

# RAVALLI REPUBLIC

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## Down to earth

*Towering timbers transformed into historic carvings by local sculptor*

**ROD DANIEL**

Staff Reporter

Faced with losing more than a dozen giant trees to beetle kill, the owners of Lost Trail Hot Springs Resort decided to preserve some of the history of the unique area — with a chain saw.

After the fires of 2000, pine bark beetles decimated many of the trees on Stann and Mary Dell Honey's property, and they knew they'd have to cut down some of the centuries-old pine and fir trees to prevent further spread.

"Because of the fires we've had quite a few of these trees die off," Stann Honey said. "If you don't get them out, then it's just going to spread."

But rather than just fell the giant trees for their timber, the mother-son pair decided, in a sense, to "make lemonade out of lemons" by converting the venerable conifers into statues to help tell the story of the lore-laden land.

Last week, as Stevensville sawyer Glenn Reynolds began cutting the dying Douglas fir, yellow pine and ponderosa pine trees that for hundreds of years have stood watch



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**Lisa Foster carves the wooden likeness of Sacajawea from the stump of a yellow pine tree that was infected with bark beetles and had to be removed at Lost Trail Hot Springs.**

over the historic hot springs, Hamilton sculptor Lisa Foster waited, chain saw in hand, to convert the remaining wood cylinders into likenesses of a few of the people who made the area famous.

Foster's first creation was of Sacajawea, the teen-age Shoshone guide that led Captains Lewis and

Clark on their journey west. According to Mary Dell Honey, who along with her son has owned the 47-acre resort for the last 11 years, Lewis and Clark are known to have camped above the hot springs 200 years ago.

"On the night of September 3, Lewis and Clark camped right here

on the west side of Camp Creek," she said. "So it seemed logical that we should honor them with these carvings."

Together, the Honeys came up with a list of subjects for Foster to create, including Sacajawea, Lewis, Clark, Chief Joseph, and Jeremiah Johnson.

For Foster, the project represents an opportunity for her to leave her mark on the valley she's chosen as her home.

"I've always wanted to leave something for society," she said. "So I'm excited about this."

Foster has only been carving with a chain saw for two years, she said, having learned the craft from her friend Bill Tower. But during that time she's entered seven competitions, has already taken home some awards and even has her own Web site — [www.shesawsit.com](http://www.shesawsit.com).

"I won second place novice in Reeds Port, Oregon," she said. "And I took third place in Ocean Springs, Washington."

Before beginning a carving, Foster explained she first tries to visualize the subject before "freeing" it from within the wood.

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## Carvings, continued

"(Mary Dell) wanted Sacajawea, so I just kept looking at the tree and walking around it," she said. "Finally I saw her in there. Then I let her out."

Foster began carving the base of the statue two weeks ago, and last Tuesday, the young Indian woman's face began to emerge from within the 14-foot-high yellow pine stump. Standing on scaffolding, the diminutive Foster made a series of small cuts with her 12-inch Stihl chain saw until Sacajawea's face shown through.

Foster's creative expression is the result of a vision Stann Honey said has been unfolding for a number of years. Pointing to the towering conifer adjacent to the resort's entrance, Honey said he always had it in the back of his mind to make the tree into a carving.

"You get one chance to make an impression," he said, "and I always thought having a carving there would get people's attention."

A few months ago, while driving past Angler's Roost, Honey saw the life-like chain saw carving of a fisherman and stopped in to inquire about the artist.

"They connected me with Lisa," he said. "When she and I got together, there was a meeting of the minds. I could tell she was the right person to do the job."

For the last couple weeks, the Honeys, Foster and staff members at the resort have been mesmerized by the bitter-sweet excitement of seeing the 300-plus-year-old trees come crashing down. According to maintenance manager Robert Shippy, it's sad to see the giant trees fall.

"We're going to come in and replant," Shippy said. "But first you've got to take out the old before you bring in the new."



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**Disease is evident in these logs** which were recently cut from bark beetle-infested trees at Lost Trail Hot Springs. The centuries-old trees succumbed to the infestation in the wake of the 2000 fires.

As the barrel-chested Reynolds climbed the giant Douglas fir tree in preparation of the felling, a crowd gathered around his pick-up truck. Foster explained the group's choice of where to stand.

"We're not sure where it's going to fall," she said, "but you know Glenn's not going to let it hit his truck."

Cutting off branches on his way up, Reynolds stopped at about 22 feet — the height of the proposed Chief Joseph carving. The small crowd below fidgeted anxiously in anticipation.

"It's amazing to watch Glenn work," Shippy said. "He eyeballs it and moves back to make the cut. What he sees, only he knows."

Reynolds fires up his chain saw and takes about 20 seconds to make a lateral cut. Before he finished the slice, he stopped to insert a wedge to ensure the tree would fall in the right direction.

Seconds later the tree started its descent. As it hit the ground the giant timber shattered like a huge piece of glass. Upon close inspection the broken tree revealed an extensive and unanticipated rot.

When Reynolds climbed down from the three-story stump, he suggested that Honey reconsider making a carving from the rotted wood. "It was much further gone

than I thought," he told Honey. "You need to decide whether you want to invest in carving it."

Reynolds estimated the merchantable timber to be taken from the dozen or so downed trees at between 15,000 to 20,000 board feet. But much of the wood, he said, won't be suitable for lumber and will have to be burned. An ever-growing cull pile tells the story, according to Stann Honey.

"Before the fires these trees were alive," Honey said. "Every one of them."

He said he estimates the entire project — seven or eight carvings in all — will take a couple months to complete, and he hopes to have everything finished before the resort hosts its annual Fourth of July party.

And even though he's saddened to be losing more than a dozen trees that were there when Lewis and Clark camped nearby two centuries ago, Honey hopes the resulting carvings will help future generations appreciate the unique history of the area.

"It's terrible that these trees died," he said. "But we're trying to make lemonade out of lemons."

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