

Beetle-riddled pine gets new lease on life as art

Wood-carver makes gift of wooden Indian to school he attended

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TOWNSEND - They may call the holiday Thanksgiving, but Gene Webb is putting his emphasis on the giving part.

Webb, who has spent three-quarters of his 40 years whittling or carving on wood in his native Blount County, will present a 7-foot-tall wooden Indian to Walland Elementary School, the school he attended in his youth and where the mascot is the Indians.

The white pine figure of a Native American in full headdress - valued at \$6,000 - will be unveiled at the school at 10 a.m. Wednesday.

"Somebody mentioned it," Webb said as he carved on the Indian on his carport, "and I thought it was a cool idea, especially since I went there."

Webb carved away on the figure Monday as a chilly rain fell and the boom box blared Hank Williams Jr.'s version of his father's song, "Kaw-liga," which is the story of a lovesick cigar-store Indian.

Webb's creation will not be the typical cigar-store type, though.

"He will have his arms crossed like he is guarding over the children," Webb said.

By the time the Indian is finished, Webb will have about 50 hours invested in it. The figure will be stained, not painted, and weigh 200-250 pounds.

The tree trunk that hid the Indian until Webb could summon him out was felled at the home of Shawn Harrison of Townsend. It was a victim of the recent pine beetle infestation, so it was felled and lay in the Harrison yard for a couple of years drying before Webb began carving on it.

Webb's mountain heritage is evident in the things he has carved in the past, such as bobcats, bears, snakes and other wildlife.

He has been carving since before he started at Walland in the late 1970s.

He said his father gave him a pin knife when he was 10, and he immediately started whittling with it.

But it wasn't long before he wanted to make more than shavings, and the seeds of a career as a professional carver were sown.

During his three decades of carving, Webb has been commissioned to create many specific pieces, including a bear at the Knoxville Convention Center, a 2-foot Indian woman for a church in Arizona, some carvings for the television show "Christy," which was filmed in Townsend, and others for the Atlanta Zoo.

Webb has produced 14 instructional carving videos, and another is in the works.

His carving of a snarling bobcat has been among the winners in numerous competitions, never placing lower than Best of Show at any event in the Southeast, he said.

Webb's other passion is the late country singer Waylon Jennings, and he has a sizable collection of Jennings memorabilia in his studio.

One of his prize carvings is a nearly life-size head-and-shoulders of Jennings that looks like it is about ready to give the viewer a few bars of "Good-Hearted Woman" at any moment.

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