

A Chance Encounter

04/01/2018

A Chance Encounter - Sculptor Gary Prazen Meets John Wayne



The late Gary Prazen's shop. His grand-son-in-law, Danny Blanton, continues to work in it full time.

A chance encounter with western actor John Wayne in 1978 propelled Carbon County native Gary Prazen into international fame for his realistic bronze sculptures. Prazen died last November at 80, leaving behind a legacy of artwork.

According to his bio, Prazen was attending a water meeting at the Carbon Country lub. He was elected Carbon County Commissioner and was talking to some constituents after the meeting.

That day, actor John Wayne toured several local mines and was the talk of the town. One of Prazen's friends who escorted Wayne to the mines later challenged Prazen to do a bronze sculpture of the famous Hollywood actor. Prazen called this his "Jack Daniel's inspiration" because it reminded him of a scene from the movie "True Grit" where Wayne put reins in his teeth and with a rifle in one hand, pistol in the other, and shouted, "Fill your hands, you SOB."

Without thinking that he had never done a bronze sculpture before, he said, "I will." With those two words, Prazen went from supplementing his income part-time with metal artwork to becoming a world-renowned bronze sculptor.

Prazen delivered on his promise and flew to Newport Beach, Calif., to present his "True Grit" sculpture to the King of Western movies. The story and photos were covered by the API wire service where Prazen's gift to Wayne was seen throughout the world. "This small gesture of art," Prazen wrote, "changed the direction of my life. If it was not for John Wayne, I doubt I would be where I am now."

Always busy, he was a county commissioner, managing Pioneer Welding and Machine Co., active in the Jaycees and Elks clubs as well as teaching welding classes at the College of Eastern Utah.

He quit it all and went into full-time designing and building his bronze foundry and equipment. He incorporated his business under the name Original Creations, Inc., in 1980. He also attended his first mining show to display his first miner sculptures.

At that time, the popular subject for bronze sculptures in art galleries were cowboys and Indians, wildlife, modern abstracts and almost every subject besides mining. No artist had sculpted mining subjects to any degree that would compliment this industry. "No artist realized what an important role mining played in the history of the U.S.," Prazen wrote.

Almost 40 years later, besides mining, his repertoire includes animals, birds, prehistoric dinosaurs, sports figures, trains, Christmas figures, Kokopellis, oil and gas field workers, angels and anything Prazen's imagination could dream up. He created one-of-a-kind artwork, custom belt buckles, custom metalwork, exclusive art for companies including engraving, plaques and trophy awards.

Hardly any areas throughout Carbon County are not graced with Prazen's work. On the USU Eastern campus, Prazen's fierce, fighting dinosaurs perch outside the prehistoric museum, describing what was happening in Southeastern Utah 160 million years ago.

Most recently he, along with his grandson-in-law, Danny Blanton, created monuments dedicated to the 1,524 people killed in mining accidents in Carbon and Emery counties over the past century.

Blanton is married to Gary's granddaughter Patricia, and said it was a chance encounter that paired Prazen and him together.

Patricia was dating Blanton and asked him if he had seen her grandfather's art work. They toured Prazen's studio and Blanton saw first hand the talented artist's work.

Next she introduced Blanton to her grandfather who asked him to help with Prazen's thriving bronze-sculpture business. Blanton saw that as a way to spend more time with Patricia, plus make extra money on the side.

Blanton, who was working a full-time job, started helping Prazen after work and on weekends. His first-solo projects were bronze belt buckles.

For the past 17 years, the pair created thousands of pieces of art work that they shipped throughout the world. Blanton said only one percent of their business is from Utah and the rest is shipped throughout the United States and foreign countries.

Reminiscing, Blanton said he told his mom in the second grade that he wanted to be an artist, but never took an art class. In high school he took a welding class at CEU, but smiled when he failed it, only because he missed so many classes going hunting and fishing.

"I have to give Gary 100 percent of the credit for instilling creativity in me. He could make something out of anything. He collected a bunch of coffee can lids and made roses out of them," Blanton said.

In describing Prazen, Blanton said he was strong, hard-working and giving. He always worked six and half days every week. Sometimes he would take time to garden or do something fun, but then he would always work late into the night.

"Gary made a living, but did not make huge profits on his pieces." He would always ask why people want to charge so much. "Money is like water, you don't need the whole ocean," Prazen would say.

"He always wanted to leave behind a legacy, a feat not many in the art field are able to achieve the type of notoriety Gary did," Blanton said.

Prazen's sculptures are known for their details and intricacies. Later in his life, he experimented with abstracts. He sometimes would draw his sculptures on paper or he would totally design from what he envisioned in his mind. Blanton said Prazen was ambidextrous; he could draw and sculpt with either his right or left hand. He also took up oil painting.

One year Prazen and Blanton shipped 1,200 statues throughout the world, but their average was 450. Austria, Canada, England, Scotland, Germany, South Africa, Mexico, India and China are all countries Original Creations shipped statues to recently.

The two artists needed more space to create and build, so a 6,800-square-foot building was erected in 2016 on their four- and half-acre parcel of land located in Carbonville. It was almost complete before Prazen died.

In the new building, Blanton hopes to build another train to scale, similar to the one Prazen and he built in 2010 at the Tie Fork Rest Area on U.S. 6 in Spanish Fork Canyon. The rest stop was voted one of the best architectural structures in Utah, largely because of his life-size sculpture of an early 1900's locomotive resting on a narrow-gauge track, the type of track that was often used to access distant coal mines at Scofield, Utah.

Blanton also plans to turn Prazen's hexagon house next to the Original Creation's Building into a museum and art gallery so people can witness some of Prazen's work. A scholarship in Gary and Janet's name is in the works to give to USU Eastern's welding department to help students achieve their educational dreams.

"Gary seemed to work longer and harder as he aged," Blanton said. "His last sculpture he completed was Judge Roy Bean (1825-1903), 'the hanging judge.'" Legend notes that Judge Bean held court in his saloon along the Rio Grande on a desolate stretch of the Chihuahuan Desert in Southwest Texas and after his death, Western films and books cast him as the hanging judge.

Prazen will be remembered as enjoying the simple life. He was super modest, and after 60 years of marriage, when he lost the love of his life, he died three months later.

~ Susan Polster