

PACIFIC WESTERN TRADERS

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

At first glance, your host behind the counter, the eighty-six-year-old maitre d' of this earthy establishment, is something of a surprise. With his white hair brushed elegantly back, trimmed white beard, pleated slacks, impeccable dress shirt, and silver-and-turquoise bolo, Herbert Charles Puffer does not resemble those rough-hewn operators of the west's legendary trading posts-August Choteau's "trading house" on the Arkansas River, Charles Bent's "Fort" in Cheyenne country, or Lorenzo HubbelT's Ganado post in Navajoland. But now this roster of the great American trading posts and their famous proprietors must list him among their number. Not only has Herb Puffer's longevity at his counter equaled theirs, it might be argued that in fostering the revival of California Native arts, dance, community spirit, and cultural identity, the Puffer family's role in history has surpassed theirs. Herb's many interests, which include both the Native and non-Native history of the region, are an open book to all visitors- many books, in fact. A pile of loose-leaf binders available for all to flip through sits on a table, in the main exhibit room. These binders constitute the store's forty-year autobiography. Leafing through them, one can view the hand-made programs for seasonal sales events, special exhibitions, one-man shows, and the miscellanea that accrue to a community hub, including hundreds of names of Indian artisans; old news clippings; Herb's invaluable notes from the area's native historians, many of which he turned into articles informing locals on Indian history, medicinal foods, and making native cool drinks and hot teas from wild plants; and his careful responses to general questions on Indians for Folsom's Towne Crier & Miner's Almanac and the Shingle Springs Gazette. Two years ago, Herb's daughter Rathe pulled up stakes in San Francisco and returned to the family hearth. Now, after forty years, their store still flourishes, its corners and crannies so familiar to its ardent supporters they could find their favorite spots in the dark. In back is the book nook, for instance, in which Herb has always taken special pride . An inveterate reader and historian, Herb turned this back room into one of the most comprehensive collections of books on American Indians anywhere. Small presses that specialize in American Indian and Californiana as well as self-publishing authors find a friendly home here. Obscure, even Out-of-print books, old issues of the Journal of Great Basin and, California Studies,, hard-to-find archeological reports, museum catalogs, and rich sections on each of Native America's classic culture areas somehow find their way to Herb's stacks. Peeking out from the books are Larry Dawson's ceramic busts of notable California Indian artists: [Marie Potts], Wuzzie, [Lizzie Enos], and others.

FULL TEXT

Headnote

Fortieth Birthday Card

UPHILL A BLOCK and a half from Sutter Street - Folsom, California's main drag - and tucked inconspicuously under the shade of buckeye and oak trees on Wool Street's west side, sits an American treasure. Of the four totems that once honored the four directions on the adobe building's roof, only the eagle and globe still jut into the sky. They barely hint at the cultural wonderland within. After opening its doors forty years ago, this establishment soon became renowned throughout the galaxy of small Indian communities that comprise Native California. It is Pacific Western Traders, known as PWT to the California Natives for whom it has become a second home, a magical mecca, as one reviewer put it, "for collectors of American Indian art, for students of Indian cultures, and for Native Americans in search of traditional supplies."

Actually, that accolade has it backwards. It doesn't come close to highlighting the extraordinary impact this cultural center, venue for non-stop special exhibitions and sales events, homespun museum, artists' supply depot, library/bookstore, and all around meeting-and-greeting ground has had on the state's Indians and non-Indians who care about her oldest cultures, arts, and ancient histories. The steady stream of artists and craftspeople, singers, dancers, and Red Power activists who come through the doors of PWT have been joined by tribal políticos, movie stars, dedicated scholars, environmentalists, and herbalists! - all sharing a passion for the appreciation and preservation of Native ways of life. At the same time, the drop-in tourist or curious stranger is never greeted by cold shoulders or made to feel uncomfortable amidst the family-like camaraderie that often infuses the store's atmosphere of laughter, intimate greetings, and deal-making. Thanks to the almost courtly hospitality that exudes from its soft-spoken proprietor, no general or innocent questions are disdained, and almost everyone leaves hungry to know more about this region that boasts the greatest indigenous diversity in North America.

As soon as one enters the store, one's nose takes it in- the blended aromas of sage, cedar, smoke-tanned leather, sweet grass, and OUs fill the air as much as ceiling hangings, a magnificent array of California and Great Basin cradleboards, Mexican masks, Day of the Dead mementos, mortars, and sculptures and paintings overwhelm the eye. The interior could be an art installation, an environment for a performance piece, or a constructed attic of evocative wonders. For newcomers with any interest in American Indians, to enter PWT is to enroll in the school of one's dreams, an introduction to the ongoing creative fecundity of Native California,

