

Totem

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Driving down Main Street from the east, the totem pole is hidden behind the imposing bulk of the Grant County Ranch and Rodeo Museum. Coming from the west, the view is partially obscured by a telephone pole.

And why is there a totem pole in John Day at all?

Grant County doesn't have much of a Native American presence these days — according to the 2020 census, only 1.7% of the county's residents identify as Native American or Alaska Native.

Perhaps more to the point, Oregon tribes didn't carve totem poles. That was something the coastal tribes of what is now Washington, British Columbia and Southeast Alaska were known for.

So what's it doing here? The answer to that question comes back to Ralph White.

Mountain Man

Ralph White died on Jan. 28, 2018, at the age of 79.

In life, by all accounts, he was a colorful character.

He wore a bushy beard and a bearclaw necklace, and he called himself the Mountain Man.

According to an article by C.J. Gish in the July 20, 1995, edition of the Blue Mountain Eagle, he made his living for many years as a chainsaw artist. White had a love for the Old West and Native American art forms — and a knack for turning tree trunks into animal figures.

"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



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle

The plaque at the base of the John Day totem pole.

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."

And she remembers exactly why her husband carved it.

"He carved it as a tribute to Chief Raymond Burke."

Personal connection

Raymond "Popcorn" 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 Strawberry Wilderness Fine Art Gallery, was looking for something to attract customers to the gallery's new location just off



Bennett Hall/Blue Mountain Eagle

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

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 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."

Police

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with a proposal and take it to Grant County's attorney to present to the city of John Day.

At the Wednesday, Feb. 16, session of the Grant County Court, the topic of how to provide the level of service the city of John Day was accustomed to came up.

County Commissioner Jim Hamsher, who is also Prairie City's mayor, said that his city disbanded its police department many years ago and has had a contract with the county to pay for policing.

Hamsher said Prairie City has not been able to fund that contract since the start of this fiscal year on July 1 due to budget constraints. He said it is not like other cities in the county are paying for policing and that he hopes his community can start paying for policing again in the future.

Rookstool, who was in attendance at the meeting, said her chief concern was making sure the residents of John Day had a level of protection comparable to what



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle

John Day City Councilor Heather Rookstool listens during a session of Grant County Court on Wednesday, Feb. 16, 2022.

they had before the Police Department was suspended.

Myers said in a later interview, however, that he was not sure John Day could afford the level of service residents had grown used to when they had their own police force.

Asked why the process of working out a new law enforcement funding arrangement is taking so long, Myers said some of the personalities involved in the discussion might be slowing the negotiations.

On Oct. 13, the city of

John Day offered to give Grant County \$300,000 annually for policing services in exchange for an equal amount from the county road fund for street improvements.

On Jan. 21, the county counsel emailed a detailed counterproposal to the city attorney.

The county's proposal would give the Sheriff's Office three additional deputies to provide coverage in John Day. To cover the cost of that coverage, the city would pay a minimum of \$282,400 a year. But that rate

was based on the city transferring the \$375,000 COPS grant to the county, which federal officials have now said can't be done.

Without the grant funding, the county's proposal called for the city to pay \$371,000 a year. But it's not clear how the city could afford that amount, given that its total property tax revenues only amount to about \$300,000 a year.

The county proposal makes no mention of any county road funds coming to the city.

Bill

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their borders.

Other provisions would prohibit the governor from retaliating against any county that did not fully extend the emergency declaration and give the Legislature the power to terminate an emergency declaration.

Finally, before taking effect, the proposed constitutional amendment would require approval by a majority of Oregon voters.

Oregon has been under a state of emergency since March 8, 2020, when Gov. Kate Brown announced plans to take extraordinary measures to protect Oregonians from the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown has extended the state of emergency several times since then.

State-imposed measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 have helped keep Oregon's infection and death rates from the coronavirus lower than in most other states.

But they have also sparked pushback from many Oregonians angered by school closures, masking requirements,

vaccine mandates and business restrictions.

Local control emerged as a hot-button issue for Grant County residents in August after Brown made an about-face on her June 30 executive order, which handed over public health decisions to counties amid a resurgence of COVID-19.

With case counts soaring from the rapidly spreading delta variant, Brown issued a flurry of new executive orders requiring masks in schools, inside state buildings and, finally, all indoor public spaces.

Those moves drew the ire of Grant County leaders, who signed onto a letter from the Eastern Oregon Counties Association calling for local control of school districts.

In addition to Owens, Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, is also listed as a chief sponsor of HJR 206. Other chief sponsors of the measure are Reps. Jessica George, R-Keizer; Lily Morgan, R-Grants Pass; E. Werner Reschke, R-southern Klamath and Lake counties; and Sens. Dick Anderson, R-Lincoln City; and Kim Thatcher, R-Keizer.



GOT INVASIVE ANNUAL GRASSES?

Grant SWCD Weed Control Dept. • Working for You in 2022

Thanks to the Grant County Court and Northeast Oregon Forests Resource Advisory Committee, Grant Weed Control is able to offer a 25% cost share program for invasive annual grass control on private grazing lands, through a Title II funded Grant Project. This program will provide a maximum \$10,000 of invasive annual grass control services with a \$2,500 maximum landowner contribution to qualifying participants. To be eligible for participation, the treatment property must not be actively irrigated and must be primarily managed for livestock grazing, minimum of 20 acres in size, located within Grant County, and must contain invasive annual grass species. Applications for this limited weed control assistance opportunity will be ranked and funded on a first-come, first-served basis.

Contact: Grant Soil and Water Conservation District Office at (541) 575-1554 or visit 721 S. Canyon Blvd., John Day, OR 97845 for applications and additional information.

The application deadline for this program is March 11th, 2022.