

Talking about the John Day totem pole

By **BENNETT HALL**
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The years have not been kind to the John Day totem pole.

A quarter-century of wind and rain, sun and snow have taken a toll on the local landmark, leaving its once-bright wood darkened, weathered and cracked.

That doesn't sit well with Margot Heiniger-White, the widow of Ralph White, the Canyon City chainsaw artist who carved the pole.

"I would like that totem pole cleaned up," she said.

And she's not crazy about the location, either, tucked between a telephone pole and a two-story building just off the city's main drag.

"It's not a very good place for it because nobody can see it," she said. "It's in a bad spot."

Location, location

Truth be told, it really is an odd place for a totem pole.

Standing 50 feet tall and weighing in at 18,000 pounds, the towering tamarack spar is topped by an eagle with a 20-foot wingspan. Below the eagle are three more carved figures: a salmon, a turtle and a beaver.

It's perched atop a concrete footing at the intersection of Main and Dayton streets, at the east end of downtown John Day.

Yet despite its imposing size and central location, the totem pole is surprisingly easy to overlook.

Driving down Main Street from the east, the totem pole is hidden behind the imposing bulk of the Grant County Ranch and Rodeo Museum. Coming from the west, the view is partially obscured by a telephone pole.

And why is there a totem pole in John Day at all?

Grant County doesn't have much of a Native American presence these days — according to the 2020 census, only 1.7% of the county's residents identify as Native American or Alaska Native.

Perhaps more to the point, Oregon tribes didn't carve totem poles. That was something the coastal tribes of what is now Washington, British Columbia and Southeast Alaska were known for.

So what's it doing here?

The answer to that question comes back to Ralph White.

Mountain Man

Ralph White died on Jan. 28, 2018, at the age of 79.

In life, by all accounts, he was a colorful character.

He wore a bushy beard and a bearclaw necklace, and he called himself the Mountain Man.

According to an article by C.J. Gish in the July 20, 1995, edition of the Blue Mountain Eagle, he made his living for many years as a chainsaw artist. White had a love for the Old West and Native American art forms — and a knack for turning tree trunks into animal figures.

"My saw is like an instrument, like a banjo or guitar, and it's music to my ears," he told the newspaper. "When I look at a log, I know it's going to be an eagle or a fish. They're there and I just have to release them."

His biggest production to date was a carved entryway for the Baker City Truck Corral, which featured two 25-foot poles supporting a 60-foot crossbeam, the article said, but he planned to top that with the John Day totem pole — at 50 feet tall, it would be the biggest in Oregon.

The article doesn't say anything about the motivation for the totem pole project other than to mention it was being carved for



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle

The John Day totem pole is showing its age, but the city has plans to clean it up and refinish it in the spring of 2022. There are also discussions about possibly moving it to a more prominent location.

the Strawberry Wilderness Fine Art Gallery, a business that no longer exists. The only other record of it in the newspaper's files from that time is a photo of the finished pole lying on the side of Dayton Street, about to be hoisted into place by a crane.

Heiniger-White's memories of the pole's carving have faded a bit with the years.

In an interview with the newspaper, she remembered that there had been some sort of an arrangement with a man who owned a store to place the totem pole near his business because "the land was free." She couldn't remember the man's last name but thought his first name might have been Ray. And she couldn't remember the name of the business.

But some of her recollections are crystal-clear, even 26 years after the fact.

She remembers the bright glow of the tamarack after Ralph White finished carving it.

"It was the most beautiful wood you have ever seen," she said, eyes shining with the memory. "It should have been spar-varnished at the time to preserve the color, but it wasn't."

And she remembers exactly why her husband carved it.

"He carved it as a tribute to Chief Raymond Burke."

Personal connection

Raymond "Popcorn" Burke died on June 27, 2006.

In 1995 he was the chief of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, which lies between Pendleton and La Grande and is home to the Umatilla, Walla Walla and Cayuse nations.

And he was Ralph White's friend.

As Heiniger-White remembers it, her husband had a genuine affinity for Native American culture and traditions that was reflected in his art. And he wanted to do something to honor his friend.

