

**KEATON** *from A1*

Green watching shorts, behind the scenes documentaries, and other films, along with presentations by featured speakers Harry Keaton “Jingles Jr.” Moore, Buster Keaton’s nephew, and Larry Telles, board member of the Niles Film Festival.

On the last day of the conference, on the evening of Aug. 14, a showing of “The General” was put on at the Chambers Covered Bridge, an actual filming location from the film.

“We didn’t really have a place,” said Katy Vaughn, president of the Cottage Grove Historical Society. “We thought about maybe tying [a screen] to the bridge and we got really excited about that and they came down and played around with different screens projecting it and decided it was going to work.”

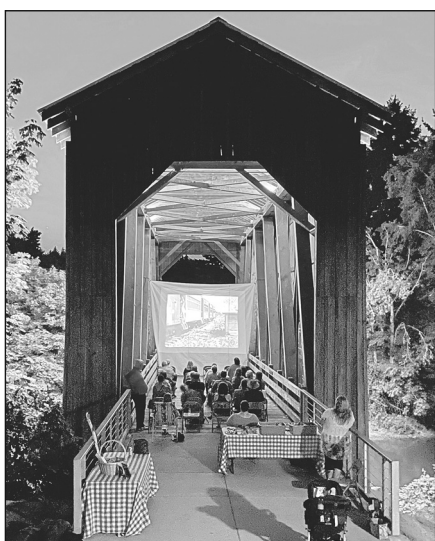
The setting couldn’t have come together without a group effort, Vaughn said. The AV equipment was provided by Roberts and the Prospectors and GoldDiggers lent the chairs and tables.

The conference itself was decided much later than usual because of the pandemic.

“We do [the conference] every five years,” said Vaughn, “and this

year we really decided late that we were going to do it. ... Normally we try to plan something like this and work on it a year ahead of time. This one was like maybe a few weeks.”

The upcoming 100th anniversary of the film



SOPHIA EDELBLUTE/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

**On Saturday evening (Aug. 14) a crowd of more than 20 people gathered on the Chambers Covered Bridge on South River Road to watch “The General,” one of Buster Keaton’s famous films, in a celebration of Cottage Grove’s history.**

will be a much bigger event, said Vaughn.

“Five years from now is the hundredth so that’s the biggie,” she said. “We will start planning that one a couple of years ahead because that one we want to do a lot of splashy stuff. But this one, we’re really excited about this.”

With seats nearly full during the showing, the celebration proved to be

a success. Not only that, but the restored Keaton mural is once again a shining symbol of Cottage Grove and the history of this small town.

“I think it shows that our town is a vibrant town, that we respect and love our history, and I think that’s all good for economic development,” said Roberts. “It really blew my mind how people came together to get this done.”

He thanked Dana Merryday with Friends of the Swinging Bridge for help with fundraising, Gerald Santana of the Cottage Grove Sentinel for his help on the committee, Suzanne Huebner-Sannes for all her help with the raffle to get the ball rolling, Connie Huston for her work on the mural itself, Cameron Reiten with KNND for advertising, Faye Stewart of Cottage Grove’s Public Works and Development and City Manager Richard Meyers for the fences and electricity.

“I want to thank all the citizens who donated money,” he added, “and the businesses who donated product for the raffle, because it wasn’t about me. I just wanted it done, and the community did it.”

**Keaton mural: A chance encounter**

BY CINDY WEELDRYER  
SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

On Saturday morning, Grants Pass residents Richard Smith and his wife Beth stopped at the Covered Bridge Brewing Group for coffee on their way to the mid-Willamette Valley town of Independence to enjoy its annual air show.

From the building’s parking lot, the Animal House “Deathmobile” caught their eye and then they noticed the colorful newly restored Buster Keaton mural behind it.

They had no idea in a few short hours a ceremony would rededicate it to the silent film star’s most famous film, “The General.”

Unaware of the Cottage Grove Historical Society’s annual Buster Keaton Conference going on at the Village Green Resort, Richard struck up a friendly conversation with former Cottage Grove Mayor Jim Gilroy and his wife, Mary, who were also getting coffee there. Richard mentioned his father, Lee Virgil Smith, was one of the local boys Keaton hired to produce the silent film.

Lee Smith was born in Silver Lake, Oregon in 1909. When he was a child the Smith family

moved to Dorena, decades before the original town was abandoned in 1946 to build the dam and create the reservoir. In the summer of 1926, Lee was 16 years old when he landed a coveted job as a camera grip moving equipment where it was needed by the movie’s production crew.

Richard said growing up, his father enjoyed retelling the stories of his short-lived movie-making experience, especially the excitement of being an eyewitness to the train bridge collapsing into the Row River exactly as planned and on the first take.

“Dad loved being part of that movie and treasured his memories of that unique experience,” Richard said. “He greatly admired Buster Keaton and became a huge fan. For the rest of his life, Dad never missed an opportunity to see a Buster Keaton movie.”

Lee and Roberta Smith married in 1936 and had three children: Mary Ann, who was born in Cottage Grove in 1937, Brenda, and Richard. Lee taught at Dorena School before moving the family to Portland in 1940 to take a wartime job as a

machinist. Richard was born there in 1944.

After the war, the family settled in Eugene where Richard grew up. Lee suffered from neurological health problems in the last year of his life. He died in Eugene, in 1975, at the age of 66. Lee loved the outdoors and the beauty of the Cascade Mountains. As a final wish, he asked his family to cremate his body and spread his ashes near the McKenzie Pass.

Richard said he shares his father’s love of airplanes. He and Beth enjoy their road trip to attend the Independence Air Show each summer. They were delighted that — by mere happenstance — they stopped for a caffeine fix about halfway to their destination and discovered Cottage Grove had an annual event to commemorate the filming of “The General.” They said they’d like to return next year to learn more about how the movie was made.

“Because our family has roots here and because of Dad’s experiences creating the movie, Cottage Grove will always be a special place for us,” Richard said. “We’ll be back!”

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