At first glance, your host behind the counter, the eighty-six-year-old maitre d' of this earthy establishment, is something of a surprise. With his white hair brushed elegantly back, trimmed white beard, pleated slacks, impeccable dress shirt, and silver-and-turquoise bolo, Herbert Charles Puffer does not resemble those rough-hewn operators of the west's legendary trading posts-August Choteau's "trading house" on the Arkansas River, Charles Bent's "Fort" in Cheyenne country, or Lorenzo Hubbel's Ganado post in Navajoland. But now this roster of the great American trading posts and their famous proprietors must list him among their number. Not only has Herb Puffer's longevity at his counter equaled theirs, it might be argued that in fostering the revival of California Native arts, dance, community spirit, and cultural identity, the Puffer family's role in history has surpassed theirs. Herb Puffer was born in the family home in Folsom on May 20, 1925, to parents rooted three generations back in the Gold Rush days of Placer and Sacramento Counties. Herb's father encouraged his son's early curiosity about local history and ecology; his playground was the American River drainage, ancestral lands of the Nisenan. Herb became familiar with bedrock mortar sites and petroglyph locations, collected the odd arrowhead along the way, and remembers Indian schoolmates and the old roundhouse at the Auburn Rancheria.

No sooner had Herb graduated from Folsom High School in 1943 than he joined the U.S. Navy. First assigned to Pearl Harbor in the South Pacific, he saw for himself the blasted wrecks that ignited America's entry into World War II, and was serving when atom bombs ended the conflict. As a civilian back in California, he clerked at various firms by day while upgrading his accounting skills at night school. In 1950, while working for U.S. Steel Products Co. in Vernon, outside Los Angeles, he met Peggy Jean Wilson from the payroll department. Four years later they married; a son, Courtney, was born in 1956, followed by a daughter, Kathe, in 1960. Between 1955 and 1970, Herb's role as comptroller for Columbia Van Lines and its subsidiary companies enabled him to live comfortably in a Torrance home; travel widely as he set up Columbia's proliferating operations throughout Europe, the Pacific, and Southeast Asia; and enthusiastically participate in southern California's rich cultural life.

Herb's lucrative work also freed the family to pursue their extracurricular passions: trips to New Mexico and Arizona, establishing friendships in Hopi Indian country and at Taos and Santa Clara pueblos that would later rebound to their store's benefit. They were also increasingly drawn to the West Coast's American Indian art shows; at one Los Angeles exhibition in the late 1960s, they had the good fortune to encounter famous healer and basketweaver Mabel McKay, from the Cache Creek Pomo community. They became fast friends and Mrs. McKay hailed the Puffers' dream of opening their own store.

Back in Folsom, Herb purchased the corner plot that sloped downhill from the present store to Sutter Street in the mid-1960s, and leased the site of the present store for doctor's offices, a contemporary art gallery, and Old Towne

Antiques. As retirement became a possibility, freeing the family to work twice as hard at what they loved, the focus on Indian arts intensified and they returned to their origins. Remodeling the upper property and installing cabinets, tables, and shelving, and using the lower building - now gone - as an art gallery and, eventually, performance space, they opened Pacific Western Traders on October 1, 1971. On hand to dedicate the enterprise with prayers and sacred smoke was their now-dear friend, Mabel McKay.

Fortunately, the Puffers came home just in time to connect with a generation of Indian elders who had been born around the turn of the century, old timers like Tom Epperson, Herb Young, Bryan Beavers, and Dan Rose who were steeped in what is often called "the old ways." Listening to storytellers such as Lizzie Enos, Marie Potts, and Betty Castro, Herb could not keep his history-hungry mind from delving into the deeper lore of the region's various Maidu villages, their sacred places, mythologies, and artisan traditions. Learning from basketmakers and weavers and Native customers, Herb and Peggy refined their eyes for evaluating and distinguishing subtle regional differences in basketry.

In Indian Country, word gets around. Before long, the Puffers' clientele widened from the immediate orbit of nearby Indian enclaves like the Auburn, Jackson, and Grindstone Rancherías to draw in Washoes and Paiutes from the Great Basin, Chumash and more southerly groups formerly classified as Mission Indians, and artisans from the more isolated Klamath and Trinity River tribes to the north. Eventually, particular artists began to stand out and find artistic encouragement and reliable commercial outlets at PWT

A fateful boost to this circle of creative natives, Indian buffs, and hobbyists came in 1973 when volunteer Peggy Wessler told them about a seventy-one-year-old Konkow Maidu artist named Frank Day. Upon seeing his work, Herb knew at once that here was an absolutely original and masterful interpreter of the region's Indian past. Over the next three years, until Day's death, the Puffers' devotion to Day involved championing his work and preserving the backstories behind the narrative-driven, two hundred-plus paintings he produced.

Born just after the turn of the last century, and enduring disability, the early loss of his mother, and indoctrination at a U.S. Government Indian boarding school, Day finally wound up living with his father, Billy, a tribal headman, and absorbing his knowledge of Konkow traditions, much of it deeply esoteric. Upon Billy's death, Day began a decade-long odyssey, wandering the West and finding odd jobs. But during the 1950s, three of Day's pursuits began to coalesce: his role as traditional host for Maidu gatherings, his storytelling and song recitation sessions with a series of anthropologists, and taking up the paint brush during his convalescence from a serious injury incurred while working as a farm laborer. By the time the Puffers met Day, his work had already been exhibited twice. Now, as exhibition curator Carla Hills described the new relationship, "The congenial and comfortable environment the Puffers had created (in Folsom) became a second home to Frank Day."

