me.”

While touring allows her to show her own artwork, Nelson sees her mission more as education and enticement to go see what’s out there. She has applied to the IRS for nonprofit status, which would allow her to apply for grants to take her traveling show to venues that don’t have the funds to pay for a visit. “This is mostly educational,” she said. “I want to be able to do this for small communities.”

She expects to hear back from the government in six weeks, or maybe six months.

“I think with the IRS, it’s best not to poke them,” she said.

In the meantime, she continues to book stops, including one in July at the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka.

Last weekend, she was in Lawrence to speak to art students about career choices other than starving artist or art teacher. On the panel with her were other KU graduates for whom art is a livelihood.

“You have to be willing to pay yourself,” Nelson said. “Otherwise, you’re a hobbyist.”

She also is expanding. The van will be retired in favor of a former bookmobile. Nelson said it should be ready for the road late next year.

It will have the same sideshow-billboard look of the van, which is intended not simply to get attention, but to be approachable, Nelson said. “Kids get it immediately,” she said.

Parents are a little slower to walk up and start looking in the windows. She thinks the bookmobile will be easier to approach, as its shape is familiar as a safe place to visit.

She will have more room in it for models, too, and plans to have a food section, where the items are the real deal, not replicas. She has the World’s Largest Grape Nerd and the World’s Largest Bran Flake, for starters.

The World’s Largest Cheeto, alas, belongs to a restaurant in Algona, Iowa. “I do have the World’s Largest French Fry in my freezer,” she said. She isn’t sure how she might take that on the road, though.

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