



Photos by Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Chuck Sams speaks to attendees at the ceremony celebrating the completion of the mural of George Fletcher in Pendleton.

Mural pays tribute to ‘the people’s champion’

Fletcher competed in the Pendleton Round-Up

By ANTONIO SIERRA
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PENDLETON — Cowboy George Fletcher rides again in Pendleton.

A mural of Fletcher astride a bucking bronco at the Pendleton Round-Up has adorned a whitewashed wall near the intersection of Southwest Dorion Avenue and First Street since September. But Travel Pendleton last week unveiled the latest tribute to the cowboy, complete with tourism promoters, local government officials and organizations celebrating the art and its addition to the Oregon Mural Trail with a ribbon cutting ceremony.

A competitor at the famous 1911 Round-Up, Fletcher was never truly forgotten: The Pendleton Round-Up and Happy Canyon Hall of Fame inducted him into its inaugural class in 1969, he was fictionalized in Ken Kesey’s 1994 novel “Last Go Round” and his likeness was cast in bronze and erected on South Main Street in 2014.

But his legacy was kept alive by the people who told his story as a part of oral history.

Seeing as he is in the final stages of the confirmation process to become the next National Park Service director, Chuck Sams may have been the most high profile speaker at the ceremony. But Sams wasn’t there as a representative of the federal government, but as the immediate past president of the Oregon Cultural Trust.

Sams, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, also had stories about Fletcher to share. His grandfather was Fletcher’s contemporary and would tell stories of riding with Fletcher as they transported cattle or broke horses at the Sams’ ranch.

Born in 1890 in Kan-



Todd Davidson, CEO of Travel Oregon, speaks to attendees at the ceremony.

sas, Fletcher, who was Black, moved to Pendleton as a child and learned to ride broncos on the Umatilla Indian Reservation while facing discrimination and racism from Pendleton residents.

He entered the bronc riding competition at the Round-Up in 1911, making it all the way to finals. While Fletcher’s final ride was a crowd favorite, the judges awarded first place to white cowboy John Spain. Fletcher was quickly dubbed “the people’s champion” and an impromptu fundraiser in the stands garnered him \$700 for his efforts. Fletcher remained in Pendleton until his death in 1973, although he stopped competing after he was injured in World War I.

Fletcher’s story resonated beyond Pendleton. Mariotta Gary-Smith, the chair of the Oregon Commission on Black Affairs, went up to speak about her own grandfather. Gary-Smith’s grandfather migrated from the Deep South to Portland during the Jim Crow era. A huge rodeo fan, her grandfather would

frequently take his family to the Round-Up and share stories about Fletcher.

Those stories of the people’s champion made their way down to Gary-Smith’s mother and eventually Gary-Smith herself. It was something on her mind when the Oregon Cultural Trust asked for ideas for its new license plate. The plate features a scenic Oregon vista, but on closer inspection, the scenery is composed of smaller pictures reflective of the state’s culture and history.

Gary-Smith submitted Fletcher, and she was pleasantly surprised when she saw the final design came out and Fletcher’s cowboy hat was near the top right hand corner, right under a wagon wheel signifying the Oregon Trail. Gary-Smith said she planned to take a picture of the mural to send to her mother.

Travel Oregon CEO Todd Davidson said the mural was exactly what his organization had in mind for the next iteration of its “Only Slightly Exaggerated” campaign. Davidson said the initial stages of the campaign focused heavily

on Oregon’s natural beauty, but Travel Oregon now wants to shift its focus to people and communities.

“We want these to be a point of community pride,” he said.

The completion of the

mural means Pendleton is now a stop on Travel Oregon’s nine-city Oregon Mural Trail, which stretches from Gold Beach to Ontario. Travel Pendleton coordinator Kristen Dollarhide said the two agencies have been working together on the project for years.

After securing funding from both travel agencies in addition to the Pendleton Foundation Trust, the Wildhorse Foundation and the Pendleton Arts Committee, Dollarhide said they looked for mural sites all over town.

They soon settled on the spot by the Old West Federal Credit Union parking lot, which was desirable due to its close proximity to a busy street. The mural only takes up a small section of the long wall, an intentional move meant to make it easier for people to take pictures by the art.

If tourists flock to the mural like tourism promoters hope they do, it means Fletcher will be the background of many more social media posts to come.

PFIZER VACCINE CLINIC FOR KIDS

The Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine received authorization from the FDA for children ages 5-11. CMH is offering a vaccine clinic for all children (CMH patients or not) in this age group.

DATE: Saturday, Nov. 13
TIME: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
PLACE: Astoria Armory
RSVP: cmhkidsvaccine.rsvpify.com

QUESTIONS: 503-325-8500

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