

Nixyaawii student art on display/3C



Tulip Fest rings in spring/4C



Drone racing draws pilots of all ages/9C



A donated old photograph of the Tutuilla Presbyterian Church with teepees and horses circa 1900.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

History comes home

Ledger, letters give glimpse into past

By KATHY ANEY
East Oregonian

Wes Potter loves to play detective with his own family history.

The Alaska man works to fill in all the blanks on his family tree and he cherishes family artifacts. Keeping one such heirloom, however, didn't feel right. This week, Potter gave an old handwritten ledger once possessed by his great-grandfather to the Tamastslikt Cultural Institute.

To some, the ledger from the late 1800s might look like a dusty old notebook, but not to those who recognize its significance.

Potter's great-grandfather, Charles Wilkins Sr., served as an Indian agent. He was the man responsible for implementing federal Indian policy on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation from 1897 to the early 1900s. A century later, Potter came into possession of a leather satchel belonging to his great-grandfather Wilkins. Inside was a register where various Indian agents had recorded in cursive every person in the tribe until 1892 and the allotment of land each had been assigned.

This week, Potter sat at a table in a Tamastslikt conference room and watched Tamastslikt Director Roberta Conner page gingerly through the ledger. Potter, a tall, bearded career Army officer who grew up on a ranch near Enterprise, smiled as Conner became absorbed in the book and explained what she was seeing.

"This is a census," Conner said. "What it shows us is that (in 1892) there are 393 Cayuses, 196 Umatillas and 455 Walla Wallas. That totals 1,043."

She explained that following the treaty of 1855, the federal government eventually broke the communally held reservation into individual allotments.

"This is the beginning of a system that dissects the reservation into small pieces of individual ownership," she said.

Allotments ranged in size, totaling either 40, 80 or 160 acres. The first name in the book is Philip Minthorn, a Cayuse known as Kash-Kash, who was 49 years old and had an allotment of 160 acres as head of household. Chief No Shirt headed the Walla Walla list. Moses Minthorn was the first Umatilla.

Conner said the tribe already has allotment information on a digitized map, but the ledger is a connection with history and those who have gone before.

"It's a big deal," she said of the allot-

ment list. "We live with the consequences of it daily, but to see the handwriting and the notations and the names ..."

She let the sentence drift off. Many of the names had been mangled by agents over the years, similar to the misspelling of the names of immigrants entering Ellis Island.

"They were written by those who had understanding of English, but not native languages," said Collections Curator Randall Melton, who also inspected the ledger. "They wrote down what they heard."

He said Wilkins likely inherited the ledger from agents who had come before him, but hadn't used it during his years at the post.

Potter said he had called Conner about a year ago to inquire about whether she would be interested in the small collection of artifacts. His mother, who lives in Hillsboro, had toured the museum and was impressed. Though he valued the items, he didn't feel good about keeping them. It was a matter, he said, of bringing them home or stuffing them back in a closet.

"I think they will do the right thing with them," he said.

The leather bag also contained a stack of letters, a drawing of tribal men and a black-and-white early 1900s photo of the Tutuilla Presbyterian Church with teepees around it. Melton read some of the letters through their plastic sleeves. The topics



Ledger art on the back of a letter depicting two tribal men wearing ceremonial garb with a horse.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Wes Potter looks on as Tamastslikt Director Roberta Conner thumbs through a ledger owned by his great-grandfather during his time as the Indian agent for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation in the late 1800s. Potter donated the ledger and other historical items owned by his great-grandfather to the Tamastslikt Cultural Institute in Mission.

"Yes, we already have the information, but this is written in first person. Glimpsing these handwritten pages transports one to a different time."

— Randall Melton, collections curator

were wide-ranging. One letter, written in 1856, gave free passage to a member of the tribe.

"The bearer," the letter said, "must not be molested, nor his property interfered with. I will not permit anyone to take his horses. All persons are warned to let him alone as he is under my protection and at present employed by me ..."

Another is a 1903 letter from a 35-year-old Missouri widower to a woman he addressed as "Miss Sacajawea." He had seen her picture in the newspaper and cut it out.

"I fell deeply in love with you and would give anything on earth to see you ... I have plenty of money," he wrote, "but have no one to share it with ... I have cut your picture out and carry it in my pocket

and look at it every day."

Another is from a grateful vagabond who was repaying a debt to Wilkins.

"I enclose five dollars in payment of the money loaned to me when I was on the tramp, as a beggar, on the ninth of September," the letter began.

Everyone gazed with interest at the

early photo of Tutuilla Church. The teepees surrounding the church likely had been occupied by parishioners who had traveled a long distance. Potter asked directions so he could take a modern photo. Eventually, he said goodbye, got back into his rented Hyundai and drove about three miles to the church. He got out and walked around the old building, rebuilt since the church was established in 1882 and the first building burned down. He stared down at words in the concrete sidewalk that proclaimed it as the "First church of the Pacific Northwest." As the clouds spit tiny raindrops and wind ruffled his shirt, he snapped some photos with his Fuji camera.

Back at Tamastslikt, Melton said each of the artifacts would be scanned, placed in sleeves and put into the museum's archive vault. The vault is temperature and humidity controlled and was built to be earthquake proof. The vault is filling rapidly with artifacts donated by people such as Potter. Built to house 50 years of artifacts, the vault is nearing capacity after only 15. Now, he said, artifacts are scrutinized more closely to determine direct significance to the CTUIR. The ledger, though, was a keeper.

"Yes, we already have the information, but this is written in first person," Melton said. "Glimpsing these handwritten pages transports one to a different time."

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Wes Potter looks around while taking photographs at the Tutuilla Presbyterian Church recently on the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation east of Pendleton.