

Opal turns 120 years old



PHOTO BY ZACH SILVA/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

Whisper Pilling, 12, reads Opal Whiteley during the 120th birthday party thrown in Whiteley's honor at the Axe and Fiddle on Main St.

By Caitlyn May
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It was a 120th birthday party to remember.

On Monday evening, the Cottage Grove Library hosted over 75 people at The Axe and Fiddle to honor Opal Whiteley, the one-time Cottage Grove resident who has left generations of Oregonians inspired, angered and puzzled.

Whiteley, who died in 1992, grew to fame through her writing, particularly her diary, "Opal, the Journal of an Understanding Heart" that came out in 1920, chronicled her childhood in Cottage Grove and earned several accolades. A year later Whiteley was accused of being a fraud and then went to England where she was eventually placed in a mental hospital for nearly 50 years. She was never released.

But on Monday, it was a time of celebration. The evening included the showing of an OPB documentary on her life, birthday cake and the singing of Happy Birthday complete with ukuleles from the library, a conversation about Whiteley from historian Steve Williamson and concluded with "Opal karaoke." For this version of karaoke, individuals read various pieces of writing that she had done.

"Some people might dismiss her as a crackpot, some people might say she's crazy, I think she was a visionary. I think she could see and hear things. She talked about the wind talking to her, for example," said Eugene resident Tom Romano who has been reading about Whiteley for the last nine years.

"I like the part where she, like, instead of talking about how she cried when her mom apparently put her out so she fainted and her nose started bleeding, she just kind of said, 'oh, this happened, oh well,'" said Pilling.

"She didn't seem like she was interested in friends but I would be her friend," she added.

In addition to celebrating a local icon, the Cottage Grove Library was also interested in showcasing its diverse collection of works it has to offer and are hoping to get the appropriate storage and display case for one of the first copies of Whiteley's "The Fairyland Around Us." The storage case the library is hoping to get would cost around \$5,000.

Wearing Opal Whiteley attire, that was provided to her by the library, twelve-year-old Whisper Pilling was excited for people to learn about someone she has grown fond of. Pilling, who participated in Opal Karaoke and blew out the birthday candles, prepared for the night by reading as much as she could about Whiteley.

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Zombie house vanquished

By Caitlyn May
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Cottage Grove City Manager Richard Meyers revealed to the city council on Monday, Dec. 11 that the zombie house on 46th St. was no more.

In a curious turn of events, Meyers was summoned to jury duty in municipal court earlier this month for a case concerning the abandoned house. As a result of the charges, the owner of record was issued a subpoena to appear in court to testify that she had not given permission for her house to be used by those charged with trespassing. The ball began rolling.

"While she was here, we had her talk to Faye and we have a signed lease," Meyers said.

The issue of the zombie house and what to do with it came before the council last month and a presentation by the city attorney included the possibility of leasing the property to the city.

The city attorney presented three options to the council including having the city lease the house from the current owner—who is out of the area and has ceased mortgage payments on the property. This option would allow the city to evict the occupants through normal channels. The second option would be to amend current city codes that allow property to be seized where prohibited conduct is taking place. The third, and most promising according to the city, is to give a 60 day notice to all interested parties. After those 60 days, the city requests a circuit court to appoint a receiver. That party can then take control of the house.

The issue with each of the options is the liability it may place on the city. After questioning from council, the city attorney noted that it would have to be navigated.

At the time, the council gave the city attorney and staff permission to proceed with the option they saw fit. At Monday's city council meeting, Meyers informed the board that the city was in possession of the house.

"We have a one year lease. Essentially, it's ours," he said. The city plans to abate the house and possibly remove structures that were added illegally by squatters.

Meyers previously noted that the individuals living in the home had been able to get electricity to the house but the city refused to turn on the water, making for questionable sanitation in the home.

While the city has the option to sublease the property, Meyers and community development and planning director Faye Stewart noted that the house was not suitable for tenants.

"We will probably try to get a hold of the bank," Meyers said. "We'll abate and make repairs and let them know those charges will rack up unless they dispose of this property."

While the city opted for the lease option for the house on 46th St., Meyers informed the board that it was a "last option" and he hoped to find other solutions for the remaining zombie houses in city limits.

Additional options for dealing with the abandoned homes and other infrastructure is expected at the city council meeting in January.

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