Only four months after the Puffers met him, Day seized upon a fourth role as if he had been waiting for it: teacher of traditional ways. The same sort of cross-generational contact which PWT was enjoying with California Indian elders was now raised to a higher level of commitment and importance as young men like Frank LaPena, Joe Marine, and Brian Bibby became aware of Day's readiness to pass it on, and their instruction began on Sundays in the Puffers' lower studio. Known today as the Maidu Dancers and Traditionalists, this band of devoted dancers learned not only dances and their songs, but also the memories, anecdotes, forgotten gossip, and personality sketches that brought what non-Indians called "history" to vivid life. These were the golden years, as PWT incubated a remarkable transmission of living culture.

Another legacy of what might be called Frank Day's residency at the Puffers' was his influence on the next generation of California Indian artists. Frank LaPena, that renaissance man of Indian letters, paintings, and movement, flourished under his tutelage. Even those not graphically influenced by Day would benefit from the attention the Puffers made sure he drew to this new energy center. Day's deerhorn-wearing, levitating Toto dancer became the store's logo, and his strange, sensuous, mystical paintings soon shared space with the humorous dancing coyotes that became painter Harry Fonseca's trademark image, the documentary scenes of foothill Indian life by self-taught Dalbert Castro, and the large dancers, dreamscapes, and symbol-rich impressionist landscapes of Frank LaPena, as well as cradleboards, Mexican tinwork, cabinets of Zuni fetishes, and other treasures.

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Strategically placed around the main room are John Howell's diorama-like ceramic scenes of California Indian dances, roundhouse gatherings, and gambling sessions, featuring authentically rendered regalia and tools and dancers' bodies and faces sculpted so as to project the delight, humor, and conviviality that transforms Indians from rigid icons into celebrants. The walls are festooned with the Puffers' magnificent cradleboard collection, arrows, and atlatl darts. Knowledgeable shoppers can find work by high-end Native artists whose artistry they have seen in the glossy pages of art magazines, too often bracketed by the latest auction prices and expensive ads oriented to the connoisseur collectors.

But none of that ethnic market elitism or competitive pricing contaminate this store. Unlike the Santa Fe market milieu, for instance, Puffer has created what might be called a truly democratic array of jewelry, sculpture, paintings, toy animals, knitted Yurok scarves, pinon-nut necklaces, and other goods. Museum-quality soapstone pipe and horn sculptures sit near a table of children's books devoted to traditional arts and narratives of Mexico. Often Herb quietly knows which artists are in financial stress, or which are starting out, and makes their wares more visible accordingly. Despite the dizzying array of items compacted into this small environment, it is less about the things than their makers. Community counts more than commerce here.

The question about rare individuals like Herb Puffer is where such unassuming, cultivated decency comes from. Herb is embarrassed when an outsider raises it. Yet one sees and feels it whenever he is on deck. The man possesses a natural sense of fairness, a quiet certainty that all women and men are created equal, that everyone should get a fair shake, that he is honored to be among the continuing stream of the region's first inhabitants. Many a friend, artist, or client have been quietly helped by the Puffers with nary a mark on any ledger, written or mental. He would be embarrassed to mention it. In the heart of the very region where some of the greatest outrages against America's Indians were committed during the Gold Rush period, it is as if this sanctuary emerged to counter-balance and even supplant that legacy.

But Herb Puffer would be the last to ever speak or think in such grandiose terms. He is too busy planning the next store event. With his co-workers Sage LaPena and Richard Kastle, turning over a piece of soapstone work in his hands, offering its maker quiet praise for the beauty he has crafted, making a fair deal for its display on the store's shelf, encouraging him to bring in more, wondering if he knows this or that other worker in that medium, inviting him to an upcoming show, and making him feel at home.

Sidebar

Pacific Western Traders suffered a devastating flood on December 3, 2011, the opening day of its annual holiday show and market. Artists and customers were evacuated from the building while emergency crews got to work; the market relocated to card tables set up on the front porch. In the wake of the disaster gallery owners Kathe and Herb Puffer unearthed many lovely and as-yet unseen works, such as paintings from the late Harry Fonseca's Gold Rush series. Extensive repairs and renovations will begin after the winter holidays; the gallery wishes to thank all artists and staff for their assistance and perseverance. Please support the gallery by visiting them during this difficult time or sending good wishes!

AuthorAffiliation

Peter Nabokov is a professor in World Arts and Cultures and American Indian Studies at University of California, Los Angeles. His booh include Two Leggings: The Making of a Crow Warrior, Native American Architecture (with Robert Bastón), The Architecture of Acoma Pueblo, A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History, and Where The Lightning Strikes: The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places. He has been a fan of California Indian art and Pacific Western Traders for many years.

DETAILS

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