"He had such a deep respect for the Native American people and respect for Chief Raymond Burke."

An article that appeared in the Dec. 3, 1995, Seattle Times fills in some more blank spots in the totem pole's story.

Written by Carol Command for Pendleton's East

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Blue Mountain Eagle, File

Ralph White, a.k.a. the Mountain Man, pilots a horseless carriage in Grant County's '62 Days Celebration Parade in this file photo from August 2013.

Oregonian newspaper, the article says the pole had its genesis as a promotional gimmick.

As Command tells the tale, Ray Potter, owner of the Strawberry Wilderness Fine Art Gallery, was looking for something to attract customers to the gallery's new location just off Main Street in John Day, and he asked his artist friend Ralph White for advice.

White's suggestion: "A totem pole; it stops 'em every time."

Once the idea was hatched, several things came together neatly to make it a reality: A local logger provided the massive tamarack trunk, the local Ford dealership provided the land and the local electric utility agreed to set the nine-ton pole in place — all at no cost.

The story goes on to talk about the historical connection between the people of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the John Day area — as remembered by Chief Raymond Burke. As a boy in the 1930s, Burke recalled bringing his grandmother and other female elders to the area, which he said had served for more than a cen-

tury as a place for tribes from throughout the region to gather for trade.

"Burke honored White and Potter with Indian names, and the carving of the pole and its blessing ceremony drew many supporters," the article states. "To further sanction the event, the three friends and the town fathers smoked a pipe beside the ancient tamarack's new home."

Making history

A plaque at the base of the pole commemorates the event.

"Erected August 21, 1995," it reads. "This totem pole is a symbol of friendship and peace from all of Grant County to Raymond Burke and all of the Umatilla-Walla Walla-Cayuse Tribe who lived here before us."

Chris Labhart remembers that day. He was mayor at the time, and he was one of the honored guests in attendance at the blessing ceremony.

The intersection was closed to traffic for the occasion, he said, and the weather was perfect. He remembers tribal members in ceremonial regalia, and Native American drummers playing their instruments. Several people spoke,

TOTEM POLE SYMBOLS

The John Day totem pole is adorned with four stylized animal carvings, each with its own symbolic meaning.
Eagle: The Great Spirit
Salmon: The food of life
Turtle: Eternal life
Beaver: The Great Builder

her out, then he went to see for himself — and found that he agreed with her.

"It needs something done," he said. "I stopped by and looked at it, and it definitely has seen its better days."

Lundbom brought the matter up at a city council meeting, and the consensus was that the city should pay to have the pole cleaned up and sealed with oil or varnish. The mayor estimates the work could be done for about \$500 or so, and the plan is to do it this spring.

He also thinks Heiniger-White has a point when she says the totem pole needs a new home.

"I all but forgot about it — I walk by it every day, but I didn't really notice it anymore," Lundbom said.

"We talked about moving it to a more prominent location, but the problem is where?"

Heiniger-White, as you might expect, has some thoughts on that subject.

"I think it needs to be somewhere it can be seen," she said. "And the place I would like to see it put is at the entrance to John Day."

Specifically, she thinks it should be relocated to the small patch of city-owned land by the bridge over Canyon Creek at the corner of Main and Third streets.

Labhart says he's not sure that's the best spot. He points out that while the totem pole might catch the eye of passing motorists at that location, there's no place for them to park if they want to get out of their cars and admire it.

A better place, he suggests, might be the Pit Stop, another city-owned property on the site of the former Wright Chevrolet dealership at Main and Canton.

Or maybe one block north on Canton, where the Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation is planning a multimillion-dollar expansion of the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site?

"To me, it would make more sense to put it in that new state park," Labhart said. "It's not Chinese, but it's part of the culture ... (and) a lot of people would see it."

Ultimately, Heiniger-White wants to do right by the totem pole. She thinks that's what the man who carved it — her late husband, Ralph White — would want if he were here to speak for himself.

"I feel strongly that I am the messenger for him," she said, "because he's passed on."

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