

Capturing the spirit Esquimalt Lagoon



Songhees carver Butch Dick is working on his largest project yet — a mural depicting the Esquimalt Lagoon. The piece is expected to be finished this fall.

By Amy Dove - Goldstream News Gazette

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A small spiral of red cedar unfurls beneath Butch Dick's fingers.

Gently pushing a straight carving knife along the grain, Dick shapes an image of a face on the plank of wood destined for Esquimalt Lagoon. The mural is meant to help people understand the Songhees' connection to the land, says Dick, an acclaimed Songhees carver and artist. Before it can go up though, Dick will pour hours of work into the massive piece of wood.

"There is a process of breaking your hands in," he says, noting they get sore and calloused. "Until about a week goes by and it doesn't bother you anymore.

"It becomes an obsession. This carving now will call me all the time," he says with a smile. "It must have got hold of me because I didn't even watch NASCAR yesterday."

It's the largest and most personal carving he has done, Dick says. He spent a lot of time at the lagoon growing up and eventually worked there gathering clams.

Spanning eight feet by 10 feet, the piece will hang on the washroom at the base of Lagoon Road. An interpretive sign highlighting the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nation's history will also be installed.

"The historical factors take a lot more digging in finding out what happened there in terms of why people had a village there," he says.

When you start carving the feel of the wood dictates what the project is going to be like, Dick says. He is using 14 different knives and gouges for this project, resulting in up to 10 breaks a day to sharpen the tools.

"The important thing is that they are all razor sharp," he says.

The mural is centered on an image of the moon, representing the grandmother, who is the main body of each family, Dick says. Flanking each side are figures representing the wind. A gentle blowing toward someone is a traditional way of showing appreciation and gratitude, Dick says. The figures also capture the natural winds that blow at the lagoon.

Around it all are images of eagles, heron and the forest. Within the trees are depictions of bears and wolves, the animals that used to be there, he says. Cougars would have been present as well, but that animal is rarely carved, he adds.

It's hard to know when a piece is done, he says. The trick is knowing your limitations as a carver and knowing when to put it aside, he adds. "I always think that I should do more," he says. "There's never ever this feeling when I say now I'm done."

Dick hopes to finish the mural by the end of September. The date for the official unveiling has yet to be set.

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reporter@goldstreamgazette.com