

Totem

Continued from Page A3

“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 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.

Margot 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.”



Heiniger-White

And she remembers exactly why her husband carved it.

“He carved it as a tribute to Chief Raymond Burke.”

Personal connection

Raymond “Pop-corn” 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 Oregonian newspaper, the article says the pole had its genesis as a promotional gimmick.

As Command tells the tale, Ray Potter, owner of the Straw-



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle

The John Day totem pole can be hard for passing motorists to see.

berry 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

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

Fish: The food of life

Turtle: Eternal life

Beaver: The Great Builder

a century 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, including a tribal historian who talked about his people’s traditional connection to John Day.

After that, a dozen or more people got up and stood in a circle, including Labhart, White, Burke and a number of tribal members.

“We passed a peace pipe around,” Labhart said. “Each of us took a toke off the pipe and passed it around.”

He agrees with Heiniger-White that the totem pole is in need of some serious TLC.

“It’s in pretty bad shape,” Labhart said. “It probably needs to be pressure-washed, maybe patched up a little.”

And he also thinks she’s right when she says it ought to be moved.

“A lot of people don’t even know it’s there because of its location.”

Next chapter

In December, Heiniger-White took her concerns about the totem pole to John Day’s current mayor, Ron Lundbom. He heard 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.”

Reed & Associates for excellent service LOCALLY!



An Independent Insurance Agency

Medicare, Auto, Home Insurance and Annuities

10106 N. 'C' • Island City 541-975-1364 Toll Free 1-866-282-1925 www.reedinsurance.net

Baker County CHURCH DIRECTORY

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH
Saturday Worship
11:00 AM
www.bakercityda.com
17th & Pochontas, Baker City
541-523-4913

BAKER CITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship
First Service 8:30 AM
2nd Service & Sunday School 10:00 AM
Jr. High & High School Youth
Tues 6:30 PM
Youth Pastor Silas Moe
675 Hwy 7, Baker City • 541-523-5425

THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS
9-11 AM - Baker City 1st Ward
10:30 AM-Noon - Baker City 2nd Ward
Noon-2 PM Baker Valley Ward
EVERYONE WELCOME!
Family History Center
Everything Free
Tues & Fri 1-4 PM
Wed & Thurs 10AM-1PM
Wed Evenings 5-8 PM
2625 Hughes Lane, Baker City
541-523-2397

St. Francis De Sales Cathedral
Daily Masses:
M, T, Th, F 9 AM
Day Chapel in Cathedral
Wed Daily Mass 9 AM
at St. Alphonsus Chapel
Sat 8 AM at Day Chapel
Baker City Saturday Mass 6 pm
Baker City Sunday Mass 9:30 am
St. Therese in Halfway 2 pm Sat
St. Anthony’s in North Powder
11:30 Sun
541-523-4521
Corner of First & Church, Baker City

Harvest Church
WORSHIP GATHERING
10:00 AM
Harvest Cafe Open
9:00 AM - 9:50 AM
3720 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4233
www.BakerCityHarvest.org

SAINT ALPHONSUS HOSPITAL CHAPEL
Open to all patients, family and friends for reflection and prayer.
St. Alphonsus Hospital in Baker City

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Sunday Worship Service
10:30 AM
1995 4th Street, Baker City
541-523-5201
firstpresbaker.blogspot.com

Calvary Baptist Church Third & Broadway
541-523-3891
Sundays
9 AM Sunday School
10 AM Worship Service
Mondays
6:30 - 8 PM
Baker Teens Underground
Wednesdays
5:30-6:30 PM Dinner & Prayer Time
Thursdays
5 - 6 PM Free Community Dinner
6 - 7 PM Celebrate Recovery
bakercalvarybaptist.com

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE CHURCH
Sunday Service
10:00 AM
www.ChristianScience.com
3rd & Washington, Baker City
541-523-5911

Elkhorn Baptist Church
Sunday School 10 AM
Morning Worship 11 AM
Evening Worship 6 PM
Discovery Kids Worship
6:30 PM
3520 Birch St, Baker City
541-523-4332

FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH
Service at 11 am
Live Streaming on Facebook
1734 Third Street, Baker City
541-523-3922
firstlutheranbakercity@gmail.com

Baker City Church of the Nazarene
Sunday Worship 9:45am
Sunday School 8:30am
Coffee is 9:15 AM - 9:45 AM
Pastor Troy Teeter
1250 Hughes Lane, Baker City
(Corner of Cedar & Hughes)
541-523-3533
www.bakernaz.com

St. Stephen's Episcopal
Services at 9 AM
1st & 3rd Sundays, Holy Eucharist
2nd & 4th Sundays, Morning Prayer
5th Sunday, Morning Prayer
2177 First Street • Baker City
Entrance on 1st Street
Corner Church & First Streets
541-523-4812

Baker & Haines United Methodist Churches
Baker UMC, 1919 2nd St, at 11am
Haines UMC, 814 Robert St, at 9am
To join us on Zoom email
bakermc@thegeo.net
and the link will be emailed to you
or follow us on Facebook
Pastor Michele Holloway

ST. BRIGID'S IN THE PINES COMMUNITY CHURCH
11:30 a.m. Services
1st & 3rd Sunday
Holy Eucharist
East Auburn Street, Sumpter
541-523-4812
A Mission of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Baker City

AGAPE CHRISTIAN CENTER
Sunday Services
10:00 AM & 6:30 PM
South Highway 7,
Baker City
541-523-6586

The church directory is published once monthly. Information for this directory is provided by participating churches, please call 541-523-3673 for more information.

Thank you to the participating churches and these sponsors:

Whelan Electric, Inc.
523-5756 • CCB 103032

Cliff's Saws & Cycles
2619 Tenth • 523-2412

Coles Tribute Center
1950 Place • 523-4300

GRAY'S WEST & CO.
1500 Dewey • 523-3677