

CARVING A LEGACY FOR THE SENATOR TREE

County Art Project Turns Charred Remains Into Cherished Pieces of History

by **Karen LeBlanc**

As a boy, Mark W. Rice often visited The Senator tree in Seminole County's Big Tree Park on school field trips and family picnics. The 3,500-year-old bald cypress tree fascinated the young boy who would grow up to be a nationally recognized chainsaw artist, carving sculptures from tree trunks that end up in collections, public parks and museums. For countless generations growing up in Seminole County, The Senator Tree, one of the world's oldest and biggest bald cypress trees, is part of local lore, an emblem of civic pride and source of many fond memories.

On January 16th, 2012, the beloved ancient tree went up in flames, accidentally set on fire by a drug addict, and the region collectively mourned the tragic demise of what was known as the oldest living thing in the Southern United States. “The Senator Tree was a piece of Florida and you could count on that tree being there; it was the one constant. I was very upset when I first found out it burned down,” says Mark, who grew up in Oviedo.

Seminole County officials grappled with the dilemma of what to do with the 118-foot-tall, 18-foot-wide tree’s charred remains, wanting to pay homage to this important piece of history. Meanwhile in Geneva, Bob Hughes, owner of the reclaimed timber business, The Ole General Store, had an idea: “Three days after The Senator hit the ground, I reached out to Jim Duby, the Seminole County Natural Resources Land Manager,” says Bob, who learned that tree was considered a total loss by the county. “The county had a lot of ideas on the table including taking the tree to the landfill, which would’ve been a terrible loss.”

Bob, whose wood-rescue business specializes in reclaimed wood and custom milling of rescued Florida hardwoods, supplies wood to several local artists. He



sent county officials pictures of the artists’ woodworks to show the potential of what could be created from The Senator’s remains. County officials requested proposals from artists to create art from the salvaged lumber in a 50-50 arrangement.

“It’s called a sawmill split, where we harvest the lumber and give half to the county and keep the other half. However, it goes a step farther because the half we give back to the county comes in the form of finished art,” Bob explains. The Senator Tree Art Project, as it became known, eventually selected three recipients, including Bob, Mark and Jeff Matter, a woodworker. The trio harvested the felled tree from the park, divided up the wood and set

about creating art. “Mark Rice wanted pieces with shape to them for carving. Jeff Matter wanted pieces that were fat and smaller for his wood lathe turnings. I don’t know of another woodworker who has been able to work with a 3,500-year-old piece of wood,” Bob shares.

Woodworks from The Senator tree depict Florida wildlife and history and are on display at various county buildings and a permanent exhibit at the Museum of Seminole County History. The participating artists also sell pieces, each with an individual serial number and a certificate of authenticity.

“The project’s goal was to salvage what remained and make art pieces for general

cultural benefit,” explains Bennett Lloyd, coordinator, Museum of Seminole County History. The Senator tree art exhibit, on view since 2015, is housed in its own wing and includes six 10-foot art panels depicting the circumference of the tree that visitors can step inside. “The Senator is as old as Stonehenge, so we have a comparative timeline chronicling the historical events that happened during the tree’s lifetime.”

Plans for a new traveling exhibit of The Senator tree art is in the works. “In a climate-controlled mobile trailer, we can bring different art pieces to venues and



showcase this artwork with a mobile platform that includes smart tablets and different stations,” Bennett explains. The mobile exhibit can be customized for different ages and audiences such as school groups or art festivals. “We just finished creating a fifth grade curriculum tied to The Senator’s story focused on environmental history and science,” he adds.

The museum is also exploring the option of licensing The Senator tree art to other museums for display. “Any other use, we would’ve lost the memory of The Senator. I think this is the best way we can preserve the tree for generations and communicate a message of preservation,” Bennett notes.

Artist Jeff Matter used his remains of The Senator to create wood turnings on a lathe that produces bowls, vases, decorative pieces and kinetic sculptures. The work is meticulous and involves a process of gluing together small pieces of wood, layer by layer, and then turning it on the lathe to create perfect square holes between the layers. Jeff found working with the salvaged wood challenging because of its condition. “The wood is called pecky cypress; some people call it worm holes. It’s actually caused by fungus. What wasn’t rotten was burnt so it’s not like I could take a piece and get a nice clean board out of it. I worked with what I had so I started leaving the burnt edge on almost every piece that I made,” adds Jeff, who turned his childhood hobby into a full-time vocation after working in carpentry and construction.

Jeff also fashions smaller, more afford-



able pieces from The Senator wood, such as bottle stoppers, pens and card holders, making the art accessible and collectable. “I’m still making pieces from the wood. I have made and sold more than a thousand pieces so far,” says Jeff, who works out of his garage studio in Orange County and sells The Senator Tree wood works at art shows. “It’s an extreme honor to work with a piece of history. I had no monetary intentions or motivations with the project; I just thought it was cool. Today, I get calls



from people all over the country who want a piece of history. I really enjoy the reactions from people at the shows the smiles and the tears of the people who have been touched by the tree.”

Mark, owner of Chainsaw Designs Inc., creates his carvings on his farm that serves as a defacto studio, with chainsaw sculptures displayed in his front yard. From salvaged stumps of The Senator, Mark carved large sculptures of ospreys, otters, eagles, bears, herons and benches

out of large branches. “I want people to experience the art. I hope they like the beauty of the carvings and I hope they appreciate that The Senator Tree is around for us to enjoy again. Its legacy is preserved for everyone,” he says. His massive stump carvings also are on view in several public parks including All Children’s Park in Port Orange, Ponce Inlet Reserve, Umatilla City Hall and Sanford’s Paws Park.

The Ole General Store, working with 15 local woodworking artists, gave Seminole County more than 100 pieces of art from The Senator. “One of the joys of my life was watching these pieces of total-loss wood turn into works of art. The artists poured their hearts into the project,” Bob says. Pieces range in size from small writing instruments to large art panels. “When I was invited to the museum’s *Meet the Artisans Showing*, I was able to witness

someone touching one of the big panels of art. She had tears in her eyes — I am sure for the loss but also tears of joy for the renewal of what was once the world’s eighth oldest living tree. Now, The Senator lives on through art because of the heartfelt imaginations of the artisans. They used their special gifts for others to appreciate for future generations,” Bob shares. The Ole General Store, located at 320 Avenue C in Geneva, has pieces on display that the public can view and purchase by appointment only.

The Seminole County Museum of History plans to continue expanding The Senator tree art exhibit with new additions and future fundraising opportunities, such as a silent auction of several pieces. “We are adding a new section on The Senator tree tourism featuring postcards and souvenirs. It’s a constantly evolving exhibit,” Bennett says.

For more information on The Senator Tree art check out the following sites: seminolecountyfl.gov/museum; Facebook.com/matterofwoodwork; chainsawdesigns.com; olegeneralstore.com

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